Komeito’s Soka Gakkai Protesters and Supporters: Religious Motivations for Political Activism in Contemporary Japan

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Recently, adherents of the lay religious organization Soka Gakkai have taken to the streets and the Internet to rebuke Komeito, the junior member of the ruling government coalition and the party founded by Soka Gakkai, for abandoning peace advocacy. This article places the recent protests in historical and doctrinal context as it introduces perspectives from within Soka Gakkai to complicate easy assumptions about adherents’ ideology, and it suggests ways to determine how Soka Gakkai political activism may take shape in the near future.

Keywords: Komeito, Soka Gakkai, politics, religion, security legislation, Buddhism, SEALDs.

Following a rugby-like scrum in the early hours of Friday, September 19, Japan opened a new chapter in its domestic politics and international relations.

Opposition members in the National Diet’s House of Councilors failed to block the committee chairman from allowing the vote, which saw the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its coalition partner Komeito gain passage of eleven new bills. These are referred to collectively as the anzen hogai kanren hōan, or “security-related legislation,” most commonly as the anpō hōan, “national security legislation,” and by angry opponents as the sensō hōan, or “war legislation.” The new security bills put into effect a decision of July 1, 2014 by the Cabinet of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō that reinterpreted Japan’s 1947 Constitution to allow for shūdanteki jieiken, or the “right of collective self-defense.” This reinterpretation allows Japan’s military, the Self-Defense Forces (SDF), to come to the aid of the United States and other allies under armed attack, even if Japan itself is not attacked directly.

Proponents of the bills claim that the new legislation will improve Japan’s security in the face of rising regional frictions. They point out that Japan, which is now able to integrate its military intelligence with America, Australia, and other allies thanks to the December 2013 Special Secrecy Law – another piece of legislation that sparked public outcry – is better equipped through these new laws to cooperate with military partners by means of seamless coordination of SDF operations with allied forces. Critics regard the new laws as unnecessary over-reach by a Prime Minister who is eager to push forward revision of Article
Nine of the 1947 Japanese Constitution, the “peace clause” that outlaws war as a means for Japan to resolve international disputes. Opposition to the new legislation inspired critics to take to Japan’s streets. The months leading up to the September 19 Upper House vote witnessed some of the largest public protests Japan has seen in decades. The largest demonstration took place on August 30, 2015, when at least 120,000 protestors gathered in front of the National Diet while tens of thousands of others demonstrated simultaneously at more than 300 other locations. Street protests have accompanied outspoken criticism by public intellectuals and opposition politicians, who argue that the September 2015 bills give the Abe Cabinet excessive leeway in dispatching Japan’s military and fear that Japan will enter a “new normal” in which Japanese troops serve routinely in combat overseas – action prohibited since the end of the Pacific War seventy years ago. A telephone poll by the newspaper Asahi shinbun carried out September 12 and 13 revealed that 68% of respondents thought the bills were not necessary for the SDF to defend Japan. Only 29% of respondents agreed with the legislation, and 54% were opposed to it.

Protest organizers and Japan’s mass media have taken note of a new group among the demonstrators: members of Soka Gakkai, the religion that founded Komeito, the junior partner in the governing coalition. Over the summer, Twitter feeds lit up with striking images of Soka Gakkai protestors expressing dissent against the political party their own religion created. Photos showed these adherents holding signs emblazoned with Soka Gakkai’s distinctive sanshokki, or tri-color flag, and placards bearing slogans that remonstrated Komeito Diet members for abandoning the party’s, and their religion’s, long-held principles of peace. These protestors are striking to many, for Soka Gakkai members have earned a reputation for their absolute loyalty to Komeito and their practice during every election to eagerly solicit votes from non-member friends, family, and acquaintances.

Soka Gakkai and Komeito are two separate entities, yet in popular understanding they are typically regarded as one and the same, a way of thinking that is reinforced by Gakkai electioneering. Literally the “Value Creation Study Association,” Soka Gakkai grew from a few thousand members at the beginning of the 1950s to claim millions of adherent families in Japan today. This massive surge was driven in part by the religion’s engagement in electoral politics, an activity that intensified when the religion founded Komeito in 1964. Soka Gakkai voters now comprise Japan’s most reliable voting bloc. No other interest group – the construction industry, agricultural collectives, teachers’ unions, the Japan Communist Party, or any other constituency – out-mobilizes Soka Gakkai when it comes to electoral politics. The Gakkai’s power to elect candidates is feared by its opponents and valued by its allies, and it unfailingly makes itself an influential presence in every election at every level, from local municipalities up to the Diet. Rock-solid voter dependability has allowed Komeito party
officials to determine with unmatched accuracy just when and where to put candidates forward for election in the National Diet and at every other governmental level.\(^6\)

Since it began operating in coalition with the Liberal Democratic Party in 1999, Komeito has been able to exercise a level of influence that it did not enjoy in its decades in opposition. At present, its 35 seats in the House of Representatives (Lower House) comprise the swing vote for the governing coalition’s super-majority in the National Diet. And while, with only 55 of the Diet’s total of 722 seats, Komeito may only rank as the fourth-largest party at the national level, it wields power beyond its numbers. Most significantly, Komeito and LDP politicians alike rely on Gakkai voters to retain their seats. Komeito has also shaped key pieces of legislation from its position within government. For example, in October 2008, Komeito convinced the cabinet of Prime Minister Asō Tarō to support a bill providing teigaku kyūfukin (supplementary income payment), a fixed disbursement (12,000 yen guaranteed for all, and 18,000 yen for children and seniors) for every Japanese citizen; this became law in the spring of 2009.\(^7\) In keeping with this social welfare orientation, Komeito was also instrumental in securing concessions limiting the implementation of a consumption tax hike and the disbursement of another one-time cash infusion to Japanese citizens in 2014, the Abe Cabinet has recently indicated that it will follow Komeito’s plan when it increases the consumption tax in 2017.\(^8\) And, as discussed below, Komeito takes credit for placing limits on the exercise of collective self-defense made possible by the new security legislation.\(^9\)

Japanese- and English-language media has paid considerable attention to Soka Gakkai protestors who have joined street demonstrations, circulated petitions, and voiced their outrage at Komeito’s departure from its founding principle of world peace. Images of Soka Gakkai members decrying Komeito appear to confirm a trend in coverage that traces a near half-century arc from Soka Gakkai = Komeito – a carefully researched 1967 book by the renowned scholar Murakami Shigeyoshi – to the 2007 declaration of Komeito vs. Soka Gakkai by popular writer and former professor of religion Shimada Hiromi. Coverage of the Gakkai protestors combined with analyses from outside observers creates the overall impression of a burgeoning opposition between Soka Gakkai and Komeito.

Here, I provide information that complicates and even contradicts this impression. Glaringly absent in discussions to date of Soka Gakkai reactions to the new legislation are the voices of ordinary Soka Gakkai members who continue to carry out electioneering on behalf of Komeito and did not participate in protests against the security bills. Missing also are explanations for why Soka Gakkai members are so invested in electoral politics in the first place, or examinations of how Komeito’s shifting policies reflect complementary changes in the opinions and actions of its grassroots-level Soka Gakkai supporters.

This article covers a range of Gakkai perspectives on the new law as it cautions against concluding that that there may be a groundswell movement of Soka Gakkai opposition to Komeito. To fill lacunae in the account to date, I contrast positions taken by the Gakkai protestors with opinions voiced by Soka Gakkai adherents I have known over a decade and a half of participant observation as a non-member researcher. The member accounts I provide, presented here as examples from what are, in many ways, representative Gakkai participants, differ starkly from those expressed by the Soka Gakkai protestors who have gained mass media attention and the approbation of left-leaning commentators. While the members I introduce can be summarized as supporters of the new laws, they express a range of sentiments, from anguish over lost community solidarity to...
hawkish rejection of the protestors, and though they continue to support the party as it advances into new policy territory, they are not blind advocates, and instead hold Komeito, and one another, accountable to guiding principles.

In order to understand their principles, as well as those of Gakkai members who oppose Komeito, one must understand their religious underpinnings. To introduce these guiding religious ideas, I identify ways defenders and critics of Komeito draw on Soka Gakkai’s distinctive conflation of modern humanism with the Buddhism of the medieval Japanese Buddhist reformer Nichiren (1222-1282) - legacies that merge within the teachings of the Gakkai’s undisputed leader, Honorary President Ikeda Daisaku (1928- ). I analyze how the current conflict over the security legislation fits within the longer history of Soka Gakkai’s rise as a lay movement in the immediate postwar years, and I conclude this article by considering what we might expect from Gakkai activists in the wake of the protests as I discuss the possibility for changes in Gakkai support of Komeito in the future.

A Buddhist Language of Rebuke

In mid-July 2015, SEALDs, Student Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy, a collective led by young activists who have organized some of the largest anti-security legislation protests, began retweeting messages from a new initiative called “SGI Against Fascism,” which put out an appeal through Twitter for like-minded Gakkai members to take part in demonstrations.

These retweets amplified attention to SGI Against Fascism, whose organizer goes by the handle Ōbai Tōri, or “cherry, plum, peach, damson.” This will most likely appear as a quaintly bucolic alias to the average Japanese Twitter user, yet Gakkai members will recognize ōbai tōri as a phrase from the writings of Nichiren, the medieval Buddhist reformer they regard as the source of their religious orthodoxy. Soka Gakkai regards itself as the only true inheritor of Nichiren’s dharma, a claim that has pitched it against rival Nichiren-based sects and placed it in diametric opposition to Nichiren Shōshū, the temple-based Buddhist sect of which Soka Gakkai formed a lay association until a schism in 1991. The four-character phrase ōbai tōri is found in Nichiren’s Ongi kuden [Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings] as part of his affirmation that the eternal Buddha manifests within all things in their diversity. It is a concept promoted by Soka Gakkai’s Honorary President Ikeda as a means of accommodating adherents’ differences and encouraging them to respect one another as they cooperate to realize ningen kakumei, or “human revolution.”

In the days following the appearance of SGI Against Fascism, journalists began uploading blog posts that included photos of Gakkai protestors who were appearing at demonstrations with distinctive placards that
included displays of the sanshokki, the tri-color flag of Soka Gakkai. Gakkai members brought together through a Facebook group called Soka Gakkaiin dakedo Jimintō ga daikirai na hito, danketsu shimashō – “People who are Soka Gakkai members but really hate the LDP, let’s unite!” – appeared at a SEALDs-organized protest in the Kansai region of western Japan on July 19 holding signs rebuking Komeito elected officials for their failings as fellow Gakkai adherents. One sign demanded Ningen kakumei o yominaose, a call for Komeito Diet members to “Re-read The Human Revolution!”, the novelized history of Soka Gakkai that recounts the rebuilding of the organization after the wartime imprisonment of its second president Toda Jōsei (1900-1958) and the death in prison of his mentor, first Gakkai president Makiguchi Tsunesaburō (1871-1944).

Here we can see intra-Gakkai appeals playing out within the public protests, a dramatic rebuke legible only to those steeped in Soka Gakkai’s literary oeuvre. Ningen kakumei (The Human Revolution) is a twelve-volume roman à clef that Gakkai members regard as de facto scripture and an indisputable account of their founding presidents’ martyrdom by Japan’s military dictators that justifies their belief in Soka Gakkai’s leaders as Nichiren’s sole dharma heirs.

Calling on Komeito Diet members to re-read this text also bears another specific Nichiren Buddhist meaning, as it evokes kokka kanyō, or “remonstrating the government,” a practice enacted when Nichiren rebuked the Kamakura-era military leadership and emulated over the centuries since then by Nichiren Buddhists.

Remonstrating the Komeito Diet members was clearly the order of the day: another sign at this demonstration pictured Toda Jōsei’s face next to the words “No! War!” in English, over a Japanese-language condemnation of Komeito for destroying its origins as a foundation for peace. Yet another protestor’s placard was a repurposed campaign poster for Komeito party leader Yamaguchi Natsuo: The protestor has added the condemnation butsubachi, “Buddhist
penalty,” a severe term for retributive punishment suffered by one who violates Buddhist principles, with an arrow pointed at Yamaguchi’s face. These Gakkai members thus situated their rebuke of Komeito and its support of the new security legislation within the grand narrative of Soka Gakkai’s religious struggle against corrupt tyranny, and it is clear from their protest that they regarded the party their religion founded as turning away from their transcendent mission by transforming into the very worldly corruption they oppose.

Critics become Supporters

The messages broadcast by these protestors may have been expressed in the language of Soka Gakkai insiders, yet their opposition to the security bills earned them support from outsiders. In late July, former Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi, now 91 years of age, broke a twenty-year hiatus on speaking at rallies to address protestors outside the Diet. On July 25, during an appearance on a TV Tokyo program, he noted with approval that “there are many Soka Gakkai members who are also worked up [about the security legislation].”18 The Japan Communist Party Secretary General and Upper House member Yamashita Yoshiki, in an August 3 press conference, praised “Komeito supporters,” a thinly-veiled allusion to Soka Gakkai members, for their opposition and credited them with possessing the greatest potential to prevent the Abe government from forcing through security legislation. He expressed his desire to foster their efforts to “pour out their feelings in the protest movement” (kimochi o shikkari kunda undō o hatten sasetai).19 This entreaty earned a sharp riposte from Komeito head Yamaguchi, who used a press conference the following day to question the Communist leader’s intentions in co-opting supporters of other parties.20

Calls by Gakkai protestors to revisit Soka Gakkai’s foundations resonated with critiques launched by Shimazono Susumu, Emeritus of religious studies at the University of Tokyo and now Professor at Sophia University, where he heads Sophia’s Institute of Grief Care. After the March 2011 compound earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disasters that devastated northeast Japan, Shimazono, already well known in academic circles, emerged as a public advocate for religious engagement in social activism and community reconstruction, championing such initiatives as the Japan Religion Coordinating Project for Disaster Relief (Shūkyōsha Saigai Shien Renrakukai) and its related programs. He grew active on Twitter and through his blog promoting anti-nuclear mobilization by urging coalition with like-minded scientists, scholars in the humanities, and social welfare activists. To date, he has attracted more than 13,000 Twitter followers, a massive number for a Japanese public intellectual, and in recent months his followers have seen him transform into a strident critic of the new security legislation.21

Not a small number of his many recent tweets and blog posts have pointed out specific ways Komeito has departed from the world peace platform promoted by its founder, Soka Gakkai Honorary President Ikeda. As Japan’s most influential scholar of so-called shinshūkyō, or “new religions,” Shimazono is tremendously knowledgeable about Soka Gakkai’s doctrine and historical development. In an exercise of what might best be termed “scholarship as advocacy” – a stance he has also taken in his work on religious responses to disaster – Shimazono has been putting this knowledge to work over recent months in exhaustive analyses of Ikeda’s writings on peace, a subject that the Gakkai’s Honorary President expounded upon for decades. Shimazono has pored over Ikeda’s Collected Writings and many of his other publications to itemize principles that Komeito and, by extension, Soka Gakkai, have violated in their support for the new security bills. He has focused in particular on Ikeda’s dialogues with intellectual luminaries, conversations in
which the Gakkai’s Honorary President discussed the proper role of a Self-Defense Force and otherwise stressed the importance of preserving Article Nine of the Constitution in order to cultivate an attitude of peace. In an analysis of Ikeda’s discussions in 1972 and 1973 with the famed British historian Arnold J. Toynbee, for instance, Shimazono quotes at length from Ikeda to note ways the Gakkai leader draws on Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Ruskin to emphasize the need to foster a humanism-focused political system that rejects war, a system that encourages citizens to prevent the rise of polities that turn to the use of weapons to resolve disputes or claim territory.22

Critiques and Rebuttals from Within Soka Gakkai and Komeito

A loosely connected network of disgruntled Gakkai adherents has continued online and in the streets to voice their opposition to the security legislation and to change the minds of Komeito politicians, all of whom also come from Soka Gakkai. Perhaps the most widely publicized of the protestors is Amano Tatsushi, a 51-year-old second-generation Gakkai member in Aichi Prefecture who goes by the handle Hitori no Gakkaiin (One Gakkai Member) on Twitter and Facebook.23 Amano garnered national attention after he posted a petition from July 30, sent out via Twitter and other platforms, calling for the withdrawal of the bills. He submitted 9,177 signatures in person to Komeito headquarters in Tokyo on September 11, where his supporter filmed him politely handing over the entire printout to personnel at the facility.24

Around the same time, a Yūshi no Kai (Volunteers’ Association) made up of instructors and alumni from Soka University and Soka Women’s College in Hachioji, western Tokyo, posted a manifesto that invokes the words of Gakkai founder Makiguchi Tsunesaburō and Soka University founder Ikeda Daisaku as it denounced the new legislation as counter to Soka Gakkai’s humanistic educational mission.25 The universities’ Volunteer Association has circulated a petition that has gathered close to two thousand signatures from Gakkai school alumni and earned letters of support from academics and peace activists overseas, including Johan Galtung, a famed Norwegian peace studies founder who co-authored a book with Ikeda Daisaku titled Choose Peace.26

Both Komeito and Soka Gakkai have responded to the Gakkai protestors. The party has proactively engaged its critics, while the religion’s administrators seek to distance Soka Gakkai from the conflict. Komeito officials, most notably Komeito Deputy Chief Kitagawa Kazuo, defend their support of the security legislation on the grounds that the new laws satisfy what they terms Komeito’s “Three Principles” for not violating Article Nine: 1)
legitimacy under international law of dispatching Japan’s Self-Defense Forces (SDF), 2) the understanding of the Japanese people, and 3) safety of SDF members. Because the new laws require that SDF forces must only take part in United Nations-mandated missions, because the laws are passed by elected officials in the National Diet after debate, and because the Prime Minister has issued assurances that Japanese troops will not be sent into areas where their safety is threatened, Komeito leaders regard the bills as satisfying their Three Principles, and therefore promote them as responsible as well as realistic measures for dealing with Japan’s security.

Komeito’s security position has shifted dramatically in recent years. In 2012, when asked whether they favored reinterpreting the constitution to allow for shûdanteki jieikan, the “right of collective self defense,” 74 percent of Komeito candidates were opposed, a stance the party had taken since its founding. By the December 2014 House of Representatives election, after the Abe administration had proposed reinterpreting the constitution to allow limited participation in collective defense, 89 percent of Komeito candidates answered either that they approved or generally approved of this policy. In the spring of 2015, Komeito produced a DVD that explains the party’s security policy, and since then its politicians have made frequent visits to local districts to screen it and address constituents’ concerns. Individual Komeito Diet members have made justifications for their support of the legislation clear in their media releases. House of Councilors member Tōyama Kiyohiko, who received a Ph.D. in peace studies from the University of Bradford in the United Kingdom, itemizes reasons why military defense of Japan’s allies does not comprise a reinterpretation of the country’s peace constitution, and instead serves to preserve it. His senior colleague in the Upper House, Ueda Isamu, situates the new laws as a logical outcome of the sequence of legislation and security guidelines agreed upon by both the LDP-Komeito coalition and the Democratic Party of Japan that was in power between 2009 and 2012. Ueda also states that constituents with whom he meets tell him that they want to see a more, not less, proactive role taken by Japan’s Self-Defense Forces, and that the legislation passed by the Diet was a balance struck within the coalition.

It is worth noting that no Komeito politician lingers on the security laws in promotional material. Discussion of the legislation is usually hidden in their homepages, buried beneath repeated appeals to other Komeito priorities, such as proposed limits to the consumption tax and related matters of domestic concern. When they do discuss the security laws, Komeito Diet members repeatedly stress the importance of their party’s mitigating function. In recent elections, Komeito has campaigned on the byline yotō no naka no yatō, or “the opposition within the government,” emphasizing that, even though they are part of the ruling coalition, they guide the government toward a moderate course. In elections to come, Komeito will potentially calculate passage of the new
security laws with the Three Principles in place into its “power to actualize” (jitsugenryoku) percentage – that is, the percentage of objectives set out in the party manifestos that Komeito politicians frequently tout on the campaign trail.\textsuperscript{31}

In the meantime, administrators from Soka Gakkai’s Kōhoshitsu (Office of Public Affairs), in press releases and in private correspondence to me, assert that the protestors are freely exercising their right to express individual opinions, but that the organization itself remains mattaku kanchi ga nai, or “absolutely unconcerned / unconnected.”\textsuperscript{32} They assert that the organization values Diet deliberations and express regret that protestors oppose this established democratic process. “It is deplorable that the three-color flag of our Gakkai is being used in a political manner,” one published statement adds.

\textbf{Electioneering as Religious Practice}

What accounts for Soka Gakkai’s distinctive conflation of lay Buddhism, modern humanism, and electioneering? In order to understand how Soka Gakkai political activism plays out at the grassroots level, let us consider this snapshot from my ethnographic encounter of a couple of years ago. It provides a representative example of Soka Gakkai’s electioneering as religious engagement:\textsuperscript{34}

Tuesday, June 11, 2013, 7:30 p.m., in the home of a Gakkai adherent in Setagaya Ward, Tokyo. I’m with Iizuka Keitarō, a local Young Men’s Division leader I’ve known for more than a decade, and we’re with his wife Seika and Mr. Horiuchi, another young man Keitarō is encouraging to join Soka Gakkai. Tonight’s event is called a daishōri taikai, a “Great Victory Meeting,” and Keitarō tells me that it is a special meeting of the Young Men’s, Young Women’s, Married Women’s, and Men’s Divisions for the local Gakkai Chapter (shibu). This full range is not represented: other than us three, there are thirteen Married Women’s Division members and seven men, four of whom are visiting Gakkai administrators, crowded into the downstairs living room of this modest home, which is dominated by a large wooden Buddhist altar.

A portion of the meeting is devoted to reading Honorary President Ikeda’s interpretation of a 1279 letter by Nichiren to his disciple Shijō Kingo.\textsuperscript{33} The letter is titled “The Strategy of the Lotus Sutra,” and in it Nichiren quotes Chapter Nineteen of the Lotus, writing “all others who bear you enmity or malice will likewise be wiped out,” and concludes by encouraging his disciple to persevere in the face of persecution: “a coward cannot have any of his prayers answered.” The selection of this letter and the other religious practices we engage in at the meeting – chanting portions of the Lotus and repeating invocations of the daimoku, the Lotus title iterated as the sacred syllables namu-myōhō-renge-kyō – do indeed take up Nichiren’s call to employ the “Strategy of the Lotus Sutra,” as they are in service of the Great Victory at hand: the June 23 Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly election.

Official Tokyo Assembly candidate registration is not to begin until June 14, but Gakkai members across Tokyo began mobilizing long before this to get out the vote. Tonight is the second Great Victory Meeting at this local Gakkai leader’s home in two days. All other local Gakkai activities – doctrinal study, soliciting subscriptions for the daily newspaper Seikyō shinbun, and many others – have been put on hold as every member in Tokyo has been enjoined to compile a tally of f-tori, “friend getting,” a vote-gathering tactic that circumvents Japan’s prohibition on house-to-house campaigning.\textsuperscript{36} My friend Keitarō stands and announces that members in his district (chiku) have claimed 140 “friend gets,” or non-members who have asked to vote for Komeito. He has set a goal of 150 for his district, and he announces a personal goal to convert his friend
Horiuchi to Soka Gakkai. Horiuchi stands and bows, a little self-consciously, to enthusiastic cheers from the Gakkai members who surround him.

As is typical in almost every Gakkai meeting, once the male leaders make their announcements, the Married Women’s Division takes over. This living room makes it clear that Mrs. Origuchi, the Married Women’s Division district leader in whose home we are now gathered, has been working assiduously with her fellow Division members on election strategy. A large card propped on the Buddhist altar before the object of worship is emblazoned with an appeal: shitei shōri no rokugatsu nijūsannichi e, “toward mentor / disciple victory on June 23rd.” A colorful handmade poster on the wall beside the altar displays a map of Setagaya Ward broken down by voting district; districts in which Komeito prevailed in the last Tokyo election are identified by a red circular seal, and the others remain blank. Next to this is a pyramidal graph with blocks colored in, recording Gakkai district names and their record of shōdaikai – thousands upon thousands of repeated invocations of the daimoku over hundreds of hours by local members, all aimed at this single electoral success. One million total repetitions is the goal, and the chart is mostly filled in.

Mrs. Origuchi urges all assembled to gather tomorrow morning at 11:15 to hear an address from the Komeito candidate Kuribayashi Noriko, who has served in the Tokyo Assembly since 2009.

Kuribayashi’s campaign color is orange, Mrs. Origuchi tells everyone: please wear orange tomorrow, bring orange-colored gudzu (goods), and encourage your friends to do the same. After a number of women give testimonials on how they have sought to convince friends and neighbors to vote for Kuribayashi, the meeting concludes with Seika, Keitarō’s wife, handing out two photocopied pages. One is a finely detailed shop-by-shop map of the local shopping street, which she gives to members charged with asking businesses to display campaign posters and to convince their employees to vote Komeito. The other is a printed invitation asking everyone to attend the official opening of Kuribayashi’s campaign office on Wednesday, June 19. Members are urged to attend the entire event, which is scheduled to last from 9:00 a.m. until 9:00 p.m.

Multiply the meeting at Mrs. Origuchi’s on this Tuesday night hundreds of times to get a sense of how Soka Gakkai mobilized for the June 2013 Tokyo election. As intense as this effort may seem, it was treated by the participants as preparatory, as a dress rehearsal for the much bigger challenge of the July 23, 2013 Upper House election. And it was only the latest in a relentless stream of electoral campaigns that dominate Gakkai activities in Japan.
Komeito’s Origins in a Nichiren Buddhist Objective

Why are members of Soka Gakkai so intensely engaged in electoral politics? Answering this question means paying attention to some doctrinal specifics. Soka Gakkai began as an educational reform movement called Soka Kyōiku Gakkai (Value Creation Education Study Association) founded in 1930 by schoolteacher Makiguchi Tsunesaburō and his disciple Toda Jōsei.

They became adherents of a temple-based Buddhist sect called Nichiren Shōshū, or Nichiren True Sect, and Soka Kyōiku Gakkai became a Shōshū lay association. Nichiren Shōshū is a minority lineage following the teachings of Nichiren, who held that only faith in the Lotus Sutra, the putative final teachings of the historical Buddha Sakyamuni, and the practice of chanting namu-myōhō-renge-kyō were effective means of achieving salvation in this degraded age, mappō, the Latter Days of the Buddha’s Dharma. All other teachings were slander that must be rejected.

Nichiren invited persecution by political authorities of his day when he petitioned the military government in Kamakura to abandon support of Tendai, Shingon, Pure Land, and other temples, and he otherwise challenged the established order, leading the Kamakura government to exile him twice and attempt to execute him once. In the centuries since his lifetime, Nichiren has served as a biographical model for those willing to martyr themselves in a righteous struggle against corrupt authority, a model that has inspired the life courses of countless clergy and laity.37

The centuries since the Kamakura era have also seen a specifically political agenda take shape in the Nichiren tradition: the sandai hihō, or Three Great Secret Dharmas. These are 1) the daimoku, the title of the Lotus
Chanted as namu-myōhō-renge-kyō, 2) the daigohonzon, a calligraphic mandala with the daimoku at its center inscribed by Nichiren on the 12th day of the 10th month of 1279, and 3) the honmon no kaidan, a “true ordination platform,” a government-sponsored facility where the daigohonzon will be enshrined and worshipped by the chanting of daimoku upon the conversion of all people to Nichiren’s Buddhism. The first two of these Three Great Secret Dharmas were realized in Nichiren’s lifetime, and after the Kamakura era the kaidan objective remained a distant hope beyond practical attainment.

Nichiren (1222-1282). Photo available here

Until the rise of Soka Gakkai. Makiguchi and Toda were imprisoned in 1944 by Japan’s wartime authorities for violating the Peace Preservation Law when, in keeping with orthodox Nichiren practice, they refused to enshrine State Shinto talismans from the Grand Shrine at Ise; Makiguchi died of malnutrition while incarcerated. After his release in July 1945, Toda set about reviving his mentor’s organization. He ultimately renamed it Soka Gakkai, broadening the group’s mandate as he expanded the study association into a mass religious movement. In May 1951, Toda announced the start of Soka Gakkai’s Great March of Shakubuku; shakubuku a Nichiren Buddhist term at this point interpreted by the Gakkai essentially as “break and convert.” By April 1958, Soka Gakkai claimed in excess of one million households, and by the end of the 1960s it claimed more than seven million. The Gakkai’s growth in these decades was driven in no small part by the inspiring objective of the “ordination platform,” reinterpreted by Toda and subsequently by his successor, third Gakkai president and now Honorary President Ikeda Daisaku, as the kokuritsu kaidan, the “national ordination platform,” following a modern Nichirenist reinterpretation that called for support from the National Diet for the construction of a facility that would mark the conversion of the Japanese populace to exclusive worship of the Lotus.

Soka Gakkai political activity emerged in the interest of securing the complete conversion of the populace and realizing the final of Nichiren’s Great Secret Dharmas. In 1954, Soka Gakkai established a Culture Division (Bunkabu): for the Gakkai, “culture” meant “electoral politics” at this point. The Culture Division oversaw adherents who campaigned on behalf of fellow members who were running for office as independent candidates. If one wished to select a single watershed moment marking a shift in Soka Gakkai’s status in Japan, it would be the Upper House elections of July 8, 1956, when three Gakkai-sponsored candidates were elected to the National Diet. The July 9, 1956 Osaka edition of the Asahi shinbun described this electoral success as “masa ka” ga jitsugen, “The ‘Unspeakable’ Has Come True,” to announce news of Soka Gakkai official Shiraki Gi’ichirō’s victory. For the first time, a massive so-called shinkō shūkyō, “newly arisen religion,” occupied seats in governmental power. The Gakkai leadership tied this political momentum to its religious aims. From August 1, 1956, Toda issued an essay titled “Ōbutsu myōgō ron,” “On the Harmonious Union of Government and Buddhism,” in which he wrote that “we [Soka Gakkai] are concerned with politics because of the need to realize kōsen rufu [the conversion
of the populace], the spreading of the sacred phrase namu-myōhō-renge-kyō, one of the Three Great Secret Dharmas. In other words, the only purpose of our going into politics is the erection of the kokuritsu kaidan.”

But something more than the lure of eschatological Nichiren Buddhist objectives was inspiring people to join Soka Gakkai. In the 1950s, Soka Gakkai largely attracted socially marginalized people – women, the poor, the uneducated, and others who fell through the cracks as Japan moved toward its postwar “economic miracle.” The Gakkai offered disenfranchised people unmatched opportunities to realize a potent combination of aspirations, which included: 1) Transcendent Buddhist emancipation through an uncompromising practice. 2) Opportunities to sacrifice meaningfully within a ranked hierarchical system based on a legitimacy-granting pedagogical model: Soka Gakkai was and is, fundamentally, a gakkai, or a “study association.” 3) Political power. Occupying seats in government prevented critics from accusing Soka Gakkai of pretending to be legitimate. Political power was indisputably real power, and Soka Gakkai was, and remains, the only religious organization to secure a lasting and influential presence in the National Diet and in local governments.

Because engagement in electoral politics was conceived as part of a transcendent religious mission, Gakkai members were propelled by the conviction that electioneering contributed directly to the realization of kōsen rufu and the construction of the ordination platform. This zeal led some adherents to violate elections law. Gakkai members first faced indictment in June 1956, charged with kobetsu hōmon, “house-to-house campaigning,” which is prohibited by Japanese elections law. In an event dubbed the “Osaka Incident,” in July 1957 a total of forty-five Gakkai members were indicted for distributing packs of cigarettes, caramels, and money to Osaka residences as part of a bid to elect Nakao Tatsuyoshi, who was running for the Upper House in a by-election. Among those arrested was Ikeda Daisaku, then a Gakkai Young Men’s Division leader.

Ikeda Daisaku (1928- ). Available here

Ikeda spent two weeks in jail and years afterward in court before having all charges against him cleared in 1962. Outside observers may regard the “Osaka Incident” as a matter of legal wrangling, but Gakkai narratives memorialize Ikeda’s imprisonment and confrontation with the Osaka Public Prosecutor in Nichiren Buddhist terms, characterizing his tribulation as a righteous triumph over corrupt state tyranny, one that justified his position as heir to his jailed mentor Toda, the wartime martyr Makiguchi, and ultimately to Nichiren himself. When Gakkai members take part in a Komeito campaign today, they can turn to the Osaka Incident to connect their efforts as Ikeda disciples to a model of Nichiren Buddhist martyrdom that transcends concerns over a specific candidate or Komeito policies. The participants chanting in June 2013 for “mentor
disciple victory” in Mrs. Origuchi’s living room would certainly have linked their electioneering to this pivotal event in Ikeda Daisaku’s biography.

By the time Komeito was founded in November 1964, just over fifty years ago, electioneering was a built-in feature of regular Gakkai practice, and the “ordination platform” objective was a well-known feature of the group – intensely attractive to adherents, and viewed as an existential threat by the Gakkai’s religious and political rivals. Gakkai critics routinely turned to two articles from the 1947 Constitution to make their case: Article 20 states that “No religious organization shall receive any privileges from the State, nor exercise any political authority,” and Article 89 reads “No public money or other property shall be expended or appropriated for the use, benefit or maintenance of any religious institution or association or for any charitable, educational benevolent enterprises not under the control of public authority.” The Gakkai’s entrée into electoral politics was widely interpreted as a direct violation of Article 20, in spite of constitutional guarantees of freedom of association and religious belief. The objective to construct a “national ordination platform” by Diet decree was more difficult to defend, as it did appear to potentially violate Constitutional prohibition of the Japanese state from bestowing privileges on a religious organization or funding a religious enterprise.

Fears of a Gakkai plot to install Soka Gakkai as Japan’s state religion with Ikeda Daisaku as a theocratic leader were heightened after the founding of Komeito and the expansion of electoral activities into the Lower House of the National Diet. In the January 1967 general election, Komeito ran one candidate in each of thirty-two multiple-member constituencies. Twenty-five were elected, making Komeito the third-largest opposition party in the Diet. In the 1968 Upper House election, Komeito captured 15.5% of the popular vote, up from 3.5% in the 1956 Upper House race. Forty-seven Komeito candidates were elected to the Lower House in December 1969, when the party claimed 10.9% of the popular vote, moving Komeito into the spot of third-biggest party in the Diet after the LDP and the Socialist Party, and in January 1970 Soka Gakkai claimed 7.55 million adherent households.

As it turned out, the end of the 1960s marked an abrupt halt to Soka Gakkai’s, and Komeito’s, meteoric rise. Matters came to a head in 1969 with a series of events since labeled the genron shuppan bōgai mondai, or “problem over obstructing freedom of expression and the press.” Komeito’s surge in the polls and Soka Gakkai’s seemingly inexorable growth from the mid-1950s into the late 1960s inspired a corresponding emergence of a robust anti-Soka Gakkai / Komeito media industry. The most well-known example of anti-Gakkai media from this time was Soka Gakkai o kiru, published later in English as I Denounce Soka Gakkai. Unsurprisingly, the book painted a lurid portrait of Soka Gakkai and Komeito as a menace to Japanese democracy. I Denounce Soka Gakkai would most likely have been greeted with limited public notice were it not for measures taken by Gakkai and Komeito leaders to attempt to forestall its publication. Akahata, the Japan Communist Party newspaper, and the book’s publisher broke a story that the book’s author Fujiwara Hirotatsu, a Meiji University professor and public intellectual, had received a phone call from a “famous politician” who passed on a request from the Komeito leader that he pull I Denounce Soka Gakkai from publication. The “famous politician” did not give his name, but Fujiwara claimed he recognized the voice of Tanaka Kakuei, then secretary general (kanjichō) of the Liberal Democratic Party and later a powerful prime minister. It is clear that links between Komeito and the LDP were forged decades before the two parties formed the coalition that operates today. The Tanaka connection appears to have been especially
important: close cooperation between Tanaka Kakuei and Komeito politicians, particularly Komeito Diet member Takeiri Yoshikatsu, were at the heart of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and the People’s Republic of China in 1972, and it is evident that networks between the LDP and Komeito remained open after this time.41

The I Denounce Soka Gakkai scandal resulted in radical transformations of both Soka Gakkai and Komeito. On May 3, 1970, Ikeda Daisaku issued a formal apology to the people of Japan and announced a new policy of seikyō bunri, the “separation of politics and religion.” Soka Gakkai and Komeito were declared separate organizations, the religion renounced plans to construct the “national ordination platform,” and it eliminated the use of politically charged terms such as ōbutsu myōgō. Meanwhile, Komeito members resigned from positions within Soka Gakkai, and Soka Gakkai renounced decision-making capacities for the party’s personnel, finances, and candidacy.

In sum, the religion and the party accrued costs and benefits during this early growth period:

Costs: Fallout from the 1970 incident struck a blow to Komeito’s fortunes in the polls. The party dropped from 47 to 29 elected Diet representatives in the 1972 elections, and though it rose to 56 officials in 1976, the most it has ever held, it never again experienced the massive swell in support it enjoyed in the five years after Komeito’s founding.

Soka Gakkai lost more than power among the electorate when it severed official ties with Komeito and renounced goals to build a national ordination platform: it lost its momentum as a mass movement. It made only modest gains after 1970. In contrast to its growth by orders of magnitude in the immediate postwar years, the religion claimed 7.62 million adherent households in 1974, up from 7.55 in 1970, and since the early 1980s its has claimed just over 8.2 million adherent households and has held steady at 8.27 million for the last decade.42 It is probable that Gakkai membership growth was already peaking by the end of the 1960s and that a flattening of its membership numbers was inevitable. In spite of these qualifications, the events of 1970 mark a watershed moment in Soka Gakkai’s history, the point when the group began to shift toward cultivating the needs of a second generation born to the converts who flocked to Soka Gakkai during its years of explosive growth in the 1950s and 60s.

Benefits: The generations that have followed the official religious / political division have been reared within a Gakkai milieu in which electioneering for Komeito has remained an adherent’s duty, on par with chanting the Lotus, carrying out shakubuku conversion, and otherwise contributing to Soka Gakkai’s institutional goals. Komeito is an ordinary political party in most senses, in that it carries out the usual business of getting elected, seeing to the needs of its constituents, policymaking, negotiating with interest groups, and other responsibilities associated with ordinary behavior by political parties. However, an obvious difference between Komeito and other Japanese parties is the understanding that in every election, from a town assembly to the National Diet, every devout Gakkai member can be counted on to fire up the vote-gathering machine that generations of Gakkai adherents have kept running since the heady days of Soka Gakkai’s early political activities.

A Legacy of Peace Promotion

Given the routinized nature of Soka Gakkai’s electioneering, one might assume that devout members will get out the vote no matter how Komeito changes its policies, and no matter the partnerships it forges. The sight of protestors outside the Diet in the summer of 2015 cast doubts on this assumption. As the Abe Cabinet has grown bolder in its quest to revise the Constitution’s peace clause, and as Komeito
continues to adjust its position on security issues to follow its coalition partner’s rightward shift, questions arise as to how, or even whether Soka Gakkai can continue to treat electioneering for Komeito as a component of its practice.

There are Gakkai members, at all levels of the organization, who are beginning to question the apparent naturalness of Soka Gakkai support for Komeito. The protestors that captured media attention before the September 19 vote indicate that some ordinary adherents are dismayed by the move away from peace promotion. Their sentiments are shared by some within the Soka Gakkai administration itself. On Wednesday, September 9, 2015, I received an unexpected call at my North Carolina State University office from a Gakkai administrator who is at the front lines of promoting Soka Gakkai as an international organization dedicated to fostering peace; not a member I know well, but an adherent familiar with my research on Soka Gakkai and Komeito. He quickly clarified that he was calling to speak to me about conflicts between his professional obligations and his personal convictions: he was in the difficult position of having to speak for a Gakkai administration that disavowed connection to the protestors while he personally commiserated with American adherents who were dismayed when they learned of Komeito’s support for the security laws.

The administrator was withering in his critique of Komeito, particularly of what he perceived as a dismissive attitude its Diet members were taking about concerns expressed by Gakkai protestors: “If Komeito were to declare to their supporters that the long-term goal of the security legislation was in fact to create a country with no war, that engaging the Self-Defense Forces was part of realizing this goal, then Soka Gakkai people may come to understand,” he suggested. Instead, he remained unconvinced by the explanations offered by Tōyama Kiyohiko and other Diet politicians. He also seemed to think that their confidence in Gakkai members’ support was overblown. “I believe that, should there be even one incident with the Self-Defense Forces between now and the July 2016 Upper House elections, you will see a radical shift against Komeito among Gakkai members,” he predicted.

He was also disappointed with the reaction by Soka Gakkai officials. When I mentioned to him that administrators at the Gakkai’s Office of Public Affairs told me the protests in front of the Diet were mattaku kanchi ga nai (absolutely unconnected) to Soka Gakkai, he immediately cried out “that is absolutely false!” He reminded me that on August 6 and 9, 2015, on the 70th anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear attacks, The Soka Gakkai Peace Committee promulgated a statement titled “Upholding the Sanctity of Life” that confirms Japan’s responsibility for the suffering of people in Asia during the Pacific War and asserts that the happiness of common people is predicated on the abolition of war. Making public these concerns would indicate that Soka Gakkai is not in fact “unconnected” to protesting members who urge Komeito politicians to hold to the peace activism cultivated within the religion, he stressed.

At the end of our conversation, the administrator expressed serious concerns about the onerous responsibilities placed on Gakkai adherents in Japan during every election. “Kōsen rufu is a serious undertaking. Constantly asking everyone to drop everything to focus on an election – this is like asking an athlete training for the Olympics to stop training every six months to spend two or three months on something else.” Up to now, political activities have been understood by the Gakkai as a component of kōsen rufu, as integral to the spread of their religious mission. “But is this really the case?” he asked. “Is this [electoral politics] really in line with what we’re doing?”
As this administrator’s concerns indicate, the most important issue at stake for Gakkai opponents of the new legislation is Soka Gakkai’s, and Komeito’s, historical focus on peace. Most members identify the beginning of Soka Gakkai’s peace movement in an address in Yokohama by Toda Jōsei on September 8, 1957, when he called for an abolition of the hydrogen bomb and declared that “anyone who ventures to use nuclear weapons, irrespective of their nationality or whether their country is victorious or defeated, should be sentenced to death without exception.”44 Under Ikeda, Soka Gakkai dropped some of this fiery rhetoric but retained its interest in denouncing war. This priority manifested in Komeito: its official founding statement of July 17, 1964 affirms that “it is only through the singular path of the Buddhist philosophy of absolute pacifism” that the world will attain salvation from the horror of war. After its 1970 split from its religious parent, Komeito found purchase with its Gakkai voters as a defender of Article Nine and, at least initially, as a critic of Japan’s maintenance of the Self-Defense Forces.

Gakkai members who came of age in the years after 1970, like the administrator who contacted me, grew up singing the praises of peace – sometimes literally. From the 1970s, Gakkai members were taking part in casts-of-thousands “world peace culture festivals” (sekai heiwa bunkasai) at sports arenas dedicated to their mentor Ikeda Daisaku, who was then transforming himself into an international humanitarian in dialogue with peace activists.

In April 1981, Soka Gakkai registered as a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), part of a movement initiated by Gakkai sub-organizations that pushed the entire organization toward peace-oriented engagement. The Youth Division organized Soka Gakkai’s first Peace Conference in 1979, and in December 1980 the Married Women’s Division established the Soka Gakkai Women’s Peace Committee, a sub-group that became a driving force behind many of the Gakkai peace activities that have emerged over the last three decades. From January 1983, Ikeda began to issue annual “peace proposals,” essays that call for international cooperation and suggest avenues for conflict resolution, and beginning in this period Soka Gakkai began to define itself as founded on three pillars: peace, culture, and education. In the 2015 Peace Proposal, Ikeda Daisaku calls for a “rehumanization of politics and economics,” actions for alleviating suffering that will trigger a “chain reaction of empowerment” that will in turn inspire the “expansion of friendship across differences to build a world of coexistence.”45 Soka Gakkai, in other words, continues to actively promote peace.

Gakkai Member Reactions to the Anti-Security Legislation Protestors: A Buddhist Rebuke of the Rebukers
But not every member who came of age within Soka Gakkai’s milieu of peace activism is an opponent of the new security laws. In fact, the protestors at the demonstrations may comprise a small, vocal minority within Soka Gakkai. This is not to say that the average Gakkai member in Japan is an uncritical Komeito supporter. Rather, mass media coverage of public Soka Gakkai dissent has forced individual adherents to come to terms with why they support Komeito, and it has called upon them to clarify to themselves and one another where they think their religion and its affiliated political party are headed in the future.

Between September 22 and 29, I corresponded in writing (in Japanese) with just over a dozen Gakkai adherents I have come to know through fifteen years of sustained ethnographic fieldwork as a non-member researcher of grassroots-level Gakkai activities in Japan. Their responses indicate that supporting Komeito remains a central, if increasingly complex, component of Gakkai life. The members I know have developed sophisticated, and at times startlingly innovative, ways of interpreting the new laws in relation to their understanding of Nichiren Buddhist principles and the teachings of their mentor Ikeda Daisaku. Here, I provide some sample translations from a few of the members who gave me permission to translate their words under pseudonyms.

The members whom I quote below, with the exception of the last person I cite, are Soka University alumni who graduated years ago from the Young Men’s Division into the Men’s Division, a milestone most Gakkai men mark at the age of forty. They range in age from their mid-forties to their mid-fifties, and all are second-generation Gakkai adherents who live in the Greater Metropolitan Tokyo Area. They represent what one might think of as the paradigmatic Soka Gakkai success story: their parents grew up in poverty in the postwar years and sacrificed to send their sons to the then comparatively new Soka University (founded in 1971), where these fukushi – “fortune children,” the Gakkai term for those born into adherent families – studied hard and earned success in a variety of vocations after graduation. Given their rearing within Soka Gakkai’s flagship school, they represent something of a male Gakkai elite. In future research, I intend to broaden my inquiry into contemporary Gakkai perspectives on peace and security by bringing in more voices from members who did not come from Gakkai schools, and particularly from women members – a crucial demographic in Gakkai political activism, as the episode at Mrs. Origuchi’s home I relayed above demonstrates. However, my preliminary inquiry into the attitudes of some representative Gakkai men provides us with a window into the attitudes of local-level Gakkai leaders who are knowledgeable about the issues that surround the security legislation and thoughtful about formulating ways to encourage others to continue supporting Komeito, even as the party changes course. As fukushi reared in Gakkai schools, they are classmates and possibly friends with signatories to the Soka University association condemning the new laws, and they share much with Amano Tatsushi, the second-generation Gakkai member who circulated the anti-security legislation petition. But, as we shall see, they hold very different views.

Mr. Nishino, a member in his early fifties, works in systems administration for a firm in central Tokyo. He lives just over Tokyo’s municipal border in suburban Chiba Prefecture, where he serves as a shibu (Chapter) leader, in which capacity he oversees approximately two hundred Gakkai households. He responded in detail to a direct question I posed him: what do you think of Komeito’s support of the security legislation?

Fundamentally, I take the position of supporting the security
legislation. Stated bluntly, 1) I’m mostly satisfied with the content of the bills, 2) I’m a person with administrative responsibilities within Soka Gakkai, and 3) I find the opinions of the opposition camp discomforting. I did not broadcast my opinion, so it may have appeared that I tacitly agree with the protestors. I want to make my stance clear.

Considering Soka Gakkai’s support of Komeito, I feel that we now stand at a crossroads. For a long time Komeito served in the opposition, and we could point to humble (perhaps microscopic) instances of practical attainments; these gave us a sense of satisfaction. Times changed, the party joined the governing administration, and within a short time (frankly, to our surprised delight) we were able to learn what it is like to realize campaign pledges and policies beyond our expectations. A Gakkai and the upper leadership of a political party that savored memories [of these victories] was born. Of course, we local supporters have continued our activities unchanged. This is because Soka Gakkai is the face of unified support of Komeito.

But then why has support divided within the Gakkai’s local divisions? My personal feeling is that, at root, the organization is split between 1) one group that experienced the purity, or nobility, of the good old days of Komeito and Soka Gakkai resisting authoritarian power, 2) a second group made up of people who wield authority and, as they receive all the criticism, take all the responsibility for running the organization. Both groups, in different ways, extract quotations from Ikeda-sensei’s thought and philosophy as they pit themselves against one another. So, seen from outside, it is perhaps difficult to comprehend what is going on. Particularly because the theme this time is “peace,” given the volume of Ikeda-sensei’s writings and speeches on this theme that are products of their specific time, and from those that speak to universal concerns, I would have to say that the protesting group has the edge.

Nishino went on to reflect on where he believes Soka Gakkai is headed in the future. To make his points clear, he relied on complex Nichiren Buddhist interpretations to frame his negative opinion of Gakkai adherents who opposed Komeito. His explanations extended far beyond the current fracas to encompass an innovative exegesis of Nichiren’s concepts, a doctrinal elaboration that forms part of his attempt to prepare Gakkai members for a post-Ikeda Daisaku world:

The doctrine of the religious organization indicates that there should not even be one hair of compromise, but in everyday dispatch of the core activities of proselytizing, solicitation of subscriptions to the Seikyō shinbun, and administration, it is obvious that various opinions emerge. A splendid aspect of Soka Gakkai is that, ultimately, differing members reach a consensus as they mutually respect one another’s views. I am profoundly convinced by Ikeda-sensei’s guidance on this point when he
said “were Christ, the Buddha, and Muhammad to meet once to speak with one another, they would reach a great mutual understanding for the happiness and peace of humankind.”

So, in times like these, when opinions within the Gakkai’s administration and those of another support organization do not match up, what is there to do? I believe that an easy standard for determining this comes from the doctrine of gojū no sōtai [five-level comparison] found in Nichiren Buddhism. 1) Naigai sōtai, or Inner and Outer Comparison (Buddhism or non-Buddhist teachings). 2) Daishō sōtai, or Greater and Lesser Comparison (Mahāyāna or Hinayāna Buddhism). 3) Gonjitsu sōtai, or Provisional and True Mahāyāna Buddhism Comparison (pre-Lotus Sutra teachings of the historical Buddha and the Lotus). 4) Honjaku sōtai, or Origin and Trace Comparison (the origin (honmon) portion of the Lotus and the trace (shakumon) portion). 5) Shudatsu sōtai, or Sowing and Harvesting Comparison (the Buddhadharma harvested beyond the text and the Buddhadharma of the text). Up to this point, Nichiren Shōshū and Soka Gakkai are in accord, but in continuing these distinctions, my colleagues and I have the following personal take: 6) Shūsō sōtai, or Sect and Gakkai Comparison (Nichiren Shōshū or Soka Gakkai). 7) Chisō sōtai, or Ikeda and Soka Comparison (Ikeda-sensei or Soka Gakkai).

I think that, right now, the distinction needed to preserve a correct religion is level seven. The faction opposing the security legislation cites from Ikeda as much [as other Gakkai members]. But who gains from their actions? People on the anti-Soka side who, as “Gakkai watchers,” gather protestors’ comments as their profession; mass media that makes a profit from viewers attracted to special reports on Soka Gakkai; and shady, parasitic communists who secretly aim to expand the strength of their party. If people acting as members within Soka Gakkai bring about this kind of disorder, even if they employ many citations from Ikeda-sensei’s writings, and even if they seek to realize noble intentions, one cannot call them disciples of Ikeda-sensei who correctly receive and pass on the dharma; they are nothing other than “worms within the lion’s body” who infest Soka Gakkai.

Not all the members with whom I communicated expressed their views with Nishino’s level of doctrinal elaboration. Mr. Hamasaki, an engineer in his mid-forties who works for a European firm and travels extensively overseas, struck a pragmatic tone:

The security legislation has become a topic of discussion overseas as well, hasn’t it? And the relationship between Komeito and Soka Gakkai, and the relationship between these organizations and the demonstrations has been written about in the mass media. Even within Soka Gakkai there are people with various ways of thinking, I think, so there must be people who oppose this legislation.
But for me, personally, I think political commitment and Gakkai mobilization are separate. Regarding the people who were at the SEALDs demonstration holding up placards with Toda-sensei’s face and other images on them – I doubt these people were true Gakkai adherents. This is because usually, if you are a Gakkai member, you would not bring a photograph of the shishō [Great Mentor] Toda-sensei to a place like that. I also don’t think you would carry the tricolor flag to declare “I oppose this as a Gakkai member!” to a protest organization that knows nothing [about Soka Gakkai]. So I think these are the usual anti-Gakkai people or those who are using the Gakkai in a put-up job. Or they are Gakkai members, but maybe ones with bizarre ideas.

That being said, regarding this legislation, there appear to be arguments for and against, and not a simple case for supporting Komeito. Rather than saying I support the [security legislation] decision, I think Komeito must carefully manage this issue. Komeito depends on the LDP’s overwhelming numerical strength, so I’m not certain where Komeito should intercede, but I want to see the party play its role in exercising restraint from within the governing coalition.

There are people who are discussing connections between Article Nine and Honorary President Ikeda’s past thinking, publications, and guidance, but I think these are separate from creating legislation. When there is an uproar about security issues (and it appears as if this is mostly because the mass media fans the flames when it identifies groups that are making the most noise about political matters), in each instance and in every era arguments are made in an ad hoc manner. But if you want to have a real discussion, you must analyze interpretation of Article Nine, the role of the Self-Defense Forces, the content of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, and the relationship with the United Nations, otherwise a reliable discussion and conclusion will not emerge.

Seen this way, I personally think that Komeito was left seeking a way forward to propose the best possible policy.

Other members were distraught by the divisions within Soka Gakkai over the security issue. Mr. Andō, an engineer near fifty years of age, spends his time outside work and Gakkai activities amassing recordings of classical music and taking spectacular nature photographs. He also expressed support for Komeito, but with a willingness to acknowledge critiques and a palpable sense of anguish, one he seeks to assuage through an appeal to faith:

Regarding this recent legislation – a quiet dispute has been spreading in my local District (chiku). Married Women’s Division members have been lamenting that there are some whose hearts are torn, some who have come to no longer speak with friends, some whose friends have refused to receive the Seikyō shinbun. From long ago, everyone has valued “solidarity of faith” (shinjin no
danketsu) as the most important thing, so expressing negative opinions is difficult, and I think that everyone believes they must always put on a positive face. This is why many members have grown silent, I think.

The people putting on a radical performance in the mass media of carrying the tri-color flag really aren’t Gakkai members – my wife and I laughed together when we talked about this.

Komeito members came to our District to speak one on one with the Men’s Division about this legislation, but even from the point of view of those of us with responsibilities within Soka Gakkai, the amount of information they provided was absolutely paltry. You only see positive news written in the Kōmei shinbun [Komeito’s newspaper]. Members aren’t willing to listen to outside voices, or the media, so the basis for cultivating individual opinions is certainly very limited.

I believe that Komeito aims at a “middle course” (chūyō) no matter if times are peaceful or if there is an emergency. This is the middle path (chūdō). They are thinking of human life first – this I believe.

I imagine that, no matter how open Diet debate may be, the reality is that there must be strictly-kept secrets about international affairs. The ruling parties of Japan determined that there is a need to create this new legislation – I have to believe this.

So, there is one Komeito Diet member named Tōyama Kiyohiko who is central to support of this legislation. He was my kōhai [junior] at Soka Gakuen [Soka Senior High School] in the same dormitory. He’s an earnest, intelligent, and courageous kōhai. If he says “this is good,” I must...not believe him (laughs).

If I think about it on my own, I am not sure if this legislation is good or not. It’s not a proactive reaction, but I have faith in what Komeito handles. In Gakkai guidance, there is the ishin tai’e [faith in place of wisdom] way of thinking. This means substituting faith in the place of wisdom. These words always come to mind when I ask others to support Komeito.

Humans are not only rational beings, I think. Intuition and matters one cannot describe but move one’s spirit are important to personal action. For this reason I think that something you “believe,” without questioning where it came from, is very important. Haven’t we sort of forgotten the value of what it means to “believe” in modern society?

This does not mean that if one believes rationality is useless; one must study more to deepen one’s understanding of the issues. Through this one determines “what do I believe?” and how to determine happiness from unhappiness, needless to say.

I don’t really understand this legislation, and I am still in a quandary about how to talk about it when I’m called on to recommend it to others, but at
least I believe in Komeito as a party that respects human life.

All of the members with whom I communicated expressed skepticism as to whether or not the protestors filmed carrying the tri-color flag at demonstrations were in fact members of Soka Gakkai. Mr. Tsuda, who called himself an “ordinary Men’s Division member” in his messages to me, posited that, even if the protestors were members, they were duped into creating a media spectacle: “It’s fine if the tri-color flag appears when Gakkai members are being interviewed, but even in scenes [on television] when there is no interview it seems as if the flag is filmed deliberately (are these really Gakkai members? Seems weird). Because of this, the people of Japan and Gakkai members alike are being tricked.” He also expressed doubts about the legitimacy of the petition circulated by faculty, staff, and alumni of his alma mater Soka University: “Happily, there do not appear to be any protesting members in my area, but some Gakkai intelligentsia are taking part in the demonstrations, thanks to the petition. In truth, this protest movement at Soka University, it seems as if it is being guided by someone from Hokkōkō. If there were really a big protest movement at Soka University, it would be much bigger news, I think.”

Some members recognized a diversity of opinion among their fellow local members even as they expressed distinctly centrist, possibly even right-leaning, sentiments. Mr. Takazawa, a musician who lives and works in western Tokyo, acknowledged that “around me there are people expressing opinions both for and against. For me, I think this kind of law should perhaps pass after Constitutional revision - maybe? This country’s citizens, including myself, are soft when it comes to understandings of security matters. When it comes time to support Komeito candidates in the next election, they will ask that this issue not be presented as the face of their platform; because Soka Gakkai is an organization that maintains an antiwar philosophy, this protest erupted. But Komeito is the mitigating factor preventing the exercise of military force. This is how we can appraise the matter.” Others were even more blunt: “I’m in opposition to those in opposition to the security legislation,” stated Mr. Nishimura, who is something of an elder statesmen among this group of Soka University alums. “Within Soka Gakkai of my region, these recent events have not had any effect. In order to explain the Komeito decision, we must read Ningen kakumei, revisit Gakkai history, and ensure that Komeito does not distance itself from its position to curb authoritarian power. The history of the Gakkai is one of combatting authoritarianism; we know the fear of authoritarian power. For this reason, because Komeito joined the coalition and secured a place from which to control violent coercive power, it must maintain its responsibility to the Japanese people by preserving this role. To do this, the party chose to accommodate the security policy, I think.”

Among those I have come to know in my years of ethnographic research, some have moved away from Soka Gakkai. One member, whom I will call Mr. Sonoda, has grown deeply bitter about what he sees as Soka Gakkai’s singular focus on Ikeda Daisaku at the expense of reverence for Nichiren Buddhism. Though he was born to a devout Gakkai mother and was himself a dedicated adherent until two years ago, he now secretly chants to an object of worship received from Nichiren Shōshū – a sacrilege unthinkable to Gakkai adherents – and has taken to deriding Komeito as “the Kōmei wing of the Liberal Democratic Party.” His opposition to the Gakkai and Komeito, however, has not translated into opposition to the security legislation. Instead, he expressed a chilling eagerness for a cathartic resolution to the simmering regional conflict, an attitude that makes Gakkai accommodation of the new security laws appear moderate by comparison:
East Asia, North Korea, Russia, China – in these places you can see different kinds of friction [with Japan]. America does not want to send its own people into Japan’s fights (this is obvious, right), but if it does nothing these fights will grow into huge conflicts. Countries that regard Okinawa and the Northern Territories as their own are fomenting conflict to advance their colonization plans; Russia and China are arming for this.

If they don’t protect the country’s citizens, what is the point of politicians?! If there is a conflict, I will volunteer. This is absolutely my own opinion, but I think this new legislation is indecisive. I think it would be good if Japan declares that, if China or Russia invade, we will melt down all the nuclear plants in the country.

**Conclusion: Can Komeito Take Soka Gakkai Support for Granted?**

It is not only politicians who think about the benefits of remaining in power. Gakkai members are some of very few politically engaged people in Japan who can vividly recall what it is like to be in government and in opposition. This gives them a rare and valuable perspective on the costs and benefits of Komeito’s compromises. During my fieldwork with Gakkai members in Japan, I was struck by the opinions I heard between 2009 and late 2012, when Komeito and the LDP were in opposition and the Democratic Party of Japan was in power. My Gakkai friends expressed frustration about being in opposition. This three-year interim clearly reminded them of decades of helplessness through which they and those in their parents’ and grandparents’ generations struggled, when they were ridiculed for belonging to what was dubbed by religious and political rivals a “religion of the poor.” Ridiculed, but also feared for representing what many opponents painted as a nefarious plot to use Komeito to install a post-war Soka Gakkai theocracy. Earning the respect (however grudging) of one’s opponents, having a chance to demonstrate as a governing party that fears of a Gakkai / Komeito theocratic plot are unfounded, keeping Komeito within the government as a mitigating force against LDP intransigence: these are worth a high price to Gakkai adherents. They are willing to sacrifice founding principles and expend considerable effort explaining why maintaining Komeito support, even after policy reversals, is both rationally and ethically defensible.

Gakkai members strategically adapting to Komeito’s shift away from pacifism is by no means a new development. In late 2003, the coalition government then led by Prime Minister Koizumi Jun’ichirō provided financing for military operations, refueled allied naval vessels, and, most controversially, sent Self-Defense Force troops to take part in the Iraq War. Though only a few hundred SDF troops served without casualties until 2006 in non-combatant roles, the presence of Japanese soldiers and sailors in the middle of a war in a foreign country triggered public outrage. Komeito, as part of the ruling coalition, was forced to defend its support for the Iraq dispatch to the public and to its own angry members. Anne Mette Fisker-Nielsen, in her ethnography of politically engaged Soka University students, took note of ways young Gakkai adherents came to terms with their support for Komeito during the Iraq War. In some cases, the students she interviewed regarded the SDF as a force sent to help the people of Iraq, while others stated that Komeito should have opposed the LDP-led Iraq dispatch even if it meant a return to the opposition. Most, however, appeared to settle on a pragmatic position akin to that taken by the adherents I cited above: Komeito represents
Gakkai interests best, it is optimally suited to mitigate against the LDP’s worst policies, and, ultimately, being in government is infinitely more effective than being in opposition.\textsuperscript{51}

Similarly, Robert Kisala collected survey data and conducted interviews with Gakkai members that, as he put it, demonstrated their “difficulty of maintaining the pacifist position without abandoning all engagement with society.”\textsuperscript{52} Kisala discovered that, due to practical dilemmas occasioned by Komeito’s political success and their then-comparatively recent cooperation with the Liberal Democrats on the 1992 Act on Cooperation for United Nations Peacekeeping Operations, or the PKO law, Soka Gakkai members were among the most willing of the peace-promoting religious practitioners he surveyed to allow for accommodations to an absolute pacifist stance.

Pragmatic support for Komeito by its Gakkai support base has persisted even as Gakkai members were filmed protesting outside the Diet. Results from the most recent local-level elections indicate that voter turnout for Komeito candidates does not appear to have suffered. In fact, local Komeito candidates are, in some cases, enjoying unprecedented levels of support. For example, in city council elections held across Japan on September 6, 13, 20, and 27, in almost all cases all Komeito candidates won their seats, and in four cases – Inagawa City and Inami City in Hyōgo Prefecture, Kusatsu City in Shiga, and Matsuda in Kanagawa – candidates tallied record-high numbers of votes.\textsuperscript{53} In most cases these candidates ran unopposed, and the total number of votes in each case was very small, yet these results indicate that support for local Komeito politicians remains reliable. It remains to be seen if politicians who enjoy more national prominence will continue to receive support from their Gakkai supporters. Municipal politicians do not write security legislation, after all, and they frequently earn good reputations for their concern for local issues. Stakes will be higher during the Upper House election, slated for July 2016, when 121 of the 242 seats will be up for reelection.

I have described multiple reasons to believe that Komeito support remains central to Gakkai faith, which would indicate that Gakkai voters will respond to calls to get out the vote during next summer’s Upper House election. However, easy assumptions about this support should be avoided. Change appears to be in the air: Gakkai adherents, perhaps sharing Mr. Nishino’s sense that Soka Gakkai stands at a crossroads, have taken to the streets to protest Komeito, and their administrators are expressing their dismay to outsider researchers. There is also precedent for Gakkai members to make their dismay heard at the polls. As it turns out, non-action by Gakkai voters can exert a transformative effect: members are capable of practicing what anthropologist James C. Scott termed “token resistance”: foot-dragging, dissimilitude, and other seemingly inconsequential tactics carried out by individuals that, when amassed, produce powerful “weapons of the weak.”\textsuperscript{54}

The clearest recent expression of Gakkai-member dissent manifested in the July 13, 2014 gubernatorial election in Shiga Prefecture, a vote held less than two weeks after the unpopular July 1 cabinet decision to allow for collective self-defense. Koyari Takashi, a former advisor to Abe’s cabinet and successor to the outgoing LDP governor, lost the election to Mikazuki Taizō from the Democratic Party of Japan.
In an analysis of electoral data, Steven Reed at Chūo University posits that, although 92 percent of Komeito supporters voted for Koyari - two percentage points higher than Koyari support among LDP voters - the total number of Komeito voters was down from previous elections, and that the absence of Gakkai supporters accounts for the margin in favor of Mikazuki. Thus, while Komeito politicians regard compromise with the LDP as a successful strategy to remain in power, Gakkai members do not necessarily hold the same view, and, depending on the timing of events and the mood of the constituents, some are willing to make their dissatisfaction clear through their own compromises - namely, by holding back on the Gakkai practice of soliciting votes.

There are other factors at work to change support for Komeito. Hinted at but not explicitly discussed in the responses by my Gakkai informants was anxiety about changes that will occur after the lifetime of Honorary President Ikeda. He is eighty-seven years of age, and has not been seen in public for years. There is ample evidence that the Gakkai administration is working to routinize his charisma in order to ensure that member activities continue at today’s vigorous pace even after Ikeda’s official passing. Local members themselves are remarkably self-reflexive about the shift their own organization is undergoing. Mr. Andō mused about this to me in the course of describing his faith-driven support of Komeito: “charismatic leadership (karisumateki shidōryoku) is thinning and centrifugal power is strengthening remarkably. There is a need for us to construct a mode of managing the Gakkai and supporting Komeito for the new generation.”

In sum, though there is precedent for Gakkai dissent to manifest at the polls, and there are transformations within Soka Gakkai that loom in its near future, it would be unwise to see the televised protestors as representing a wholesale shift by Soka Gakkai against Komeito. Coverage of Gakkai dissenters by mass media outlets and scholarly observers who are staunchly opposed to the Abe Cabinet and the security legislation can come across as an expression of wishful thinking, as the selective use of evidence to support a predetermined conclusion. Recent discussions with members and historical precedent makes it difficult to believe that millions of Gakkai adherents, like the members who gathered with Mrs. Origuchi to help the Tokyo Assembly candidate seek reelection, will simply jettison this core component of their religious practice. In order to gain a fuller picture of what is happening among Gakkai political activists, we must carry out investigations into Komeito’s Soka Gakkai voter base. We must learn from Gakkai members who do not seek media attention yet nonetheless work constantly to solicit votes in their local areas. It is only by taking their positions into account that scholars of Japanese religion and politics will understand how the country’s most powerful voting bloc will operate in the future.

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His sincere thanks go to Axel Klein and Steven Reed for their invaluable help with this article.


Notes

1 For coverage of the security legislation and cases made by its critics, see Hornung, Jeffrey. “Abe on His Heels: The Prime Minister’s Domestic Standing After the Security Reforms.” Foreign Affairs, 19 September 2015; Asahi shinbun 19 September 2015. The Japanese press was particularly concerned by foreign coverage of the rumble in the Diet and the demonstrators outside the building; see the Asahi shinbun’s timeline on the heiwakenpō (Peace Constitution).

2 This event attracted considerable notice within and outside Japan. See here.

3 Asahi shinbun 14 September 2015.


5 A collection of these striking images, which circulated via Twitter, Youtube, and other platforms, is available here.

6 For a quantified analysis of Komeito’s high statistical average of electoral successes, a rate that depends on the party’s ability to assess its chances based on 1) the number of Soka Gakkai voters in each district and 2) the assumption that Gakkai voter turnout is almost equal to the number of Gakkai adherents of voting age, see Smith, Daniel M. “Party Ideals and Practical Constraints in Kōmeitō Candidate Nominations,” in Ehrhardt et al., 2014, 139-162.

7 For discussions of social welfare-oriented concessions and other policies Komeito has fought for in coalition, see Hasunuma, Linda, and Axel Klein, “Kōmeitō in Coalition,” in Ehrhardt et al. 2014, 240-265.

8 See coverage of this from October 13, 2015 in the Japan Times and October 14, 2015 from the Yomiuri shinbun.


10 The Asia-Pacific Journal has provided considerable coverage of SEALDs. See here and here for key resources.

11 See here. Ōbai Tōri’s Twitter feed is accessible here: https://twitter.com/obtr3.

12 Discussions of the split between Soka Gakkai and Nichiren Shōshū appear in McLaughlin 2012.

13 Soka Gakkai members would locate Nichiren’s discussion of ōbai tōri in the Ongi kuden as it appears on page 784 in the Nichiren Daishōnin gosho zenshū (Tokyo: Soka Gakkai), Soka Gakkai’s 1952 edited collection of Nichiren’s writings better known to its
adherents as the Gosho: “When one comes to see that each - the cherry, plum, peach, and damson - is a thing that is, in itself, the uncreated three bodies [understood here to refer to the True Buddha] without undergoing change, this is the definition of all-encompassing.”

Ikeda expounded numerous times on ōbai tōri. Members today will most likely encounter his thoughts on this topic in a recent reprint of one of his more popular works: Ikeda Daisaku, Kōfuku to heiwa o tsukuru chie dai ni-bu (jō). Tokyo: Seikyō Shinbun, 2015.

Many papers and broadcast media outlets carried coverage of the Gakkai protestors. These images appeared early on Ideanews, a blog maintained by the journalist Hashimoto Masato, and circulated widely through social media.

See here.


Quoted in Nihon keizai shinbun 26 July 2015. It is important to note that Murayama, as head of the Japan Socialist Party, cooperated with former Komeito politicians in coalition government in the mid-1990s and that he was deeply invested in security legislation issues for his entire career. His own reinterpretation in the mid-1990s as Prime Minister recognizing the constitutionality of the SDF and the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty changed the Japan Socialist Party’s longstanding opposition to these institutions.

Mainichi shinbun 3 August 2015.

Mainichi shinbun 5 August 2015.

For Shimazono’s Twitter feed see here, and for his blog, see here.

See, for instance, Shimazono’s analyses of Ikeda’s stance on collective self-defense, an analysis that quotes extensively from the Toynbee-Ikeda exchange 1972 that was published in English as Choose Life: A Dialogue (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2007).

Twitter feed accessible here.

Amano’s petition and appeal appear on his blog. This site includes a link to a Youtube clip of him submitting the petition and a chronicle of support he has received from like-minded Gakkai adherents.

The petition and the Yūshi no Kai’s manifesto (in Japanese, English, Spanish, and Italian) is available here. A Twitter and blog from a related organization that sent out a “Statement of Opposition to the Security-Related Bills, by Soka Alumni – Friends of Article 9,” a separate effort that has gathered over 300 signatures, are available here and here.


An interview carried out by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA with Kitagawa in which he outlines these points is available here.


For Tōyama’s full explanation, see here.

See