

Tokyo exploits COVID-19 disaster to push militarist and repressive constitutional revision

Ben McGrath
13 June 2021

The Japanese government of Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) are pushing ahead with plans to revise Japan's constitution to facilitate remilitarisation and block the emergence of a working class movement opposed to war and capitalism.

The ruling class is trying to drum up the necessary public support for such changes by exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic, now resurging across Japan.

The precursor to any attempts to alter the constitution is a national referendum bill that passed Japan's parliament, the National Diet, last Friday. The upper house approved the bill with support from both the ruling LDP and the main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP). The bill passed the lower house last month, also with support from both big business parties.

Suga told right-wing supporters during a Constitution Day speech on May 3: "We must aim for [the referendum bill's] passage as the first step in the debate on constitutional revision." The bill, initially proposed in 2018 under former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, ostensibly makes voting in a national referendum easier, by allowing polling places to be set up in public places like train stations and department stores.

The LDP and other proponents of constitutional revision are pushing this bill, as they believe they will be able to dominate public debate on it through a massive and well-financed media campaign, essentially silencing anti-war voices.

Seeking to posture as opponents of the LDP's plans, the CDP argued for spending restrictions in the bill that would supposedly limit the amount of money spent on television, radio, and internet advertisements.

However, the CDP agreed to the bill anyway, on the basis that it contains a mandate for enacting restrictions on spending in separate legislation within three years. There is no reason to believe that such laws will come into being, particularly as the LDP continues to dominate both houses of the Diet. Furthermore, while the CDP postures as an opponent of constitutional revision, many of its members openly support the LDP's agenda.

As Tokyo increasingly flexes its military might overseas, the government sees the revisions as necessary to block the development of an anti-war movement, particularly following 2015, when mass protests around the country erupted in opposition to "collective self-defence" bills, which allowed Japan to take part in military actions overseas, alongside an ally, namely the United States. These protests culminated in August that year, when 120,000 people gathered outside the Diet to denounce the bills that were nevertheless rammed through the following month.

The ruling class hopes to insert a national emergency clause into the constitution that would allow the cabinet to suspend certain democratic rights, including by shutting down political meetings or banning anti-war rallies. Lawrence Repeta, a former law professor at Meiji University, said an emergency clause "would give the cabinet the power to create a secret government during an emergency that the cabinet itself would declare. It would be the very antithesis of the constitutional democracy we have today."

The other major attack on the working class is a proposal to add a paragraph to the constitution's Article 9, in order to explicitly legalise the Self-Defence Forces, the formal name of Japan's military.

Article 9, known as the pacifist clause, bans Japan from maintaining a military and waging war. Many within the Japanese ruling class feel that even this revision does not go far enough and instead want Article 9 scrapped completely. As the constitution has never been revised, since it went into effect in 1947, any amendments would set a precedent for bigger changes in the future.

Constitutional revisions must pass both houses of the Diet with a two-third majority, and then receive a majority of votes in a national referendum. While the pro-revision side has the necessary numbers in parliament—including support from within the opposition bloc—there is widespread public opposition to altering the constitution and to remilitarisation in general. Opinion polls regularly show that far more than 50 percent of the population opposes any revisions.

Exploiting the pandemic, the ruling class is attempting to drum up support for the national emergency clause, claiming it is necessary to grant the government more power to enforce lockdowns and other measures. Tokyo claims that current laws prevent it from issuing legally-binding stay-at-home orders. Satoshi Yokodaido, a professor of constitutional law at Keio University, challenged this, saying: “I don’t think a lack of an emergency clause is the reason the COVID-19 response has not gone well. The problem is incompetent politicians.”

Tokyo’s response to the pandemic, however, is driven by more than just incompetence. It is bound up with the profit interests of big business, which opposes any measures that obstruct its capacity to generate revenue. This finds its most immediate expression in the push to hold this year’s Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo, despite widespread opposition and the danger posed that the huge event could lead to further transmission and the emergence of dangerous new strains of COVID-19.

Furthermore, during the pandemic, schools, a major transmission vector for the virus, have been kept open and testing has been inadequate. Countless people have reported being unable to receive a test, despite showing symptoms of COVID-19, indicating that the real number of cases is far higher than the government reports.

Tokyo’s claims that it needs a national emergency

law to combat the current or future pandemics are thus entirely fraudulent. In reality, the ruling class has long pushed for these constitutional changes, as it pursues an agenda that increasingly comes into conflict with the needs of the broader population and puts Japan on the path to war.

The political establishment is attempting to use the COVID-19 disaster, exacerbated by the capitalist class itself, to carry out attacks on democratic rights and hasten the return of Japanese militarism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact