

Abe Shinzo and Japan's One-Strong (*Ikkyo*) State¹

Gavan McCormack

**Emeritus Professor,
School of Culture, History and Language,
College of the Asia-Pacific
Australian National University**

One Strong

Abe Shinzo has exercised extraordinary influence over the Japanese state. On 20 November 2019, as he passed his 2,587th day in office (over eight years) he became modern Japan's longest-serving Prime Minister. But what are the sources of this longevity and what will be the consequences for Japan and the Asia-Pacific?

Probably few, even among his close supporters, suggest that he has been exceptionally popular. His parliamentary dominance rests on a combination of political apathy, absence of credible opposition, and a well-funded political party machine honed by more than half a century of Cold War and post-Cold War parliamentary dominance. From a narrow electoral base, during his second term of office that followed the general election of December 2012, Abe moved to concentrate an unprecedented measure of control over the levers of state, nominating his close associates to special policy advisory committees and to head the Cabinet Legislative Bureau, the National Security Council, the Bank of Japan, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and the national broadcaster (NHK). He also paid close attention to the cultivation of the major national media groups. In October 2017 the support of just 17.9 per cent of eligible voters (48.2% of the vote) in the small seat electorate division was sufficient to secure the Abe camp 61.1% of the parliamentary seats. In September 2018 Abe extended his party leadership position to three terms (nine years from 2012) and so anticipated steering the country through the 2020 Olympic Games and beyond to the adoption of a new constitution before retiring in glory late in 2021. Coronavirus upset that plan by causing the Olympics to be postponed to 2020, but early signs were that Abe would turn that delay to good purpose.

Such is the degree of concentration of power in the hands of the executive and the enfeebling of the elected parliament that government under Abe is sometimes referred to as "*ikkyo*" ("one strong," with implications of dictatorial). Yet the more power is concentrated in "one strong" hands, the more enemies sharpen their knives, allies grumble, and public stocks fall, leaving a prospect of increasing uncertainty. The other Japanese term increasingly employed in reference to the Abe government is "*sontaku*" (anticipatory compliance, or preemptive ingratiation, with implications of indirect rule), in which case cronyism is rampant and orders are perceived and implemented without actually having to be uttered. That the Prime Minister would probably want to help his friends with certain projects, such as (in the following analysis) a Shinto-ist Elementary School or a Veterinary College, or to promote certain "grand" state projects such as the JR Tokai or a casino, could be taken for granted without

¹ An earlier version of this paper was published on the Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus, <https://apjjf.org/2020/7/McCormack.html>

the issue of any instruction to that effect. Sycophancy becomes a defining bureaucratic virtue. Such a state is likely to be severely tested by the coronavirus affair of 2020.

“One strong” implies “many weak.” There is a discrepancy between Abe’s political principles and commitments and those of the majority of electors who choose him. Roughly half the Japanese people oppose Abe’s core concern, constitutional revision, especially as it relates to Article 9 (the clause that offends him by renouncing “force or threat of force as means of settling international disputes” and resolving not to possess “land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential.”)² Despite public opposition often at levels of 70 per cent or more, his governments have enacted – often by forcing through the Diet – major legislation, especially bills with serious implications for security and human rights and freedom of expression – including the Revised Education Basic Law of 2006, the Secrets Law of 2013, the Security laws of 2015 (opening the door to war in support of an ally), the Integrated Resort (Casino) law of 2016, the Conspiracy Law of 2017. More than half opposed the raising of the consumption tax from 8 to 10 per cent when Abe pushed that through in 2019. A similar percentage (75 per cent) opposes the country’s reliance on nuclear power, although the government is committed to reviving (and expanding) the national grid, much of it still offline in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster of 2011.

Appropriate to the world that in Anglophone terms was (from 2016) dubbed by Oxford Dictionaries the realm of “post-truth,” government in Japan in many respects came to confront rather than represent the people. Surveys regularly show a high proportion of people who disbelieve and distrust the Prime Minister even while, not uncommonly, they vote for him, saying they see no alternative. Young voters in particular tend to be swayed by social media and digital news sources heavily weighted towards the government line. As under Trump in the US, so in Japan under Abe post-truth gathers strength.

From 2017, however, scandals arose one after the other, exposing the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the Abe “one strong” state. What follows is a brief account and assessment of some of the most important of the scandals embroiling the Abe regime: the Moritomo school, Kake Veterinary College, JR Tokai Linear Super-Express, Casino/Integrated Resort, and Shinjuku Flower Viewing affairs. A final note addresses the significance of the corona virus of 2020 (declared a “pandemic” by WHO from 11 March 2020), in which the tendencies identified in the earlier cases – irresponsibility, cover-up, manipulation of the record, irrationality – become more evident even as the stakes become higher.

1) The “Abe Shinzo Commemorative Elementary School”

In what was to become known as the Moritomo Gakuen (Moritomo School) affair, a plot of national land was sold in June 2016 at one-seventh its estimated value to close associates and personal friends of the Prime Minister and his wife who were intent on establishing a primary school in addition to the existing kindergarten. With the name “Abe Shinzo Commemorative Elementary School,” Abe’s wife Akie its honorary principal, and the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education as the school’s educational philosophy, it would be an unflinchingly reactionary institution. Treated as a sacred document and memorised by the kindergarten (and,

² Support LDP constitutional revision, 37 per cent; oppose: 49:0 per cent (Kyodo, August 2018) and support 31, oppose 46 (*Asahi shimbun*, July 2019) and support 32 oppose 56 (Kyodo, July 2019), “Seron chosa, Abe kaiken e no hantai tsuyoku, *Akahata*, 25 July 2019.

prospectively, the elementary school) children, the 1890 Rescript had been central to the modern (early 20th century) Japanese state's emperor worship.³ It called on the Japanese people to be “good and faithful subjects” who

“...offer yourselves courageously to the State; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth [and] render illustrious the best traditions of your forefathers.”

In offering no greater glory than death in the imperial cause it seemed almost absurdly out of sync with the 21st century, yet the remarkable fact is that at the existing Moritomo kindergarten children of three to five years of age were beginning their day bowing before portraits of members of the imperial family, singing the “Kimigayo” anthem, reciting the Rescript and shouting rightist slogans such as “Japanese adults should make sure South Korea and China repent over treating Japan as villain,” and “refrain from teaching lies in history textbooks.”⁴ However improbable, the Rescript's statement of political principle was widely endorsed in ruling Japanese circles. The Prime Minister's wife was effusive in praise of the projected institution and its Shinto-ist spirit. Lecturing at the kindergarten on 5 September 2015, she praised the projected school as in keeping with her husband's views. Other prominent figures in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, including Education Minister Matsuno Hirokazu and Defence Minister Inada Tomomi also endorsed the Rescript's moral and educational value and Education Vice-Minister Yoshiie Hiroyuki saw no problem with it being recited at morning assembly.⁵ On 31 March 2017, the Abe cabinet adopted a resolution critically confirming that, although it should not be used exclusively, it was “impossible to deny the usefulness of the Imperial Rescript in the teaching of moral education.” Significantly, no member of the Abe government saw the Rescript as fundamentally at odds with the democratic principles of post-war educational reform and the 1947 Constitution.

In February 2017, as the national daily *Asahi shimbun* published a bombshell story to the effect that the publicly-owned land for the school site had been sold to the Moritomo group for a sum estimated to be about 14 per cent of its market value. A storm broke over this affair. Prime Minister Abe and his wife both distanced themselves from their sometime friends, principal, Kagoike Yasunori and his wife Junko. References to the Prime Minister and his wife were abruptly deleted from the school's home page and its name was changed from “Abe Shinzo Commemorative” to “Mizuho no Kuni” (Land of Abundant Ears of Rice) Elementary School. Dramatically, Abe declared that he would resign from office and from the Diet if he or his wife were shown to have had any involvement in the sale of the site to Moritomo.⁶ As evidence began to leak out about the nature of the extraordinary deal between

³ The Imperial Rescript on Education, 1890, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Imperial_Rescript_on_Education/

⁴ For my discussion of the early stages of the affair, see *The State of the Japanese State*, pp. 210-213.

⁵ “Chorei de no kyoiku chokugo no rodoku ‘mondai no nai koi’ bunka fukudaijin,” *Asahi shimbun*, 7 April 2017. See also Tomohiro Osaki, “Imperial Rescript on Education making slow, contentious comeback,” *Japan Times*, 11 April 2017.

⁶ “Abe shusho, ‘Watakushi ya tsuma kanyo nara jinin’ kokuyuchi kakuan haraisage de,” *Asahi shimbun*, 17 February 2017.

the Japanese state and the Moritomo group, the government fended off charges of impropriety by outright denial, while saying that all relevant materials had been destroyed. Between late February and April 2017 the Ministry of Finance undertook an extensive secret vetting process, making “dozens of deletions” to 14 documents concerning the sale.⁷ In particular, it saw to it that all reference by name to Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, his wife Abe Akie, Finance Minister Aso Taro, and the Nippon Kaigi organization (the ultra-nationalist, historical revisionist organization to which all parties to this affair, including the Prime Minister and virtually all members of his government belonged) was deleted.⁸ Having done that, it then released the fake documents to the Diet.

The pressure in the Ministry, which is generally regarded as the centre of power and arbiter of legitimacy in the Japanese state, to cooperate in this gross illegality must have been intense. One official (54-year old Akagi Toshio, upon whom more below) committed suicide. Another, who came to prominence as Ministry spokesman in denying any wrongdoing before the Diet in the early months of the affair, resigned once the malfeasances were exposed. Needless to say, whoever was responsible, the sale of government property at virtual gift price and the subsequent planned deletion or doctoring of public documents were highly irregular and potentially serious criminal acts.

As the gap widened between the “official” (doctored) version of events and the “real” version gleaned from materials leaked by whistle-blowers, government credibility collapsed. On 22 June 2017 parliamentary opposition parties demanded a special session of the Diet to discuss the affair. Under Article 53 of the constitution the government is obliged to summon the Diet for special session if demanded by “a quarter or more of the total members of either House.” Though that requirement was met, the Abe government stonewalled, at first ignoring the demands.⁹ Then, after 98 days, it took the sudden initiative of dissolving the Diet, not in response to the demand under Article 53, however, but only to call fresh general elections. As the miasma surrounding the Moritomo affair was thickening, Abe succeeded in evading closer investigation.¹⁰

The person who might be most able to offer light on the circumstances was Moritomo’s former proprietor and principal, Kagoike Yasunori. Kagoike’s allegation before the Diet on 16 March 2017 of special treatment and of having received a Prime Ministerial gift for the new school of one million yen (about \$8,800), delivered by the Prime Minister’s wife, was highly embarrassing.¹¹ It was also ironic since perhaps nobody in early 21st century Japan took more seriously than Kagoike the Abe creed of “beautiful Japan,” the “land of abundant ears of rice,” and the values of the Imperial Rescript. It is perhaps because Kagoike and his wife, Junko, were both ideological allies (also Nippon Kaigi members) and personal friends

⁷ Reiji Yoshida, “Finance Ministry admits to doctoring official papers on Moritomo land scandal,” *Japan Times*, 12 March 2018.

⁸ On Nihon Kaigi, see McCormack, *The State of the Japanese State*, pp. 29-30.

⁹ The government could defend its inaction by pointing out that Article 53 included no provision as to time limit.

¹⁰ Lawrence Repeta, “Backstory to Abe’s snap election – the secrets of Moritomo, Kake and the ‘Missing’ Japan SDF activity logs,” *The Asia Pacific Journal – Japan Focus*, 15 October 2017 <https://apjff.org/2017/20/Repeta.html>.

¹¹ According to Kagoike Yasunori’s sworn testimony before the Diet on 23 March 2017.

of Prime Minister Abe and his wife Akie, that the fallout between them when it came was spectacular. Both Kagoike and his wife were arrested in late July 2017 on charges of fraudulently seeking public subsidies for the school. Refusing to “confess” or cooperate with the prosecutors, they were then detained for just under 300 days, denied any human contact save with their lawyers, confined (in the case of Mr Kagoike) in a windowless cell where he was able to know night from day only by observing the demeanour of his captors and (in the case of Mrs Kagoike) in a cell without heating or cooling despite Osaka’s seasonal extremes of heat and cold.

By the time they were released on bail ten months later (May 2018), although public and parliamentary attention to the affair had somewhat waned, many questions nevertheless remained, including the extraordinarily low purchase price, the matter of the one million yen Prime Ministerial present,¹² the question of whether the Prime Minister’s wife’s enthusiastic association with it could be considered a “private” matter, and, not least, the significance of the adoption by high officials in early 21st century Japan of the educational philosophy of 20th century fascism and militarism. Both the Prime Minister and other government spokespersons strived to dispose of the matter by simple denials. Although they were subject to occasional Diet questioning, there was no formal investigation.

In August 2019 the Osaka Prosecutors Office closed the case against 38 government bureaucrats (of the Ministry of Finance) responsible first for the “peculiar” discounted sale to Moritomo and then for tampering with or discarding public documents with a view to covering up high-level wrongdoing.¹³ What the Ministry officials had done, the Prosecutors ruled, was “from the standpoint of ordinary citizens, outrageous” but no intent to deliberately damage the state had been shown.¹⁴ Thus absolved from legal consequences, the Ministry announced it was imposing administrative punishments on its officials who had a hand in the affair. The Minister himself (Aso Taro, who was also Deputy Prime Minister and a close associate of Prime Minister Abe) apologized but refused to resign. Instead, he imposed on himself a modest salary cut as mark of contrition.¹⁵ The official who in 2016 had supervised the knockdown price sale of the site resigned to accept formal responsibility in the wake of its exposure, but then months later was promoted to head the National Tax Office, in effect *rewarded* for his law-breaking efforts.¹⁶

The unresolved question is: on whose authority was the original deal struck and on whose authority was the cover-up subsequently undertaken? It is unthinkable that bureaucrats could have acted in either case on their own initiative. But it is also – if in a different sense – unthinkable that the responsibility for either should attach to the Prime Minister or his wife. Consequently the tortured logic of the formula by which government sought to resolve the matter.

¹² Which Kagoike theatrically tried to return to the prime minister by accosting him on Tokyo streets.

¹³ “Prosecutors close Moritomo land sale case with zero indictments,” *Asahi shimbun*, 8 May 2019.

¹⁴ “Prosecutors close Moritomo land sale case,” *Ibid*.

¹⁵ The “one-year salary cut” he announced referred to his annual ministerial allowance of about 1.7 million yen (\$15,600), not his Diet member salary. (Mari Yamaguchi, “Japan’s finance minister takes pay cut, officials punished,” *Associated Press*, 4 June 2018.)

¹⁶ Daigo Satoshi, “Sagawa kokuzeicho chokan o himen seyo,” *Shukan kinyobi*, 29 September 2017, pp. 12–13.

Unlike Abe Shinzo and Abe Akie, however, to whose defence the resources of the Japanese state could be mobilized, Mr and Mrs Kagoike (Yasunori and Junko) faced the full powers of the state alone. Their indictment and trial was framed to focus exclusively on their criminal responsibility, while ignoring that of the officials they dealt with, turning a blind eye to the possible criminal conspiracy in the actual land sale and the lying and subsequent cover-up and deception of the National Diet. For both Kagoikes the public prosecutors sought seven-year sentences. In verdicts handed down on 19 February 2020, they were convicted of unlawfully receiving a total of 170 million yen (about \$1.5 million) in central and local government subsidies for construction of the elementary school.¹⁷ Yasunori was sentenced to five years in prison and Junko (found not guilty on some of the charges relating to overcharging and inflating the number of teachers employed) to three years suspended for five years. Following the judgement, Yasunori was released on payment of a 12-million yen bond (ca \$107,000).

The case settled little. If Kagoike and his wife were guilty of defrauding the state by the sum of 170 million yen, they did so driven not by personal greed but by the need to gain subsidies to make up for their unrealistic school funding plan.¹⁸ However, the officials in the Japanese Treasury had defrauded the Japanese state of a four and a half-times larger sum, (approximately 800 million yen) in effect giving away state property and then going to extraordinary lengths to cover up what they had done. Few will see the judicial outcome as just, and some will instead incline to believe that in so ruling the court itself was complicit in continuing to cover-up high level state crimes.

In March 2020, the affair took a sudden dramatic new turn. The widow of Akagi Toshio, the Osaka-based Department of Finance bureaucrat who had committed suicide in 2017, launched a suit for damages against the Department and her husband's then superior, Sagawa Nobuhisa, for having driven Toshio to death by their pressures to break the law by doctoring the Department's records on the land sale, especially by deleting all reference to the Prime Minister and his wife. She based her claim on the evidence of the suicide note her husband had left, in which he made serious allegations against his superiors, referring in some detail to the intense pressure he had been subject to. "It's so scary," he wrote, "that I will lose my mind."¹⁹ The dramatic exposure of the Akagi note may or may not have the effect the dead man had sought, a reopening of the formal investigation of the affair, but at least it reopened it in the public mind.

2) Kake Gakuen Veterinary College

As the dust of controversy still swirled over the Moritomo affair, a fresh scandal arose over an unrelated private educational institution. Kake Gakuen. Kake is a mammoth educational foundation in Western Japan, running institutions from pre-school to post-graduate. It is

¹⁷ Kyodo, "Moritomo Gakuen couple in Abe cronyism found guilty of fraud," *Japan Times*, 19 February 2020.

¹⁸ An editorial in *Kahoku shimpo* drew my attention to this point. (Moritomo hojokin sashu hanketsu, giwaku no kakushin wa harete inai," *Kahoku shimpo*, 21 February 2020.)

¹⁹ "Moritomo jisatsu shokuin, isho zenbun kokai, 'Subete Sagawa kyokucho no shiji desu'," *Shukan bunshun*, 26 March 2020. See also Reiji Yoshida, "Suicide note reignites Moritomo scandal that rocked Abe administration," *Japan Times*, 18 March 2020.

headed by Kake Kotaro, a close Abe personal friend, frequent golfing companion and family intimate from the time they both studied at University of Southern California in the 1970s.²⁰ On 15 occasions between 2007 and 2014, the Kake group sought official approval for establishment of a veterinary school in Okayama University of Science in Imabari City, Ehime Prefecture. In 2015, it reformulated that application to fall within the ambit of a proposed “strategic special economic zone” under Abe’s “three arrows” design for stepped-up economic growth, and the application suddenly began to move forward. It was approved in November despite the statement of opposition in October issuing from the Japan Veterinarian Medical Association which found that the project failed to meet any of the established criteria.²¹ Suspicions then began to circulate over the possibility that the decision in Kake’s favor might have been influenced by his close personal friendship with the Prime Minister.

As accusations and counter-accusations grew, it also came to light that Imabari City had provided the land (a 16.8 hectare site of estimated value around ¥3,675 million or \$33 million) without charge as well as meeting a significant proportion (9.6 billion yen) of the total project cost of 19.2 billion yen (ca. \$172 million).²² Documents purporting to date from September-October 2016 and to be from the Ministry of Education, circulating widely early in 2017 and then published in *Asahi Shimbun* on 17 May, pointed to a highly irregular procedure in which the Prime Minister’s “will” and the wishes of the “highest level of government” were crucial in determining that the school should go ahead.²³

A week later, former Education Vice-Minister Maekawa Kihei stepped forward to confirm that the documents were genuine at a press conference and subsequent newspaper interview with *Mainichi Shimbun*, and later personal account in the monthly *Bungei shunju*.²⁴ Days before Maekawa published his bombshell, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* began to circulate scurrilous rumors against him, alleging that he frequented “dating” establishments where he sometimes paid the bill for young women (with the implication that he was paying for sexual services).²⁵ The Cabinet office was assumed to have “leaked” this information in a bid to silence Maekawa and his inconvenient witness.²⁶ However, it later transpired that since his retirement from the Ministry in January 2017, Maekawa had been an active member of an NGO association concerned with research and action to address child poverty. The allegations of impropriety went nowhere,²⁷ while his testimony of direct pressure from a senior Abe adviser to hurry up the process raised serious unanswered questions.

Maekawa found the process starting from the initial overtures from the prime minister’s office in late August to the decision in November 2016 to have been highly “irregular” or “dodgy” [*yugamerareta*].” He referred to intervention by Kiso Isao, special adviser to the

²⁰ The following account draws in part upon my *The State of the Japanese State*, pp. 213-215.

²¹ Kataoka Nobuyuki, “Imabari-shi to Kake gakuen no keikaku jitsugen wa muri da,” *Shukan kinyobi*, 2 June 2017, pp. 18–19.

²² “Moritomo mondai ni kokuji, Kake giwaku ni mo hyojo shita ‘Nihon kaigi’ no sen,” *Nikkan gendai*, 7 June 2017.

²³ “Outline of negotiations with Cabinet Office secretary,” (Naikakufu shingikan to no uchiawase gaiyo), 26 September 2016, reproduced in *Mainichi Shimbun*, 2 June 2017.

²⁴ Maekawa Kihei, “Maekawa Kihei zen bunka jimujkan shuki, waga kokuhatsu wa yakunin no kyoji da,” *Bungei shunju*, July 2017, pp. 94–105

²⁵ “Jinin no Maekawa, zen bunka jikan, deai-kei ba ni dehairi,” *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 22 May 2017.

²⁶ “Kantei retteru hari shippai, Maekawa zen jikan ‘ii hito episodio zokuoku,” *Nikkan gendai*, 3 June 2017.

²⁷ “Abe kantei ga shubun sagashi ni yakki, Maekawa zen bunka jikan ‘kuchi fuji tembo’ mo,” *Nikkan gendai*, 30 May 2017.

Prime Minister and a board member of Kake Educational Institution, in late August 2016, to urge acceleration of the procedure: “I think he visited me in the capacity of a special adviser to the Cabinet.” Maekawa described having been “summoned to the prime minister’s office” about the plans on two occasions in September and October 2016 by Izumi Hiroto, a special adviser to the Prime Minister. “As far as I remember, Izumi said to me (in September), ‘[t]he prime minister can’t tell you to do this directly, so I am telling you to do it instead.’” At a subsequent, 17 October, meeting, Izumi followed up by directing Maekawa to “reach an early conclusion.”²⁸ Maekawa added that, “the discussions that should have taken place did not,” and that “[t]he prime minister’s secretary and adviser have become much more influential and important than any of the Cabinet ministers.”²⁹

Even after the authenticity of the Kake documents in circulation (sufficient to constitute a prima facie case of improper exercise of influence against the Prime Minister) had been confirmed by multiple sources from within the Ministry (including Maekawa), the Minister announced that a search had failed to turn up any such documents. Abe and his government (including Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga Yoshihide) dismissed the matter as one based just on “weird documents” (*kaibunsho*), vehemently denied any wrongdoing and refused to consider any official investigation.³⁰

However, simple denial was not enough. Following an emergency meeting of Abe’s closest aides, Suga reversed himself, reopening the investigation and “finding” 14 of the 19 “weird documents.” Suga continued to claim, however, that they did not demonstrate any direct association of the “Prime Ministerial will” with the decision.³¹ Further material turned up in July 2017 confirming Maekawa’s account and indicating that Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Hagiuda Koichi had “conveyed Abe’s will on the school project” to the Ministry of Education, setting the specific deadline of April 2018 for it to open.³² By 2018 no less than five senior government officials had testified that they had striven to advance the Kake cause on behalf of the Prime Minister. Abe continued to insist that he had known nothing about the case till it became a public matter in January 2017.³³

Although it is not clear how exactly veterinary science might be given an ultranationalist twist, such an element is not to be dismissed. Kake’s middle schools are noted for their adoption of rightist history and civics texts, offering a “Japan is beautiful” patriotic education, an orientation to constitutional revision and an end to the post-war regime.³⁴ And

²⁸ “Gov’t attempts to bury Kake scandal only deepening suspicions, *Mainichi Shimbun*, editorial, 31 May 2017; “Ex-education vice minister slams gov’t process for fast-tracking Kake project, *Mainichi Shimbun*, 5 June, 2017; “Suspicious Abe gov’t trying to run out Diet clock on Kake affair,” editorial, *Mainichi Shimbun*, 6 June, 2017. And, on Kake and the relationship with the Prime Minister, Koizumi Kohei and Kamei Hiroshi, “Sontaku ya boryaku no ura de ‘otomodachi’ yugu, Abe kancho ni sukuu kake gakuen jinmyaku,” *Nikkan gendai*, 7 June 2017.

²⁹ “Ex-Education Minister,” op. cit.

³⁰ “As investigative reports grow, Suga rebuffs demand to reopen Kake probe,” *Japan Times*, 8 June 2017.

³¹ “Suga shi ‘kaibunsho’ hatsugen wa tekkai sezu ‘kotoba no hitori aruki zannen,’” *Ryukyū shimpo*, 15 June 2017.

³² “Close-up Gendai,” NHK TV, 19 June 2017; see “Kake scandal continues to plague Abe administration with discovery of new document,” *The Mainichi*, 21 June 2017. The College did in fact open on time in April 2018.

³³ Reiji Yoshida, “Breaking down the Kake Gakuen scandal: Who is lying, Abe or his political opponents?” *Japan Times*, 1 June 2018.

³⁴ “Moritomo, Kake, kaiken sengen ... subete no ura ni ‘Nihon kaigi’ no ijo,” *Nikkan Gendai*, 9 June 2017. See also Koizumi Kohei and Kamei Hiroshi, “Sontaku ya boryaku no ura,” op. cit.

when in due course the veterinary school opened (April 2018) the entrance exams held to determine the first student intake pre-determined that Korean applicants be awarded zero on the interview component of their application (for which 50 out of 200 points were awarded), irrespective of their actual ability. It meant that all eight of the 69 applicants who happened to be South Korean nationals were eliminated, including the person who topped the entire cohort on the written papers.³⁵ Whether the blatantly discriminatory practice continued remains to be made clear.

3) JR Tokai's Linear Super-Express

Slightly different in character, yet extremely serious in its economic and environmental implications, is the case of the JR Tokai (railroad company) project for the construction of a linear (magnetic levitation) super express rail link between Eastern and Western Japan (Tokyo and Osaka). The cost has been estimated at a fabulous nine trillion yen (over \$80 billion). That would make it one of the grandest and most expensive infrastructural projects in the world. It is to cost slightly more than China's south-north water transfer project (78 billion as of 2014), and not quite matching the international space station (which cost well over one hundred billion dollars but was covered by a consortium of rich counties over many decades). Perhaps the most startling comparison is with Japan's Oedo municipal subway that runs for 44 kilometers under densely populated Tokyo and cost about 1.3 trillion yen,³⁶ meaning that the linear project is some 5.5 times greater. Construction commenced early in 2016 on a deep, mostly underground (at depths to 1,400 meters) route, along which linear trains would travel at speeds up to 505 kph. The first section, linking Tokyo with Nagoya, was originally scheduled for 2045 but in 2016 that date was brought forward to 2027 following the grant of three trillion yen in low interest (0.8%) credit by the national government. Since there was a thirty-year period of grace before any repayment was required, it amounted to a huge state gift to a supposedly private company run by a close friend of the Prime Minister.

In August 2018, the national economic daily, *Nikkei Bijinesu*, referred to the project as a "land-based Concorde" and pointed out that JR Tokai's head, Kaneko Shin, had met with Prime Minister Abe on at least forty-five occasions during the decision-making process,³⁷ thus suggesting that the affair should be viewed through the same lens as the Moritomo and Kake cases, as an example of rampant cronyism. The project continues. For the steadily shrinking and aging population of 21st century Japan, it is hard to imagine any project more unnecessary and more comprehensively risky than a transport system rocketing people up and down the country deep underground at fabulous speed. When the anticipated magnitude 8-plus "Nankai Trough" quake hits Japan's capital region, estimated as a 60-70 per cent probability within 30 years and 90 per cent within 50 years, it does not bear thinking of what will become of those caught deep underground.³⁸

³⁵ "Kankokujin nyukensei o zen-in fugokaku, Kake gakuen ju-I gakubu no 'fusei nyushi, giwaku," Yahoo Japan, 4 March 2020.

³⁶ Sugiyama Junichi, "Kaigyō 26 nen toei chikatetsu no 'kuronin' Oedosen, tsui ni kuroji ka?" *Norimono nyusu*, 22 July 2017

³⁷ Forty-five occasions since the formation of the (second) Abe government in December 2012 (Kaneda Shinichiro, "Zaito 3-cho en tonyu, rinea wa dai-3 no Mori Kake mondai," *Nikkei Bijinesu*, 2 August 2018). See also my own analysis (McCormack, *The State of the Japanese State*, pp. 183-4).

³⁸ Robin Harding and Steve Bernard, "Japan: the next big quake," *Financial Times*, 18 May 2016. For a recent authoritative analysis of the quake prospect, Ishihashi Katsuhiko, "Cho koiki daishinsai ni do sonaeru ka," *Sekai*, March 2020, pp. 80-93.

One recent account concludes that it is “deficit-breeding, energy-wasting, environmentally-destructive, and technologically unreliable ... a guaranteed fiasco.”³⁹ And it has the potential not only of its own collapse and of serious ecological disaster but of bringing down the existing Tokaido shinkansen by poaching its customers. Abe refers to this project as a dream, but it is a dream he did much to inflict on the nation which has real potential to become a nightmare.

4) The Casino Project

Gambling is nominally forbidden under Article 185 of the Criminal Code. There are, however, significant exceptions and Japan is in fact a gambling super-power, with the Welfare Ministry estimating 3.6 per cent of people (3.2 million) at some level of dependency.⁴⁰ The pachinko pinball slot machine industry is substantial (with an estimated revenue equal to six times that of Macao’s casinos) and betting is allowed on horse, motor boat, and cycle racing. Leisure and construction groups within the ruling Japanese Liberal-Democratic Party establishment have long pushed for revision of the law to allow casino-style licensed gambling and both the Prime Minister Abe and the Deputy Prime Minister, Aso Taro, have been key figures in the parliamentary casino lobby. Both served as its “principal advisers” from the time that group was set up in the Diet in 2010.⁴¹ Internationally, the global gambling industry had also long called for restrictions to be lifted so as to allow a Macao- or Las Vegas-style casino business.⁴² They pointed out that Japan was the only OECD country without legalized casino gambling. Public opposition, however, was formidable. Because of it, casino-promotion forces tended to downplay the word “gambling” and prefer instead to use the term “Integrated Resort,” representing the IR as part of the path to national greatness, to be built and managed by the private sector and to attract many millions of visitors while being carefully controlled to prevent abuses.

The Abe government in its second term beginning 2012 adopted the casino as a priority national policy project to drive economic growth. Later, as the 2020 Olympic Games loomed, the casino became also the formula to help overcome the recession otherwise anticipated in their wake. Secure in their dominance of both houses of the Diet, in December 2016 after a paltry six hours debate – part of which LDP members used to recite Buddhist scriptures so as to fill in time – they forced through the Diet an “Integrated Resort Promotion Law.”⁴³ The words “casino” and “gambling” were conspicuously absent.

There was, however, rather more to the Abe decision to drive the country along the gambling path to greatness than this. In February 2017, just months after adoption of the new law, on the occasion of the first meeting between Abe and the new US President, Trump explicitly urged that Japan look favourably on the proposal that the Las Vegas and Macao gambling tycoon Sheldon Adelson be granted one of the forthcoming three Japanese casino licenses for his Las Vegas Sands Corporation.⁴⁴ Adelson was a major Trump benefactor, having contributed \$20 million to his presidential election fund in 2016 and an additional \$5 million

³⁹ Aoki Hidekazu and Kawamiya Nobuo, “End game for Japan’s construction state – The linear (Maglev) Shinkansen and Abenomics,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal – Japan Focus*, 15 June 2017.

⁴⁰ Kyodo, “An estimated 3.2 million Japanese addicted to gambling,” *Japan Times*, 30 September 2017.

⁴¹ “Abe seiken chusu ni, kajino giren menba zurari,” *Akahata*, 9 September 2014.

⁴² McCormack, *The State of the Japanese State*, p. 189.

⁴³ Torihata Yoichi, “Kajino-ho seiritsu,” *Sekai*, February 2017, pp. 29-32 at p. 29.

⁴⁴ Justin Elliott, “Trump’s patron-in-chief,” *ProPublica*, 10 October 2018, <https://features.propublica.org/trump-inc-podcast/sheldon-adelson-casino-magnate-trump-macau-and-japan/>

for the inauguration ceremony (and having committed multi-millions for Trump's 2020 presidential campaign). On the eve of the Abe visit to the US for his first Trump meeting in February 2017, Adelson flew to Washington for a meeting with Trump, Jared Kushner (the president's son-in-law) and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. When he joined Abe at the breakfast table the next morning there can be no doubt that subjects for discussion included the future of the Japan casino industry following adoption of the new law. We cannot know for sure that President Trump intervened to promote the Las Vegas Sands cause, but it would certainly be no surprise if he had done so.

For the record, Abe later denied any such exchange with the President and/or the gambling tycoon, but he has not been pursued over the matter in either parliament or media, and the implications are such that whatever the truth, he would be sure to issue denials.⁴⁵

In fact, the Abe practice makes it increasingly difficult to discover the truth. Many government committees no longer take minutes and, when such records do exist, the Abe government encourages bureaucrats to delete them as soon as possible and/or to doctor them appropriately to ensure that no embarrassing or incriminating trace of government (Abe) intervention remain.

What is clear, however, is that upon return to Tokyo from his meetings with Trump and Adelson in Washington and Florida, having established a rapport with the President that attracted world-wide attention, Abe moved the casino project into high gear. In April, convening for the first time the official promotion body, he announced that Japan's "Integrated Resorts" would be tightly regulated, "clean casinos," no less.⁴⁶ Shortly after these meetings, Adelson flew to Tokyo for high-level meetings with senior figures in Abe's Liberal-Democratic Party, and later that year flew in for a Las Vegas Sands event featuring British football's super-star David Beckham and American rock guitarist Joe Walsh of The Eagles. Beckham notably declared "Las Vegas Sands is creating fabulous resorts around the world, and their scale and vision are impressive."⁴⁷ In due course an enabling law was forced through the Diet almost without debate in July 2018,⁴⁸ despite opposition levels in the country that (according to *The Economist*), were above 80 per cent.⁴⁹

On Christmas Day 2019, however, Akimoto Tsukasa, a key associate of the Prime Minister, responsible within the cabinet through much of 2017 and 2018 for IR/casino matters, was arrested on suspicion of having received about 3.7 million yen (\$33,800) in bribes from the Chinese online betting firm, 500.com, which he then distributed to at least five other Diet members in the attempt to win favour for a casino license for the village of Rusutsu in Hokkaido.⁵⁰

It remains to be seen whether this affair will be contained by the arrest of Akimoto (and possibly some or all of the other Diet member beneficiaries of Chinese gambling largesse)

⁴⁵ Elliott, op. cit. See also Tomohiro Osaki, "Japan's top government official denies Trump asked Abe to 'strongly consider' giving casino license to one of his benefactors," *Japan Times*, 1 October 2018.

⁴⁶ "Kurin na kajino no jitsugen e, suishin honbu hatsu kaigo," *NichitetsuNews* 24, 4 April 2017.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Elliott, op. cit.

⁴⁸ Utsunomiya Kenji, "Seiki no gukyo, kajino-ho kyoko," *Shukan kinyobi*, 10 August 2018, p. 55.

⁴⁹ "Japanese government has legalised casinos, but they are not popular," *The Economist*, 2 February 2017.

⁵⁰ "Five other lawmakers may be involved in Japan's casino-bribery scandal," *Nikkei Asia Review*, 2 January 2020.

and whether Sheldon Adelson's Las Vegas Sands and Macao interests were involved. The commitment of the Abe government to opening the national gambling market seemed undimmed, but 70 per cent of people are of the view that the government should think again, and only 21 per cent thought the plan should go ahead unchanged.⁵¹ The amount involved in the casino scam thus far unfolding may have been trivial, especially in the context of the global gaming industry, but Abe had been heavy involved in the promotion, insisting it would be clean and unproblematic, and the arrests were a blow to him.⁵²

5) Flower Viewing

On 13 April 2019, the Abe government convened a mass "cherry blossom-viewing" garden party at Shinjuku Gyoen gardens in Tokyo. The event itself was not controversial. It had been held annually, with up to 10,000 people invited, since 1952. But under the second Abe government (from December 2012) the number of invitees increased steadily. In 2019 the Abe government invited 18,200 people, supposedly those who had distinguished themselves in politics, the arts, culture, entertainment, and so on, but in practice most had been nominated by the ruling party, the Prime Minister's prefectural support group, and even his wife.⁵³ 850 people also accepted invitations to a dinner on the eve of the flower party at an up-market Tokyo hotel (New Otani Banquet Hall) for which they paid a modest sum (5,000 yen).

On 9 May 2019, suspicious that the flower party may have been rather more than it seemed, the Japan Communist Party's Miyamoto Toru rose in the Diet to seek release of the guest list, only to be told that it no longer existed. As later transpired, its 800 pages had been dumped into a giant government shredder (a "Nakabayashi NSC-7510 Mark 3")⁵⁴ within one hour of Miyamoto seeking access to them. Such an admission fed suspicion. 69.2 per cent of people simply did not believe the Prime Minister's explanations on the flower-viewing affair.⁵⁵

Early in 2020, the focus of public and media interest in this affair shifted from the missing guest list to the question of payment: had Abe, the government, or the Liberal Democratic Party paid part or all of the cost? If so, the *prima facie* case for seeing the party and the dinner as breaching the Political Funding law (forbidding the wining and dining of constituents) was clear. Abe assured the Diet, however, that although the pre-party dinner had been hosted by his supporters' association, it was the hotel that set the 5,000-yen price although it did not issue any quotes or detailed statements. An Abe staff member had collected the money at the entrance and handed it to the hotel in return for receipts written by hand and with the addressee line blank. That seemed improbable and, later, a spokesman for ANA Hotels (that alternated with Hotel New Otani in hosting large government events) said that it was impossible:

⁵¹ "Over 70% want gov't to review casino plan: poll," *The Mainichi*, 12 January 2020.

⁵² Katagiri Nobuyuki, "Kajino oshoku, kakudai no kanosei," *Shukan Kinyobi*, 10 January 2020, pp. 34-5.

⁵³ Eric Johnston, "Cherry blossom-viewing party: Breaking down Abe's latest cronyism scandal," *Japan Times*, 27 November 2019.

⁵⁴ Simon Denyer, "Government shredded in paper secrecy," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 November 2019.

⁵⁵ Eric Johnston, op. cit.

“there are no cases in which detailed statements are not issued to event hosts, it has never issued receipts with the addressee blank; and it does not collect fees from individual participants instead of the host of an event.”⁵⁶

The contradiction with Abe’s account was plain. It looked like a fresh case of Abe and his associates making up facts as required by circumstances. As the disbelief in Abe’s story spread, his office proceeded to have “talks” with the hotel, whereupon ANA changed its story.

“My office,” said Abe, “checked with the hotel and they said they were merely responding to Ms Tsujimoto [Constitutional Democratic Party representative who asked the Diet question] in general terms. They said that speaking of individual cases would infringe on the confidentiality of operations, so individual cases were not included in their response to Tsujimoto.”⁵⁷

The hotels, in other words - not surprisingly since the Prime Minister and Government were major customers - had no wish to contradict the Prime Minister. While the Diet and the people brooded over these improbable exchanges between Prime Minister and hotel and the unlikely claim that any hotel would host so many people, so cheaply while issuing only blank receipts, the immediate consequence was further erosion of confidence in the Prime Minister. This time, unlike other scandals, his own direct personal involvement was clear and blame could not easily be shifted to bureaucrats. There would be no such party in 2020.

6) Coronavirus

As this article was being revised for publication, the coronavirus struck, profoundly affecting the entire world. Here is not the place for a detailed account of the Abe government’s response to the outbreak but it seems appropriate to point to some aspects of the still unfolding crisis that are indicative of the structural nexus common to it and to the cases considered above. No other event had such potential, on the one hand to reinforce and on the other to challenge, Abe’s “one strong” state: to reinforce by means of “emergency powers” given to the Prime Minister under the “special measures law to deal with the new influenza and other related diseases”) adopted by the Diet on 13 March 2020, which was a logical extension of his steady appropriation of powers discussed above; or to challenge, in the sense of causing social and economic pain for which blame might attach to the Prime Minister for the way he had handled, or mishandled, things.

Abe’s support figures have not exactly plummeted under these recent shocks and scandals, but in the early months of 2020 were sliding, in the 30-40 per cent range, and the number of those who did not support him was either equal or slightly greater than that of those that did. Even after the outbreak of the mystery illness was first reported in early December in and around Wuhan City in Hubei, Japan allowed direct flights to and from Wuhan (38 per week)

⁵⁶ “Japan PM and hotel differ on how controversial pre-sakura party dinner was handled,” *The Mainichi*, 18 February 2020.

⁵⁷ “Japan PM and hotel differ,” *ibid.*

to continue.⁵⁸ As the outbreak reached a crisis point in Wuhan in January and spread throughout the country, Chinese visitors to Japan hit a record of more than 920,000 in that month.⁵⁹ Abe and his government are widely seen to bear some blame for having detained the Diamond Princess cruise ship with its 3,700 passengers and crew offshore from Yokohama for several weeks from 3 February, allowing it to serve as incubator spreading the disease, first among the detainees themselves and then more widely once the passengers and crew disembarked on 21 February. As Isabel Reynolds wrote in *The Japan Times*, “The Abe government waited until Feb. 1 to bar visitors with symptoms, tested only a tiny fraction of possible cases in the initial days, and moved suddenly last week to quarantine arrivals from China after the pace of infections there had begun to slow.”

On 15 February Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga brushed off questions about the virus, refusing to treat it seriously, and even when the US and other countries restricted entry by Chinese (or foreign nationals who had been in China, Abe welcomed visitors for the New Year festival.⁶⁰ Only on 26 February did the government belatedly call for all public (sporting cultural, etc) events at which crowds of people might be expected to gather to be cancelled or postponed and, the following day, 27th, Abe “requested” all schools and other educational institutions to close for approximately four weeks from 2 March until the opening of the spring school year in April. The country was thrown into confusion especially by this latter order (framed as request for “self-regulation” but coming from the Prime Minister it was tantamount to an order). It was especially controversial as it seems to have been taken against the advice of Cabinet Secretary Suga and without consulting the Minister for Education. The confusion was compounded by the fact that the Prime Minister’s call for all schools and universities to be closed was followed by directive from the Minister for Health requesting operators of kindergartens and nursery schools to remain open.

Anger and dismay was the common response to this sequence of measures. One former Minister of Health (2006) who had also served as Governor of Tokyo (2014-2016) referred to the Abe government’s handling of the crisis as “disastrous” and blamed Abe for having “stayed too long in power.”⁶¹ Under the prevailing “*sontaku* politics,” the Prime Minister’s office was indeed all powerful, Masuzoe complained.⁶² The mayor of Chiba, Toshihito Kumagai, went even further, saying the school closure “could result in a breakdown of Japanese society.”⁶³

As of mid-March 2020, Japan accounted for 1,423 confirmed COVID-19 cases, 697 of them attributable to the Diamond Princess and another 14 to returnees on charter flights from China, and 28 deaths (7 from the ship). However, these relatively low figures owe much to

⁵⁸ Nishiyama Takanori, “Abe seiken, kansensha kazu o sukunaku, ‘kaizan’,” *Shukan kinyobi*, 21 February 2020, p. 11.

⁵⁹ Isabel Reynolds, “Japan plays COVID-19 catch-up with rushed state-of-emergency bill,” *Japan Times*, 11 March 2020.

⁶⁰ Nishiyama, and multiple Japanese media reports.

⁶¹ Dooley, etc, op. cit.

⁶² Masuzoe Yoichi, “Masuzoe Yoichi - dakara ieru, shin gata uirus ‘kosei rodosho’ koko ga abunai,” 4 March 2020. <http://ironna.jp/article/14445/>

⁶³ Quoted in Satoshi Sugiyama, “Abe’s bold school closure move appears spurred by criticism of irus response,” *Japan Times*, 28 Feb 2020.

the fact that government's priority has consistently been as been to minimize the disease in order not to upset the scheduled opening of the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games in July. The testing regime has been anything but rigorous, as the comparison with neighboring South Korea shows. By the end of February 2020 Japan had tested 8,100 and confirmed 1,023 cases, while South Korea had tested 200,000 and confirmed 7,000 cases. Kami Masahiro of Japan's Medical Governance Research Institute reckoned in early March that the published figures for Japan amounted just to the "tip of the iceberg."⁶⁴ The real figure is likely very much greater and an explosive leap in infection is highly possible. The Japanese media recounts many cases of people seeking but being unable to gain access to test facilities. While South Korea tends to rank well above Japan in international infection tables, in realistic terms the official Japanese figure of infected should be multiplied by approximately ten.

The crisis was widening and deepening, By March 2020, 62 countries or regions have imposed restrictions (such as mandatory self-isolation) on entry of Japanese people or people from Japan and other countries while Japan imposes restrictions on the entry of people from 29 countries or regions.⁶⁵ Even as Abe's powers remained short of actual emergency, the ruling assumption on the part of the bureaucracy was that priority should attach to the Prime Minister's Olympic dream and Japan should at all costs escape censure or criticism over its handling of the coronavirus matter and stick to the established Olympic schedule. Having gained the Olympics in September 2013 by (falsely) assuring the IOC that the Fukushima catastrophe had been resolved and was "under control," in the early months of 2020 Abe seemed intent on conducting them at any cost, only yielding with extreme reluctance to pleas from the IOC, US president Trump, and prominent athletes for them to be carried over.

The tendency of the Abe "one strong" state - evident in the Moritomo, Kake, casino, linear, and flower viewing affairs - of treating Prime Ministerial-favored projects as "national policy" might, if continued through the corona virus, have disastrous consequences. The *New York Times* wrote in early March of the Prime Minister who "made only brief appearances at strategy meetings, and spent his evenings wining and dining friends and cabinet ministers, appearing at parties even as the government called on people to avoid public gatherings."⁶⁶ That suggested a "one strong" leader whose strength was illusory.

7) Conclusion

During the three years from February 2017, when Moritomo and Kake first drew public attention, Abe has weathered more-or-less successfully the storm of successive scandals. As of the beginning of 2020 his support among the Japanese people was about the same as that of Donald Trump among the American, following the latter's acquittal in Congressional impeachment proceedings. For both, it seemed that the hubris born of near absolute power fed a febrile atmosphere in which cronyism and corruption thrived. Both had their fingers in dubious pies, but while the one is globally notorious, the other is seen – outside Japan at least - as above suspicion.

⁶⁴ Will Ripley, Sandhi Sidhu, Junko Ogura and Emiko Jozuka, "Japan's coronavirus infection rate could be 'tip of the iceberg,' as experts call for more testing," CNN, 5 March 2020.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/05/asia/japan-coronavirus-infection-levels-hnk-intl/index.html/>

⁶⁵ Magosaki Ukeru, "Tokyo gorin ga shingata koronaurirus no 'rutsubo' ni naru kikensei," *Nikkan Gendai*, 13 March 2020. (<https://www.nikkan-gendai.com/artiles/iew/news/270341/>)

⁶⁶ Ben Dooley, Motoko Rich and Hisako Ueno, "Anger in Japan over virus begins to focus on Prime Minister," *New York Times*, 7 March 2020.

If there is a hidden thread that ties together the parties to the series of Japanese scandals it might be the Nippon Kaigi organization. Virtually all parties, government and private sector and including Prime Minister and his wife, the Kagoikes, Kake Kotaro, the mayor of Imabari City, as well as virtually all members of Abe's cabinet - were and are members or supporters. An inclination on the part of Nippon Kaigi members to help fellow believers in a post-conservative radical rightist or neo-Shinto cause can reasonably be assumed. Though the term is not commonly applied to the Japanese case, in major respects, including the cases discussed in this short paper, the Abe government has been practicing the politics of post-truth, in which those who hold power determine what is to be known as truth. The same Japan where Treasury officials would order the doctoring of official documents to help the government out of a predicament of its own making (Moritomo) and where the Prime Ministerial will was a key political consideration (Kake) also saw other revelations of official, high-level deception and obfuscation or data fixing.⁶⁷

Looking back over the past three years, when support for the government dropped at the time of the Moritomo affair in June 2017 to a potentially critical level below 30 per cent, Abe was saved by the North Korean missile and nuclear tests that made it possible for him to shift public attention from scandals to security. In September that year, he seized the initiative, dissolved the parliament, and called a general election (October) in which he regained a dominant position in the Diet even if with much reduced trust or popularity. From the following year, circumstances again developed to his favor. He and his advisers could concentrate on stirring a “celebratory” mood, shifting public attention to public events marking the transition from Heisei to Reiwa and the imperial abdication and accession. As that phase passed in 2019, and even as the flower-viewing affair simmered and Abe's explanations looked more and more dubious, in early 2020 he could hope his star would rise again thanks to the Olympic and Paralympic Games. That the Games had to be postponed was an undoubted blow to that design but might yet be turned to his advantage. If the 2021 summer Olympics were to be successfully carried out as a grand “recovery” event, that would potentially clear the way for Abe's re-election in September to head his party, the Liberal Democratic Party, which would mean a fourth spell as Prime Minister. Leading the country through Coronavirus and Olympics over the coming year and a half would also make it very difficult for critics and opponents to pursue his responsibility for the series of scandals that have marked his third term.

At time of writing, the coronavirus had certainly shaken the government and the personal standing of the Prime Minister but support levels seemed to be holding at around 40 per cent,⁶⁸ even though three-quarters of the people disbelieve the Prime Minister and government in relation to one or other scandal. It might mean that Abe is unlikely to be able to pursue his constitutional revision goal, but since the adoption of the security legislation of 2015 enabling Japanese forces to be committed to war if and when required by Washington,

⁶⁷ Notably the “loss” and then “doctoring” of Self-Defense Forces daily activity logs on the South Sudan deployment of 2016-7 (on which see Repeta, op. cit) or the 2019 doctoring of labour statistics to support the Prime Minister's “Abenomics” success story by showing rising wages and good times even as wages and conditions actually worsened (“Seifu tokei ‘shinrai yuraida’ 75%, naikaku shijiritsu wa kiko, Mainichi shimbun seron chosa,” *Mainichi shimbun*, 3 February 2019.)

<https://mainichi.jp/senkyo/articles/20190203/k00/010/146000c/>

⁶⁸ Jiji in early March reported 39.3 per cent “support” and 38.8 per cent “non-support” for the Abe government (“Abe seiken shiji yokobai 39%,” 13 March 2020. NHK at almost the same time found “support” and non-support at 43 per cent and 41 per cent. (Bloomberg, 9 March 2020).

the US was no longer pressing for revision and it might therefore no longer be necessary.⁶⁹ With no plausible alternative Prime Ministerial candidate on the horizon he might yet do as he had done in 2017, recover from the nadir.

However, the more successful Abe becomes at centralizing power in and around his office and crushing opponents or critics, the less democratic the country becomes, the more enemies he creates and the more potentially vulnerable he becomes to exposure. While maintaining the frame of a democratic state, Abe has presided over the consolidation of something quite different: an authoritarian, neo-Shinto *ikkyo/sontaku* state. Whether it would prove viable in the long term remains to be seen.

Author

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*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012, (co-authored with Satoko Oka Norimatsu), second, revised and expanded, paperback edition, 2018 (Japanese, Korean, and Chinese editions available of first edition); *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*, London and New York: Routledge, 2018, pp. 118-134. He writes regularly on Okinawan and Japanese matters at the Asia-Pacific Journal.

⁶⁹ Tawara Soichiro, “Waga sokatsu – Taikenteki sengo media-shi,” (13), *Sekai*, January 2020, pp. 243-251.



In Better Days – Kagoike Yasunori and Junko, with Abe Akie, Prime Minister's wife (center) at Moritomo Gakuen School Site, 25 April 2014



Moritomo Gakuen School Site, March 2017



Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, with wife Akie, and supporters at Flower Viewing Party, Shinjuku Gyoen, Tokyo, 13 April 2019