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Now is the Time for a National Debate on the Monarchy Itself

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By Okudaira Yasuhiro

The imperial institution with its official toleration of hereditary succession and gender discrimination is an enormous contradiction embedded in the Constitution of Japan. Debate over a female successor to the throne ignores this illogicality at its peril. Today we should be thinking not about a female monarch but the monarchy itself, and what the country ideally should be. Yet nobody discusses this issue.

The female monarch debate got underway in late January 2005 with the first formal meeting of the Prime Minister's private advisory organ, a group of "Informed People Concerned with the Imperial Household Law." I watched with a chill as its activities unfolded.

Why Must We Save the Monarchy?

The advisory organ is trying to resolve the problem of male succession about which present prospects are quite bleak. The Prime Minister wants the advisers to deliberate "in accordance with the trend of public opinion." Yet as I understand the matter, the advisory conference is nothing but a stage device for guiding public opinion in the direction of "altering the article in the Imperial Household Law which prohibits a woman from becoming emperor. A change in the Law is possible because the public now supports it." Like any advisory organ, this one is merely a device for producing the government's desired outcome. This time too the Cabinet Legislative Bureau and the Imperial Household Agency set the stage for dealing with the problem.

What we really must debate is whether we still need the monarchy: is it good for Japanese society? Assuming we retain it, how should it connect with the traditional monarchy? Before the war, such a discussion would have been unnecessary. The government would have gone back to the mythological Amaterasu Omikami, and explained that the successor was the descendant of a uniquely unbroken line which had received a divine mandate to have a male rule Japan. How natural then for persons of right-wing bent to oppose a female emperor. But we live in a world in which the monarchy will not work if constituted on a mythological basis. On what ground then does the nation support the emperor system?

The Postwar Monarchy as a Product of Compromise

People doubtless support it for numerous reasons. Without specific reasons, many simply feel that the monarchy must be there or else they will be in trouble. The vast majority who think that way never trouble themselves about mythology. How natural then that over 80 percent of the people say that even a woman can become emperor.

The remaining 15 or 16 percent of the nation would seem to absolutely want to abolish the monarchy, saying that there is no reason for it to exist. Lending no ear to this argument, the

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usual discussion is proceeding with ceremony. All they do is argue, with "retaining" the emperor system as the premise, about how to justify it and to revise the law.

Historically speaking, the present Imperial Household Law, stipulating only male succession to the throne, was simply a provisional measure. At that time the most that ruling elites could do was to retain the monarchy while worrying about how the occupation army might react. Luckily it went well, and they were greatly relieved. Never once did the occupation army insist on gender equality.

GHQ retained "traditional" aspects of the monarchy because it knew the use-value of an institution that had the "traditional" and "historical" power to make people grovel. If the occupation army had stood firmly on the principle of democracy it would never have retained the monarchy. The Americans even inserted into the Constitution, which should extol democracy, the words "hereditary succession". Clearly, they retained the monarchy in a way that contradicted democratization. Even the Imperial Household Law was the product of a compromise between GHQ, which did not want a monarchy under the terms of the Meiji Constitution, and Japan's leaders who did.

Imperial Family Members Who Have Neither Freedom Nor Privacy

Compromise means avoiding debate over essentials. That's why, at some point in the postwar period, we sorely needed a national debate on what the monarchy meant. But we never had one, and the government thought that was just fine. Today's dispute over a female emperor is a replay of this scenario. I can't help but feel that nearly sixty years after the end of the war, we are still making this sort of compromise.

To being with, the question is being posed incorrectly. Having started with the problem of succession to the throne and become deadlocked on how to handle it, they are trying a new method that had once been inconceivable.

We couldn't have a discussion over the fundamental question because the Constitution stipulates retention of the emperor system. Chapter 1 specifies a hereditary monarchy. Now, unfortunately, the monarchy lives in the heart of the nation. It will probably never be discussed. But I would like people to think about members of the imperial family who will be forced to go on leading uncomfortable lives. They are given special privileges but, at the same time, are treated like film celebrities, as seen in weekly womens' magazines.

One might say that the nation has stripped imperial family members of their privacy on the premise that they have privileges. However, I see no discussion about whether we should let this situation stand or go on victimizing them?

The Debate on Constitutional Revision

I wish to have a discussion at some point about abolishing the symbol emperor system. That entails revising the Constitution. But right now we are still politically weak and unable to do it. Before this problem arose in the 1990s, and particularly since the start of the present century, many people including my friends often argued that, since the government wants to revise Article Nine, why shouldn't we support revising the Constitution in order to abolish the monarchy: that is to say, Article One (position of the emperor and popular sovereignty), Two (succession to the imperial throne) and Eight (imperial house property and endowments)?

But we lack the power to present the problem as we see it. In a situation where over 80 percent of the public approve of a female

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emperor and more than 70 percent approve of the monarchy itself, those who want to misinterpret our views for other reasons will say: fine; let's revise the Constitution. In other words, we might be presenting them with the opportunity to revise Article Nine.

Unfortunately, there are no political forces in today's Japan to even raise the idea of "Analyze the monarchy and revise the Constitution" or "Let's debate these matters." It probably won't be possible during my lifetime. Nobody, including myself, has the political power or can pen a clear enough political statement to generate such debate.

Politically weak, we are leaving intact a monarchy based on hereditary succession as stipulated in the Constitution. I don't think I'm wrong, rather the 80 percent of the nation who so loosely support the symbol monarchy are mistaken.

Okudaira Yasuhiro wrote "Now is the Time for a National Debate on the Monarchy Itself [Ima koso 'tennosei' sonomono ni kokuminteki rongi o 'jotei' ronso ni igi ari"] for Shukan kinyobi*, No. 545 (Feb. 18, 2005), pp. 12-13.*

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