



The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

in-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Murakami Ichiro and Ultra-Nationalist Intimidation in Japan

by David McNeill

On December 19, 2003, Japanese police arrested 54-year-old rightist Murakami Ichiro, along with five accomplices, charging them with violating the Firearms and Swords Control Law.

Murakami is accused of leading a terror campaign, under the banner of the Kenkoku Giyugun (Nation-Building Volunteer Corps), and the Kokuzoku Seibatsutai, (Volunteer Corps to Punish Traitors), which conducted 23 shooting, arson and bomb attacks on targets across Japan over a one-year period beginning in November 2002.

The targets included the offices of the Hiroshima Teachers Union, the facilities of the religious cult Aleph (formerly known as Aum Shinrikyo) in Tokyo and Osaka, the pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryun), and in the most high-profile attack, the home of Foreign Ministry official Tanaka Hitoshi, the man widely held responsible for a short-lived 2002 thaw in Tokyo-Pyongyang relations.

Typically, Murakami's arrest was followed by a quick bout of contrition and a string of confessional pronouncements leaked to the media, which were then used to scrutinize his motives. A businessman who dabbled in sword collecting, Murakami was "enraged" after watching TV footage of Japanese abductees returning home from North Korea in October 2002. He was "a Japanese national with a heart" who felt that he "couldn't let North Korea get away with" the abductions, quoted the Asahi newspaper.¹

Thus couched, and divorced from any historical analysis of Japanese ultra-right activities, Murakami's attacks could be seen as the understandable if extreme manifestation of widespread popular anger against Pyongyang, and an isolated, atypical phenomenon. An alternative analysis, however, might place Murakami's brief flurry within the context of a long campaign of violence and intimidation by ultra-nationalists against the enemies of "pure" Japan, one with deep structural roots in the Japanese political landscape and an established modus operandi.

Friends in High Places

Those wishing to understand these historical roots and the relationship between the ultra-right, their bedfellows in organized crime, and the political establishment, are advised to re-read Alec Dubro and David E. Kaplan's recently re-released *Yakuza*, a seminal work that purports to uncover how a "criminal enterprise can infect the very heart of modern capitalism," no idle boast.¹ The book makes clear that Murakami Ichiro's political forefathers rose from the ashes of the Second World War, thanks to sponsorship from powerful mainstream figures such as Kimura Tokutaro, minister of justice under Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru. That the nation's highest-ranking law official operating, it will be remembered, under the leadership of the U.S. occupation authorities, saw fit to unshackle (in the interests of fighting communism) organized crime and the same ultra-nationalist forces that had helped propel Japan to disaster in 1931-1945, should be some indication of how "isolated" the Japanese ultra-right has been from that time forward.

Of course, links from the top of the political tree to the criminal underworld is not a uniquely Japanese phenomenon, as those familiar with the Italian and even U.S. cases are aware. The attempts by U.S. spooks, operating under the Kennedy administration, to enlist the help of the mafia and other criminal elements to assassinate Fidel Castro show that even the most supposedly liberal political figures lose their political scruples when confronted with an enemy they consider worthy or threatening enough.³

But the Japanese underworld can boast links to those in power second to none. While observers might plausibly argue that the Kennedy/Mafia affair was a brief, isolated fling, they could hardly do so in Japan. From Kimura and Yoshida, through to Kishi Nobusuke, prime minister from 1957-1960 and grandfather of current LDP Secretary General Abe Shinzo, to ex-Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro, the list of establishment politicians who have huddled with nationalists and gangsters is long and undistinguished.⁴

A senior member of Japan's No.3 organized crime group, the Sumiyoshi-Kai, recently told me that trying to compare the Japanese underground with the U.S. mafia was completely mistaken. "Most Japanese politicians know who we are and what we do, and there are many who call on us when they need help," said Agata Mitsunori. "They might try to control us if we get too big for our boots, but they won't destroy us. We're too useful."⁵

Moreover, the extreme right in Japan can always take comfort from numerous pronouncements by pillars of the establishment. Prime Minister Mori's famous 'slip', that Japan was a "divine nation centered on the emperor," is only one example of how apparently ultra-rightist posturing, like calls for the restoration of the emperor's powers and denials of well-documented war crimes, find echoes all the way up to the top of Japan's dim political corridors.

It was little surprise then that after the attack on Tanaka Hitoshi's home in September 2003, Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro was able to say that Tanaka "deserved" it, without paying for this statement with his job.⁶ And we learn that after Murakami's arrest, Nishimura Shingo of the Democratic Party of Japan was a personal friend, a top advisor to Murakami's sword collector's group and a recipient of political donations from the groups he led.⁷

Such close, but often overt, ties between the political and criminal underworld enables one of the world's largest criminal organizations, the Yamaguchi-gumi, to flourish, and allows tens of thousands of ultra-right activists and groups to openly organize and demonstrate across the country, threatening and intimidating journalists, trade unions, socialists and other ideological enemies. Why should there be any mystery when out of this huge pool of well-funded and politically supported activity, a "misguided extremist" like Murakami occasionally rises to the surface and causes waves?

Intimidation

My own baptism of fire into the world of ultra-nationalism in Japan came in 2000, when I was hosting a local radio show with my Japanese wife in Kanagawa Prefecture. Following an on-air discussion about the Nanking Massacre, a group of local "political activists" paid a visit to the station's management and forced them to make a public apology, over our heads for having dared to broach the issues.⁸ The confidence of these activists, the ease with which they achieved their aims and the complete absence of any discussion about the merits of our case are what stays in my mind from this incident which, I wrote at the time, must surely be only the tip of a very large iceberg:

Even accepting that the extreme right in Japan is not an entirely coherent group and that its members are often in ideological dispute with one another, taken together, its activities add up to a massive and organized intimidating presence. Every large media institution in Japan, and many small ones, have experienced political harassment of some sort.⁹ As a working journalist, I've had a number of opportunities over the last four years to confirm these initial observations. I relate just a couple here.

* In June 2003 I interviewed Okadome Yasunori, chief editor of the exposé magazine *Uwasa no Shinso* (The Truth of the Rumor). A proud member of the

radical sixties/seventies generation in Japan, 54-year-old Okadome set up one of the country's bravest and most irreverent publications a quarter of a century ago to "challenge taboos," particularly the emperor system and organized politics. During the interview, however, he announced he was stepping down in 2004, leaving the magazine facing an uncertain future. Dozens of noisy protests by rightists and six libel cases have taken their toll.

On June 7th 2000, for instance, two members of an ultra-nationalist group paid an unscheduled visit. The men had come to complain about the magazine's failure in its June issue to use the proper honorific "hi" when referring to Crown Princess Masako. After haranguing Okadome and demanding a published apology, the visitors split his head with a glass ashtray and stabbed him in the leg. They then told the bleeding, half-conscious editor to call the police before sitting down in his office to wait for their arrival. The two were arrested and sentenced the following September to 16 months' imprisonment each.

This apparently odd behavior, deliberately attacking a public figure and then calmly waiting for the punishment, had a remorseless political logic -- intimidation. The men and their superiors knew that by sacrificing themselves to the authorities and to media scrutiny, the word would go out loud and clear to others -- stay in line. The strategy worked. The magazine now uses the correct honorific on those rare occasions when it tackles the imperial family and Okadome has had enough. "I'm tired," he said.

* On Oct. 25th 2003, Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) member and anti-corruption politician Ishii Koki was murdered outside his Setagaya, Tokyo home on his way to work. Only the second sitting parliamentarian in postwar Japan to have been assassinated (the other was Asanuma Inejiro, head of the Japan Socialist Party, also by a rightist, in 1962), Ishii was a thorn in the side of the political establishment and a formidable enemy of the so-called "construction state." His alleged killer, Ito Hakusui, is a well-known petty criminal with links to ultra-nationalist groups.

Ito had haunted Ishii's constituency office for years trying to sell overpriced books and extort "political donations" -- a common rightist practice. The authorities closed their investigation into the circumstances of Ishii's death after Ito surrendered to the police -- another common practice. But his family, a number of journalists and investigators, and Outgoing Social Democrat (SDP) parliamentarian Hosaka Nobuto all believe Ito had help from someone much higher up the political hierarchy. Hosaka says fear of rightist retaliation, and political apathy, have hobbled the investigation into Ishii's death:

"The police have not investigated whether there was an accomplice or getaway car. The judges [in Ito's trial] won't accept any evidence that conflicts with the notion that Ishii was murdered by one man. The DPJ did well in the last [2003] election thanks partly to Ishii's work, but they don't want any controversy. The press doesn't want to dig it up. It's more comfortable for everyone to let this lie."

During the period when Ishii was in office from 1992-2002, Japan's public debt exploded by over 342 trillion (over \$2.5 trillion), or nearly 70 per cent of GDP, leaving it with "a deeper public-debt crisis than any other nation in modern history," says long-time Japan-watcher Gavan McCormack. Japan's huge construction machine, and the political corruption and secret deals that oil it, so alarmed Ishii he spent years trying change the system, poring over thousands of government documents, tabling hundreds of hours of Diet debate, and eventually setting up his own anti-corruption task force within the DPJ, dubbed the "G-Man Squad" after the Prohibition-era FBI gang-busters in the United States.

"He was obsessed with trying to find out where all this tax money was going," says his daughter, Tatiana. "He discovered there was a secret budget paying out to all these people. He would stay in his Diet building office until late at night working. The heating would go off and the building supervisors would call and ask when he was going home. My father joked it was all deliberate, to stop politicians working."

Ishii's work made him powerful political and gangland enemies. Japan's yakuza, which control a huge chunk of the construction industry, will have shed no tears over his death. "I think somebody offered Ito money to kill my husband," says Natalia Ishii. Was Ishii murdered because of his work?

Ishii's death, Okadome's retirement, and thousands of other examples large and small, from the failure of the Japanese media to publicize the Korean roots of the Imperial family, to the stunning ignorance of most young Japanese about much of their own history -- a natural consequence of a hushed and cowed media and education system -- are the result of the failure of Japan's political class to confront ultra-right extremism.¹⁰

Odd then to hear Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro parrot the current U.S. administration's obsession with "terrorism," while having little to say about the far more dangerous homegrown version. Certainly in terms of its corroding effect on the media that is supposed to help sustain the social life of a nation, and ultimately on public discussion and the vibrancy of the political process, the miniscule threat of foreign-sponsored intrigue in Japan can hardly rival the years of dedicated service by domestic terrorists.

Notes

1. "Rightist: N. Korea had to be punished," Asahi Shimbun, Dec. 25, 2003. Available at <http://www.asahi.com/english/world/TKY200312250166.html>. See also Justin McCurry, "The Enemy Within," The Guardian, Dec. 30, 2003. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/elsewhere/journalist/story/0,7792,1114012,00.html>.
2. David E. Kaplan and Alec Dubro, *Yakuza: Japan's Criminal Underworld*. University of California Press, 2003.
3. Among the many books that deal with the Kennedy family's involvement with the mafia are Evan Thomas, *Robert Kennedy: His Life*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000, and Seymour M. Hersh, *The Dark Side of Camelot*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1997.
4. In 2000, Chief Cabinet Secretary Nakagawa Hidenao (Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro's closest aide) resigned after being photographed dining with the boss of an ultra-right organization. Mori himself gave a speech at a wedding attended by Inagawa Yuko, the boss of the Inagawa-kai crime syndicate.
5. See David McNeill, "Out of the Shadows," *The Independent*, Aug. 19, 2003.
6. "Ishihara unrepentant over bomb barb," *Japan Times*, Sept. 12, 2003. Available at <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/getarticle.pl5?nn20030912a2.htm>.
7. This revelation was greeted with incredulity by much of the press, which cannot have been following Nishimura's career very closely. A well-known supporter of nationalist causes and a hero of the hard-right for years, in 1997 Nishimura planted the Japanese flag on a rocky, windswept island known here as Senkaku (or Diaoyu in China) in the East China Sea, signalling what he said was "The revival of a proud Japan and an awakening of people's consciousness." In 1999, he was forced to resign from his post as vice minister of the Defence Agency after suggesting that Japan should consider acquiring a nuclear arsenal.
8. See David McNeill, "Media Intimidation in Japan: A Close Encounter with Hard Japanese Nationalism." Available online at <http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/discussionpapers/McNeill.html>.
9. *Ibid.*
10. In December 2001, Emperor Akihito spoke at a press conference to mark his 68th birthday about the Korean ancestry of the Japanese Imperial family and said he felt a close 'kinship' with the country. The speech, from the head of an institution that is the ultimate linchpin of the myth of Japanese uniqueness and the lodestar for the most repressive ideas of racial superiority, was widely reported outside Japan, especially in Korea, but was largely ignored by the Japanese media. The Asahi was the only major paper to cover it in detail. See, Jonathan Watts, "The Emperor's New Roots," *The Guardian*, Dec. 28, 2001. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/japan/story/0,7369,625426,00.html>. The media has also failed to discuss the fertility-treatment assisted birth of a baby

girl to Crown Princess Masako in December 2001, despite the story being widely covered outside Japan; a trivial issue perhaps, but indicative of how far the media will go to avoid angering ultra-nationalists.

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