

Hashimoto's school for aspiring politicians starts with fervor

Kuchikomi April 9th

On March 24 in Osaka, there occurred a mass gathering that, to Shukan Shincho (April 5), was difficult at first glance to classify. The many young men in sober business suits made it look like a job fair. But there were older people too, men and women. Some sort of religious gathering?

Not at all. The occasion was the launch of Osaka Mayor Toru Hashimoto's Ishin Seiji Juku (literally, Restoration Politics Institute) – a kind of political school for aspiring lawmakers cast in Hashimoto's dynamic, politically conservative mold. The aim is to groom candidates for the next national election, which must be held by summer 2013 and may well be held sooner.

The 2000-plus aspirants who crowded the auditorium – about half of them from the Osaka-Hyogo area – are a measure of Hashimoto's charismatic appeal – and also of a spreading despair over Japan's political paralysis in the face of urgent crises ranging from a long-stagnant economy to radiation leakage still unstaunched more than a year after an earthquake and tsunami gutted the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.

To his opponents Hashimoto is a dictator-in-the-making, a neo-Fascist. Some have likened him to Hitler. To his supporters, his essential qualities are energy, vision, no-nonsense clarity and determination – just what is needed, they say, to free Japan from its logjam. Comments elicited by Shukan Shincho at the Juku launch suggest the fervor animating those rallying to Hashimoto's standard. For example:

“I want to change Japan,” said a 36-year-old company president. “My family's a bit put out, but I'm all set to give up my job and become a lawmaker.”

“After the earthquake I really started to think about where Japan is going,” said a 28-year-old artist. “I'm seriously aiming to become a Diet member.”

A 31-year-old company employee waxed trenchant on the exclusiveness of the political class: “The word for government originally comes from the word for festival. Then somehow politics became the preserve of those from prestigious universities. Me, I'm a high school graduate. It's not right that those of us who don't come from the right schools are shut out of politics.”

“My company doesn’t know I’m here,” said a 32-year-old man. “It would be awkward if the TV cameras picked me up. That’s why I’m in the corner.”

Approaching a woman verging on elderly, Shukan Shincho is surprised to learn her occupation – she’s a snack bar “mama.” At 64 she said “I’m too old to become a lawmaker but I can be a staff worker, can’t I? I’ll work to support Hashimoto behind the scenes.”

It takes all kinds to make a political world. A jobless young man in his twenties said, “My goal is to become a lawmaker so I can earn some money.”

Hashimoto himself has said he will not be a candidate in the next national election, but his political group, the Osaka Ishin no Kai (One Osaka), is a swelling political force which aims, via the Juku, to field 300 candidates. For better or worse, this could represent a major shakeup of the national political landscape.

Questions

1. What’s your opinion of Mayor Hashimoto?
2. Hashimoto has become very influential in the Kansai region. Do you think he has the ability to become a national political figure? Why? Why not?
3. The article suggests that the Juku might “represent a major shakeup of the national political landscape”. Do you agree? Why? Why not?
4. Japanese people generally express frustration with the performance of their political leaders. Why do you think this is?
5. Do you think Japanese politicians are generally better or worse than in other countries?
6. The average age of Japanese political leaders is much higher than in Europe or America. Why do you think this is? Is it a good thing or a bad thing?
7. Do you agree with the statement that “those of us who don’t come from the right schools are shut out of politics”? Is this a problem in your opinion?
8. Do you think Japan needs a major political change? Why? Why not?
9. Who do you think is the best person to lead Japan now?

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