

Japanese government planning attacks on democratic rights on pretext of pandemic

By Ben McGrath
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Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on Saturday gave his third news conference on the COVID-19 pandemic, warning that if the number of infections continues to grow, hospitals could be overwhelmed. Like his counterparts around the world, Abe's primary concern was to reassure big business that a massive bailout package would be coming.

Tokyo, the metropolitan area of which is home to more than 38 million people, had 430 confirmed cases of COVID-19 as of Sunday. There were 68 new cases that day, a single-day record for the city. There were 168 new cases throughout the country, bringing the total to 1,880, including 53 deaths. Japan's Minister of Health Katsunobu Kato informed Abe on Thursday that Japan is now at a high risk of rampant infection. Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike suggested last week that a lockdown in the capital could be coming.

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Abe said on Saturday that Japan was at a "critical stage," stating, "We're going to compile an unprecedented level of economic measures that exceed those taken when the Lehman Brothers crisis occurred [in 2008]."

At that time, Tokyo supplied a handout worth 57 trillion yen (\$US528 billion). Details on the latest package have not been finalized, but Abe stated it would "include a full range of fiscal, monetary and tax measures." Tokyo already approved a 1 trillion yen (\$US9.3 billion) bailout package earlier this month as Japan's economy is predicted to contract by 2.9 percent in the first quarter of this year.

Despite the growing health crisis around the world, Tokyo has done next to nothing to prepare, carelessly relying on the fact that infections had not grown at the

same rate as in other countries such as South Korea, China, Italy and the United States. While Japan has the capacity to test approximately 7,500 people a day, the average is 1,200 to 1,300. Only approximately 25,000 people have been tested. By contrast, South Korea has tested more than 394,000.

Kentaro Iwata, a professor of infectious diseases at Kobe University, said last week: "It is hard to comprehensively explain (testing capacity in Japan as a whole) as it varies across the country. But not enough is being done around me (at least)." He also stated: "Japan has not contained (the virus), or perhaps I should say we cannot even judge whether we have contained it without conducting a sufficient number of tests."

Masaya Yamato, director of the Infectious Diseases Center at Osaka's Rinku General Medical Center, stressed the seriousness of the situation, stating: "The economic impact should not be a top priority. Tokyo should lock down for two to three weeks. Otherwise, Tokyo's medical system could collapse."

Other health experts have warned that companies and local governments have not taken effective measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Hospitals have denied testing to people, even those showing symptoms, who do not meet specific requirements set by the Health Ministry: close contact with a confirmed patient or travel to an outbreak centre, along with coronavirus symptoms. Some people have been rejected for not having symptoms for longer than four days.

The Japanese ruling class has wasted weeks in not preparing for a COVID-19 outbreak. Whether or not Japan emerges as a centre of a serious outbreak does not alter the criminality of the lack of government preparation. As has been seen in crisis after crisis, like

the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011, the government has proven unwilling to put even basic measures forward to protect the lives of Japanese workers, farmers, and youth.

According to a Health Ministry report, Osaka could have as many 3,400 COVID-19 infections by early April. “It’s possible that provision of medical treatment to seriously ill patients may become difficult,” the report stated.

Last week, Osaka’s government was preparing an additional 600 hospital beds for patients. Tokyo only had 100 hospital beds for patients with serious infectious diseases, with the local government stating it would secure 600 more.

The concerns of the Japanese ruling elite however have focused on exploiting the crisis to justify attacks on democratic rights as well as to protect their economic interests.

On March 13, the government led by Abe and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) revised a 2013 law that will allow the prime minister to declare a state of emergency, without parliamentary approval, for up to two years. The bill received support from the two main opposition parties, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) and the Democratic Party for the People.

Abe admitted before the changes were passed that: “Given that individual rights would be suppressed, I would thoroughly examine its potential impact before making a decision.” The government would be able to instruct residents to stay indoors, close schools and cancel events while allowing it to take over land and facilities for the government’s use. The cancellation of events could easily be used to suppress political gatherings the government disagrees with.

In February, LDP members argued that a state of emergency law should be included in the country’s constitution. The LDP has pushed for such a clause for years, including it in their 2012 draft constitution, which contains other attacks on democratic rights. These included allowing the military to put down domestic unrest, allowing the Cabinet to enact laws independent of the National Diet during a state of emergency and requiring the population to obey all orders from the state in the event that an emergency is declared.

There is no reason to believe that the government will

stop short of pushing these measures through in the future after the groundwork has already been laid with the latest revisions to the current state of emergency law. It is the same method Tokyo has used to pursue remilitarization and circumvent the constitution’s Article 9, banning Japan from going to war or maintaining a military.

Tokyo’s actions make clear that it is the working class in Japan that must oversee and coordinate the response to social and health crises, including the coronavirus pandemic.

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