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FUJINOMIYA, Japan — The silent courtyards, pine groves and temples here at the foot of Mount Fuji hardly look like a battleground. But there is an atmosphere of siege among the monks rustling about in gray silk robes at the headquarters of Japan's most prominent Buddhist sect.

After simmering for years under the surface, a bitter war has erupted in recent months between Japan's largest religious organization, the Nichiren Shoshu sect of Buddhism, and its main lay organization, known as Soka Gakkai.

Slander, venality and usurpation of priestly authority are among the sins of the lay group cited by the sect's chief priest, Nikken Abe. He accuses the Soka Gakkai leaders of performing sacred functions reserved for the clergy and behaving as if their group is a religion itself.

Especially galling to the monks have been suggestions that Mr. Abe's dictates and demands of loyalty need not be followed in full. "A person who disobeys the High Priest will, without a doubt, fall in to the Hell of Incessant Suffering," Mr. Abe wrote recently.

The lay organization leaders counter that Mr. Abe and his fellow priests are corrupt, highhanded and feudal in their attitudes. They scoff that the priests lecture piously about modesty, but give lavish wedding parties at luxury hotels and drive around in red sports cars.

Billions of Dollars at Stake

"Thanks to our efforts, the Nichiren Shoshu sect has increased its membership and brought more income to the priests," said Einosuke Akiya, president of Soka Gakkai. "But the priests became corrupt. They cling to old and outdated doctrines to create a totally priest-centered world."

Billions of dollars in revenue and assets are at stake, since Soka Gakkai claims a membership of eight million families and is hugely wealthy and politically powerful. The lay group, for instance, controls a small political party, the Komeito, that sometimes provides the margin of support in Parliament for Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa's agenda.

Right now, Mr. Miyazawa is seeking Komeito's support for his bill to let Japanese troops take part in United Nations peacekeeping forces, a step that has stirred unease among most people, especially Buddhists, who fear it might be a forerunner to a rearmed Japan.

The Komeito's support for the peacekeeping bill is the latest target in the religious dispute, with the clergy accusing the party of selling out its pacifist principles. "They used to be antiwar, but they're becoming so

A bitter feud has simmered for years between Japan's largest religious organization, the Nichiren Shoshu sect of Buddhism, and its main lay organiza-

tion, Soka Gakkai. About 30,000 worshipers held a rally at Taiseikiji Temple last summer to support the priests in their struggle against the lay leaders.

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Laymen are told that 'the Hell of Incessant Suffering' awaits.

dirty from all that money," said Kotoku Obayashi, a sect spokesman.

In November, the chief priest, Mr. Abe, excommunicated the leaders of Soka Gakkai and ordered it to disband. The lay group simply refused and stopped sending its members to pilgrimages at the Taiseikiji Temple here at the sect's headquarters 70 miles southwest of Tokyo. The excommunication was a blow to the temple, where the number of visitors has fallen dramatically.

Founded 700 Years Ago

The Nichiren Shoshu sect was founded 700 years ago, but it did not gain its millions of followers until after World War II, when the Soka Gakkai (or "Value Creating Society") took root among the displaced

and impoverished masses of Japan's devastated cities.

Under the leadership of Daisaku Ikeda, president from 1960 to 1979, Soka Gakkai grew into a powerful force. Mr. Ikeda, now honorary president, is regarded by followers as a major spiritual leader with a message of peace for the world.

But Mr. Ikeda's ascension has rankled the priesthood. So has Soka Gakkai's gradual takeover of certain religious functions, like officiating at weddings, funerals, coming-of-age ceremonies and other rites once overseen exclusively by priests.

Since all such ceremonies involve contributions of money, the lay group's moves meant that it began siphoning income away from the priesthood. "What it all comes down to is money, power and greed," said a worshiper at the Taiseikiji Temple loyal to the priests.

With Soka Gakkai's success have come problems, and a reputation for corruption and involvement in some of Japan's recent scandals.

The sect was ordered to pay millions of dollars in back taxes from

undeclared income for its business of making gravestones, for instance. Two years ago, \$1.2 million in yen notes found in a safe in a dump in Yokohama was traced to a Soka Gakkai member.

More recently, \$11 million paid by Soka Gakkai for two Renoir paintings disappeared, raising questions about whether the lay group was stashing sums away for political payoffs.

Embarrassing for Both

"Back in the 1950's, Soka Gakkai was a voice for the underprivileged, like the Communist Party," said Shin-ichi Nakazawa, an anthropologist and specialist in religions. "Today it has become prosperous, conservative and pro-establishment. It's losing its raison d'être."

The battle lines are clearly embarrassing to both sides. "Yes, it's a struggle over money and power," said Mr. Akiya, the Soka Gakkai president. "But you could say that about all the great religious struggles in history, like Martin Luther standing up to the Catholic Church.

"I assure you that if Soka Gakkai were interested only in material wealth, the vast majority of the people would not have trusted our movement."