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by Shin Sugok

If public hatred against the socially weak were organized and came under the control of power, it could even pave the way for the emergence of a new fascism.

The families of 10 missing Japanese believed abducted to North Korea unexpectedly found themselves caught in a vicious crossfire. Their crime? They had expressed their disappointment and anger at Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's failure to find out what happened to their missing relatives during his Pyongyang visit on May 22.

The families received a barrage of phone calls and e-mail messages criticizing what they said and how they behaved.

The spate of hostile comments erupted immediately after the families spoke out against the prime minister. It reminded me of the bashing meted out to the families of Japanese taken captive in Iraq in April. When they criticized the Japanese government, they, too, faced a severe public backlash. Critics held that the former hostages were "personally responsible" for what had befallen them.

It took decades for North Korea to admit to the abductions. Meanwhile, both politicians and the media ignored the families who kept pressing the government to take action. I think the lack of public interest drove home to them the apathy of society. Still, members of the Association of Families of Victims Kidnapped by

North Korea were shocked that their anger was not shared by the public.

But this time, they must have felt a different kind of "public coldness." This came in the form of critical faxed messages, phone calls and e-mails from "ordinary citizens."

Recently, there seems to be a growing trend for the public to direct its anger and hatred at the socially weak rather than at the powerful such as government leaders and major corporations.

Take, for example, the case of a Kumamoto hotel, which refused to accommodate former leprosy patients last fall. No sooner had the former Hansen's disease patients announced that they found the hotel's apology insincere than they found themselves the target of harsh public criticism.

I think this trend clearly shows a fundamental dimension of "the masses" in Japanese society. As long as wretched people in weak positions put up with their misery, society tends to show sympathy and compassion. But once such people become vocal and raise objections against the government or businesses that caused them harm, the masses make an about-face and criticize them for making excessive demands and showing insufficient gratitude.

This experience is shared by many ethnic Koreans in Japan, including myself. Whenever minorities break their silence and demand their human rights, they are met with harsh denial.

Since the abduction issue came to public attention, ethnic North Koreans have faced repeated incidents of bullying and harassment.

Most of the North Koreans have remained silent and put up with the abuse. They know that once they raise their voices, the public will gang up on them.

Only those who personally experience the fire of unreasonable public attack know how frightening it can be.

Weak people who are exposed to a torrent of hatred are made to acutely realize that the society in which they live is intolerant toward the socially weak who speak up.

Technology is partly to blame for this trend because misunderstandings can be spread so rapidly. The rapid advancement of information technology such as fax machines and the Internet exacerbates the abuse.

The masses have an outlet for their superficial rage and frustration against weak targets in electronic media because they know the victims will not fight back. It is almost as if they are playing a game.

Since one can remain anonymous on the Internet, hidden discrimination tends to surface, amplify and reproduce. Attackers do not have to worry that their identities may be known, so they can attack the weak to their hearts' content.

No matter what, this sort of hostility never leads to constructive debate, which is indispensable to a democracy and the solution to most problems.

The Japanese tend to be sensitive to what other people say. Knowing this, if such public hatred were organized and came under the control of power, it could even pave the way for the emergence of a new fascism.

The media should properly address these problems and alert the public to the possible dangers that abuse of the weak can bring.

Shin Sugok is a personnel development consultant. This comment appeared in The Asahi Shimbun/International Herald Tribune on July 30, 2004.