

## A New Imperial Measure

It was almost too convenient to have been natural. By expiring early on Saturday morning Emperor Hirohito caused minimum disruption to the nation he left behind. The financial markets had to close that morning, but Saturday only ever sees light trading anyway. Banks, railways and printers had all of Sunday to reprogramme their computers and ticket machines to the new era *Heisei*. There is the strong suspicion that the emperor was allowed to die at a time that best suited those who remained, especially the conservatives.

For several years now those on the Left in Japan have feared that the death of Hirohito would provide the hawks within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the ultra-nationalist Right with the chance to revive old ideas about the nature of the Japanese state and the role of the Emperor within it. Politicians such as former prime minister Nakasone, have made no secret of their desire to revise the constitution which was imposed on Japan by the Americans in 1946 to eliminate its 'alien' nature. At least they wish to remove the 'peace clause' in which Japan renounces 'the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes'. Others would like to see the emperor becoming more central to the constitutional apparatus.

In June there has to be an election to the weaker of the two houses that make up Japan's parliament - the House of Councillors - and a general election to the House of Representatives has to be held before mid-summer 1990. The opposition parties must fear that the LDP will seek to use the wave of interest in the imperial institution to improve its image in the eyes of the electorate. This is all the more important in view of the damage to the LDP's reputation caused



The Emperor's new clothes, or still the old imperial mystique?

by the revelations in late 1988 and early this year that several of its leaders including the minister of finance had made large profits from insider dealing. The *Recruit* scandal had dominated the front pages since late November and the opposition had used the controversy to force policy concessions from the government.

The opposition parties can be divided into three groups: the centre-Left consisting of the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP - 6% of the popular vote at the last general election) and the Clean Government Party (CGP - 9%) an offshoot of a lay Buddhist organisation; the Japan Socialist Party (JSP - 17%) and the Japan Communist Party (JCP - 8%). Weak and divided, the opposition's best chance of attacking the LDP and reducing its electoral popularity has always been on the occasions of the scandals which surface every few years. Their task over the next few months will be to prevent the LDP from dominating the political arena through manipulation of the

new emperor.

It is the Communist Party which has shown most implacable opposition to the emperor system. Their newspaper (*Akahata* Red Flag, daily sales around 500,000) has in the past few days reminded its readers that the former emperor bore ultimate responsibility for the aggressive war in Asia and the suppression of human rights in pre-war Japan. In addition they have refused to attend any of the ceremonies held by the new emperor. The JSP has concentrated its attention on

urging that the religious (Shinto) aspects of the funeral be kept separate from the political. To mix the two, it argues, runs contrary to the spirit of the constitution which requires the state to remain aloof from religious matters. The two centre-left parties meanwhile have indicated they will attend all the ceremonies to be held over the next few weeks and have offered little criticism of their form or content.

The early indications are that the worst fears of the Left are unwarranted. In his first public speech the new emperor, Akihito, echoed the government line that his father had 'prayed for world peace and the welfare of his people' but he also pledged himself to uphold the constitution. This would seem to weaken the position of those on the Right who would like far-reaching constitutional revision which would place more power in the hands of the emperor. The death of Hirohito may have destroyed the mystique surrounding the imperial institution. Already *Spitting Image*-type dolls of the UK queen have been shown on Japanese television - perhaps indicating a new wave of openness of criticism of the Japanese royals.

But there is still a long way to go. It will be over a year before the formal enthronement of the new emperor, Akihito. Media attention is bound to be focused on him throughout this time. Progressive groups in Japan will have a hard time making their voices heard. •  
*Ian Neary*

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