

Japan: Protesting For Peace

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On Sunday, 30 August 2015, more than 100,000 Japanese protested in the vicinity of the Japanese parliament against new security bills tabled in the upper legislative chamber by the Shinto Abe government. About 300 similar rallies were held in different cities all over the country. One television station estimated that perhaps a million people had participated in the mass protests.

There is overwhelming opposition to the bills which allow the Japanese armed forces to engage in overseas combat if that was required to protect Japanese interests. Protecting Japanese interests is given a wide interpretation as to include cooperating militarily with allies in foreign operations. Prime Minister Abe sees this as a form of “collective self-defence.” The bills were passed by the powerful lower legislative chamber in July 2015, in spite of popular opposition. They are almost certain to be adopted by the upper chamber at the end of September where Abe’s ruling bloc has a majority.

Most Japanese constitutional scholars argue that the bills violate the Japanese Constitution, specifically Article 9. Under Article 9, “the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes.” This is why they, and a whole spectrum of academics from various other disciplines, have denounced Abe’s security bills and are campaigning for the preservation of the sanctity of Article 9.

A lot of Japanese are afraid that if the bills are passed, Japan would be drawn into regional and global armed conflicts that serve the narrow interests of elites at home and in the United States who want Japan to play a more direct and decisive role in containing China. It follows from this that Japan’s relations with China could deteriorate further. North Korea could become even more hostile towards Japan. Ties with South Korea could take a turn for the worse. Japan could find itself adopting military postures on behalf of one party or the other in unresolved territorial disputes in the South China Sea. In a nutshell, Japan’s interaction with the rest of Asia would be fraught with new challenges expressed through friction and tension.

This is why ASEAN citizens and other Asians should be deeply concerned about what is happening now in Japan. If Japan seeks a more militaristically oriented role, it would have an adverse impact upon present and future generations in the continent. We should make it abundantly clear that we do not want to see Japan embroiled in wars and conflicts in other lands. We should be explicit in our support for Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution. In 2007 and in 2014, in inter-religious conferences in Tokyo, I had underlined the significance of Article 9 to peace in Asia and the world. Article 9, I opined, should be incorporated into the constitution of every nation on earth.

At a time like this when Article 9 is being subverted by powerful forces within and without Japan, we should stand shoulder to shoulder with our sisters and brothers in Japan as they demonstrate their total commitment to peace.

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