



Asia Pacific Bulletin

EastWestCenter.org/APB

Number 218 | June 28, 2013

Japanese Historical Reconciliation Should Begin at Home with Okinawa

BY SOMEI KOBAYASHI

Somei Kobayashi, recent Japan Studies Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “Japan-Okinawa historical reconciliation that is premised on human rights could become a prototype for historical reconciliation between Japan and other Asian states.”

The relatively small island of Okinawa in southern Japan has great significance not only in the modern history of Japan, but also for today. The people of Okinawa are frustrated with both their own government and the US government, primarily because of the presence of US military bases on the island. Today, this distrust and anger towards both governments is reaching a boiling point with many Okinawans believing that they are victims of discrimination from their government in Tokyo. Since the administration of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was inaugurated in late 2012, Japan has been contending with questions regarding the interpretation of history and Japanese treatment of countries it occupied during WWII—especially China and South Korea. However, it is time that Japan looked closer to home to the grievances of the people of Okinawa.

The island of Okinawa, once known as the Ryukyu Kingdom, has its own unique culture and language. In 1879 the Meiji government of Japan unilaterally abolished the Kingship of Ryukyu and incorporated the island into the Japanese Empire as Okinawa Prefecture. The reason was that the Japanese government aimed to utilize Okinawa as a central defense point against the imperialism of western countries towards Asia. Indeed, the Japanese government defined Okinawa as “the South Gate of Empire for national defense” against external intruding powers. To successfully implement this policy, the Japanese government needed to incorporate Okinawa into Japanese territory. If Okinawans were not “Japanese,” how could the government task them to defend Japan against encroaching western powers? After incorporation into Japan as Okinawa Prefecture the indigenous population was subject to Japanese colonial rule. The result was that Ryukyuan culture and language were abolished and “Japanese culture” was introduced under the guise of Meiji “modernization.”

Almost seventy years later, during WWII, Okinawa bore the full brunt of its association with Japan when US forces captured the island for a bridgehead to attack the mainland. During the three-month bloody assault in 1945, approximately 20 percent of the indigenous Okinawan population was killed—over 122,000 people—both civilians and military. An additional 66,000 military personnel from the Japanese mainland were also killed, alongside over 12,000 from the United States.

Many Okinawans still bitterly remember that period in their history when they were “sacrificed” by Tokyo to defend Japan. Even after the end of WWII when the San Francisco Peace Treaty came into force on April 28, 1952, returning sovereignty to Japan, Okinawa still remained under the control of the United States. While the Japanese government had residual sovereignty over the island, administrative rights were firmly under US jurisdiction and the United States continued to occupy

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

“Historical reconciliation by the Japanese central government and the people of Okinawa could potentially result in a more equitable relationship between the two parties.”

Okinawa. The people of Okinawa remember the date of April 28 as “Mortification Day,” the day the Japanese government abandoned Okinawa while gaining their own independence from US occupation.

Throughout the Cold War, Okinawa continued to be subjected to US control hosting a large number of US military bases. As a result, Okinawa became known as the “unsinkable US aircraft carrier” and the US government considered the island to be the “Keystone of the Pacific.” Over the years, resentment by the Okinawan people towards the central government in Tokyo has steadily increased. Most Okinawans believe they were sacrificed by Tokyo for Japan’s defense, at little to no cost for the remainder of the Japanese population. Even when the United States finally returned administration of Okinawa to the Japanese government in 1972, more than 70 percent of the military bases in Japan remained on Okinawa—and still do today. This is a serious bone of contention for Okinawans, taking into consideration that the island accounts for less than one percent of Japan’s land mass.

There is a collective sense amongst Okinawans that the Japanese government fails to acknowledge these facts, and treats them as second-class Japanese citizens. There is an ongoing debate within Okinawa about seeking independence from Japan. This further complicates relations between Okinawa and Tokyo. The present situation affects not only Japanese domestic politics, but also has broader policy implications for the US-Japan alliance, and Japan’s security posture in the wider Asia-Pacific region. Historical reconciliation by the Japanese central government and the people of Okinawa could potentially result in a more equitable relationship between the two parties.

The first move that the Japanese government and people should make in an effort to reconcile with Okinawa is to objectively review the Ryukyu-Japan historical relationship. In particular, mainlanders should understand that the Okinawan people have long suffered subjugation from rulers in Tokyo, and that many mainland historical revisionists attempt to erase this narrative. An objective review of historical Ryukyu-Japan relations since the 19th century reveals the existence of inequalities and discrimination between the Okinawan and Japanese people. Another point is that while under US administration until 1972, Okinawans were excluded from attaining Japanese citizenship, even though they were Japanese nationals. Therefore, their fundamental basic human rights were not even acknowledged, let alone respected.

The Okinawan people have long believed that, collectively, they have carried a heavy burden hosting US military bases and this in turn had had a detrimental effect upon their standard of living. A full understanding of Okinawan history is a lesson in human rights and human dignity. To fully embrace historical reconciliation, the Japanese government and people should acknowledge the aspirations of the Okinawan people to live without the burden of hosting the majority of US military bases in Japan. For this aspiration to be realized, the number of US military forces on the island has to be reduced. Both the Japanese central government and the US government have a role to play in this.

This process will not be easy, but it is necessary. A peaceful and content Okinawan prefecture would go a long way towards stabilizing Japan-Okinawa relations and would also have a positive impact upon the wider bilateral US-Japan relationship and beyond, impacting both Japanese and regional security. Furthermore, Japan-Okinawa historical reconciliation that is premised on human rights could become a prototype for historical reconciliation between Japan and other Asian states. Mainland Japanese citizens need to understand that reconciliation with Okinawa has to be addressed, and the sooner the better.

The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington.

APB Series Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye
APB Series Coordinator: Damien Tomkins

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the East-West Center or any organization with which the author is affiliated.