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Don’t forget Myanmar and Cambodia! – Reflections of a Japanese advocate for democracy

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The ongoing war in Ukraine has captured the world’s attention as it marks the emergence of a new geopolitical order. At same time, it overshadows many highly problematic developments across the globe beyond Europe. In Southeast Asia, Myanmar and Cambodia are the most prominent cases of such worrying developments that deserve more attention and scrutiny. This article contains reflections of a life-long advocate for peace, democracy and the rule of law on the strategies, approaches and policies that would provide robust responses of Japan – being one of the leading donors in Myanmar and the largest in Cambodia – to mitigate the impacts of the political and humanitarian crisis in Myanmar, and of a regime in Cambodia that is becoming increasingly authoritarian.

Ukraine opened the hearts of the Japanese people

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has become the greatest global tragedy of the century and has brought about a major shift in Japan's foreign and security policies. Japan steered to blame Russia at the expense of Northern territorial negotiations and energy supply. She accepted 1042 Ukrainian evacuees and granted 722 of them a status of residence for specific activities that would allow them to stay for one year. From now on, settled refugee status from other countries such as Afghanistan and Myanmar are likely to be increased. Thus, the current number of 47 people should be significantly increased.

In 1979, I was involved in the establishment of Japan's first refugee support NGO, the Association for Aid and Relief (AAR), by supporting Mrs. Yukika Sohma, a daughter of Yukio Ozaki, who as a Member of the Japanese Diet (Parliament) opposed the Pacific War and who as a Mayor of Tokyo sent cherry trees to Washington D.C. Her purpose of creating the AAR was to help "Open the hearts of the Japanese people" by helping refugees. However, the number of settled refugees, which was three at that time, has increased by only 44 in 43 years! The courage and actions of the Ukrainians have opened the hearts of the Japanese government and people for refugees which have been closed thus far.

The National Army of Myanmar is killing its own people

However, there are other countries that need, in a sense, the same compassion as Ukraine. They are Myanmar and Cambodia. In Myanmar, the number of civilian deaths since the military coup d'état in February last year is enormous, and the Institute of Strategic Policy Research (ISP Myanmar) and Radio Free Asia report that more than 5,600 people have died. It is said that there are about 860,000 internally displaced persons and refugees who have left the country (UNOCHA). The major difference between Ukraine and Myanmar is that while according to an American think tank, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), about 10,000 Ukrainian civilians were killed by the Russian army, an enemy country, in Myanmar the victims were killed by the National Army and police, their compatriots. It was a coup d'état that overturned the result of the big victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi in the general election in November 2020. The citizens organized non-violent demonstrations nationwide to cope with it. The scenes of the barbaric acts by the soldiers and police officers and the resistance by the people were shown live both inside and outside the country. The military felt threatened by the resistance and intensified the suppression by the armed forces, while the citizens formed the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). National railways staff, doctors, teachers, tax officers, etc. have abandoned their workplaces, and tax payment refusals and electricity bill payment refusals have spread. Most of the NLD parliamentarians are hiding abroad or in border areas, and 107 national parliamentarians and local parliamentarians have been arrested. The NLD established the National Unified Government (NUG) and set up offices in seven countries, including Japan. In

May last year, the citizens organized a People's Defense Forces (PDF) for self-defense and launched counterattacks. The National Army expanded their attacks in the PDF's strong holds of ethnic minorities and rural areas. Prompt killing, indiscriminate shooting, burning, torture, and rape are conducted. Army Commander in Chief Gen. Min Aung Hlaing boasted that he would "annihilate the Democrats" in his official speech on the Army Memorial Day on March 27.

A global encircling network is sieging the National Army

The international encircling network against Russia is expanding, and that for the Myanmar National Army, too. Immediately after the coup, Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi called for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other government and political leaders and declared that new official development assistance (ODA) projects would be suspended. Even Koji Yamazaki, the Commander in Chief of the Grand Japanese Self-Defense Forces, signed the statement of top military leaders of 12 Western countries on March 27, saying "the army has a responsibility to protect its own people, not to harm them."

However, Hideo Watanabe, Chairman of the Japan-Myanmar Association, who met Gen. Min Aung Hlaing at the time of the coup d'état, showed off the "relationship with the army." Japanese Ambassador Ichiro Maruyama said to the Japanese media on January 9 that Japan has a special kind of channel with the Military which the West does not have, but its "quiet diplomacy" has not produced effective results. The Japanese Self-Defense Forces accepted a request to train four military officers of the Myanmar National Army. These gave the impressions both inside and outside the country that Japanese government is close to the Myanmar National Army.

On the other hand, the Diet adopted a parliamentary resolution for Myanmar in June last year in both houses. It called on the National Army to immediately stop the atrocities against civilians and immediately release Aung San Suu Kyi Chi and government and political leaders, and called on the Japanese government to restore the democratic political system through diplomacy. The resolution was initiated by the bipartisan "Parliamentarians League to support Democratization of Myanmar". They met with the National Unity Government (NUG) and made successive requests to the Japanese government. On February 9, this year, 79 bipartisan parliamentarians and Japanese and foreign organizations submitted a request to Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, demanding early approval of the NUG and full return to the democratic government that won the 2020 general election; recognition of the refugee status for Myanmar people coming to Japan and recognition of residence status for Myanmar people residing in Japan; suspension of ODA that benefits the armed forces; and curbing investment by Japanese companies in military-related companies and compensation for Japanese companies withdrawing from Myanmar.

International efforts to support these policies are accelerating. President Biden of the United States invited the leaders of eight ASEAN countries to hold a special summit meeting on May 12, but did not invite the representative of the Myanmar military administration. Conversely, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman met Foreign Minister Zinma Aung of the NUG to clearly support the NUG. In the joint statement of the US-ASEAN summit, "[f]ull support for ASEAN's peaceful resolution efforts, including contacts with all the parties concerned in Myanmar by the ASEAN Special Envoy," was stated. Cambodia's Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn, the ASEAN Special Envoy, revealed a visit to Myanmar within a few weeks. Prior to that, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, the Chairman of ASEAN, urged Gen. Min Aung Hlaing to allow the special envoy to meet Aung San Suu Kyi. The envoy visited Myanma since June 30 and was allowed to meet the leaders of seven ethnic minority military groups, but not Aung San Suu Kyi.

Opportunity to stop Japan's aid to benefit the National Army

I have been involved in Japan's aid to Myanmar in two ways. Firstly, at the request of Mrs. Yoko Kitazawa, who was a leader of the Jubilee 2000 debt cancellation campaign, a bipartisan group of parliamentarians was established to support her campaign, and in May 2000, as its representative I submitted a request to Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi, a few days before he collapsed due to a cerebral infarction. It was the start of the debt cancellation policy of the Japanese government for heavy indebted poor countries (HIPCs). Secondly, in April 2012, Japan, the world's largest creditor country, exempted Myanmar from the debt of 2.2 billion USD. The remaining 1.4 billion USD was replaced with a new loan and the repayment was postponed. At that time, I was the State Minister of Finance in the Democratic Party government. The debt waiver was premised on the progress of democratization, and the decisive factor was the transfer of power to the civilian government in 2011. Since then, large-scale infrastructure projects such as the railway between Yangon and Mandalay and the sewerage system in Yangon have started. The total amount of support was close to 14.8 billion USD.

The military administration waged a coup and abandoned the premise of democratization. Therefore, the Japanese government has the responsibility to review its support. According to a United Nations' Report on the Economic interests of the Myanmar military in 2019, Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC) under the armed forces and their more than 100 subsidiaries boast the highest profits in the country. However, most of the huge income is not included in the government budget, but is in the income of the armed forces. Their business is diverse, including ruby and jade mining, cement manufacturing, and finance. It has the same structure as that of the Pol Pot regime, which carried out a genocide in Cambodia, monopolizing the right to sell jewelry and timber for their war expenses. After peace in 1993, Finance Minister Sam Rainsy (later the leader of the Cambodian Rescue Party) carried out a drastic reform to switch the timber tax revenue held

by the military and provincial governors to the national revenue, putting his life under risk. Ms. Yuka Kiguchi, Secretary-General of Mekong Watch, points out that the relationship between Japan's debt cancellation before democratization and the armed forces. In order to prevent moral hazard due to the debt cancellation, the aid was limited to the purchase of goods agreed by the two governments, and the Myanmar government was obliged to report to the Japanese government. However, of the three years of debt relief assistance from 1995, at least 36.5 million USD was unclear money without a receipt. In addition, amongst those projects which had receipts, about 19 million USD was used to purchase heavy machinery for felling of the Myanmar Timber Corporation, which is a source of military income. At a press conference on May 21 last year, Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi confirmed that "we would prevent the ODA to support the armed forces-led system," and "told the Myanmar side that ODA could not be issued as it is." However, there is no evidence that the Japanese government has stopped ODA. The Minister of International Cooperation of the NUG has pointed out in the *International Development Journal* in March that "the armed forces are attacking the people from the buildings built by the Japanese ODA."

Rather, Japanese companies which are sensitive about the image of Japan are going ahead with withdrawing from Myanmar, including the withdrawal of Kirin Brewery from a joint venture with a military company (MEHL), and of Mitsubishi Corporation and ENEOS from the Yetagun natural gas mining business. It is relevant that in recent surveys in April by a group of Japanese to the Myanmar employees of Japanese companies, showed 30% of them support the suspension of ODA from Japan and 60% support the suspension of Japanese financial aid to military companies.

Cambodia waged a political coup before the change of government

While the Myanmar army staged a coup after a big defeat in the general election, it was Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen who planned a political coup before the general election of 2018. In the 1993 general election after the peace agreement in Cambodia, the Funcinpec Party led by Prince Ranariddh who had been campaigning from outside the country for years became the first party. Then, Hun Sen created a two-person prime minister system, and using his military and administrative control since 1985 seized de-facto power. After the 1997 general election, Prime Minister Ranariddh was expelled from the country by Hun Sen by a coup d'état. After that, the popular Sam Rainsy formed the Cambodian Rescue Party (CNRP) and in collaboration with Kem Sokha won almost half of the total votes in the 2013 general election and the 2017 local election. Then, Prime Minister Hun Sen held a political coup before the 2018 general election, in which he was expected to be defeated. In September 2017, Kem Sokha, the CNRP leader, was arrested for national treason, and in November, the Supreme Court decided to ban 118 CNRP parliamentarians and other political leaders from political activities for five years. It was a coup d'état that the Supreme Court, at the behest of the Prime Minister, deprived the MPs, who had been elected by the people, of their rights. In addition, the

Supreme Court ordered the dissolution of the CNRP. The 2018 general election was virtually a one-party election of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), which won all 125 seats. In response, Western countries have imposed the following strong sanctions, while the Japanese government did not recognize it as legitimate and refused to dispatch the election monitoring team.

In August 2020, the European Union (EU) excluded imports of Cambodian clothing and shoes from trade incentives, citing human rights infringements in the production of these commodities. Last December, the United States listed Cambodia as a country to which all weapons exports are banned and also decided to ban the export of US high-tech products to Cambodia.

For 37 years, since 1985, Prime Minister Hun Sen has maintained his power. The way he monopolizes power has been described by a European Parliament resolution of 11 March 2021 which called on "the Government of Cambodia to put an end to all forms of harassment, intimidation and politically motivated criminal charges against members of the opposition, trade unionists, human rights defenders, the media and civil society actors." But in recent years, he added a new weapon: the use of the social networking service (SNS such as Facebook). Sam Rainsy describes what happened in *The Geopolitics* on January 11 in 2022 as follows: Prime Minister Hun Sen provided a large amount of money to a young woman who was a supporter of the CNRP and a website called *Celebrity* to attack the opposition party. Approximately 400 messages between Prime Minister Hun Seng and the woman were exchanged via *Line*. When Sam Rainsy posted it on Facebook, he was accused by Hun Sen. Not only was the accusation used as a pretext to dismiss the CNRP, but he was sentenced to a 1 million USD fine and his house in Phnom Penh was confiscated. Sam Rainsy urges *Line* corporation in Japan to acknowledge the fact that the abovementioned communication had existed and thus save him. Like in the Ukrainian operation with its full use of the SNS and the relationship between President Trump and Twitter, *Line's* response will have a major impact on Asian politics.

The European Parliament adopted a resolution on May 12 calling on the Cambodian government to stop persecuting and threatening political opponents, labor union members, human rights activists and journalists prior to the June 5 local elections and next year's general elections. They also accused the Cambodian Supreme Court of dismissing the CNRP in November 2017 and called for the withdrawal of charges against CNRP leader Kem Sokha, former leader Sam Rainsy and other CNRP political leaders.

The local elections on June 5 saw another miracle of Mekong. The Candlelight Party (CLP), which had been created by Sam Rainsy but could not use its name for years as he, the leader, was banned from political activity, garnered 22% of the votes and became the second largest party. It happened despite various harassments as described by the United Nations Human Rights Office which said that the election was "disturbed by the pattern of threats, intimidation

and obstruction targeting opposition candidates." The CRP had rapidly increased its support and chose candidates in most constituencies in a few months. The support by the international community for real, fair, and free elections in 2023 can help democracy effectively take root in Cambodia.

Changes in the status quo by force is not allowed inside a country

Prime Minister Kishida of Japan said at a press conference in March in Cambodia: "We do not allow force to change the status quo in any region of the world." This is referred to the assumption that Russia, China, etc. might "change the status quo from the outside." But in view of the recent attacks and crackdowns on citizens around the world, political opinion is increasing that "change of the status quo by domestic force" also should not be allowed. The post-election coup d'état in Myanmar and the pre-election coup d'état in Cambodia are typical examples.

In March, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) recognized humanitarian infringements by the Myanmar Armed Forces as war crimes and crimes against humanity, citing attacks on civilians in densely populated areas with air bombs and large weapons, arbitrary arrests, torture, the use of civilians as human shield, burning to death, etc. In other words, the armed suppression of their own people by their own army was recognized as war crimes and crimes against humanity. In January this year, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and others decided to sanction the chief prosecutor, the Supreme Court judge, and military personnel who decided to prosecute Aung San Suu Kyi. It is one of the legal foundations of a state that changes of the status quo by force within a country are not allowed.

The invasion of Ukraine also disclosed the dangers of personal dictatorship, including the examples of Russian President Putin, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, Myanmar's long-term military clan, and North Korea's General Secretary Kim Jong-un. Personal dictatorship tends to use power to change the status quo both internally and externally, with the risk of involving wider regions of the world, and cannot be overlooked.

Both politicians and citizens are risking their lives

The abovementioned political opinion has increased because citizens and politicians are fighting for their lives in Ukraine, Myanmar, Cambodia, etc. The Ukrainian citizens never took a step back in the fight against mighty Russia, and the citizens of Myanmar and Cambodia continue to fight the mighty and brutal army and police. They move our hearts. On the other hand, some of my friends who were politicians and activists in Cambodia and Myanmar have been killed in the last 20 years or more. Sam Rainsy himself has escaped assassination attempts. He was targeted by a grenade attack in Phnom Penh on March 30 in 1997. It killed

at least 16 people and left more than 100 seriously wounded. The report of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations reached the following conclusions in October 1999:

> (1) Members of Hun Sen's Bodyguard Force participated in the planning and execution of the attack.
> (2) Hun Sen, being one of the only two people with authority over the Bodyguard Force, must have known of and approved the attack.

Sam Rainsy was attacked even in France and the French government has issued an arrest warrant for a Cambodian who did it. The footage of a Ukrainian female parliamentarian with a gun who stayed on in Kiev was also spectacular. As a member of parliament, I have only felt dangerous twice. I tell myself that I must support these citizens and politicians who are fighting for their lives.

Japan's diplomacy supported by other peoples

On May 19, Japanese state TV *NHK* reported a surge in civilian killings in rural areas by the Myanmar Army and commented: "While Japan insists on freedom and democracy with the West, it is not permissible for Japan to leave Myanmar overrun by the military. Now that the West is absorbed in Ukraine, Japan's involvement is required."

The invasion of Ukraine created an environment in which Japan could change its policy. The excuse that "if you push the dictatorship government more, they will become closer to China" is no longer valid. For Myanmar, it is all about fulfilling the request submitted to Prime Minister Kishida by the "Federation of Parliamentarians to Support the Democratization of Myanmar" on February 9 which was mentioned earlier. For Cambodia, it is the implementation of the measures and points required by the EU Parliament and others. Implementing these is consistent with Kishida's diplomacy, which has been supporting Ukraine and sanctioning Russia. Gaining true trust from the people of other countries in this way is also Japan's greatest security.

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About the author

Yukihisa Fujita is former State Minister of Finance of Japan and two-term member of the House of Representatives and two-term member of the House of Councillors. He initiated the Agenda for Reconciliation (AfR), a series of conferences on trust building and reconciliation and also founded the Diet Members' League for a Total Ban on Anti-Personnel Landmines. He served as a Director of the Association for Aid and Relief (AAR), the first Japanese NGO to help refugees, launching in 1980 projects to help Cambodian refugees and citizens at the Thai-Cambodian border and later inside Cambodia. These projects are continuing to the present day. The AAR is currently active in over 65 countries and regions around the world.

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