

## Abe's Assassination and its Surprising Outcome

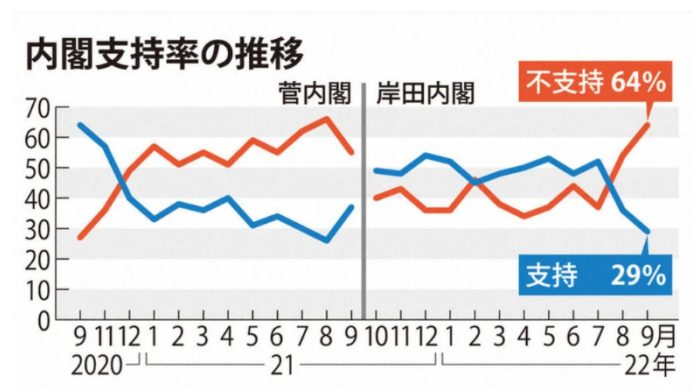
### Abstract

In July 2022, former Prime Minister (PM) Shinzo Abe was killed during a political rally in Nara, Japan. The event came as a surprise in a nation with strict gun laws and low levels of violence. The murderer asserted that Abe's connections to the South Korea-based religious organization Unification Church were the reason for the attack rather than any political motivations. The Church is accused of using predatory sales tactics, promoting questionable religious practices such as arranged mass weddings, and political influence. Following the assassination, it was found that many members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) had connections to the Unification Church, which led PM Kishida to reshuffle his cabinet to remove these individuals. How has this incident altered the political landscape in Japan? What is happening within the LDP? This article will seek to analyse the impact of Abe's assassination and its aftermath in Japan's politics.

Tags: Japan, assassination, Unification Church, controversy, East Asia, politics, lobbying, LDP

### Introduction

Following the snap election in October 2021, Prime Minister (PM) Fumio Kishida was elected. Even though his political approval rating was not particularly high – just under 50% – the LDP was able to win a strong majority, which would make it easier to pass legislation <sup>1</sup>. PM Kishida's approval rate hit the highest in July 2022 with 63.2% of respondents approving his Cabinet <sup>2</sup>. This seemed to indicate that the assassination would strengthen the position of the LDP since voters would mourn former PM Abe as a martyr. But things did not go as smoothly as predicted.



Former PM Suga's and current PM Kishida's approval ratings from September 2020 to September 2022 <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> McCurry, 'Ruling Party of Fumio Kishida Wins Comfortable Victory in Japanese Election'.

<sup>2</sup> Kyodo NEWS, 'Japan Cabinet's Approval Rating Rises to Highest 63.2% after Vote'.

<sup>3</sup> Ito, '岸田内閣支持29% 7ポイント減、3割割る 毎日新聞世論調査 [写真特集1/8]'.

The assassination uncovered a series of controversial facts about the LDP which outraged the Japanese people. In September 2022, the approval rating of Kishida's cabinet dropped to the lowest point, 40.2%, due to LDP's links to the Unification Church<sup>4</sup> — a South Korea-based religious organization founded by Reverend Sun Myung Moon in 1954<sup>5</sup>. The poll also showed clear opposition to Abe's state funeral with 60.8% of respondents against it. This plunge in popularity led PM Kishida to shuffle his cabinet and expel LDP members with connections to the Church. Nevertheless, support continued to fall, reaching 27.4% in October 2022<sup>6</sup>. The government's disappointing response to price increases, LDP ties to the Unification Church, and Abe's state funeral appear to be the causes.

How has Abe's assassination altered the political landscape in Japan? What is happening within the LDP? How has the population reacted? This article seeks to analyse the recent events in Japan's politics to better understand the outcome of what happened. It begins with a description of the assassination and an explanation of the killer's motivations. It then analyses how the assassination revealed a complex web of connections and lobbying between Japan's ruling party and the Unification Church, as well as the ensuing public backlash due to its discovery.

## Abe's Assassination

On July 8, days before a legislative election, former PM Shinzo Abe was shot and killed in Nara by an unidentified assailant. Abe was giving a political speech at a traffic intersection when the attacker fired twice at him from behind. Abe would later be transported by helicopter to the Nara Medical University Hospital, where he would be pronounced dead five hours after the shooting. The shooter was Tetsuya Yamagami who served in Japan's Self Defence Forces between 2002 and 2005. Due to the extremely strict Japanese gun laws, the investigations revealed that Yamagami was able to bypass legislation by making his gun from parts ordered on the internet<sup>7</sup>.

The investigators reported that Yamagami killed Abe for personal, as opposed to political reasons. Yamagami's father had died when he was just four, leaving his mother in a vulnerable and desperate state. She turned to the Church, but over time, donated significant sums rather than sustaining the family business which went bankrupt. Such bankruptcy eradicated Yamagami's hopes of pursuing higher education. This seems to be the reason why he decided to attack Abe, who he believed was close to the Unification Church.

Yamagami told the police that he had originally planned to kill Hak Ja Han, wife of the Church's Founder Moon who had died in 2012, but it was unlikely that she would visit Japan due to covid restrictions so he decided to target Abe. Yamagami acknowledged that Abe is not his true enemy saying "he is only one of the Unification Church's most influential sympathizers"<sup>8</sup>. Abe's

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<sup>4</sup> Kyodo Staff Report, 'Kishida Cabinet Support Rate Continues to Plummet, Survey Shows'.

<sup>5</sup> Khalil, "'Predatory Cult': The Shadow of Unification Church over Abe's Funeral'.

<sup>6</sup> Kyodo Staff Report, 'Kishida Cabinet Approval Slips below 30% for First Time in Jiji Poll'.

<sup>7</sup> Arranz et al., 'Assassination of Shinzo Abe'.

<sup>8</sup> Yamaguchi, 'Abe Murder Suspect Says Life Destroyed by Mother's Religion'.

presence in the Church's promotional content likely contributed to Yamagami's decision to target him. Here are three such examples:

- 1) Last year, Abe delivered a [short speech](#) at an event affiliated with the Church<sup>9</sup>;
- 2) Abe often appeared in the Church's weekly magazine *Sekai Shisou*<sup>10,11</sup>;
- 3) Abe's grandfather had ties with the Unification Church's Founder<sup>12</sup>.

The Church would frequently exploit its members, pressuring them to donate substantial sums of money, and playing on the Japanese guilt for their colonial atrocities in the Korean peninsula<sup>13</sup>. As more information about the Church's predatory behaviour and relationship with the LDP came to light, the public's sympathy for the shooter grew<sup>14</sup>.

### LDP's Patronage System

The Unification Church, now officially known as The Family Federation for World Peace and Unification<sup>15</sup>, is described as “a messianic, utopian sect with Christian overtones that combines post-war politics with appeals to family values centred on a charismatic cult-like figure”<sup>16</sup>. While the Church may not have been directly connected to Abe – as they proclaimed he was not a member<sup>17</sup> – it was certainly associated with Japan's ruling party, the LDP. The oldest known connection with the party is through Abe's grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, who forged a partnership with the Unification Church based on their shared anti-communist views and founded the International Federation for Victory over Communism<sup>18,19</sup>. The Founder's conservative views were a perfect match to the anti-communist sentiment brewing in post-war Japan.

Since its inception in 1955, the LDP has worked on creating a strong patronage system with associated interest groups that would provide their votes in exchange for benefits such as pensions, livelihood support, housing loans, and protection from reforms. The LDP makes use of this complex network of clients during elections. They frequently included conservative groups, such as *Nōkyō*, the largest agricultural organization in Japan, and the religious *Seichō No Ie*, which promoted militarism and emperor worship<sup>20</sup>. The Unification Church turned out to be part of this

<sup>9</sup> Shoaib, ‘Donald Trump and Mike Pompeo Spoke at a ‘Moonies’-Affiliated Event, despite Japan Controversy’.

<sup>10</sup> 世界思想 in Japanese

<sup>11</sup> SMART Flash, ‘安倍元首相銃撃 容疑者が語っていた「統一教会との関係」を示す「祝電報道」2021年にはビデオメッセージも’.

<sup>12</sup> Kelly and Park, ‘Explainer’.

<sup>13</sup> Khalil, “‘Predatory Cult’: The Shadow of Unification Church over Abe’s Funeral’.

<sup>14</sup> McLaughlin, ‘Church Drama Is a Dilemma for Kishida’.

<sup>15</sup> 世界平和統一家庭連合 in Japanese

<sup>16</sup> Khalil, “‘Predatory Cult’: The Shadow of Unification Church over Abe’s Funeral’.

<sup>17</sup> Khalil.

<sup>18</sup> 国際勝共連合 in Japanese

<sup>19</sup> Kelly and Park, ‘Explainer’.

<sup>20</sup> Reed, ‘Patronage and Predominance’.

patronage system where LDP politicians gained access to the Church members in return for more support for their political campaigns<sup>21</sup>.

It was indeed revealed by the LDP Secretary Toshimitsu Motegi that 179 LDP members - nearly half of the party - had direct connections with the Unification Church<sup>22</sup>. As this was a voluntary inspection, many LDP participants declined to disclose their allegiance and it is likely that many hid the truth<sup>23</sup>. For instance, two prominent LDP politicians, Eriko Yamatani and Koichi Hagiuda, were both involved with the Church but did not disclose it<sup>24</sup>. Hagiuda has been supported by the Church since his days as a simple Hachioji city assembly member, and he would often participate in events held by the Church like Christmas parties and Sunday barbecues<sup>25</sup>. It is reported that, through this patronage network, the Unification Church could promote its key agendas such as the opposition to women's advancement in society and same-sex marriage<sup>26</sup>.

The Unification Church, despite its controversial teachings and predatory practices towards its members, has colluded with the LDP for several years by trying to push its agenda to influence national policies. How did the Japanese citizens react when these revelations were disclosed?

### Japanese Citizens' Reactions

Despite the initial predictions that Abe's assassination would lend more legitimacy to the LDP<sup>27</sup>, these revelations caused a public backlash, with many Japanese taking a more critical stance towards the LDP. Japan has had its fair share of problems with cults. For instance, the famous sarin attack on the Tokyo metro by the religious group Aum Shinrikyo<sup>28</sup> still haunts national memory and has most likely played a role in triggering this reaction over the Unification Church<sup>29</sup>. This is not a unique occurrence for the LDP either, as they had ties with other religious groups like Seichō No Ie<sup>30</sup>, Nippon Kaigi<sup>31</sup>, the Association of Shinto Shrines, and its major political ally, Komeito, founded by the Buddhist movement Soka Gakkai<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Kelly and Park, 'Explainer'.

<sup>22</sup> McLaughlin, 'Church Drama Is a Dilemma for Kishida'.

<sup>23</sup> Miyahata and Nakasawa, '旧統一教会との接点、自民党の自主点検リストに「あの面々」の名前なし SNS上で批判殺到: 東京新聞 TOKYO Web'.

<sup>24</sup> Miyahata and Nakasawa, '旧統一教会との接点、自民党の自主点検リストに「あの面々」の名前なし SNS上で批判殺到: 東京新聞 TOKYO Web'.

<sup>25</sup> The Asahi Shimbun, 'Unification Church Followers Remind Hagiuda'; Daily Shincho, '萩生田光一政調会長、生稲晃子氏の選挙支援を統一教会に要請か 教会関係者は「萩生田さんは家族同然」'.

<sup>26</sup> Yamaguchi, 'Japan PM Apologizes for Party's Church Links, Will Cut Ties'.

<sup>27</sup> Sugiyama and Nussey, 'Abe's Body Returns Home, Japan Grieves for Former Leader'.

<sup>28</sup> オウム真理教

<sup>29</sup> McLaughlin, 'Church Drama Is a Dilemma for Kishida'.

<sup>30</sup> A right leaning religious group, 成長の家

<sup>31</sup> A far-right organization, 日本会議

<sup>32</sup> 創価学会

But what made this scandal extremely upsetting for the Japanese public were the nasty practices of the Unification Church: coercing its members to make large donations, convincing them to purchase spiritual tools for salvation, organizing arranged mass weddings, and harassing the members' families for recruitment purposes. Furthermore, the Church's popularity was a relatively unknown fact until now. Japan has been its biggest source of income for decades with 600,000 followers<sup>33</sup>.

Following these events, Japanese citizens started to show clear opposition to Abe's state funeral. In a poll conducted by Mainichi Shimbun, 62% of respondents opposed the funeral because the former PM was not worthy of the high price, at around \$12 million paid for by taxpayers<sup>34</sup>. Additionally, the controversies surrounding Abe's political career started to receive more attention. On the one hand, Abe is credited with restoring Japan's worldwide prestige, admired by many for his strong stance against China and North Korea, but loathed by others for his blatant revisionist views of history and overt jingoism<sup>35</sup>. In September, countless protests against the state funeral broke out in Japan<sup>36</sup>; a man even set himself on fire<sup>37</sup>.

On October 17, Kishida launched an investigation into the Unification Church under the Religious Corporations Act as he stated that he was "taking seriously" the allegations aimed at the Church. Kishida further said that the government received more than 1700 requests for help over financial issues and mental health problems from the Church's victims<sup>38</sup>.

## Conclusion

Abe's assassination had an unexpected outcome as it uncovered a series of controversies within Japan's longest-ruling party. The discoveries range from Abe's grandfather being a partner of the Church's Founder to the current LDP having deep connections with the Church. This has shed more light on the complex patronage system that the LDP has created throughout the years and the role this played in influencing national policies regarding minorities' rights protection and social progress. The controversial practices entertained by the Church towards its members triggered a public backlash against the LDP, which not only supported the religious group but was even endorsed by them. This led to growing discontent towards Kishida's government and opposition to Abe as a figure worthy of national recognition.

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<sup>33</sup> Kelly and Park, 'Explainer'.

<sup>34</sup> Lies, 'Japan's Funeral for Divisive Slain PM Shinzo Abe Fuels Backlash'.

<sup>35</sup> Klug, 'Abe's Militaristic Funeral Captures Japan's Internal Divisions'.

<sup>36</sup> Kageyama, 'Protesters Call for Cancellation of State Funeral for Japan's Abe'.

<sup>37</sup> Katsumura and Lies, 'Japanese Man Sets Himself on Fire in Apparent Protest at Former PM's State Funeral'.

<sup>38</sup> Kaneko, 'Japan PM Orders Probe into Unification Church Links to Ruling Party Members'.

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