

Public Order Maintenance Law and Senji Yamamoto

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You are now at "Hanayashiki Ukifune-en," a cooking inn where Senji Yamamoto, who was assassinated at the young age of 40 for his opposition as a Diet member to the so-called "Public Order Maintenance Law," a rare evil law in prewar Japan, had been the owner for two years before his death.

- (1) Japan had a bad law called the Public Order Maintenance Law from 1925 to 1945, sometimes translated into English as the Peace Preservation Act, but in reality it was a "political suppression law". It was a law that could punish those who plotted to change the country's political system or deny the capitalist system of private property. Later this afternoon, you visit the monument to the Korean poet Yun Dong-ju, who was also a victim of the Public Order Maintenance Law.
- (2) The main purpose of the Public Order Maintenance Law was to prevent socialist and communist forces from gaining a foothold in parliament through the universal suffrage system introduced at the same time. The Public Order Maintenance Law, which eventually added the death penalty as the maximum penalty, was also used to suppress political movements, pacifists, and new religions.
- (3) In order to reflect the will of the people in politics, the system to elect members of the Diet was initiated in Japan in 1890, the year after Senji Yamamoto was born. According to the "House of Representatives Election Law" established at that time, voters who had the right to elect members of the Diet were limited to "men aged 25 or older who had paid at least 15 yen in national tax," and only 1.1% of the population (about 450,000 voters) were eligible. In addition, the right of suffrage to run for the Diet was limited to "men 30 years of age or older who had paid at least 15 yen in national tax." In 1900, the tax payment was lowered from 15 yen to 10 yen, but the essence of the law remained the same.
- (4) Eventually, a movement began to move forward for a "universal suffrage law" that would allow people to exercise their right to vote and be elected without any discrimination. In the Taisho era, the trend of "Taisho democracy" based on political scientist Sakuzo Yoshino's *Minponshugi*, or the idea that policy decisions should follow the will of the people, spread, leading to the establishment of a party cabinet system and universal suffrage. A movement to protect the constitution arose, and tens of thousands of people held demonstrations demanding universal suffrage. After that, the Takashi Hara Cabinet lowered the tax eligibility for voting rights from 10 yen to 3 yen, but even then only 5.5% of the population was eligible to vote, and the movement to demand universal suffrage grew even stronger.

- (5) In 1925, the Kato Takaaki Cabinet removed the requirement to pay tax as an electoral qualification and enacted the Universal Suffrage Law, which granted men over the age of 25 the right to vote and men over the age of 30 the right to be elected. Although the number of voters increased to approximately 12.41 million people, or 20.8% of the population, women were still unable to participate in elections. The government feared that the realization of universal suffrage would lead to even more social movements and enacted the Public Order Maintenance Law as a preventive measure.
- (6) Already in 1922, the then cabinet of Korekiyo Takahashi had submitted to the Diet a "bill for the control of radical social movements," but the bill was scrapped without deliberation, and the following year, 1923, in order to restore the confusion after the Great Kanto Earthquake, the "Security Ordinance" was issued as an emergency imperial decree. The Public Order Maintenance Law was the successor to these developments.
- (7) When the first general election was held in February 1928 under the cabinet of Giichi Tanaka, eight members of the Socialist Party and two members of the Labor Peasant Party, including Senji Yamamoto, were elected. In 1928, the government carried out a crackdown on socialists and communists, resulting in the "March 15 Incident" and the "April 16 Incident." In addition, in an emergency imperial decree, the maximum penalty under the Public Order Maintenance Law was the death penalty, and a new "crime of accomplishment of purpose" was created to punish supporters of socialists and communists as well.
- (8) One who directly opposed this movement was Representative Senji Yamamoto. He ran in the first general election in Kyoto and was elected with over 14,000 votes. He opposed the amendment of the Public Order Maintenance Law in the 55th and 56th Diet sessions and was scheduled to debate the amendment in the House of Representatives on March 5, 1929, but a motion by the ruling party (Rikken Seiyukai) forced a vote on the amendment, which was passed without Yamamoto being able to debate the motion. That night, Senji Yamamoto was stabbed to death by Hokuji Kuroda, a member of a right-wing group, at an inn in Tokyo where he was staying.
- (9) Between 1925 and 1945, hundreds of thousands of Japanese were arrested on suspicion of violating the Public Order Maintenance Law, and about 75,000 were sent to prison. The death toll from torture and prison deaths reached approximately 2,000, including the Korean poet Yun Dong-ju.