

Thornton Fuwa Naoka

Japan Women's University. President of Japan Comparative Literature Association Japan

On the Relation between Academic Societies and the Government in Japan

If time permits, I would like to talk about the controversy that erupted between the Science Council of Japan (SCJ) and Japanese Prime Minister Suga's administration in October of 2020, a political and academic controversy that remains unresolved to this day. I believe the controversy sheds light not only on the precarious state of the humanities and social sciences in Japan but also the ever – present risk posed by governmental interference in matters of academic freedom.

The SCJ is the Japanese government's top academic advisory council, representing more than 800,000 domestic scholars in virtually every academic discipline. The Council's governing body, called the General Assembly, consists of 210 members serving staggered 6 – year terms. Although the Council is nominally under the jurisdiction of the Prime Minister, in practice the members of the General Assembly are appointed by the Prime Minister following the recommendations of the selection committee of the SCJ. In other words, the Prime Minister's appointments are strictly pro forma in nature. But in 2020, in an unprecedented move, Suga withheld the nomination of six academics from the list of 105 scholars recommended by the SCJ. All six scholars hailed from the social sciences and the humanities. Although Suga never really spelled out the reasoning for his veto, lest anyone harbor doubts, all six of the rejected academics had voiced opposition to controversial security legislations enacted by the government during the tenure of Suga's predecessor Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Hundreds of domestic academic associations issued formal statements of opposition (including the Japan Comparative Literature Association), and 200 academic organizations beyond Japan's borders also voiced concerns. In response to the growing swell of opposition and media pressure, Suga's Liberal Democratic Party issued a proposal to convert the SCJ into an organization independent of government oversight, in effect threatening to withdraw full or partial state funding.

Suga's term in office was short. In October of 2021 the ostensibly more liberal Fumio Kishida replaced Suga as prime minister. But when the SCJ requested Kishida to reconsider his predecessor's controversial rejection of the six academics, Kishida refused to renege on Suga's decision.

I want to analyze some of the reasons for the weakness of the SCJ, as compared with similar academic councils abroad, and consider the vital role national academic councils perform not just in Japan but internationally.