

Emperor and empress greet huge crowds at Tokyo enthronement parade

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Emperor Naruhito and Empress Masako waved and smiled from an open car in Sunday's motorcade which passed through central Tokyo, marking his enthronement before about 120,000 delighted well-wishers who cheered, waved small flags and took photos from both sides of packed sidewalks.

Security was extremely tight with police setting up 40 checkpoints leading to the route. Selfie sticks, bottles and banners — and even shouting — were not allowed inside the restricted zone.

Residents in high-rise apartments along the road were advised not to look down from their windows or balconies.

Naruhito succeeded his father, Emperor Emeritus Akihito, on May 1 following his abdication the day before, and formally ascended the Chrysanthemum Throne in a palace ceremony last month.

The parade started from the Imperial Palace at 3 p.m. with the national anthem, "Kimigayo," being played by a marching band.

Naruhito, wearing a tail coat decorated with medals and carrying a brimmed hat, and Masako, in an off-white long dress and wearing a tiara, kept waving from a Toyota Century convertible. The car was decorated with the imperial chrysanthemum emblems and the emperor's flag during the half-hour motorcade on the 4.6-kilometer-long (3-mile-long) route from the palace to the Akasaka imperial residence in the warm autumn afternoon sun.

Naruhito, sitting on the right side on the slightly raised backseat, constantly turned his head to the right and left, responding to people cheering from the opposite side of the street as the motorcade slowly moved at a jogger's speed. It was surrounded by a fleet of police outriders.

Masako, a Harvard- and Oxford-educated former diplomat who has been expanding the scope of her activities after years of struggling with a stress-linked illness, appeared teary-eyed at one point during the event.

The Cabinet Office said about 119,000 people gathered to watch the event. The parade for Emperor Akihito's enthronement in 1990 attracted roughly 117,000 spectators.

The parade was postponed from the original October date due to the recent typhoon that left more than 90 dead and tens of thousands of homes flooded or damaged.

Thousands of people had lined up at checkpoints hours before the parade, trying to secure their place to get the best possible view of the imperial couple.

Takahiro Suzuki, a 75-year-old retiree who traveled from Chigasaki, in Kanagawa Prefecture, arrived two hours ahead of the parade, but said it was worth it.

“The sky is so blue and this is a great day for taking photos, as if the heaven’s blessing for (the emperor),” said Suzuki, an amateur photographer.

He said he admired the former emperor and wants to see Naruhito continue his father’s work.

“I hope he will continue to stick with peace, as his father did,” he said, but added that Japan should think seriously about the stability of the monarchy as it faces a shortage of eligible successors.

Conservatives insist on the male-only succession, but Suzuki says he doesn’t mind having a female monarch.

Sunday’s event was the first since one was held for Naruhito and Masako’s marriage in June 1993, just three years after his parents marked their enthronement with a parade.

Naruhito and Masako have been warmly welcomed by the public.

Many Japanese were especially impressed by the couple freely conversing with U.S. President Donald Trump and his wife, Melania, during their visit weeks after Naruhito’s succession in May, according to palace watchers.

There are expectations that Naruhito, the first emperor with a college degree who also studied abroad, and Masako will internationalize the imperial household.

Naruhito, who studied at Oxford, is a historian, a viola player and an expert on water transport. Masako developed “adjustment disorder” after giving birth to the couple’s only child, Princess Aiko, and facing pressure to produce a boy in Japan’s monarchy, which allows only male heirs.

Despite concerns about her health and skepticism over her ability to fulfill even part of hugely popular former Empress Michiko’s work, Masako has been seen in good health and in smiles when carrying out her official duties recently.

Opinion polls show public support and a sense of friendliness to the royal family have increased over the past three decades, owing largely to Naruhito’s parents’ effort to bring what used to be the aloof palace closer to the people.