Loud for Their Size: Japan’s Right Wing and Social Media
By Jonathan Berkshire Miller

The strong showing of an ultra-nationalist politician in a governorship race earlier this year shone a spotlight on growing right-wing sentiment in Japan, and in particular the use of social media tools by Net-uyoku, or right-wing activist Internet users. While estimates have put their number at around only one in a hundred Internet users in Japan, their outspoken and sophisticated online presence has given them a disproportionate notoriety, writes Jonathan Berkshire Miller.

Debate continues on the true nature of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his cadre of cabinet ministers. Many international media outlets, including The New York Times and The Economist, have accused the Abe administration of “tilting Japan to the right,” pointing to his comments on history and his visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine last December. Meanwhile, Abe’s defenders note his track record of pragmatism in dealing with regional neighbors and his ability to contain his personal views in favor of a more effective diplomatic agenda.

But while debate over the “real Abe” continues, there is less uncertainty over the growth of the right wing in Japan. An example of this was the gubernatorial election in Tokyo Prefecture in February. The victor was Yoichi Masuzoe, a moderate whose candidacy was supported by Abe. Yet, while Masuzoe won the election, a more alarming result was the fourth-place finish — with nearly 12 percent of the vote — of ultra-nationalist Toshio Tamogami. A former Air Force general and founder of an infamous conservative group, Ganbare Nippon (“Do Your Best, Japan”), Tamogami advocates a revisionist line that serves the interests of his group, it is hard to define the enduring characteristics of its members. Despite this, Osaka University Professor Daisuke Tsuji also affirmed this interpretation through a detailed study that revealed Net-uyoku only represent slightly over one percent of all Internet users in Japan. The fact remains that the growth of the right wing in Japan is notable, as evidenced by Tamogami’s support, but it is perhaps exaggerated. As Tsuji has noted, “Politicians could be misled to believe the public opinion on the Web reflects the majority and shift more to the right. People with less interest in politics could also be led in that direction as a result.”

Japan’s mainstream electorate remains moderate and holds balanced and pragmatic views both on history and their country’s diplomatic relations with neighbors.

1 Muneo Kaigo, “Internet Aggregators Constructing the Political Right Wing in Japan,” Journal of E-Democracy, 2013, p. 60.
2 Ibid., p. 61.
5 Ibid.