

Woman Power in Japan

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Japan does not rank high in international tables, when it comes to the presence of women in high office, be it in politics or in the economy. In fact if one looks at the number of women who occupy senior management positions in India, Japan is definitively a developing country. Furthermore, unlike India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, Japan has never had a female prime minister. When it looked as if a girl, the daughter of the present crown prince, would follow on the throne, conservative Japanese were quick to point out that according to their interpretation of the constitution only a male heir would be able to become emperor, a largely symbolic and ornamental position.

However, in recent weeks we may have witnessed a change. In July Tokyoites were called to elect a new mayor. Yuriko Koike, a former member of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), ran as an independent, since she had not been put up as an official LDP candidate. The 63 year-old Koike, who had been a member of the Japanese Parliament from 1993 to 2016 and who in 2007 had been, for only two months, Japan's defense minister, won a convincing victory. She will now be the face of the Tokyo administration, when Japan's capital will host the next Summer Olympic Games in 2020.

After a convincing victory in the elections to the upper house of the Japanese Parliament in July 2016, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has rearranged his cabinet. He appointed the 57 year-old Tomomi Inada as the new minister of defense. Inada, a lawyer by training, has become the second woman to lead the defense ministry. She is known as a staunch conservative and a supporter of Prime Minister Abe's policy to strengthen Japan's security and make the country more powerful in military terms. She has been known to visit the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, an act that is seen as provocative both in China and in South Korea, as the shrine remembers also the souls of Japanese war criminals.

One if not the most important challenge faced by Japan in the 21st century is demographics. The population of the island nation is rapidly ageing and shrinking. On the positive side we have a continuous expansion of the life expectancy of the average Japanese. On the negative side, since many years the birth rate is by far not sufficient to keep the population stable. From 2010 to 2015 the Japanese population shrunk by one million persons to 127 million, the first decline since the 1920s. From now on it will be a process of demographic decline that is even going to accelerate, as the number of women who can start a family will shrink. Projections indicate that by the end of the century Japan's population will number not more than 83 million people.

This is a dramatic development, affecting of course the geopolitical status and even more profoundly the economy of Japan. Already today we are witnessing shrinking domestic markets forcing most major Japanese companies to intensify their presence abroad. We are also witnessing emerging shortages amongst the labor force. Japan is traditionally very reluctant to accept immigration. Unlike the national economies in Western Europe that are also confronted with demographic decline but that are compensating this through immigration, Japan keeps its borders tight. Much less than two percent of the Japanese population are foreigners.

Japan is fully aware of the challenges posed by an ageing society. There are a number of measures being taken, from technology and science to social policies. Prime Minister Abe has made it clear that in the short and medium term there is no other solution to the shrinking number of Japanese in working age than a much more active participation of Japanese women in the economy. In the first instance this is not an issue of the presence of women in boardrooms. It is the simple challenge that Japanese women should be able to continue working while having a family and, even more importantly, to return back to their professional career once they have raised a family.

The number of hurdles to make it difficult for Japan to reach standards that are usual for modern societies is large. Firstly, there are traditional cultural inhibitions. Working mothers are seen as a sign of either neglect or poverty. The woman has to work in order to contribute to the household budget. To put a young child into a crèche or not be at home when the child returns from school is seen as failing parental duties. An even more difficult hurdle is the reluctance of employers to give jobs to women who might want to make a career break and who make it clear from the start that they intend to have a family. Furthermore, the infrastructure as well as the financial incentives for women to work while having a family, are woefully inadequate. Japan which is otherwise a very wealthy society with an exemplary infrastructure lags behind. Abe has promised tax measures and incentives to change all that. We have to wait and see if these promises will really be materialized.

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