

# Tokyo 2020-21: The Troubled Games of the XXXII Olympiad

Gavan McCormack

**Abstract:** *On 25 March, the Olympic Torch Relay is to set out from Fukushima with its “sacred flame” on a grand national circuit, visiting all 47 of the country’s prefectures and arriving at the Tokyo Games venue for the opening ceremony on 23 July. But will this scenario really play out? Even as the countdown to the Olympic opening ceremony proceeds, in the shadow of the 3.11 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster and the Covid pandemic there are reports that cancelation might be imminent.*

**Keywords:** *Olympics, Tokyo, coronavirus, sexism, postwar, politics, Japan.*

## Japan “Under Control”

The Games were awarded to Japan in the first instance because Prime Minister Abe Shinzo assured the International Olympic Committee at Buenos Aires in September 2013 that Fukushima matters (the catastrophic quake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown of 2011) were “under control” and there would be no problem in Japan playing host to the world. In the Abe design, adopted by his successor Suga Yoshihide in November 2021, the “Recovery Games” would signal to the world recovery from the 2011 events. The grim fact, however, is that this assurance was unfounded. As of 2021 not only is the Fukushima crisis, now in its 10th year (the initial 2011 declaration of emergency has yet to be rescinded), but a second major crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, several times declared a national emergency, followed. For neither the Fukushima disaster nor the COVID pandemic is resolution in sight.



## Dual Crises: Nuclear and Pandemic

The people of Fukushima, and indeed of Japan as a whole, continue to suffer from the impact of the 2011 meltdown of the cores of reactors 1, 2, and 3 of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, releasing into the soil, air and sea a radioactive slurry, including caesium-137 and strontium 90 equivalent (according to nuclear physicist Koide Hiroaki) to 1,000 Hiroshima bombs. Within the reactors a significant volume (estimated at more than 1,100 tons) of nuclear fuel, debris, and waste remains, nearly twice as much as at Chernobyl. The caesium slowly degenerates but, according to Koide, even the passage of 100 years will diminish it by only

one-tenth, leaving Japan in a state of nuclear emergency far into the future. A decade on, many thousands of Fukushima citizens remain displaced. In April 2011 2,700 tons of “less radioactive” water was released into the sea, but much more has accumulated since then, having absorbed some measure of radioactivity from being poured to cool the melted reactor cores.

The build-up of polluted water continues at a rate (as of early 2020) of around 140 cubic metres per day (700 drum cans-full), with a total volume now in excess of one million tons. In September 2017, TEPCO admitted that around 80 per cent of the water stored at the Fukushima site still contains radioactive substances above legal levels, strontium, for example, at more than 100-times the legally permitted level. Concentrations of tritium, in particular, are high, and the government view that it is capable of discharge without harm has been strongly contested. One independent expert writes of the Japanese government as having “consistently failed to eliminate a cocktail of other [than tritium] radioactive elements, including iodine, ruthenium, rhodium, antimony, tellurium, cobalt and strontium.” Although nobody knows what would be the effect of pouring substantial quantities of irradiated fluids – even if partially “cleaned” – into the ocean over the next decade, that remains the government plan. The water dump, however, is to be held over until *after* the Tokyo Olympics.

Japan has so far escaped international censure over its nuclear record and its high-risk plans. One may readily imagine the response from the international community if some other country, North Korea for example, were to announce its intention to pour nuclear contaminated materials into the ocean.

With the 2011 nuclear crisis and state of emergency still in place, un-rescinded, a second, very different crisis, the COVID-19

pandemic, followed from 2020. Over one hundred and twenty million people around the world have so far contracted it and 2.65 million died, including more than 500,000 in the U.S. In Japan, approximately 446,000 have contracted it and 8,500 died. In its current iteration, the COVID-19 emergency declaration covers Tokyo and its surrounding prefectures and extends from January to March 2021.

### The Olympics as Farce

As if the two emergencies were not enough, in February 2021 an unexpected complication occurred. The head of the Japanese Olympic Committee, Mori Yoshiro, declared that meetings in which there were many female participants were slow to get anything done because women talked too much. As sexist comments go, it was relatively mild, but it stirred a wave of outrage, from women and men, in Japan and internationally. He first issued a perfunctory apology and retraction, while declaring that he had no intention of resigning, but then, as the wave of criticism rose around him, and three days after the IOC itself declared his remarks “absolutely inappropriate,” still protesting that he had been misunderstood, Mori resigned.

Though he is now gone, however, the question remains as to what his apparent gaffe signified. As a major political figure, including a year (2000-2001) as Prime Minister, Mori stands out in early 21st century Japan as a believer in the absolutist Shinto formula upon which the pre-war Japanese state was built and which ultimately led to war with much of the world in the 1930s and 1940s. As such, he has been a major figure in the ranks of those pressing for revision of the constitution to bring it back into accord with the 1889 imperial constitution. As he put it in May 2000, addressing a Shinto politics forum, “everyone should recognize that Japan is the land of the gods, centred on the emperor.” It was precisely the formula of the

Japanese state that reached its apogee and then collapsed catastrophically in 1945, giving way in 1946 to the post-war constitutional order based on popular sovereignty. After that 2000 statement, support for his government steadily drained away, recording an absolute nadir of 6.5 per cent in February 2001, at which point Mori resigned as Prime Minister. However, his archaic and reactionary worldview was no serious obstacle to his continued high profile roles as core member of the Shinto Politics League in the Diet and from 2005 national coordinator for Japanese sport.

From time to time, Mori continued to stir controversy by making statements that outraged democratic, constitutionalist sentiment. In June 2003, when chair of a ruling Liberal Democratic Party committee on Japan's falling birth-rate, he expressed the view that it was inappropriate for women who declare they will not have children to be given any subsidy from the public purse. The latest, contemptuous, reference to women may be seen as a further expression of the feudal framework, in which the emperor is the supreme, concentrated expression of unsullied Japanese-ness, and women are impure, inferior beings, as in the expression *danson jōhi* (men to be revered, women to be contemned).

Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide and his deputy, Minister of Finance Aso Taro, both distanced themselves from Mori's latest remark, though both men are known to share his attachment to the pre-war, emperor-centred polity. Although they were mildly critical of Mori, they refrained from calling for his dismissal, focusing on the possible impact of Mori's comment for the "national interest" (*kokueki*) rather than on its inherent sexism.

They seemed not to realize that the problem with Mori's statement was its breach of a fundamental principle of modern democracy, rather than the damage it might cause to the national interest. It offended simultaneously

against the Olympic Charter, which defines the Olympic movement as one transcending national interest, and Article 14 of the Constitution of Japan (Article 14), which prohibits gender discrimination, not to mention the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1981 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

## Women's Rising

In the event, it was a kind of uprising by furious women that may have played the decisive role in forcing Mori's resignation. Mori's plan for the Games assigned a key role to an army of 80,000 unpaid volunteers, including many bilingual or tri-lingual women. In the light of Japan's deeply entrenched institutional sexism — the country ranked 121st out of 153 countries on the World Economic Forum's 2020 "[Gender Gap](#)" table — the Mori remarks came as an intolerable insult. Women sent in their resignations by the hundreds, along with quite a few men, in a snowballing phenomenon that was only halted by his resignation.

However, the Mori affair is not going to be solved simply by his resignation, rooted as it was in the deep and ramified structures of Japanese sexism. The ruling LDP is considering proposals for the inclusion of more women on parliamentary committees while hedging the idea with the assurance (to male staff) that the women would neither speak nor vote; essentially, they would be observers. The whole framework of the Olympic movement in Japan is imbued with Mori values and staffed by Mori appointees. The context of his controversial remark on February 3 was that of resistance to modest reform efforts from within and beyond Japan, as is clear from his words.

"MEXT [Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology] has been making itself a nuisance by demanding we raise the number of female Board

members to 40 per cent. But the more women there are the longer board meetings go on. I am embarrassed to have to mention it, but meetings of the Rugby Association take twice as long now that women are included ..."

In other words, Mori continued to resist government pressure (however *pro forma*) to change his and the Olympic Committee's ways.

## Prospects

On February 12, Hashimoto Seiko, a 56-year old seven-time Olympic woman speed skater and Olympics minister in the Suga cabinet, was appointed to succeed Mori. Since Hashimoto is well-known as Mori's protégé, the two referring to each other as "like daughter" and "like dad," and since Hashimoto upon assuming the post had no word of criticism but was even effusive in praise of Mori as her teacher and political exemplar, it is highly unlikely that she is going to usher in a new era in the Olympic movement in the weeks prior to the scheduled start of the event.

The Japanese government, in consultation with the International Olympic Committee, must first decide whether to proceed with the Games. Opinion polls consistently report public opposition running at levels of around 80 percent. A March opinion poll found just 9 per cent in favour of proceeding according to plan with the Games. Even in the corporate sector, a February survey found just 7.7 percent of firms to be in favour of going ahead with the Games, 56 percent wanting another postponement or outright cancellation. The Governor of one prefecture (Shimane) served notice that he might withdraw his prefecture from the torch relay because, he said, "it is highly likely that

[the Games] will spark another infection spread. As things stand now, the Olympics should not be held."

Can the Japanese people and their business sector somehow be persuaded to see the Games of the XXXII Olympiad as a symbol of recovery from nuclear disaster and pandemic? A of mid-March they were remarkably unpersuaded. Even among athletes, there were reports of concern about the potential risks of participation. With the Torch being readied to set off on its grand national tour, the Japanese Olympic organization and government were still struggling to find some way to reconcile the need for public attention, grand spectacle, and multiple celebrations, with the pandemic principles of social distancing. Japan remained closed to foreign tourists, the virus was still spreading, with over 1,000 new cases in Japan each day, and the decision had apparently already been made that, even if the Games were to go ahead, spectators from abroad would be excluded.

To avoid a repeat of the 1940 outcome (Tokyo's cancelled XIIth Olympiad Games) the Japanese choice in 2021 might come down to one between going ahead as planned, a more-or-less conventional global spectacle with a million foreign visitors anticipated and with the risk of setting off mass COVID-19 infection and circulation, and the conduct of a very different kind of spectacle, hitherto unimaginable, in which the Olympic torch would be escorted through empty streets and admission to the venues confined to competitors and officials, possibly even being confronted by hostile, angry citizens. The latter would be the XXXII Olympics as global grand farce, with the Mori affair its prelude.

**Gavan McCormack** is emeritus professor of the Australian National University in Canberra, a fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, and a founding editor of *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*. His recent publications include: *Resistant Islands: Okinawa Confronts Japan and the United States*, (co-authored with Satoko Oka Norimatsu), second, revised and expanded, paperback edition, 2018 (Japanese, Korean, and Chinese editions available); *The State of the Japanese State: Contested Identity, Direction and Role*, Folkestone, Kent, Renaissance Books, 2018; and “Ryukyu/Okinawa’s trajectory: from periphery to centre, 1600-2015,” in Sven Saaler and Christopher W.A. Szpilman, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Modern Japanese History*. He writes regularly on Okinawan and Japanese matters at *The Asia-Pacific Journal*. A shorter version of this article, without notes, was published in the Australian online *Pearls and Irritations*, June 2022.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Koide Hiroaki, “[The Fukushima nuclear disaster and the Tokyo Olympics](#),” translated and introduced by Norma Field, *The Asia-Pacific Journal – Japan Focus*, March 1, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> The storage tanks are estimated to reach capacity by 2022. (Tim Schauenberg, “[Fukushima: How the ocean became a dumping ground for radioactive waste](#),” 11 March 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Chang Mari, “[Dumping Fukushima’s contaminated water into the ocean could be a violation of international law](#),” *Hankyoreh*, 10 January 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Koide, op. cit; “Fukushima dai-ichi genpatsu no osensui hasseiryō, ima mo ichinichi doramu kan 700 ko-bun chikasui ya amamizu ga shinnyū,” *Mainichi shimbun*, 28 January 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Fairlie, “[Should TEPCO/Japanese government dump tritium-contaminated water from Fukushima into the sea?](#)” 18 September 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Fairlie, *ibid*.

<sup>7</sup> Kihara Satoru, “[Mori hatsugen wa ‘kokueki o sokoneru kara mondai na no ka](#),” *Arinohitokoto*, 11 February 2021.

<sup>8</sup> The female participation rate among members of the lower house of the national Diet is just 9.9 per cent (as of October 2020) and in local government assemblies, 14 per cent (“Mori sexist remarks show slow progress in narrowing gender gap,” *Mainichi shimbun*, 10 February 2021). According to the Geneva-based Inter-Parliamentary Union that amounts to ranking as 167th of 190 countries.

<sup>9</sup> “[Jiminto josei giin ni to kaigi miseru ga hatsugen mitomezu hoshin hyomei](#),” *BBC News Japan*, 18 February 2021.

<sup>10</sup> “Mori Yoshiro shi ‘josei takusan haitte iru rijikai wa ....’ mikka no besshi hatsugen zenbun,” *Yahoo Japan*, 4 February 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Kihara Satoru, “[Shunin kaiken de senmei ni natta Hashimoto Seiko no futekikaku sei](#),” *Ari no hitokoto*, 19 February 2021.

<sup>12</sup> “Tokyo gorin ‘yotei dori kaisai subeku’ wa 9 per cent,” *Mainichi shimbun*, 13 March 2021

<sup>13</sup> “Over half of firms in Japan want Olympics canceled or postponed, survey shows,” *Japan Times*, 15 February 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Arata Namima and Masashi Shimizu, “Citing pandemic, Shimane chief suggests halting Olympic relay,” *Asahi shimbun*, 17 February 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Justin McCurry, “[Tokyo 2020, Tokyo Olympics, definitely going ahead unless cancelled again](#),” *The Guardian*, 2 February 2021.

<sup>16</sup> “Olympic officials to bar overseas spectators from attending events,” *Asahi Shimbun*, 10 March 2021.