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Komeito Seeks the Middle Road in Japanese Politics

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KOMEITO SEEKS THE MIDDLE ROAD IN JAPANESE POLITICS

In the four years since its formation, the Komeito--Clean Government Party--has become a significant force in Japanese politics. As the political arm of the militant Soka Gakkai Buddhist lay organization, the Komeito has enlarged upon earlier successes of its predecessor, the more informally organized Koseiren, by winning representation in the Japanese Diet. Following its success in the House of Councilors election in July 1968, the Komeito plans to run 75 candidates in the next Lower House election which could be held sometime next year. The other political parties, which in the past have tended to view the Komeito and Soka Gakkai as a temporary fringe element on the Japanese political scene, are increasingly concerned over the growing strength of the Komeito.

In recent months the Komeito has exhibited a gradual movement to the left in both tactics and policy, resulting in positions which are in conflict with US interests. The Komeito is now demanding that the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty be phased out during "the 1970s," and that Japan's ties with Communist China be expanded substantially.

At this stage in its development, the Komeito is at a crossroads. To become a truly major force in Japanese politics, it must break out of its close embrace with the Soka Gakkai and broaden its appeal among such diverse elements as labor, the press, small business interests, and the rural populace. Should it be successful, the Komeito has an excellent opportunity in the coming years to fill the growing void in Japanese politics between the ruling conservative party and parties of the left which are becoming increasingly displaced from the mainstream of Japan's political life.

The Komeito, established by the Soka Gakkai in November 1964, succeeded the Koseiren, which ran candidates in local elections and for the Upper House of the

Diet. The Komeito inherited from the Koseiren 15 seats in the Upper House and over 1,000 seats in local assemblies. The Soka Gakkai sought to expand its

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political influence by running Komeito candidates for the Lower House, where the real legislative power in Japan lies.

The decision of the Soka Gakkai to enlarge the scope of its participation in Japanese politics was partly motivated by a need to keep its membership growing, as well as a desire to hold the interest of the members it already had. Another important motivation clearly was the Soka Gakkai's wish to establish a mechanism through which its potentially great, but heretofore diffuse, influence could be channeled into practical politics. The Soka Gakkai probably also wanted to broaden its base of financial support by attracting small businessmen and others interested in securing the patronage of its followers.

Leadership

The Komeito owes much of its success to its young and able leadership. In this respect it has a distinct edge over the Japan Socialist Party, the largest opposition party, which has been handicapped by its predominantly older, less flexible leaders. The leaders of the Komeito generally advanced to their present positions on the basis of their proselytizing and organizational talents. Most are dedicated believers in the Soka Gakkai and in Nichiren Buddhism, but are not so dogmatic that they are insensitive to changes in the Japanese political climate.

The leadership of the Komeito also differs from that of the Socialists and of the other major parties in that it does not visibly suffer from factionalism. The unity of the Komeito leaders has, in large part, accounted for the party's ability to adjust its policies to what the leadership sees as shifts in Japanese public opinion. The Socialists, on the other hand, have generally been unable to develop new policies because of a constant paralysis of leadership brought about by endemic factionalism. Thus, the Japan Socialist Party has remained bogged down by intraparty bickering while the Komeito has moved forward with considerable élan.

Domestic and Foreign
Policy Lines

The ideological framework in which Komeito objectives are cast is broadly derived from that of the Soka Gakkai. The ultimate aim of the Soka Gakkai is the establishment of a "parliamentary democracy in which every individual has been awakened to the principles of Buddhism," as part of a new "third world." This "third world" is to be based on a vaguely defined "neo-socialism" which will promote the welfare of the entire people rather than just the working class. The Komeito and the Soka Gakkai place considerable emphasis on the fulfillment of material desires during a person's own lifetime, rather than sacrificing in this world in

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order to be rewarded in the hereafter. A philosophy of this nature has an obvious appeal to those elements of Japanese society which have not fully shared in the prosperity of postwar Japan.

In the realm of practical politics, Komeito policies generally reflect trends in public opinion rather than the doctrines of Nichiren Buddhism. The Komeito has attempted to find the broadest possible consensus among Japanese on each issue and has then fashioned the Komeito position accordingly.

The Komeito effort to align policy with public opinion accounts in large part for occasionally abrupt tactical shifts on such issues as the reversion of Okinawa. During the mid-1960s, Komeito policy stressed Okinawa's strategic importance and the complex nature of the reversion problem. In August 1967, however, the Komeito demanded the "immediate and complete" reversion of Okinawa as well as the immediate removal of all US nuclear bases and most conventional bases there. The Komeito no doubt believed that this new position would appeal to many more Japanese than the earlier, more moderate position.

Since the formation of the Komeito, its political orientation, at least in tactical terms, has gradually moved toward the left. The shift has come from conscious efforts by party leaders to attract broader electoral sup-

port, primarily at the expense of the Socialists.

The Komeito's line on economic matters is aimed at the left as well as at disenchanted supporters of the Liberal Democrats. The party has called for a comprehensive welfare state, involving a substantial redistribution of income, and the nationalization of certain, as yet undesignated "key" industries.

The foreign policy of the Komeito is based on the rather vague concept of "complete neutrality." Related to this is the party's hardening position on the Mutual Security Treaty with the US. Until recently the Komeito considered the treaty the best arrangement under existing conditions but opposed it in theory. Now it is demanding that the treaty be phased out in three stages during "the 1970s." The Komeito maintains that the treaty subordinates Japan to the US, that it exacerbates tensions in Asia, and that it may involve Japan in a war against its will.

Komeito foreign policy has not wavered so much on certain basic issues, such as opposition to the war in Vietnam and advocacy of increased exchanges with Communist China. The Komeito insists that Japan, because of its importance in East Asia, should play a greater role in easing tension between China and the US. Although it recognizes the potential nuclear threat to Japan posed by China, the Komeito

claims that Japan itself will be isolated if it continues to follow the US policy of isolating China. The Komeito advocates that Japan recognize China immediately, that China be admitted to the UN, and that Japan's commercial ties with China be expanded. This pragmatic position is characteristically attuned to views long held by the Japanese "man in the street."

The Komeito's leftward shift may be more tactical than fundamental. The essentially conservative nature of the leadership seems to indicate that the current tactics represent political opportunism more than firm convictions of the Komeito leaders. Furthermore, much of the party's financial support comes from small businessmen and shopkeepers, who are among the most conservative elements in Japanese society.

Tactics

With the Komeito's swing toward the left, it has shown an increasing willingness to cooperate with the Socialists and the Japan Communist Party in the Diet to further Komeito's interests. The Komeito has, however, repeatedly stressed that this parliamentary cooperation does not indicate approval of Socialist and Communist ideologies. Cooperation has been, and likely will continue to be, on an issue by issue basis. Particularly in the case of the Communists, there is considerable ill will between the parties because they often compete for support from the same

proletarian elements in Japanese society.

The Komeito is relying more and more on the street protest rally as a political tactic. The highly disciplined Komeito has shown several times recently that it can quickly and effectively mobilize supporters for demonstrations. It could probably mobilize 200,000 to 400,000 supporters virtually overnight for an important issue such as agitation for review of the Mutual Security Treaty in 1970. The Liberal Democrats clearly respect this capability of the Komeito, and can be expected to avoid action on matters which could arouse strong Komeito opposition.

The Komeito's political methods are becoming increasingly sophisticated. There now is less of a tendency to resort to blatantly unethical campaign methods, and a greater reliance on Komeito mobilization skills, both in the street and in the polling booth. Because of the high degree of discipline of Komeito supporters, the party boasts the most efficient use of votes of any political party in Japan. Komeito discipline has also enabled the party to persuade followers to move to areas of weak electoral strength in support of a Komeito candidate, even when they had to find new jobs and homes.

Sources of Support

Komeito still draws its support largely from the ranks of the Soka Gakkai, whose membership

comprises primarily members of the lower and lower-middle classes clustered in urban areas. Japanese of strongly nationalistic sentiment are also attracted to the Komeito because of its stress on Japanese ways.

The Komeito is now making plans to expand its support in the Japanese labor movement, where its influence traditionally has been weak. The Komeito announced last year that it would form a new labor union--to be called the Democratic Labor Council--after the next Upper House elections. According to a recent policy statement, a preparatory body will be set up late in 1968, and the labor union itself will be organized sometime next year.

The Komeito labor organization will be aimed primarily at workers in small- and medium-sized enterprises. The potential for Komeito growth in this area is clearly indicated by a recent Ministry of Labor survey, which revealed that two thirds of the nearly 30 million employed workers in Japan do not belong to labor unions. The majority of these workers are employed in small- and medium-sized enterprises.

The early formation of a Komeito-sponsored labor union would be opportune because of the fluid situation in the Japanese labor movement. The influence of Sohyo, the major labor organization, has declined recently, as has its membership. Furthermore, the percentage of

union members in the total number of employed workers in Japan has also been declining. The Komeito leadership is projecting a "gradual growth" for the new union during the first four or five years.

Domestic Political Significance

Unencumbered by an outmoded and inflexible ideology, the Komeito may be in a better position to reflect the general consensus on particular issues than any of the other opposition parties, particularly the Socialists and the Communists. The Komeito thus appears to be in a position to fill a great need in Japanese politics--a relatively middle-of-the-road opposition party which is attuned to the views of the broad masses of Japanese. If the Komeito is to fill this role, it will, however, have to undergo an extended period of substantial change and growth.

There are several major impediments to the growth of the Komeito, but according to tentative indications, the Komeito is beginning to overcome many of them. Its most serious liability is a relatively narrow base of support. The Komeito's heavy dependence on Soka Gakkai members is becoming an increasing handicap because the growth of the Soka Gakkai has been losing momentum. Although the Komeito has made significant gains in recent elections in terms of seats won, the percentage increase in the size of its vote has begun to fall off--especially

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at the local level. The decision to form a labor union in part may have reflected concern over the slackening rate of growth.

There has been some recent evidence, however, that the Komeito's base of support is now expanding beyond the Soka Gakkai. According to Komeito claims, in the Upper House election last July the Komeito vote in some areas was more than double the number of Soka Gakkai voters in those areas. In Kobe, for example, the Komeito claims to have received 400,000 votes although there were only 170,000 eligible Soka Gakkai voters. Although Komeito claims must be treated with caution, it appears that the Komeito has successfully extended its appeal to non - Soka Gakkai members on a modest but significant scale.

There is some indication that Komeito support in rural areas is also increasing. Komeito leaders point to the party's growing electoral strength in such areas as Fukuoka. Party representatives have visited other rural areas to investigate ways to expand Komeito support among non - Soka Gakkai members. The Komeito reportedly is considering increasing its grass-roots support in small villages by expanding Soka Gakkai mechanisms for transmitting complaints of villagers upward from the village level.

In urban areas, the Komeito support from among non - Soka

Gakkai elements could snowball rapidly if there were a sudden deterioration in the political or economic situation in Japan. Even without radical change for the worse, the Komeito seems assured of at least moderate growth during the next few years because of the continuing rapid urbanization of Japanese society. The constant migration of rural Japanese to the cities guarantees a continuing influx of insecure and maladjusted people to replace earlier arrivals who move up the socioeconomic ladder.

Another factor which may, however, inhibit Komeito expansion, particularly into the Japanese labor movement, is the opposition that the Komeito's planned labor union will draw from the other major labor unions, already apprehensive about the threatened Komeito expansion into their domains. As yet the major labor organizations, particularly Sohyo, have publicly ignored the Komeito's plans. Sohyo, concerned about its declining numbers, is, however, now eyeing the large numbers of unorganized workers in small- and medium-sized enterprises--also the prime focus of Komeito attention.

The failure of the Komeito to win the support of any significant segment of the Japanese labor union movement thus far has deprived the Komeito of one of the traditionally important core elements of a Japanese opposition party. This deficiency, in combination with the failure of the Komeito to attract

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support from the mass media and the intellectuals, also traditionally important core elements of the political opposition, limits the ability of the Komeito to function as a modern political party.

The Komeito may be able to compensate partially for the lack of allegiance from established labor union leaders by creating its own labor union. There is also evidence of a growing respect for the Komeito in the Japanese mass media, particularly since the recent Upper House election. Japanese intellectuals, as well as many middle-class Japanese, tend to view the Soka Gakkai and the Komeito as a fanatical religious organization. Although the Komeito is gradually gaining respectability as a result of its efforts to mirror the widest range of Japanese public opinion, many Japanese still identify its aims very closely with those of the Soka Gakkai. The Komeito will have to disassociate itself from this image if it is to attract the support of the elements of Japanese society necessary for it to function as an effective opposition party.

The Komeito's growing difficulty in maintaining iron discipline among the rank and file as the party membership expands may also affect its future success. Many of the younger recruits to the party's ranks tend to lose interest quickly. Discipline may also be weakened if the Komeito sacrifices organizational

cohesiveness and single-minded dedication to Nichiren Buddhism in order to broaden the party's appeal. Thus, the Komeito leadership is faced with a decision which can fundamentally alter the present character and direction of the party.

Government Party Concerned

The Liberal Democratic Party apparently is anticipating significant Komeito growth; Liberal Democratic leaders recently have privately expressed concern over Komeito prospects in the next Lower House elections. Preliminary Liberal Democratic estimates predict a possible loss of ten seats to the Komeito. Liberal Democratic Secretary General Fukuda recently commented that his party might have to put off elections until 1970 in order to develop more effective countermeasures against the Komeito's expanded electoral efforts. Fukuda's comment undoubtedly reflects the increased awareness of Japanese political observers of the political significance of the Komeito following the Upper House elections last July and the Komeito's subsequent announcement that 75 candidates would be entered in the next Lower House elections. The earlier tendency of the Japanese "establishment" to underestimate the strength of the Komeito has been subjected to serious re-examination, resulting in what in many cases are probably inflated estimates of the Komeito's growth potential. (CONFIDENTIAL NO FOREIGN DISSEM)