Declaration (02.09.2015)

(Translated into English by Nevin Thompson)

As signatories to this declaration, we have all strongly protested and condemned the cowardly murder of two Japanese men, Kenji Goto and Haruna Yukawa by ISIS.

We are concerned that what has been an escalating pattern of violence might trigger even more violence and cruelty.

At the same time, as events have unfolded in recent weeks, there has been strong societal pressure in Japan for broadcasters and others in the mass media to practice “self-restraint” (“自粛”, or jishuku) and avoid any criticism of how the government has handled the hostage crisis. This societal pressure has extended even to the level of attempts at controlling how elected National Diet members question government policy.

This level of control of public discourse is deeply worrying for our democratic society in Japan.

“In such extreme times it is important for each and every Japanese person to wholeheartedly support the government’s policies.”

“If you value human life, you must never attempt to obstruct the government.”

“If you criticize the government at this time, you are just aiding and abetting terrorism.”

Using this logic, attacks are being made on voices criticizing the Abe government’s handling of the ISIS hostage crisis. However, this logic obscures a bigger issue.

First of all, the actual policies and actions of the Japanese government do not necessarily contribute to resolving the hostage crisis.

And even if the policies were always beneficial, it is only natural that the government’s policies and activities should always be monitored, carefully examined, and carefully evaluated by the electorate, elected legislators and the mass media.

As well, when we use the term “extreme circumstances” (非常時) as its logic for calling for “self-restraint” when criticizing government policy, it would also include such extraordinary circumstances as nuclear accidents and massive earthquakes and other natural disasters.
As another example, if Japan were to enter armed conflict with another nation, using the current logic of "self-restraint", the argument could be made that "at this time any criticism of the government only serves to help the enemy's cause. In extreme times such as these the national polity must unite as one to support the government."

As Japan entered the Second World War, this same logic was used to impose the concept of "self-restraint" on Japanese society and stifle dissent. During those years of military government in Japan the concept had a name: 翼赞体制 or "yokusan taisei," a "system in support" of the war aims of the Japanese government.

By accepting "self-restraint" aren't we as a society embracing the very wartime thinking that allowed our nation to invade other countries, eventually leaving Japan as a burned and blackened wasteland?

By creating subjects that are taboo to speak about, are we not leading our country on to ruin once again?

In fact, we know there are some actual cases recently where pundits or broadcaster criticize the government, and a throng of voices on the Internet and other media are quick to blame, pressuring dissenting voices to be silent.

The problem is, those who are quick to attack any criticism of government policy are barely aware that they themselves are in the vanguard of a new, unquestioning "system in support" (翼赞体制, "yokusan taisei") for the Japanese government.

To these people, calling for "self-restraint", it's all a matter of "common sense" and "acting like a grown-up." But is this really correct?

Isn't it vital that we use our imagination to compare what happened in the past to what might happen in the future?

Article 21 of the Japanese Constitution says:
Freedom of assembly and association as well as speech, press and all other forms of expression are guaranteed.

Article 12 of the Japanese Constitution says:
The freedoms and rights guaranteed to the people by this Constitution shall be maintained by the constant endeavor of the people, who shall refrain from any abuse of these freedoms and rights and shall always be responsible for utilizing them for the public welfare.

We must support and maintain the spirit and intent of the Japanese Constitution, especially in such "extraordinary times." We must keep a firm, protective grip on the spirit of the Constitution, which guarantees our right to express our opinions freely.
This is because when we as a society experience extraordinary circumstances, we need to hear from a variety of different perspectives on how to solve the problem. This way of thinking should be paramount.

We, as people who exercise our right to freely express ourselves, now declare to resist at all costs the threat of conforming to "self-restraint" and avoiding criticizing the government.

No matter what party holds the reins of government, each and every one of us will follow only our conscience. We make a personal pledge to never hesitate about what we write, speak, draw or otherwise create.