Widespread opposition in Japan to Shinzo Abe's state funeral

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28 September 2022

The Japanese government held a state funeral for Shinzo Abe on September 27, the country's former and longest-serving prime minister who was assassinated in July. The event generated widespread opposition in the public, which knows Abe as a warmonger whose tenure in office was marked by a sharp push for remilitarization and attacks on democratic rights.

The funeral took place at the Nippon Budokan, an indoor arena in central Tokyo near the Imperial Palace. The event came with an estimated price tag of 1.66 billion yen ($US11.5 million), which included 250 million yen ($US1.73 million) for the funeral itself as well as costs for security and other expenses.

In total, more than 6,400 people from over 190 countries attended the funeral. Visiting foreign officials include top representatives of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a US-led, quasi-military alliance against China, that includes Japan as well as Australia and India. US Vice President Kamala Harris, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi were in attendance.

In addition, Taiwan also sent a delegation in a decision calculated to deepen Taipei's connections to Tokyo, the US, and other allies.

Abe was killed on July 8 in Nara while campaigning for the Upper House election on July 10. He was allegedly shot by Tetsuya Yamagami, a 41-year-old unemployed worker, angered over Abe's connections to the Unification Church, a far-right cult to which Yamagami's mother had donated some 100 million yen ($US700,000) since the 1990s.

Abe served as prime minister from 2006 to 2007 and again from 2012 to 2020, playing a key role in sharply shifting Japanese politics to the right.

Abe oversaw an agenda of remilitarization while preparing constitutional revisions that would make it easier to wage war overseas and to restrict democratic rights at home. This included record-high spending on the military; constitutional "reinterpretations" to justify going to war abroad alongside an ally (namely US imperialism); and railroading military legislation through the National Diet in 2015 to codify the reinterpretations despite widespread public opposition and protests.

His government, furthermore, engaged in a whitewashing of history in the media and in schools, denying or downplaying the crimes of Japanese imperialism prior to and during World War II. This was done to try to dull anti-war sentiment, particularly among youth, who face being dragooned into new wars in the future.

Abe did not settle into retirement after stepping down as prime minister, but continued to serve as a lawmaker, making belligerent comments on China, particularly over Taiwan—a Japanese colony for 50 years, from 1895 to 1945. He was fully committed to Washington's attempts to goad Beijing into war over Taiwan and even suggested in February that Japan should consider hosting US nuclear weapons.

The glorification of Abe by the present government of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida is meant to continue this agenda. State funerals are rare in Japan. Prior to World War II, the event was used by the ruling class to honor political and military figures in addition to members of the imperial family. Public mourning was compelled by law, which was scrapped after the war. Since then, the only non-royal family member to receive a state funeral was in 1967 for former Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida, who led Japan during the immediate post-war period.

Opponents of the state funeral denounced it as undemocratic and unconstitutional, amounting to a

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return to the pre-war period with the forced public mourning of Abe, paid for with tax payers' money. An online petition calling for the cancellation of the funeral gained more than 400,000 signatures. A *Yomiuri Shimbun* poll conducted at the beginning of September found that 56 percent of people opposed holding the event.

Numerous demonstrations were held against the funeral, attracting thousands of participants. Approximately 10,000 demonstrators marched in Tokyo on September 26, a day before the funeral. Machiko Takumi, one of the demonstrators, stated to the BBC, "Abe passed the collective self-defense bill (in 2015). It means Japan will fight with the Americans, which means he made Japan able to go to war again. That's why I oppose a state funeral."

Another protester in his 70s set himself on fire near the prime minister's office on September 21. The man, who survived and was taken to a hospital, left a note stating he was "strongly opposed" to the state funeral.

A 17-year-old high school student at a 4,000-strong rally outside the National Diet on August 31 told the *Asahi Shimbun*, "I'm not convinced that as much as 250 million yen has to be spent on the state funeral when students are having a hard time amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Hashtags to show opposition to the state funeral are being shared on social media. I want Kishida to reconsider and not ignore the [people's voices]."

Japan continues to lead the world in new COVID-19 cases. Without any discussion or input from the population, Tokyo has removed nearly all virus mitigation measures and allowed the deadly virus to run rampant throughout the country. As of September 27, there were 368,077 new official cases for the preceding week while thousands have died during the latest virus surge that began in July.

Kishida, therefore, is making clear that his government will not only continue preparations for war, but will run roughshod over the opposition of the working class and youth to attacks on democratic rights and mass infection with COVID-19. This is a process taking place around the world, as ruling classes legitimize far-right and fascist parties and politicians. This includes Donald Trump in the United States, and in Europe, Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Brothers of Italy (FdI).

Parties like the main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) offer no genuine opposition to the rise of the far-right. In regards to Abe's state funeral, CDP leader Kenta Izumi stated there is a "need" to "provide an opportunity for public mourning" while adding, "I too would like to express my appreciation for former Prime Minister Abe's achievements and efforts." He offered only mild criticism of the funeral, asking, "Where was the discussion [over the funeral's planning] between the three branches of power?"

In other words, what bothers Izumi is not Abe's right-wing record, but that the Democrats did not have more of a say in planning the funeral. Undoubtedly, the CDP hoped to offer its services in containing the protests that were emerging.

Workers and youth must also take the glorification of Abe as a sharp warning that further attacks on their social conditions and a deepening of Tokyo's war drive are being planned.

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