The Legacy of Abe Politics: The contrast with the assassination of Hara Takashi—From confrontational democracy to a democracy of dialog

Hara Takashi (1856–1921) served as the Prime Minister in 1918-1921.
Source: Portraits of Modern Japanese Historical Figures (www.ndl.go.jp/portrait/e/)

Abe Shinzo (1954-2022) served as the longest-serving prime minister in Japanese history for eight years and eight months.
Photo: Cabinet Public Affairs Office

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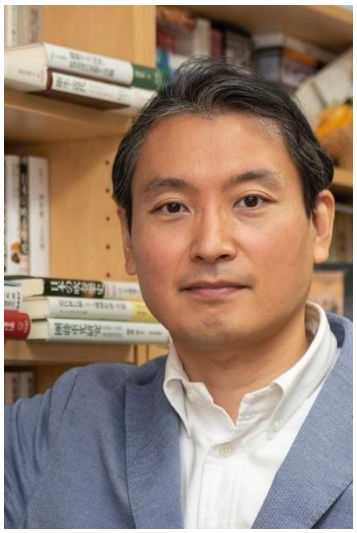

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On July 8, I was in Nagano City in Nagano Prefecture on a research business trip when I heard reports about the assassination of the former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. I had seen a notice on a poster for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) candidates on a noticeboard for the Upper House election. The notice said, "16:55 Nagano Station Speaker Former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo." I noted the date in my diary to take the opportunity to hear him. However, the speech in Nagano was canceled and Abe went to support another candidate at Nara City where the incident took place.

As if to muffle the indescribable feelings, something that happened 101 years ago came to mind. On November 4, 1921, Prime Minister Hara Takahashi (1856–1921), the "Commoner Prime Minister," was stabbed to death by a young man at Tokyo Station. This incident was the first assassination of a sitting prime minister in the history of constitutional government in Japan. Apparently, the tragic incident made people speechless and the whole city fell silent.

Come to think of it, this rings a bell. From time to time, I have seen well-known politicians targeted with acrimoniously worded posts on social media saying, "You deserve the same fate as Hara." Former Prime Minister Abe (1954–2022) was the target of criticism as was Prime Minister Kishida Fumio. Even though I was distressed by such excessively strong words directed at democratically elected politicians, I tried to understand it as a social safety valve for venting frustration and an aspect of liberalism. I never imagined that anyone would put the words into action.

Following the assassination, comparisons have been drawn with historical incidents. In modern times alone, quite a few politicians had their careers cut short by assassination, among them Okubo Toshimichi (1830–78), Hoshi Toru (1850–1901), Ito Hirobumi (1841–1909), Inukai Tsuyoshi (1855–1932), Saito Makoto (1858–1936) and Takahashi Korekiyo (1854–1936).

Many historians emphasize the differences between each incident. Current or former employer, political intent or personal grudge, prewar imperial sovereignty or postwar sovereignty of the people …. Theirs is a reasonable stance for studying history based on fact, but comparisons that ignore these differences set off warning bells.

On the other hand, understanding how our predecessors handled these incidents may provide major clues for moving forward and processing these indescribable feelings. To cordon off an incident in society as a non-political issue based on a slight amount of leaked information is to lose an opportunity to reflect.

Hara is the best figure to compare with Abe. Their political positions were similar as both men played a role in party politics and showed strong political leadership in an age when reform was demanded. While they were highly regarded for their political skills by researchers and contemporary politicians, both men were also criticized in the media and in public opinion for being heavy-handed and authoritarian.

There are also similarities in the circumstances around their assassinations. They were both democratically elected prime ministers dealt a premeditated hand by a single citizen without any clear political background.

On the other hand, there are major differences between the democracies in the period when the two men lived. Hara's was an age of confrontation when different powers locked horns with each other under the separation of powers based on the Meiji constitutional system. Abe's was an age of dialog as a political act when the governing party, which is charged with responsibility for the nation, listens to the opinions of the people based on the Constitution of Japan and the parliamentary cabinet system. These two phases stand in contrast.

Praise for strong leadership, public criticism, and violence intended to change something. The different phases of democracy. Bridging politics and society, modern and contemporary times, the two tragedies seem to have implications for a democracy.

Setbacks, biding time, dramatic comebacks

What did politics and the people want from them?

Hara Takashi established his career as a party politician at a time when the Meiji period (1868–1912) transitioned into the Taisho period (1912–26), and is regarded as the first party politician to capture the prime minister's seat.

Public opinion was impatient. In 1913, people surrounded the Diet demanding the immediate implementation of party politics (the Movement to Protect Constitutional Government). However, Hara did not agree with radicalism and distanced himself from the movement. He was branded a traitor to constitutionalism who was prolonging government by the *han*-clan (*hanbatsu*) government. A year later,

Rikken Seiyukai (Association of Friends of Constitutional Government), the party Hara was leading, fell from power and suffered a crushing defeat in the general election two years later.

For Abe, on the other hand, everything went smoothly the first time he came to power. It was in 2006. People welcomed the arrival of a new age with a young prime minister in his early 50s, and the first to have been born after the war.

However, the young prime minister made more enemies by launching a rapid succession of reforms, and was criticized for being heavy-handed. As the Cabinet became embroiled in one scandal after another, his approval rating plummeted. The decisive blow came with the issue of the missing pension records. Abe stepped down after only one year in office when he suffered a crushing defeat in the Upper House election.

Amid hardship, neither man was disheartened, but looked to the future and cultivated their parties and their peers. They both dispelled anything that showed hints of elitism and became appreciated as dependable leaders that listened to others.

After biding their time, each one made a dramatic comeback. Hara was brought back by the popular sentiment that had dragged him down earlier. In 1918, the last year of World War I, dissatisfaction with the Siberian intervention, which had no clear goals, set off the Rice Riots of 1918, which engulfed the whole country. The han-clan government could not keep going. The choice fell on Rikken Seiyukai led by Hara.

At first, people had no great expectations of a new cabinet that had come to power with the approval of the *genro* (elder statesmen from the han-clan). Hara depended on the han-clan. A coalition cabinet that compromised with the han-clan was seen as the best he could do.

Therefore, with the exception of the military minister, Hara appointed Rikken Seiyukai members, or bureaucrats affiliated with Rikken Seiyukai, to the cabinet. People were amazed at the emergence of this genuine party cabinet, and their expectations increased.

The emergence of the second Abe Cabinet (2012) was also dramatic. The response to the Great East Japan Earthquake had thrown the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government off course. Facing down comments that a defeated general should not come back, Abe ran in the LDP Presidential election. Bouncing back from unfavorable speculation, he advanced to the deciding vote, and in the end he was reelected.

Taking advantage of the momentum, he won a major victory when he faced Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko of the DPJ in a debate in the Diet and extracted a commitment to dissolve the Lower House and call new elections. Expectations were high for the first prime minister to head a second government based on the Constitution of Japan.

By defying expectations, the two men succeeded in making their comebacks and opening up new horizons. Backed by strong expectations of the people, Hara was in power for three years and one month before he was assassinated, and Abe was in power for seven years and eight months before he resigned.

Deflated expectations, personal attacks, and assassination

Perhaps he is the reformer of our times? The expectations placed on both Hara and Abe were far higher than before. While recollecting both men, I will focus on Hara.

Making cost-of-living measures his immediate task, Hara was held in high regard for pushing ahead with expansionist fiscal policies. However, the conclusion of World War I marked the start of an economic bubble. Hara prioritized support for the business sector, which led the national economy, and put off the social policies that were needed due to the social change brought about by World War I. The day-to-day

life of the citizenry grew harder as inflation accelerated.

In 1920, seeing the unpopularity of the Cabinet, the opposition parties tried to reform the House of Representatives Election Law, which had only just been revised the previous year, and embarked on a proposal for the Universal Male Suffrage Act. Hara took to the rostrum and objected by arguing that to change a law after it had already been revised without as much as an election constituted abuse of legislative power. The newspapers praised the well-reasoned argument, but they simultaneously warned that the people would hardly be impressed by a clever line of argument.

Hara responded to the attacks of the opposition parties by dissolving the Lower House without warning, and won a crushing victory in the election. But this was only the start of the nightmare. In the eyes of the people, Hara and the Rikken Seiyukai appeared to have even more authority than before now that they had won the election. As the victory loosened the ruling party's sense of morality, a number of corruption cases erupted. Speculative fever among the wealthy classes rose and the share market started to slump.

The opposition parties attacked the blunders by the government and submitted as many as thirteen propositions against the government in the Diet. The ruling party also exposed the secrets of the opposition parties, and the national assembly turned into an arena for heckling. The Diet degenerated into a place for dragging down the opponent rather than a venue for verbal debate, and people's expectations of both the administration and parliamentary politics waned in the election. The newspapers were no exception as many journalists were arrested for corruption. The sense of stagnation deepened.

A negative image of Hara emerged. He is not concerned about the people, he caters to the han-clan and the business sector, and he controls the ruling party with its absolute majority. People regarded Hara as the personification of authority and the personal attacks began.

When it was discovered that the prospective crown princess was color-blind, popular sentiment was busy discussing the pros and cons. When Hara stood by the principle that the government does not interfere in the affairs of the Imperial Court, the public accused him of being irresponsible and ridiculed him for neglecting his political responsibilities.

The attacks also extended to his personal life. A major newspaper revealed that Hara regularly visited a female calligrapher and intimate friend in the home that he had set up for her. This was a heavy blow for Hara who was known as a devoted husband. Some articles also claimed that he had lost his confidence amid criticism from all sides, and that he relied on fortunetellers.

He must have been very tired. Around this time, he noted in his diary that he had been able to pass bills through the Diet session on an unprecedented scale. He must have felt so cornered that he could not move forward unless he wrote down his achievements to encourage himself. His well-known last will and testament was also approved in this period.

In actual fact, Hara was exploring the timing for stepping down. His period in power had already far exceeded the average term of a year and a half for Japanese prime ministers before the war, and the policies set out by his administration had also largely been realized. However, with the condition of Emperor Taisho taking a turn for the worse and no party political successor found, the *genro* did not give him leave to step down.

The Crown Prince's visit to Europe offered some hope for the future of the Imperial family and for Japan, and the United States proposal for the Washington Naval Conference (1921–1922) was an opportunity to renew the image of Japan, which was seen as militaristic, so Hara told his Cabinet he would see one more Diet session through.

This was the time when Hara finally understood the need to appeal to the nation and became more proactive about responding to the coverage in newspapers and magazines. Seeking the understanding of the public ahead of the ordinary Diet session, he was busy touring the whole country to give speeches when he was stabbed to death at Tokyo Station as he was about to head to the party conference in the Kansai region.

What I have described here happened 101 years ago. How does this appear to us who are alive today? The first assassination of a sitting prime minister in the history of constitutional government in Japan did not happen to a politician from the han-clan, which had been seen as the personification of political power, but to a party politician elected by the people.

What was the reason?

Why did this tragedy occur? As the context for the crime becomes clear, the conclusion is that the reason was the spread of anxiety about the progress of capitalism and changes to the social order.

It was a transitional period when old ideas and new ideas came and went. The painter Arishima Ikuma (1881–1974) saw a society that was breaking up, one where there was no longer any contact between the ideas of the earlier era and the new era. The offender, who had old ideas that valued the power of the individual, killed a politician with old ideas who had used the power of the individual to run the political process.

Hara had ambitions to raise the awareness of the populace. He had increased spending on education and he had implemented reforms to improve the treatment of police officers and to assign superior human resources around the country.

The old bureaucrats and military factions viewed Hara's approach as progressive whereas the populace still saw him as conservative and lacking a sense of democracy. This was the difficult dilemma of the transitional period. The prevailing attitude was to verbally abuse others without listening to anyone with different ideas.

This attitude figured even more prominently in the media. Sensationalism was rampant and, as I mentioned above, intruded into Hara's private life. When Yasuda Zenjiro (1838–1921), the founder of the Yasuda *zaibatsu* (a financial clique), was assassinated one month before Hara was stabbed to death, many newspapers discussed and even praised the claims of the assassin. This had a major impact on the ambitions of the assassin who stabbed Hara.

A certain female activist bitterly criticized the media for toying with the discourse, making the public believe that a politician who wagered his life on the affairs of state was a traitor while sneering that having a body guard was contrary to being the "commoner Prime Minister."

Fifty years after the Meiji revolution (*Meiji ishin*), discourse was free, though inadequately so, and the path to self-realization through one's own efforts had begun to open up. On the other hand, the official stance was based on Imperial sovereignty and the people were not yet aware that they were becoming a major political power.

Hara is often regarded as having argued both for and against universal suffrage, but this is a misunderstanding. Rather, he supported universal suffrage in the future by, for example, granting financial support to campaigners for women's suffrage. He thought that the legitimacy of party politics would be strengthened if universal suffrage was implemented.

He was not in denial, but Hara realized that it was too early for universal suffrage. Weaving a reasoned and established public opinion out of the emotional popular sentiment that expresses what people think

required people to understand their own power, to take responsibility for their opinions, and to listen to the opinions of others. Hara wanted a society where such dialog was the norm.

After the war, sovereignty transitioned to the people in both name and reality. Power was concentrated in the hands of the governing ruling party thanks to the parliamentary cabinet system. Such concentration of power is premised on democratic dialog where elected representatives choose the path forward through debate. The balance between the concentration of power and dialog is much more important.

However, in the early Heisei era (1989–2019), power became even more concentrated around Prime Minister-led initiatives in order to adapt to the changing times. The balance was upset, the prime minister was once again seen as an influential person, and the tragedy repeated itself.

How should politics respond?

Now I will return to the story of 101 years ago. How should politics respond in the wake of an assassination? The assassination was perceived as a denunciation not only of Hara as an individual, but also the Rikken Seiyukai, the bureaucracy and the military clique. Political and social reforms were considered urgent.

In that case, Kenseikai (the Constitutional Politics Association), the opposition party, should have had high hopes. However, they had persisted with their opposition to the ruling party and were not prepared to assume power. Above all, even the people viewed their verbal attacks on Prime Minister Hara as one of the reasons for the assassination, so the party leaders were forced to explain themselves. Seeing the situation, Yoshino Sakuzo (1878–1933), known for his thoughts on *minpon shugi* (democracy with people as the basic principle), lamented that the opposition parties had no power and that there was no outlet for the political power of the populace.

The root of the problem was that democracy had been undermined. Ozaki Yukio (1858–1954), the "God of constitutional politics," cited the push for votes even when the debate had been lost, in other words, ignoring the power of debate, as the reason for the lack of reform of the streak of irrationality in society. He criticized the political culture in Japan where disagreements are resolved by force of numbers rather than debate, and made a strong appeal for improvement and progress, saying it is not acceptable that someone who disagrees must be consigned to oblivion by the pen, by speech, by malicious gossip, or ultimately, by the blade.

Even if one politician is assassinated, the conduct of other politicians will not change. The only recourse is for the populace to change since there will be no fundamental change without open discourse. Constitutionalism had indeed been introduced with the Meiji revolution. In the process, the Japanese people had acted non-constitutionally, betraying themselves even though they had demanded constitutional politics. Hasegawa Nyozekan (1875–1969) argued that constitutional politics in Japan had been made null and void by the Japanese people.

After World War I, the world was awash in difficult policy issues including labor relations, wealth disparity, ideology, fiscal policy, and international politics. Even Hara could not control the loose fiscal administration.

To realize the underlying principles of democracy, it is essential that the populace makes decisions and acts on the basis of reason. It takes more than one great politician to make this happen; it takes a sound populace. The intellectuals and politicians who realized this finally got off their backsides and got involved with political education.

The significance for today

Around the time of the transition from the Meiji to the Taisho period, people started to actively express their political will. Sometimes, this manifested itself in the form of violence. When the right to vote is restricted, violence is a strong statement of intent, though not a legal one. Based on the separation of power under the Meiji constitutional system, the people had two forces at their disposal to change politics: discourse and violence.

As the Taisho democracy progressed, politics based on discourse became widespread and it became possible to exercise authority without the use of violence. This meant that people's power of reasoning was tested when things did not go their way. When reckless criticism of the government by the opposition parties and sensationalism in the media resonated with discontent among the people, violence that was intricately intertwined with self-realization continued to be waged under the banner of social reform.

Shortly before he died, Hara thought that the criticism against him had peaked. He embarked on social policies, and the Crown Prince was warmly welcomed by the people when he returned from his tour of the West. Seeing this, Hara was determined to see one more Diet session through. Unfortunately, his courage led to a tragedy for Japanese politics.

After Hara's death, Rikken Seiyukai fell apart and the political world descended into chaos. If only Hara was still alive was a phrase repeated in many quarters. Party politics did not stabilize and nine years later, in 1930, Hamaguchi Osachi (1870–1931), the popular second "commoner Prime Minister," was shot at Tokyo Station and died the following year. Soon after, party politics came to an end.

The problem was in the system. The separation of powers under the Meiji constitutional system necessitated personal integrity. As demands for the people to participate in politics grew, the interests of the old guard and the people were in conflict and it was next to impossible to build bridges between them. This is where Hara's limitations and tragedy lay.

However, that was the prewar democracy. As seen in the Movement to Protect Constitutional Government and the Rice Riots, the people will force politics to change. This also meant that reform still felt possible in a confrontational democracy. But, this is not the basis for creating reconciliation, so the consequence for prewar democracy was defeat.

In this light, a system to stabilize the government, stipulating a parliamentary cabinet system, was created in postwar Japan. As a result, politicians were far less likely to become embroiled in the drama of assassination. Amid the guaranteed stability of the system, the present assassination is a test for the people of Japan. The people have strongly rejected the violence perpetrated on former Prime Minister Abe. It is unlikely that the assassination will set in motion a negative chain reaction as happened 101 years ago when the nature of society was being debated. This is no longer an age of confrontational democracy.

Nonetheless, understanding divisions in society at a turning point in time, and weaving a reasoned and established opinion out of the controversy of emotional popular sentiment has not manifested even today. It will not continue without diligent effort on our part.

As bearers of politics in the broad sense, we must tirelessly listen to each other to overcome the confrontational democracy and to create a democracy of dialog. The assassination has reminded us how important this is.

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