

Walls of the World: The rising tide of East vs. West, Church vs. State in Poland

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WARSAW, Poland -- Poland's nationalist ruling party Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc; PiS) passed a law in the lower house of the national parliament in January 2018 that anyone who criticized Poland or its citizens publicly for being complicit with the Holocaust carried out by Nazi Germany would be sentenced to prison time or fined.

This law, however, immediately came under fire from Israel. This was because there were examples of some Poles, themselves, being involved in the mass genocide of Jews during World War II.

What followed was a situation that could not have been predicted. Anti-Semitic comments that had previously been unheard of in Poland began to leave the lips of PiS politicians and others related to the party in no short supply.

"(What Israel has done) makes it difficult for me to look at Jews with friendship and sympathy," "If there is now a wave of anti-Semitism, or a different perspective on the Jews, then one must say it is the fault of the Jews themselves ..." The onslaught of such statements was pointed out by Rafal Pankowski, the representative of citizens' group "Never Again," which monitors racial and ethnic discrimination.

During World War II, Poland was occupied by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and concentration camps where the Holocaust occurred, such as Auschwitz, were built in the country. After the war ended, the communist government of Poland also cracked down on Jews, but after democratization, the government protected the rights of Polish Jews as an ethnic minority.

In 2001, an American historian discovered that during the war, there was an incident when Poles in the northern town of Jedwabne placed a large number of Jews in a barn and set it on fire. The Polish government at the time recognized the incident, and issued an apology. It is precisely because of this background that Poland's recent "transformation" has struck those familiar with the matter as strange.

"Some people think or thought nationalism and anti-Semitism could be an effective tool for mobilizing support," Pankowski said. "(PiS) won the election, and maybe they thought OK, it worked once, it will work again with a different target -- with a different minority," ventured Pankowski. Xenophobic groups have been expressing their agreement with the anti-Semitic comments from members of PiS, and the internet is overflowing with comments agreeing with such sentiments and other discriminatory statements toward other races. While the motive is unknown, there have recently been incidents such as rocks thrown at synagogues.

PiS has officially declared that it is fighting against anti-Semitism. However, in February 2018, Jewish groups in Warsaw implied that PiS had done nothing to crack down on anti-Semitic activities in Poland, and issued a statement that not lifting a finger was the same as allowing the hatred directed at Jews. As the Holocaust law weathered heavy criticism from the United States, PiS, which is on good terms with the U.S. government, decided to drop prison time from the punishments listed in the legislation last June. Still, the law itself is still on the books.

The political sphere in Poland is currently divided into the two parties of the right-wing PiS and the moderate Civil Platform party (Platforma Obywatelska; PO), of which former Prime Minister and current President of the European Council Donald Tusk is a member.

With the support of the Catholic Church, PiS has slipped further to the political right, but will it continue to expand its "far-right" wing? The answer may come as the merits and demerits of the PiS administration are questioned this November, when Poland will hold general elections.

(Japanese original by Koji Miki, Vienna Bureau)

