

As the new administrative reform minister, Taro Kono declares war on fax machines

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After being tapped as administrative reform minister, Taro Kono has wasted little time in waging war on emblems of Japan's bureaucratic red tape — first *hanko* personal seals and now the fax machine.

Streamlining administrative work, eliminating vested interests and pushing for a shift toward digitization are among the much-hyped pledges underpinning the identity of Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's fledgling administration.

On Friday, Kono said his ongoing crusade against hanko — which is often cited as a factor behind the rigmarole of municipal paperwork in Japan — will go a long way toward phasing out the nation's entrenched fixation on fax, another low-tech practice that's hampering efforts to go paperless.

"To be honest, I don't think there are many administrative procedures that actually need printing out paper and faxing," Kono told a regular media briefing on Friday.

"Why do we need to print out paper? In many cases, that's simply because the hanko stamp is required. So if we can put a stop to that culture, it will naturally obviate the need for printouts and faxing," he said.

According to the Information Technology Cooperative, more than 95 percent of businesses still use fax machines today. The share of households that use fax, on the other hand, is on the decline and fell to 34 percent, according to an internal affairs ministry survey in 2018.

Hanko, also known as *inkan*, is a personal stamp that spells out a person's name and is commonly used as proof of authentication for an array of public documents and application forms.

In most cases, hanko must be manually stamped, forcing many to show up to their company offices just for that purpose. The practice came under intense scrutiny earlier this year when it forced thousands of businesspeople to commute into their workplaces even in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

Although acknowledging some of the most official types of paperwork may have a legitimate need for hanko, Kono was resolute and insisted on phasing it out.

"As far as administrative procedures are concerned, I want to end the culture of stamping hanko just for the sake of stamping it," he said.

"I will push my way through."

A day after being appointed to his current post, Kono, who has 2 million followers on Twitter and is known as a bit of a showman, announced the launch of an anti-red tape hotline on his website, encouraging the public to tip him off to examples of bureaucratic inefficiency they want rectified. His request resulted in the website being deluged with thousands of messages, triggering the temporary closure of the hotline just a day later.

On Friday, Kono said he was still in the middle of laboring his way through the 4,000-plus messages. Besides those pertaining to hanko and fax, one of the most common complaints that caught his attention, he said, was the fact that certain types of writing utensils — such as fountain pens and ballpoint pens — are often required when signing names for application forms.

Such protocols prevent people from writing their signatures on tablets and therefore hinder efforts to encourage more online contracts, he pointed out.

Kono's war on hanko and the fax has been quick to resonate with Environment Minister Shinjiro Koizumi. As of Friday, the ministry axed the requirement for hanko for some types of paperwork, including an application form for parental leave, Koizumi said.

At the Environment Ministry, "we have a special hanko seal that only the minister is permitted to use, and my staff sometimes come up to my room just so they can ask me to stamp documents," Koizumi told a news conference on Friday. "It is just too inefficient."

Reiterating Suga's slogan of "not being constrained by precedent," Koizumi expressed a willingness to rethink hanko requirements with a view toward "swiftly abolishing" them.

Despite his calls for ridding administrative procedures of hanko, Kono emphasizes his campaign doesn't extend to the eradication of the hanko tradition per se.

"The culture of hanko is something long ingrained in our nation," the minister said, referring to its time-honored use as an ownership mark for books and sealing wax for envelopes. "I hope that many people will take this opportunity to stop to reflect anew on the hanko culture that we have."