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New Dissent in Japan Is Loudly Anti-Foreign

By **MARTIN FACKLER**
Published: August 28, 2010

KYOTO, Japan — The demonstrators appeared one day in December, just as children at an elementary school for ethnic Koreans were cleaning up for lunch. The group of about a dozen Japanese men gathered in front of the school gate, using bullhorns to call the students cockroaches and Korean spies.

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Tyler Sipe for The New York Times
Zaitokukai's founder, who goes by the assumed name Makoto Sakurai, uses the Internet to organize members of the group.

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Tyler Sipe for The New York Times
An armband worn by a member of the Japanese group Zaitokukai. The red characters say "The Volunteer Corps Against Lawless Koreans"; the black characters say "Expel barbarians."

Inside, the panicked students and teachers huddled in their classrooms, singing loudly to drown out the insults, as parents and eventually police officers blocked the protesters' entry.

The December episode was the first in a series of demonstrations at the Kyoto No. 1 Korean Elementary School that shocked conflict-averse Japan, where even political protesters on the radical fringes are expected to avoid embroiling regular citizens, much less children. Responding to public outrage, the police arrested four of the protesters this month on charges of damaging the school's reputation.

More significantly, the protests also signaled the emergence here of a new type of ultranationalist group. The groups are openly anti-foreign in their message, and unafraid to win attention by holding unruly street demonstrations.

Since first appearing last year, their protests have been directed at not only Japan's half million ethnic Koreans, but also Chinese and other Asian workers, Christian churchgoers and even Westerners in Halloween costumes. In the latter case, a few dozen angrily shouting

demonstrators followed around revelers waving placards that said, "This is not a white country."

Local news media have dubbed these groups the Net far right, because they are loosely organized via the Internet, and gather together only for demonstrations. At other times, they are a virtual community that maintains its own Web sites to announce the times and places of protests, swap information and post video recordings of their demonstrations.

While these groups remain a small if noisy fringe element here, they have won growing attention as an alarming side effect of Japan's long economic and political decline. Most of their members appear to be young men, many of whom hold the low-paying part-time or contract jobs that have proliferated in Japan in recent years.

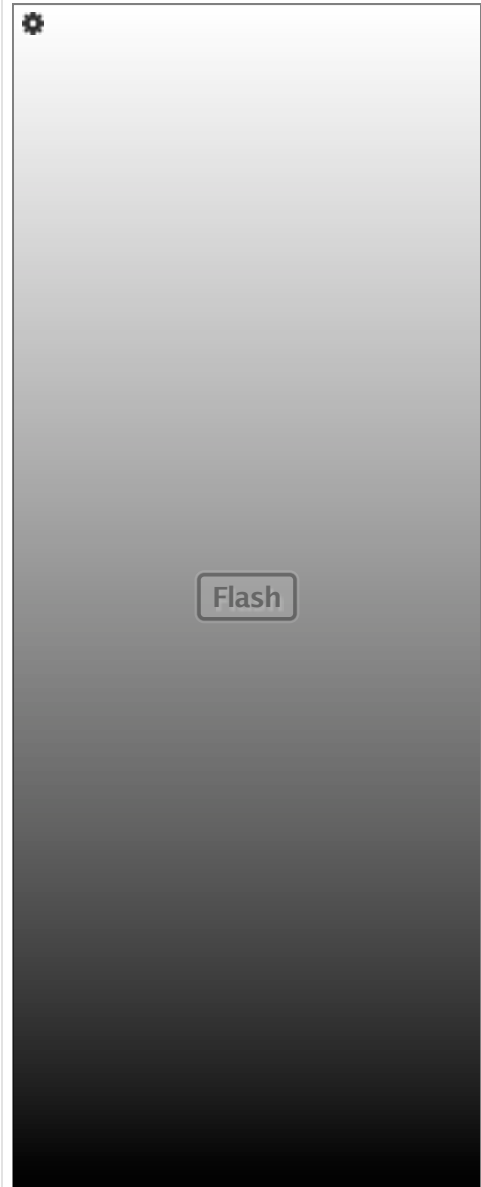
Though some here compare these groups to neo-Nazis, sociologists say that they are different because they lack an aggressive ideology of racial supremacy, and have so far been careful to draw the line at violence. There have been no reports of injuries, or violence beyond pushing and shouting. Rather, the Net right's main purpose seems to be venting frustration, both about Japan's diminished stature and in their own personal

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economic difficulties.

“These are men who feel disenfranchised in their own society,” said Kensuke Suzuki, a sociology professor at Kwansai Gakuin University. “They are looking for someone to blame, and foreigners are the most obvious target.”

They are also different from Japan’s existing ultranationalist groups, which are a common sight even today in Tokyo, wearing paramilitary uniforms and riding around in ominous black trucks with loudspeakers that blare martial music.

This traditional far right, which has roots going back to at least the 1930s rise of militarism in Japan, is now a tacitly accepted part of the conservative political establishment here. Sociologists describe them as serving as a sort of unofficial mechanism for enforcing conformity in postwar Japan, singling out Japanese who were seen as straying too far to the left, or other groups that anger them, such as embassies of countries with whom Japan has territorial disputes.

Members of these old-line rightist groups have been quick to distance themselves from the Net right, which they dismiss as amateurish rabble-rousers.

“These new groups are not patriots but attention-seekers,” said Kunio Suzuki, a senior adviser of the Issaikai, a well-known far-right group with 100 members and a fleet of sound trucks.

But in a sign of changing times here, Mr. Suzuki also admitted that the Net right has grown at a time when traditional ultranationalist groups like his own have been shrinking. Mr. Suzuki said the number of old-style rightists has fallen to about 12,000, one-tenth the size of their 1960s’ peak.

No such estimates exist for the size of the new Net right. However, the largest group appears to be the clumsily named Citizens Group That Will Not Forgive Special Privileges for Koreans in Japan, known here by its Japanese abbreviation, the Zaitokukai, which has some 9,000 members.

The Zaitokukai gained notoriety last year when it staged noisy protests at the home and junior high school of a 14-year-old Philippine girl, demanding her deportation after her parents were sent home for overstaying their visas. More recently, the Zaitokukai picketed theaters showing “The Cove,” an American documentary about dolphin hunting here that rightists branded as anti-Japanese.

In interviews, members of the Zaitokukai and other groups blamed foreigners, particularly Koreans and Chinese, for Japan’s growing crime and unemployment, and also for what they called their nation’s lack of respect on the world stage. Many seemed to embrace conspiracy theories taken from the Internet that China or the United States were plotting to undermine Japan.

“Japan has a shrinking pie,” said Masaru Ota, 37, a medical equipment salesman who headed the local chapter of the Zaitokukai in Omiya, a Tokyo suburb. “Should we be sharing it with foreigners at a time when Japanese are suffering?”

While the Zaitokukai has grown rapidly since it was started three and a half years ago with just 25 members, it is still largely run by its founder and president, a 38-year-old tax accountant who goes by the assumed name of Makoto Sakurai. Mr. Sakurai leads the group from his tiny office in Tokyo’s Akihabara electronics district, where he taps out announcements and other postings on his personal computer.

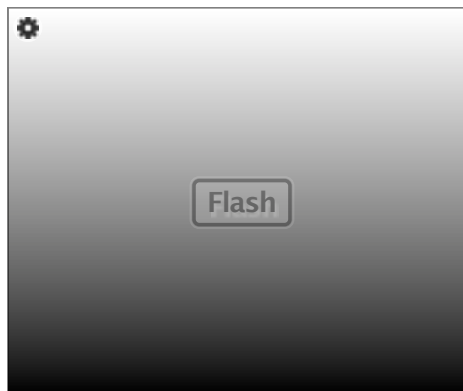
Mr. Sakurai says the group is not racist, and rejected the comparison with neo-Nazis. Instead, he said he had modeled his group after another overseas political movement, the Tea Party in the United States. He said he had studied videos of Tea Party protests, and shared with the Tea Party an angry sense that his nation had gone in the wrong direction because it had fallen into the hands of leftist politicians, liberal media as well as foreigners.

“They have made Japan powerless to stand up to China and Korea,” said Mr. Sakurai, who refused to give his real name.

Mr. Sakurai admitted that the group’s tactics had shocked many Japanese, but said they needed to win attention. He also defended the protests at the Korean school in Kyoto as

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justified to oppose the school's use of a nearby public park, which he said rightfully belonged to Japanese children.

Teachers and parents at the school called that a flimsy excuse to vent what amounted to racist rage. They said the protests had left them and their children fearful.

"If Japan doesn't do something to stop this hate language," said Park Chung-ha, 43, who heads the school's mothers association, "where will it lead to next?"

A version of this article appeared in print on August 29, 2010, on page A6 of the New York edition.

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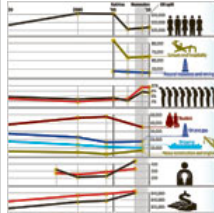


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