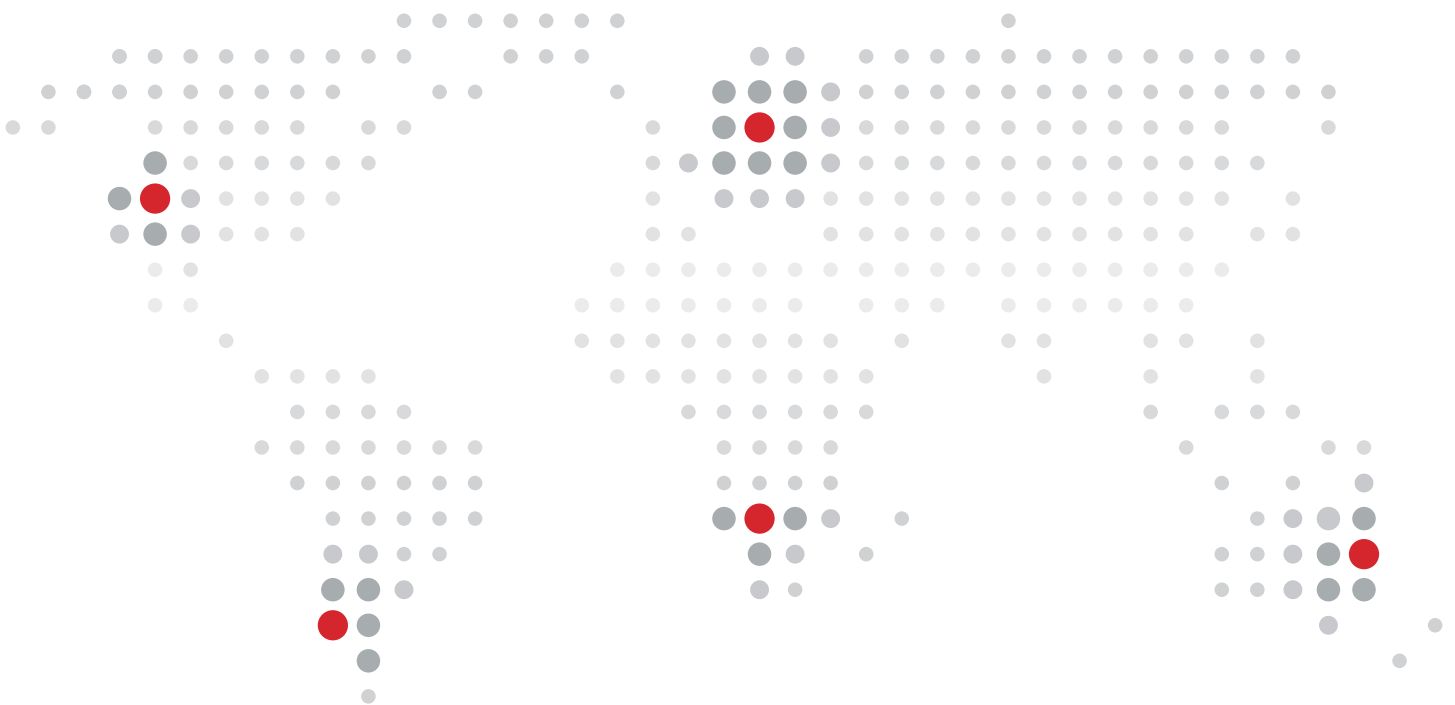


Fake news all round? How Shinzo Abe is making Japan a “beautiful country”

SVEN SAALER

January 2020





When Shinzo Abe became prime minister of Japan for the first time in 2006, he set out his political vision in a book. *Towards a Beautiful Country* became a bestseller – people were naturally curious as to what the new head of government had to say. Most readers were disappointed, though, as the book was little more than a collection of Abe's speeches and lacked coherence. But the title suggested a certain logic: it seemed that, to Shinzo Abe, Japan was not yet a beautiful country; rather, it was a nation still awaiting beautification.

Although Abe did not clarify how he would set about this task, a political slogan that he had started to use around the time the book was published – “putting the post-war regime behind us” – offered observers a clue. Making no secret of his opposition to the measures introduced during the Allied occupation of Japan following World War II under the banner of the “democratization” of Japan, Abe set out to revise the 1947 constitution, a document which still remains popular in Japan, as well as the Fundamental Law of Education. While during the war children had been brought up to be obedient and willing to sacrifice themselves for the state, “moral education” classes were abolished by the occupying power and school history lessons were stripped of racist and militaristic rhetoric. These measures laid the foundations for the pacifist attitudes that still remain deeply rooted within Japanese society.

Shinzo Abe has consistently opposed what he describes as Japan's “postwar regime.” During his first term in office, he revised the national education law. Later, the indoctrination of children with “patriotic values” became an official educational goal. Abe himself likes to refer to a “healthy nationalism,” which he contrasts with the deeply rooted pacifist strand in Japanese society. Against the backdrop of the ultranationalism of the prewar and wartime periods, this neo-nationalist rhetoric rings alarm bells for Japan's Asian neighbors who suffered under Japanese militarism and colonial rule.

Aside from his revision of the education law, Shinzo Abe failed to introduce any further neo-nationalist measures during his first term. After only a year as prime minister, he resigned in 2007, without even laying the groundwork for his major political goal,

the revision of the constitution. However, after the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) – battered from the outset by the 2008 world financial crisis and later by the triple catastrophe of 2011 (the massive earthquake and tsunami in Northeast Japan and the nuclear disaster in Fukushima) – was forced to resign, its progressive administration massively discredited through conservative media campaigns, Abe staged a comeback. He was elected for a second term at the end of 2012 and has since been a vigorous proponent of constitutional reform, making it his government's chief priority for 2019.

As the revision of the constitution is not a major concern for most Japanese, during his second stint as prime minister Abe has adopted a more strategic approach and has emphasized economic policy as the centerpiece of his government's agenda. In none-too-modest fashion, he has dubbed these policies “Abenomics” and since their introduction has been busy touting the success of his economic policies on various international platforms.

Abe's catchphrase about a “beautiful country” took on a completely different meaning in this context, as the Abenomics PR campaign is indeed an attempt at beautification – in the sense of providing window dressing. Abenomics has done nothing to improve the quality of life enjoyed by ordinary people. Incomes have been stagnant for more than two decades, and Abenomics has failed to change anything in this regard. And while the profits of large corporations have reached new heights under the Abe government, no trickle-down effects have been observed. Slight increases for low wage earners – so minimal that they can hardly be expressed as percentages – have been compensated for by rising taxes and insurance premiums. However, many Japanese are unaware of these trends, taken in by the government's extensive PR machinery and its manipulation of the media, which has led to a rapid fall in Japan's previously high rankings in the Press Freedom Index. Foreign observers have also been fooled by the government's glossy brochures and its impressive online presentation of the “positive results” of Abenomics.

Meanwhile, recent scandals have shown that this beautification of the “achievements” of Abenomics



has gone well beyond glossy brochures and websites. In early 2019, it was revealed that the statistics used by the government to demonstrate the success of Abenomics had also been “beautified” and, in many cases, were based on incorrectly interpreted or simply falsified statistics. For many years, irregularities have been reported in the work of many government ministries; the Japanese press has suggested that 40% of official statistics have been affected. Statistics on domestic income trends are at the core at the most recent scandal. This manipulation of official figures was exposed during a recent parliamentary discussion of Abenomics, where the opposition showed that the figures the government presented had been falsified. While the administration continued to insist that incomes had risen during 2018, the opposition showed that this was the result of manipulated statistics and that, on average, incomes had fallen.

These revelations have led to widespread distrust of the government’s multimedia presentations praising Abenomics—or indeed any information provided by this administration. This reaction is hardly surprising, considering that Abenomics has been nothing but a distraction from the beginning, introduced as a cover for Shinzo Abe’s major goal—the revision of the constitution. However, as in the past, this scandal failed to damage the government’s standing; according to the polls, the administration soon recovered from this setback. Thus it is likely that Abe will waste little time in once again turning his attention to the question of constitutional reform, a task which he referred to as his “lifework” in his 2006 book. If he achieves his aim, Japan could soon become a “beautiful country”—at least according to the prime minister’s definition of the term. If he is successful, the MAGA hats worn by Trump supporters in the US might also become a popular choice of headgear in Japan, reflecting one aspect of the prime minister’s personal agenda: “Make Abe Great Again.”



Imprint

© 2020

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Department of Western Europe /
North America
Division for International Dialogue Hiroshimastr. 28
10785 Berlin
Germany

Responsible:

Sven Saaler, FES Representative in Japan

FES Office Tokyo / Japan

Japan is an important partner for Germany in Asia. The two countries are key actors in the international arena and face similar political, social, economic and environmental challenges.

The FES Tokyo Office promotes Japanese-German dialogue, encourages multilateral discussions involving participants from East Asia, Europe and North America and helps to maintain and expand Euro-Japanese networks in politics, civil society and academia. The activities of the Tokyo office involve a broad spectrum of representatives from politics and civil society and it seeks to encourage academic exchange by organizing symposia and workshops.

Our activities focus primarily on security, climate and energy policy, but also extend to societal issues such as demographic trends in Japan and Germany and the high budget deficits in the industrialized world, including related economic issues such as recent developments in Japan's labor market and questions of consumer protection. Debates about historical legacies and history education in Europe and East Asia are also part of our program..

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
7-5-56 Akasaka
Minato-ku To-
kyo, 107-0052
Japan
Tel: (03)-6277-7551
Fax: (03) 3-3588-6035
E-Mail: office@fes-japan.org
www.fes-japan.org

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung or of the organization for which the author works.