

What Price Security? Japan, Britain and the threat of terrorism

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Although Japan and Britain are both island nations, they are worlds apart--not just geographically, but in their approach to the threat of terrorism.

Both governments became targets of al-Qaida for supporting the U.S.-led war against terror. The two countries are now tightening immigration controls in their battle against terrorism.

While the measures being introduced are similar, the intensity of debate over related legal revisions is like oil and water.

In May, Japan's Diet passed a bill requiring all foreign nationals aged 16 or over--with the exception of state guests and those with special permanent resident status--to be fingerprinted and photographed upon arrival.

Despite the controversial nature of the legislation, debate in the Diet was low-key. Interest among the general public was lukewarm, at best.

In March, Britain passed legislation requiring

all passports to contain biometric data such as irises and fingerprints. But that transpired only after heated debate and repeated revisions and rejections.

British immigration control officers started using iris recognition on an experimental basis that same month.

However, with continuing dissent and a general election slated for 2009, it is possible--if the ruling Labor Party is trounced--that the new system will be scrapped as it is not due to be in place until 2010.

Japan's system changes have much in common with those in Britain, including exercising tighter controls on foreign nationals and the use of fingerprinting.

Meanwhile, Japanese and foreign residents of Japan with ID cards embedded with fingerprint data will be able to use fast-track border control checks operated by automatic gates.

Anybody found to have ties with terrorist groups will be deported.

During the Diet debate, opposition Minshuto (Democratic Party of Japan) called for caution and more time for deliberations on the issue.

Proposed revisions included a clearly worded statement that personal information such as fingerprints would not be used for purposes other than immigration control.

Opposition lawmakers also expressed concerns about using the U.S. firm Accenture to set up the new border control system using biometric data. They said they feared data recorded in Japan might become available in the United States.

Last fall, Accenture won a bid for only 100,000 yen to develop an experimental system that allows holders of IC cards with fingerprint data to pass through automatically operated immigration gates.

Accenture also developed the fingerprint data-management system for the U.S. government that tracks all foreign nationals entering the country.

The U.S. firm is also involved in the development of systems for tax authorities and public prosecutors in Japan.

The government dismissed concerns of possible data leaks with the promise that it would "strictly control data in line with the law."

Kono Taro, senior vice minister of justice, stated a pressing need for the new legislation, saying: "We can't afford to be leisurely about this. There were terrorist attacks in Bali and in London, and al-Qaida is said to be targeting Japan, too."

The bill proposed by the government was endorsed on May 17.

The revisions to the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Law stirred little public interest in part because most Japanese assume the changes have nothing to do with themselves, experts said.

Japanese nationals are excluded from the fingerprint requirement. An estimated 470,000 non-Japanese with special resident status are also exempt.

Most of those with special resident status are Koreans who came to Japan before and during World War II. Their descendants also fall into this category.

"It was a decision as a matter of policy," a senior Justice Ministry official explained.

The decision to exclude them from the new requirements stemmed from fears of a severe backlash from the Korean community, sources said.

Mizukami Yoichiro, 64, former director of the Tokyo Immigration Bureau, said he believes the fingerprinting requirement runs counter to Japan's national interest in that it will hinder efforts to co-exist peacefully with others.

With this in mind, he asked an executive official of pro-Seoul Korean Residents Union in Japan (Mindan) if he minded receiving preferential treatment.

The executive apparently was bewildered.

In the 1980s, second- and third-generation Korean residents spearheaded a movement against the

fingerprint requirement for alien registration.

Kim Sang Sa, 34, a third-generation Korean resident, acknowledged the Korean community was slow to react this time around.

"We started to move in March after we learned the details of the proposed bill," he said. "But we ran out of time when the bill was approved."

Kang Sang Jung, a professor of political science at the University of Tokyo, says the revision is a reflection of the "anxiety syndrome" that he believes is gripping Japan.

"Security attracts attention, and people are increasingly seeing foreigners as targets for risk management," he says.

Kang, a second-generation Korean resident, had his fingerprints taken for alien registration at the age of 16. Later, he refused to be fingerprinted.

"In Europe and the United States, moves to tighten control like this would surely face opposition because of human rights concerns," he says. "Crime prevention is important, but we need to hammer out a balance in conflicts between order and our rights."

Yoshinari Katsuo, 55, a former representative of the Asian People's Friendship Society, voiced sadness that Japanese seem to generally regard the new legislation as "somebody else's problem."

Yoshinari noted that foreign nationals residing in Japan were basically kept in the dark, with the result that most foreigners assumed the new legislation would only affect new arrivals--which is far from the case.

"So far, Japan has been a comfortable place for foreigners to live in," said Pakistani Nusrat Ali, a 44-year-old long-term Japan resident. "But from now on, you'll be treated like a criminal simply because you are a foreigner."

In Britain, meantime, the Labor government clashed head-on with opposition parties over border control revisions and anti-terrorism legislation.

Following last July's terrorist attacks, Prime Minister Tony Blair declared that the "rules of the game are changing" and went on to propose steps that would make it easier to expel foreign criminals.

But his administration's plan to introduce ID cards with biometric data met with strong opposition both from the left-of-center Liberal Democrats and, on the right, the Conservative Party.

Critics fear police may take advantage of the new ID card as a means to crack down on illegal immigrants, thereby fueling racial tensions, or that it may lead to the leak--and abuse--of personal information. Another factor is cost.

Miyajima Takashi, professor of sociology at Hosei University's graduate school, attributes the difference in

public perceptions
between Japan and Britain to the two countries'
experience with
immigrants.

Miyajima notes one in 10 British citizens is an
immigrant or a
descendant of one.

When problems arise with a foreign country,
the immigrant population
serves as a "bridge," linking the British to other
nations.

That, he says, explains the British tendency to
believe that
problems facing foreigners also concern them.

"On the other hand, Japan has only a short
history of accepting
foreigners," he says. "The Japanese don't share
foreigners' opinions
and tend to regard them as 'not directly related
to us.'"

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