

Japan's PM exploits pandemic to push pro-war constitutional revisions

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The Japanese government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is looking to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic to continue his drive to revise the country's constitution to remove barriers to remilitarization and tear up democratic rights. On May 3, Constitution Day, Abe promoted this agenda in a speech to representatives of Nippon Kaigi, the right-wing extremist organization that is a major supporter of Japanese rearmament and militarism.

In his speech, Abe called for a debate in the National Diet, Japan's parliament, on adding a clause to the constitution to give the Cabinet additional powers during a national emergency, changes that would restrict democratic rights. "We're facing extremely critical challenges of deciding what roles the state and citizens should fulfil in the event of an emergency, how we should overcome national crises and how we should position these matters in the Constitution," he declared.

A revised law approved this past March with the support of the two main opposition parties gives the government the power to declare a state of emergency for up to two years and includes the ability to enforce lockdowns and to close schools and public events. However, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) argues that this law could be found unconstitutional, making the proposed revisions necessary. If passed, the government could use a state of emergency to shut down political meetings with which it disagrees, including anti-war rallies.

The proposal is not a response to the current pandemic, but a long-planned change. Abe stated that emergency powers were one of the four proposed changes the LDP had put forward in March 2018. The other major change involves revising Article 9, known as the pacifist clause, which bars Japan from fielding a military or participating in wars. Abe added Sunday

that it was necessary to "put an end to the debate over the constitutionality of the Self-Defense Forces." He has previously proposed a clause to Article 9 to explicitly recognize the SDF, the formal name of Japan's military.

Abe and the ruling class chafe at the legal barrier Article 9 represents to Japan's re-establishing itself as a major power in Asia, a goal Tokyo desires to pursue through military means if necessary. Though various "reinterpretations" over the decades have provided the Japanese ruling class with the loopholes to create and arm the SDF, Japan is still unable to fully project its military force in the region and other parts of the world as it desires.

Since the end of January, Tokyo has been using the SDF as part of its COVID-19 response, which Abe pointed to in his speech to claim that it is necessary to clarify the military's legal status. The prime minister has regularly exploited past crises for the purpose of remilitarization, including using the Japanese hostage crises in Algeria and Syria in 2013 and 2015 respectively to loosen restrictions on the military.

The other proposed revisions include changing the Diet's Upper House districts and a vague reference to free education—a cynical addition to try to win public support for the other, far more unpopular changes. The LDP previously proposed free education at the pre-school and university levels, but has backed off this proposal, an indication that it is little more than window dressing.

Abe had initially pledged in May 2017 during a similar speech to Nippon Kaigi, to which he and most of the members of his cabinet belong, to revise Article 9 of the constitution by this year. It is becoming increasing unlikely that this will take place, especially as the government deals with the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We are afraid that it will be taken as a move to capitalize on the crisis,” a senior LDP official told the *Asahi Shimbun*.

The prime minister stated Sunday that, “I understand a path to the revision will be rocky, but I am determined to make it happen together with you”—an indication that he hopes to push through the changes before September 2021 when his term as LDP president, and therefore prime minister, is projected to end.

The proposed revisions to the government’s emergency powers and to Article 9 are attacks on democratic rights and push Japan further towards rearming, which is particularly aimed at China and North Korea. Since it was enacted in 1947, Japan’s constitution, drafted by the US occupation force, has never been amended. Any changes now would serve as a precedent, making it easier to further erode democratic rights in the future as Tokyo plans highly unpopular wars of aggression.

While there is opposition in the Diet to Abe’s plans, this is not a genuine anti-war movement. The two main opposition parties, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) and the Democratic Party for the People (DPP) supported the March emergency law. There is also support among the opposition, particularly in the DPP, for revising Article 9. Their differences with Abe and the LDP are a matter of tactics.

Yukio Edano, head of the CDP, went so far as to say that the current constitution already empowers the government to restrict people’s individual rights in the event of an emergency, under the concept of “public welfare.” Edano stated, “It is absolutely not true that necessary measures cannot be implemented under the rule of the current Constitution.”

DPP leader Yuichiro Tamaki did not express disagreement with constitutional revisions, but merely questioned the timing. “We can proceed (with talks on constitutional reform) in a calm environment after the coronavirus situation settles down,” he said, undoubtedly concerned that in the current “environment” of mass discontent over the government’s COVID-19 response, attempts to revise the constitution would be met with an outburst of social anger similar to or larger than the mass anti-war allies that took place in 2015.

Polls regularly show that more than half the

population is opposed to the proposed constitutional changes. In a recent *Asahi Shimbun* poll, 57 percent of respondents stated that the government should handle crises without revising the constitution and 65 percent opposed changing Article 9.



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