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Japan in Uproar Over Censorship of Emperor's Anti-Nuclear Speech

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Why did Japanese TV channels cut Emperor Akihito's address on the one-year anniversary of the Fukushima crisis?

There is a particularly sensitive accusation reverberating through online discussion boards and social media in Japan: that Emperor Akihito's speech on the one year anniversary of the earthquake and tsunami was censored on TV for his comments about the nuclear disaster at Fukushima.

The 78-year-old Emperor Akihito had insisted on attending the memorial service, though he had been released from the hospital for heart bypass surgery less than a week earlier. While the emperor is technically just a figurehead, he is still deeply revered here. Many Japanese see him a source of guidance in times of political difficulty, which have been many in the last 20 years. His speech was highly anticipated. Unlike Prime Minister Noda, who never mentioned the nuclear crisis in his speech on the anniversary, the Emperor addressed it directly.

As this earthquake and tsunami caused the nuclear power plant accident, those living in areas designated as the danger zone lost their homes and livelihoods and had to leave the places they used to live. In order for them to live there again safely, we have to overcome the problem of radioactive contamination, which is a formidable task.

While this statement may seem more obvious than radical to outsiders, underneath the Imperial-grade Japanese understatement were two ideas that have become quietly explosive. First, he seemed to suggest that the nuclear crisis is not over, a "formidable task" yet to be overcome. This noticeably contradicts the government's official stance that Fukushima has achieved a cold shutdown and, for all practical purposes, the crisis is over. Second, it implies that it is not yet safe for people to return to areas stricken with high levels of radiation, at least not before the "formidable task" is "overcome." This, again, contradicts the government's position that it is now safe for people to return to almost all areas and that neither Tokyo Electric Power Company nor the national government are obliged to assist in long term evacuations.

It's impossible to say for sure whether the emperor intended to weigh in on two of the country's most sensitive policy debates. Either way, his words have struck Japan's national conversation with a weight that could only be delivered by the emperor himself.

"The emperor's words were like a knife to my heart." tweeted @shun1sta, in a string of comments typical of the public reaction. "He seemed in such pain as well... I can only imagine the determination he felt to say what he did." "It seems to me that the Emperor was doing the most he could do, despite the constraints of his position, to communicate his opinion on the nuclear matter." "Surely the government asked him not to mention the nuclear crisis. He must have fought hard to tell the truth."

It is rare for Emperor Akihito, an accomplished biologist and the world's leading authority on certain species of Gobi Fish, to publicly take sides on any subject other than biology. It is said that his love for the sciences is partly due to the ease in which his colleagues can disagree with him. The reverence he commands in other spheres is so strong that, when it comes to politics, his opinion is considered a constitutionally guarded state secret. His normal silence only adds to the weight of his rare public statements on such matters.

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