

Shinzo Abe's killing: the history of political violence in Japan

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Shinzo Abe's murder is the latest political attack in Japan, a country which has strict gun laws.

Our reaction upon hearing the news of the shooting of former prime minister [Shinzo Abe](#) was one of shock and incredulity in equal measure. What followed was a frenzy of trying to piece news reports and gossip together to make sense of events, until his eventual death was announced a few hours later.

At first glance, Abe's assassination harks back to the 1920s and 1930s when the assassination of sitting and former prime ministers (Hara Kei, Hamaguchi Osachi, Inukai Tsuyoshi, Takahashi Korekiyo, Saitō Makoto) was a feature of [Japanese politics](#). We do not readily associate political assassination and violence with democratic and pacifist post-war Japan. In this light, it is not surprising that many reports focused on political violence in Japan as "[almost unheard of](#)". However, like any country, sudden and extreme acts of political violence are not without precedent in Japan.

During Abe's second period in power (2012-20), one of his most controversial initiatives was the reinterpretation of Japan's exercise of its right to [collective self-defence](#). This was seen as part of a steady shift towards a more militarised Japan, and resulted in two very public cases of people setting fire to themselves in [June](#) and [November](#) 2014 in protest. In the latter case, the person died.

In Abe's first period in office (2006-7), [mayor of Nagasaki Itō Icchō](#) was shot and killed by a member of the *Yamaguchi-gumi*, Japan's largest organised crime syndicate, over a seemingly trivial matter of compensation for damage to his car. In 1990, Itō's predecessor, [Motoshima Hitoshi](#), was also the target of an unsuccessful assassination attempt by a right-wing extremist over public comments he made regarding Emperor Hirohito's war responsibility.

In 2006, senior Liberal Democratic Party politician Katō Kōichi's home was subject to [an arson attack](#) by a right-winger angered by comments Katō had made critical of prime minister Koizumi Junichirō's visit to Yasukuni shrine. The shrine has long been a controversial symbol of Japan's wartime legacy.

The failed [coup-d'état](#) by world-famous writer Mishima Yukio in 1970 shocked Japan and had deep roots in his own ultra-nationalist political views. Mishima had founded the Shield Society, a paramilitary organisation, two years prior to the coup, recruiting members with far-right leanings, who wanted to restore the Emperor's political powers. Famously, Mishima committed ritual suicide when the [coup attempt](#) failed.

1960 was a tumultuous year in Japanese post-war history as a result of the revision of the US-Japan security treaty. Abe's grandfather, [Kishi Nobusuke](#), was the victim of a failed assassination attempt in July of that year. Later the same year, Japan Socialist Party leader [Asanuma Inejirō](#) was stabbed to death by a radical ultra-nationalist student. Asanuma was an outspoken critic of Japan's ties to the

US and also sought closer relations with Communist states in Asia. A [photograph](#) of the attack won the Pulitzer prize.

These examples are all actions of individuals. Japan is also not a stranger to organised political violence by groups of people. The most devastating incident of post-war political violence, was undoubtedly the Tokyo [sarin gas attacks](#) in March 1995. At the hands of a religious cult, [Aum Shinrikyō](#), key subway stations serving political centres in Tokyo were targeted with the aim to initiate the end of the world. The nerve agent claimed 14 lives, and injured more than 1000 people. The cult leader, Asahara Shōkō alongside key members of the cult, were executed in 2018.

During the 1970s and 1980s Japan saw domestic terror at the hands of a series of left-wing revolutionary groups. Most famous of these was the Japanese Red Army (JRA), who hijacked [planes](#), [attacked embassies and businesses](#), [as well](#) as [civilians](#). The wanted posters for individuals involved with the JRA still appear at Japanese train stations, and recently Tokyo police have made [videos](#) reminding the populace that members are still on the loose.

As the numbers show, [gun crime is rare in Japan](#) so political violence is shocking and extreme. However, as is the case in other countries (one need only think of the murders of MPs [Jo Cox](#) and [David Amess](#) in the UK), it is sadly far from unheard of.

Sadly, Shinzo Abe is only the most recent in a long line of politically motivated attacks. Unfortunately, the highly visible nature of criminal prosecution in Japan gives perpetrators a large platform to announce their views. This doesn't just happen in Japan. The judicial process has been used for political grandstanding in recent cases across Europe and the US, with the [Breivik](#) case in Norway as a particularly harrowing example. The same may happen in Japan in due course.

Many words will be written about this event over the hours, days and years to come but at this point in time our sympathies are with Abe's family. <https://theconversation.com/republishing-guidelines>
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P.S.

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