



Arson: Yasukuni Shrine, Terror and the Future of Japanese Democracy

Asahi Shimbun

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The arsonist who destroyed the family home of ruling party lawmaker Kato Koichi committed a cowardly act that strikes at the very heart of democratic principles. Kato, a Lower House member and former secretary-general of the Liberal Democratic Party, is known for his vocal stance on issues.

The 65-year-old suspect, apparently a senior member of a Tokyo-based right-wing group, attempted hara-kiri ritual suicide after setting fire to the premises in Tsuruoka, Yamagata Prefecture. He was hospitalized with burns and deep cuts to his abdomen.

Kato, 67, is a leading figure within the LDP who stridently opposes Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visits to war-related Yasukuni Shrine. He is also a member of a group of LDP, New Komeito and Minshuto (Democratic Party of Japan) lawmakers that is considering a new national war memorial. Because of his severe burns, the arson suspect is unable to speak. No messages claiming responsibility have been found and the motive for the attack has yet to be clarified. But given the circumstances, it is only natural to assume this was an act of terrorism against Kato's remarks.

As elected representatives, politicians must be allowed to exercise their right to free speech. To suppress this right through violence would undermine what holds a democratic society together. There is no way such acts can be condoned or tolerated.

Kato was born and raised in the house that was destroyed Tuesday. He must have fond memories of living there. His 97-year-old mother happened to be out at the time and so escaped injury or worse. The incident occurred on the 61st anniversary of the end of World War II. It is a day to remember how we were deprived of our freedom of speech and plunged into a catastrophic war. It is also a time to renew our vow for peace.



The frame of the Kato home following the fire

If the right-winger deliberately chose this day to commit the crime, it would be tantamount to laying down a direct challenge to the democratic society that postwar Japan has strived so hard to build. In that sense, the crime is twice as serious.

Kato used newspapers and television appearances to criticize Koizumi's visits to the Shinto shrine that memorializes 14 Class-A war criminals along with Japan's war dead. In the August issue of the monthly *Bungeishunju*, Kato wrote that Koizumi's successor, to be chosen in the LDP's Sept. 20 presidential election, should not visit the shrine.

"I want Koizumi's successor to be a person who can make proper judgments about history, including World War II," Kato wrote. That triggered a flood of protests to Kato's office. He even received a cutter blade in the mail. There is no doubt the arson attack is an extension of such threats. We urge the police to clarify the motive and background of the crime and take all possible measures to prevent dignitaries from terrorism.



Kato interviewed following the arson

With regard to arson against politicians, the home of then Construction Minister Kono Ichiro was burned down in 1963 by a right-winger. Since then, threats and attempts to silence politicians have not ceased.

After the incident, Kato said: "As a politician, I have to continue to speak up." We wholeheartedly support his stance. It is important for politicians, business executives and opinion leaders to stand up and say what they think without flinching.

In prewar Japan, one after another, politicians, including prime ministers, were attacked by terrorists and lost their lives. The political system collapsed. We never want Japan to retreat to such a dark age again. Terrorism must be contained.

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