

Japan - Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's Death: Inherited Right-wing Politics Then and Now

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On July 8, Japan's former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was killed by a man who told police that he had a grudge against a "certain religious group", the Unification Church. This event incident revealed a facet of Abe's past as a right-wing nationalist that has never been told in Japan.

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On July 8, Japan's former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has died after he was shot at a political campaign event which was held two days before the 2022 Japanese Upper House elections. He was shot while he was giving a speech on a street. A 41-year-old suspect admitted shooting Abe with a homemade gun. He has told police that he had a grudge against a "certain religious group". The suspect also said he planned to attack a leader of the religious group who he believed caused his mother to make huge donations to the group and it eventually led her into bankruptcy.

On July 11, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, widely known as the Unification Church, said the mother of the suspect is a member of the religious group. The religious group also said the mother had joined the group around 1998 and went bankrupt around 2002. Japanese political parties and media called the act "a challenge to democracy" or "attack on freedom of speech". At the time of writing, the motive of the suspect isn't yet completely clear. And the police and media reports indicate that it wasn't political. However, the incident revealed Abe's past as a right-wing nationalist that has never been told in Japan. Also, what the Japanese population have been lost by his "one-strong" politics was buried in the dark.

Politicians' links with a "certain religious group"

The incident of gun violence is extremely rare and unexpected in Japan, where possession of firearms is strictly prohibited. So, Abe's death has shone a spotlight on the suspect's family troubles with a "certain religious group": the former Unification Church (currently Family Federation for World Peace and Unification). For decades, the close relationship between the former Unification Church and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leaders has been the issue that has hardly been discussed in Japan. The former Unification Church was established in 1954 in the South Korean by anti-communist Sun Myung Moon. Some officials of the then Sung-man Lee regime were also

involved in the establishment [1]. The Japanese branch was opened in 1959. And in the 1990s, the group expanded aggressively throughout the world. Abe and his grandfather Nobusuke Kishi, also a former Japanese Prime Ministers, were not members. But they were known as supporters [2].

The group was one of the LDP's reliable allies against communism. Abe appeared at the former Unification Church-related events as a speaker in September 2021 via video link with the former US President Donald Trump [c]. The former Unification Church (currently Family Federation for World Peace and Unification) is inseparable from the anti-communism rightist group: International Federation for Victory over Communism [3].

Links with another religious group

Abe also had connections with another right-wing religious group: the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership (SAS). He was the Chairperson of the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership Diet Members' Caucus, an affiliate of the organization which is composed of members of parliament. SAS is a political organization centered around the Shinto shrine world, with headquarters in all prefectures. The concept of "Shinto" (or Shintoism) defined by SAS resembles State Shinto, which was the official ideology of former Imperial Japan (from 1868 to 1945). The idea of SAS is full of discrimination due to incomprehension [4].

It has been pointed out that SAS has a close relationship with the "Nippon Kaigi" (the Japan Conference), a far-right nationalist organization that was established in 1997. The Japan Conference insists on revising the Constitution of Japan, especially Article 9 which forbids international acts of aggression which includes offensive wars. Both SAS and the Japan Conference have Diet Members' Caucuses. Many parliamentary members belong to both of the two Caucuses. And the national image that the two groups are aiming for overlaps [5].

Abe's lasting legacy: constitutional revision

Abe's career was crossed by international right-wing nationalism links. And even after his death, his political influence as a right-wing nationalist remains. On April 3 this year, Abe called for early revision to the Constitution of Japan: specifying the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) in its Article 9. And incumbent Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and other conservative party leaders were set to continue featuring Abe in constitutional reform debate. For Kishida, the constitutional revision issue was critical in keeping the LDP's right-wing and pro-LDP conservative voters to his side. One of Kishida's aides said "He is aiming to achieve constitutional amendment and make it his political legacy [6]."

The landslide victory of LDP in the Upper House election gave Kishida a free hand to tackle long-term issues. In the 248-seat Upper House, LDP won 125 seats. And Komeito, the petit-bourgeois coalition partner of LDP, won 13 for a total of 76 seats for the ruling coalition. Article 96 of the Japanese Constitution requires a two-thirds majority in both houses of the Diet to recommend constitutional revision to the public. So, the result of the election results assigned a sufficient number of seats for the ruling coalition. Abe's negative legacy of "constitutional revision" was inherited to Kishida and it could be invoked for longer term goals.

Our politics in the post-Abe era

Abe's death during a campaign speech has sent shock waves across Japan and around the world.

And it has extorted a storm of lavish praise to the “Japan’s longest-serving Prime Minister”. He had exerted enormous influence over Japan. He passed his 2,587th day in office and became Japan’s longest-serving Prime Minister. He was sometimes referred to as “one strong” or dictatorial. Meanwhile, the Japanese population has lost a lot by the emergence of “one-strong” politics. And his death buried most of them in the dark.

Originally, Abe’s political dominance was maintained by the historical background of Japan’s postwar politics. And it had rested on combinations of political apathy and a well-funded political power augmented by more than half a century of parliamentary dominance in Cold War and post-Cold War eras. Then a large discrepancy between Abe’s political policies and those of the majority of voters who choose him grew dramatically. Despite fierce public opposition, Abe regime has enacted major legislation such as the Revised Education Basic Law (2006), the Specially Designated Secrets Protection Law (2013), the laws related to Japanese military legislation (2015), and the Conspiracy Law (2017).

In 2015, Abe had crossed the Rubicon and made Japan a war-capable nation by passing a set of security bills to loosen the tight restrictions on the Self-Defence Forces, which had reappointed himself a dictator for life. And his politics, which prioritized capital, had ignored victims and exploited the labour force under low-wage and unstable working conditions in the name of “self-responsibility theory”.

Especially from 2017, scandals arose one after the other, which had exposed the strengths as well as the weaknesses of his “one strong” state. Then united front to overthrow the Abe regime was gradually formed among the population. Following is a brief account of some of the important scandals destabilized the Abe regime: the Moritomo Gakuen scandal (2016), the Kake Gakuen scandal (2017), the integrated casino-related bribery scandal (2019), the “cherry-blossom party” scandal (2019), and the vote-buying scandal in Hiroshima (2019). These scandals exposed the institutional problem of politicians’ management only for their personal benefits. Our politics in the post-Abe era should include:

- Politics that makes the most of the Peace Constitution
- Politics that prioritizes people’s lives rather than pro-capital policy
- Breaking away from sexism and racism

We must never forget Abe’s long-term dishonest and undemocratic politics. It is the starting point of a process of radical political change for the working class in Japan.

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Footnotes

[1] The New York Times, 16 March 1978, “Unification Church Called Seoul Tool”

[2] Richard J. Samuels, December 2001, “Kishi and Corruption: An Anatomy of the 1955 System”

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[3] Reuters, 11 July 2022, "Unification Church confirms mother of Abe suspect is a member"

[4] At a June 13 meeting held by the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership Diet Members' Caucus, a pamphlet about sexual minorities and surname use among married couples was distributed. The pamphlet described sexual minorities as suffering from an "acquired psychological disorder" that is just as addictive as gambling.

[5] Yamaguchi Tomomi, Nippon Kaigi to Jinja Honcho, Tokyo, 2016 pb ISBN 9784865720105

[6] The Mainichi, 4 April 2022, "Japan's LDP features ex-PM Abe in constitutional reform drive, risking opposition backlash"