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Japan's identity crisis

Japan's new royals are cosmopolitans. But the country finds itself in a struggle between openness and ritualised tradition

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In Japan, harmony lies at the heart of everything, from politics to society in general. The recent change on the imperial throne, however, has brought to the fore how much Japan searches for its core identity beneath the harmonious surface.

The Japanese government and the governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) were at a loss how to handle Emperor Akihito's wish to abdicate. The Japanese constitution doesn't provide a procedure for an emperor's resignation and there are no corresponding legal regulations.

Therefore, the Emperor's televised announcement came as a complete surprise to the political class, although his desire was long known. He did not want to die as a senile man in office. Instead of being a prisoner of his office, he availed himself of the right to determine his own life.

In Japan's House of Representatives, the national conservative deputies of the LDP opposed the abdication of the emperor. But he had swayed public opinion in his favour, showing a wilfulness quite unusual in Japanese affairs. However, the law then introduced regulating the emperor's resignation is not a general rule. It allowed only the resignation of Emperor Akihito. If someday the new Emperor Naruhito wants to resign, he will need to ask for permission as his father did.

The Emperor's symbolic role

Japan's political class fears every possible change in the institutional system like the devil hates holy water. It's difficult for foreigners to understand the ritualisation of the imperial ceremony, with its constant emphasis on the supposedly ancient traditions of the imperial family – it must be recognised as an attempt at self-reassurance.

The nation as a whole gains assurance through the person of the Emperor. He does not express himself on political issues. Thus everyone can identify with him: in him they can see what they want to see.

Nevertheless, Emperor Hirohito and, above all, his son Akihito, have repeatedly and with subtle gestures expressed that they stand for a shift away from imperialist Japan' policy up to 1945. In 1978, 14 war criminals sentenced to death by the Tokyo military tribunal for the crimes of World War II were taken to Yasukuni Shrine. After this, Emperor Hirohito no longer visited the shrine – without giving a reason. In this way, he avoided a conflict between social groups that would have threatened the unity of the nation.

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His successor, Akihito, has continued this path, even after Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited the Yasukuni Shrine in each year of his term of office, from 2001 to 2006, and even as national conservative circles gained increasing influence with the publication of textbooks that relativised or even denied Japan's war crimes.

The fact that Akihito did not honour the war criminals at the shrine was a clear rejection of their politics. Moreover, Akihito visited most of the countries that Japan had overrun with war and expressed regret over the suffering that it had brought these countries. In Asia, where symbolism plays a much greater role in public discourse than in Western culture, Akihito's gestures were well understood. Any further indication in the direction of an apology would have been construed in Japan as a political statement – which the Emperor is forbidden from making.

Japan's Meghan Markle

The new Emperor Naruhito, when he was Crown Prince, showed that he will follow his father's line in dealing with Japan's imperialist past. More so than his father, he has the image of a cosmopolitan man. And even more strongly than his father, he sees the need to open up Japan's rigid social structures and to support the diversification of society by standing up for tolerance.

Naruhito is married to Masako Owada, the daughter of a senior diplomat who also served as President of the International Court of Justice. She studied at Harvard, Oxford and Tokyo University. Her path to a top career in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs seemed clear. When the then Crown Prince Naruhito's desired to marry her, she hesitated for a long

time.

It was clear that her knowledge and her skills would not be demanded while at the Emperor's side. Above all, she needed to give birth to a male heir to the throne to ensure the survival of the Japanese imperial family. Masako Owada knew for certain that without a male heir to the throne, without the identification figure of an emperor, Japan's unity as a nation would be at stake. To some extent it was incumbent upon her to ensure the survival of the Japanese nation.

After much hesitation, Masako Owada decided to renounce her prospective brilliant diplomatic career and to marry the crown prince. When she gave birth to a daughter, she promptly experienced a prolonged depression. She has apparently largely overcome this phase by now. The media no longer speak of her depression, but rather of her extraordinary abilities.

However, the high hopes placed in Empress Masako only show that Japan is losing the self-confidence of a country with a great tradition.

She's the former diplomat who meets and greets the statesmen of the world in various languages – without the aid of interpreters – and represents a modern, cosmopolitan Japan. Meanwhile in Japan, her skills are a mixed blessing. Japan's conservatives frown on excessive cosmopolitanism. If it becomes clear that she's more agile than the Emperor in dealing with foreign statesmen, she will draw criticism from those conservatives.

What's identity crisis in Japanese?

However, the high hopes placed in Empress Masako only show that Japan is losing the self-confidence of a country with a great tradition. The repeated emphasis on its status as the world's oldest monarchy doesn't change that. Quite the opposite, the everlasting appeal to tradition and the practice of supposedly ancient rituals are actually an expression of the fragility of national identity. With the Meiji Restoration after 1868, Japan has reinvented itself, but the newly invented identity is still a vulnerable one and must be reiterated in an exaggerated fashion.

Neighbouring countries, which were particularly affected by Japan's imperial policies and fear a resurgence of Japanese imperialism, criticise Japan's Shinto religion as the ideology of Japanese imperialism. Shinto is considered the original Japanese religion. It's the oldest and, next to Buddhism, the most widely practiced religion in Japan.

In the constitution adopted in 1946, religion and state are separated. But there are a number of Shinto rituals performed by the Emperor, for example, during his enthronement. This directly contradicts the Constitution. The rituals include the annual *Daijō-sai*, or Great Thanksgiving Festival, in which the Emperor makes an offering of sacred rice to his divine mother, the sun goddess Amaterasu. At Emperor Akihito's accession to the throne in 1990, a complaint was lodged before the Supreme Court against state financing the religious ritual. The Supreme Court, Japan's highest court, ruled that the degree of mixing religion and state was acceptable.

Now another such lawsuit is being filed. Most likely, the Supreme Court won't be able to reach a verdict against the conservative forces. Premier Shinzo Abe is a staunch supporter of the interweaving of the state and Shinto religion. The new Emperor Naruhito would hardly dare take a stand against this core piece of conservative politics. And so, Japan's struggle between cosmopolitanism and ideological narrow-mindedness continues even under the new emperor.



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