

Issues of Freedom of Assembly and Freedom of the Press in Henoko, Okinawa

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Introduction

I will begin by introducing four phrases in the native Okinawan language that are helpful in understanding the importance of freedom of assembly and freedom of the press in Okinawa. They are “Nuchi du takara,” “Chimugurisan,” “Ichariba chōdē,” and “Yuimāru.” They mean, respectively, “Life is the greatest treasure,” “To be so struck with grief that one’s heart aches,” “As soon as we meet, we are like brothers and sisters,” and “Helping one another.” These words speak to the hearts of many Okinawans.

I believe that the way Okinawans think and act, as symbolized by these four phrases, is reminiscent of the spirit of India’s Mahatma Gandhi’s principle of nonviolence and America’s Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.’s struggle against discrimination. Okinawa has a culture of valuing human life and dignity, and solving problems through dialogue and compromise rather than by violent means.

The governments of Japan and the United States are now pushing forward with the construction of a new base in Henoko, Okinawa in spite of strong opposition by many citizens. In response, Okinawans are using legal and nonviolent methods to protest. Okinawans participating in these protests are not anarchists, nor are they anti-US or anti-Japan activists.

The Okinawan people’s demand for a stop to the construction of the new base, which will threaten human lives and dignity, is not an excessive demand, and their beliefs are not extremist. Rather, I believe their demand is entirely reasonable.

Elections have seen the overwhelming victory of candidates who oppose the Henoko base construction, and public opinion polls show that 70% to 80% of Okinawans oppose the construction of a new base. Both citizens and the news media have the freedom and the right to be critical of the way the Japanese and US governments are taking a hardline stance and ignoring popular sentiment.

After forcing the overwhelming burden of US military bases on Okinawa for 70 years since the end of World War II, and ignoring the human rights abuses that have occurred, the two governments now seem ready to move forward with their plan, a plan devoid of democratic legitimacy, to build a new base in Okinawa. Okinawa is not a colony of Japan or the United States. Nonetheless, by insisting on building the new base in spite of Okinawan opposition, the governments of these two countries seem to be saying that Okinawa is their colonial possession, and Okinawan people, as colonial subjects, have no place objecting.

To state part of my conclusion in advance, if Japan and the United States wish to

consider themselves to be democratic nations, they must rethink their anachronistic, imperialistic ways. Okinawans may protest in a legal and nonviolent manner, but that does not mean that they are not resisting. Okinawans are determined to resolutely protect freedom of assembly and freedom of speech. We must not underestimate the determination of the Okinawan people, conceptualized as “All Okinawa.”

1. Freedom of assembly and freedom of the press as they relate to the Henoko issue

I would now like to speak about recent events in Okinawa, focusing on the issue of the construction of a new base in Henoko as a replacement for US Marine Corps Air Station Futenma.

The new base is planned to be built jutting out into the sea off the coast of a preexisting US military facility in Nago, in the northern part of Okinawa Island. Japan’s Ministry of Defense and their Okinawa branch, the Okinawa Defense Bureau, are in charge of the construction plans. On land, security relating to the construction is provided by the local police, and on sea, security is provided by the Japan Coast Guard. US military security guards are also deployed within the base compound.

Meanwhile, citizens have protested the base construction by conducting daily sit-in protests in front of the gate of US Camp Schwab for over a year, and larger protest rallies have been held many times.

The police have not yet resorted to such barbaric tactics as turning their weapons on citizens protesting the new base construction. However, during the approximately one year and two months between last July and September 15 of this year, there have been numerous scuffles between protesters and the Okinawan police, and a total of seven citizens have been arrested for allegedly interfering with police duties or for violating the Special Criminal Law by trespassing on US base land.

Amid high tension as protestors faced off with the police, a protest leader acting calmly to ensure that the protests would not reach a boiling point was detained by US military security guards, then handed over to the Japanese police. Of course, other protestors harshly criticized his move as an unlawful arrest. Ultimately, all those who were arrested were released without being prosecuted.

Reporters who are colleagues of mine have been threatened by groups of riot police officers and removed from the scene. Obstructing reporters on the job constitutes violation of free press, and as editor in chief, I issued a strong protest in response to this behavior.

At sea, the response by the Japan Coast Guard to protestors in boats has become increasingly violent, with some coast guard officers overturning protest boats, causing some protestors to come close to drowning.

As of September 15, over the past one year and two months, a total of 690 people have

been detained based on the accusation that they have crossed the boundary delineating the temporary restricted area established to enable the Okinawa Defense Bureau to conduct their operations smoothly.

The Okinawa Bar Association has released a statement from the president regarding the behavior of the Japan Coast Guard at Henoko. The statement expresses concern that the forceful measures taken by coast guard officers, including stopping citizens and journalists in kayaks and small motor boats, climbing aboard their boats, overturning kayaks, and forcefully towing small boats further out to sea, may be an overreach of their legal authority.

The temporary restricted area off the coast of Henoko was established by the Japanese government in order to facilitate the new base construction. However, the coast guard has implied that Japan's Special Criminal Law can be applied to citizens who intrude into this zone. Regarding this, the Okinawa Bar Association's statement points out, "[The Special Criminal Law] is a set of laws that exist to facilitate the operation of the US military in Japan. To expand the application of this penal law to include intrusion into the temporary restricted area, the aim of which is to facilitate the new base construction, could violate the personal liberties guaranteed by the Constitution."

The actions raised in the statement also violate the spirit and the letter of international laws stipulating the protection of human rights.

At the Ryukyu Shimpo, since July of last year, nearly 1,300 of our reporters have traveled to Henoko to report on the high-tension situation there, both on land and sea, observing clashes between police officers and protesters and protest boats being overturned by the coast guard.

The commandant of the Japan Coast Guard spoke critically of Okinawa's newspapers to the press, calling out the two Okinawan newspapers by name and alleging that they have exaggerated the truth in their criticism of the coast guard's aggressive behavior. At Henoko, however, the coast guard and other patrol boats have continuously exhibited aggressive behavior, climbing aboard protesters' boats, purposely colliding with boats, and in one instance climbing onto a woman's shoulders in order to seize her camera. Meanwhile, the coast guard has provided a false version of the facts, refusing to answer specific questions and generally avoiding the press. The coast guard commandant's criticism of the media is wrongheaded: it is in fact the refusal of the coast guard to take proper accountability for their actions that is problematic.

At large-scale rallies to prevent the construction of the new Henoko base, police officers can often be seen with video cameras, recording footage of the protesters. The

authorities may say this is to ensure safety or to prevent protests from getting out of hand, yet the act of numerous police officials persistently recording footage of news reporters and ordinary citizens exercising their right to protest legally and nonviolently constitutes suppression of free assembly and free press, and as such cannot avoid criticism.

There exists an agreement between Japan and the United States called the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). This agreement, frequently criticized by people in Okinawa and throughout Japan as being an “unequal treaty,” ensures the US military a privileged status within Japan. From an Okinawan perspective, for the government to establish a temporary restricted zone and to utilize regulations arbitrarily in order to facilitate the construction of the new base is just one more injustice added on top of the already unfair system enabled by the SOFA. We must not allow freedom of assembly and of the press to be violated by the establishment of a temporary restricted zone and the excessive use of force being used to police it.

2. Political pressure on the press

Okinawans have been consistent in voicing their opposition to the way in which the governments of Japan and the United States are forcefully proceeding with the construction of the new Henoko base contrary to public sentiment, and we are gradually gaining more and more supporters. Recently, globally renowned scholars Noam Chomsky and Johan Galtung, among others, have expressed their support for the movement in Okinawa to prevent the new Henoko base construction.

Public opinion polls consistently show that between 70% and 80% of Okinawans oppose the construction of a new base in Henoko. Nation-wide public opinion polls also show that a majority of Japanese people believe the planned base construction in Henoko should be cancelled. Japanese citizens are becoming increasingly critical of the Abe administration’s heavy-handed ways.

The people of Okinawa only ask that the protection of fundamental human rights, equality under the law, the right to pursue happiness, and the right to enjoy a minimum level of health and cultural wealth in their lives—all guaranteed by the Constitution of Japan—be applied to them as they are to citizens in other parts of Japan. The roles of the legislative, administrative, and judicial branches of government are to ensure that these rights are protected. The government and local government employees must not neglect to ensure the protection of citizens’ rights.

Okinawa only makes up 0.6% of Japan’s total land area, and Okinawa’s population is only 1.1% of Japan’s total population, but 74% of US military bases in Japan are located in Okinawa, and serious accidents and incidents involving the US military, including military aircraft accidents and crimes by US service members, occur regularly.

When the media raises the issue of these incidents, US military officials respond that “a certain number of accidents are bound to occur.” But Okinawa is not US territory, nor is it a colony of the United States. If there were no US bases, people in Okinawa would not have to live in fear of accidents and incidents involving the US military. Okinawans cannot agree with US military officials’ implications that a certain level of sacrifice by people living near US bases is inevitable; implications that reflect an occupier consciousness.

I will repeat myself once more.

The people of Okinawa are protesting against injustices perpetrated by the current administrations of Japan and the United States. It is only natural that Okinawans should be guaranteed the same constitutional rights as all Japanese and American citizens; namely, the universal values of democracy and human rights.

Two years ago, the Abe administration in Japan forced the governor and Diet representatives of Okinawa to renege on their campaign promises to have the Futenma base relocated outside of Okinawa and to go along with the policy of the national government and ruling party. This served to divide the people of Okinawa. By implicating local Okinawan police officers and public officials through such divisive measures, the governments of Japan and the United States are engaging in colonial policies that would be unthinkable in other parts of either country. More and more people in Okinawa are starting to raise these issues and express this type of criticism.

A recent poll has produced results that seem to reflect the rising sentiment of Okinawans.

A public opinion poll of Okinawan citizens conducted jointly by the Ryukyu Shimpo and the broadcaster Okinawa Television showed that 87% of those polled expressed a desire for greater autonomy for Okinawa.

Meanwhile, those who believed that Okinawa should remain a prefecture of Japan reached 67%, while 21% believed Okinawa should become a special autonomous state, and 7% supported independence for Okinawa. I believe this reflects the fact that while most Okinawans are not currently considering independence, a great many people are dissatisfied with the current situation in which Okinawa is denied the right to self-determination.

We must not turn our eyes from the problems going on in Okinawa. I believe what is being questioned now is the conscience and sense of responsibility of the people of Japan and the United States, and what is at stake is the question of whether Japan and the United States truly deserve to be called democratic nations. Both countries must stop denying Okinawans their human rights and right to self-determination.

The two newspapers covering all of Okinawa Prefecture, the Ryukyu Shimpo and the Okinawa Times, fulfill journalism’s natural role of putting a check on power, while

making an effort to encourage and stand on the side of oppressed citizens and society's weakest members. All of the more than forty local newspapers that are part of the Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association take this same basic journalistic stance.

It appears that Okinawa's two newspapers are viewed as antagonistic toward the current Japanese government's ruling party based on the claim that they consistently publish articles critical of the government. Okinawa's two newspapers have been criticized by the ruling party as being left-wing and biased, and a popular novelist close to the ruling party has stated that the two Okinawan newspapers must be put out of business. It might be an exaggeration to call this suppression of speech, but the beliefs at the root of their comments are the same as those at the root of suppression of speech.

The pressure put on the reporting of Okinawa's two newspapers caused waves throughout Japan, and the Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association's Chief Editors Committee, a group made up of editors of newspapers and television broadcasters nationwide, published a statement of protest in response to this pressure. Additionally, to our great encouragement, both the Japan Press Club, which draws many journalists from around Japan, and the Foreign Correspondents Club of Japan, based in Tokyo, published statements expressing deep concerns about the issue of media suppression following this incident.

I believe the reason I am speaking to you here today is that for the past year and a half, the Ryukyu Shimpo has been reinvestigating the history of Japan's annexation of Ryukyu and the assimilation policies they put in place there. We have been asking questions about the state of Okinawa's right to self-determination, as well as the ideal relationship between the state and the people, between the center and the periphery.

It is said that if the new base planned to be built in Henoko is completed, it could be used for 200 years. No matter how many times the Okinawan people express their refusal of the new base construction, the governments of Japan and the United States take a hardline stance in pushing forward with the construction plans. The Okinawan people's right to self-determination, the crucial right to determine our own future, is being denied to us. The issue of the new base to be built in Henoko is symbolic of this. That is why the Ryukyu Shimpo and other Okinawan media are criticizing the government's hardline stance.

In Japan, the media places great importance on "objective reporting." However, that principle risks falling into the trap of so-called "announcement journalism," which merely announces accurately and faithfully the information provided by the government. Of course objective reporting that values accuracy is important, but we believe that even more important is fair and unbiased reporting that takes a critical stance in revealing information that the government fails to provide, or would prefer to hide.

My understanding of fair and unbiased reporting is that it places a strict check on the

political administration of the time, be it a right-wing, moderate, or left-wing administration. I believe that a newspaper must dedicate itself to putting a check on all power to deserve to be called true journalism.

In the past, powerful figures from the Japanese ruling party have criticized Okinawa's newspapers, saying that they favor the Communist Party, that they are "clearly anti-US and anti-Israel, and resemble Arab newspapers," or claiming that "Okinawans' minds are controlled by the two Okinawan newspapers." However, newspapers can only exist if they have broad support from local reads who agree with their reporting and their editorial stance. Any newspaper so presumptuous as to try to control the minds of its readers would go out of business immediately.

Japan's newspapers have a regrettable history of actively cooperating with the war-promoting policies of Japan's pre-World War II militarist government, continuously publishing false reports based on lies disseminated by the military. Okinawa's newspapers are no exception. We, too, bear a history of abetting Japan's war of aggression by rousing militaristic sentiment through false reporting.

After World War II, the newspaper industry in Japan has established a moral philosophy influenced by the principles of democracy existing in the United States, and guaranteed the right to freedom of expression and freedom of the press by the Constitution of Japan, has devoted itself to providing reports that correspond to the people's right to know. Okinawa, however, was separated from the rest of Japan by the San Francisco Peace Treaty and put under US military rule, and until the 1960s, US Civil Administration decrees placed both direct and indirect restrictions on the publication of newspapers, magazines, books, pamphlets, and other forms of expression.

Precisely as a result of the experience of submitting to restrictions placed on speech both before and after the war and previously being unable to fully respond to the people's right to know, newspapers must now take to heart the importance of freedom of expression and freedom of the press and refuse to repeat the mistake of contributing to human rights abuses by those in power.

Behind Okinawa's newspapers critical stance toward the governments of Japan and the United States with regard to the Henoko new base construction issue is a deep sense of remorse for the negative history that burdens Japan's newspaper industry, as well as a desire to foster in Okinawa and Japan the universal values of liberty, democracy, and respect for human rights that are promoted by the governments of Japan and the United States.

It is said that the pen is mightier than the sword. I believe this is the case. The power of diplomacy and dialogue is stronger than that of military force, and the former ought to be prioritized over the latter. I fear that when this balance is turned on its head, humanity will fall prey to the blunders of history, and will risk facing extinction.

The Ryukyu Shimpo is just a small newspaper company, but we vow to reject suppression of free speech, continue to strive for fair and unbiased reporting, and provide a check on the excesses of state power.