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Shinzo Abe's political legacy lives on

After Shinzo Abe's assassination, his supporters are ever more intent on realising his controversial political goals

The assassination of Shinzo Abe has shaken Japan to its core. The former prime minister was shot dead in the street at an election rally on 8 July 2022. Politicians of all parties have condemned the act as an attack on democracy. There is speculation in the mass media about the motives of the perpetrator, which has inevitably led to a discussion about Abe's politics, who was highly influential but also controversial until the end.

What we know is that the assassin was employed by the Japanese Self-Defence Forces from 2002 to 2005 and apparently knew his way around weapons. He committed the crime with a homemade shotgun and during a police search other firearms and explosives were found in the perpetrator's flat. We also know that the perpetrator held a grudge against a religious group that he associated with Abe. The assassin's mother had apparently joined the group and donated all her possessions to it. So his grudge was initially directed against the religious organisation, whose name has not yet been officially confirmed, and not explicitly against Shinzo Abe.

Abe and his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) have for years sought proximity to religious communities to expand their voter base. The focus has been on groups of the Japanese Shinto religion, which in turn have close ties to the right-wing conservative lobby group 'Japan Conference' (*Nippon Kaigi*). However, Abe also appeared in video contributions at events of other religious communities. For the assassin, this may have suggested a special connection between Abe and these groups. It remains to be seen, however, what the police investigation will uncover in the coming weeks.

Japan's history of political violence

Historically, political violence is by no means rare in Japan. Before Japan introduced the cabinet system, the leading figure in the government, Toshimichi Okubo, was assassinated by a government critic in 1878. In 1909, former Prime Minister Hirobumi Ito, also known as the 'Bismarck

of Japan', fell victim to an assassination attempt. The perpetrator was a Korean independence fighter who wanted to draw attention to the problems with the colonisation of Korea taking place at the time.

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In 1921, Prime Minister Takashi Hara was assassinated by a right-wing fanatic in Tokyo's main railway station. Nine years later, another right-wing extremist assassinated Prime Minister Osachi Hamaguchi. Hamaguchi survived the assassination, but died a year later as a result of his injuries. Then in 1932, Prime Minister Tsuyoshi Inukai was assassinated — an act that ended the era of party cabinets in Japan and led to the dominance of the military. In 1960, a member of a right-wing extremist group assassinated Abe's grandfather, then Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, but he survived. Only a few months later, a right-wing extremist assassinated the leader of the Socialist Party, Inejiro Asanuma, during a speech in front of running television cameras. In 1990 and 2007, the respective mayors of Nagasaki were assassinated; Hiroshima Motoshima survived the attack, Iccho Ito was less fortunate in 2007 and died one day after the attack.

While the shock of Abe's assassination runs deep, discussions about his political legacy have already begun. Abe was a controversial figure; hence, opinions on his legacy will diverge widely. Even though it is not yet clear whether the assassin's motivation was political, supporters of the conservative politician are already declaring him a martyr. Critics of his nationalist course, on the other hand, warn against whitewashing Abe's polarising politics. Abe's political slogan 'We're taking Japan back' is reminiscent of Donald Trump's slogan 'Take America Back'. Steve Bannon, former security adviser to Trump, once referred to Abe as 'Trump before Trump.'

Abe's militarism

Abe's policy of expanding Japan's security and military policy space has been particularly controversial. The security laws passed in 2015 deeply divided the nation. Not least because of the experiences of World War II and the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, pacifist attitudes are deeply rooted in Japan's society. With the widely known Article 9, this pacifism is even enshrined in the constitution. Abe's

legislation — aimed at being able to support the US in military operations beyond national defence — met with widespread opposition and provoked the largest demonstrations against the government since 1960, when Abe's grandfather Nobusuke Kishi had pushed through the extension of the military alliance with the US.

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Abe was also known for his tendency to whitewash Japan's wartime past. Abe doubted that it was appropriate to describe Japan's role in World War II as that of an aggressor. Rather, the war was forced on Japan, which merely defended itself. Japanese war crimes, moreover, were no worse or more reprehensible than those of other belligerents, including the US — an allusion to the indeed controversial atomic bombing. Particularly in the two Koreas and China, his remarks were met with a combination of astonishment and horror.

Shinzo Abe's assassination was particularly charged because it happened shortly before the election to Japan's Upper House. However, projections had predicted a clear victory for the LDP even before Abe's assassination — and the election results brought no surprises. The ruling party and its coalition partner won a clear majority, while almost all opposition parties suffered losses. The LDP won 63 of the 125 seats up for grabs, while the largest opposition party, the CDP (Constitutional Democracy Party), lost shares and won only 17 seats. Voter turnout was also only marginally higher than in the last elections.

It remains to be seen whether the assassination attempt on Abe will have a more profound impact on Japan's politics in the medium term. Abe's supporters in the LDP will continue to push for the implementation of his political goals, including the revision of the constitution. In the face of rising security tensions in the region, Abe and his supporters have been calling for a revision of Article 9 of the 1946 constitution for more than a decade. In this article, Japan 'renounces for all time war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes'. Although Japan has an well-equipped force — the Self-Defence Forces — many politicians see the country as too militarily constrained by the constitution. According to polls, a majority of the population still rejects a revision of Article 9, but the LDP's renewed election victory on 10 July may encourage the party to insist on completing Shinzo Abe's agenda.



Sven Saaler

Tokyo

Sven Saaler is FES Representative in Japan and Professor of Modern Japanese History at Sophia University in Tôkyô. He has written and edited books on history debates in Japan, East Asian regionalism and Japanese-German relations. Among his most recent publications are *Mutual Perceptions and Images in Japanese-German Relations, 1860-2010* (Brill, 2017) and the *Routledge Handbook of Modern Japanese History* (Routledge, 2017).