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Can the Unified Lines of Battle in Okinawa Be Extended?

by Kumagai Shinichiro

Translators' note: It is impossible not to be moved by the story of Itokazu Keiko's recent campaign for the House of Councilors. Her political awakening, rooted in her mother's horrific wartime experiences in the Battle of Okinawa, points to the continuing importance of the Pacific War in the Okinawan political imagination. However, this essay is much more than a consideration of the role of memory in political struggles. It draws attention to the failure of any single political party in contemporary Japan to adequately represent the interests of a majority of citizens. The hegemony of the Liberal Democratic Party has been replaced by a fragmented field of competing political organizations and efforts to form viable coalitions. The author argues that Okinawa's unique success in forging a coalition of reformist parties capable of challenging the primacy of the ruling conservative coalition of the Liberal Democratic and New Komei Parties demands attention. Unlike the pessimistic and essentializing conclusions of a national official of the Japanese Communist Party cited in the text, the author shows that this coalition cannot simply be attributed to the unique historical experience of the Okinawan people. Instead, coalitions are the result of careful, grounded and principled negotiations, and that they can be driven by the efforts of groups and movements outside of the conventional field of political parties. Social movements have once again provided the engine for political organization in Okinawa at a time when reform forces throughout much of Japan remain divided.

Itokazu Keiko was successful in her bid for election to the House of Councilors.

It was on the third anniversary of her mother's death that Itokazu Keiko, a bus guide who narrated the events of the Battle of Okinawa, first heard of her mother's wartime experiences from her aunt. "She said that right before the Battle of Okinawa ended, my mother gave birth to a baby girl on the battlefield. That was the birth of my older sister. But she just lived for one week. What's more, my aunt said that in the next week, my three-year-old elder brother died of malnutrition and malaria."

Itokazu's mother couldn't accept her son's death. Day after day, she fled through the mountains with the child's body on her back.

"My aunt and grandmother couldn't bear to see my mother carrying the decomposing body of her son around on her back, so they decided to bury him. He was buried alongside the body of his infant sister. My mother screamed that she didn't want them to bury him, and afterwards, she dug him up once again."

While narrating wartime experiences for so many tourists, she didn't know about those of her own mother.

"My mother was so cheerful -- how could this have happened to her? When I learned about it, I cried all night long. I just couldn't stand it that a war like this could so cruelly rip away someone's life. I didn't want to experience what my mother had been through. I didn't want to let my children experience it."

This was when Itokazu started to work as a Peace Guide. She began a study group and she also taught many of her junior colleagues. Within a short time, she received strong backing of women and was elected to three consecutive terms in the prefectural assembly as a representative of the Okinawan Social Mass Party (Okinawa Shakai Taishuto, or Shadaito). A united front of opposition parties put her forward for the House of Councilors election, where she was to go up against Onaga Masatoshi, the nominee of the Liberal Democratic and New Komei Parties.

The crumbling tradition of a united front for reform

The history of the unified struggle for reform in Okinawa goes back to the election of a legislative assembly under the American Occupation. In a typical gerrymander, there was a division into arbitrary small electoral districts so as to create circumstances favorable to the American military authorities.

"In the struggle against the US occupation, when the power to return to Japanese sovereignty was divided, we simply couldn't fight. That is when we began to reduce the number of candidates to a single person so that we could fight as a united front."
Akamine Seiken, Okinawa Prefectural Head of the Japanese Communist Party, describes it this way: "In the victory of the Governor in the first state elections, and in the sweeping victories in the elections of various leaders of organizations working for Okinawan autonomy in the 1970s, we learned that if we stood together, we would win." After that, it was taken for granted that in Okinawa, parties would fight together in a united front.

However, in the intervening years, fissures appeared. Three years ago, in the campaign for the House of Councilors, both the Social Democratic Party (Shaminto) and the Communist Party put forward their own candidates. In the divided outcome, they were beaten by the LDP candidate. 20,000 votes separated the Social Democratic and Liberal Democratic Party candidates: with the 46,000 votes that the Communist Party received, one can assume that a united front of opposition parties would have won.

The 2002 gubernatorial election was also divided. While it was policy that was under negotiation, everything was fine; but with the selection of a candidate, the going got rough. The coalition of the Democratic, Social Democratic and Social Mass Parties put forward one candidate; the Communist Party also put forward their own candidate. As Aragaki Shigeo, Secretary of the Social Mass Party said, "That was the worst election."

Arasaki Moriteru, the former President of Okinawa University, had been deeply involved in efforts to reunify the united front for reform that had crumbled over the years. As he said, "The position of the split parties was so embarrassing that, even if their ballots were combined, it would not have been possible to match the votes cast for Inamine Keichi. I was disgusted."

When the Socialist Party became the Social Democratic Party, it changed its position to accept Ampo, the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. This policy change increased the political gulf separating it from the Communist Party which calls for the elimination of Ampo. Around the same time, the small constituency system helped the Democratic Party with its slogan of "ingenuity" to make headway in Okinawa.

"It is now impossible to imagine an election without the Democratic Party," said Taira Chosei, Secretary of the Okinawan branch of

the Social Democratic Party.

The Social Democratic Party also feels some distrust for the Communist Party. "I originally became a city assemblyman representing a coalition of the Socialist and Communist Parties," Taira recalls. "But a trivial thing changed our relationship and I was even branded as 'an enemy of welfare' in Akahata [Red Flag], the Communist Party publication. Since then, I no longer trust the Communist Party."

According to Arasaki, the coalition faced "irreparable disruption." Until now, reform groups oscillated between breakups and joint electoral defeats. What made it possible to accomplish a coalition victory this time?

Efforts to reestablish coalition

Secretary Aragaki addressed two turning points in the course of reestablishing the coalition this time.

"The first was a rapprochement with the Democratic Party. There was a movement to support a Democratic Party candidate. There was also a sudden plan to put Itokazu into a faction of the Democratic Party after her election in return for the Democratic Party's agreement not to advance its own candidate. On March 13, an agreement was signed among the Social Mass, Social Democratic, and Democratic Parties, indicating that the "faction to which Itokazu belongs will be carefully negotiated after an election victory."

The second turning point was a compromise with the Communist Party.

"We were negotiating with the Social Mass Party to support Ms. Itokazu as our joint candidate, but the agreement among the three parties changed our plans. All our effort to support her would be in vain if she were forced to join the Democratic Party after her election. Also, this agreement doesn't even address the question of the elimination of Ampo. There was also concern over a clause in the agreement prohibiting any changes for the worse to the Constitution. In this respect, the Democratic Party acts just like the LDP, saying that they're not going to change it for the worse because they're going to use their 'ingenuity' (the party slogan) to amend it for the better. We cannot possibly work together with people like this," said Akamine of the Communist Party. In the end, the Communist Party, fearing that the Democratic Party would attempt to eliminate the no war provision of the Constitution, announced that it would nominate its own candidate. Once again, it seemed that the reform parties would wind up in disarray.

"It was the grass-roots activists who have been committed to the anti-base movement that started to take charge out of a sense of emergency," continues Arasaki. "If the reform parties, having been defeated in the gubernatorial election, again squander their chance to win this election for the House of Councilors, the momentum for social movements would be greatly damaged. This was the impetus for activists to take charge. We were elated by them and started to move."

Seven people including Arasaki, Yamauchi Tokushin (former mayor of Yomitan Village) and Oyadomari Kosei (former mayor of Naha City) took the initiative to visit the offices of the Okinawan opposition parties. They personally negotiated with each party in the hope of reuniting them. On April 20, a citizens' assembly was held, triggering a burst of citizens' calls for unity. Oyadomari, whose four terms as mayor of Naha was made possible by a unified front of reform parties, began to speak quietly.

"Shimabukuro Soko, member of the House of Councilors and the Chairman of the Social Mass Party, came to my house asking me to lead a group of supporters for Itokazu Keiko who had been nominated to run for the House of Councilors. Since we are very close, I agreed. But I think it was the next day that I read a newspaper article about the agreement among three parties. Sensing that this would ruin any coalition, I immediately called the chairman and turned down his request to lead the group of supporters. I can enjoy this kind of responsibility and be energetic only when progressive forces unite and work together."

Itokazu Keiko and her supporters were also looking for unification.

"When I was offered the opportunity to run as a candidate from the Social Mass Party to replace Shimabukuro Soko, I said I would only run on the condition that the opposition parties unify. If the opposition parties split, it means we're helping the LDP," said Itokazu.

Itokazu Kazuo, secretary-general of the support group also spoke out. "The only parties that would benefit from our split would be the LDP and New Komei. We all felt that Okinawa's future would be doomed if we remained divided and lost again. We realized that we must reunite and win one seat in the Diet for peace, to represent Okinawa."

Thanks to mediation by Arasaki and others, negotiations between the Social Mass and Communist Parties resumed, and they signed a policy agreement including a position against Ampo as well as a memorandum to guarantee independent activity. The Communist Party then withdrew its own candidate. It was finally possible to nominate a candidate backed by all opposition parties: the Social Mass, Social Democratic, Communist and Democratic Parties as well as the Liberal League and the Greens.

Influence on other areas

In Tokyo and Hiroshima movements to support a unified candidate didn't succeed. Why is it that only Okinawa could achieve a coalition of opposition parties? In part, it might be due to the fact that Okinawa has had a history of coalitions since the era of the reversion struggle. Okinawans also experienced the Battle of Okinawa. They also experience contradictions of national policies as they emerge in everyday life.

Does this mean that other areas have to accept the lack of coalitions?
Ohata Moto, Director of Elections of the Communist Party Central Committee, addressed the question in this way:

"Opposition parties can be united in the Diet to stand up against misrule by the LDP and New Komei, but in terms of the basic issues of national politics, our political positions are varied. The Democratic Party somewhat resembles the LDP; aside from us, no party demands scrapping Ampo. We're nowhere close to signing an agreement and fighting together in the arena of national elections."

"Basically, Okinawa has built successful coalitions on the basis of the unique nature of its historical background. So, we are unlikely to see any effects from it in other areas for some time. For a political party, elections are the best opportunities for political activity, so it is critical for them to nominate their own candidates and promote their policies. Also, under a system dominated by two major parties, the Social Democratic and Communist Parties might be forced to give up their own candidates," said Fukushima Mizuho, head of the Social Democratic Party.

"Just because Okinawa could make it happen, it doesn't follow that other areas will be able to duplicate its success. This is because the tendency toward two major parties is rooted in the small electoral district system in the House of Representatives is affecting the House of Councillors," commented Green representative Nakamura Atsuo.

The reason for Okinawa's success in sustaining a coalition in the face of a system with two major parties was, according to Aragaki, secretary of Social Mass Party, that "Okinawa originally had an established system of two major coalitions of reform groups and the conservative party."

One of the organizers of a group called the Association to Promote the Victory of Itokazu Keiko is Muraoka Itaru, editor of "Chaos and Logos."

"Since Koizumi is having his way in almost everything, it is really necessary to establish a coalition in order to fight back. But it becomes difficult when there are deep-rooted mentalities, such as hatred for the Communist Party. Also the Communist Party feels that it can manage an election on its own. Still, here we have an example showing that a coalition can be achieved when movements rise up from below," he stated.

In Okinawa, citizens' groups and intellectuals have revitalized failing coalitions. Isn't it time for citizens' groups and labor unions in other parts of the country to become more involved in forging coalitions for elections?

It is hard to forecast what will happen to this coalition in Okinawa.

"The alliance between the Social Democratic, Social Mass and Democratic Parties will be the basic organizational structure in the future," said Chairman Taira of the Okinawan branch of the Social Democratic Party.

"Coalition is not just about consolidating parties. It is an act of addressing the unusual local aspect of Okinawa in one voice such as the burden of bearing 75% of the U.S. military bases in Japan. This is our creed," asserted Arasaki Moriteru.

"Ideally, we will be able to keep this coalition going. Without coalition and solidarity, there can be no victory for the protection of the lives of people in this prefecture. Since we have achieved a coalition this time, I must win this election and carry the message of the suffering that people endure because of the military bases to national politics," concluded Itokazu Keiko.

"The power of coalition does not end in a formula of one plus one equals two. It becomes three and then four. In fact, it's multiplication, not addition." I cannot forget this comment from a woman campaigning for Itokazu Keiko's election.

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