

New Religious Movements and Conservative Politics in Japan: An Overview of Electoral and Non-Electoral Political Activities of Happy Science and the Happiness Realization Party

Jeffrey James Hall

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Introduction

The assassination of former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in July 2022, allegedly carried out due to Abe's connections to a new religious movement, has shed light on the need for further academic study of the political activities of such groups in Japan. In this article I will provide a brief overview of how one new religious movement, Happy Science (Kofuku no Kagaku), has used a variety of different methods to influence the political sphere.

The most well-known example of religious involvement in Japanese politics is that of Sōka Gakkai, a Japanese Buddhist religious movement that emerged in the 1930s and has been active in electoral politics since the 1960s. Its practitioners back Kōmeitō, a party originally founded by Sōka Gakkai but official separate from the religious movement since the 1970s. Kōmeitō's candidates, all of whom are Sōka Gakkai practitioners, can count on a very reliable base of voters who consider voting a part of their religious duty. Sōka Gakkai practitioners number in the millions, which has trans-

lated into significant electoral success for Kōmeitō.

In recent years Kōmeitō has consistently accounted for between 10 and 15% of votes in national elections. Its political influence and the reliability of its voters have been recognized by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which has maintained a coalition with Kōmeitō since 1999. In both national and local elections, the LDP and Kōmeitō have cooperated in vote sharing schemes, not running competing candidates in key districts and instructing supporters to support coalition candidates. Even though it has been a junior partner in subsequent coalition governments, Kōmeitō has successfully formed a codependent relationship with the much larger LDP, allowing it to exert considerable influence on policy and “punch significantly above its weight.”¹

Due to its size, influence, and the openness of its involvement in electoral politics, Sōka Gakkai has been the focus of most existing research on the relationship between new religious movements and politics in Japan. For example, Fisker–Nielson’s volume on grassroots political action of practitioners,² Yakushiji’s broad overview of Kōmeitō’s five decades of electoral politics,³ McLaughlin’s fieldwork-based exploration of the religious movement and its followers,⁴ and the 2014 edited volume *Kōmeitō Politics and Religion in Japan*, which brought together the scholarship of many international researchers.⁵

In this paper I do not aim to repeat points made in existing scholarship, so I will instead focus on one new religious movement that has not received a great deal of attention in English language scholarship, Happy Science. It is much smaller than Sōka Gakkai, preventing it from forming a viable political party at the national level. Happy Science’s involvement in electoral politics, as well as their efforts to influence politicians through the formation of affili-

ated organizations, are nonetheless noteworthy and deserving of scholarly attention.

Happy Science and the Happiness Realization Party

Happy Science is a “new, new religion” (*shin shin shūkyō*) founded in 1986. Its founder Ōkawa Ryūho, has preached the “unity of religion and politics” as a necessity for the realization of “God’s ideal on Earth.”⁶ Accordingly, Happy Science has attempted to influence both domestic Japanese politics and international politics.

In 2009 Ōkawa announced the creation of the Happiness Realization Party (*Kōfuku Jitsugen-tō*—hereafter written as HRP), a political party that would offer a “third way” alternative to the two major parties at the time, the Liberal Democratic Party and the Democratic Party of Japan. Although the HRP’s positions on issues such as immigration were left-of-center, most of its party platform could be considered right-wing or conservative, especially on issues of national security and remilitarization.⁷ In the 2009 Japanese general election its candidates presented themselves as hawkish advocates for constitutional revision and supporters of a strong military deterrent against security threats from China and North Korea. Setting the lofty goal of obtaining an outright majority in the National Diet, it fielded 288 candidates for single-seat constituencies and 49 proportional representation district candidates. HRP candidates were on the ballot in almost every single electoral district in Japan.

Although Happy Science claimed a membership of 10 million, the results of the 2009 election suggested that its actual number of adherents was much lower, or at least not as committed to the HRP as its leaders had hoped. Although the HRP received

1,071,958 votes, or 1.52% of votes for single-seat races, votes were too widely dispersed between districts for any of its candidates to win. The number of votes cast for the HRP in proportional representation blocks totaled 459,387 or 0.65%, which was also too few votes for any candidate to claim victory.⁸ Later that year, the HRP ran failed candidates in two Upper House by-elections and city-level elections in Tokyo and Sendai.⁹

Within Japan's electoral system, candidates are required to pay an election deposit (*kyōtakukin*) of either 3 million yen for single-seat races and 6 million yen for proportional representation races, with the deposits not returned to candidates who fail to receive under 10% of votes.¹⁰ Regional and local elections have similar election deposit rules, costing from the hundreds of thousands to a million yen for each candidate. Fielding over 300 candidates in a national election and failing to reach the deposit return threshold represented a major expenditure of money with no tangible results for Happy Science.

In subsequent national elections between 2010 and 2022 the HRP fielded a far fewer number of candidates, all of whom lost by wide margins. In the most recent election, the 2022 Upper House election, it fielded 11 candidates for district races and only one candidate for the national proportional representation vote. Its national vote total in 2022 was under 150,000, far below the required amount to win any seats.

Despite consistently failing in national elections, the HRP has achieved some success in local elections. As of September 2022, the HRP website listed 46 politicians who held elected offices in city or two assemblies across Japan.¹¹ Within small towns and cities, a coordinated effort by the local branch of a religious movement can yield electoral success because the bar for victory is significantly

lower than regional or national elections. For example, in the small town of Ono in Fukushima prefecture, HRP candidate Aida Yuriko secured a seat in the town council with just 365 of the 8,509 votes cast in town's 2020 election.¹²

Election campaigning, even if not successful, can be interpreted as a kind of solidarity-building exercise that draws practitioners closer to their religion and its leadership. This could be one reason why Happy Science created its own political party. However, I would argue that it is also seeking real political influence in Japan. As Happy Science has reduced the number of candidates its fields through the HRP in national elections, its members and ex-members have become involved in other political activities that are arguably much more effective.

Affiliated Organizations and Political Activism

A notable feature of Happy Science's involvement in politics has been the efforts of its members and former members to found political organizations that are not officially a part of the religious movement, but nonetheless advocate political views similar to those of the Happiness Realization Party. These "secular" organizations have succeeded in cooperating openly with politicians and activists who would likely be hesitant about open cooperation with a new religious movement.

Aeba Hiroaki (who has also gone by the names Aeba Jikido and Jay Aeba), one of the earliest leaders of the Happiness Realization Party, has been an instrumental figure in these efforts. After stepping down from HRP leadership in 2009, Aeba became active in building transnational ties between Japanese conservatives and members of the American Republican Party. Aeba became a regular attendee of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC),

the largest annual gathering of conservative activists and politicians in the United States, where he and other members of the Happiness Realization Party studied the success of grassroots American conservative activists. With the help of Bob Sparks, an American political consultant with experience as an advisor to the Florida Republican Party, they aimed to create a religious conservative movement like “the Christian Coalition, Buddhist-style”(with Happy Science presented to their American counterparts as similar to Buddhism).¹³

In 2015 Aeba officially resigned from all of his positions related to Happy Science and the Happiness Realization Party. Soon afterwards he founded the Japanese Conservative Union (JCU), a Japanese counterpart to the American Conservative Union, which hosts CPAC in the United States. As Chairman of the JCU, Aeba was the first Japanese person to deliver a speech at an American CPAC conference, delivering speeches there in 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022.

Starting in 2017, the JCU has hosted an annual CPAC Japan conference. Although much smaller in scale than its American counterpart, it has nonetheless been able to feature speeches from leading conservative politicians in both Japan and the United States. Japanese guest speakers have included prominent LDP lawmakers such as Inada Tomomi, Amari Akira, Nakatani Gen, Nagao Takashi, and Aoyama Shigeharu. American speakers have included major Trump allies such as Steve Bannon, Mick Mulvaney, Ted Cruz, Mike Lee, and Mike Pompeo.

International media has reported Aeba’s connections to Happy Science and the Happiness Realization Party, often coupling it with ridicule of Happy Science’s religious teachings. It is not uncommon for such articles to refer to Happy Science as a “cult.”¹⁴ Aeba re-

sponded to this negative press coverage by vehemently denying any continued ties to Happy Science. The website of the JCU also created a special page containing a “statement correcting inaccurate news reports,” arguing that the media reports are “libelous inaccuracies” because Aeba and the JCU have no affiliation with Happy Science.¹⁵ Happy Science also responded to the same news reports with its own denial of ties to the JCU.¹⁶ The JCU’s official denial of ties to Happy Science help to define it as secular organization capable of attracting politicians who would otherwise be weary of engagement with new religious movements.

Happy Science adherents have also been active in political activism related to debates over historical responsibility and war memory in Japan. In 2013 Happy Science member Fujii Mitsuhiko founded the Rompa Project, an organization that aims “communicate the truth about Japanese history to the world.”¹⁷ With the backing of the Happiness Realization Party, Fujii has involved the Rompa Project in protests against the movement to build “comfort women” memorials in the United States.¹⁸ The Rompa Project has also sought and received cooperation from historical revisionists who are not members of the Happy Science religion. In its first few years it hosted lecture events featuring well-known revisionists such as Fujioka Nobukatsu (founder of the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform), Kase Hideaki (Chairman of the Society for Dissemination of Historical Fact), novelist Hyakuta Naoki, and conservative Youtuber KAZUYA.¹⁹ Fujii, the Rompa Project, and Happy Science have also helped organize speaking events in the United States aimed at spreading revisionist views of the “comfort women” issue. Included among the speakers at their American events was LDP lawmaker Sugita Mio.²⁰

Through these two examples it is evident that current and for-

mer members of Happy Science have been involved in political activism that strengthens ties between conservative politicians in Japan and the United States. The two organizations in question are not officially connected to Happy Science, but the political causes they advocate are very similar to those of the religious movement and its political party.

Fieldwork Observations of Japan's Pro-Trump #StopTheSteal Marches and the Involvement of New Religious Movements

Another notable example of the political activism of Happy Science members took place in late 2020 and early 2021. In the wake of Donald Trump's loss in the 2020 American Presidential Election, several demonstrations were held in Japan supporting Trump's claims that the election had been "stolen." These were promoted internationally using the Twitter hashtag #StopTheSteal, and coincided with the outbreak of similar demonstrations in the United States. I conducted in-person non-participant observation at two of the marches, held in Tokyo on November 26, 2020 and January 6, 2021. In addition, online ethnographic observation (netnography) of social media accounts of participants in the marches was carried out and I observed several livestreams of marches that I was unable to attend in person.

Known members of Happy Science and the Happiness Realization Party were the main organizers of several of these demonstrations. The language used in the demonstrations mirrored some of the language the Happy Science and the HRP used in their own publications. For example, the flier for the January 6 demonstration, featured the English text "GOD BLESS TRUMP – SUPPORT TRUMP FROM JAPAN 0106" as its title, with Japanese text explaining its purpose. The text declared that they sought to

“protect freedom, democracy, and faith” and “fight against the Chinese-made coronavirus.” Donald Trump was described as a “president close to God, fighting for justice,” and a warned that a Biden victory would be a victory for the “Greater Chinese Empire” that would threaten Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan. The Japanese term “Greater Chinese Empire”(Daichuka Teikoku) is not a common term used for present day China in Japanese language publications, but it is a term used in the writings of Happy Science founder Ōkawa Ryūho.²¹ The flier itself did not mention any affiliation with Happy Science. However, it did list the name and phone number of its organizer, Furuyama Takao, who openly described himself as a member of Happy Science and the HRP. Furuyama’s events were also promoted online and attended by Nabeshima Hisashi, a HRP candidate who unsuccessfully ran for local office in Tokyo in the 2009, 2015, 2017, and 2019 elections.²² Additionally, HRP official Oikawa Yukihiisa promoted the marches to his thousands of Twitter followers,²³ and the HRP’s Change Japan YouTube channel broadcast live videos of Oikawa marching at the head of demonstrations held in November 2020 and January 2022.²⁴

A significant feature of all of these events was the participation of people who were affiliated with other new religious movements. These demonstrations were by no means purely something for adherents of Happy Science and its political party. It was a nominally secular event that drew its support from the adherents of several different religious movements with similar views on Donald Trump’s importance as a figure who could prevent the spread of Communist Chinese influence.

This cooperation was observable at one of the largest pro-Trump demonstrations in Tokyo, which took place on January 6, 2021, the date on which a rally held in Washington, DC led to the violent

storming of the US Capital Building. The main Tokyo demonstration was held on the evening of that day in the Hibiya area of Tokyo and attracted about 1,000 participants. Unlike the event that took place hours later in Washington, the Tokyo demonstration was carried out in a peaceful manner with no observable clashes with police.

A smaller pro-Trump demonstration was also held that day in Tokyo, organized by a group calling itself “Japan Loves Trump.” Social media posts revealed that its organizer was an adherent of the Sanctuary Church, a new religious movement that is an offshoot of the former Unification Church. It was held early in the afternoon of the 6th near the United States Embassy in Tokyo. Its timing and location made it possible for participants to attend both it and the Happy Science-affiliated march. “Japan Loves Trump” fliers actually encouraged followers to attend both events. The Sanctuary Church did not officially state that it supported the January 6th demonstrations in Japan at the time, but its founder Moon Heung Jin participated in the rally held in Washington that day.²⁵ According to journalist Fujikura Yoshiro, Moon later acknowledged his Japanese supporters’ participation in pro-Trump marches during a June 2022 visit to Japan.²⁶

The involvement of another new religious movement, Falun Gong, was also visible at the demonstrations. Falun Gong originated in mainland China in the 1990s, where the Chinese government came to see it as harmful, banning it in 1999 and arresting many of its practitioners. Like the Sanctuary Church, Falun Gong is presently headquartered in the United States, but has a small following in Japan as well. Some participants in the march carried signs related to the Chinese government’s suppression of Falun Gong. On several occasions I was offered Japanese language editions of the

Epoch Times, part of the transnational media empire affiliated with Falun Gong.²⁷ I also observed a cameraperson livestreaming the event for Vision Times, another Falun Gong media outlet. Falun Gong practitioners could be observed in livestreamed broadcasts of other demonstrations held in November, December, and January.

Concluding Remarks

Happy Science tried to enter national electoral politics in 2009 through the creation of the Happiness Realization Party, but ultimately failed to mobilize enough votes to win any seats in Japan's National Diet. This setback led to a decrease in the number of candidates it fielded in national elections, but it did not mean that Happy Science practitioners had given up on the idea of influencing national politics. Instead, current and former Happy Science practitioners became involved in grassroots activism through organizations such as the Japan Conservative Union and Rompa Project. These organizations identified as secular in nature, allowing them to openly cooperate with mainstream Japanese conservative activists and politicians while also promoting a political ideology similar to that of Happy Science's founder, Ōkawa Ryūho. Current and former practitioners have positioned themselves within a wider transnational conservative movement, taking on important roles as facilitators of increased ties between conservative members of Japan's ruling LDP and populist Republican Party politicians in the United States. Happy Science has also shown a willingness to cooperate with practitioners of other new religious movements that share some of its conservative ideology, a phenomenon that could be observed in pro-Trump demonstrations held in Japan in late 2020 and early 2021. This serves as an example of how small religious movements that lack the size to elect candidates in national

elections can nonetheless play an influential role in Japan's political scene.

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² Anne Mette Fisker-Nielsen, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Japan: Soka Gakkai Youth and Komeito* (London: Routledge, 2013).

³ Katsuyuki Yakushiji, *Kōmeitō: Sōka Gakkai to 50-Nen No Kiseki* (Tōkyō: Chūō Kōron Shinsha, 2016).

⁴ Levi McLaughlin, *Soka Gakkai's Human Revolution: The Rise of a Mimetic Nation in Modern Japan* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020).

⁵ George Ehrhardt, *Kōmeitō Politics and Religion in Japan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014).

⁶ Yosuke Hayashi, "Faith in Religion Sets You Free," The Libertyweb Global (IRH Press, May 14, 2014), <https://eng.the-liberty.com/2014/5064/>.

⁷ David McNeill, "Party Offers a Third Way: Happiness," Japan Times, August 4, 2009, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2009/08/04/issues/party-offers-a-third-way-happiness/>.

⁸ "General Election 2009," Asahi Shimbun, August 29, 2009, <https://www.asahi.com/senkyo/2009/>.

⁹ Hotaka Tsukada, "Religious Issues in Japan 2009: Religion and Society in Contemporary Japan," *Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion & Culture* 34 (2009): pp. 97–112, 98.

¹⁰ Leo Lin, "The High Cost of Running for Office," Tokyo Review, August 28, 2017, <https://www.tokyoreview.net/2017/08/election-deposits-japan/>.

¹¹ "地方議員：議員種別 (Local Lawmakers List)," 幸福実現党 – The Happiness Realization Party, accessed September 11, 2022, <https://hr-party.jp/member/types/local/>.

¹² "小野町議会議員選挙 – 2020年01月26日投票：福島県小野町," Senkyo.com Election Results – Onomachi, January 26, 2020, <https://go2.senkyo.com/local/senkyo/19677>.

¹³ Molly Ball, "Can the Tea Party Take Japan?," The Atlantic (Atlantic Media Company, May 1, 2012), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/05/can-the-tea-party-take-japan/308938/>.

¹⁴ Jake Adelstein, "Speaking at CPAC: Former Leader of Magical Cult That Channels Ghost of Trump," The Daily Beast (The Daily Beast Company, February 26, 2021), <https://www.thedailybeast.com/former-leader-of-magical-cult-that-channels-ghost-of-trump-speaking-at-cpac>.

¹⁵ "Q & A," Japan Conservative Union, May 16, 2022, <https://conservative.or.jp/en/about-qa/>.

¹⁶ "Counterarguments against Incorrect Articles on Happy Science," HAPPY SCIENCE Official Website, March 18, 2021, <https://info.happy-science.org/2021/1883/>.

¹⁷ "論破プロジェクトとは (What Is the Rompa Project)," Rompa Project, accessed September 10, 2022, <http://rom-pa.com/aboutus/>.

¹⁸ Tomomi Yamaguchi, "The 'History Wars' and the 'Comfort Woman' Issue: Revisionism and the Right-Wing in Contemporary Japan and the U.S.," *The Asia-Pacific Journal Japan Focus* 18, no. 6 (March 15, 2020).

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