

Japan: Tens of thousands on Okinawa denounce US base relocation plan

By Ben McGrath
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On August 11, 70,000 protesters gathered on Okinawa, Japan to denounce the central government's relocation of a US military base on the island. The demonstration took place to also mark the death of Okinawa prefectural governor, Takeshi Onaga, who died from pancreatic cancer on August 8 at the age of 67. Other rallies took place around the country, including in Tokyo.

The demonstration took place in Naha, the capital of Okinawa Prefecture. Protesters held signs that read "New Henoko Base, No!" and other slogans to denounce Tokyo's plan. They also adopted a resolution demanding the central government cancel its plans to relocate the US base.

Okinawan residents and others opposed to the US military presence in Japan have demonstrated for years against the central government's plan to relocate the US Marine Corps Air Station Futenma base from the center of the crowded Okinawan city of Ginowan to a new facility being constructed at Henoko on the island's coast.

Governor Onaga, who came to office in November 2014, fought against the base relocation, having made it a central issue of his gubernatorial campaign. However, he consistently worked to channel opposition to the base along parochial lines, exploiting locals' legitimate anger towards crimes committed by US soldiers and contractors, from drinking and driving to rape and murder.

In order to block a wider political struggle against Japanese and US militarism, Onaga claimed that the base relocation issue stemmed from Japan's mainlanders looking down upon and taking advantage of Okinawans, who had to bear the brunt of hosting US troops.

Onaga had been a member of the ruling Liberal

Democratic Party (LDP) until he ran as an independent for mayor of the prefecture's capital Naha in 2000, an office he held for 14 years. He remained a conservative heavyweight in prefectural politics and did not oppose the US-Japan security treaty. In fact, he stated in 2015, "I have served as a politician for over 30 years, and I have consistently supported the US-Japan security arrangement."

The anti-war sentiment of those who backed Onaga often went further and included the demand for the removal of US bases from Japan altogether. The protesters have often coupled their struggle against US bases with opposition to the government's agenda of remilitarization, which includes the revision of the country's constitution to remove any barrier to the expansion and overseas deployment of the Japanese military.

Given that Okinawa is a major staging point for US military action in Asia, opposition to the base is intimately bound up with the struggle against militarism. On July 30, during another rally in front of Abe's residence in Tokyo, one of the participants, an 81-year-old woman, drew this connection. "I want to go to Okinawa, but I can't make it, so I will raise my voice against base construction here. Having a base comes down to being complicit in war," she stated.

Onaga's tactics, however, represent a dead end for the struggle. The governor spent his last years working to ensnare the base issue in court and convince the population that this could block construction at Henoko.

In October 2015, Onaga withdrew the approval given by his predecessor Hirokazu Nakaima for land reclamation on the coast. This was quickly overturned by the Defense Ministry's Okinawa Defense Bureau. A fight in the courts ensued and in December 2016,

Japan's Supreme Court ruled that Onaga's actions were illegal.

For more than year after that, the governor threatened to withdraw approval for reclamation on a new basis. This was a stalling tactic Onaga used as he negotiated with the central government. Only as anti-base opponents grew frustrated with the delay, staging sit-ins at prefectural offices, did he once again announce he would revoke the reclamation project's approval.

Onaga stated on July 27, "Facts that were not yet known when land reclamation approval was given have come to light, and the appropriate and rational conditions in terms of land usage (that are required for land reclamation approval) are no longer being met."

This new revocation was meant to stop planned reclamation work from beginning on August 17, though Tokyo is holding off on the construction project in the run up to a September 30 election to choose Onaga's successor.

Ultimately, Onaga, local businesses and others with commercial interests on Okinawa sought to have the base removed from the island in order to use the territory for land development that would attract businesses and tourists. At the same time, they highlighted its cheaper cost of labor compared to other areas of Japan.

The US military's constant presence in Okinawa since the end of World War II has impeded commercial development as one-fifth of the main island in the prefecture is covered with US bases which are home to half of the 50,000 US troops in Japan.

Other establishment parties, including from the so-called left, lent political credibility to Onaga while he was in office. The Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP), the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) and Social Democratic Party (SDP) all praised him after his death.

Seiken Akamine, a JCP member of parliament in the Lower House, stated, "The asset that Onaga left is the idea that we must stop the conflicts between conservatives and liberals and prevent [US military] bases from staying in Okinawa for the future of the prefecture." That the JCP attempts to build illusions in not only so-called liberal politicians, but in conservative ones as well, is an indication that the party long ago abandoned its anti-capitalist posturing.

In fact, the conservative LDP is looking towards the special election to choose Onaga's replacement as a means of putting the base dispute to rest legally speaking. The party intends to run Ginowan Mayor Atsushi Sakima as its candidate. Deputy Governor Kiichiro Jahana will take over as interim governor until the September 30 election.

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