

Soka Gakkai in Japan Faces More Media Attacks

By JEFF FARR, Associate Editor

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The next three months will see Soka Gakkai members campaigning for Clean Government (Komei) candidates toward Japan's Upper House elections in July. The next three months are also sure to see an increase in politically motivated attacks from the tabloid press on the SGI.

The close relationship that exists in Japan between the tabloid press and political authority, especially the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, has led to hundreds of articles over the last few years — 500 in 1995 alone — accusing SGI members and leaders of everything from bribery to murder. Now that the coalition party New Frontier has disbanded, the Soka Gakkai is back to mainly supporting Clean Government candidates, which worries LDP leaders. All the Clean Government candidates fielded were elected in last July's Tokyo elections. As well, the party has been criticizing the LDP's economic policies at a time when Japan is experiencing a serious economic slump.

The political situation in Japan and the Soka Gakkai's involvement in it may seem far removed from our SGI-USA activities, but these tabloid articles continue to surface here on the Internet, sometimes leading people to doubt the SGI. Translations of tabloid articles, which are generally done by a small group of temple members, may seem to come from authoritative sources when they appear on the Internet — few Internet users know the tabloid practices (no bylines, no attribution, no fact-checking) of magazines like the *Shukan Shincho* and *Shukan Bunshu*.

In the past, foreign correspondents in Japan have also been duped by the tabloids. Respected publications like the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Time* and *The Australian* have all at times used tabloid articles as their sources for their reporting on the SGI.

In response, the SGI has made concerted efforts to reveal Japan's tabloids for what they are. SGI members have created several Web sites, like Clearing Up the Clearing House (the Clearing House being a temple-backed site), to explain how the tabloids work and to deny their allegations. In late 1996, the SGI Public Relations Office in Tokyo launched an advertisement campaign ("Should You Be Concerned?") targeting the tabloids' readership throughout Asia and the foreign media there.

The SGI has also challenged many of the tabloids' libelous articles in court, winning financial awards. A recent example, although not involving the SGI directly, concerns a Hokkaido Soka Gakkai member, Nobuyuki Shiroyama, who last month won a Supreme Court ruling against the *Shukan Shincho*. In September 1994, the magazine claimed that Shiroyama had killed a Nichiren Shoshu priest in a head-on traffic collision that July. But the police and an insurance company had already found the priest at fault for straying into oncoming traffic. Nevertheless, *Shukan Shincho's* headline read, "Soka Gakkai Leader Kills Taiseki-ji Priest in Car Crash." The Sapporo District Court awarded Shiroyama \$7,600 (under Japan's weak libel laws, which allow for only small financial awards); Shinchosha, the magazine's publisher, appealed to the High Court; the High Court again ruled in Shiroyama's favor; Shinchosha then took the case to the Supreme Court; and now the final appeal has been dismissed. The ruling mentioned, "The suspicion that the story was from the start intended as an attack on the Soka Gakkai cannot be overlooked."

The potential financial and political gains to be found for the Soka Gakkai's enemies in attacking the organization, though, far outweigh the potential penalties. While Shinchosha must now pay Shiroyama \$7,600, that's nothing compared to how much the company's made off the story from magazine sales.

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Libel suits brought against publishers by the Soka Gakkai have even, at times, encouraged tabloids to publish further sensational stories on the libel suits themselves. This allows politicians to keep fabrications like Nobuko Nobuhira's in the public's mind during election time. When, in the *Shukan Shincho* in 1996, Nobuhira falsely accused President Ikeda of raping her three times over a 23-year period — and the Soka Gakkai *didn't* bring a libel suit against the magazine — Nobuhira and her backers, believed to include LDP members, sued President Ikeda to keep the story alive. (Mrs. Nobuhira has of late been trying to drag out the ongoing case by unsuccessfully appealing for a new judge.)

Another tactic of the tabloids, which we have also seen on the Internet, is to recycle and repeat anti-Soka Gakkai stories already proven false. A few years after a tabloid loses a libel case to the Soka Gakkai, the story in question can resurface in another magazine. Thus, *Gekkan Pen's* 1976 story that President Ikeda was a womanizer, which in 1983 led to a libel ruling against the magazine, was reborn as a *Shukan Bunshun* article in 1996. On the Internet, especially on the newsgroup alt.religion.buddhism.nichiren, tabloid articles like these are endlessly reposted despite the protestations of SGI members that the stories have already been thoroughly refuted.

Being well aware of the tabloid practices in Japan will prepare us to be able to explain why the SGI and the SGI president are subjected to negative coverage over the next few months. Question No. 10 in the pamphlet *Questions and Answers on the Temple Issue* — “What is behind the temple's promotion of media reports that paint the Gakkai in a negative light?” — also explains this situation.

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