

Special interview

Yuriko Koike, governor of Tokyo

The Asia-Pacific Initiative held an interview with Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike on November 27, 2020. Governor Koike, who led Tokyo's efforts to fight COVID-19, spoke on a variety of topics, such as disseminating information and messages to the public concerning the novel coronavirus, risk communication, dissemination of information to an international audience, as well as the division of roles between the national and regional/local governments. The following is a summary of the interview given at the Tokyo Metropolitan Government.

– Governor Koike referred to a “lockdown” on March 23. Yasutoshi Nishimura, minister in charge of the COVID-19 response, told us in an interview that the “lockdown” remark had the risk of causing a misunderstanding that the Japanese government could take enforceable measures as had been introduced in many Western countries, thus delaying the government’s declaration of the state of emergency (on April 7). What did you think of that?

I was surprised. I had never heard of such terms as lockdown, cluster or overshoot (before the COVID-19 outbreak). They were not my own words, but I merely quoted the terms used in the discussion by the national government’s panel of experts just as the Tokyo Metropolitan Government was weighing its response at the time. It is also said that the message to avoid the “Three Cs” – which had not become widely known from when the experts first said it – came to be shared among the public only after I mentioned it. I wonder if that testifies to a weakness in public communication by the national government.

I’m afraid that the problem is still ongoing. People involved in infectious disease control use a lot of technical and difficult terms. I make the utmost effort to make my messages easy to understand so that they prod people into action. It’s not appropriate for people in the national government to blame me for that. I wonder if such an attitude on the part of the government still exists. I believe that the government won’t be able to gain public trust in its policies unless it fulfills its own responsibilities. Recently, government officials (the Cabinet Secretariat’s Office for Novel Coronavirus Disease Control) even asked me to disseminate my messages with “slightly stronger language.”

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– Do you think you will refer to a “lockdown” again?

I would, if the government wants me to say that. I will mention it if the government asks me to say it – that the government is saying that.

It's a question of risk communication. As I dealt with the issue, I became acutely aware that the government lacks the perspective of how Japan is viewed by the rest of the world.

I was watching the Diamond Princess case with grave concern. Since there was an assumption that the cruise ship might possibly be berthed in Tokyo, we had nearly completed our arrangements. The transportation bureau of the metropolitan government prepared buses for transporting [the passengers and crew] and discussed what to do with infection control and obtaining the cooperation of the drivers. Then we were told that [the cooperation of the metropolitan government] was not needed. I think the [national government] had approached various parties. That was all right, and the metropolitan government's response was that it would do all it could.

At the time, I was watching CNN and BBC coverage of the news, and they would only broadcast footage of people in protective gear going aboard the Diamond Princess. I remember how Benjamin Netanyahu (the current prime minister of Israel) was appearing nonstop on CNN during the Gulf War and talking like a machine gun about Israel's position and its national defense. I was wondering why the government didn't set up a podium in front of the Diamond Princess and have an English-speaking official from either the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry or the Foreign Ministry as a spokesperson to explain in English to the overseas audience the day-to-day situation and the government's response. Otherwise, people overseas would get the impression of Japan as a scary country. I felt it was very regrettable that such a consideration was never given at the time.

Other countries were sending out information that they were taking such steps as drive-through tests for the virus, which led me to think about what Japan should disseminate to the rest of the world. I approached journalists from the foreign media and had them report on the lodging facilities [for asymptomatic patients and patients with mild symptoms]. I had an ordinance enacted to position those facilities as quasi-medical institutions where doctors see the patients and nurses are constantly stationed. Those facilities are now serving as a buffer (as the infection is expanding again). The capacity of hospitals would be overwhelmed by asymptomatic and mild cases if all the people testing positive for the virus were hospitalized.

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The key is to isolate the patients, and hotels sufficiently serve that purpose as long as patients have access to monitoring by doctors and consultation with nurses. In Tokyo, roughly 400 new infection cases are now reported each day, and the operation of hospitals would break down if all of them were hospitalized. People suffering from other illnesses would not be able to receive the necessary treatment. Therefore, we turned hotels into facilities [for the asymptomatic and mild case patients] to recuperate, and installed devices that run on Japan's information technology such as [the humanoid robot] Pepper and cleaning robots – and had the media report on them.

How did Japan fight the novel coronavirus in the global fight against the pandemic? We need to think what do we disseminate to the rest of the world to explain how the nation responded to COVID-19. I wonder if it's time to be making inward-looking comments within Japan as to who made such and such remarks. I think the issue concern the nation's dignity.

– When the state of emergency was declared in April, the metropolitan government had made preparations from a fairly early stage as to the scope of business sectors that would be requested to temporarily close. In imposing curbs on business activities, what did you think about the framework of the revised Act on Special Measures for Pandemic Influenza and New Infectious Diseases and the sectors that should be the targets of business closure requests?

The framework of the special measures act was hastily crafted, and the emphasis was placed on just getting it enacted. I know how Diet proceedings work, and I understand that it had to be done that way.

On the other hand, if the disease – a lot about which remained unknown at the time – was being passed on via human-to-human contacts, it was clear that we needed to reduce the opportunity for infection as much as possible. But the heads of industry associations and the people who actually work in the sectors concerned – or the hairdressing business in this case – couldn't sustain their shops without workers coming into contact with customers. Managers find it tough to close shops, but workers feared being infected. We had to choose one or the other. Eventually it was decided to keep those shops open, but we communicated [to the sector] to make sure that infection countermeasures such as wearing masks and disinfection were fully implemented – so that workers would feel secure.

Also, in defining the scope of sectors to be asked to close their shops, the national government's standards listed some facilities by their old names. So the metropolitan government, which knows current business practices better, first decided on the sectors subject to the business closure requests, and then entered discussion with

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the national government. And that became a de facto standard and spread across the country via the national government.

– While the metropolitan government intended to make stringent requests for curbing people's movement and business activities, the national government called for a step-by-step approach to tightening the restrictions.

For that matter, we should learn from Shinpei Goto (a politician from the Taisho to the early Showa eras). In the Sino-Japanese War [of 1894-85], he was concerned that the 200,000-plus returning Japanese troops might bring home the cholera epidemic, so he had them isolated on the islands of the Seto Inland Sea and gradually returned them to their hometowns after quarantine.

Goto was a man known for advocating grand projects. When he was put in charge of the reconstruction of Tokyo following the devastation of the capital in the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, he proposed that money equivalent to the annual national government budget should be spent on building new roads – including today's Meiji-dori, Yamate-dori and Gyoko-dori – in one go. Then the project was pared down through deliberations in the Diet to about one-third of his original plan as – just as I guess it often happens today – legislators chopped off various parts of the plan as “not necessary.” I believe Tokyo's problem of narrow streets would have been much more improved if that grand project had been implemented.

When you engage in a big project like managing a crisis, you should first lay out a grand plan, and then gradually narrow down its scope. That way, people feel more secure, especially in dealing with an epidemic crisis. Shinpei Goto served as the seventh mayor of Tokyo. I have learned a lot from Goto – and from history.

– Some of the issues in response to the COVID-19 crisis, including the “Go To Travel” program, shed light on the question of which party – the national government or the local authorities – should have the power and responsibility to make judgments. What do you think of the issue?

Since I used to be involved in national government administration, I realize that the state tends to pass the buck on to local authorities when it faces difficulties in managing a project. What's most important here, however, is better cooperation between national and local governments. Also needed will be the rapport to make sure that the state's policy measures will have the intended effects. While people in the national government should be responsible for designing the policy program, the power and fiscal resources to implement the program should be left to those on the frontlines of carrying out the measures. At the same time, the national government occasionally takes advantage of this structure.

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The first job I was put in charge of in government administration as parliamentary vice minister of the Internal Affairs and Communications Ministry was decentralization and regulatory reform. At the time, I witnessed central government powers standing in the way of motivated local government leaders, and realized that, while the state should be responsible for its own policies, it was important to encourage those heads of local authorities to take their own initiatives. Otherwise, all the local governments would become weaker as they depended on grants from the central government and lost power while the slogan of decentralization was repeated. Today, Tokyo is the only local government that does not receive local allocation tax grants from the central government.

– Did you encounter any difficulties in dealing with public health centers run by Tokyo's special wards?

[The health centers] are headed by the mayors of those wards – just like ordinance-designated cities under the Local Autonomy Act. Therefore, there was a chain of command issue. However, the metropolitan government also keeps watch over the operation of those facilities in the whole region. Along with the relationship between the metropolitan government and the health centers run by the special wards, I think there is also a problem with the different terminology used by medical and administrative officials.

– What was the toughest challenge you faced in responding to COVID-19?

Japan lags far behind other countries in digital transformation. The delay in our efforts was particularly severe in terms of online education, teleworking and the use of videoconferences. I'm pushing hard for digital transformation so that we can visualize the invisible enemy. I have tried to promote digital transformation in Tokyo since before [the COVID-19 crisis], having tapped Manabu Miyasaka, former president of Yahoo Japan Corp., as a vice governor of Tokyo.

– Do you see any problem in the chain of command and cooperation between the metropolitan government and the public health centers run by the special wards in responding to the expanding wave of infections? Will it work all right going forward?

The public health centers deal with immediate tasks such as tracing the contacts of people who tested positive for the virus, while the metropolitan government's job is to grasp the overall status of the infections and make a judgment. We are increasingly able to run these operations in interconnected ways. Metropolitan government officials are dispatched to the health centers as extra help or liaison, and we have set up

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secondary health centers manned by large numbers of “tracers” (to track down the contacts of infected persons). We have 40 newly-hired tracers starting today (November 27).

Reducing the number of new infection cases with unknown infection routes will ease people's anxiety. Our cooperative relationship is strengthening.