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Japan's 'war on terror' should start at home

Wakamiya Yoshibumi

Japan's 'war on terror' should start at home

By Wakamiya Yoshibumi

A long time ago, I visited Seizo Kaikan in Tsuruoka, Yamagata Prefecture, while covering a Lower House election. The facility was the local base of Lower House member Kato Koichi. It also served as an assembly hall for his supporters.

The hall was built in 1961 for Kato's late father Seizo, also a politician, with money raised by his supporters. Since Kato succeeded his father and won his first election in 1972, the walls were said to have been covered by campaign posters from 12 elections. The histories of the two politicians were deeply ingrained there.

Who would have thought the hall would be reduced to ashes along with Kato's family home, which was adjacent to the facility? On the evening of August 15, a senior member of a Tokyo-based right-wing organization doused the structure with gasoline and set fire to it. He then attempted ritual suicide by disembowelment. (He has since been arrested on suspicion of arson.)



The Kato home in flames

Fortunately, Kato's 97-year-old mother Onobu, who lived in the house, was unharmed. At the time of the fire she was out taking a walk. Still, losing the home she has lived in for most of her life as a dedicated wife and mother to politicians must be agonizing for her.

For the past few years, Kato has been vocal in his criticism of the Liberal Democratic Party's handling of the Yasukuni Shrine issue. Specifically, he has stressed the importance of Japan-China relations and opposed Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro 's repeated visits to the shrine where 14 Class-A war criminals are venerated along with Japan's war dead. Kato is also a key member of a group of lawmakers who advocate the construction of a new national facility to mourn the war dead.

Of all days, the arsonist chose Aug. 15, the anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II, to set the fire. We, therefore, have little choice but to interpret the crime as an act of terrorism connected to Kato's criticisms of Koizumi's shrine visits.

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Kato, however, appears undaunted. Since the incident, he has organized an intra-party study group that attaches importance to Asian diplomacy. But it must be easier said than done to continue to engage in political activities at the risk of endangering his family.

History repeating itself?

The day after the attack, Lower House Speaker Kono Yohei called Kato's Tokyo office to see how he was coping. The two are by no means personally close. But as far as Yasukuni and China affairs are concerned, their ideas are quite close.

At the August 15 memorial ceremony for the war dead, Kono delivered the following eulogy: "When I think about the young and talented people who gave their lives believing in the 'awakening' of a newly born Japan and hoping to serve as its pioneers, I feel that we must not leave the responsibility of war leaders at the time unquestioned."



Kono Yohei

Kono's speech must have been directed at Koizumi, who shed tears for young soldiers who went on suicide missions as kamikaze pilots. It must have been meant to remind him that we must not forgive those who ordered the suicide missions. Needless to say, it was also an expression of objection toward Yasukuni Shrine for enshrining Class-A war criminals.

As it happens, in 1963, when Kono's father Ichiro was serving as construction minister, his private home in Hiratsuka, Kanagawa Prefecture, was razed to the ground by an arsonist.

Ichiro played a central role in normalizing diplomatic relations between Japan and the Soviet Union. The crime was staged by a group of right-wingers, who had always criticized Ichiro as a supporter of communism.

One of the perpetrators was Nomura Shusuke.

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After serving a prison term, he attacked the headquarters of Keidanren (Japan Federation of Economic Organizations) in 1977 and consequently was sent back to prison. In 1993, Nomura visited the president of The Asahi Shimbun at the newspaper's Tokyo head office. During the meeting, he committed suicide by shooting himself in the abdomen with a pistol.

Japan has a history of such terrorist acts both before and after World War II.

There were times when left-wing radicals went wild. But acts of terrorism by right-wing groups have been just as ghastly.

In 1960, the chairman of the Japan Socialist Party, Asanuma Inejiro, was assassinated by a sword-wielding right-wing youth during a rally on the stage of Hibiya Kokaido hall in Tokyo.



The assassination of
Asanuma Inejiro

In 1961, the home of Shimanaka Hoji, president of the publishing firm Chuokoron-sha, was attacked by a right-wing radical. A housekeeper was killed and Shimanaka's wife was seriously injured. On May 3, 1987, Constitution Day, the Hanshin bureau of The Asahi Shimbun was attacked by a man with a shotgun. One reporter was killed and another was seriously injured. All of the crimes targeted free speech.

Fighting terror on the home front

The threats continue even now.

In January 2005, two lit Molotov cocktails were placed next to the entrance of the home of Fuji Xerox Co. Chairman Kobayashi Yotaro, who chairs the new Japan-China friendship committee for the 21st century. The incident took place shortly after Kobayashi said of the prime minister's Yasukuni visits, "Personally, I wish he would stop."

In July this year, a Molotov cocktail was thrown into the side entrance of the Nihon Keizai Shimbun, immediately after the newspaper ran an article about a memo stating that Emperor Hirohito, posthumously known as Emperor Showa, expressed displeasure at Yasukuni Shrine for honoring Class-A war criminals. The memo was written by a former grand steward of the Imperial Household Agency who had jotted down the emperor's comments.

This is how an atmosphere that makes it difficult for people to freely object to Yasukuni visits gradually develops. And that is exactly what the extremists want.

It will soon be five years since the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center towers in New York and other U.S. targets. Since then, in response to U.S. President George W. Bush, who declared "war against terrorism," Koizumi has supported the U.S. initiative and even went so far as to dispatch Self-Defense Forces personnel to Iraq.

I thought "war against terrorism" was a key phrase of the Koizumi era. If so, why isn't he prepared to fight "right-wing terrorism" on the home front?

This is a time of crisis for Kato, who has held such key posts as chief Cabinet secretary and

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secretary-general of the Liberal Democratic Party. Despite this, neither Koizumi nor Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe Shinzo, who is the Cabinet's official spokesman, rushed to make any public statement that expressed anger at the incident. Nor did they announce plans to step up measures to crack down on terrorists.

The incident took place during the Obon holidays when Koizumi was holed up at his official residence. Abe, who was relieved from giving regular news conferences, was busy making preparations for the upcoming LDP presidential election. Still, why couldn't they have taken the time and trouble to make a single comment? Although it has been more than 10 days since the incident, I am shocked to hear that Kato has not received any words of sympathy or encouragement from them.

It is not a matter of how warm or cold a person is. What I want to question is whether such people have the makings required of leaders who are responsible for running the administration. Isn't silence tantamount to conniving with terrorists?

Surely the silence has no special meaning. Still, with such an attitude, how can they claim to be "fighting terrorism?"

Wakamiya Yoshibumi heads The Asahi Shimbun's editorial board.

Editor's Note: This article appeared in the Aug. 28 edition of The Asahi Shimbun. The same day, Prime Minister Koizumi publicly addressed the arson for the first time.

It was published in IHT/Asahi on September 6, 2006 and in Japan Focus on September 9, 2006.

For another comment on the issues see Steven Clemons, "**The Rise of Japan's Thought Police,**" Washington Post, August 27, 2006.

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