

# The Henoko Base Project: Okinawa's Tamaki Government at the Brink

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Since the death of Okinawan Governor Onaga Takeshi on 8 August, the Henoko base construction plan has been in flux. With the issues coming to a head, the media in Japan and the world shows ever less interest, easing the way for the Abe government to have its way. Crucial phases in the long-running contest between state and prefecture have been noted many times, but perhaps none is comparable to today as the commencement of works to reclaim the base site on Oura Bay is imminent.<sup>1</sup>

The prefecture proceeded following the death of Onaga with cancellation (31 August) of the permit for reclamation works. On 30 September it then elected Tamaki Denny as Onaga's successor (with an 80,000 majority). Once in office, Tamaki repeatedly called for talks on the base issue with the national government. In due course talks, billed as "concentrated discussions" (*shuchu kyogi*) took place in November, but only after the Abe Government's Minister for Land, Infrastructure and Transport, Ishii Kei-ichi, on 30 October issued an order suspending the effect of the Prefecture's August cancellation of the license to reclaim the Henoko site on Oura Bay. By the highly unusual procedure of one section of government declaring the acts of another to be legal and proper, the way was cleared to resume works.<sup>2</sup> Only then would the national government agree to the "talks" with Okinawa.

The talks that followed through the month of November were conducted in secret and scarcely "concentrated." They involved just three brief meetings on successive Mondays between Deputy Cabinet Secretary Sugita Kazuhiro and Okinawan Vice Governor Jahana

Kiichiro, followed by a 28 November meeting between Prime Minister Abe and Governor Tamaki. Between the government's insistence that reclamation and base construction proceed immediately and the prefecture's that it be cancelled there was no room for compromise. Under the cloak of "talks," the government prepared for full-scale onslaught on Oura Bay that was to follow. Talks over, confrontation resumed.

The Abe government resumed site works and announced that it would proceed to dump fill into Oura Bay from "mid-December." Governor Tamaki commented, lamely, that it was "extremely unfortunate" that government should so act while he, as Governor, had been "thinking that dialogue could lead to a good outcome." Early in December Defence Minister Iwaya Takeshi announced the actual date: reclamation would commence: Friday, 14 December.<sup>3</sup>

For its part, following the fruitless November "discussions", Okinawa prefecture launched two initiatives. On 29 November, it formally asked the Central and Local Government Disputes Management Council to resolve the dispute between it and the national government. The previous (Onaga) administration had twice, in 2015 and 2016, attempted to have this nominally independent body (a five-person experts committee appointed by government) assigned an arbitration role, only to be knocked back. First it was told that the Commission had no jurisdiction to intervene and then was advised to pursue "sincere negotiations" in order to resolve "the continuing undesirable relations

between state and prefecture.” The prefectural case as submitted by Tamaki, a 79 page text with further documents attached, argued first that the Okinawa Defence Bureau was not an appropriate body under the terms of the Administrative Appeal Act to have sought the intervention by the Minister for Land who suspended the operation of the prefectural rescission order,<sup>4</sup> and second that it was inappropriate for one section of government to rule on the legitimacy of the acts of another.<sup>5</sup> As its record suggests, the Disputes Resolution Council is an unlikely venue to seek “resolution.” And even if it were to issue some recommendation, by the time it does so under the government’s plan Oura Bay is likely to have been damaged beyond restoration by the dumping of sand and soil.

Okinawa Prefecture also announced in December that it would conduct a prefectural referendum on 24 February, asking the people of the prefecture whether or not they supported the base construction project. Tamaki agreed - presumably under Abe government pressure - that he would adopt a “neutral” (*churitsuteki*) stance on the question. In other words, despite having been elected principally because of his stance opposing reclamation/construction, he would not lead the prefecture in voting against it. In response to a newspaper question as to what it would mean to conduct the referendum if the process of reclamation is already underway by then, Tamaki responded, “rather than timing, it is the expression of the people’s sentiment that counts.” A February referendum might well produce more evidence of anti-base sentiment but that sentiment has been clear for two decades without Tokyo paying attention. Furthermore, whatever the referendum outcome, the government insists it will ignore it.

This would seem to mean that reclamation of Oura Bay, scheduled to begin by mid-December, will have continued for two months

before the Okinawan people cast their 24 February vote, and perhaps for three months before any decision is handed down by the Disputes Resolution Council. The national government is committed to proceed with Henoko construction even if every single Okinawan says “No” to it, so neither the referendum nor the submission to the Disputes Council seems to offer much prospect of blunting the state’s resolve.

However, for the national government to be able to make a decisive start on reclamation it must resolve complex logistical problems, finding a way to transport huge volumes of sand and soil to the site. On this front the prefecture might be able to create serious problems for the government. The scale of the main works now projected is so gigantic that ships - also easier than trucks to protect from angry citizens - are designed to play the major role henceforth. Very controversially, in September and November 2017 then Governor Onaga granted permits for use of facilities at the northern Okinawa ports of Motobu, Oku and Nakagusuku to bring sand and soil to Henoko. At that time, prominent citizen activists (such as Yamashiro Hiroji) sharply criticized the decision because it was at odds with the prefecture’s stated insistence that the Henoko project not proceed.<sup>6</sup>

The question now is whether Governor Tamaki will renew or extend these port use licenses. If he follows the Onaga precedent of approving the permits, he might still offer minimal positive cooperation to the national government by approving its “minor” requests - including permits for port use and for coral removal<sup>7</sup> - while opposing the project as a whole and appealing to the government to stop. That tactic for Onaga had slowed the works, but it had not halted them. As it confronted the newly elected Tamaki administration, the Abe government strove to avoid frontal clash, insisting - in cases to which it knew the prefecture would be most unlikely to assent -

that such assent was not necessary. It planned to use the port facilities of Motobu for loading fill materials onto ships for transport to the site, but that port suffered severe damage from a typhoon in September 2018, necessitating repairs that would take some months, so the prefecture declined to grant the necessary permit.<sup>8</sup> Government therefore decided to use the Ryukyu Cement Company's facility at Awa, on Highway 449 about five kilometres from Motobu, in Nago City), maintaining that, as a commercial facility, prefectural consent was not necessary.<sup>9</sup>

The 14 December target date evidently depended on activating the Awa pier. On 3 December, one ship was quietly loaded, and a second was in preparation, when the prefecture intervened, dramatically, noting that the procedures for confirming completion of port works had not been filed as required, and there were grounds for suspecting that Ryukyu Cement was using its facilities licensed for specific operations (the cement business) for something quite other, or perhaps for unauthorized sub-leasing (to the Okinawa Defence Bureau) and prefectural regulations governing control of red soil discharge into the sea had not been met.

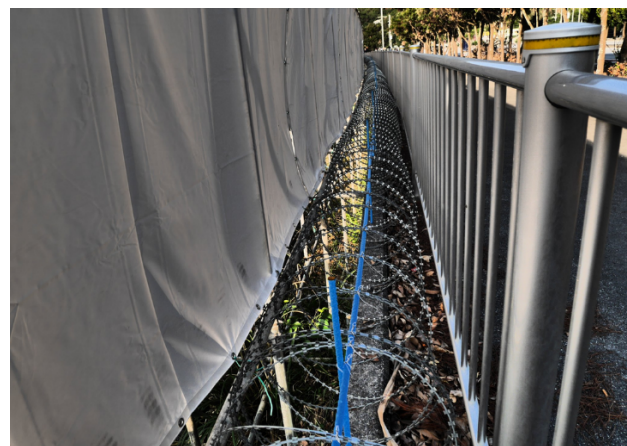


**Henoko Landfill Ready for Loading, Ryukyu Cement Works, Awa, December 2018**  
(Source

(<http://ospreyfuancub.hatenablog.com/entry/2018/12/03/034536>))

Governor Tamaki denounced the Awa works as “illegal” and ordered the port closed pending satisfaction of the legal requirements. That would, it was thought, take approximately two months.<sup>10</sup>

However, after suspending loading operations briefly on 3 December, the government resumed them two days later. It made sure that Ryukyu Cement issued the necessary formal notification of works completion – albeit retrospectively – and it announced that other matters would be addressed within the law.<sup>11</sup> If the prefecture found something problematic about the piles of sand and soil spread over the cement works site, the government would set them aside and bring in other materials. This amounted to saying, “Trust us, we are the government.” The government order to resume works was issued before the prefecture even had the opportunity to enter or inspect the site. Prefectural officials were shocked. In this high-stakes battle the Henoko national policy project was one in which local governments would not be allowed to intervene. Reclamation, promised for 14 December, would commence on 14 December.



**The Awa Site: Barbed Wire and**

**Sheeting (Source  
(<http://ospreyfuanclub.hatenablog.com/entry/2018/12/03/034536>))**

The contretemps raised the question: what powers does a Governor have? Nominally, at least, the status of a prefectural governor is equal to that of the Prime Minister. Chapter eight of the constitution spells out the principle of “local autonomy” under which local public entities “have the right to manage their property, affairs and administration.” In his ruling in the Naha High Court case between national government and prefectural government in 2016, Judge Tamiya Toshio put it in these words:

“under the 1999 revision to the local autonomy law it was envisaged that the state and regional public bodies would serve their respective functions *in an equal, cooperative manner*” (italics added).<sup>12</sup>

There has been little sign of that “equal, cooperative” relationship in the Abe government’s treatment of Okinawa. Governor Tamaki would appear to possess significant administrative powers. We may soon learn if he is prepared to exercise them to block or delay the planned December 14 construction of the base. He could order a closure of the Awa pier and send in prefectural riot police to enforce his order. He could also suspend or cancel all licenses (for port use and for coral removal) issued during the prefectural administrations of his two immediate predecessors, Nakaima Hirokazu and Onaga Takeshi, between 2013 and 2018. Above all, he could announce his intention to withhold prefectural consent from the major revisions of the construction plan occasioned by technical and engineering problems as the national government faces the now publicly recognized problems of the soft “mayonnaise” floor of the Bay and the earthquake fault lines that cross it.

The fact that Tamaki is an avowed supporter of

the base system in general (opposed only to the “new” base construction project at Henoko) and that he has also declared his support for the Pentagon’s call for shared (US and Japan) military base usage, makes it unlikely that he will launch such a virtual war against the Abe state. But no one can say how he might act if the government continues its discriminatory, undemocratic and even illegal measures against Okinawa and if prefectural pressure to resist mounts. Ultimately it is the people of Okinawa who have the right to decide how their prefecture is to be governed and how their environment is to be protected (or sacrificed).

The *Okinawa Times* reports that although reclamation of the Henoko site is only at its very early stage, the cost has already ballooned, multiplying the original Department of Defence estimate of 240 billion yen by a factor of ten, to two and a half trillion yen (roughly 22 billion dollars), and, even in the unlikely event that construction proceeds smoothly and according to significantly revised plans from now on, another 13 years will be necessary before the “Futenma Replacement Facility” will be ready for the Marine Corps to move in.<sup>13</sup> That means that the Abe government can offer no relief for at least the next thirteen years to the people of Ginowan from the threat (and nuisance) posed by the giant base sitting in the middle of their town. Henoko construction does not constitute any, let alone the “only,” solution to the Futenma problem, or, indeed, to Abe’s “Okinawa problem.”

National policy pursued ruthlessly by Prime Minister Abe requires the crushing of the Okinawan will and the sacrifice of the land and sea of Henoko-Oura Bay. Still less than three months after he was elected by a huge majority on a mandate to stop that process, Governor Tamaki faces the full force of the Abe government’s determination to press ahead with reclamation and base construction whatever the cost, beginning in just under a



week a process which could spell extinction for the multiple life forms of Oura Bay.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This essay follows closely upon, and may be read as a sequel to, my “Grappling with Clientelism: the Japanese State and Okinawa under Abe Shinzo” (<https://apjjf.org/2018/23/McCormack.html/>), “The Asia-Pacific Journal – Japan Focus, 23 November 2018.

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of this legally dubious 30 October government declaration of the legitimacy

of its actions, see my “Grappling with clientelism.”

<sup>3</sup> “Ju-yokka Henoko dosha donyu, hoji kokka no hakai yurusarenu,” editorial, *Ryukyu shimpō*, 4 December 2018.

<sup>4</sup> This law was designed to offer relief for citizens aggrieved by some government malfeasance, not to provide government an instrument for sweeping aside protest.

<sup>5</sup> “Okinawa-ken, keiso-i e no shinsa moshide, tekkai taishi ni fufuku, chiji dosha tonyu hoshin ni hanpatsu,” *Ryukyu shimpō*, 30 November 2018.

<sup>6</sup> See my discussion in *The State of the Japanese State*, p. 113.

<sup>7</sup> When it came time for renewal of permits for removal of coral from Oura Bay in 2017, the government announced it would not seek renewal, thus avoiding a prefectural refusal. It simply continued its coral-removal works ignoring permission. (“Henoko dosha hanshutsu chudan ho mushi wa muri suji no shirushi,” *Okinawa taimusu*, 5 December 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Repairs were estimated to call for about three months work.

<sup>9</sup> “Seifu, Henoko ni dosha tonyu e, minkan sanbashi o tsukatte de mo nennai ni,” *Asahi shimbun*, 2 December 2018.

<sup>10</sup> “Dosha hanshutsu ‘iho’ Tamaki chiji kokyo yosai kanri kisoku ihan da, Ryukyu semento o shido ni,” *Ryukyu shimbun*, 4 December 2018.

<sup>11</sup> “Henoko dosha tsumikomi saikai, tonyu meguri kobo gekika, Okinawa ken no taiko saku ga shoten,” *Ryukyu shimpō*, 6 December 2018.

<sup>12</sup> *The State of the Japanese State*, p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> Figures reported in “‘Keiso-i ni shinsa de’ ‘jichi’ tou jisshitsu shinri o,” editorial, *Okinawa taimusu*, 30 November 2018, and “Ju-yokka Henoko dosha,” op. cit., *Ryukyu shimpō*, 4 december 2018.