



ABDICATION OF EMPEROR AKIHITO AND THE FUTURE OF JAPAN'S IMPERIAL FAMILY

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On December 01, 2017, Chaired by Japanese PM Shinzo Abe, a ten-member Imperial Household Council which comprises lawmakers, royals, and supreme court justices decided April 30, 2019, for the abdication of Emperor Akihito. That is the first abdication by a Japanese monarch in about two hundred years. The decision came after Emperor Akihito, earlier this year expressed his desire to step down citing the inability to perform his duties due to the deteriorating medical condition. However, since Japanese Imperial Household Law doesn't have the provision of abdication, a special one-time legislation was passed in Japanese parliament on June 09, 2017 that will enable Emperor Akihito to abdicate.

Japanese imperial family is considered to be the oldest continuing hereditary monarchy in the world, and the emperor traces its roots to the first Japanese emperor Jimmu (descended from the sun goddess Amaterasu) in 660 BC.¹ The

post-war constitution limited the role of the monarchy to a symbolic level that includes duties such as opening parliament and conducting ceremonies and rituals as a head of Shinto, Japan's native religion. That is the reason, the current generation of Japanese people are indifferent to the imperial family. However, for traditionalists and older people, the emperor is something like soul or essence of Japan.²

The Imperial Household Law explains the rules for succession, regency, different duties of the Imperial family, and other such things related to the Imperial family.³ Though it has been amended few times (last time in 1949), however rules about abdication and male-only succession remained unchanged.

The Emperor who abdicate in favour of his son is called *Daijo Tenno*. Last time it was two centuries back (in 1817) that Emperor Kokaku abdicated, and his son Ninko became the Emperor. The title of *Daijo Tenno* will be given to

Emperor Akihito when he will be abdicated on April 30, 2019.

However, this issue of abdication also brings attention to another contentious issue that the imperial family of Japan is facing. Japan's imperial family is shrinking. After the WW II, reformist Americans wanted to limit the number of imperial family members, and for that reason, they de-recognised 11 out of 12 branches of the imperial family and demoted 51 members to commoners status.⁴ That makes the direct descendant of Emperor Hirohito (his two sons- Akihito and Hitachi) and their family eligible for the Chrysanthemum Throne. Presently, only four members are eligible to the throne, in the following order:

First in line: Crown Prince Naruhito (elder son of Emperor Akihito, born in 1960)

Second in line: Prince Akishino (younger son of Emperor Akihito, born in 1965)

Third in line: Prince Hisahito (grandson of Emperor Akihito and son of Akishino, born in 2006)

Fourth in line: Prince Hitachi (younger brother of Emperor Akihito and younger son of Emperor Hirohito, born in 1935)

It is evident that it is getting difficult for Japanese imperial family to continue their family line. This crisis is extrapolated by the Imperial Household Law which doesn't allow female

Emperor. However, till 2005 the deliberations to change this law were at its peak because Japanese imperial family didn't produce a male heir since 1965. But the birth of Prince Hisahito in 2006 put these discussions in the backburner. Now, the abdication of Emperor Akihito again brings focus to the looming problem of shrinking family line and inclusion of female emperor. According to the current law when the female member of Japanese imperial family marry, they become commoner (unless and until they are marrying into the imperial family).⁵ Though, the idea of the female emperor is not new or too radical for Japan, as until 1889 females were allowed to sit on the throne. This prohibition continued in the Imperial Household law of 1947. The last female emperor that ruled Japan from 1762 to 1771 was Empress Go-Sakuramachi. As Japanese imperial family is in crisis, to introduce this practice again is one option to save the imperial line that is continuing since 660 BC.

Another solution to deal with the issue of the shrinking of the Japanese imperial family line is- to use the service of a concubine. Using concubine is also not unusual for Japanese imperial family as nearly half of 125 emperors were born out of wedlock only. Until the Meiji era (1869-1912), concubine and collateral houses served to provide a safety net to ensure succession by a male.⁶ Before the post-war Imperial Household Law of 1947 excluded illegitimate offspring from the imperial family, Emperor Yoshihito (1912-1926) and Emperor

Hirohito (current Emperor Akihito's father) (1926-1989) choose not to have concubine to follow family values. This option can also be utilised to save the imperial line. Without reform; Prince Hisahito could be the last in a long line.

As far as the legacy of Emperor Akihito is concerned, he epitomises post-war Japan. Way back in 1950's, when more than half of marriages were arranged- he married to a commoner. Whether spending time with family or bringing up their children on their own (rather than nannies, wet nurses and house tutors), Crown Prince Akihito and his family set the examples which were followed by young Japanese people in the post-war era. After his father Hirohito died in 1989, Akihito became Emperor. Through his landmark visit to China in 1992 or his "deep remorse" for Japan's action during WW II and many other such initiatives, he proved to be the best possible steward of the post-war constitution or as it is known to the world as "Peace Constitution." After ruling 28 years, the Emperor is 83 years old now, and he is still trying to set the examples for all those people of his generation. In 2013, Emperor Akihito decided to break the ancient imperial burial custom over his apprehension about the shortage of space for new tombs at the Musashino Imperial Graveyard. Though the location for their burial is still unknown, both Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko listed conditions such as "not many trees should be cut for the construction of the halls" and "the places must be safe ones that can deal

with hot or cold weather, torrential rain or tornadoes."⁷ This decision shows their concerns towards the environment, and will also set a precedent for next generation of imperial family members to opt for cremation rather than burial. Emperor Akihito is proved to be a modernising force in a tradition-bound Japanese imperial family.

From a broader perspective, the abdication of Akihito was not a crisis, as it came out due to his medical condition. The primary issue that needs proper attention is related to the relevance and existence of the Imperial family. As the young generation of Japanese citizen is finding it difficult to connect with the imperial family and if this trend continues then time will come when they see no need for an imperial family. The Imperial family is a linkage between ancient and modern Japan, they are the keepers of 2,600 years old legacy, and as traditionalists believe "the essence of Japan", from that perspective the "shrinking of the Imperial family" is in a pertinent danger. The imperial family along with the Government of Japan should need to ponder carefully to avoid this existential threat.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ "Learn about the oldest ongoing hereditary monarchy in the world!!" *JP Info*. March 22, 2015, <http://jpninfo.com/3258>. Accessed December 06, 2017.

² “Why is the Japanese monarchy under threat?” *The Economist*. June 02, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2017/06/economist-explains-0>. Accessed December 06, 2017.

³ “The Imperial House Law.” *Kunaicho*. 2017, <http://www.kunaicho.go.jp/e-kunaicho/hourei-01.html>. Accessed December 06, 2017.

⁴ Tonomura, Hitomi. “Lineage and change: The imperial family and the debate over female emperor.” *Wilson Center*. October, 2005, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Japanese%20women%20PDF.doc.pdf>. Accessed December 07, 2017.

⁵ “The Imperial House Law.” *Kunaicho*. 2017, <http://www.kunaicho.go.jp/e-kunaicho/hourei-01.html>. Accessed December 06, 2017.

⁶ Koichiro, Takahashi. “The Future of Japan’s Dwindling Imperial Family.” *Nippon*. July 25, 2014, <https://www.nippon.com/en/currents/d00129/?pnum=1>. Accessed December 07, 2017.

⁷ “Japanese emperor will break burial tradition by being cremated.” *PRI*. November 16, 2013, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2013-11-16/japanese-emperor-will-break-burial-tradition-being-cremated>. Accessed December 14, 2017.