A New Governor and a New Era for Okinawa Reflections of an All-Okinawa Activist

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Cries of "Shitaihya" and "Yushittai" (Okinawan words meaning "Well Done [People of Okinawa!]" and "Take That [Abe government!]" rang out across Okinawa. The 30 September 2018 gubernatorial election occasioned by the sudden death of Governor Onaga Takeshi was literally an all-out war between the Okinawan people doggedly opposing the construction of a new military base at Henoko and the Abe government trying by all means to crush the will of the people. As Onaga's second son, Takehiro, kept insisting during the election period, "this is not an election to be won, or an election we want to win, it is an election we simply must win at all costs." Needless to say, this election was not just a struggle against candidate Sakima Atsushi but against the Abe government that backed him, to decide whether or not former Governor Onaga Takeshi would be able to pass the baton of our struggle to the candidate (Tamaki Denny) who inherited his mission of no new base.

All-Out Struggle between the Abe Government and Okinawa

No sooner had the ballot boxes been closed at 8 pm on 30 September than the word spread that "Tamaki has won!" But having tasted the bitterness of defeat at the hands of the Abe government's dirty campaign in the February Nago City mayoral election, in which the ruling LDP and Komeito mobilised money and authority, we could not immediately believe that we had really won. "Impossible, counting has only just started," some said. At Nago the combination of "avoid discussion of the key issue" [i.e., the base problem] and abundant resources produced the desired result, so the government applied the same means, themselves referring to it as its "Nago-formula" or "victory formula," to the gubernatorial election. Furthermore, this time more than 70,000 "Ishin" (Japan Innovation Party) voters who had voted for Shimoji Mikio in the last election could be added to the Sakima support base, so, counting Komeito votes that last time had been left up to individuals, the government felt confident that Sakima would be able to make up the 100,000 margin of former Governor Onaga's victory in 2014, and therefore to win.

Gov. Tamaki Denny during the campaign

From September, Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide made three visits to Okinawa, and [popular ruling party member] Koizumi Shinjiro two, with other prominent LDP and Komeito political figures also making repeated visits and Komeito, together with [its religious partner] Soka Gakkai, sending by some accounts between 7,000 and 8,000 activists from throughout Japan. From the day after the official announcement of the election (13 September), advance voting gradually gathered momentum. Companies put such great pressure into organizing the corporate vote that lots of employees sent their employers photographs of their vote in order to show their loyalty, this making nonsense of the secrecy of the poll and negating the democratic process. We gasped, "Are there no depths to which they will not stoop?"

Slanderous and demagogic attacks - 90 per cent of them directed against candidate Tamaki - circulated and grew more vicious. Considering their influence on the younger generation that relies exclusively on the web, not reading newspapers and scarcely influenced even by television, frankly speaking we were really fearful.

On the eve of the election the exceptionally strong Typhoon 24 struck Okinawa. We called desperately for people to cast their vote for Tamaki before the typhoon, and more than 35 per cent of the electorate cast their votes in advance, the highest proportion ever recorded. As I listened to the fierce storm from the town hall where I had fled from my prefabricated home to seek refuge, I was filled with concern over whether some evil might be perpetrated in the confusion under cover of the storm. I was overcome by the sense of crisis that we were at a turning point between an Okinawan future of hope or of darkness. It would be unforgivable for us somehow to lose this election after former Governor Onaga had given his life to pass on the baton of struggle. All I could do was keep making calls on my mobile.

Victory Thanks to the Comprehensive strength of the Okinawan People

Candidate Tamaki was victorious in this election, winning 396,632 votes, over 80,000 more than his opponent, and including a majority of votes in all four national election electoral districts. Joyful cries of "He has beaten the national government!" rang out across Okinawa.

Tamaki chose Ie Island to launch his campaign. It was the first time in Okinawa's constitutional history for a campaign to be launched from a remote island. His choice of Ie was not only

because it was his mother's birthplace but because of its association with "the bitterness of life on the remote islands" (*shima chabi)* and the "land struggle." Ie may be seen as a microcosm of Okinawa in its experience of the landing of US forces in the Battle of Okinawa, the fierce battle that then enveloped the people of the island, the bitterness of concentration camp life that followed, and the US base island that has continued to this day. Yet at the same time, Ie is seen as a bastion of conservatism. More than anything was it cause for joy that this same Ie island should this time have been won by Tamaki, who was able also to overcome the humiliation of the February Nago mayoral election winning 1800 votes more in Nago City than Inamine Susumu had gotten in falling to the LDP candidate in the previous election. As a Nago citizen, I was especially delighted that Tamaki was able to roll back the humiliation of the term "Nago formula."

The vexing problem of choice of a candidate to succeed Onaga was suddenly resolved in accordance with Onaga's will. Tamaki Denny could conduct a remarkably short campaign by combining, as in a three-legged race, with former Governor Onaga's ghost, whom he praised as "the politician who bore the burden of Okinawa's post-war history." How was it that the "Sakima victory" predicted by many "experts" from Okinawa and elsewhere never eventuated? I myself thought that, even if we won, it would be by a narrow margin.

Funeral of the late Governor Onaga Takeshi

People have advanced various theories. In a word, it was a comprehensive victory accomplished by the combination of the individual efforts of each and every Okinawan: the many who were mobilized to vote by corporations but did not betray their conscience, the Soka Gakkai members who openly supported Tamaki even while waving the three-coloured Soka Gakkai flag, the young people who devised Tee-shirts with "Denny-ite" [Dennytteru] and such made-up words, the local papers that carried out fact checking on web reports and energetically propagated their findings.

Whereas in the February Nago mayoral election many of those in the under-40 group supported the LDP's Toguchi Taketoyo, this time Tamaki got the 30s votes as well. In the case of those in their teens or twenties Sakima may have won a majority but the gap was small.

My heart is filled with pride at the Okinawan people for having seen through the Abe government's mobilization of money and people in a campaign dripping with discrimination and prejudice against Okinawa. I felt I was constantly hearing Governor Onaga saying, "Uchinanchu, Usheratti nai birando" ("Don't

treat us Okinawans lightly"). And Tamaki's bright, cheerful and straightforward character, the greeting he issued on the launch of his campaign on Ie Island while standing on a beer crate, his humble posture throughout the campaign in which he stood steadfastly on the same level as the ordinary people, all added weight to his words born of his own experience of hardship about "independence, cooperation, diversity," "leaving no-one behind" and "a caring Okinawan community."

The Path Ahead

At a 4 October press conference upon assuming office as Okinawa's 13th Governor, Tamaki spoke of his "determination to devote myself body and soul to achieving the early closure and return of Futenma base and the stopping of construction works on a new base at Henoko." He adopted the position of seeking "dialogue" with the governments of Japan and the United States. "Forcing our way through the thorns, we surely could see the future of peace of mind and security that the Okinawan people seek."

On the previous day, responding to Nago City's greetings upon his election, he spoke of "Soon after being elected I want to visit the US where I will ask "Is Okinawan democracy somehow inferior to American democracy?' There may be some astonishment in America at the emergence of an Okinawan Governor whose father is American, and at the fact of Okinawa's proclaiming a message of "tolerance and diversity" in direct opposition to the "logic of exclusion" that has become common throughout the world, especially under President Trump in recent years.

On 9 October a prefectural funeral for former Governor Onaga was conducted at the Okinawa Prefectural Budokan. Governor Tamaki spoke as chief mourner before the assembled 3,000 people. If by some chance somebody embodying the mind of the Abe government had won the election, the portrait of the Governor on display would not have been smiling. Unsurprisingly, from here and there among the audience heckles and angry shouts of "Liar!" "Shameless!") were directed at Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga as he read the funeral oration on behalf of Prime Minister Abe. Many Okinawan people may have shared such a sentiment even if they did not utter the words. There could scarcely be any Okinawan who did not feel anger at the blatant lies repeated endlessly about "lightening the Okinawan burden," "paying heed to the sentiments of Okinawans" and "doing everything we possibly can." In my heart I felt, "Isn't that precisely what the former Governor referred to as "decadence"? As Suga rose from his seat to leave, he was peppered with cries of "Go away!" and "Don't ever come here again!"

The following day, 10 October, through the medium of the Association of Okinawan members of the National Diet (Urizun no kai) who had taken part in the previous day's ceremony, the All Okinawa Conference met and addressed the head of the Okinawa Defense Bureau (ODB), Nakajima Koichiro, demanding abandonment of the new base construction works at Henoko in accord with the outcome of the gubernatorial election. In response to the question "How do you interpret the outcome of the gubernatorial election?" Nakajima simply responded, "As a public servant, I cannot comment on elections." On the demand for abandonment of Henoko, all he had to say was to repeat the formula for long described by Governor Onaga as "decadent," saying "We are working on the Henoko transfer in order to bring forward the reversion of Futenma by even one day." The two sides were at cross-purposes.

On 12 October, Governor Tamaki had his first meeting with Prime Minister Abe since being elected. He explained the position of the Okinawan people, and his own position, of opposition to the Henoko new base

construction. But the Prime Minister's response was completely unchanged. No surprise in that, and both the new Governor and the people of Okinawa understand that the way ahead will be hard. Since Okinawa prefecture, in accordance with the will of Governor Onaga, had rescinded the license for reclamation of Oura Bay on 31 August, the works on land and sea were suspended. Though he saw no prospect of resolution through the courts, Governor Tamaki continued to call for dialogue – "From our side we have no intention to cut off dialogue," as he put it.

On 30 October, Ishii Keiichi, Minister of Lands and Infrastructure, suspended the effect of the prefecture's revocation of the Henoko reclamation license. Governor Tamaki criticized the government for acting according to its own script. Administrative law specialists from throughout the country criticized the state's misuse and abuse of the Administrative Appeal Act designed for the relief of citizens complaining about state power.

On 3 November, over 1,000 people gathered at Camp Schwab gate and Inamine Susumu, joint representative of the All Okinawan Council, said, "the shameless government must not be allowed to get away with this. We are flexible and resilient. We will keep fighting." On the eve of taking up office as freshly elected mayor of the city of Tomigusuku, Yamakawa Hitoshi said, "the government does its best to divide the people of Okinawa, but no-one in Okinawa, Liberal-Democratic Party members included, wants that."

The government announced that from 1 November it would order works resumed to restore the floats marking no-entry sections of the Bay that had been removed in accord with the revocation order, but in fact the works have remained frozen. It is clear that Shiokawa pier in Motobu City, used for unloading reclamation and construction materials from ships, had been damaged by the typhoon at the end of September and that it could not be used. Motobu Cty refused the permission sought by the ODB, and it seems that repairs will take several months.

At the October Prefectural Assembly a resolution was adopted to conduct, before the end of April 2019, a prefectural referendum on the question of Henoko reclamation. What is the likely next step on the part of the government anxious to proceed with reclamation and bring things to a "point of no return" before this prefectural referendum? Any change of plan requires approval by the prefecture of application to the prefecture for permission, so for the time being the government will just fill in the "outer moat", that is, do works for which no permit is needed. Delivery of refill and construction materials resumed at the Gate on November 15th, after works had been suspended for three and a half months, and the riot police resumed their dragging away of protesters. The people of Okinawa looked askance as this farce, in which the government thus set about resuming works even as it was responding to Governor Tamaki's request for discussions to seek a solution to the problem.

On the 11th, immediately after the US mid-term elections, Governor Tamaki set out on a visit to the United States, his father's country, bearing the aspirations of the Okinawan people. Even for the US, where mini-Trumps proliferate, I believe the Okinawan politics of democracy, diversity and tolerance can become a source of hope. I look forward to forging new links transcending division and aiming at peace.

The Ball is now in the Court of Mainland Japan

Why is it that a government that fundamentally tramples on democracy can last so long? We have repeatedly shown the will of the Okinawan people. There could be no clearer

expression of the popular will than our battling the storm during the recent election. We cannot do more. The problem will not be resolved until the Japanese people take up the problem as one that concerns them.

The ball has been passed from the people of Okinawa to the people of mainland Japan. A little before the gubernatorial election, Koganei City in Tokyo adopted a resolution calling for the whole of Japan to open a national debate on the question of whether Henoko base construction should be stopped and whether a replacement for Futenma is necessary or not. I was much encouraged.

It is an eminently reasonable proposal for the Japanese people as a whole to discuss the need for a new base at Henoko. If they conclude it is needed then it would be necessary to discuss possible sites throughout Japan, with the exception of Okinawa because Okinawa is already subject to excessive base burden. I welcome the extension of this debate to the whole country.

Uchina (Okinawa)'s future must be decided by Uchinanchu (the Okinawan people). We Okinawans, including Governor Tamaki, are determined to build a new Okinawa, diverse and open to Asia.

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