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Can we see real social change?

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Following Mr. Shinzo Abe's sudden stepping down from the presidency of the Liberal Democratic Party (meaning the position of the Prime Minister of Japan), his successor was elected without much debate, based on the old factional political dynamics with incomplete voting of the members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. This is a typical decision-making process of the Abe administration, nicknamed "Government without deliberation."

Toward the end of the Abe administration, Environment Minister Shinjiro Koizumi decided to make the Ministry more future-oriented and set up the "Selection and Concentration" Office last January. Amid the stagnant political arena for environmental policies, it is good progress that the Ministry will transform itself into an agile, future-looking, and creative ministry. However, the report has some points of concern.

The biggest concern is that the synthetic report submitted in August is quite introspective and does not refer to working with civil society and NGOs/NPOs. Given the limited resources of taxpayers' money, the Ministry emphasized the importance of nurturing human resources through communication/discussion with private enterprises and business industry groups. The report little refers to the NGOs/NPOs. Despite their precious working knowledge and on-site experience, as well as their independence from the interest of any party, NGOs/NPOs are not reasonably respected.

Minister Koizumi has appeared a lot on Japanese media and quite active in addressing himself to the global community. However, I have never heard him refer to "civil society" in his speech. More regrettably, senior officials of the Ministry have not shown interest in collaborating with NGOs/NPOs. Some of them (younger ones) did not know the important roles NGOs/NPOs play in the environmental arena.

Japan agreed with the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development

(1992). However, the government of Japan does not observe the Principle 10 of the declaration for promoting public participation in environmental policy processes.

A recent example is that the government did not disclose the proceedings of its council meetings on the long-term strategy under the Paris Agreement. In Japan, NGOs/NPOs' participation in policymaking has been really limited and become just a formality. As a member of one of the sub-committees of the Central Environment Council of Japan, I am allowed to speak only a few minutes to provide comments on the meeting agenda. No discussions among the members and with the officials of the Ministry of the Environment. If, as suggested in the August report, online meetings replace face-to-face meetings in the future, we will see less discussion among participants and much further away from Principle 10. For whom and with whom are they going to make the Ministry transformation and survive the climate crisis? Quite strange, I should say.

To become a future-oriented ministry, senior officials and political parties/politicians should modify their introspective and closed mind/culture. The mission of the Ministry of the Environment is different from other ministries because it administers cross-cutting issues. I hope that they will keep this in mind and lead the government toward a real social change. For that purpose, they must work together with civil society and especially NGOs/NPOs. That is a global trend in this era of uncertainty.