

# The COVID-19 War in Japan: Is National Face-Saving More Important than the People's Lives?

By [Prof. Joseph H. Chung](#)

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*The performance of Shinzo Abe in the war against the corona virus has been less than poor.*

*Abe is blamed for having put the policy priority to the Olympics and Abenomics over human life.*

*The Japanese people have the legendary docility and they seldom protest government policies.*

*But, this time, the life of each Japanese person is threatened. Would they continue their docility and silence?*

In this paper I will do the following.

First, I will discuss the problems of Abe's handling of the COVID-19. I argue that Abe made two errors, namely the missing of the golden time and mismanagement of the whole process of fighting the virus.

Second, I will see the nature and the depth of the ordinary Japanese people's dissatisfaction with Abe's government's handling of the corona-virus crisis.

Third, I am asking myself how much longer the ordinary Japanese people will tolerate the corruption of the right-wing establishment, risk the restoration of the pre-1945 military imperial Japan and the ruin of the national economy which Abenomics could not prevent.

## The COVID-19 Crisis and Abe's Policy Failure

From the mid January 2020, the cases of the infected were observed in several prefectures. The government was aware of this trend and began to prepare anti-virus measures.

On January 30, the government established the Novel Corona Virus Response Headquarters under the Task Force headed by the Deputy Chief Secretary of the Cabinet, Okita Yoshiki with high ranking government officials who were far from being experts in the field of infectious diseases.

On February 6, the medical tests and consulting system was established. On February 16, Abe held the first meeting with the experts.

And, the criteria of testing were the fever of 37.5 C for four days and pronounced fatigue. This criterion was largely criticized as being too restrictive to find out the extents of

infections.

In fact, a good part of infected is not symptomatic, that is, there are no visible signs of infections. In some studies, the asymptomatic cases represent as much as 80% of the infections.

On February 25, Abe announced concrete anti-virus measures consisting of home quarantine and social distancing. These measures required that those who were of high risk should not go the hospital for treatment and they should get the prescription through phones.

Thus, Abe's government was well aware of the crisis by creating needed institutions, but the trouble was that these institutions could not do their expected functions.

The basic problem of Abe's anti-virus measures may be characterized in terms of the choice of wrong policy priority, bad planning and poor coordination.



The bad choice of policy priority was shown with the arrival of the cruiser Diamond Princess on February 3 in Yokohama Bay. This seems to have disturbed much Abe's government.

There were already unknown infections cumulated up in January and, now, there were 3,711 individuals on the cruiser without knowing how many were infected among the passengers and the crew.

But, 13 individuals infected were allowed to leave the ship without tests; they were allowed to use public transportation facilities. If these 13 individuals were infected in addition to unknown infected persons on the land who had not been quarantined, they could have transmitted the virus to a huge number of individuals.

Suppose that there are 100 persons infected and that the multiplier of virus propagation,  $R_0$  is 2 and that the transmission period is three days. It means that the number of infected doubles every three days.

On Day 1, we have 100 infected; on Day 3, we have 200 infected; on Day 6, we have 400 infected; on Day 9, we have 800 infected; on Day 12, we have 1,600 infected. Nobody knows how many persons were infected in Japan by February 3, the day of the cruiser's arrival in Yokohama Bay.

But, one thing sure was that the government should have better managed the situation on the board of the cruiser and made suitable planning of the anti-virus war.

Speaking about the government's handling of the Diamond Princess cruiser, Iwata Kentaro of Kobe University a specialist on infectious diseases was known to have evaluated the cruiser handling as "the violation of all elementary principles of dealing with infectious diseases".

The fundamental question is about Abe's perception of the corona virus crisis. Professor Iwata Kentaro was quoted to have said that "the leaders' sense of entitlement was breeding indifference to the crisis and incompetence in dealing with the crisis" (1)

Koichi Nakano of Sophia University was quoted to have said:

"The Abe government has approached this crisis first as and foremost economic crisis and government public relation crisis rather than an epidemiological crisis." (2)

This was clearly shown by the nomination of Yasutoshi Nishimura, minister of economic rehabilitation, as minister of corona virus counter measures. Abe was concerned with the salvaging what was left of his Abenomics.

The most important issue for Abe was the opening of the July Olympics, which was threatened by the corona virus crisis.

For Abe, the Olympics Game was a sort of saviour for him and for his government. It could be redemption for the failure of Abenomics; Abe was hoping to have tens of billions of billion dollars of income through Olympics related tourism; there was huge expected income from the rights of TV diffusions. The huge multiplier effects of employment and income deriving from the construction of facilities would have been considerable

For Abe, the Olympics Game was something perhaps more important than the economic and financial bonanza; it was also the question of "saving face of Japan."

Japan was losing face because of the three-decade economic deflation, the mishandling of the 2011 triple disasters of earthquake, tsunami and the nuclear melt-down in addition to disappointing treatment received from Trump and the "Japan-passing" in the North-Korean peace dialogue.

So, it was more difficult for Abe to give up the Olympics, In fact, he waited until March 24th, before he postponed it for July 2021.

In the meantime, for more than three months from January to mid March had passed and the number of infected could have increased beyond our imagination; nobody knows how many, but it could be several tens of thousands, may be, more than hundred thousand, given the total population of 127 million inhabitants.

In fact, there are some experts who think that the total number of the infected could be 8 times of the reported cases of infections, if the testing campaign were more aggressive.

Nevertheless, Abe waited until April 7 before he declared the state of emergency for Tokyo and six surrounding prefectures. The world could not understand Abe's way of handling the crisis.

Professor Koichi Nakano of Sophia University said this.

“Abe seemed generally reluctant to call the state of emergency, so may be out of fear of further damaging the economy, he dragged his feet too long, but he had no choice but to accept the outbreak which is now out of control.” (3)

Thus, Abe missed the golden opportunity to save Japanese lives most likely because of his concern about his Abenomics and the interests of his corporate friends.

Abe has been criticized for the wrong timing of the closing of schools in February without proper planning and coordinating.

Abe was widely criticized for the terribly sub-standard face masks which were suspected to have been produced by incompetent company close to the establishment.

But, Abe's failure the most criticized was the poor testing. As of May 3, the number of tests in Japan was 1.3 per 1,000 people as against 12.0 for South Korea and 18.0 for the United States.

And the number of cases of infections, as of May 3, was 15,789 to increase to 16,779 as of June 3. The number of death rose from 549 to 900 in the same period.

It is the generalized view that the number of cases and deaths are low, simply because the number of tests is low. Abe tries to justify the low level of tests by evoking the poor reliability of the test kits, the lack of hospital facilities to deal with a large number of cases.

Such arguments are not very convincing, because Japan has been boasting about the high quality of the public health system.

#### The Voice of the Ordinary Japanese

One of the sad aspects of the corona virus crisis is the Japanese people's impression that Abe attaches greater importance to money and the glory of his “New Japan” than to human life.

The ordinary Japanese have been enduring the decades-long economic deflation, shrinking value of income, decreasing real jobs, the wide spread corruption of the establishment of the Japanese society and suffering of the elderly from hunger and social alienation.

But, now, they might have had enough; the life of each Japanese man, women and child is threatened. This is a new experience; they are frightened. They might have decided not to accept the loss of human life for Abenomics and Japan's Face-Saving.

In fact, they seem to have given up their legendary docility and have decided to open up their mind; they seem to liberate themselves from the pejorative image of “docile sheep”.

The following is the results of the poll conducted by Mainichi Shimbun in collaboration of a research partner on May 8, 2020.

#### *Evaluation of the government and political parties*

Do you support the current administration in Japan led by Abe?

- No (45%);
- Yes (40%)

Which political party do you support?

- LDP (30%),
- the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ) (9%),
- Nippon Innovation Party (11%),
- four other minor political parties (below 5 %)

It is interesting to notice that while 40% of the poll respondents support the government, only 30% support the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) led by Abe. This seems to show that Abe is losing people's support. In the past, LDP used to have 70% popular support.

#### *Evaluation of the COVID-19 policies*

Do you think that the declaration of state of emergency in the area you live can be lifted by the end of May?

- No (46%),
- Yes (36%)

Do you feel uneasy about Japan's medical and testing system in relation to novel coronavirus?

- Yes (68%);
- Not uneasy (14%)

How do you evaluate the administration's response to novel corona virus?

- Negatively (48%);
- Positively (22%)

As many as 46% of the respondents believe that the state of emergency will not be lifted, while it has been lifted.

This means that Abe has ignored the people's fear. Such fear seems to come from their mistrust in the medical and the testing system. As a matter of fact, 68% do not feel easy with the system. All in all, 48% of the respondents evaluate negatively the government response to corona virus.

#### *Japanese people's docility*

Since the declaration of the state of emergency did you go out of home?

- Not at all (15%);
- went out for essential needs such as works and shopping (82%)

How much have your own direct contacts with other people declined since the declaration of

the state of emergency?

- Declined by 80% (56%);
- by at least 20% (26%)

The respondents' responses to these questions seem to reflect that the Japanese people respect the government instruction of self quarantine and social distancing.

Since the declaration of the state of emergency 15% did not go out all, while 82% went out for essential missions.

On the other hand, as many as 80% of the respondents say that, since the declaration of the state of emergency, the contact with other people declined by 56%.

These poll results seem to lead to two conclusions. First, the Japanese people are not happy with the way the government has been handling the corona-virus crisis.

Second, even if they are not satisfied with the whole system of public health and government reactive policies, the Japanese people could have saved many lives by virtue of self quarantines, social distancing, saluting by bowing instead of shaking hands, frequent hand washing and the culture of wearing face masks.

However, nobody knows how many lives have been saved by the Japanese docility and popular culture. It is more than certain that the real number of the infected and the corona-virus related death could be much higher than the reported figures.

There is a theory saying that the government does not report the true figures of infections and deaths, even if it has the true data, in order not to make the people feel insecure.

But, this theory does not seem defensible, because each individual having the risk of being infected should be eager to know the truth. Anyway, by the end of June, the true picture might emerge.

What will happen to the Japanese Culture of Docility and Harmony?

A part of my education took place in Korea under the Japanese rule. I used to admire the docility, the obedience to authorities, strict disciplines and the quest for harmony of the Japanese people.

On the other hand, I was sad to see that the great majority of the Japanese people had to suffer from decades-long war without much complaining; it was difficult for me to see the Japanese families sending their fathers, sons, brothers to Kamikaze fighter planes.

I was wondering for whom the war was? I was wondering who was benefitting from the war?

Was it for the people or for the glory of a few ambitious political and military leaders who had the illusion of conducting the "holy war of liberating Asia from the White"?

Even now, I see, in front of my eyes, the poor Japanese children and the elders starving to death on the street of Tokyo and other Japanese cities in 1944 and 1945.

The Japanese people thought, since the Hiroshima and the Nagasaki, that they would enjoy

peace, prosperity, the end of Kempeitai (cruel military police) and ordinary people-friendly government.

In short, they were hoping a decent and human society in which even the ordinary people can enjoy. But the ordinary Japanese people have been denied of such world.

History tells us that, if a single political force rules the country for very long period, the probability of corruption of the political establishment, the abuse of power and the alienation of the week increases. This has happened in Japan.

One of the amazing political scenes in Japan is the one in which one political party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) ruled, since 1957, 57 years out of 63 years, or 91% of the period.

During this period, Japan had 21 prime ministers. The longevity of Japanese prime ministers has been as follows: 1-year PMs: 4; 2-year PMs: 11; 3-year PMs: 2; 5-year PMs: 2; 8-year PM:1; 10-year PM:1

Shinzo Abe has been prime minister for 10 years (2006-2007 and 2012-2020).

Yasuhiro Nakasone (1982-1987) and Junichiro Koizumi (2001-2006) were two 5-year prime ministers.

Abe's maternal grandfather, Nobuske Kishi (1957-60) and Hayato Ikeda (1961-64) were two 3-year prime ministers.

The instability of the Japanese government is well reflected by the fact that 71.4 % of prime ministers since 1957 were 1-year or 2-year prime ministers.

The excessive instability of the Japanese government was attributable partly to the different term for the party presidency (3 years for LDP) and the term of prime minister (4 years). The prime minister is the president of the party in power; this can create confusion.

However, the more important reason for the instability could be the never ending corruption of the political leaders. In fact, many of them killed themselves or lost the position of prime minister because of corruption.

One of the notorious scandals was the Recruit Scandal in which 70 lawmakers bought, in 1988, the stock of a company before its listing and made fortune. There were savage sex offenses at night clubs by lawmakers of the LDP. The bribery scandals of construction industry has been a part of the corruption culture of the establishment.

The land dealing scandal in which the first lady was involved was related to the acquisition of public land for a small portion of the land's market price; the land was for the establishment of a Meiji-era inspired ultra-right primary school, Moritomo Gakuen.

The scandal which made the Japanese the very angry was the scandal of prolonging the tenure of the Tokyo chief prosecutor, Hiromu Kurokawa, from 63 years to 65 years.

The chief prosecutor is a strong supporter of Abe, who needed the prosecutor in order to use the Bureau of Prosecutor for Abe's political purpose including the silencing of the voice of objections to his ambitions.



For the first time, 4 million twitters of the ordinary Japanese people emerged to protest Abe's hidden intention. It happened that Kurokawa played, for money, the illegal "mahjong" game and he resigned.

There is a close correlation between the length of power and the extent of the corruption culture. As we saw, out of 63 years since 1957, the year of the creation of LDP by Abe's grandfather, it ruled Japan for 57 years, that is, 91% of the period.

Such long period of power leads necessarily to the creation of the corruption culture dominated by big business, bureaucrats and politicians. This group begins with money-power collusion, then the creation of the oligarchy and eventually the creation of corruption culture.

Once you come to the era of the corruption culture, it is very difficult to get rid of it. We have seen it in South Korea under the 58-year rule by the conservative governments since 1948, that is, 81% of the period, 1948-2020.

The most disastrous effect of the corruption culture is this. The core of the culture is the monetary-political establishment whose interest is the maximization of the interests of the establishment at the expense of those of the ordinary people.

The nomination and the expulsion of prime ministers are most likely determined by the establishment. Many of the short-term prime ministers are those who might have done something which the establishment did not like.

Under this situation, the economic prosperity has not been very beneficial to the ordinary Japanese. One of the popular descriptions of Japan since the 1980s was "the country is rich but, the ordinary people are poor."

There is another political phenomenon which makes the Japanese people worried and insecure; it is the Abe group's dream of restoring the pre-1945 military imperial empire of Japan.

Abe's decades-long ambition has been the amendment of the Peace Constitution, in particular, Article 9, which prevents Japan from making offensive wars. His group proposes even the way Hitler changed the Weimer Constitution by force.

The statement of the deputy prime minister who was also foreign minister, Taro Aso, showed how much the Abe team admired the Nazi constitution.

"German's Weimer constitution was changed into Nazi constitution before anyone knew. It was changed before anyone else notices. Why don't we learn from that method?" (4)

There was also the State Secret Act adopted in 2013 designed to silence the voices of objection. This Act has the following characteristics.

- Civil servant who leaks state secrets can be imprisoned up to 10 years.
- Civilians and journalists who reveal state secrets may be imprisoned up to 5 years.
- It is the government which defines what should be state secrets

To restore the old Japanese empire, Abe has to silence the voice of objection. Abe has made



the NHK (Japan's national TV) into "Ave TV."

The Japanese people have endured all these realities; they have suffered from 3-decade long economic deflation; they have had to watch helplessly how Abenomics could not find the solution.

As a matter of fact, Abenomics has failed. The fiscal arrow and the monetary arrow have hit the wrong targets. The fiscal arrow has increased the national debt to 253% of GDP. The monetary arrow had inundated cash, in the name of QE (quantity easing), in the financial institutions without really connecting the money to the real economy, the good-producing economy.

The real arrow was the third arrow of structural adjustment. This policy means the strengthening of the industries by not bailing out the hopeless big companies. Most of the monetary and fiscal resources have been used for the bailout of businesses close to LDP.

The Japanese people have endured all these hardship caused by wrong policies. Yet, they have not gone down to the streets to protest.

They did once for the antiwar movement in 1969. In 2011, more than 300 civic organizations made street demonstration against the government mishandling of the triple disasters of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown.

But, they could not continue, because of the lack of sustained backing of political forces.

However, Abe's choice of the glory of New Japan (neo-military and imperial Japan) at the expense of simple happiness of simple people might lead to the open protests against Abe's political forces.

The simple happiness of simple Japanese is peace, more equal distribution of the fruits of economic development and a little better social status recognized and respected by the elite group.

To do this, they need strong opposition parties. But, there are too many small political parties and the Abe's LDP is too strong and still popular.

However, if united, the ordinary Japanese people can change things.

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*Professor Joseph H. Chung is professor of Economics and co-director of the Observatoire de l'Asie de l'Est (OAE) of the Centre d'Études sur l'Intégration et la Mondialisation (CEIM), Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG).*

## Notes

(1) [thedailybeast.com/japans-covid-19-state-of-emergency-locks-down-criticism](https://thedailybeast.com/japans-covid-19-state-of-emergency-locks-down-criticism)

(2) Ibid

(3) [theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/09/dash-loom-in-japan-as-tokyo-governor-says-abe-covid-measures-not-enough](https://theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/09/dash-loom-in-japan-as-tokyo-governor-says-abe-covid-measures-not-enough))

(4) [thedeathbeast.com/japan-shinzo-abe-government-has-a-thing-about-hitler-it-likes-him](https://thedeathbeast.com/japan-shinzo-abe-government-has-a-thing-about-hitler-it-likes-him)

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