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Threat Is Seen to Free Speech in Japan

Politician targeted by an arsonist after criticizing the premier calls for an end to the intimidation.

By Bruce Wallace, Times Staff Writer August 30, 2006

TOKYO — An outspoken politician whose mother's house was burned to the ground after he criticized Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visits to a controversial war shrine warned Tuesday that increasing intimidation by right-wing extremists was casting a chill over free speech in Japan.

"There is less freedom than before to express one's feelings," said Koichi Kato, a onetime senior member of the governing Liberal Democratic Party, or LDP. Kato has become a target of hard-line nationalists for his criticism of Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni Shrine, which honors the souls of 2.5 million of the country's war dead, including 14 convicted war criminals from Japan's imperial era.

Many politicians, academics and journalists have been cowed into silence by the threat of nationalist violence, suffocating a crucial debate on Japan's relations with China, Kato said.

"I am one of the few [lawmakers] who dares to say things on the record," he said.

Kato, 67, made his comments flanked by bodyguards at a crowded Tokyo news conference on the day police arrested a 65-year-old man for the arson attack two weeks ago. Masahiro Horikome was accused of setting the fire that gutted a building in Kato's hometown of Tsuruoka,

which the lawmaker used as both an office and a home for his 97-year-old mother.

Onobu Kato was out for an evening walk when the fire started. She was not hurt.

Horikome was discovered at the scene with stab wounds to his stomach, suggesting he had tried to commit suicide in a ritual disembowelment. He was treated in a hospital and was formally arrested Tuesday once his condition improved.

The arson attack came just hours after Kato appeared on national television accusing Koizumi of "destroying Japan's diplomacy toward Asia" by visiting Yasukuni on Aug. 15, the anniversary of Japan's World War II surrender.

The latest of Koizumi's annual visits was hailed by Japanese nationalists, for whom the date is laden with symbolism, and condemned by both China and South Korea, whose governments say the prime ministerial pilgrimages amount to denials that Japan was the war's aggressor.

Koizumi, whose term ends soon, denies his Yasukuni visits repudiate Japan's guilt and says they have not contributed to what pollsters and observers here see as a rise in nationalism.

"Absolutely not," Koizumi said Monday when asked by reporters whether he was trying to stir Japanese nationalism by going to Yasukuni. "But it is true that there are people who are trying to do so."

Koizumi also condemned the arson attack for the first time. "Using violence to suppress speech is unforgivable," he said. "We must ensure the public understands the importance of respecting freedom of speech."

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Koizumi and Kato once shared an ambition to remake the deeply conservative LDP into a more modern party but broke over the prime minister's free-market economic policies and his hard line on relations with China. Party members who call for greater accommodation with Beijing have been ostracized under Koizumi and face continued exile if, as expected, he is succeeded next month by Shinzo Abe, widely regarded as an even stronger nationalist.

Kato and other critics say the whiff of violence in the political atmosphere has curbed dissent on the hard-line approach with China. They point to the closing this month of a purportedly independent journal published by an institute funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs after it ran an article critical of Koizumi's foreign policy. The article raised the ire of nationalist media commentators, who called it "anti-Japanese" and ran a campaign that resulted in the journal suspending publication.

Koizumi appeared to applaud that move when he admonished reporters this week to "stop making reports that lead to our country being criticized by other countries, or encourage it [nationalism] in other countries."

Most observers here say the nationalist violence lacks the systemic intimidation that characterized Japanese militarism of the 1930s.

Kato says it has been "sporadic." He suggested that the arson attack was "probably a solitary act" by someone on the fringes of the right-wing movement rather than part of an organized conspiracy.

"There are right-wing organizations that have principles and the right way of responding" to criticism, he said. "The problem is small organizations with a patriotic and nationalist bent that tend to operate on their own.

"We are a society where people can be moved to anger very quickly," he said.

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