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Central Asia
Middle East
War and Terror
Business in Brief
Asian Economy
Global Economy
Letters

Archive

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Advanced Search

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Book Reviews

# Japan

## Where politics and religion mix in Japan

By Jamie Miyazaki

TOKYO - A perennial player in Japanese politics, and considered a coalition king-maker, the New Komeito Party is linked to a pacifist religious group that claims it is the only true Buddhist religious organization. The New Komeito Party currently is the enabling coalition partner with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who sent troops to Iraq, but speculation abounds that it might be wooed in the future by the increasingly successful opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ).

Katsuya Okada, leader of the DPJ, laid out his party's impressive electoral gains in this month's Upper House elections and looked ahead to the next Lower House parliamentary polls, to be scheduled by 2007. With a shot at forming the next Japanese government, many observers speculate that the DPJ might consider a coalition government with New Komeito in order to gain power. New Komeito (translation: Clean Government Party) has been in coalition with the LDP since 1999.

Rebuffing the suggestion of a DPJ-New Komeito coalition and stressing the DPJ's gradual and staggered "hop, skip, jump" electoral strategy for power, Okada was somewhat irked by the sudden barrage of questions about New Komeito and that the DPJ might need its help.

The Upper House has 115 seats. In this month's Upper House polls, New Komeito had 10 seats up for grabs and gained 11 in the proportional allotment system. It now holds a total of 24 seats in the Upper House and 34 seats out of 480 in the powerful Lower House of the Diet, or parliament. The governing LDP had 51 seats up for grabs, but only won 49 in a small but significant setback in the Upper House. The DPJ had 38 seats up for grabs and won 50, the big winner in the Upper House.

To add insult to injury for New Komeito, a post-election LDP report last week warned of the dangers of relying on a party with religious links in order to maintain its grip on power. With the political field thinning out as smaller parties either simply drop off the map or merge with one of the two big parties, it isn't easy being a third party in Japan these days. One could be forgiven for thinking that the days are numbered for New Komeito: the last significant third party, the others are minuscule, without clout. Dismissing it, however, would be a mistake.

In fact, despite the disparaging noises coming from the DPJ and LDP, New Komeito is not just surviving, it is holding its own, managing to gain an extra seat in July's contest. Not a big victory, yet New Komeito, alongside the opposition DPJ, were the only two parties to increase their pre-election strength. More important, these small numbers have a crucial multiplier effect: the New Komeito party is the de facto king-maker in an era of coalition governments.

### Soka Gakkai and New Komeito

Founded in 1964 to further the cause of the Buddhist Soka Gakkai sect, the then Komeito Party embarked on an expansion beyond its initial Tokyo base. A 1970 scandal in which Komeito leaders attempted to prevent retailers selling a book critical of the Soka Gakkai caused the Buddhist group and the party ostensibly to go their separate ways. For much of the 1980s the party spent its time in the wilderness as one of the ineffectual opposition parties in the face of LDP dominance.

Japan is fairly irreligious, in the Western sense, and that may be what spooks a lot of people about Soka Gakkai. The central practice promoted by Soka Gakkai is chanting to the Gobonzon, a scroll inscribed by Nichirin Daishonin, the founder of Nichiren Buddhism. Komeito was originally formed as a political shield to protect Soka Gakkai interests as they came under serious discrimination in Imperial Japan.

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Today, both New Komeito and Soka Gakkai want to eliminate nuclear arms and armed conflict in general and they aspire to bring about the "dawn of a new civilization of mankind".

It wasn't until the 1990s that the original Komeito party's political capital began to rise. Initially part of the short-lived non-LDP coalition government in 1993, the party went through a number of metamorphoses before emerging in its present form, following a merger between Komeito and the New Peace Party in November 1998. In October 1999, New Komeito joined the Keizo Obuchi-led LDP coalition government, and has been a coalition partner ever since.

It now holds 24 seats out of 115 in the Upper House (winning 11 in the last election), and 34 in the more powerful Lower House. Thus, New Komeito provides the LDP the necessary seats (a majority - 50% plus one) it needs to govern the world's second largest economy.

New Komeito's role as junior coalition partner, however, is not without some controversy. Despite officially separating from Soka Gakkai in 1970, the two organizations maintain strong ties and blur the strict constitutional separation between state and religion. After World War II, this rigid separation was enshrined in the constitution. At the time, the United States and framers of the Japanese constitution saw the fusion of Shintoism and nationalism by the government as a driving force for Japanese imperialism.

Following the Aum Shin Ri Kyo subway attack in 1995, a new religious corporation law was drawn up enabling the government to investigate the finances of religious organizations - ostensibly to target Aum, which it did very successfully, but Shizuka Kamei, a prominent right-wing member of the ruling LDP, in his usual style, claimed it could be used to investigate Soka Gakkai as well. So far, it hasn't happened.

Soka Gakkai's 8 million Japanese members provide the overwhelming bulk of the party's electoral base and many New Komeito legislators were Soka Gakkai faithful before joining the party. Since 1970, however, individuals have been prohibited from holding posts in both organizations. Indeed, New Komeito makes no secret of its close ties with the group, comparing the relationship to that of left-wing parties and labor unions.

This in itself would not be particularly controversial were it not for persistent rumors and accusations surrounding Soka Gakkai. The organization has billions of dollars in assets and is dominated by its enigmatic and reclusive spiritual leader, Daisaku Ikeda, giving him serious political and financial clout. Ikeda, who does not give interviews, is often said to be New Komeito's de facto head. More worrying has been the group's reputation for intolerance of its critics and internal dissenters, sometimes resulting in incidents of violent intimidation, critics say. Indeed, while it might be unfair to label the group a cult, the Soka Gakkai, with its heavy emphasis on fund raising, and claims as the only true Buddhist organization, has some disturbing authoritarian religious strands.

#### **Strange bedfellows**

Public suspicion of Soka Gakkai is also ironically shared by more than a few members of the LDP. Noted right-wing LDP politician Shizuka Kamei once rather discourteously remarked, "Japan is finished if Soka Gakkai takes over." Indeed, New Komeito's and Soka Gakkai's pacifist philosophy and lower-middle class support base contrast with the more right-wing hawkish elements of the LDP, which dispatched troops to Iraq on a mission that has deeply divided the nation. Fortunately, small matters such as ideology have never much got in the way of marriages of convenience in politics.

In an era in which floating voters now constitute an increasing share of the electorate, New Komeito has a critical asset, the very strength that arouses controversy - a core disciplined electoral bloc of Soka Gakkai members. With traditional LDP electoral blocs, such as farmers, postal workers and the like crumbling, New Komeito's ideologically indoctrinated members represent one of the largest vote-gathering machines in the country: 8 million reliable votes. The legion of housewives who constitute the backbone of Soka Gakkai's

electoral machine can deliver New Komieto, or alternatively New Komeito-endorsed candidates, between 20,000 and 30,000 votes in every major constituency. In urban areas where floating voters are prominent, and in low-turnout races, this can often decide elections.

However uneasy some LDP members may be about New Komeito's ideological affiliations, the LDP's viability as the party of government has become entwined with the fortunes of New Komeito. In fact, despite calls to become less dependent on their coalition partners, the LDP is quite careful these days to tone down its anti-Soka Gakkai rhetoric and has dropped assertions that New Komeito represented a breach in the constitutional separation of state and religion. It needs New Komeito and Soka Gakkai voters.

#### **The New Komeito paradox**

New Komeito's appeal is essentially limited to Soka Gakkai faithful, and this makes it unlikely to break out beyond its narrow electoral support base. Herein lies the paradox of New Komeito: it is unlikely to disappear any time soon because of its core constituency, but it will also probably never expand enormously beyond its current clutch of seats. This is what makes it such an important player in Japan's political field. Thirty or so seats in the Lower House and 20 or so in the Upper House are for all intents and purposes not up for grabs, they belong to New Komeito, the LDP can count on them.

Moreover, when one looks at the remarkable gains made by the opposition DPJ in the recent election (11 seats) it was mainly at the expense of the Communist Party that lost 12 seats, and there was no LDP rout. This perhaps suggests that the future lies in a consolidation of votes around the LDP, DPJ and New Komeito. Consequently, New Komeito could increasingly come to hold a more important swing position, unless the two major parties can successfully steal each other's core voters or capture an overwhelming number of floating voters.

This raises intriguing questions about DPJ leader Okada's wish to form an independent DPJ government by the next election. Given the nature of Japan's electoral system and the size of Soka Gakkai, this may well not be feasible. Moreover, LDP wishes to distance itself from its coalition partner may be equally unfeasible. One thing to count on, though, is that since its establishment in 1930, Soka Gakkai has consistently managed to confound its critics, and it is likely to continue baffling them.

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