

Suicide as Protest - Two Self-immolations under the Abe Regime 抗議としての自死 安倍政権下で二度も起こった焼身事件

Satoko Oka Norimatsu

Between 2012 and 2014 we posted a number of articles on contemporary affairs without giving them volume and issue numbers or dates. Often the date can be determined from internal evidence in the article, but sometimes not. We have decided retrospectively to list all of them as Volume 10, Issue 54 with a date of 2012 with the understanding that all were published between 2012 and 2014.

A screen-shot from ANN News on the Hibiya Self-Immolation Incident

Satoko Oka Norimatsu

On the evening of November 11, 2014, a man set himself on fire at Hibiya Park in Tokyo, an area where government buildings are concentrated. The act was a protest against both the [“July 1 Cabinet Decision,”](#) which paved the way to lifting the constitutional ban on Japan’s exercise of its right to collective self-defense, and the new US military facility construction at Henoko and Takae in Okinawa.



Just four and a half months earlier, in Shinjuku, a major Tokyo commercial and entertainment district, another man from Saitama, north of Tokyo set himself afire in the middle of a busy shopping street, barely escaping death. His name has not been reported but [Asahi Shimbun's follow-up article](#) two month later describes him as a previously homeless man in his sixties now living on welfare. This self-immolation occurred on June 29, in the midst of a national debate over re-interpretation of Article 9 of the constitution that would allow Self Defense Forces to fight wars outside Japan in support of its allies, namely the United States. His act was witnessed by hundreds, many of whom photographed it and posted on social media sites.



June 29, Shinjuku protest speech before a Saitama man set himself on fire

(See more photos and video on [Mail Online](#))

In contrast to the international media that acted quickly, the major Japanese media followed slowly, with the exception of NHK, which blacked out the incident at a time when

the Abe administration was bent on eliminating the constitutional restriction on Japan’s overseas military action. The incident took most observers by surprise, as self-immolation as an act of political expression is, as Temple University Japan’s Jeff Kingston writes, “a last-resort demonstration of defiance normally confined to despotic states.”

The Japanese media response to the November 11 event was swifter than it was to the earlier self-immolation. The story was covered by [NHK](#), [Asahi](#), [Yomiuri](#), [Mainichi](#), and [Jiji](#), but their reports were uniformly based on the information provided by the police – the man was seen on fire at around 6:55 PM, November 11 in Hibiya Park, and he died shortly after being taken to a hospital; he had a camera set up to film the event and left a note addressed to Prime Minister Abe and the two parliamentary leaders, demanding nullification of the July 1 Cabinet Decision and the Henoko/Takae construction.

Most Japanese newspapers ran a small story buried inside the paper. Internationally, [BBC](#), [Telegraph](#), [Daily Mail](#), [Independent](#) and [RT](#) were among those that provided coverage, but interestingly there did not seem to be any US mainstream media coverage of the second incident, in contrast to the June self-immolation when the [New York Times](#) and [CNN](#) were among those that quickly reacted. Whether this had anything to do with the fact that the second suicide protested not just the Japanese government’s policy but also the construction of new US military facilities in Okinawa is unknown. But many of those that did report the November 11 self-immolation only mentioned opposition to constitutional revisions as the motive, making no mention of the US military base issue.

衆議院議長殿
参議院議長殿
安倍晋三内閣総理大臣殿

抗議文

違憲無効な「7・1閣議決定」を直ちに取り消せ！

集団的自衛権容認に基づく安保法制の立法準備及びガイドライン再改定などを即刻やめよ。

これらと結びついた沖縄の辺野古・高江の基地建設を今すぐ中止を。

国会両院は、違憲・無効な「国の存立を全うし、国民を守るための切れ目のない安全保障法制の整備について」2014年7月1日国家安全保障会議・閣議決定の取り消し決議を。

わたくしは死をもって訴えます。

2014年11月11日 新田 進

なお、この文書はいくつかの報道機関等に送付しました。

Nitta Susumu's letter of protest at the scene of his self-immolation.

It was sent to several media outlets.

The November 11 protest letter reads:

President of the House of Representatives

President of the House of Councilors

Prime Minister Abe Shinzo

Statement of Protest

Immediately nullify the unconstitutional, invalid
“July 1 Cabinet Decision”!

Without delay, withdraw any security-related
bills and revision of the United States-Japan
Defense Guideline based on the above decision.

Promptly stop military base construction in
Henoko and Takae in Okinawa, associated with
the above moves.

I demand that both Houses of parliament pass a
resolution to nullify the July 1, 2014 decision by
the National Security Council and the “[Cabinet
Decision on Development of Seamless Security
Legislation to Ensure Japan’s Survival and
Protect it’s People](#)”.

With my death, I plead.

November 11, 2014 Nitta Susumu

I have sent this statement to some media
organizations.

Nitta Susumu, was a member “[Katsudo Shudan](#)

[Shiso Undo](#) (Activist Group Thought Movement),” a socialist group established in 1969 that upholds “proletarian internationalism” and calls on the proletariat to “overcome the capitalistic modern age as a whole.” In the front page lead article of the group’s newsletter “[Shiso Undo](#) (Thought Movement)” dated June 15, two weeks before the Cabinet decision, Nitta condemned Abe’s attempt to re-interpret the constitution via a cabinet decision, saying that this “denies constitutionalism, and issues a death sentence to the pacifist principle of Article 9 and the constitutional revision process stipulated by Article 96, thereby undermining people’s sovereignty.”

Perhaps for Nitta, the “death sentence” to the war-renouncing constitution was worth defying with his own death.



Nitta's article on the cover of the June 15 edition of newsletter "Shiso Undo".

Nitta's posthumous essay was published on November 26 in the group's journal "Shakai Hyoron (Social Review)". In the article titled "The July 1 Cabinet Decision is Unconstitutional and Invalid - Calling for Reconstruction of the Movement against Destruction of the Constitution!", Nitta, a former court clerk, stresses on the unconstitutionality and (therefore) invalidity of the "July 1 Cabinet Decision" and calls for nullification of it. He criticizes the mass media for presenting the Cabinet Decision as if it constitutionally legitimizes the use of Japan's right to collective self-defense. He also

criticizes the pro-constitution movement, including himself, for "being caught in the mass media's trap" and buying into the government-created perception that the Cabinet Decision was sufficient to do what it claimed it did.

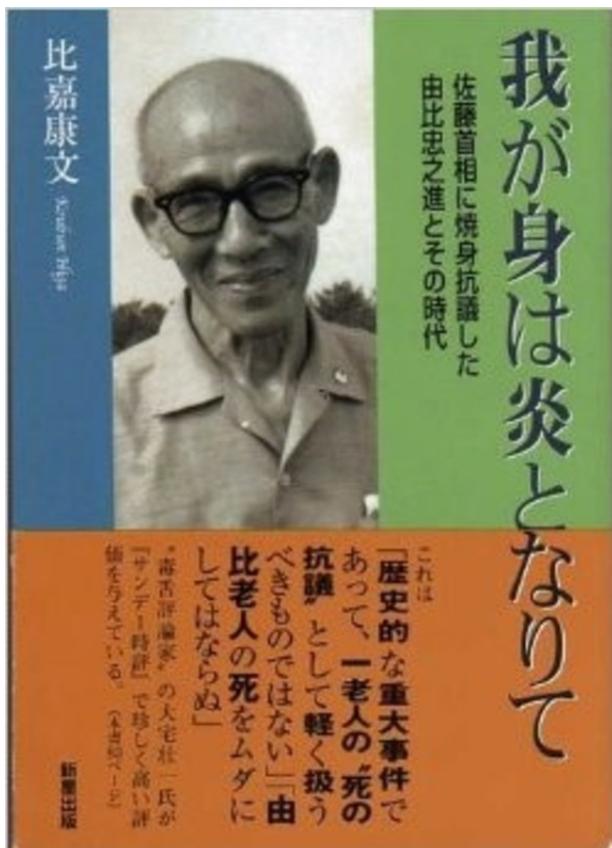
It was not immediately clear why Nitta had chosen November 11 for his protest, whereas the June 29 event occurred during the days leading up to the Cabinet Decision of July 1. But November 11, 1967 was the day when Yui Chunoshin, a 73-year old esperantist self-immolated in front of the Prime Minister's residence, condemning Prime Minister Sato Eisaku's support of the U.S. war in Vietnam and demanding that Sato negotiate harder with the United States for return of Okinawa and Ogasawara islands.

Yui, like Nitta, committed the act in the heart of the power centre of Japan. And like Nitta, Yui sent his letter of protest to the major newspapers. But when Yui died, major media provided far more extensive coverage. According to Higa Kobun, an Okinawan journalist who published Yui's biography in 2011, Tokyo Shimbun printed Yui's 3 1/2-page letter in full, and other major papers summarized it. In Nitta's case, only Tokyo Shimbun, a left-leaning regional newspaper distributed in Tokyo and adjacent prefectures, mentioned having received Nitta's letter, but they did not publish it and their reporting was minimal. Other newspapers made no mention of receipt of the letter. There was not even coverage of Nitta's death in the Okinawan newspapers, despite the fact that his reasons for choosing death included his protest against US base construction in Okinawa.

In 2014, Yui's political suicide seems largely

forgotten. Japanese press coverage of Nitta's suicide made no reference to either Yui's or the Shinjuku incident in June, whereas the foreign media referred at least to the Shinjuku incident. None of the media referred to Yui's self-immolation in reporting the Shinjuku incident in June. Some instead mentioned famous author Mishima Yukio's dramatic hara-kiri death in 1970, which had a totally different context from self-immolation in desperate defiance against the government by a nameless man. Nitta's act is perhaps closest to Yui's in 1972 in character (self-immolation as protest against national policy), which is doubtless why he chose Yui's anniversary for his protest.

During the almost half century since Yui's death, there have been at least four other politically motivated suicides: first a 17-year old boy Shirakawa Kazuo self-immolated in front of the U.S. Consulate in Osaka in April 1968 protesting the Vietnam War; second a 26-year old Okinawan man, Uehara Yasutaka, fatally crashed a motorbike into the front gate of the Parliament Building in Tokyo in May 1973, a year after Okinawa's reversion to Japan; third a 29-year old man, Funamoto Shuji, self-immolated in front of U.S. Air Force Kadena Base in Okinawa in June 1975 protesting Crown Prince Akihito's planned visit to Okinawa the following month, after abandoning his plan to assassinate Akihito.



Yui Chunoshin on the cover of Higa Kobun's biography of Yui.

Finally, as Higa Kobun notes, another self-immolation occurred under the Kishi Administration. On June 3, 1959, Kobayashi Hideo, a 42-year old Buddhist monk from a Zen temple in Hiroshima, came to the Prime Minister's residence, told security police he wanted to see Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke, then suddenly committed hara-kiri, stabbing his neck to finish the job. His protest was against the revision of the Ampo treaty and Japan's continued sacrifice of Okinawa as a U.S. missile base and its people. Kishi rammed through the Ampo revision in 1960 in the face of powerful opposition.

Kishi, a former unindicted class-A war crimes suspect in Sugamo Prison, and his younger brother Sato Eisaku, both of whom became Prime Ministers who "were met with death, as the ultimate form of protest, by a pacifist citizen, and both are about Okinawa," Higa comments. The current Prime Minister Abe Shinzo is Kishi's grandson, and Sato's grandnephew.

Kishi-Sato-Abe. With the addition of two incidents in a single year, self-immolation invoked by their pro-US military policies and Okinawa base policies have become a pattern as one form of response to the dark legacy of the political family that has retained power at the highest level throughout the postwar era Japan.

Strikingly, five of the seven above-mentioned protest suicides in the post-war Japan, directly pertain to Okinawa. One of them was committed by an Okinawan (the 1973 motorbike crash), and another occurred in Okinawa (self-immolation protesting the visit of the Crown Prince). It should not be taken lightly that Japan's and the United States' Okinawa policies have met not only one of the most powerful and sustained mass protest movements since the 1950s, but have also repeatedly prompted such desperate acts.

It must also be noted that in 2014 alone, two such protests occurred for the first time in decades, both under the 2nd Abe Shinzo administration, and both as a vehement response to Abe's attempt to destroy what constitutes the core of Japan's post-war identity, Article 9.

Satoko Oka Norimatsu is Director of the Peace Philosophy Centre, a peace-education organization in Vancouver, Canada, with a widely-read Japanese-English blog peacephilosophy.com. She is co-author with Gavan McCormack of *Resistant Islands: Okinawa Confronts Japan and the United States*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2012. The Japanese translation is 『沖繩の〈怒〉—日米への抵抗』 (法律文化社、2012) and the Korean translation is 『저항하는 섬, 오끼나와: 미국과 일본에 맞선 70년간의 기록』 (창비, 2014). She is also co-author with Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick of 『よし、戦争について話そう。戦争の本質について話をしようじゃないか』 『Let's Talk About War. Let's Talk about What War Really Is!』 (金曜日、2014). She is a Japan Focus editor.

Related Articles:

Jeff Kingston, [Self-immolation Protests PM Abe Overturning Japan's Pacifist Postwar Order](#)

Jeff Kingston and Asano Ken'ichi, [Japanese Mass Media Buries Self-Immolation Protest Over Abe Government's Constitutional Coup](#)

Bryce Wakefield and Craig Martin, [Reexamining "Myths" About Japan's Collective Self-Defense Change](#)