

## “Towards a Beautiful Country”: The Nationalist Project to Transform Japan

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*Japan is often regarded by scholarship as an example of what a healthy East Asian liberal democracy ought to look like. Despite its reputation for pacifism and liberal democracy, Japan has demonstrated a remarkable shift in political culture in the last decade, as successive governments have embraced decidedly nationalist policy choices. As the Abe Administration continues to push ahead with its plan for Constitutional Revision, a goal long advocated for by nationalist groups, Japan seems poised to enter a period of renewed nationalist discourses and policymaking. Existing scholarship presents these shifting political trends as having been facilitated by the political elite, and many scholars argue that elite-driven, or top-down nationalism, is the driving force of political change in the modern Japanese political system. This paper challenges these assertions, instead arguing that resurgent nationalism in Japanese politics can be traced to the grassroots of society, within groups and organizations funded and run by private citizens with political interests. Through a study of two non-government organizations, Nippon Kaigi 日本会議 and Jinja Honchō 神社本庁, this paper clearly demonstrates the critical impact that grassroots organizing through non-government organizations has had on driving nationalist policymaking at the national level. The political success of these lobbying groups has been clearly evidenced in their presence at the highest level of Japanese government, as well as the remarkable similarities between their organizational goals and the political goals of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. This paper demonstrates that the relationship between grassroots nationalist organizations and the Japanese government is one of influence and pressure, rather than a coincidental alignment of political ideals.*

### Introduction

Japan has entered an era of deep political change. The days of deep government factionalism and a laser-focus on economic development have since given way to shifts in mainstream Japanese political discourse. With the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Japan has faced new challenges and new political realities, as ideology is no longer taking a backseat to extreme economic growth. A nationalist revival is taking place in Japan, from the grassroots all the way up to the national Cabinet. This political shift

towards nationalism carries important implications for both policy and public discourse. An important marker of these shifts has been the increasing embrace of nationalist discourse by politicians within the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and in the opposition parties. This embrace of nationalist tendencies has taken many forms, from repeated visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine by elected officials to an increasingly aggressive push toward constitutional revision, a goal long advocated for by those on the right of Japan's political spectrum. Contemporary literature on Japanese politics is in relative agreement that this nationalist shift is taking place, and scholars such as Giulio Pugliese and Margarita Estévez-Abe have argued that this phenomenon is *elite driven*.<sup>46</sup> This top-down approach to examining Japan's nationalist discourses is rooted in the idea that elected officials are the primary force for advocating meaningful political change. It is easy to come to such a conclusion, as Prime Minister Shinzō Abe and his Cabinet have increasingly led the call for more nationalist policy choices, such as key changes to the Constitution. However, this assertion leaves out key factors in understanding the changing Japanese political landscape. By arguing that the nationalist revival is being driven by Japan's elites, these scholars ignore the critical role that non-government organizations and private institutions have played in advocating change at both the national and grassroots level. This paper will challenge existing assertions of elite-driven nationalism and demonstrate the rising influence of non-government nationalist organizations on public policy outcomes. Through two in-depth case studies of Japan's most influential nationalist organizations, Nippon Kaigi 日本会議 (Japan Conference) and Jinja Honchō 神社本庁 (The Association of Shintō Shrines), this project will clearly demonstrate the existence of a complex and influential network of nationalist activists that continue to exert significant influence on public officials and policymaking outcomes.<sup>47</sup> By examining the origins, organization, and goals of these two institutions, as well as their extensive connections to elected officials, this paper will highlight the extensive role in which private organizations have played in driving nationalist policy outcomes in Japan since the turn of the century. This paper argues that such organizations have created an expansive network of influence extending from the grassroots deep into the highest echelons of the political office, resulting in significant shifts in political discourse and the formation of nationalist policy outcomes.

## Defining Nationalism

Any discussion of ideological trends in society or in government is at risk of abstraction, especially when dealing with a topic as politically controversial as nationalism. It is therefore critical that we construct a clear working definition for what this paper refers to as '*nationalist policies*' or '*nationalist discourses*.' Such terms as '*nation*' and '*nationalism*' are all too commonly misused or loosely applied by both academics and news media alike, which propagates contradiction and misunderstanding.<sup>48</sup> To understand what is meant by the term nationalism, a clear definition of *nation* must first be ascertained.

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<sup>46</sup>. Giulio Pugliese, "The China Challenge, Abe Shinzo's Realism, and the Limits of Japanese Nationalism," *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 35, no. 2 (2015): 47. Pugliese argues that Abe has purposely fanned nationalist furor, coining the term "top-down nationalism"; Margarita Estévez-Abe, "Feeling Triumphant in Tokyo: The Real Reasons Nationalism Is Back in Japan," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3 (2014): 165. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24483416>. Estévez-Abe argues that increased nationalist discourse has been promoted by Abe as a conscious policy choice.

<sup>2</sup>. All translations are by author unless otherwise noted.

<sup>48</sup>. Lowell W. Barrington, "'Nation' and 'Nationalism': The Misuse of Key Concepts in Political Science," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 30, no. 4 (1997): 712.

Lowell Barrington, in his extensive attempt at defining such terms, defines the nation as a collective that is “united by shared cultural features (myths, values, etc.) and the belief in the right to territorial self-determination.”<sup>49</sup> In the context of Japanese studies, this definition is easily applied as Japan has historically existed as a relatively homogenous society with well-defined territorial borders. In addition, Japanese history is rife with references to a common creation myth, which has served as a collectively unifying principle under the Imperial Household. With this definition in mind, nationalism can therefore be characterized as, in Barrington’s terms, “the pursuit of a set of rights for the self-defined members of the nation, including, at a minimum, territorial autonomy or sovereignty.”<sup>50</sup> This definition implies that nationalism must define both territorial boundaries that the nation has a right to control, as well as the membership boundaries of the individuals that are thought to have a right to belong to the collective.<sup>51</sup> In contrast to this definition, many popular definitions, such as those used in mass media, refer to nationalism as “right-wing political thought and action aligned with militarism,” and as Matthew Penney explains, “a whole complex of beliefs, assumptions, habits, representations, and practices that reinforce the concept of the nation.”<sup>52</sup> With these definitions in mind, it therefore becomes possible to define nationalist policies and nationalist discourses as those policy decisions and accompanying discourses aimed at strengthening a sense of collective national unity through the strengthening and protection of territorial borders and the boundaries that define that collective nation. In terms of Japan, this refers to a set of policies and beliefs that view the Japanese people as a quantifiable collective, unified through shared historical experiences, values, and collective identity.

### Shifting Political Discourses

Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there has been a notable shift in policy priorities and discourse at the highest levels of the Japanese government. Beginning with the election of Prime Minister Mori Yoshirō in 2000, who famously declared that Japan was “a divine nation centring around the Emperor,”<sup>53</sup> along with his successor, Koizumi Jun’ichirō, who visited the controversial Yasukuni Shrine to pay homage to Japan’s war dead an unprecedented six times, Japan’s elected officials have grown increasingly bold in their embrace of nationalist discourses.<sup>54</sup> Under Prime Minister Abe Shinzō, these embraces of nationalist discourse have accelerated and taken the form of actual policy outcomes. Such policy outcomes include an expanded role for the Self-Defence Forces, continued revisions of history textbooks, the mandatory singing of the national anthem in schools, and the legalization of the Imperial Calendar. Abe’s party, the LDP, has also released a draft constitution containing numerous proposed amendments favouring removal of pacifist clauses such as Article 9, which forbids Japan from maintaining the capacity to wage war.<sup>55</sup> Such developments have not gone unnoticed by scholars, the vast majority of whom have declared the trend toward nationalism as being driven by elites such as Abe and

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<sup>49</sup>. Barrington, 712-713.

<sup>50</sup>. Barrington, 714.

<sup>51</sup>. Barrington, 714.

<sup>52</sup>. Matthew Penney and Bryce Wakefield, “Right angles: Examining accounts of Japanese neo-nationalism,” *Pacific Affairs* 81, no. 4 (2008): 538.

<sup>53</sup>. BBC News, “Japanese PM sparks holy row,” 16 May 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/750180.stm>.

<sup>54</sup>. BBC News, “Koizumi shrine visit stokes anger,” 15 August 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4789905.stm>.

<sup>55</sup>. Brad Glosserman, “The Abe Administration and Japanese National Identity: An Update,” *Joint U.S. Korea Academic Studies*, (2016): 117.

his Cabinet. Fabian Schäfer refers to Abe's "hidden nationalist agenda" and writes that the government is purposefully utilizing populist right-wing strategies to advance a nationalist agenda.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Mike Mochizuki argues that Abe's recent electoral success is not due to his ideological positions, but is instead the result of the collapse of opposition parties.<sup>57</sup> He continues to explain that this situation has simply presented Abe with the opportunity to "pursue his nationalist agenda" without an opposition to stand in the way.<sup>58</sup> Taking this argument even further, Jeff Kingston writes that all of the recent nationalist trends in contemporary Japan are a trend that is elite-driven and vigorously promoted by the nation's political leadership".<sup>59</sup> All of these scholars are correct in their assertions that nationalist policies and discourses are being *promoted* at the highest levels of Japanese government. There is little doubt that Abe and his Cabinet have voiced support for such policies, even if many policy goals yet to be attained. What these scholars ignore, however, is the underlying explanation for such a dramatic shift in Japanese political discourse. The argument that Abe and his government are the primary drivers of nationalist change does not adequately account for the dramatic uptake of nationalist discourse into the mainstream of Japanese politics, a reality that would likely have been dismissed by scholars before the year 2000. As scholars of liberal democracies know, democratic governments are designed to be representatives of certain interests. Democratically elected politicians are not only held accountable to voters but are almost always held accountable to interest groups or lobbies that support them financially and/or politically. This is undoubtedly the case in Japan, where the influence of interest groups and lobbies has continued to flourish since the electoral reforms of the 1990s.<sup>60</sup> Through an examination of such interest groups, which are by definition non-government organizations, it becomes clear that the recent trends towards nationalism in the Japanese government are the direct result of specific interests and influence campaigns with the intent of explicitly influencing policymaking at the government level.

### Nippon Kaigi

The first of this paper's case studies examines the rise of Nippon Kaigi 日本会議 (Japan Conference) and its increasing activity at the highest levels of Japanese government. Nippon Kaigi is often described as Japan's most successful and most established right-wing advocacy group and lobbying organization.<sup>61</sup> The group was largely unknown outside of Japan until 2014, when the New York Times introduced it as "a nationalistic right-wing group that was all but unknown until recently," following a renewed media scrutiny on Nippon Kaigi's influence on politics after the 2014 Diet elections.<sup>62</sup> Nippon Kaigi was actually founded in 1997, as a merger of two existing right-wing nationalist organizations, the

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<sup>56</sup>. Fabian Schäfer, Stefan Evert, and Philipp Heinrich, "Japan's 2014 General Election: Political Bots, Right-Wing Internet Activism, and Prime Minister Shinzō Abe's Hidden Nationalist Agenda," *Big data* 5, no. 4 (2017): 294.

<sup>57</sup>. Mike M. Mochizuki, and Samuel Parkinson Porter, "Japan under Abe: toward moderation or nationalism?," *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2013): 27.

<sup>58</sup>. Mochizuki, 26.

<sup>59</sup>. Jeff Kingston, "One-Hand Clapping: Japanese Nationalism in the Abe Era," *In Japan and Asia's Contested Order*, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2018: 147.

<sup>60</sup>. Yutaka Tsujinaka and Robert Pekkanen, "Civil Society and Interest Groups in Contemporary Japan," *Pacific Affairs* 80, no. 3 (2007): 429. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40023391>.

<sup>61</sup>. James Babb, "The New Generation of Conservative Politicians in Japan," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 14, no. 3 (2013): 361.

<sup>62</sup>. Daiki Shibuichi, "The Japan Conference (Nippon Kaigi): an Elusive Conglomerate," *East Asia* 34, no. 3 (2017): 179.

National Conference to Protect Japan and the Society for the Protection of Japan.<sup>63</sup> Nippon Kaigi's origin in these other two groups is notable, as the use of the term "protection", or *mamoru* in Japanese, is clearly in line with this paper's definition of nationalism. The prevalence of the term *mamoru* implies a sense that there are territorial or societal boundaries that must somehow be protected from some perceived harm. Utilization of such a term in this context can therefore be interpreted as explicitly nationalist in the framework of this paper's definition. Since 1997, Nippon Kaigi has quickly established itself as an umbrella organization of right-wing groups, intellectuals, business leaders, and politicians, as well as a grassroots membership of 38,000 fee-paying members across all 47 Japanese prefectures.<sup>64</sup> Nippon Kaigi has a clear set of organizational objectives which guide its activities, including such goals as: "A new constitution suitable for a new era," "Politics that protect the country's reputation and the people's lives," "Creating education that fosters Japanese sensibility," and "Contributing to world peace by enhancing national security."<sup>65</sup> A list of goals such as these serves as a set of guiding ideological principles for the organization. In order to measure the actual influence of Nippon Kaigi, however, it is necessary to examine the way in which these abstract organizational goals translate to real policy outcomes.

Nippon Kaigi maintains a parliamentary division, the Parliamentary League for Nippon Kaigi 日本会議国会議員懇談会 (Nippon kaigi kokkai giin kondankai), which serves as its direct connection to lawmakers.<sup>66</sup> Within the National Diet, Japan's parliament, 280 sitting lawmakers are listed as members of Nippon Kaigi's parliamentary league, including Prime Minister Abe himself, who serves as "special advisor" to Nippon Kaigi.<sup>67</sup> In addition to its influence in the Diet, Nippon Kaigi also claims 1,692 members elected to local councils across the country.<sup>68</sup> It is important to note that Nippon Kaigi did not obtain this substantial presence in politics by recruiting elected officials. Instead, as Thierry Guthmann notes in his overview of Nippon Kaigi, many of these politicians have maintained close personal ties with the nationalist lobby since the earliest days of their careers.<sup>69</sup> This implies that Nippon Kaigi members and sympathizers have actively sought out elected office, which challenges existing assertions made by some scholars that elected officials have gravitated toward the nationalist lobby for political purposes.<sup>70</sup> Nippon Kaigi, throughout its history, has demonstrated a multi-pronged approach at driving policy change at both the national and local level. This includes signature drives and a sustained grassroots effort at mobilizing both people and resources to enact political change and influence politicians.<sup>71</sup> These efforts have often been successful, and Nippon Kaigi is largely responsible

<sup>63</sup>. Sachie Mizohata, "Nippon Kaigi: Empire, contradiction, and Japan's future," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 14, no. 2 (2016): 2.

<sup>64</sup>. Babb, 361; David McNeill, "Nippon Kaigi and the radical conservative project to take back Japan," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 13, no. 48 (2015): 4.

<sup>65</sup>. Nippon Kaigi, "Nippon Kaigi ga meza sumono" 日本会議が目指すもの [The Aims of Nippon Kaigi], 7 December 2018. <http://www.nipponkaigi.org/about/mokuteki>.

<sup>66</sup>. Mizohata, 3.

<sup>67</sup>. Mizohata, 3.

<sup>68</sup>. Mizohata, 3.

<sup>69</sup>. Thierry Guthmann and Aike P. Rots, "Nationalist Circles in Japan Today: The Impossibility of Secularization," *Japan Review* (2017): 214.

<sup>70</sup>. Pugliese, 47. Pugliese asserts that Abe and his government have sought to use nationalism as a way to drum up support and create a politically favorable environment for those politicians on board with the national cause.

<sup>71</sup>. McNeil, 4.

for the Tokyo Metropolitan Government's passing of measures mandating punishment for teachers who refuse to stand, face the flag and sing the anthem during school ceremonies.<sup>72</sup> Nippon Kaigi's ability to mobilize at the grassroots level serves as the core of influence campaign, and members often hold "lectures and rallies to pressure local assemblies to submit resolutions to Tokyo by bombarding them with requests, petitions, and phone calls."<sup>73</sup> This type of grassroots mobilization has helped to drive the explosive growth that Nippon Kaigi has continued to enjoy across Japan.

In addition to this grassroots foundation, it can be argued that Nippon Kaigi's most successful approach to enacting change has been their extensive network of influence within the highest levels of Japanese government. As previously discussed, as many as 280 members of the Diet are associated with Nippon Kaigi's parliamentary group. Even more significantly, well over half of the 20 members of Cabinet are also Nippon Kaigi members. The fact that this organization has been able to create a network of politicians so vast that they hold the majority in the executive branch is a further indication of their growing influence. It is important to note, however, as James Babb points out, the presence of right-wing members in the government is not a new phenomenon, but rather "political dynamics now allow and even encourage them to express these views more clearly."<sup>74</sup> These political dynamics have largely been changed by the shifting political discourses around the idea of nationalism, which has largely been led by Nippon Kaigi. The group has facilitated the rise of a generation of politicians that appear to be less attached to post-war pacifism and are more willing to embrace significant change in the pursuit of the *protection* of the nation. The close relationship between these politicians has seen substantial policymaking achievements, such as Nippon Kaigi's successful lobbying for the reinterpretation of the constitution to allow for limited Japanese military action abroad. Nippon Kaigi has also led the lobbying for the introduction of revised history textbooks in schools that reinterpret Japan's role in the Second World War, and has helped to design the new LDP draft constitution, which contains several proposed amendments to the constitution that would enact sweeping changes on many aspects of life in Japan.<sup>75</sup> The LDP draft constitution is an almost perfect copy of the proposed constitution and calls for many of the same policy changes, such as the restoration of the Emperor as the head of state, and the rewriting of Article 9, which deals with the legal status of the Self Defense Forces.<sup>76</sup> Changes such as this have been the goal of nationalists and the Japanese right wing since the end of the war, but it has only been since the turn of the century that such reforms have been gained traction with the support of groups like Nippon Kaigi. In his book on Nippon Kaigi published in 2016, journalist Aoki Osamu wrote that the group only appears influential because the ideological tenets that they espouse are coincidentally aligned with that of the Abe Administration, concluding that there is no causal link between the operations of Nippon Kaigi and the noticeable shift in political discourse since the beginning of the Abe Administration.<sup>77</sup> Aoki insists that the relationship between Abe and Nippon Kaigi is one of sympathy and resonance, rather than

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<sup>72</sup>. McNeil, 5.

<sup>73</sup>. Mizohata, 4.

<sup>74</sup>. Babb, 359.

<sup>75</sup>. McNeil, 4.

<sup>76</sup>. The Japan Times, "The LDP's draft constitution," 24 August 2016.

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2016/08/24/commentary/japan-commentary/ldps-draft-constitution/#.XAsNnKfMyYU>.

<sup>77</sup>. Shibuichi, 191.

influence and control.<sup>78</sup> What Aoki fails to consider is the clear material connection between Abe, his Cabinet, and Nippon Kaigi. As Guthmann explained in his assessment of the ideological foundations of Nippon Kaigi, Abe and many of his colleagues have been members and deep supporters of Nippon Kaigi since the beginning of their political careers, and were supporters of nationalist values well before advocating for change within the government.<sup>79</sup> Further, Aoki's dismissal of any causal link between the government and Nippon Kaigi in spite of evidence to the contrary is explained as simply being a coincidence. The ideological coherence between members of the Abe Cabinet and Nippon Kaigi run deep, as evidenced by their unity on the topics of constitutional reform and education reform, which casts serious doubt on Aoki's suggestions of coincidence. Nippon Kaigi's ideological foundation, its organizational structure, and its ability to mobilize at both the grassroots and government levels demonstrate its significant influence on enacting policy change and introducing nationalist discourse.

### Jinja Honchō

The second case study this paper will examine is Jinja Honchō 神社本庁 (The Association of Shintō Shrines), the expansive administrative organization responsible for overseeing the management of Japan's 80,000 Shintō shrines. Historically, Shintō was a belief system that existed as an extension of the Japanese creation myth, in which the Emperor was revered as a living God and spiritual leader of the Japanese nation.<sup>80</sup> This system, often referred to as State Shintō before 1946, reflected an attempt at unifying religion and state into a unitary Japanese identity; an identity that was based in the common belief that the Japanese people had descended from the gods, or *kami* 神, in Japanese.<sup>81</sup> According to this paper's previously established definition of nationalism, this attempt at unifying the Japanese people under a set of shared customs and myths is a critical element of nationalist discourse. While State Shintō no longer exists in an established political form, the impact of Shintō on Japanese identity is still noteworthy. Following Japan's defeat at the end of the Second World War, American occupying forces introduced what was called the Shinto Directive, aimed at dismantling the wartime influence of State Shinto and established a legal basis for secularism in Japan.<sup>82</sup> With the relegation of Shintō places of worship to the private realm, Jinja Honchō was established as a private, non-government association dedicated to the continued management of the Shrines that previously had been under the jurisdiction of the imperial government.

Despite its existence as an administrative organization, Jinja Honchō has proven to be one of the most influential and effective political lobbying organizations in Japan.<sup>83</sup> Through the establishment of its political arm, Shintō seiji renmei 神道政治連盟 (Shintō Association of Spiritual Leadership), Jinja Honchō has successfully lobbied for several nationalist causes, such as the legalization of the National Flag, the reinstatement of the National Anthem, and the establishment of a national holiday on April 29<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>. Shibuichi, 191.

<sup>79</sup>. Guthmann, 214.

<sup>80</sup>. Guthmann, 209.

<sup>81</sup>. Guthmann, 209.

<sup>82</sup>. Guthmann, 211.

<sup>83</sup>. Guthmann, 208.

in honour of wartime Emperor Showa.<sup>84</sup> Jinja Honchō's lobbying arm boasts high membership levels in the national Diet, with some estimates suggesting that the group has more membership among politicians than even Nippon Kaigi.<sup>85</sup> In addition to its nationalist policy lobbying efforts, Jinja Honchō has also been a staunch advocate for continued visits by public officials to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, an act that many of Japan's neighbours in Asia view as a way of celebrating Japan's wartime military activities.<sup>86</sup> Any comprehensive study of nationalist discourses in Japan cannot be divorced from the study of Shintō and its ability to organize politically. Through Jinja Honchō's Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership, the organization has established an influential network of sympathizing politicians in the highest levels of government. After the 2016 Cabinet reshuffle, 19 of Abe's 20 Cabinet members were members of the Shinto Association of Spiritual Leadership, which led some scholars to conclude that Shintō-inspired elements have been a central element of the Abe's government's ideological foundation.<sup>87</sup>

The true influence of Jinja Honchō and political Shintō, however, lies in the organization's hand in building the nationalist coalition that has proved to be so influential in enacting policy change in Japan under Abe. The existence of Nippon Kaigi is directly tied to its ideological unity with Jinja Honchō, and the ties between these two organizations suggest that little separates the two groups organizationally. The ideological foundations of Nippon Kaigi's founding in 1997 has been closely linked with Jinja Honchō political and religious syncretism. The two organizations are united by a profound resentment for the postwar order and share a deep nostalgia for the perceived "golden age" of Japanese political and cultural life.<sup>88</sup> Since Nippon Kaigi's founding in 1997, the board of directors has largely been staffed by representatives and leaders from within Jinja Honchō.<sup>89</sup> Ideologically speaking, these two organizations are highly synchronized as a result, and some scholars have suggested that Jinja Honchō continues to form the backbone of Nippon Kaigi both ideologically and organizationally.<sup>90</sup>

### **An Alliance of Nationalists**

When viewed through the lens of nationalism, the policy proposals and discourses discussed throughout this paper reflect a deep concern with national identity, which in the Japanese context is profoundly reflecting in Shintō. The alliance between Nippon Kaigi and Jinja Honchō is further indicative of the religious foundation of Japanese nationalism, even within the framework of a secular state. The goals of these two organizations are highly aligned, even if they are not stated to be explicitly religious. Both Nippon Kaigi and Jinja Honchō are fundamentally built on the idea that Japanese identity ought to be protected, and the way to accomplish this is to "rebuild" a Japan that is centred around the Imperial Household, which they view as the "essential constitutive element of the nation".<sup>91</sup> It is important to remember that despite the extensive involvement of these groups in the Diet and in the

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<sup>84</sup>. McNeil, 5.

<sup>85</sup>. Babb, 361.

<sup>86</sup>. Shibuichi, 182.

<sup>87</sup>. Mizohata, 10.

<sup>88</sup>. McNeil, 3; Guthmann, 207.

<sup>89</sup>. Guthmann, 214.

<sup>90</sup>. Guthmann, 215.

<sup>91</sup>. Guthmann, 216.



Cabinet, they are fundamentally private and non-governmental in nature. Both groups exist primarily as grassroots organizations that lead fundraising and signature drives in the pursuit of effecting policy change in the name of nationalism. The success that these groups have enjoyed in recent years is not the result of coincidentally aligned views between the grassroots and the elite. To the contrary, the evidence demonstrates the extensive inroads that Nippon Kaigi and Jinja Honchō have made in rallying elected officials to their causes, and it can be effectively argued that in many respects, these nationalist groups are the primary drivers of Japanese politics.<sup>92</sup>

The effect of these groups on mainstream political discourse goes beyond the confines of the Abe government or even the LDP. Since 2016, Japanese politics has seen a spectacular collapse of the opposition parties and the further entrenchment of power by the LDP. During the leadup to the 2017 Diet Elections, the LDP's main opposition, the Democratic Party, collapsed and announced that it would not contest the election.<sup>93</sup> In its place rose a new opposition party, Kibō no Tō 希望の党 (Party of Hope), led by Tokyo Governor Koike Yuriko. Interestingly, Koike herself had served as the Minister of Defense under Abe and was a member of both Nippon Kaigi and the Shintō Association for Spiritual Leadership.<sup>94</sup> In addition, Koike established a "litmus test" for politicians looking to join the Kibō no Tō, ensuring that the party was represented by politicians that supported Nippon Kaigi policies such as constitutional revision.<sup>95</sup> While this election resulted in a stunning defeat for the upstart party, it solidified an ideological trend in Japanese politics: the consolidation nationalist ideology across party lines. Nippon Kaigi and Jinja Honchō, as evidenced by the 2017 election, have accrued influence across multiple parties, and crafted a political system in which nationalist ideology has become the dominant political discourse. While these shifts in political discourse are most visible within the elected elite, it is important to consider the driving ideology and influence of groups like Nippon Kaigi in facilitating this consolidation of ideological influence.

## Conclusion

There is little doubt among scholars that Japan is experiencing foundational shifts in its political discourse and ideologies which constitute its government, resulting in some degree of uncertainty about where the country is headed in the years ahead. While it is generally agreed that nationalism and nationalist rhetoric has become more mainstream in Japanese political life until recent years, the mechanism by which these changes have taken place is more complex and cannot be attributed simply to the ideological leanings of a few elected elite. While scholars such as Pugliese, Aoki, and Glosserman have argued that this phenomenon is elite-driven and a coincidental partnership between like minded politicians and interest groups, this paper has demonstrated that shifts in Japanese political discourse can be traced back to actions of grassroots political and religious movements with their ideological origins in the postwar order. Non-government organizations such as Nippon Kaigi and Jinja Honchō have spent years building a complex system of influence from grassroots activists straight up into the highest

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<sup>92</sup>. Tawara Yoshifumi, "What is the Aim of Nippon Kaigi, the Ultra-Right Organization that Supports Japan's Abe Administration?," *Asia-Pacific Journal-Japan Focus* 15, no. 21 (2017): 9.

<sup>93</sup>. Robert J. Pekkanen, Steven R. Reed, Ethan Scheiner, and Daniel M. Smith, eds. *Japan Decides 2017: The Japanese General Election*, Springer, 2018: 31.

<sup>94</sup>. Mizohata, 3.

<sup>95</sup>. Pekkanen, 32.

echelons of elected government. These organizations embrace an ideology that can be defined as explicitly nationalist according to the definition put forward by this paper and have seen a high level of success in enacting meaningful policy change in line with their agenda. As this paper has explained, understanding the origins of these organizations and the ideological foundations on which they have been built is critical in crafting an accurate analysis of the mechanisms by which political change in Japan has been created. Nippon Kaigi and its ideological backbone Jinja Honchō have each created extensive political lobbying wings which reign in politicians at both the local and national levels in order to drive nationalist policy outcomes from the ground up. This is not a phenomenon that is primarily elite-driven, as evidence suggests that a nationalist movement has been built by these organizations from the grassroots of Japanese society. As elected officials in the Diet and Cabinet have continued to align themselves with the ideological platform of Nippon Kaigi and Jinja Honchō, these organizations will continue to consolidate power in the form of ideological unity across party lines. As Japan appears to be nearing a vote on constitutional revision, the activity of these groups will intensify, and the pressure placed on politicians to align themselves with a burgeoning ‘nationalist movement’ will continue to develop. Japan’s increasing embrace of nationalist discourse has taken many forms, all with the goal of establishing a “new normal” in Japanese politics, and grassroots movements will continue to exist at the forefront of driving decision-making among Japan’s elected elites.<sup>96</sup> Future scholarship in the field of nationalist political discourse in Japan ought to examine the foundations of such ideological shifts at the grassroots level, rather than viewing political change strictly through the lens of elite-driven political discourses.

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<sup>96</sup>. Catherine Wallace, “Japanese Nationalism Today-Risky Resurgence, Necessary Evil or New Normal?,” *Meiji journal of humanities* 12: 76.

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