

A Small Town Election: Nago City, January 2010

Town hall Japanese politics is rarely of much interest beyond the town, much less beyond the country, but the 24 January election of a new mayor in Nago City (population: 60,000; 45,000 eligible voters) was far from ordinary; no local election in post-war Japan carried such weight. By 17,950 to 16,362 (in a 77 per cent poll) challenger Inamine Susumu, supported by the Democratic Party and its coalition partners together with labour and civic organizations, defeated incumbent Shimabukuro Yoshikazu, supported by the LDP (and its Komeito partner) and by construction related business interests.

The election was not a plebiscite, and a majority of voters attached higher priority to matters other than the base (welfare, the environment, and education), but it served nevertheless as a sign that the base was not wanted, confirming the evidence of opinion polls declaring a 70 per cent level of Nago City opposition to the Henoko project.¹

The reverberations will continue for some time, shaking governments in Tokyo and Washington and compelling them to take back to the drawing board the 2005-6 agreements on reorganization of US forces in Japan and the 2009 Guam Treaty. For Nago itself, the Inamine victory marked an absolute caesura. It put an end to 13 years of bitter division and uncertainty. When first the idea of a Henoko base was raised in 1996, the City mobilized to reject it. A plebiscite in 1997 delivered a clear negative verdict but the then mayor, Higa Tetsuya, after reporting the outcome to the national government then rejected it, declaring that Nago City would cooperate in the base project, and resigned. Inamine's 2010 victory over Shimabukuro (whose campaign manager was Higa) put decisive end to the 13 years of confusion initiated by this shocking, anti-democratic gesture.

It is a paradox that, while surveys found popular opposition to the base scarcely faltering, mayors in the Higa mould, supported by special interest business groups, were elected in 1998, 2002 and 2006. The Nago ruling coalition was held together by the conviction that the best hope for Okinawa's depressed economy, and for advancing special interests and thereby lining their own pockets, was to cooperate with the national government in servicing the US military.

Divisions in the opposition camp to some extent helped the pro-base cause during this decade, but the base compliant forces also developed a formidable framework of equivocation, obfuscation, and conditionality. Within that frame, the base system was sustained locally by a politics of deception similar to that of secret diplomacy and lies that served the "alliance" at the national level. LDP-supported mayors and city governments did what they could to divert attention from the base issue and to concentrate it instead on the jobs and fees and other economic benefits that were supposed to flow from cooperation with Tokyo. In so far as the base was mentioned it was always in terms of qualified, conditional acceptance. Nobody would agree to a permanent, substantial US military facility, and so nobody could ever say, "What this city needs is a new US base..." It was therefore initially called a "heliport," a small,

¹ Surveys by *Yomiuri shimbun*, *Okinawa Times* and *Asahi shimbun*, and *Ryukyu shimpō* and Okinawa TV, published 19 January 2010, found: 73, 65, and 69 per cent respectively wanting the Futenma base relocated outside Okinawa. See Urashima Etsuko and Gavan McCormack, "Electing a town mayor in Okinawa," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 21 January 2010.

demountable, joint civil-military use structure that would float on the sea for 15 years before being demolished. Chameleon-like, however, the project kept changing, and with each change it grew larger, more permanent, more threatening, till it became the giant reclamation, dual-runway and military port project of 2006.

The series of local government election victories during the decade initiated by Higa's betrayal gave LDP governments in Tokyo confidence that they could continue to pursue the base construction while dividing and buying off the opposition. But with the victory of the Democratic Party in the Lower House elections of August 2009, the balance of forces changed, and the Nago opposition, though tired by apparently endless struggle in their resolutely non-violent contest against the state, took heart.

Shimabukuro, guided and helped by his mentor Higa, fought a desperate campaign. During election week, his camp took advantage of the provision in the election system for early voting to mobilize local businesses (promising them lucrative construction contracts) and press them to muster advance votes collectively, business by business. An astonishing 14, 239 (31.7% of the electorate) did vote in advance, well above the 30 per cent of the previous, 2006, election."² Though he was the best hope of the pro-base cause, Shimabukuro avoided any mention of it other than to say it was something for the national government to decide, painting himself as a critic of the Guam treaty plan and as one who favoured the "offshore" option that had been under consideration in 1998-2005. By 2010, however no one in Tokyo or Washington was interested in this option. By 24 January, even Nago business seemed to have lost faith in the Higa-Shimabukuro model. Dependence on national government handouts dished out for compliance on base matters had served only to deepen the city's economic doldrums.

What the January election showed was that the tide had indeed changed, perhaps decisively. Inamine pledged to prevent the seas of Henoko being made the site for a new military base, to put an end to the special interests (associated in particular with former mayor Higa) tied up with the base that had destroyed the city's finances and demoralized its citizens, and to give priority to economic policies geared to locally sustainable jobs in harmony with the environment. Beyond the specific promises, however, what Nago City electors were asking of him was that he lift the curse imposed on the city 13 years earlier by his predecessor's betrayal.

Gavan McCormack,
25 January 2010

² 31.7 per cent of the electorate cast "advance" votes. On 19 January, citizen groups supporting Inamine lodged a complaint with the Election Commission, arguing that the mobilization of advance votes was in breach of the Public Office Election Law and the antithesis of free voting. (Urashima and McCormack, cit.)