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Japan

Rise of “Hashism” – From Osaka to the National Political Arena

- IV Online magazine - 2012 - IV448 - May 2012 -

Publication date: Tuesday 1 May 2012

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“Critics of Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto sometimes describe his politics as ‘Hashism’, referring to a supposed similarity between some of his tactics and those of fascism.” (“The Asahi Shimbun”, March 3, 2012) [1]

Hashimoto, a former lawyer and TV personality, was elected Governor of Osaka Prefecture in 2008 with his popularity and aggressive campaign against administration and public sector workers. He challenged the “ineffective” administration and “wasteful” public services and resorted to predatory practices, drastically cutting the wages of public employees and reducing or abolishing subsidies to a series of cultural and social facilities. In addition to his tough policy on national anthem issues [2], his anti-China remarks and aggressive attitude toward Korean National Schools pleased reactionary forces.

One of his main agenda had been unifying the governments of Osaka City and Osaka Prefecture in order to allow an extensive local authority, “Osaka Metropolitan Government”, to attract more investment and compete effectively with other big cities in Asia. As this type of rearrangement requires not only negotiation with the city government but also revision of national laws, which he knows would inevitably contradict the interest of some part of central bureaucracy as well as national political parties, Hashimoto formed his own political party, “Osaka Ishin-no-kai” or “Osaka Restoration Association”, as a catalyst for a political change in the whole country.

Although his “achievement” as governor was quite dubious, his confrontational way of pushing through his rough ideas gave a kind of catharsis to the constituency and tamed the majority of the local assemblies. After gaining the majority of the prefectural assembly and a good number of seats of the city assembly at the election in April, 2011, he opened a battle against Mayor of Osaka City, Kunio Hiramatsu, on the method to solve the “duplication” of the roles of the city and the prefecture.

At the same time, he tightened his control over public employees. In June, 2011, he introduced an ordinance to force teachers to stand at “Kimigayo”, national anthem, at school ceremonies. He also announced a plan to introduce ordinance on education and ordinance on public employees which include provisions for punishment against disobedience to administrative orders. [3]

When the four-year term for Mayor Hiramatsu expired in November, 2011, Hashimoto resigned as governor in order to run for mayor. His colleague, Ichiro Matsui, ran for governor to succeed him.

Sweeping Victory in November Elections

The elections for Mayor of Osaka City and Governor of Osaka Prefecture were fought between “Osaka Ishin-no-kai” led by Hashimoto on one hand and ruling Democratic Party (DP) plus the main opposition party, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) on the other hand. Even the Communist Party joined the camp of Kunio Hiramatsu in order to call for a united resistance against the autocratic rule of Hashimoto.

The result was a sweeping victory for Hashimoto and his Ishin party. [4] “Apparently the helplessness felt by many Osaka people amid economic stagnation and the sense that power is concentrated in Tokyo, boosted Mr. Hashimoto. More than 150,000 Osaka city residents are on welfare – about one of every 18 citizens, the highest rate in Japan. Mr. Hashimoto captured the hearts of Osaka voters with such bites as ‘Strong power, almost dictatorial, is needed

to change today’s politics’ ...The established parties failed to present plans that would give hope to Osaka people. Neither the DP nor the LDP could overcome the populist rhetoric used by Mr. Hashimoto.” (The Japan Times Online, Dec. 1, 2011)[<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/ed...>]]

After elected as Mayor, Hashimoto lost no time promoting his agenda. For him, the appearance of decisiveness and the speed with which to upset the adversaries are the keys to success. With his favoured argument, “an elected officer can make any decisions and force these decisions because it is “the will of voters”, he intimidated the officers into obeying him and launched a blistering attack on the trade unions of municipal employees. Every day, his controversial policies attract media coverage, contributing to the maintenance of his high popularity.

Decisiveness and Speed

Here are some of the major changes since Hashimoto took control of the city administration:

– More than forty advisors and counsellors were recruited to work out plans for concretising “Osaka Metropolitan Government”, drastically cutting budgets for public services, tightening the discipline, re-developing the central part of the city, recruiting administrators (including school principals and heads of a wards) from private sectors and so on. Most of these advisors were handpicked by Hashimoto.

– Frontal assault on trade unions of municipal employees. In February, the city government ordered all municipal employees to answer the questionnaire on their involvement in trade union activities in order to dissuade them from active commitment. After fierce criticism from lawyers and other people as well as protests from trade unions, they suspended and disposed the questionnaire. However, they are still continuing unfair labour practices of ordering the evacuation of union offices in the city hall and threatening to abandon the check-off of union dues.

– Hashimoto announced a plan to reduce the wage of transportation workers (mainly bus drivers) by 40%! A city councillor of Ishin used fabricated data on their union’s involvement in the Mayor election in the city assembly. Even after the councillor admitted the fabrication, Hashimoto rejected to apologise and justified his deed as having stimulated the discussion about issues of political activities of trade unions.

– Hashimoto is rushing to rearrange public schools so that competition among schools and teachers are stimulated. He wants to abolish school districts for high schools to allow “free choice”, which means increasing motivation for selected elites and closing schools with poor records.

So far, the “changes” he has brought about are welcomed by broad layers of citizens and both DP and LDP are shifting to appeasement policy or active cooperation with Ishin. However criticism and resistance is increasing day by day as people become aware of the serious implications of his policies.

Rising to the National Political Arena

From the start, Hashimoto has been talking about challenging the inductility of the centralist bureaucrats and changing politics from local governments. After the victory in November elections, he has renewed his ambition for gaining the political power of the central government.

Ishin is planning to endorse more than 200 candidates in the coming election of lower house and actively cooperate with other like-minded candidates. They released a rough draft of its election platform in February, which includes “reforming the nation’s administrative bodies and revising the Constitution”, the abolishment of the upper house and electing future prime ministers by popular vote. “It largely reflects Hashimoto’s unconventional politics, but some proposals seem infeasible due to a lack of supporting details” (“The Daily Yomiuri”, Feb. 16, 2012). [5]

The extraordinary high popularity and expectation toward this new political force is threatening both DP and LDP. The Komei Party and the “Minna-no-tou” (“Your party”) are supposed to cooperate with Ishin. Shintaro Ishihara, Governor of Tokyo Metropolitan Government and Takashi Kawamura, Mayor of Nagoya City, will also closely cooperate with Ishin. [6]

As the impasse of the DP government become more and more obvious, Ishin is taking tougher position against the DP. They chose the nuclear power plant issue as a focus of campaign because Prime Minister, Yoshihiko Noda discredited himself by pushing ahead with the restart of the Oi nuclear power plant located within 100 kilometres of Osaka. Hashimoto has expressed his opposition against resuming the operation.

Resistance of Workers and Citizens

The popularity of Hashimoto reflects the dysfunction of parliamentary democracy and impasse of the established political parties. Expectation for changes, which was pervasive at the time of the power shift in 2009 (from LDP to DP), has been swiftly turned into disillusion and impatience among people. Hashimoto’s energetic and catching agitation, empowered by excessive appearance in mass media, has been quite effective to activate hostility among people and divert their fury toward public employees, elders, beneficiary of social welfare and progressive intellectuals.

To this extent, “a supposed similarity between some of his tactics and those of fascism” does exist, for sure. A very striking fact is that so many people chose Hashimoto after the heated election campaign of last year despite the widespread criticism and concern about his openly authoritarian idea and practices.

However, the real issue is the failure of the trade unions and political parties to organize actions against this “petit-fascism” and elicit the oppressed desire for more humane society.

Hashimoto’s attacks on public employees and reduction of social services are nothing new. They are only the continuation of the neo-liberalists’ “reform” under Koizumi government (2001 to 2006) and basically the same as what is going on in most of the advanced capitalist countries in the world. The striking difference is the lack of massive resistance from trade unions in the case of Osaka and Japan as a whole.

For the moment, it is hard to expect an effective counter offensive from major trade unions because they seem to be feeling isolation. Instead of daring to organise resistance, they seem to prefer to avoid or minimize the confrontation in order to secure the organization. Division among trade unions and progressive political forces, with somewhat hostile attitude to one another, is making unified resistance more difficult.

Therefore, the actions so far are quite humble or limited in size. Some of the minor trade unions are quite active in organizing a broad campaign to defend the rights of workers and trade unions, democratic and creative education, affordable public services and humane community from “Hashism”. Major municipal employees have launched lawsuits against a series of unfair labour practices by the mayor and administration. Various forms of struggles against forcing to sing Kimigayo (the anthem) and raise Hinomaru (the “national flag”) have been continuing despite

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concerted intimidation against teachers involved. Young people began to organize themselves and raise their voices. In town meetings arranged to explain the city’s plan of education reform, storms of criticism from parents and people in the community often prevail. There have been meetings of hundreds of people repeatedly at the city hall to express their objection to “Hashism”. Efforts are taken to overcome the division of the progressive forces and cooperate each other in order to broaden the scope of the struggle.

In late February, two leaders of education workers from Wisconsin visited Osaka at the invitation of Osaka Social Forum 2012 [7] and shared their story about the courageous struggle against Governor, Walker in February to march last year. They attended 5 meetings in Osaka and Kyoto, where they impressed and encouraged hundreds of workers including teachers and retired workers.

These are only the first stage of the resistance. But the historic uprising of workers, students, farmers and citizens in Wisconsin proved that people are ready to fight back in order to defend their rights. Bold and continuous actions and dissemination of our alternative of participatory democracy would change the people’s mind-set gradually. Although this fight is being fought in Osaka, the outcome of the fight will determine whether Hashism grows to be a real danger of fascism or workers and citizens derail it. The stake is very high and the battle has only begun.

[1] <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind...>

[2] The national anthem (“Kimigayo”) and the national flag (“Hinomaru”) have been very controversial in Japan because of the historical background. See, for example, “Hashimoto stalks anthem foes” (“The Japan Times Online”, May 27, 2011) [=> <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20110527a2.html>] and “Osaka should respect ruling on Kimigayo, Hinomaru” (The Asahi Shimbun, Jan. 18, 2012) <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/views/...>

[3] The ordinances were passed at the prefecture assembly in March, 2012 and are scheduled to be voted on at the city assembly in June. LDP and Komei Party expressed their support to the ordinances after Ishin accepted some amendments suggested by them.

[4] Mayor: Hashimoto got 750,813 votes while Hiramatsu got 522,641. Governor: Matusi got 2,006,195 votes while Kurata (supported by DP) got 1,202,034 and Umeda (supported by Communist Party) 357,159. It is said that most of the supporters of Komei Party, a Buddhist Party which has been allying with LDP, voted for Hashimoto and Matsui. LDP was split between anti-Ishin group and “appeasing” group.

[5] <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/nationa...>

[6] [For the general political scene, se...](#)

[7] <http://osaka.socialforum.jp/>