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Ainu quest for rights enters political realm

Shiro Kayano, 54, was once just like the millions of salarymen who populate Japan's neon-lit cities. He wore a suit and tie, bought the latest technology and earned a paycheck in Tokyo's advertising sector.

But a chance visit to a Canadian indigenous household two decades ago set him on a different path: seeking political power for the Ainu, a tiny ethnic minority in a nation of 127 million.

Kayano's ambitious bid to win 10 out of the 242 seats in the Upper House for the newly created Ainu Party in the next national election — as well as vast land claims for his people — is the latest move aimed at boosting recognition for what was once a hunter-gatherer society in Hokkaido.

Fairer-skinned and more hirsute than most Japanese, the Ainu traditionally observed an animist faith with a belief that God exists in every creation — trees, hills, lakes, rivers and animals, particularly bears.

Ainu men kept full beards while women adorned themselves with facial tattoos that they acquired before they reached the age of marriage. Ainu clothes were robes spun from tree bark and decorated with geometric designs.

But like many indigenous groups around the world, most of the Ainu have lost touch with their traditional lifestyle after decades of forced assimilation policies that officially banned their language and culture, leaving them a disadvantaged minority in the modern world.

The number of Ainu has been estimated at about 70,000, but the real figure is unknown because many have integrated with mainstream society and some have hidden their cultural roots.

“We think what is necessary for modern Ainu is our participation in politics,” said Kayano, who now curates a museum of Ainu heritage in Hokkaido.

“Given the current political turmoil, I expect maybe we’ll have a chance.”

The ruling Democratic Party of Japan has fallen under heavy criticism over its sales tax hike and the restart of the two nuclear reactors, opening a door for political newcomers, Kayano said.

“If I’m elected, I’d like to work on introducing Ainu-language classes in elementary and junior high schools — I believe we will be able to recover our language.”

But Kayano, whose father, Shigeru, was the only Ainu lawmaker in history, has his sights on more than just reviving his ethnic group’s traditions and all-but-extinct language.

He wants the Ainu to be granted their traditional homeland of Hokkaido and even some two-thirds of Japan’s territory, mostly national parks.

Historically, the Ainu dominated Hokkaido until the 19th century, when Japanese were encouraged to settle there, pushing the Ainu off their land and farther to the periphery.

Kayano acknowledged that his vast land claims are unlikely to succeed, and it is not even part of his new party’s platform.

“I know it’s a long shot, but nothing will begin without starting to say a word,” he said.

And there have been signs of change after decades of marginalization.

In 2008, the government for the first time recognized the Ainu as an indigenous people in a landmark Diet resolution, which pledged to support a community that has lower than average income and education levels.

The government has been studying policies that would revive the Ainu language and create venues where traditions such as spiritual ceremonies could be held.

However, finding people who speak Ainu fluently isn’t easy.

In the small agricultural community of Biratori, Hokkaido, 81-year-old language teacher Sachiko Kibata is one of few who can pass along Ainu to the younger generation.

Kibata only learned the language about 20 years ago from Kayano’s father.

“But I do have childhood memories of my grandmother speaking the Ainu language, so that also helped me learn,” she said.

For Kayano, his push started about 25 years ago after he visited a Canadian indigenous community whose traditional lifestyles have also been diluted by historical assimilation policies.

“I realized the outrageousness of one ethnicity being deprived of its own language and culture by force,” he said. “I woke up to my identity as an Ainu.”

The newly minted political party was inspired by a trip last year to a global indigenous people’s conference in Peru, neighboring Bolivia, where Evo Morales is the South American nation’s first indigenous president.

Despite his resolve, Kayano knows he faces an uphill battle, even among his own people.

“There are some Ainu who say ‘there is no discrimination against us anymore’ while others say, ‘why don’t we instead make the effort to become winners in Japanese society?’ ” he said “Those people think that making a claim for Ainu rights is harmful for them. And I can’t force them to share my ideas.”



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