Waiting for Japan’s Barack Obama

By Mikyoung Kim

Japan has long prided itself on its homogenous society. But with the country’s population set to plunge in the years ahead, the demand for foreign workers and a more open immigration policy will test the country’s cultural insularity, writes South Korean academic Mikyoung Kim.
OBAMA CITY went all out for the new leader of the free world. Residents of the port city in Japan’s Fukui Prefecture did everything from gathering signatures to symbolically endorsing Barack Obama’s presidential campaign and selling Obama fish cakes. A letter from a retired mayor of Obama tried to give deeper significance to the coincidentally shared name by stressing themes of common humanity and responsibility.

The historic election of Barack Obama as the first black president of the United States, and the enthusiastic international reaction, confirm that awareness of multiculturalism and minority rights is on the rise. But the global trend is expressed in Japan in a uniquely Japanese way.

The island country is under mounting pressure to go multicultural and multiethnic, while moves to loosen up its immigration policy are gaining momentum. Facing the challenges of a rock-bottom birth rate of 1.25 percent in 2006 and a lagging gross domestic product that grew at only 1.2 percent between 2001 and 2005, the country needs to correct its demographics to stay vibrant in the world market — more so than ever amid the global economic crisis. The populations of Japan’s emerging rivals in Asia, China and India, for instance, are expected to be 1.262 billion and 1.733 billion, respectively, in 2050 from 1.328 billion and 1.109 billion in 2005, whereas that of Japan is predicted to shrink rapidly from 128 million in 2005 to 94 million in 2050. The specter of a crippling labor shortage is alarming enough that the long ruling and historically xenophobic Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) is preparing legislation to relax immigration policy.

Visible changes are already taking place. The government is inviting 1,000 nursing students from Indonesia for the next two years to make up for the lack of elderly care service personnel. The first batch arrived last summer and began Japanese language training on the state’s tab. The foreign student admission quota is expected to increase from the current 130,000 to 300,000. The government also wants to pave the road for the admission of desirable “intelligent immigrants,” while making permanent residency easier to attain by reducing the current requirement of 10 years of work experience in the country. The LDP proposal is modeled on American immigration law.

But while Japan sees the necessity of having more foreigners, are the Japanese ready for the arrival of “aliens”? The experiences of ethnic minorities in Japan suggest that the road to multiculturalism is going to be bumpy. Having foreigners as a substitute for the dwindling Japanese labor force is a separate issue from acknowledging them as rightful co-inhabitants of the land. The former is the policy domain of the government; the latter entails the cultural tolerance of the Japanese people. Robotic machines replaced many Japanese workers amid the
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The economic boom of the 1960s and 1970s, and now foreigners are being tapped as a substitute for the shrinking Japanese labor pool. Without an emotive commitment by the people at a cultural level, robots and foreign workers could well be seen in the same light in the Japanese mind.

As one nursing home owner told a Japanese newspaper, “I will avoid hiring the Indonesian nurses even after they pass the national qualification exams. I prefer working with young Japanese workers.” The reality of an understaffed and half-idle facility apparently didn’t alter the owner’s adamant position. “Why does the government provide the Indonesians with free language training? They will go back to their country after all, and their educational subsidy comes from us, the Japanese tax payers,” complained another person in a media report.

Japan as a nation needs foreign workers, but Japan as a society wants the least costly laborers who are the most like themselves. With the Japanese and global job markets now rapidly deteriorating, is equal protection being granted to immigrant workers? It is not likely, because debates on immigration and labor policies have proceeded here with insufficient deliberation on universal human values.

According to Japan’s 2006 census, foreigners comprise about 1.6 percent of the Japanese population or about 2 million people. They are often provocatively blamed for crime, drug use and other social woes. At the same time, violations of foreigners’ human rights by Japanese are not negligible. The United Nations Human Rights Report and the US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices express concerns over the “deeply rooted” racial discrimination against ethnic minorities in Japan. The controversial, discontinued fingerprinting requirement for alien registration was revived, in a different form, in November 2007. All foreigners entering Japan, with the exception of permanent residency holders, have to submit index fingerprints and a photo at the Japanese port of entry. The system was resurrected in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the US. Considering the fact that most terrorist attacks in Japan have been committed by Japanese (for instance, the Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attacks in the Tokyo subway system in 1995 and the Red Army’s hijacking of a JAL flight in 1970), the justification for the requirement is thin.

People of Korean (aka, zai-nichi) and Chinese descent, including Taiwanese, make up the largest subgroups of minorities in Japan, occupying 29 percent and 27 percent of the total, respectively, followed by Brazilians, Filipinos and Americans. Zai-nichi are categorized as “special permanent residents” according to Japanese immigration law. Without having any particular allegiance to the motherlands of South Korea or North Korea, and without feeling particularly foreign in Japan, the group of 400,000 people exists in a political vacuum. Ongoing debates on granting zai-nichi voting rights in local elections are one telling reminder of their socio-political marginalization.

Japan’s founding constitutional principles in the postwar era — pacifism, political democracy and human rights — seem to exclude the rights of zai-nichi. Despite representing third and fourth generations of people who willingly
migrated or were forcibly taken from the Korean Peninsula during the Japanese occupation before and during World War II, their legal status has been severely limited in the political domain.

This is in sharp contrast to the status of African Americans in the US. The Fifteenth Amendment of the US Constitution established universal voting rights in principle, although it took the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to fully implement this key right. Behind this long-fought and hard-won triumph were visionaries and activists of various races, creeds and genders. Even though the LDP’s immigration proposals are based on the American model, vastly different cultural norms in Japan and the US are visible in the differing experiences of zai-nichi in Japan and African Americans in the US. A surprising number of Japanese still cling to the founding myths of racial purity, whereas most Americans view their society’s obvious multi-ethnic character with pride and approval. The Japanese, with strong norms for group uniformity, tend to overstate their degree of cultural homogeneity. Americans, on the other hand, tend to celebrate multiculturalism, allowing a minority candidate such as Barack Obama, with a distinctly foreign-sounding name, to reach the White House. Such contrasting soils shape basic life opportunities for immigrants in Japan and the United States. If the American Dream is about “making it” no matter where you or your ancestors came from, the Japanese Dream is about “moving up” among your own kind.

Refugee politics shed a similar light on how distant Japan is from the rest of the post-industrial democratic world. It took 31 years before the Japanese government, a signer of the 1951 Refugee Treaty, began cracking open the door to refugees in 1982. Japan then admitted an average of three refugees a year between 1988 and 1997.
The number increased to 20 upon the government’s decision in 1998 to apply a revised domestic law to international asylum seekers. As of 2002, a grand total of 284 refugees are living in Japan. The disparity with other advanced countries is glaring. Japan granted refugee status in a mere 22 cases in 2000, a year when the corresponding figures were 24,000 for the US, 13,989 for Canada, 11,446 for Germany and 10,185 for the United Kingdom. Japan had 216 asylum seekers in 2000 and a refugee admission rate of about 10 percent — versus rates of 38 percent in the US (63,650 applicants), 37 percent in Canada (37,860 applicants), 15 percent in Germany (78,760 applicants) and 11 percent in the UK (98,900 applicants).

The Japanese government cites two reasons to explain this puzzling phenomenon: geographical isolation and cultural understanding. Because Japan is an island country lacking land borders with neighbors, the argument goes, access to the nation for prospective refugees is limited. Officials also assert that Japanese language skills are an important element of the refugee screening process. However, such excuses fail to explain why only 20 Chinese (including ethnic Koreans) and 100 Burmese applied for refugee status in Japan between 1999 and 2001. During the same period, 63,000 Chinese and 110,000 Burmese sought asylum in geographically distant Western countries. They knocked on the borders of Australia and New Zealand at rates 60 times and 7 times higher than in Japan, respectively.

Government explanations are not convincing to explain why there are so few foreign workers, refugees and even tourists in an otherwise ultramodern Japan. Something else is going on. Japanese society avoids confronting the “something else” because to do so would cause discomfort, inconvenience and urusa (noise) — an unwelcome assault on the collective aesthetic experience. Yet the whirlwind of globalization is forcing the Japanese modus operandi of cultural intolerance into a defensive crouch.

Where is Japan’s Barack Obama? Nowhere on the horizon, it seems.

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