

japantoday

Friday, July 6, 2007

What to do about imperial succession law?

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Maintaining stability in the imperial system should be the most important goal in considering whether we allow a female emperor in Japan.

Crown Princess Masako gave birth to a baby girl on Dec 1 after more than eight years of marriage. She has been under tremendous pressure to have a baby boy because postwar Japanese law stipulates that only males may be heirs to the throne.

Emperor Akihito, the current emperor, is the 125th in the Japanese royal succession. Of these 125 monarchs, there were only eight female emperors (two of them became emperor twice) and the most recent was Gosakuramachi who ruled Japan between 1762 and 1771.

Crown Princess Masako's giving birth to a girl will certainly rekindle demands to change the existing imperial law of succession. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) considered changing the Imperial Household Law early this year. In May, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi said that he was personally in favor of changing the law to allow female succession.

On the other hand, the chief cabinet spokesperson indicated that a thorough examination would be necessary to deal with this issue. In other words, there was no consensus as to the necessity of amending the Imperial Household Law, and the conservative wing of the LDP has prevailed. In November, the LDP announced that the party had no immediate plans to change the law to allow a female emperor.

What are the major problems concerning the imperial succession issue? First, there have not been any male births in the imperial family for over three decades, and the youngest male in the imperial household is Akishinomiya (the Crown Prince's younger brother) who is 36 years old. If no baby boy was born in the imperial family, it would be possible to have a situation where no one is eligible to assume the throne in the near future under the current law.

Second, female royal family members disaffiliate from the imperial household once they get married. If the government amended the law to allow female succession, females would remain royal family members with their husbands, which will lead to substantial expansion of the imperial family. The current expenses for the imperial family amount to 307.95 million yen, but they would certainly increase accordingly.

Third, amending the succession clause may lead to reconsideration of other controversial issues in the Imperial Household Law, such as whether or not to allow imperial family members to renounce succession, to abdicate the throne, and to leave the imperial household at will. If they were allowed to do so, the whole imperial system would become unstable.

Since the Emperor is "the symbol of the state and of the unity of the people," it is the responsibility of the Japanese people not to allow the imperial succession issue to become a cause of controversy or to bring



about an unstable situation.

The issue of female succession may become a serious, imminent problem, but it is a problem of a temporary nature. In the future, as in the past, the imperial family may have more male members.

Consequently, the government should enact an ad referendum law with a limited period of validity to allow females to succeed the throne in an extraordinary case without affecting any other part of the existing Imperial Household Law.

December 3, 2001

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