Following multiple national disasters, Fukushima native Tomo Honda BA ’97 emerges as a leader. Could he be the future face of politics in Japan?

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALFIE GOODRICH
And center stage in this tableau of bucolic Japan? Tomo Honda – complete with three-piece Italian-cut pinstripe suit, shiny shoes, wireless mobile phone earpiece, iPad in his hand, and a dazzling smile as he steps out of his car. The scenario easily captures the essence of Honda, a 37-year-old Japanese politician who is as likely to be found attending high-powered government meetings or shopping in an Apple store as traipsing through rice fields. For Honda, a typical day includes an impromptu visit to an elderly farmer working in the green fields of his rural constituency in the Fukushima region of northeast Japan.

This year, however, has been far from typical. Before last March, Fukushima, a prefecture renowned domestically for its mountains and plentiful cows, had scarcely registered on the radar of the international community. Today, the name is synonymous globally with nuclear disaster. It was within these rural confines that the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant was severely damaged during Japan’s March 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami. The atomic meltdowns, reactor explosions, radiation leaks, evacuations, and regular comparisons to Chernobyl that ensued in the following days and months are well-documented. For Honda, it has been a turbulent, challenging time as a politician at the heart of a national crisis -- as well as a resident, husband, and father of a two-year-old son.

“Since March 11, I have changed the way I look at life,” he says. “What I want to do for people, what I want to do for this society: These things are more concrete to me now. My thoughts are more concrete than before.”

“The hardest decision of my life”

Honda happily defies Japanese political stereotypes. Unusually, he has no political connections in his family and was the youngest politician to be elected to Fukushima Prefectural Assembly six years ago, at the age of 31. Even more surprising for the often-insular world of Japanese politics, Honda is unashamedly international: he speaks fluent English, French, and German, a legacy of more than a decade in the United States and Europe.

Such lack of convention, however, has not deterred Honda from recently winning his third term as an elected representative – which he compares to a state senator in the United States - in his hometown of Nihonmatsu, Fukushima.

Most of Fukushima’s 58 senators are in attendance at today’s opening session of the regional assembly in the modernist 1960s-style government building in the city. Strolling confidently through Fukushima’s halls of power, Honda appears younger and more contemporary than many of his peers. En route to his office, Honda walks past zigzags of transparent tape neatly placed over cracks spanning concrete corridor walls, a physical reminder of the power of the earthquake.

Honda’s life took a circuitous – and international – route to the world of Fukushima politics. He was born in rural Nihonmatsu, raised alongside two younger brothers by his father, a physician, and his mother, a housewife.

Pondering his oldest son’s childhood for clues to his adult path, Takeshi Honda, 74, says: “He was our first child, so we took care of him more cautiously than with his other two brothers. We took him
everywhere, and he was always surrounded by adults. So Tomo behaved like an adult while in school and conversed like an adult from an early age. I thought he would be good as a lawyer or university professor as he was so confident speaking in public.”

His son adds with a self-deprecating laugh: “I did not consider myself as a nerd at school, but perhaps I was considered a little bit of a nerd by others. At that time, I was interested in comparative public policy, globalization, global economics. I was fascinated by these issues, but not necessarily politics itself.”

The fact that Honda did not enroll at a respectable Japanese university and become a lawyer or academic was the first of many surprises his parents were to face. Instead, at 18, he decided (unusually among his peers) to study overseas. While Honda was taking English at Cambridge, a friend’s father who was a Suffolk professor recommended the University. In 1993, Honda enrolled here to pursue a history degree. He describes the subsequent four years as the most defining and influential period of his life, a time when his world – and mind – were pried wide open.

“Boston was pretty different from anywhere I’d been before,” Honda recalls. “Very multinational, very multicultural. Very diverse in age, ethnicity, very open atmosphere, and very colorful. Basically, very unlike Japan. Studying there was a big inspiration and directly affected my way of thinking and the way I regard the world and society.”

He adds: “Keeping up was really tough. But I studied hard, got involved in debating, did lots of reading, and backpacked in Europe in the summer. By the second year, I was having the time of my life.”

The impression Honda made on his Suffolk contemporaries was no less memorable, according to longtime friend Hanae Yoshida Zahir, 38, a mother of two based in Swampscott, Massachusetts who describes how he always dressed immaculately in a suit.

“Tomo gave the impression of a very well-mannered and classy person,” she says. “He was not afraid of asking any questions...he was curious to know things at a deeper level, not just on the surface. I think Suffolk gave him an opportunity to discover the world.”

One of the most influential figures during his time at Suffolk was department of history chair and professor Robert Allison, who recalls with still-lingering surprise how Honda’s inquisitive mind once led him to quiz a Turkish student over the Armenian genocide.

“Tomo made a very vivid impression,” he says. “He was always engaged and enthusiastic. He is extraordinarily personable, friendly, and very bright. He has a tremendous intellectual curiosity and interest in other people and their ideas.” He adds: “Did we know he would become a politician? Not really, but his personality – his ability to talk to people, and to listen to people, and his ability to see through to the heart of a problem – are essential skills to a successful politician. It is a worthy and noble calling. I am sorry he cannot run for office in this country!”

Upon graduation, further studies beckoned in Paris and Switzerland before a career as a corporate planner in the automobile industry took Honda to Germany – at which point the idea of becoming a politician took root. “I had almost zero interest in politics until my mid-20s,” says Honda. “The seed was first planted by a conversation with a colleague in the office.” Their exchange revolved around Honda's explanation of the current political situation in Japan, which prompted his colleague to state that maybe Honda should become a politician and sort things out himself. Honda replied that he would never be able to become a politician as he is not from a rich political family – and his colleague declared that Japan was therefore not a democracy. The seemingly light-hearted office banter deeply affected Honda: the more he dwelt on it and reflected on his country and his future, the more it dawned on him that politics was his calling.

“Something clicked after that conversation,” he says. “I spent six sleepless months wondering what to do. It was the hardest decision of my life. But eventually I decided and moved back home.”
And so, at the age of 30, Honda surprised friends and family once again by swapping the glamour of metropolitan Europe for rural Nihonmatsu.

“Going abroad to study was very unusual for Nihonmatsu,” recalls Tsuyoshi Sato, 37, a social worker and one of Honda’s oldest friends. “I’d never known anyone like that before. And then when I heard he was moving back to Nihonmatsu to become a politician, I was equally surprised. I didn’t even know he was interested in politics.”

But Honda wasted no time on his political reinvention – and launched himself wholeheartedly into door-to-door canvassing. “I went to see everyone in the area,” he said. “My message was that the government is raising taxes and using it for nothing. The system of Japan is not working. We have to aim for a smaller government, more liberal society, with a focus on education and international issues.” He adds: “I think people needed new ideas. The community was stagnating, and most politicians were over 60.”

Ten months later, in December 2005, in a turn of events Honda describes as “serendipitous,” the town’s representative resigned and a special election swept Honda to power (10,7720 votes to 9,085). Since then, he has thrown himself into political life: He is involved in around 100 unions, committees, and guilds, while also lecturing monthly in public administration at a community college. His working life could perhaps have fallen neatly into the category of conventional regional politician – were it not for one day that will forever be etched into the memories of all Japanese: March 11, 2011.

“I was sitting in the government offices,” he recalls. “It was the biggest, longest earthquake I’d experienced in my life. I watched the floor – a hard, solid floor – move in waves. Bookcases fell off walls.”

Honda and his wife immediately cancelled a party at a restaurant for their son Aoi-kun’s second birthday, but it took longer for the full impact of the disaster to unfold: first, the tsunami; then, the nuclear crisis.

“The first explosion at Fukushima Daiichi took place at 15:35 [3:35 p.m.] on March 11. There was not so much panic. The next day, the third plant exploded. This time it was a bit different. Recycled plutonium fuel was involved. We started to worry. Then on March 15, I was on my bicycle cycling around Nihonmatsu, checking up on people. My son was outside with family queuing for petrol. I now know that we were exposed that day to 275 times the recommended amount of radiation.”

The scale of the tsunami also impacted him. Describing a visit to the coast, he recalls: “I have never been before in a war zone. But what I saw changed my life. There were dead bodies everywhere. Wherever I looked, I saw what used to be a human being, just like us.

“I told myself and those who had died that their deaths would not be in vain and I would genuinely try to make the world a better place to live in. That’s my lifetime mission.”

Confiding with a wry smile about how he dealt with it as a father, he continues: “Now this is the samurai culture part of the story, possibly difficult for non-Japanese to understand. On March 16, I sat down my wife and said, ‘I am a politician, I have to be the last person in Nihonmatsu. You are my wife, if I die here, you die here with me. But we also have a son. If you are worried about him being here, please take him to family in Yokohama.’ Straight away, she said no. She said, ‘Your son is the politician’s son. He would gladly give his life for you. He is staying here with his father.’ And that was that.”

**“my lifetime mission”**

Back in the office, the assembly opens – an occasion of somber speeches beneath flags in a regal hall before Honda returns to the most pressing matter. All things nuclear have been top of the agenda for Honda since March 11, not only in his constituency but also as the appointed special councilor for Fukushima Assembly’s committee for natural and nuclear disaster control. It’s a challenging role, collating information from local municipalities, residents, unions, and businesses in order to monitor and advise the Fukushima government’s handling of the situation.

“My expertise in comparative international public policy and disaster control management was regarded as an asset,” he explains. “I have been extensively studying the case of New Zealand’s 2011 earthquake and its recovery as well as Chernobyl.”
A clutch of suited ministry officials arrive for a meeting to discuss the discovery of rice contamination at a Nihonmatsu farm. Afterwards, Honda shifts his focus onto the forthcoming elections. Regional elections in northeast Japan, which take place every four years, were scheduled for April but postponed until November after the disaster. His manifesto includes pledges for a smaller government without raising taxes, proposing Fukushima as a special policy region with zero tax for enterprise, and – a new addition since March 11 – no more nuclear power.

“Fukushima’s name, like Chernobyl, will be written in the history of mankind,” he says. “But even with us, this disaster happens. We can all learn from this lesson, not only in Japan. I think we as humankind do not need nuclear power.”

Following Nihonmatsu’s merging with three villages a few years ago – common in depopulated rural Japan – the new election involves a population double the size of previous elections (60,000-plus), which means that two seats are up for grabs. It’s a close contest, but Honda comes in second, with 8,032 votes to the frontrunner’s 12,329 – enough to keep his seat. As a result, he will continue to play a crucial role in the region’s revitalization over the coming four years.

But challenges remain – as perhaps is inevitable for a young, international politician working in traditional Japan, according to Kanako Kimura, Honda’s secretary and campaign manager.

“I think he can give the wrong impression with his CV,” she says. “Educated in the U.S. and Europe with BA and MA degrees, working internationally – all this may give people the feeling that he is elite and inaccessible. But on the contrary, he is very friendly, caring, and kind-hearted. He is also much younger, smarter, and more effective than other politicians.”

● a natural leader

His Nihonmatsu constituency is next on the agenda and Honda jumps in the car, slips on some classical music, and sets off for his hometown – a 30-minute journey during which the city gives way to green fields fringed with idyllic mountains.

Nihonmatsu fits into the category of typical Japanese rural community: a historic castle, faded 1950s-style boutiques, and boarded-up businesses. The few residents in the street confirm its ageing population and shrinking birthrate, common problems in rural Japan. Located only 56 kilometers from the damaged nuclear power plant, it’s clear why the population has diminished further in recent months.

Honda makes a sharp turn and follows a winding track into a green valley where farmer Kato Shigeo is at work tending his cucumbers. Shigeo, 61, is sanguine about recent events: “How do I feel about the last few months? It’s difficult to talk about my feelings, but in some ways, we’ve been very lucky. Radiation levels have been lower here than in other areas.”

Honda continues on to his own house, a traditional wooden building next door to where he grew up and his parents still live. Shoes are slipped off at the door, and his wife Noriko appears with slippers, soft drinks, and a plate of sliced Japanese nashi pear. Their young son Aoi abandons the iPad he was playing with and greets his father. A glimpse of red string hanging around the toddler’s neck beneath his yellow football T-shirt is the only clue of recent dramas.

“It’s a radiation dosimeter,” Noriko explains quietly. “All the children in Fukushima have been given one.”

Later, the family heads to their favorite local sushi restaurant for dinner. “It’s funny, Tomo is not really Japanese in some ways,” Noriko explains. “He hates wasabi, he loves Western food, and he enjoys American movies. But I think he does whatever he thinks is right, for himself and for people in society. He is very consistent in his policies and with what he is doing. This can be seen as inflexible at times, but consistency comes with being a natural leader.”

His wife’s words tap into the essence of Honda’s personality. He may be a man of surprises – from leaving home and studying overseas to returning home and becoming a politician. But there is one certainty to Honda’s future: his consistent determination to help his nation recover from its worst disasters in decades – no doubt leaving a colorful mark on Japan’s political landscape in the process. 😊