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Japan's gold medal in pandemic mismanagement

Government corruption, insufficient testing, a weakened health system. Despite its negligent pandemic response, Japan presses on with the Olympics

Japan has always been famous for perfect organisation. Regardless of whether and to what extent this reputation ever corresponded to reality, for a long time the Japanese — along with the rest of the world — believed in their efficiency and capability. In fact, unlike many previous Olympics, the buildings for 'Tokyo 2020' were completed on schedule. They exude a flair of modern functionality and local tradition.

For many years, Japan's good reputation also included its efficient and well-functioning civil service. Japanese officials were believed to be immune to corruption. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has shattered this reputation, exposing Japan's civil service to be highly corrupt. That can be seen from three cardinal mistakes.

Business as usual

First, decisions were repeatedly put on the back burner out of consideration for external factors. When the first, still relatively small wave of infection reached Japan in February 2020, the government downplayed the threat. In doing so, it received the backing of a commission of experts, all of whose members were well practiced in issuing favourable opinions. The commission acted not out of ignorance, but out of consideration for an important Sino-Japanese deadline — the May 2020 visit of President Xi Jinping to Tokyo.

Hoping that the pandemic would soon be over, the Shinzo Abe cabinet delayed the decision until ultimately the Chinese Foreign Ministry dropped the travel plan. During these weeks of inaction, the spread of the virus in Japan took on threatening proportions so that finally a national emergency had to be declared. Another factor behind the watching-and-waiting of inaction was the Olympic Games, scheduled for July 2020, which were not cancelled until the end of March.

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But even so, the failures of the government were repeated in May, when a trial run was held in Sapporo for the Olympic half marathon. In northern Japan, the number of Covid-19 cases had already exceeded the alert level in April. By the time the authorities began discussing a state of emergency on 5 May, after the marathon had ended 'without any problems', it was already too late. In the days that followed, the number of cases in Sapporo grew exponentially. As a result, the state of emergency declared for Tokyo and Osaka in April had to be extended as well.

Lack of testing

The second error was implementing a strategy of minimising Covid-19 testing. Against the WHO's recommendation to 'test-and-isolate' — in addition to social distancing — as the only effective control strategy, the Japanese Ministry of Health has tried to keep the number of Covid-19 tests low. The number of tests in Japan in April 2020 was only 5,000 to 8,000 per day, which of course also explains the low number of recorded infections. Several times the government did announce that it wanted to increase the number of tests — but it was not until autumn 2020 that a slow upward trend in Covid-19 testing capacity was observed among the general public.

But even today, Japan, with a population of 126 million, is achieving a maximum of only 86,000 tests per day. An efficient system already existed that could conduct more than 50 tests simultaneously. This equipment was hardly used in Japan because of the lengthy approval process at the Japanese Ministry of Health. Even now the equipment has not been fully approved. The claim was that more tests mean a greater burden for the health insurance company. However, the health authorities were also constantly threatened with overload, a fact related to the neoliberal austerity measures of recent decades. Even after 15 months of the pandemic, the ministry has hardly expanded the testing system.

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An argument for keeping tests low, which the Japanese National Institute of Infectious Diseases, has repeatedly presented, is that if, after an expansion of the testing system a large number of citizens were to test positive, this would result in a collapse of the health care

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system. To back this up, officials have referred to the example of Wuhan, where crowds of people disregarded social distancing rules in hospitals in order to get tested.

The consequence of this pseudo-philosophy was multiple waves of infections that cost a large number of human lives and led to a partial collapse of the health care system. Osaka, where the local governors have advocated extreme variants of neoliberal policies, was hit particularly hard. It is here that, due to the refusal to be admitted to a hospital, an exceptionally large number of people died at home.

In the meantime, the Olympic Minister, Tamayo Marukawa, announced that the safety of the athletes and the population during the Olympic Games is ensured by a daily test volume of 30,000 for all athletes, coaches and sports officials. Even interpreters and volunteers are to be tested. Yet virtually no more than 10,000 tests per day have been carried out in Tokyo in the last 15 months.

An opportunity for self-enrichment

The third cardinal mistake, indeed the cardinal sin, has been the bartering away of government contracts for combatting the pandemic to often dubious private companies. The pandemic revealed the extent of entanglement of the government and private companies, whose boards often include former state secretaries and ministerial directors.

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This can be best seen in Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's decision all Japanese should be issued two cloth masks per household. The problem was not only that these were masks made of gauze material, which basically offers no protection against viruses, but that a large part of this mask business was to be handled by a micro-company registered in Fukushima.

On the eve of the press conference at which Abe announced the distribution of masks, the Fukushima company had amended its articles of association to allow it to participate in handling the business. To top it all off, it took many months for each household to receive its two 'Abenomasks' (the name being a pun on Abe's signature 'Abenomics' economic policy). Shortly after the distribution ended, the company disappeared from the register of Fukushima.

Similar inconsistencies also occurred in the awarding of the orders for the

creation of the Japanese Covid-19 warning app, to oversee applications for support from government aid programs and more. Many of the orders went to the largest advertising agency Dentsû, which in turn passed the respective contracts on to smaller companies and collected the difference as a profit. Part of these profits flow back into the pockets of political associations and interest groups.

In this system of entanglement, in which the government is wandering around a Covid-19 landscape devastated by profit interests, without increasing test capacities, and without efficiently importing and distributing vaccine, opinion polls are becoming increasingly clear: by now, 80 per cent of those surveyed are either in favour of not holding the Olympics this summer or at least for postponing it. There are great fears that the event will trigger a new explosion of the pandemic in Japan and around the world. But despite the manifold problems outlined above, the Olympics will apparently be held, come what may.



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