Abenomics and the Liberal Democratic Party

written by Donald C. Wood | January 30, 2023

The eyes of the world turned briefly to Japan on July 8, 2022, following the lethal shooting of Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lawmaker and former prime minister Shinzo Abe while he was campaigning in the ancient city of Nara. Reactions of shock, disbelief, and anger at what at first appeared to be a politically motivated, anti-democratic act of brutality were understandable. Japan is known for low levels of violent crime and firearm ownership, Abe had only stepped down as head of state less than two years earlier after a nearly eight-year tenure as a divisive and powerful prime minister, and an upper-house election was only two days away.

Initial news reports lamented Abe's murder and condemned the apparent attempt to subvert the democratic process through violence—ironic, in that Abe is widely seen as having been an especially undemocratic leader.[1] U.S. news media took this to a higher level, depicting a nation unified in shock and anger over a politically motivated assassination. Domestically, even the left-leaning *Asahi* newspaper ran a front-page article on election day with the headline, "A vote in defense of democracy." Opinion pieces praising Abe's political achievements and personal character began to appear. However, a significant proportion of Japan's population was not deeply saddened by Abe's death. This became clear when current Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's July 14 announcement that a state funeral would be held for Abe was met by public outcry and when donations of money and goods for the killer began pouring into a detention center where he was being held.[2]

Of vital importance was the early revelation that the attacker, who was unemployed, was motivated by a personal grudge and not by political ideology. First, the public learned that he blamed the former prime minister for supporting a religious organization to which his mother had been coerced into donating money. Soon it became clear that his mother had apparently handed so much wealth over to the Unification Church (now officially called the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification) that his family was destroyed and his own future imperiled. It was also revealed that Abe had indeed been involved with the organization, though not as a member, and that he had drawn on it for campaign assistance. This is the main benefit for Japan's politicians who have cozied up to the Unification Church. One LDP lawmaker's secretary is quoted as having candidly said, "Followers bring their friends along and help with making telephone calls and handing out leaflets. They work for free and work hard. This is valuable."[3] In Japan's political system, characterized by brief campaign periods, staffing shortages, and easy access to elected officials, relying on this kind of support—even from cultist groups—has unfortunately become commonplace, and this is especially so for LDP politicians and the Unification Church.[4] A recent poll found that 440 lawmakers at both the national and regional levels have ties with the organization, 80 percent of whom belong to the dominant, conservative LDP.[5]

The Unification Church's socially conservative politics and anti-communist stance, inherited from its founder Sun Myung Moon (who was convicted of tax fraud in New York in 1982), have been cited as reasons for the strength of its connections to the LDP and particularly to the Seiwa Kai, a rightist

faction that was headed by Abe's father in the 1980s and by Abe himself for a short time before his murder.[6] But since the 1980s, the Unification Church has attracted attention in Japan for increasingly aggressive donation-collecting tactics backed by appeals to ancestral and collective guilt over Japan's 1910-1945 domination of the Korean Peninsula. This campaign reportedly aimed to take in at least 30 billion yen annually as of 2017[7] and brought the organization to a point where 80 percent or more of its annual income may come from Japan.[8] Reports of families and lives being ruined by massive, coerced donations to the organization abound. If Japan's center-right and rightist politicians had had more concern for the country's people, they would have steered clear of the Unification Church. Unfortunately, however, winning elections has taken priority. (It is worth noting that a recent *Asahi* newspaper poll found no Socialist Party or Communist Party members with ties to the organization in the national Diet.)

Abe's murder's cause and aftermath speak clearly of his record as prime minister from December 26, 2012, to September 16, 2020, and his political legacy, not to mention LDP social, economic, and political philosophy. But a forgotten incident that occurred in the northern city of Sendai the day before Abe's 41-year-old killer attacked him from behind with a homemade double-barreled shotgun says nearly as much about Abe's domestic achievements. At approximately eight o'clock that morning, an unemployed 43-year-old man armed with a kitchen knife attacked two junior high school girls on their way to school because he wanted to escape society and go to jail, as he reportedly told investigators.[9] There is no proof that the attack was caused in any way by Abe's policies, but the action and the reason given are in line with social symptoms of LDP ideologies and priorities and the effects of Abe's trademark "Abenomics." It is also telling that the two attackers were both unemployed men in their forties who had "slipped through the cracks" of Japanese society, the reality of which does not mesh with LDP or Abe fantasy. In other words, the men represent people about whom the LDP does not care and whom the successive Abe Administrations chose to ignore.

Unfortunately, due to the late (1947) introduction of universal suffrage, the traditional domination of politics by male elites, and the overwhelming post-World War II U.S. influence, Japan has few viable alternatives to the LDP. During the early years of the MacArthur occupation, when the main U.S. concern was transforming Japan into an egalitarian democracy, rounding up fascists and nearly anyone else who had been associated with wartime administrations was top priority. But the establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on the Korean Peninsula in 1948 and the victory of the People's Liberation Army in China late the following year—by which time the USSR had become a nuclear power—motivated the United States to largely reverse course regarding its treatment of nationalism in Japan. The decision to not try Abe's grandfather Nobusuke Kishi as a war criminal—despite his involvement in the colonial rule of Manchuria in the 1930s, cosigning of Japan's 1941 declaration of war, and service in wartime administrations—and to release him from prison in 1948—reflected this shift.

With the end of the U.S. occupation in 1952, Kishi and other blacklisted individuals became free to re-enter political life. Kishi won a seat in the Diet the following year, helped found the LDP in 1955 to counter the influence of the then-vibrant Socialist Party, and became prime minister in 1957. He was only able to hold the office for three and a half years due to political fallout over the 1960 revision of the security treaty with the United States, but by the time Kishi resigned he had helped establish a political system fully parallel to U.S. interests, with ties to conservative groups such as the Unification Church, that would not waver in its course until 1993. Moreover, the LDP and its members were set to enjoy heavy, covert financial assistance from the CIA to the 1970s.[10]

One side effect of the establishment of this "1955 system," of successive U.S.-Japan security treaty revisions, and of U.S. wars in Southeast Asia, was the emergence of radical Japanese leftism in the form of the Communist League, the Revolutionary Left, and the Red Army. These groups and their

members attracted much attention and became objects of derision during the 1970s by pulling off hijackings and taking hostages both inside and outside of Japan and by leaving trails of human remains to show for their violent internal conflicts and purges. Japan's left-oriented political parties, on the other hand, have largely failed to attract much positive attention and yet became objects of derision for many voters, partly because of negative impressions made by the above-mentioned radicals and due to their general exclusion from the credit given for Japan's LDP-led rise from the ashes of the 1940s. Intertwined as it was with the party's tight U.S. government, military, and business relationships, this ascension led the country to the pinnacle of Asian development and quality of life during Japan's mid-1950s to early 1970s "high economic growth" period. One result was the reinforcement of a belief that only the LDP is capable of successfully running Japan, a tired but surprisingly effective trope that the party's members still use in election campaigns.

The powerful but clunky and subdivided LDP has given birth to adversarial parties. Some have teamed up with the socialist, communist, and other relatively weak left-oriented groups to form short-lived opposition coalitions and alliances, briefly wresting power from the LDP in 1993 and again 16 years later. But the 2009 victory of the centrist/center-left Democratic Party of Japan (the DPJ, which was largely controlled by former LDP members) wound up reinforcing the LDP's claims of exclusive leadership ability because (in short) the DPJ failed to stop the "revolving door" phenomenon that had plagued the office of prime minister since Shinzo Abe abruptly ended his first occupation of that position in 2007. The third DPJ prime minister in three years capitulated in December of 2012, allowing Abe to reclaim the office and the LDP to roar back to power—bolstered by its alliance with the socially conservative Komeito, a party with close ties to the Soka Gakkai religious organization—leaving the opposition in tatters and setting the stage for the introduction of Abe's eponymous economic policy package. The DPJ sputtered for a few years but finally imploded in 2016.[11] Its remnants have continued to challenge the LDP in subsequent elections from within a messy field of generally weak parties—some of which are right of the LDP—whose poor election performances and lack of unity appear to ensure LDP dominance at least for some years to come.[12]

Abenomics was unveiled to much fanfare at the start of Abe's second stint as prime minister. It was conceived as consisting of three arrows—an allusion to a famous story about the sixteenth-century warlord Mori Motonari, who supposedly taught his sons a lesson about loyalty by demonstrating that three arrows bundled together could not be broken, whereas an individual arrow could easily be snapped. The three arrows of Abenomics—aggressive monetary policy, fiscal consolidation, and growth strategy centering on restructuring and revitalization—were supposed to be fired in succession to lower the value of the yen and boost exports, spur wage and spending increases, reduce unemployment, increase tax revenues flowing into government coffers, and raise the GDP, thus creating a virtuous cycle of economic reinvigoration and development to counter years of relative stagnation and deflation[13] (although the former was not as bad as it was often made out to be and the latter was better for households than its opposite).

The first arrow was fired quickly: Under new leadership, the central bank began buying government bonds to flood the market with cash, and interest rates were lowered to near-zero (and even below zero in 2016) to weaken the yen against the dollar. This helped larger export-oriented corporations, raising the chance that these would make greater donations to LDP campaign war chests and that their employees would vote for LDP candidates. Stockholders of such corporations were also pleased.

The second arrow consisted mainly of boosting government spending but not, predictably, on social programs or infrastructural development that would have benefited the most people. Rather, spending went to construction projects and high-profile development initiatives like the maglev bullet train that is now expected to cost more than ten trillion yen, the very expensive 2020 Summer

Olympic Games in Tokyo, and the military and police. Tax laws also played roles; whereas corporate taxes were cut or kept at relatively low levels to maintain steady revenues close to ten trillion yen per year, a highly regressive consumption tax took annual government revenues in that category from 10.8 trillion yen in 2013 to a whopping 21.7 trillion yen in 2020.[14] In other words, the recipe for the first two-thirds of Abenomics was, "Help the rich, take a little from them, and take a lot more from everyone else."

The last arrow, which could have been used to help the masses, never quite made it out of the quiver. This represented the final third of the recipe: "Placate the masses with smoke and mirrors and promises you know you won't keep." Instead of enacting meaningful social and labor structural reforms to better empower workers, improve their conditions, and raise wages, superficial measures such as setting stronger guidelines for taking paternity leave were established and pretty but empty terms like "womenomics" were tossed about. The crown jewel of Abenomics in this area was the so-called *hataraki-kaikaku* (work system reform) law passed in June 2018. This may have looked good on the surface, but it did little more than create a new layer of paperwork full of falsifications to cover a labor system that continues to suffer from the same old problems as before.

My experience of living in Japan through the long, lean years of Abe's second (2012-2020) term allowed me to see and feel changes that to me were unprecedented. First, the buying power of the yen plummeted. This made it hard to buy anything from, or to send money, overseas. At the same time, not a few business leaders praised Abenomics. There was a giddiness among many, who loudly and publicly extolled the apparent virtues of the plan, revealing their high expectations for Japan to once again become an economic dynamo—a return to the *Japan as Number One* era. Political, financial, and even educational institutions realigned their long-term plans to dovetail with or run parallel to Abenomics, hoping to ride an expected wave of wealth and prosperity. But higher taxes and inflation hurt the working class, widening the disparity between it and the corporate world and upper socioeconomic echelon.

Indeed, even in 2013 it was clear that Abe's administration was poised to divert funding for social programs and welfare benefits to military use to prepare for standing in unison with the United States against unspecified enemies and to promote "self-independence among the poor."[15] This, despite Japan's child poverty rate of 16.3 percent and single-parent household poverty rate of 54.6 percent at the time.[16] Next, the Abe administration managed to divert public attention to the issue of freeloaders mooching off the social welfare system, partly by capitalizing on the 2012 revelation that the mother of a prominent comedian had been living off government handouts for over a decade.[17] Harsher punishments for violators were set, and nearly all welfare payments were cut, in 2013.[18] It became common to hear complaints about the "welfare cheat problem" in daily life, and municipal governments cracked down on apparent violators, even though reports indicate that no more than 0.5 percent of payments were going to illegitimate recipients at the time.[19] Municipal ordinances encouraged residents to report suspected cases of misuse of welfare money,[20] and one city office got in trouble after its employees dressed up in jackets sporting a message vilifying welfare-cheating "dregs" on their backs.[21]

Those who stood to benefit financially from Abenomics overlooked the disheartening mood of the time and made money, driving wealth disparities up to new levels. Corporate leaders had been given an opportunity to boost profits beyond the benefits of Abenomics, largely by Abe himself: the 2020 Summer Olympic Games. While the masses worried about welfare cheats (and the possibility of distant rocky islands being seized by China), the same corporations that were refusing to raise wages jockeyed for special Olympic Games deals with massive under-the-table payments.[22] Meanwhile, wealthy individuals and companies salivated over opportunities to benefit from large-scale casino resorts, which the Abe administration wanted to build at key spots, resulting in more

clandestine exchanges. The December 2019 arrest, and 2021 conviction, of an LDP lawmaker for accepting bribes from a Chinese gambling operator eager for a chunk of a new market was probably only the tip of the iceberg.[23] Illicit money-making methods aside, under Abenomics many got rich and many who were already wealthy got richer, driving luxury goods purchases among the new rich high enough to boost the GDP to pre-COVID-19 levels by the summer of 2022.[24] But the majority—symbolized perhaps by the two men facing conviction for assault and murder mentioned above—experienced overall wealth loss, increased economic insecurity, or total destitution.

Throughout the dark, jingoistic 2012-2020 era of Abe rule, Japanese society became more divided politically: supporters of Abe and the state pitted against unpatriotic subversives and the generally unwelcome. Emboldened by Abe administration nationalism, far-right hate groups like the infamous Zaitokukai launched online recruiting campaigns that resulted in ugly anti-Korean rallies in major cities. These, in turn, spurred anti-rightist protests. And the next big scapegoats for LDP/Abe administration failures were non- or insufficiently procreating adults, because a shrinking population means fewer laborers and taxpayers in the future, among other complications. During the first half of 2018, when Japan's birthrate stood at 1.42,[25] several members of Abe's cabinet and other prominent LDP lawmakers publicly blamed women and "selfish" people for not having children, or more children, despite the fact that 70 percent of parents surveyed at the time reported that they were not doing so due to financial reasons and job demands.[26] The mouthy LDP politicians had conveniently overlooked the fact that improving such conditions was not only their job, but also central to Abenomics. These comments were widely recognized as representative of Abe administration ideology.[27] Moreover, blaming women for not providing the country with more children was nothing new for LDP lawmakers. In January 2007, during Abe's first stint as prime minister, the health, labor and welfare ministry chief publicly branded the nation's women "birthing machines" and chastised them for not working harder to serve that function.[28] And as if attacking the country's women, and couples with "only" one or two children, was not offensive enough, an LDP lawmaker declared in a July 2018 article that non-heterosexual people were "unproductive" and therefore should be ineligible to receive government support.[29]

My faith in Japan, though wounded by the nationalistic, pro-Abe giddiness of 2013-2016, was increasingly reaffirmed during the latter half of the decade, as more and more people began to groan when the prime minister publicly touted his eponymous and dubious recipe for economic reconstruction. One by one, institutions that had adopted long-term plans based on anticipation of Abenomics windfalls reconsidered their options and dropped such plans, scaling their expectations back to more realistic levels. Before long, only certain economists, commentators, and shills were publicly seen, heard, and read unequivocally extolling the virtues of Abenomics and confidently pointing toward great benefits on the horizon. This marked the beginning of a curious development: As disappointment in and distrust of Abenomics rose inside Japan during the remainder of the decade of Abe rule, expectations seemed to remain strong overseas, particularly in the United States. This also carried over to Abe himself, who tended to be viewed favorably by the U.S. media throughout his time as prime minister and even after.

Had Abenomics succeeded, many more people might have tolerated LDP/Abe administration arrogance and offences—not to mention the scandals, bellicosity, and historical revisionism.[30] There may even have been less resistance to Abe's campaign to control Japan's free press.[31] But Abenomics was doomed from the start because it rested on three flawed beliefs: (1) that trickle-down economics works, (2) that growth (measured by GDP) is necessarily good for a country, and (3) that the state and economy exist a priori of the people. First, at its core Abenomics was a dressed-up trickle-down scheme. But trickle-down failed under Reagan and Thatcher in the 1980s, under Fed Chair Ben Bernanke in the 2010s, and under Abe—and caused Liz Truss' downfall—because it simply doesn't work. A government that cuts corporate and other taxes at the highest levels aiming for a trickle-

down is simply outsourcing its redistributive function to the wealthiest class. Combined with a devalued currency, a regressive sales tax, and inflation with insufficient salary boosts, it sucks wealth from the working class and cruelly punishes those who have slipped below that level. Japan's predicament well illustrates the recent conclusion of King's College London researchers David Hope and Julian Limberg that trickle-down economics enriches the wealthy but brings no benefits to countries in terms of growth or employment.[32] (See also Olinsky and Mayerson's 2013 similar argument.[33]) Indeed, new assessments of the effects of Abenomics and Japan's current fiscal situation point to heightened wealth inequality and increased financial misery.[34] The OECD now ranks Japan only barely within the top 30 low-Gini-coefficient countries.[35]

Second, chasing economic growth is a fruitless endeavor in this era of late capitalism. Capitalism itself is sputtering, breaking down and requiring wealth injections and patch-ups every time it hits a bump in the road, as the shadow of the grim reaper of ecological ruin hanging over it grows longer. Furthermore, the realization that GDP is one of the worst possible measurements of the health of a country's economy—the conclusion of a 2010 book by Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi—is spreading.[36] Furthermore, "growth" as it is conventionally conceived, and as necessarily a good thing, has increasingly come into question. Cogent arguments have been made that infinite economic growth is not possible.[37] Growth has even been labeled "passe" (yet arguments to the contrary have been made, by eminent economist Joseph Stiglitz, for example).[38] Noted economist Herman Daly argues for de-emphasizing growth, which he calls "an idol of our present system," as well as GDP.[39] Anthropologist Jason Hickel presents a compelling argument for degrowth, leading to a new type of economy that would be both fair and ecological—one that would not enrich the wealthy and powerful but protect the weakest people on the planet.[40] Opinions vary, but it has become clear that simply aiming for economic growth measured by GDP is no longer tenable and that politicians who do so are passe.

Last, Abe and his cohorts made the mistake of viewing the state as a permanent entity, for which its citizens are obligated to work, and the state's economy as its lifeblood, to be fed by the people and used mainly to protect the state from those who would harm it. According to this mindset, the state's money belongs to the state and its people should be grateful to receive it, and those who do not pay taxes but rather live on state handouts are problematic at best, generally undesirable, and unpatriotic at worst. But a state only exists because it has people, the economy exists as an outgrowth of society, in which it is embedded and for which it functions, and the wealth of a state belongs to its people. Individuals sometimes need to draw on it for survival and cannot always make payments to support it. To be sure, there will always be opportunistic "freeloaders," but this label is too often misapplied for political gain, and true "freeloaders" are far less harmful than their wealthy and powerful opportunistic counterparts. Japan has too many politicians, especially at the highest levels, who were born privileged and seem to have no concern for those who were not or who do not fit into their status quo fantasy world. Many of these, like Abe, are legacy lawmakers, a term that describes at least one-quarter of the country's politicians.[41] And unfortunately, Japan also has too many growth-focused, conventional economists. Yet it has others, too. University of Tokyo emeritus economics professor Naohiko Jinno has long eschewed neoliberalism and pointed toward Scandinavian models, arguing for Japan to build a kinder, more inclusive, more generous system based on a sharing philosophy akin to Nordic countries.[42] It is no wonder that LDP prime ministers have long eschewed him.

Japan's current prime minister, Fumio Kishida, has publicly laid the blame for Abe's murder at the feet of the Nara police for not providing adequate protection on that fateful July day.[43] It is true that with better protection Abe would probably still be alive. However, the attack occurred in the first place because of structural problems with Japan's political system, because for far too long and for far too many of Japan's politicians—particularly those of the LDP and others on the right—winning

elections has been more important than what is best for society, and because of a general lack of concern on the part of the LDP for unemployed, "non-productive" residents of the country. Many other violent attacks of late—although none condonable—can be attributed at least in part to dereliction of duty on the part of the state; research points to economic inequality and inability to respect others as the most important factors in the prevalence of murder in a society.[44] Japan's economic revitalization minister publicly admitted in October 2021 that Abenomics caused greater wealth inequality, and encouraging respect for all members of society was never high on Abe's agenda.[45] Abe is gone, Abenomics is (ostensibly) out, and Kishida now touts "new capitalism." However, right now this looks like old Abenomics in a new suit. Sadly, unless Japan's political status quo changes, and soon, its people are likely to get more of the same. They deserve better.

notes

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