

# Extremists Flourish in Abe Shinzo's Japan

By [Jeff Kingston](#)

Global Research, November 24, 2014

[Asia-Pacific Journal](#)

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [History](#)

*Many Japanese and long-time Japan observers have expressed dismay about the recrudescence of self-righteous nationalism under PM Abe Shinzo who has emboldened rightwing extremists now threatening democratic institutions, civil liberties and Japan's relations with its neighbors.*

Nakano Koichi, a professor of political science at Sophia University, comments, "The revisionist right in Japan with the active encouragement, if not involvement, of the Abe government has succeeded in controlling NHK news, intimidating Asahi Shimbun, and now academia."

Abe has presided over the mainstreaming of reactionary extremism in his quest to rewrite and rehabilitate Japan's dishonorable wartime past in Asia and in doing so instigates widespread international criticism. Any other national leader who did the same for their nation's egregious history would merit a similar reaction.

Recently Hokusei University in Sapporo moved to fire part-time lecturer Uemura Takashi, a former Asahi Shimbun journalist, because rightwing goons have threatened violence if he isn't removed. The provisional decision not to renew Uemura's contract came under duress, the president pointedly emphasizing the university's lack of resources to cope with the threats to student safety. Since the spring, the university has been inundated with threatening letters and phone calls demanding the teacher's dismissal for his controversial articles in the 1990s about the comfort women system.

What started as a clash over history has morphed into a broader political battle over national identity and Japan's democratic values. Nakano worries that, "each time a university succumbs to right wing intimidation, 'success' encourages more terrorist threats."

Reactionaries maintain that the Asahi and its reporters tarnished Japan's international reputation, but as Hokkaido University historian Philip Seaton explains, it is the "efforts by a small but powerful minority in Japan to deny atrocities that sullies Japan's name in international eyes."

These reactionaries are now inflicting infinitely more damage on Japan's reputation than a handful of newspaper articles in the 1990s. It is scandalous that the so-called Net Right of extremists, lurking behind pseudonyms and spewing ill-informed vitriol on the Internet, are eroding democratic freedoms, censoring inconvenient truths and degrading Japan's image internationally.

As Martin Fackler of the New York Times recently wrote (10/29/2014), these cyberactivists, "have gained an outsize influence with the rise of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's conservative

government, which shares the goal of ending negative portrayal of Japan's history, and with the acquiescence of a society too uninterested or scared to speak out." Fackler goes on to note several examples around Japan where the Net Right has imposed its agenda through thuggery.

Japan's cyber-terrorists sound like religious extremists, threatening "divine retribution" in the form of gas canisters packed with nails. By stopping towns from erecting repentant war memorials, caterwauling on the Internet and scaring employers into firing 'undesirables', these vigilantes represent Japan in jackboots. This evokes the 1930s when ultranationalists hounded respected academics such as Tatsukichi Minobe and Tadao Yanaihara from their posts, acts that coincided with a wave of assassinations.

The Net Right is the cutting edge of Japan's 21<sup>st</sup> century McCarthyism, reminiscent of an era when communist hysteria in the US unleashed a witch-hunt in the 1940s and 1950s that trampled on democratic freedoms.

Seaton insists that, "defending academic freedom must be sacrosanct. To terminate the ex-Asahi reporter's contract simply sends the message that "intimidation works". This incident could initiate a dangerous slide toward the muzzling and dismissal of researchers working on sensitive issues."

Andrew Horvat, former president of the Foreign Correspondents Club of Japan, points out that Uemura " has been caught in the cross fire of a proxy war on the comfort women issue. The aim of the rightists is to undermine the reputation of the Asahi, a liberal paper and he has become a pawn in this game."

Tomomi Yamaguchi, a professor of Anthropology at Montana State University says that Uemura has been on the right's hit list from the mid-2000s largely due to vilification by Nishioka Tsutomu, a professor at Tokyo Christian University.

Satoku Norimatsu, director of the Vancouver-based Peace Philosophy Centre, speculates that Hokusei itself is a target because of its 1995 Peace Declaration that goes much further than the Murayama Statement in acknowledging Japan's war responsibility and obligation to atone. Back then PM Murayama Tomiichi [condemned](#) Japanese aggression in Asia and called for an end to the "self righteous nationalism" currently embraced by the Net Right.

Andrew DeWit, a professor of public policy at Rikkyo University, asserts that, "The Abe regime has clearly abetted this mobilization of right-wing extremists against academic, media and other institutions."

"Allowing extremists to intimidate academe will not foster the learning environment that Japanese universities require in order to become the 'super global universities' envisioned in Abenomics", DeWit explains. "You cannot have it both ways, winking at ultra-nationalism that targets academe while at the same time actually building globally competitive institutions of critical inquiry."

Alexis Dudden, a professor of history at the University of Connecticut, argues that post-1945 Japan has advanced because of, "the ability to study, learn, and teach in an open atmosphere. Since then, Japanese society and all who engage with it have benefited and

thrived because of this fundamental freedom guaranteed in the 1947 Constitution.” In her view, “Turning away now degrades Japan’s capacities to lead and defines a “safe” society as one that cowers from bullies and sanitizes history to fit contingent political demands.”

Sven Saaler, a professor of history at Sophia University, notes that, “right-wingers have been pushing their agenda constantly with violence. They have actually violently attacked journalists, newspaper offices, and politicians.” Likewise, Mark Mullins, Professor of Japanese Studies at the University of Auckland, warns that, “Threats from right-wing activists have to be taken seriously. Recall that in 1990 Nagasaki Mayor Motoshima Hitoshi was shot by rightists for expressing his views about the Emperor and war responsibility; and in 2006 Katō Kōichi, a moderate LDP politician, had his house in Yamagata burned down for his criticism of Prime Minister Koizumi’s visits to Yasukuni Shrine.”

Saaler sees a broader pattern: “In recent years, pressure by right-wing groups has led to cinemas cancelling movies dealing with sensitive, war-related issues; hotels cancelling the reservations of conference rooms for symposia dealing with such issues; and museums cancelling or revising exhibitions with sensitive contents.”

Under Abe, Norimatsu believes the situation is worsening as, “widespread anti-China and anti-Korea sentiments, books of that kind becoming bestsellers, hate demonstrations, assault on history by the nation’s leaders that trickles down to the general public, page-ripping of Anne Frank’s diaries, hiding of Barefoot Gen in school libraries, assault on protest tents in Okinawa and anti-nuclear tents in Tokyo, and public places refusing to rent space to groups that discuss issues like the constitution and anti-nuclear power.”

Amid this rightist chill, Mullins worries that, “Academic freedom—and freedom of speech more broadly—is clearly threatened and is a legitimate concern for those who care about the future of democracy in Japan.”

Nakano laments that, “when an important principle of liberal democracy is under attack, the government should be playing an active role to condemn the attacks in strongest terms”, but instead is fanning the fires.

Saaler concludes, “The situation can be compared to Weimar Germany, where the authorities turned a blind eye to right-wing activities and let right-wing violence go largely unpunished.” Here we remain far from descending into that Nazi abyss, but government tolerance for intolerance and hooliganism makes a mockery of the rule of law, democratic norms and the Olympic spirit.

(Readers interested in the Hokusei affair are referred to the Foreign Correspondents Club of Japan [press conference](#) by Koichi Nakano and Jiro Yamaguchi)

**Jeff Kingston** is the Director of Asian Studies, Temple University Japan. He is the editor of [Natural Disaster and Nuclear Crisis in Japan: Response and Recovery after Japan’s 3/11](#), Routledge 2012 and the author of [Contemporary Japan. \(2<sup>nd</sup> edition\)](#), Wiley 2013.

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