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by David McNeill

Nagai Eishun is part of a dying breed, a man who would rather have his life ruined than stand to attention for a flag and anthem he despises. "Not so long ago, everyone I knew thought the same as me but times have changed a lot," says the 56-year-old Tokyo high-school teacher. "Our numbers are dwindling, but we have to keep fighting. Educational freedom in Japan depends on it."

In other countries, standing for the national anthem is a source of pride but in Japan the anthem is the Kimigayo (His Majesty's Reign), the same dirge that rang in the ears of millions of Imperial troops who went off to kill in the name of the Emperor in Asia during World War II. Since 1999, the playing of the anthem and the flying of the Hinomaru (Rising Sun) flag, have been compulsory at Japanese school ceremonies, but some teachers refuse to toe the line. Invariably, controversy erupts every year in March when the flag flutters at graduation ceremonies across the country.

"It's as though Germany brought back the Nazi Swastika and forced teachers to stand for it," says Suzuki Kazuhisa, who teaches civics at a high school in Kanagawa Prefecture. "If teachers don't fight it, who will?" For the last five years, Mr. Suzuki has demonstrated at his school's graduation ceremonies against the anthem and flag by wearing a white rose and raising his clenched fist in the air, a protest that has almost cost him his job.

Mr. Suzuki is not alone. Hundreds of teachers have been officially cautioned or disciplined for similar offenses, and pressure to follow the new directive is widely blamed for the suicide of Ishikawa Toshihiro, a Hiroshima high school head teacher who found himself sandwiched between the demands of the local education board and his overwhelmingly anti-anthem staff.

The fight over what were once the dividing symbols of left and right is one indicator of subtle but momentous political changes playing out in Japan could have enormous implications for the rest of the world. After half a century of living uneasily with the legacy of the no-war constitution and shunning the politics of nationalism, many observers say that Japan under Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro, is drifting steadily to the right.

Koizumi himself has led the charge with a sustained effort to rehabilitate another taboo symbol of Japan's militarist past, Yasukuni Shrine, which honors millions of Japanese war dead, including convicted World War II criminals. Despite angry protests from Imperial Japan's wartime victims China and South Korea, Koizumi has made four visits while in office to the shrine, and he says he intends to keep going.

"There's no question that there has been a resurgence in nationalism over the last couple of years," says Kato Tetsuro, a political scientist at Hitotsubashi University. "It has been going on for years but really accelerated when North Korea admitted to kidnapping Japanese citizens. You can see it in the attempt to introduce more patriotism into the schools, but

also in the increasingly tough talk against North Korea and the dispatch of Japanese Self-Defense Forces to Iraq. It's led by a large section of the (main ruling) Liberal Democrat Party under Koizumi Junichiro. They will now try to change the constitution."

Critics of the controversial SDF dispatch, which has put Japanese troops in a combat zone for the first time since World War II, say the move is illegal under Article 9 of the constitution, which prohibits offensive capability. Written during the postwar US occupation, the clause has long been a target of the nationalist right and steadfastly defended by the left. But the social democrats and communists were decimated in last November's general election and the main opposition Democratic Party of Japan support constitutional revision, making it probably only a matter of time before Article 9 disappears.

Should that happen, Japan is not short of military hardware or troops (see box). Official pacifism has not stopped the country from building up one of the world's most formidable war machines, mainly thanks to its key ally the U.S. The obvious potential target in the short term is troublesome neighbor North Korea, but many believe Japan's real worry is the unstoppable rise of China. A number of nationalists, including Tokyo's controversial governor Ishihara Shintaro, have said they think China should be "broken up" to prevent it becoming a threat to the region.

Politically a minnow on the world stage, Japan is potentially a military giant. The world's second largest economy boasts an army of 238,000 who are probably the best-equipped troops in the planet outside of the US, thanks to Japan's fifty-year alliance with Washington. The 45,000 Air Self-Defense Force personnel fly a fleet of 203 F-15 fighters, and 32 F-2 fighters (Japan is one of only three countries (the others are Saudi Arabia and Israel) permitted to

purchase F-15s). The Maritime forces have four Aegis-equipped destroyers, carrying a price tag of 120 billion yen each. In addition, there are more than 40,000 US soldiers permanently stationed in bases across Japan.

Although hardly combat-tested, Japanese troops are disciplined, highly trained and well-paid: A Tokyo magazine reported that SDF personnel in Iraq will get up to 24,000 yen (approximately \$200) a day while serving in Iraq. The family of an SDF member killed in the line of duty in Iraq is likely to receive up 90-100 million yen.

Japan has no nuclear weapons but, as leading politician Ichiro Ozawa boasted in 2002, the country could go nuclear in months. Already a major nuclear power and a technological superpower, all that is standing in the way is the lack of political will and the opposition of the country's anti-nuclear lobby.

All this of course is deeply disturbing to Japan's dwindling band of progressives and pacifists, many of whom can be found teaching in public schools across the country. Because of the key role of wartime educators in forging a nation of Emperor-worshipping militarists, many teachers have tried to hold the line against the state's more regressive moves. For this reason, Mr. Nagai is leading a last-ditch effort to force the authorities to respect what he calls "the right to freedom of thought," by taking the Tokyo Education Board to court. His group of 228 teachers, mostly in their forties and fifties, who work at public schools across the city filed a lawsuit last month demanding that the Metropolitan Government pay them the nominal sum of 30,000 yen each for the "psychological suffering" caused by the directive.

The choice of Tokyo as the venue for the final showdown over the anthem and flag is no coincidence. Under Governor Ishihara, the city

has taken an especially hard line against recalcitrant teachers. Last October, Tokyo upped the ante in the flag/anthem dispute by ordering schools across the city to drape the flag prominently across the front stage at enrollment and graduation ceremonies (some schools had merely hung it offstage), and by changing the wording of a directive referring to protesting teachers from "may be punished" to "will be punished" for not singing the anthem. Needless to say, there is no love lost between Governor Ishihara and the teachers.

"In my view, Japan is drifting back toward fascism and Ishihara is one of the main reasons why," says Mr. Nagai. "How can he just order people to stand and sing for these symbols when he knows what they stand for? It's absolutely unforgivable." The teachers say their fight is supported by thousands of other educators and millions of ordinary Japanese who resent the centrally imposed directive, but there are signs that the once hated symbols are slowly losing their potency. "The anthem brings back bad memories for older people who had relatives killed in the war," says housewife Shimoda Harumi. "So I'm against being forced to sing it, but I think the teachers are going too far. It means nothing to young people."

The anthem and flag are prominently featured in the wall-to-wall TV coverage of the dispatch of SDF troops, who are sent off in militaristic, pomp-laden ceremonies that sit uneasily with Japan's declared humanitarian goals in Iraq. There are clear indications that the coverage has helped shift once solidly hostile public opinion. A Mainichi Shimbun survey last December found almost 60 percent of Japanese people opposed to the dispatch of troops to Iraq. By February, this had dropped to 47 percent, according the same newspaper, the same percentage that supported the dispatch.

The decision to take their battle to court is likely to cost the teachers dearly. Already, most are millions of yen out of pocket thanks to the

decision by teachers union Nikkyoso to not support them and, with the litigation likely to take up to ten years to work its way to the High Court, the costs will mount. A Nikkyoso spokesman said that while they opposed the 1999 directive and defended teachers disciplined for refusing to respect the national anthem and flag, they could not support "offensive" measures such as the Nagai-led litigation. According to Mr. Nagai, the union's reluctance to aggressively challenge the government reflects its steady rightward drift since the formation of the moderate Japan Confederation of Trade Unions (RENGO), which shuns militant trade unions and favors accommodation with employers. "Nikkyoso has been growing weaker for years," he says. "But since the [former] Socialist Party went into power with the LDP [in 1993 as part of a short-lived coalition government] they've abandoned us. It's a huge problem for us."

Many teachers have been told, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, that the court case is a bad move. "I've had calls from ultra-nationalists threatening to kill me, and violence is a real possibility," says Mr. Nagai. "Ten years ago when my children were still in school I might have had second thoughts but now there's just my wife, who is also a teacher, and she supports me. We're determined to see this to the end."

The prospects for victory are not good. The Tokyo District Court ruled in December last year against a teacher who sued the education board after being reprimanded for refusing to play the Kimigayo anthem on the piano during a school ceremony. Even when district courts rule in the plaintiff's favor in Japan, the High Court overrules them in most cases. Still, the teachers say they are fighting to win, "for the next generation."

"I'm personally against the directive," says Mr. Nagai, "but more important, I'm against forcing children to sing the anthem and stand for the



flag. That's called brainwashing. Schools change first, then society so our responsibility as educators is clear if we see something bad happening. And in my heart, I believe this is bad."

A shorter version of this article appeared in the London Independent newspaper on February 18, 2004.

David McNeill is a freelance writer and teacher living in Tokyo.