

End of an era as Japan's emperor abdicates



Japan's Emperor Akihito (L), Empress Michiko (2nd L) and other members of the royal families attend the abdication ceremony at the Matsu-no-Ma state room in the Imperial Palace in Tokyo

AFP | Tokyo, Japan

Emperor Akihito of Japan formally stepped down yesterday, the first abdication for 200 years in the world's oldest monarchy, as his son Naruhito prepared to take the Chrysanthemum Throne and usher in a new imperial era.

In the "Room of Pine" in Tokyo's Imperial Palace, the popular 85-year-old performed the abdication ritual in the presence of the imperial regalia -- an ancient sword and sacred jewel.

Dressed in a Western-style morning coat, Akihito stood on a small stage before an invited audience and members of the royal family and offered his "deepest heartfelt gratitude to the people of Japan."

He said he would "pray for the peace and happiness of all the people in Japan and around the world."

Empress Michiko stood by his side in a white and silver gown and the outgoing emperor paused briefly after exiting the stage, to help his wife of 60 years down the steps.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe praised the royal couple, saying they had offered "courage and

hope" to the Japanese people, particularly in times of suffering.

"His Majesty has fulfilled his responsibility as the symbol of Japan," Abe said.

Despite near-constant rain in Tokyo, several hundred well-wishers congregated outside the Palace during the historic ceremony attended by around 300 people.

"I feel overwhelmed emotionally," said a tearful Yayoi Iwasaki, a 50-year-old bank employee, standing outside the palace.

"In the past, enthronements followed the death of emperors and people weren't sure whether they should be happy and celebrating, but with this transition, I am sure that we can celebrate while welcoming the new era," she said.

High security

Akihito will technically remain emperor until the stroke of midnight when Naruhito takes over and the new era of "Reiwa" -- meaning "beautiful harmony" -- begins, lasting for as long as he reigns.

Earlier Tuesday, draped in ornate golden-brown robes and wearing a towering black hat, Akihito reported his abdication to his ancestors and Shinto gods

at several sanctuaries in the palace.

On Wednesday, the 59-year-old Naruhito will inherit the imperial regalia in a 10-minute ceremony that is off-limits to female royals, even his wife Masako. He will shortly afterwards make his first address to the nation as its 126th emperor.

Crowds were expected to gather to count down to the new era outside the palace and at the scramble crossing in Tokyo's lively Shibuya district, although the drizzle threatened to dampen some of the enthusiasm.

Security has been beefed up with extra police patrols on the streets, sniffer dogs scouring the palace grounds and even divers inspecting the moat.

A more public enthronement ceremony will take place on October 22, during which Naruhito will parade through the streets of the capital and be congratulated by other world leaders and royalty.

President Donald Trump sent congratulations, offering "heartfelt appreciation" to the outgoing imperial couple and stressing the "close relationship" between the US and Japan.

He will become the first foreign leader to meet the new emperor on a trip in May.

'Felt close to him'

Born in 1933 as Japan was em-

barking on a militaristic sweep across Asia in the name of his father Hirohito, the 11-year-old Akihito listened in tears as his nation's defeat in World War II was announced in an unprecedented radio address.

He has broken new ground in the sensitive role, expressing regret over Japan's wartime actions and gradually modernising the royal family and bringing it closer to the people.

Akihito and Michiko, whom he met at a tennis tournament in 1959, touched hearts in Japan and around the world when they knelt before survivors of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami and listened to stories of terrible suffering.



Japan's Crown Prince Naruhito (R) and his wife Crown Princess Masako (C)

"It is true the emperor is seen to be like a god, but at the same time, you felt that you were close to him," Rikia Iwasaki, a 13-year-old schoolboy, told AFP outside the Imperial Palace.

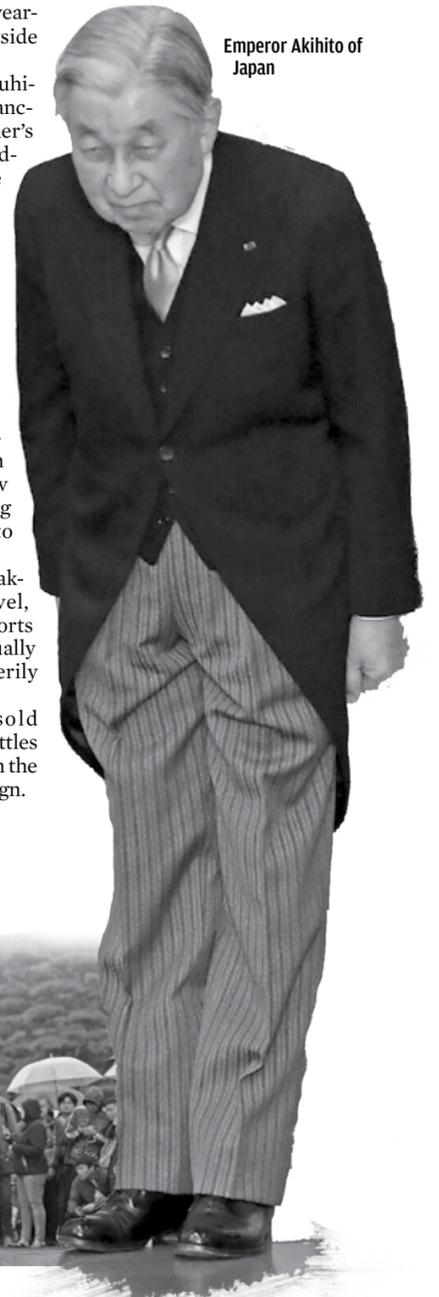
The Oxford-educated Naruhito now faces the delicate balancing act of continuing his father's popular legacy while upholding the traditions of the Chrysanthemum Throne that stretch back centuries.

He has called for "new royal duties" to fit modern times and has criticised the sometimes stifling lifestyle imposed on royals, especially as his wife Masako has struggled to adapt to palace life.

The abdication has resulted in a 10-day holiday in Japan, although polls show many famously hard-working Japanese were opposed to such a long break.

They have nonetheless taken the opportunity to travel, with bullet trains and airports overflowing and Tokyo's usually packed commuter trains eerily empty at rush hour.

Entrepreneurs have sold everything from "Reiwa" bottles of sake to \$10 cans of air from the "Heisei" era of Akihito's reign.



Emperor Akihito of Japan



People gather outside the Imperial Palace, where the abdication ceremony for Japan's Emperor Akihito is taking place

Trump sues banks in bid to block Congress subpoenas

New York, United States

US President Donald Trump, along with his family and businesses, yesterday sued Deutsche Bank and Capital One in an attempt to stop them from complying with Congressional subpoenas issued as part of a probe into foreign political influence.

The subpoenas -- which the Trumps described in their suit as "intrusive and overbroad" -- were issued to several banks by the Democratic-majority House's intelligence and financial services committees, which are looking into the president's finances as part of a larger probe into election meddling by Russia.

The lawsuit is the latest step in Trump's fightback against the Democrats, and alleges that the subpoenas have "no legitimate or lawful purpose."

"The subpoenas were issued to harass President Donald J. Trump, to rummage through every aspect of his personal finances, his businesses, and the private information of the President and his family, and to ferret about for any material that might be used to cause him political damage," said the suit, filed

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THE SUIT FILED WITH THE US FEDERAL COURT

with the US federal court in the Southern District of New York.

"No grounds exist to establish any purpose other than a political one."

The suit accuses Congress of stepping beyond its law-making mandate into law enforcement, and says the subpoenas violate the financial privacy rights of Trump and his family.

Deutsche Bank was one of the



US President Donald Trump makes a statement for the press while meeting with members of the 2019 NCAA Division I champions from Baylor University's women's basketball team in Washington, DC.

few major Western financial institutions to continue to lend to Trump's real estate empire after several of its casinos went bankrupt in the 1990s, resulting in claims by creditors valued at \$330 million in present-day dollars.

"We remain committed to providing appropriate information to all authorized investigations and will abide by a court order regarding such investigations," the German bank said in a statement.

But the Trumps want to block

any such disclosures, and have requested in their latest lawsuit "a permanent injunction prohibiting Deutsche Bank and Capital One from disclosing, revealing, delivering, or producing the requested information, or otherwise complying with the

subpoenas."

Their filing also argues that Congress is seeking information about "events that occurred while President Trump was a private citizen, years before he was even a candidate for public office."

Following the money

The suit comes weeks after the release of a heavily redacted version of the Mueller report, which concluded an almost two-year investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election.

The president described it as a "complete exoneration."

But Democrats believe the investigation has revealed serious wrongdoing by Trump and have not yet decided on whether they want to push for impeachment.

The Congressional subpoenas to the banks were announced days ahead of the release of the Mueller report, and House member Adam Schiff described the one sent to Deutsche Bank as "friendly."

Explaining why the banks were subpoenaed, Maxine Waters, chair of the House Financial Services Committee, said the body was investigating "the potential use of the US financial system for illicit purposes."