

# Japan Faces Demographic Disaster

Japan's Prime Minister has warned that his country will fall over an economic and social cliff unless it reverses its population decline. "Our country is on the brink of being unable to maintain the functions of society," [said Fumio Kishida](#) at the beginning of this year's Diet session.

Mr Kishida's apocalyptic statement is by no means news. Japan's population has been shrinking for years. Rural towns are being abandoned. The number of people in nursing homes is constantly rising. Schools are closing because there are no children to fill the classrooms.

In 2020, researchers predicted that Japan's population would decline from 128 million in 2017 to less than 53 million in 2100. In 1973, at the peak of the baby boom, 2.09 million children were born; in 2022 the number of births was below 800,000.

If Mr Kishida is serious, his government will do whatever it takes to save the nation from social, economic, cultural, and historic irrelevance.

So what comes next for the Japanese?

Their options are limited.

First, they could fade into history, like the Minoans, Etruscans, or Hittites. These forgotten folks left behind monuments and peculiar scripts and a few loan words in the languages of their conquerors. Will the Japanese meekly accept that their legacy will be manga comics and sushi? No. They are a samurai people and they are going to fight.

Second, they could open the doors to high-fertility migrants.

The Amish would prosper in Japan's fertile – and abandoned – countryside. More plausibly, Filipinos are nearby and would fit in better. However, the Japanese are notoriously xenophobic and are unlikely to allow an immigration flood to submerge their unique culture.

Third, they can bribe Japanese women to have more children. At the moment this appears to be Mr Kishida's plan. Reversing the demographic trend will be the "top priority" for his administration. He plans to splash money around to "create a children-first economy and society". "Policies on children and child care are the most effective investment for the future," he told the Diet. He will provide an additional 80,000 yen (US\$592) annually to couples who have a child.

Economists, though, are sceptical.

"This is not going to magically solve the problems that Japan, as a nation, faces," Noriko Hama, of Doshisha University in Kyoto, told Deutsche Welle. "It is not a question of just throwing money at young couples and expecting them to have more children. It is a matter of poor social infrastructure that allows people to feel safe enough to have children."

The Yomiuri Shimbun, one of Japan's leading newspapers, was also pessimistic. "If [the low birthrate] continues," [it said in an editorial](#) before Kishida's speech, the number of future workers will continue to decline, and society will lose its vitality. But how many more people will want to have children if the existing cash benefits are simply expanded? The effectiveness of this measure is open to question."

So how will Japanese politicians solve the problem?

There is an obvious, if unwelcome, solution: to restrict abortion. Abortion is decreasing in Japan – partly because the population is shrinking – but there were still 141,000 of them in 2020. If Japanese stats are like those in Australia or the United States, probably 140,000 of these were done to preserve

the health of the mother or to avoid economic hardship.

Would 140,000 more babies turn around Japan's demographic decline? No, but it would help.

Would this be popular? Absolutely not. Abortion rights activists would fight it tooth and nail.

The politically astute way to stop abortions without violating human rights would be to introduce a staged series of restrictions, accompanied by a massive publicity campaign promoting bigger, happier families, the joy of parenthood, and Japan's dark future without children. (What's "[Cheaper by the Dozen](#)" in Japanese?)

It's also possible that as their demographic doomsday approaches, the Japanese will realise that children really are a blessing and react accordingly. Today's total fertility rate is about 1.3 children per woman, far below the replacement level of 2.1. But [one hundred years ago](#), it was 5.26. Big families are not alien to Japanese culture. Children's Day is a public holiday in Japan and its celebration is a centuries-old tradition.

The problem for wealthy societies like Japan is that women and men no longer feel that having and raising children is a fulfilling life project. And by the time that many women realise that it could be, their biological clock has already stopped ticking.

How difficult will it be to persuade women that exotic cruises, or Michelin dining, or a promotion to deputy assistant director of municipal waste disposal or posting on TikTok are not as exciting and challenging as having children?

In today's Japan (as everywhere else), very difficult.

But Mr Kishida told his colleagues that finding a solution for his country's low birthrate "cannot wait and cannot be

postponed”.

Restricting abortion is an obvious fix. And what other option do Japanese politicians have?

Other than asking their Filipino neighbours to turn off the lights?

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