

Perseverance an effective weapon for activists in Japan

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It has been said and believed for several decades that Japanese are not active in the political process, demonstrations or making public appeals. But that is not the case. There have been many cases of steady and long-enduring social activism in Japan, just like in other countries, but they have remained largely unknown until recently. To take one example, the demonstration against the planned construction of a nuclear plant in Kaminoseki, Yamaguchi Prefecture, by inhabitants in Iwaishima, a small island across from Kaminoseki, has been held every Monday for about 30 years.

The 3/11 disaster changed the situation across the country to a considerable extent and many people wanted to learn about social activism so they could take action on pressing issues such as the displacement of people, especially Fukushima nuclear disaster victims, nuclear power plants, poverty and unemployment, military bases, etc. We saw a strong upheaval of social movements in 2012, but they unfortunately withered quickly this year.

We seem to be lost in "understanding" the significance of the unprecedented disaster in Fukushima. It brought to light Japan's structural problems, as the social movements mentioned above often pointed out. The problem of the Fukushima nuclear fiasco fundamentally stems from the same root as those of Kaminoseki, Hiroshima, Okinawa, Minamata and so on.

But these protests are disturbing for those who want to vanquish the disasters by treating them as if they were trivial matters. They use phrases like: "We have overcome the disaster," "The problem is under control," "It is over," "We will prepare for the coming Olympic," or "It is obsolete to stick to old problems." For the powers that be, "obsolescence" is a keyword to get people to turn their attention to new things. Their strategy is to consign remembrances to

oblivion. Thus the struggle now is against the practice of hurling the word "obsolescence" at opponents.

With this in mind, Okinawa is a suitable place to make an observation. I recently went with some colleagues to Takae on Okinawa Island, where a sit-in protest has been taking place against environmental destruction caused by the construction of helipads and the flight of Osprey aircraft.

This protest and the successive occurrences of SLAPP (strategic lawsuit against public participation) suits filed by government authorities became known this year through the documentary "A Targeted Village" ("Hyouteki-no-Mura"). It was originally an hour program made by a local TV station, Ryukyu Asahi Hoso, which was broadcast only once or twice after midnight in Honshu. Someone then put it online and it eventually got enough views to prompt the production staff to make a longer film version. It has been playing in Tokyo since Aug. 10 and its popularity has exceeded expectations. Now more theaters across Japan want to screen it.

We were in Takae to take part in the sit-in protest, but only for one or two days. During our stay there was no violent clash. The time passed calmly as a small number of us kept watch at the gate of a U.S. base. But the presence of one person, Shun Medoruma, a famous writer and novelist who won the Akutagawa Prize, was particularly noticeable. I knew him personally and was aware of his harsh criticism of the U.S. military's heavy presence in Okinawa through his statements as well as through his novels. But actually seeing him in action was totally different from just knowing him.

He was there almost daily. Standing with a transceiver and wearing a cap and his face covered with a towel to protect himself from the sun, he checked cars and people going into and out of the base all day long. He often slept in his car because Takae was too far from his home to come and go every day. Except for a short break to read a newspaper or light materials, he devoted his entire days to this protest.

I knew that the third volume of the best

selection of his novels was to be published soon so I asked him about it. He told me that he had the proof sheets in his car, but that he could not find time to concentrate on them. If he had not been taking part in the sit-in, the proof reading would have been finished by the end of August.

We were struck by the fact that this brilliant writer had staked his professional life on this protest. His determination was not changed by criticism that his fans were waiting for new novels so he should engage himself more in writing. Medoruma said that if there were no problems such as the helipad construction, he would like to come up with future topics for writing by spending his time reading books and thinking freely. It pained me to hear this.

As for the film "A Targeted Village," Medoruma's criticism is inexorable. He found it ridiculous that the mass media report only dramatic events that impress large audiences and that people in mainland Japan shed tears by watching the dramatic scenes in "A Targeted Village." He added that after the violent police crackdown on Takae protesters in September 2012, no more reporters came to cover the continuing sit-in protest.

Certainly Medoruma's protest has its limitations. It is almost unknown compared with "A Targeted Village". Besides, the sit-in style of protest itself has limits and expressing opposition through legislative, administrative or juridical means could be more effective. Still the persistence of his protest, characterized by his refusal to let the sit-in be "consumed" in the form of a TV program or a film, is unforgettable.

I would define Medoruma's strategy as resistance to any move to denigrate long-lived protest movements as "obsolete." He would not mind being criticized as obsolete. His fight uses "obsolescence" as a weapon. Such a fight could possibly be stronger than one that tries to dodge this label.

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