DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 27.07.2021 | Momoko Nojo

# Japan's young people are left behind

Japan's youth are levelling heavy criticism against holding the Olympic Games — but it's falling on deaf ears. A new form of protest could change that

Last week Friday, the Summer Olympics began in Tokyo. A year late, to be sure, but still labelled 'Tokyo 2020'. Despite the postponement, the mood in the city is down. With around 2,000 new infections daily in Tokyo and a new Covid-19 emergency, the city is on its way into the fifth wave. An elusive sense of insecurity, mixed with powerlessness and anger, hangs over the population. According to opinion polls, a large part of the Japanese people still oppose the Olympic Games. People are not convinced by the government's mantra of a 'safe event without cause for concern'.

The younger generation in particular is upset that the Games are being held by hook or by crook. A few months ago, when there was still relatively strong support among the population for hosting them, the youth already levelled heavy criticism: 'The vaccination campaign is not making any progress, children have to do without their sports festivals and school life is severely restricted. And then the Olympics are going ahead?'

A year and a half after the outbreak of the pandemic, discontent with politics is spreading among the Japanese population. Restaurant owners have to limit their business or stop it altogether, schools cancel class trips and festivals. Pupils and students are being deprived of a piece of their irretrievable youth in the name of 'containing the infection'.

## Covid-19's effect on young Japanese

For children and young people, the perceived duration of a year is much longer than for adults. Nevertheless, they heeded the Japanese government's call for 'voluntary self-restraint' during the pandemic, which avoided harsh lockdowns in Japan. Young people were concerned with the well-being of society as a whole, regardless of the fact that they are less likely to be severely affected.

Despite this, it's young people in particular that are often singled out as the 'culprits' in the pandemic response and rank at the bottom when it comes to the question of possible compensation or aid. The media hardly mention the company employees who are having a drink after work. Nor do they talk about the questions that arise at the sight of crowded suburban and underground trains at rush hour.

Instead, they like to show pictures of the Shibuya and Harajuku districts, which are particularly popular with young people, and discuss the problem of 'young people going out and drinking in the open'. The question of targeted support for young people, who are particularly vulnerable in the current economic situation because of their mostly precarious employment, and who easily fall prey to isolation and loneliness in anonymous big cities without social contacts, is however rarely addressed. The Covid-19 crisis has revealed and deepened the weak position of young people in Japanese society.

## Why not cancel the Games?

The mostly elderly organisers keep emphasising that the Olympic Games are a celebration of youth. But it's precisely the youth who are levelling the harshest criticisms. And the economic and social consequences of a renewed spread of Covid-19 will primarily be at the expense of young people and more vulnerable sections of the population. Concerns run high about the spread of new virus variants and another extension of the emergency beyond the Games.

So why didn't the government cancel or postpone the Olympics again? First of all, because the Games are not primarily a sporting event. The commercial dimension is becoming more and more important. When deciding whether to organise, postpone or cancel the Games, the ideas of the International Olympic Committee and the sponsorship contracts must first be taken into account, as well as the financial burdens on the Japanese state and the prefecture of Tokyo. The decisive factors are structures that force the city to subordinate the protection of human lives and the everyday existence of citizens – which should actually be given priority – to the interests of government and business.

Eight years ago, when the choice of Tokyo as the venue for the 2020 Olympic Games was announced, I was extremely happy and even a little proud. I was a high school student at the time. At the time, I didn't understand that the question of hosting the Games was a highly complex issue. And it's still difficult for me to categorise it emotionally.

The current problems with the Tokyo Games cannot simply be dismissed

as a consequence of the Covid-19 crisis. In addition to criticising the current conditions, Japanese youth are also fundamentally questioning how the Olympic and Paralympic Games are actually run. Many deeper structural problems are becoming apparent now. There needs to be a serious discussion about the meaning of the Games and how to hold them in the future.

## Prime Minister Suga's nostalgia

The hard push for the Olympic Games in Tokyo has shown that, on the one hand, young people do not know how to make themselves understood politically. On the other hand, the Japanese government does not know how to listen politically. Before the pandemic, there was often talk of a 'trend towards conservatism' among Japanese youth. This refers to the high approval rating for the incumbent government as well as the significant share of votes for the conservative Liberal Democratic Party among younger voters. This is usually explained by saying that Japanese youth are generally satisfied with the current situation and do not see any serious social problems.

But I think that this reading is wrong. It is not true that young Japanese are increasingly conservative. Young people hold on to their status quo because they don't want things to get worse. Resignation is also a key factor. The circumstances of the Olympic Games have deepened the sense of political powerlessness among Japanese youth. They have the impression that their views and needs fall on deaf ears in politics and society.

When Prime Minister Suga had to explain himself in the Japanese Lower House in June about holding the Olympic Games at the present time, he began to recite his personal memories of the 1964 Tokyo Games. Suga was a student himself at the time. 'I want to pass on hope and courage to the children and young people of today,' Suga defended his position. What the children and young people of today need, however, are not nostalgia-soaked ramblings about Olympic Games in the last century, but an explanation of the current situation based on data and facts.

## Mobilising Japan's youth

For me, the numerous problems surrounding the Olympic Games have once again painfully revealed the weakness of Japanese democracy. At the same time, I see a glimmer of hope. I was encouraged by the success of the signature campaign I initiated following the sexist remarks of former Prime Minister Yoshirō Mori, who had to resign as chairman of the Olympic organising committee. In Japanese society, misogynistic remarks

by men in high positions are nothing new. Even if they cause a stir in the social media for a few days, they have mostly remained without consequences so far.

When I heard about Mori's comments, it was clear to me that they could not be tolerated under any circumstances: 'Meetings in which women participate never come to an end because women talk too much,' Mori is reported to have said. So I started an online campaign that brought in over 150,000 signatures in a short time and ultimately led to Mori's resignation. The fact that my involvement was successful shows the importance and potential success of 'making yourself understood' politically. If you raise your voice and get the support you need, you can definitely make a difference.

In Japan, participation in classical political mobilisation, such as demonstrations, is usually not as high as in America or Europe. But through internet-based political action, it seems that something can be achieved. I hope that the youth will explore new ways of engagement for democracy. Let's use the Tokyo Olympics as an opportunity to demand political participation.

---



**Momoko Nojo**
Tokyo

Momoko Nōjō is the founder and director of the NGO NO YOUTH NO JAPAN and studies economics at Keiō University in Tokyo. She is committed to gender equality and political participation of young people. Her petition #DontBeSilent led to the resignation of Yoshiro Mori, the chairman of the organising committee of the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games, in early 2021.