

## **KAZE, September 2019**

**Hurrah, Japanese young people, for our common future!**

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The voting rate of Japan's national election in this July was an all-time low of 48%, which is a clear indication of Japanese people's distrust of politics. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe as LDP president declared that his cabinet (or his party) was trusted, but is it really so? LDP's absolute share of votes was only 18.9%. Apparently, they are losing public trust, but they obtained more than half of the seats. Not at all fair! I cannot but agree with a TV show comment that the election this time may have followed the political rules but it is quite doubtful if it meets the principle of democracy. Democracy today is facing a real crisis all over the world and Japan is not an exception.

Trying to make a breakthrough in this stagnant situation, the Green Alliance Japan, a group of environmental NPOs that I am co-representing, has been organizing a discussion session twice a year with a few officials of the Ministry of Environment Japan because they virtually design policies. This year's theme was "The role of environmental NPOs and how to expand public support to NPOs". We selected this theme to raise questions about the difference in NPO/NGO status in Japan and Europe. In Japan, most subsidies to NPOs/NGOs are meant to be used for projects, not for administrative expenses. Therefore, NPOs/NGOs are suffering from financial problems and chronicle staff shortage.

Before the day of the discussion session, we sent a set of questions to the ministry participants: "what role do you expect of environmental NPOs/NGOs to play in formulating policies or working with the international community?", "why the official support to NPOs/NGOs has been quite unsatisfactory in Japan?", etc.

During the session, we did not hear any clear answer to these questions (as we half expected), but one of the ministry officials expressed their personal views: one said that the NPO/NGO network is important and their views as a citizen would be useful for policy-making, and another said that the NPO's opinion is precious but their method of building a consensus needs further deliberation.

It was good to know that the ministry officials acknowledge NPOs/NGOs representing civil society, but it was a pity that they still look suspicious of the value of NPO/NGO's participation in policy-making processes. In Europe, environmental NPOs/NGOs with professional expertise and long experiences in civil society are valued as a strong and reliable actor for building a real civil society. Unfortunately, however, Japanese ministry officials have yet to arrive at such understanding of the real value of NPOs/NGOs.

In the meantime, the Mainichi Shinbun, a major Japanese newspaper, reported on 8 August that the Cabinet Office is planning to establish a new personnel rule. If this rule is introduced, those ministry leaders will be promoted for abolishing/reducing existing projects that Cabinet considers unnecessary.

It is astounding! Even now, personnel issues of the national government are fully controlled by the Cabinet Office and ministry officials tend to read the situation for their promotion or self-protection. Further pressure on government officials in the form of personnel rules will only undermine environmental policy making that have already been heavily suppressed under the economy-first Abe Cabinet.

If this new rule is really installed, government officials will be even more discouraged from designing drastic environmental measures or collaborating with NPOs/NGOs. I really worry about their demoralization especially when they are expected to take definite actions toward extreme weather events caused by climate change attacking various parts of the world.

As we all see, torrential rainfalls, heatwaves, and drought have been occurring various parts of the world. These climate disasters caused serious damages to the economy, not to mention our daily lives. IPCC warned against food shortage due to global warming which is becoming more and more serious, presaging that the prices of grains will rise by as high as 23% by 2050. If this happens, Japan, whose food self-sufficiency is less than 40%, will soon be starved. Despite this critical situation, almost no political parties/candidates of the July Japanese national election raised the issue of climate change. People talked about the danger of organizing next Olympic Games in boiling hot summer in Tokyo, but even media do not urge the government to take urgent measures to tackle serious climate change events.

Under the Abe administration, politicians are all out to control politics chasing after short-sighted merits for their stakeholders, and government officials tend to work for their own merits rather than for the Mission as a public servant making every effort to protect their position. In this desperate situation, can we really protect a sound natural/social environment and relay it to the next generation? Who is responsible for the future of this country? After years of growing distrust of government and politicians, Japanese people seem to be giving up their expectations for politics and the government.

Amid the current chaotic political situation, young people in Japan are beginning to voice their concerns about the future. Inspired by Greta, a 16-year old Swedish climate activist, Japanese high-school and college students will join the Global Climate March scheduled on 20 September. I had a chance to talk with some of those conscious young people and felt that we, adults, should do something for our common future. Supporting these young people would be one of the contributions that we could do to compensate for what we unconsciously did in the past. We, adults, should realize our responsibility for what we have done on the environment and work hands in hands with the younger generation to take one step forward for survival. This seems to be the only possible path that we can take for sustainable future.

Filled with a sense of crisis, the Green Alliance Japan decided to voice our concern in the form of a demonstration. On 20 September, we will join the Climate March together with our young friends of high-school and college students.