



From Tokyo University Professor to Governor of Kumamoto Prefecture: All about 16 years over four terms



The Kumamoto factory of Japan Advanced Semiconductor Manufacturing Inc. (JASM), a subsidiary of Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, Ltd. (TSMC), was completed in Kikuyo Town, Kumamoto Prefecture at the end of December 2023.

Photo: KOROKICHIKUN / PIXTA

Kabashima Ikuo, Former Governor of Kumamoto Prefecture

In 2008, while still a professor at the University of Tokyo, Kabashima Ikuo ran for and was elected Governor of Kumamoto Prefecture. He served as governor for four terms until his retirement in April 2024. The *Chuokoron* editorial team spoke with him about his eventful 16 years in office, including the huge success of the prefecture's PR mascot character "Kumamon," the recovery from the devastating 2016 Kumamoto Earthquake, and the current prosperity following the establishment of a factory by Taiwanese semiconductor giant TSMC.

From agricultural cooperative worker to political scientist through hard work

—After graduating from high school, you worked for a local agricultural cooperative (employee, Inada Village [now Yamaga City] Agricultural Cooperative, Kumamoto Prefecture) and went to the United States as an agricultural trainee. From there, you studied hard and enrolled in the Agricultural College of the University of Nebraska. You then entered the doctoral program at Harvard University Graduate School, where you studied political economy and government. As a professor at the University of Tokyo with such a unique background, you were already a self-made man in 2008. Why did you run for Governor of Kumamoto Prefecture?

For a long time, I had a desire to be involved in politics.

As you know, my career has been very unusual. I studied reproductive physiology in the Agricultural College and researched methods of preserving pig sperm, but then changed my major to political science in graduate school. Looking back, I think I had a dream of becoming a politician since I was a child, and that was the strong driving force behind my desire to study political science. I wanted to make use of what I had learned, and I wanted to demonstrate it in a proper way.

Another reason was that Kumamoto was going through a difficult period politically at that time. The overall situation of the Kumamoto prefectural government, especially its finances, was very bad. Fiscal reconstruction was inevitable. Kumamoto Prefecture was indeed in an adverse situation.

However, in my case, I have always tried to make the “impossible” possible in life. Rather, I have always believed that dreams lie in adversity, and that there must be some kind of opportunity there. So I thought that even if I became governor, I would be able to overcome this adversity and move forward with my dreams, and I would be able to make Kumamoto a better place.

A “landslide” victory in the gubernatorial election with political science theory

——In the world of political science, you were known as a leading authority on election research.

In my case, since I am a specialist in voting behavior research and a theorist in this field, my students begged me “not to run for office.” Because if a voting behavior theorist ran for election and lost, my students would not be able to eat very well as theoretical researchers who would take over Kabashima’s voting behavior theory (laughs).

Looking back at the gubernatorial election at that time, there were five candidates, including myself, all of whom were conservative and quite strong. However, since an election expert was running, I had to win by a landslide. I had decided to run the campaign according to the theories of political science.

Since Kumamoto Prefecture is traditionally a stronghold of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), it is easy to win if you are endorsed by the LDP. In fact, the LDP offered to endorse me, but I declined and ran as an independent.

Why? I was the most liberal and centrist of the five candidates. If I were to receive the LDP’s endorsement, I would certainly be able to secure the votes of the conservative base, but I would lose the votes of those who lean more to the progressive side. If I lean to the left or right, the range of people who support me would narrow, so even if I were to win, it would be difficult to achieve a landslide victory.

According to the theory of political scientist Anthony Downs (1930–2021), there are few voters who hold extreme left-right views, and most are concentrated in the center. In other words, if there are five conservative candidates, the one who is the farthest left, that is, the one who is closer to the center, will attract more voters.

The leaders of the Federation of Kumamoto Prefectural Branches of the Liberal Democratic Party understood this and said that they would not endorse me, but they would like to support me more than the official endorsement. Of course, some of the local LDP members seemed angry at how selfish my argument was.

But it was because I stuck to it that I was able to win a landslide victory with 46% of the vote (the second-place candidate had 18.3%). Downs’ theory was correct.

First term's top priority was fiscal consolidation

——How did this landslide affect your administration in your first term?

Above all, as governor, I was able to gain a “freedom of mind (sense of political freedom of thought and action).” If I had been elected with the nomination of the LDP, I would inevitably have been constrained by their intentions. Only with such “freedom” can I truly pursue my own politics.

There were three major issues in my first term.

The first priority was the financial issue I mentioned earlier. When I became governor, the balance of the prefectural debt, which is usually equivalent to the debt of the prefecture, was 1.693 trillion yen. On the other hand, savings such as the financial adjustment fund were about 5.3 billion yen. If this were a company, it would be in a state of immediate bankruptcy. Then there was the issue of Minamata disease¹ and the Kawabe River Dam Basic Plan², which have been issues in the prefectural government for over 40 years.

What helped me at that time were the teachings of the political scientist Professor Richard Neustadt (1919–2003), under whom I studied at Harvard University. Professor Neustadt, who was originally an advisor to past presidents and then became a political scientist, said, “Even for an American president, if he doesn’t tackle the toughest challenges within the first six months, his administration is bound to fail.” In the case of Kumamoto Prefecture, there were three difficult problems, but I had to find a solution within six months.

The first thing I did was to rebuild the prefecture’s finances. I decided to do this from the day I took office, and I started by cutting my own salary by one million yen per month. The governor’s monthly salary was 1.24 million yen, so I was left with only 240,000 yen. In addition, I was taxed on my income from the previous year, so my take-home pay was 140,000 yen. As expected, my life became tough, but with the support of my wife, I managed to get through it by cutting back on our household finances.

As a result, I was able to return about 50 million yen to the prefecture from my income as governor during my first four years. It was difficult, but the people of the prefecture understood that I was not doing my job for the money, and that created political trust, which was a great thing. When I made painful spending cuts, such as cutting prefectural subsidies to various organizations by more than 30% and reducing prefectural employees’ salaries by 3–7%, I think everyone was patient and cooperative because they had political trust that the governor himself was making sacrifices.

By cutting subsidies, we were able to reduce spending by about 13.2 billion yen over three years, which was very effective in rebuilding the finances.

Thanks to these efforts from my first term, I was able to pay off about 150 billion yen in debt over two terms and eight years, and fiscal reconstruction was on track. If I had not tackled the fiscal problem first, I would not have been able to respond to the disaster and other necessary measures that followed. If important issues are put off, I will be busy dealing with one incident after another, and eventually the problem will become unsolvable. This must have been what Professor Neustadt really meant. I think it was theoretically correct that the most difficult problems should be tackled first.

¹ Minamata disease is a neurological disease caused by severe mercury poisoning. Minamata disease was first discovered in the city of Minamata, Kumamoto Prefecture, in 1956.

² The Kawabe River Dam project was first proposed by the former Ministry of Construction in 1966, following three consecutive years of floods in the Kuma River Basin (1963–1965).

Minamata disease special measures law and the cancellation of the dam project

——What about the issues of Minamata disease and the Kawabe River dam?

The Minamata disease issue is my political starting point. It was also an issue I had to deal with in my first term.

In 2008, the ruling parties were the LDP and Komeito, but the opposition parties, including the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), were becoming very strong. I had experience teaching at the Matsushita Institute of Government and Management (MIGM), so I was close to the leaders of the opposition parties. So I decided to lobby the opposition parties in Nagatacho (the center of Japanese politics), urging them to cooperate with the ruling party to pass the special measures bill. I think it is unusual for a prefectural governor to lobby, but as a result, the “Special Measures Bill Concerning Relief for Victims of Minamata Disease and Solution to the Problem of Minamata Disease” ([Minamata Disease] Special Measures Bill) was submitted to the House of Representatives as a member bill in March 2009. It was then passed in July of the same year (“The Act on Special Measures Concerning Relief for Victims of Minamata Disease and Solution to the Problem of Minamata Disease”).

The purpose of the Special Measures Law was to help as many victims as possible, and as a result, about 37,000 people in Kumamoto Prefecture and over 50,000 people nationwide were able to receive compensation. Of course, there are people who were not covered by the Special Measures Law, so the problem has not been completely solved. However, if the Special Measures Law had not been enacted, all these people would have been left behind, and things would have been much more difficult than they are now. Minamata disease is an issue that both the national and prefectural governments must continue to deal with firmly in the future, but I think it was a good thing that the Special Measures Law was enacted at that time.

Regarding the Kawabe River Dam Basic Plan, the other four candidates in the gubernatorial election opposed its construction. Among them, I promised to make a decision within six months of taking office. This was not opportunistic, but because I felt that I could not make a decision without actually seeing the site. There has long been opposition to this dam on environmental and other grounds, and on the other hand, many people have already left their homes because of its construction. The regional conflict over the dam was serious. Upon taking office as governor, I immediately established an expert council and continued to study the issue. As a result of these discussions, I announced the cancellation of the dam at the prefectural assembly meeting in September 2008, five months after taking office.

The LDP, which has a majority in the prefectural assembly, is in favor of construction, so this must have come as quite a shock. Prefectural government officials also assumed that construction would take place, so it would be a problem if that was overturned. Of course, the national government and the construction industry were in favor of construction. It was not easy to stick to my own will when all the influential parties involved were in favor of construction. It would have been easier to say yes. But is that what the people of the prefecture want? I became painfully aware of the difficulty and importance of maintaining “freedom of mind.”

Despite the problems, a public opinion poll conducted immediately after the announcement of the cancellation of the plan showed that 85% of the people in the prefecture supported this decision. At that time, the people of the prefecture wanted flood control that did not depend on a dam.

However, the increasing number of abnormal weather events worldwide did not allow it. In July 2020, during my fourth term, the “2020 Kyushu Flood,” which caused major damage in the southern part of the prefecture due to flooding of the Kuma River system, including the Kawabe River, again raised the question of whether the cancellation and retreat was really the right decision.

After the torrential rain disaster, 30 meetings were held with various stakeholders from all local governments in the Kuma River basin. As a result, it became clear that the current public opinion is that “we want both lives and clear rivers to be protected.”

The only way to achieve both goals was to propose “Green Basin Flood Control” to the prefectural assembly, which centered on “Flood Mitigation Dams (FMDs)” that would allow river water to flow normally and store water only during heavy rains. I was ready to resign immediately if this proposal was not accepted by the people of the prefecture.

Fortunately, the people of the prefecture changed their minds about flood control in response to the abnormal weather, so my proposal was accepted. It is difficult for politics to change the direction of a decision once it has been made. What made “The Politics of Reorientation” possible was the trust that was built with the people of the prefecture. I think it all comes down to that.

Kumamon was born from the phrase “break a plate”

——What surprised you when you went from being a political scientist to a prefectural governor?

It was the culture of the prefectural government. I would say it was a managerial or regulatory [prefectural government] type. To put it in a positive way, it was solid, but whenever I proposed something, I would immediately get the response that it was difficult because there was no precedent. There was a culture of banging on stone bridges to make sure they were safe, but not to cross them.

In contrast, what I preached to the officials on various occasions was, “Break the plates.”

People who wash a lot of dishes are more likely to break them. In other words, it is important not to be afraid of failure and to try many things. But ordinary officials do not think that way. If you don’t wash the dishes, you won’t break them. However, when they think about the role of a prefectural government official, the people of the prefecture are the main characters, and since they are working for the people of the prefecture, they should aim to maximize the happiness of the people of the prefecture. The important thing is not to protect the culture of the prefectural office. Let’s break plates, that is, take risks and challenge ourselves for the happiness of all the residents of the prefecture. “The more plates you break, the more challenges you’ve taken on.” That’s what I asked for.

There was some resistance at first, but this way of thinking was gradually understood. The greatest achievement of this effort is undoubtedly [Kumamon](#).



Kumamon was created by art director Mizuno Manabu as a kind of bonus in the process of designing the logo for the prefecture's “Kumamoto Surprise” PR campaign for the full opening of the Kyushu Shinkansen in March 2011.
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Kumamon was created by art director Mizuno Manabu as a kind of bonus in the process of designing the logo for the prefecture's "Kumamoto Surprise" PR campaign for the full opening of the Kyushu Shinkansen in March 2011. The mascot first appeared in public in March 2010, about a month after the original illustration was drawn. However, the first costume, which the staff hastily put together from a ready-made costume, was skinny and not very cute. When it approached children, they ran away.

In normal bureaucratic work, all that would have to be done is to complete all the events by the end of the fiscal year³ in March of the following year, so as long as everything was in order, it would have been fine and that would have been the end of it. No one would have blamed them. But this time the staff was different. The original illustration of Kumamon was very cute, so the officials moved in the direction of developing the design of the costume to get closer to it. As a result of the officials' challenge, the chubby Kumamon we see today was born.

In fact, there had been talk from the Kumamoto Prefectural Finance Division that they would like to dissolve the Kumamon Project once the events marking the full opening of the Kyushu Shinkansen line were over. However, by that time, Kumamon's popularity had grown considerably, so I said it was no good. I suggested that instead of disbanding, they should value the common space where Kumamon is active, and that the prefecture should buy a license for Kumamon, not charge a usage fee, and let everyone use it as much as possible⁴. This worked out well.

Currently (as of April 2024), the cumulative sales of Kumamon-related products are about 1.5 trillion yen. I think that through Kumamon, the prefectural government has become a group that takes on challenges.

"Creative Revival" after the 2016 Kumamoto Earthquake

——In April 2016, the third term, the 2016 Kumamoto Earthquake occurred. For the first time in recorded history, two earthquakes of magnitude 7 were recorded in succession, causing extensive damage mainly in the Kumamoto region.

After the three difficulties were resolved, from the second half of my first term to my second term, there was a lot of positive news, such as the great success of Kumamon, the opening of the entire Kyushu Shinkansen line, and Kumamoto City becoming an ordinance-designated city, and it was a relatively happy time. My friends in Tokyo told me to quit after my second term and come back, and Harvard University offered to find a post for me, so I was quite hesitant about whether to run for governor for my third term. But in the end, it was the right decision to run. April 16, the day the main shock of the 2016 Kumamoto earthquake occurred, was the first day of my inauguration for my third term. If I had left the governorship after my second term and gone to Harvard University, I might have been pelted with stones.

The 2016 Kumamoto earthquake was the biggest challenge of my four terms in office. The three challenges of my first term have continued from the past, but I had to make immediate and accurate decisions about disaster response. "What is needed at this time?" I thought that the first thing to do was to establish principles for recovery and reconstruction and to quickly communicate them to the people of the prefecture.

³ Japan's fiscal year starts in April and ends in March of the following year.

⁴ The copyright of Kumamon is held by Kumamoto Prefecture. Kumamon can be used free of charge if it is in line with the purpose of Kumamoto Prefecture and permission is obtained after application for use. A usage fee is required to use Kumamon overseas.

I set out three principles. First, minimize the pain of those affected by the disaster. Second, aim for creative revival rather than simply restoring things to their original state. Third, link recovery and reconstruction to the development of Kumamoto.

An excellent council of experts is essential for creative revival. The problem with the Reconstruction Design Council after the Great East Japan Earthquake at the time of the Great East Japan Earthquake was that there were too many people, and they just kept talking and lost their unity. Learning from this experience, in the case of Kumamoto, I asked [Iokibe Makoto](#) (former president of the National Defense Academy, who passed away in March 2024) to be the chairman of the Kumamoto Recovery and Reconstruction Experts Meeting and Mikuriya Takashi (professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo) to be the vice chairman, and I invited seven excellent and trustworthy people whom I know well to participate. As a result, members were able to meet a week after the disaster and finalize recommendations two months later, which allowed for a quick process.

This response was based on the “gap hypothesis” of political scientist Samuel P. Huntington (1927–2008). The key point of this theory is that expectations rise in the short term, while reality rises slowly and gradually, so that as time passes and the gap between expectations and reality widens, dissatisfaction grows. I have always kept this theory in mind when responding to disasters. Because it takes time for reality to improve, as a governor I have to start working on the future immediately after the disaster, while expectations are still low.

Prefectural government officials are reluctant to take over the secretariat of the expert council at a busy time, when only a short time has passed since the earthquake. But if something isn’t done sooner rather than later, the effects will be felt over time.

The airport and train station were renovated, and a new harbor was built

——What was the most important thing to consider when thinking about “creative revival”?

Of particular importance, as recommended by the Kumamoto Recovery and Reconstruction Experts Meeting, was the creative revival of transportation infrastructure such as airports and ports, which would serve as gateways to bring in economic vitality from both within and outside Japan.

For example, Aso Kumamoto Airport was badly damaged, so its reconstruction was left entirely to the private sector through a concession (sale of operating rights) method. We now have a very impressive airport, but it was built with private capital, not prefectural money.

As for the port, Kumamon Port Yatsushiro, which will serve as a base for receiving large international cruise ships weighing over 200,000 tons, was developed through tripartite cooperation between the prefecture, the national government and private companies. Cruise ship ports are often desolate, but fortunately Kumamoto Prefecture has Kumamon. The concept⁵ is that cruise ship passengers who disembark can play with a total of 84 Kumamons, both large and small.

And then there’s [JR Kumamoto Station](#). When I became governor, the thing I wanted to renovate most was Kumamoto Station, the gateway to the prefecture. I wanted to do something about it, so I asked architect Ando Tadao to come up with a design for the new station building.

In fact, Ando and I both became professors at the University of Tokyo at the same time (1997), and

⁵ Around the passenger terminal, there is a distinctive green space (the Kumamon park) themed around Kumamon as a place of hospitality for passenger ships and tourists. <https://kumamonport8246.com/>

we got along well and had a relationship because we both had unique backgrounds — me as a former agricultural cooperative worker and Ando as a former boxer. So I asked Ando if he could do something about it since Kumamoto Prefecture was short of money, and he gave us a very low design fee. In 2019, a magnificent station building was completed, with a motif of the *musha-gaeshi* (warrior repellent)⁶ on the stone wall of [Kumamoto Castle](#).

Ando also donated a children's library to Kumamoto ([Children's Book Forest Kumamoto](#)), which he designed and built at his own expense. It opened next to the prefectural library in April 2024 and is very popular. I was touched by this, and it made me realize that friends are an important thing to have.

Attracting TSMC and developing transportation infrastructure

——In November 2021, during the fourth term, it was announced that Taiwan's TSMC will build its first factory in Japan in Kumamoto Prefecture, and the opening ceremony was held in February this year (2024). Kumamoto's economy is also booming, but what do you think of this situation?

One of Kumamoto's weaknesses was its poor road network. Although there was a vertical axis leading to Fukuoka and Kagoshima, horizontal travel to Oita and Miyazaki was very inconvenient. Therefore, the aim of the creative revival was to create this horizontal axis.

Currently, the construction of the Naka-Kyushu Odan Road (Middle Kyushu crossing road), which connects northern Kumamoto City with Oita City, and the Kyushu Chuo Expressway, which runs from the outskirts of Kumamoto City to Nobeoka City in Miyazaki Prefecture, are progressing rapidly. As the center of Kyushu with a vertical and horizontal transportation network, Kumamoto is now trying to realize a new Silicon Island of Kyushu.

As for the attractiveness of TSMC, the government plainly decided that if it does not focus on semiconductors now, the industry will never emerge in the future. It is on the back of such a transportation infrastructure that TSMC has blossomed, and I believe it is now contributing greatly to Kumamoto's economy.

——Were there any issues you were unable to resolve during your term?

The biggest concern about TSMC's expansion in Kumamoto was the cost of infrastructure development, such as surrounding roads, an access railway to the airport, and drainage facilities. According to preliminary calculations, it will cost about 114 billion yen over 10 years. The prefecture cannot afford this, and I could not impose such a challenge on my successor.

So in August 2023, I visited the Prime Minister's Office and asked for support⁷ directly from then Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. The Prime Minister gave me a clear and reassuring response: "We will

⁶ Kumamoto Castle's stone walls are called by their nickname, *musha-gaeshi*. These stone walls are one of the features of Kumamoto Castle. While the bottom of the castle walls appear to be easy to climb, the higher you go, the steeper the slope turns, and you can't climb to the top. Not only heavily armored samurai, but even lightweight ninja failed to climb these walls. That's why they are called *musha-gaeshi* which roughly translates to "warrior repellent." (From Kumamoto City's website <https://castle.kumamoto-guide.jp/en/history/>)

⁷ In preparation for the government's budget formulation for fiscal 2024, Kumamoto Prefecture implemented an "urgent request pertaining to social capital maintenance about semiconductor-related industrial accumulation promotion" on August 21, 2023.

https://www.pref.kumamoto.jp.e.qp.hp.transer.com/soshiki/18/180867.html?_ga=2.53333736.1786112444.1731292603-1048947656.1728356528, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/101_kishida/actions/202308/21menkai.html

create a flexible mechanism that will allow us to steadily respond to the necessary additional infrastructure investment over a period of several years.” Japan is a country with a one-year budget, so it is not an easy thing for the prime minister to say that he will be stable for several years. This gave me peace of mind and made me willing to step down after four terms.

As I have said, Kumamoto Prefecture was going through a difficult time when I became governor. However, it was a blessing in my life to be able to serve the people of the prefecture in a public capacity at a time when my hometown of Kumamoto was facing adversity.

When I was a professor at the University of Tokyo, I worked hard to achieve results in my research. For example, academic achievements, such as how well my papers were recognized by academic societies around the world, were my greatest source of joy. However, since I became governor, over the course of four terms and 16 years, my greatest joy changed to contributing as much as I could to the happiness of the people of the prefecture as a public servant, and the realization that I am serving the people of the prefecture became a daily joy.

If I had not become governor, I would not have felt this way. I am truly grateful that I was able to do such a happy job with love and respect for the people of the prefecture, and that the people of the prefecture supported me with a sense of mutual trust.

Translated from “Tokushu: Kumamoto ga sugoi: Kumamon, Jishin, Handotai... Todai kyoju kara Ken-chiji e: 4-ki 16 nen no subete wo kataru (Special feature: Kumamoto is amazing: Kumamon, earthquakes, semiconductors... From Tokyo University Professor to Governor of Kumamoto Prefecture: All about 16 years over four terms),” Chuokoron, October 2024, pp. 120-129 (Courtesy of Chuo Koron Shinsha) [November 2024]

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Born in Kumamoto Prefecture in 1947. Earned his Ph.D. (Political Economy and Government) from Harvard University. After serving as a professor at the University of Tsukuba and the University of Tokyo, he served four terms as the Governor of Kumamoto Prefecture from April 2008 to April 2024. His publications include *Seiji Sanka* (Political participation) (The University of Tokyo Press, 1988) and *Sengo Seiji no Kiseki* (Trajectory of postwar politics) (Iwanami Shoten, 2004)

