



Vietnamese workers at a factory in Tochigi, Japan. While the country is one of the few ethnically homogeneous countries in the world with comparatively low rates of immigration and acceptance of refugees, it is welcoming of foreign talents who can contribute to Japanese society. PHOTO: NORIKO HAYASHI/NYTIMES

Japan's quiet reckoning with fringe xenophobia and immigration anxiety

Latent anti-foreigner sentiments must be tackled alongside concerns over the economy and employment.

Lim Tai Wei

The issue of foreigners in Japan was a hot topic in Sunday's Upper House election. It was a race where the populist right-wing Sanseito party, running on a Japan First agenda, emerged as one of the biggest winners with 14 more seats. The lead up to the election saw mass media fuel discussion of the controversial issue of foreigners.

But xenophobia did not win. Parties in favour of immigration, like the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, maintained their 38 seats in the Upper House election.

The results are unsurprising. Surveys by the major news dailies in Japan show foreigners were not a topmost concern. "Economy and employment" was the top issue voters wanted addressed, according to a Yomiuri Shimbun survey published on July 11, with "consumption tax", "pension and healthcare" coming in second and third. Even national broadcaster NHK indicated that "policies on foreign resident" was ranked a distant seven on the list of voters' concerns.

Nonetheless, pre-empting fringe attempts to attribute blame on foreigners for social ills and avoiding such narratives seeping into the mainstream must remain a priority for Japanese leaders. Such concerns are perceived by some observers as particularly heightened among the fringe far-right and disgruntled conservatives in a post-Shinzo Abe Japan.

The worry among mainstream Japan is that populist politicians in Japan may emulate the rise of the far-right populist movements in the West (like Reform UK, AfD in Germany or the Lega movement in the United States) at a time when Japan needs migrants to cope with its declining population and labour force.

A LID ON ANTI-FOREIGNER SENTIMENTS

For now, the situation remains under control. Most Japanese accept that foreign talent, migrant labour and tourists are crucial in

mitigating any economic challenges arising from Japan's ageing and declining population. Sixty-eight per cent of respondents in an Asahi Shimbun survey in January 2025 consider record numbers of foreign visitors a positive development.

There is also substantial mainstream discomfort with a minority party that appears to campaign on populist slogans that target foreigners. This is reflected in how the full spectrum of Japanese political parties have refused to play the anti-foreigner card for the Upper House election. Even Sanseito considers itself an anti-globalist party, rather than an anti-foreigner party.

Mr Yoshihiko Noda, who leads the Constitutional Democratic Party, the country's biggest opposition party, criticised Sanseito, argued that foreign residents are important for Japan's economy and advocated for a multicultural society that respects minorities.

The far-left progressive Japan Communist Party pledged to fight against discrimination and xenophobia.

The ruling Liberal Democratic Party government also announced the setting up of an administrative body to tackle concerns over foreigners and assuage concerned voters.

With Japan's super-ageing population, the imperative for multi-ethnic and multicultural migrants has become existential, a priority underscored by both the Fumio Kishida administration and the current Shigeru Ishiba administration.

For many years, Japanese civil society groups have been a tempering force – working to integrate foreign workers into Japanese society, helping to provide language lessons for the migrant workers and their families and supporting them to form unions to protect their rights.

Progressive civil society groups have also warned against political parties trying to rouse voter sentiments to score political points. Eight human rights organisations, including Solidarity Network with Migrants Japan, issued a statement on July 8 urging politicians to cease divisive rhetoric on foreigners and lobbied for authorities to prevent hate speech during campaigning.

CAN JAPAN COPE?

Integrating foreigners in Japan has few antecedents until relatively recently, but there is good news.

While the country is one of the few ethnically homogeneous countries in the world with comparatively low rates of immigration and acceptance of refugees, it is welcoming of foreign talents who can contribute to Japanese society and visitors to Japan.

Due to its homogeneity, the country is less susceptible to the tribalism and political polarisation found in other developed and far more multicultural countries.

That door is more wide open today. Migrants to Japan – skilled and unskilled – have grown in numbers, with the foreign population reaching 3.8 million by the end of 2024. Japan's foreign population's 10 per cent increase in 2024 set a new record for the third consecutive year.

Japan enjoys several advantages in coping with the migrant issue. It was conservative and cautious in accepting migrants for decades, so the inflow of people has been manageable. And it enjoys the power of hindsight from observing other societies, particularly in the West, deal with the socio-economic and socio-political impact of large numbers of incoming migrants and refugees.

However, long-term economic policy planning and changes are needed to address risks going forward, particularly given that anti-foreigner sentiments can be easily fuelled by bread-and-butter anxieties over livelihoods, jobs and the cost of living.

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post-pandemic Japan that generate value-added jobs, including in energy, advanced chips-making and steel-making, as well as in solid-state electric vehicle (EV) battery manufacturing, the defence industry, and tourism.

Many priority industries are already delivering results. NHK reported on July 1 that there were 41 job openings for every 10 seekers by March 2025. In 2024, 67.81 million were employed in Japan with a labour force participation rate of 61.7 per cent. As at May 2025, the already-low unemployment rate dipped to 2.5 per cent, with labour force participation increasing to 62.3 per cent.

If the Japanese authorities can sustain economic rejuvenation, they can address the root causes of xenophobia and anti-foreigner sentiment, namely, voter anxieties about the economy, and prevent populists from scapegoating foreigners.

LONGER TERM POLICY REFORMS

Japan's model of migrant integration is evolving. The government has begun to establish cultural and language training centres in migrant source countries to help potential work-visa holders acclimate before arriving in Japan. These centres may eventually expand to more countries that are key sources of foreign talent and labour.

This early orientation aims to prepare those arriving on short three-year work visas, who are expected to return home after fulfilling their employment contracts. In contrast, long-term visa holders who are allowed to bring their families, will be required to pass additional assessments, including language proficiency tests, to remain in the country.

As a long-term strategy towards sustainable immigration, Japan is also investing in innovative technological solutions to address its demographic challenges. Originally planning to bring in one million more skilled migrant workers before 2030, Japanese authorities revised the target to 820,000 in March 2024, after determining that 200,000 jobs could be performed by AI, smart robots, and industrial automation. This shift reduces overreliance on human migrants while maintaining a steady growth in the foreign workforce.

Over time, these technologies are expected to grow more sophisticated and take on a wider range of roles. Japan is well-positioned in this space as a global leader in developing assistive robots, therapeutic robots, wearable exoskeletons and industrial automation systems.

Ultimately, addressing economic challenges through advances in high-tech sectors and integrating more human-replacement technologies may enable Japan to keep concerns over foreigners in check.

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