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Japan to ditch 'hanko' seal in drive to digitise bureaucracy

Minister aims to sweep away tradition of authorising documents with personalised stamp

Robin Harding, Kana Inagaki and Leo Lewis in Tokyo, November 22 2020

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'Hanko' seals are universal in Japanese culture and function in place of a signature

Taro Kono catalogued almost 15,000 occasions when the only way to satisfy Japan's fastidious bureaucracy was with a personalised hanko seal. He is now determined to get rid of them.

In an interview with the Financial Times, Japan's new minister for administrative reform said that sweeping away the centuries-old tradition of stamping documents with a hanko would open the

way to digitising Japan's government.

Selected for the task after high-profile stints as foreign and defence minister, Mr Kono's assault on the seal reveals new prime minister Yoshihide Suga's determination to reform the hidebound Japanese state.

Hanko seals are universal in Japanese culture, functioning in place of a signature, and most households have several. But they clash with Mr Suga's desire to create a digital agency and put more government services online.

"The showstopper was hanko," said Mr Kono. "If you ask people to put the hanko on it, it has to be on paper. You cannot put the hanko on the computer screen, right?"

The coronavirus outbreak has exposed Japan's backwardness on digitisation, which posed hurdles as the country tried to adopt online medicine and other digital tools to combat the pandemic.

One of Mr Kono's first actions on taking the job in September was to order a government-wide survey of procedures requiring a hanko. It found 14,992 instances. He has decided to maintain the hanko requirement for 83 procedures and scrap it for the rest.

"So 14,900 procedures, whatever, you don't need a hanko any more. That's amazing, isn't it?" he said.

Mr Kono said there were three separate classes of hanko: a seal registered with the municipal authorities, which can be used to make binding contracts; a seal registered with a bank, which can be used for payments; and an everyday hanko with no legal purpose.

Most of the government procedures used the last kind of seal, he said. "It doesn't certify anything. You know, I can go out and buy a hanko for Mr Suzuki and put Suzuki-san on it. So this is totally meaningless. I was focusing on mainly those ones."

Most of the hanko requirements can be done away with as an administrative decision but Mr Kono is also planning legislation to remove some that are written into law. The surviving 83 procedures require a registered seal or a banking seal.

“When I first became defence minister, the first paper I had to sign off had three pages of hanko. And I said: what the hell?” he said. “I mean, I know they’ve seen the paper, but I don’t think any one of them is going to be responsible. So I said, OK, you can have only four hankos maximum.”

Removing the requirement for hankos will allow for digitisation, but will not necessarily make the government more efficient if there are just as many people having to sign for online decisions.

“I think the key to success is you just don’t put everything you are doing online. You’re going to review the procedures,” Mr Kono said. “You don’t need the hanko if you don’t need the paper.”

Mr Kono, 57, is regarded as one of the most likely future candidates for prime minister. He has ministerial responsibility for Okinawa and the four islands Japan disputes with Russia as well as the administrative reform portfolio.

In the television comedy *Yes, Minister*, the fictional politician Jim Hacker wrestles with British bureaucracy as minister of administrative affairs — but he eventually becomes prime minister. “It’s encouraging, isn’t it,” Mr Kono said.

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