Religious Nationalism in Contemporary Japan: The Case of Nippon Kaigi

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Introduction

The assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on July 8, 2022, revealed a dimension of Japan that is often overlooked: religiously motivated political violence. International perceptions of Japan are often shaped by the concept of *Nihonjinron*, a historical narrative that portrays the country as a near-perfect society, free of conflict and defined by a legacy of homogeneity and harmony. This idealized image, carefully crafted to promote social conformity, has obscured Japan's history of religious and political violence, particularly during the era of Imperial Japan (1868-1945). In this period, Shintoism and Zen Buddhism were co-opted as powerful ideological tools by the state, fueling a culture of militarism and ideological warfare. This period (1921-1945) culminated in immense human suffering, including the loss of around 10 million lives and the internal assassination of prominent political leaders, including prime ministers.

After Japan's utter defeat in World War II, this past seemed to have been left behind—merely a dark memory of an era plagued by extreme violence. Under the tutelage of the United States, Japan underwent a rapid political transformation, adopting the principles of "modernity" and incorporating its key components under American direction. On the surface, Japan displays the characteristics of hegemonic modernity: a triumphant political-legal order, an ethic of self-control incrusted within its population, remarkable economic prosperity, legal egalitarianism, and a stable democracy. Given this context, it may seem far-fetched to claim the existence of a religiously driven nationalism in contemporary Japan. The country's economic, social, and cultural success has long obscured a past where violence, politics, and religion were intricately intertwined—an aspect that is slowly becoming visible again.

Although not yet a widely explored topic in Japanese studies, several scholars have highlighted the growing presence or increased visibility of far-right movements in Japan, particularly during Shinzo Abe's tenure from 2012 to 2020. Abe's assassination raises critical questions about the role of these groups in shaping Japan's political landscape today—most notably, the influence of ***Nippon Kaigi*** **(日本会議),** an ultra-nationalist and religiously oriented organization closely linked to Japan's political elite formed in 1997. During Abe's third term alone, 15 out of 18 cabinet members were affiliated with or had ties to Nippon Kaigi, demonstrating its extensive reach within the highest levels of government (Boyd, 2019; McNeill, 2015). Despite operating largely behind the scenes, Nippon Kaigi has been instrumental in promoting a revisionist view of Japanese history, advocating for the

restoration of traditional values, and pushing for constitutional reforms that would redefine Japan's postwar identity.

In this context, the general objective of this research is to analyze the phenomenon of religious nationalism in contemporary Japan through a case study of Nippon Kaigi, demonstrating how its ideological and religious agenda—as well as its specific mechanisms of political influence—shed light on the intricate relationship between religion, politics, and violence within the Japanese political system. From this central aim follow three specific objectives: (1) to trace and interpret the historical and cultural foundations of Japanese religious nationalism; (2) to examine the organizational structure and ideological agenda of Nippon Kaigi; and (3) to assess the group's capacity to influence public policy and shape national political discourse.

As of 2025, only one book (Guthmann, 2024) and a limited number of academic articles in English specifically address Nippon Kaigi, highlighting a significant gap in scholarly research.[1] This lack of extensive literature is not necessarily indicative of the group's insignificance but rather suggests that its influence remains an understudied and often overlooked phenomenon. Within this small universe of Nippon Kaigi observers, there is no clear consensus on its actual power and political reach. The questions surrounding the organization remain pressing: How deeply embedded is Nippon Kaigi within the Japanese government? To what extent does it shape policy decisions? Is Japan experiencing a shift toward political radicalization, and if so, is Nippon Kaigi a driving force behind it?

The responses to these questions vary significantly across academic and journalistic analyses. Some scholars argue that Nippon Kaigi's influence is overstated, pointing to a lack of direct evidence linking the organization to concrete legislative outcomes or significant policy changes (Takubo, 2016, as cited in Guthmann, 2024). According to this perspective, Nippon Kaigi operates more as a symbolic entity that unites like-minded conservatives rather than as a powerful force capable of steering national politics. Others, however, take a more cautious and nuanced approach, suggesting that while Nippon Kaigi may not control the government outright, its ideological presence is deeply embedded in the political discourse. These scholars argue that the organization's impact exists on a spectrum between fantasy and reality (Guthman, 2024).

[1] For further reading see: Shibuichi, 2017; Boyd, 2019; McNeill, 2015.

Regardless of the stance one takes, what is clear is that Nippon Kaigi represents a crucial intersection between religion, nationalism, and politics in contemporary Japan. Its activities, alliances, and ideological framework warrant closer examination, particularly in light of recent political developments that suggest a growing alignment between religious conservatism and nationalist agendas. Understanding Nippon Kaigi's role is essential not only for comprehending Japan's current political trajectory but also for situating the country within broader global trends of religious nationalism and right-wing populism.

Nonetheless, these studies, in our view, lack a holistic approach, as most of them focus exclusively on formal political evidence—such as politicians' membership in the organization, the formulation of public policies, and electoral outcomes. While these factors are undoubtedly relevant for assessing Nippon Kaigi's influence, we believe they are not sufficient to fully grasp its significance. The most insidious threats are often those that remain unseen or are least expected. It is under this premise that the present study approaches Japanese nationalism and Nippon Kaigi as a case study, employing a perspective that extends beyond political and legislative evidence to incorporate a crucial yet frequently overlooked element in political analyses: culture.

Our analysis will therefore be characterized by a cultural approach to the political phenomenon, emphasizing that examining the formal structures of the political system alone is insufficient to reach precise conclusions. Given that lobbying groups like Nippon Kaigi do not hold official positions within the government, their influence may initially appear negligible. However, by analyzing the political system not solely through its formal institutions and outcomes but also through its cultural idiosyncrasies, we can uncover nuances that might otherwise remain obscured.

It is a misconception to assume that politics exists as an autonomous entity, isolated from external influences. In order to understand the role of groups such as Nippon Kaigi within the Japanese political system, it is essential to adopt a perspective that illuminates the complex interplay between religion, culture, and violence. This study, therefore, draws on key scholarly contributions—most notably the work of Gerald Curtis (1999), who offers a penetrating analysis of how power is exercised in Japan, and the seminal work of Masao Maruyama (1969), whose interpretation of prewar nationalism remains vital for understanding the enduring influence of historical ideological frameworks in contemporary Japanese politics.

To undertake this analysis, we will employ René Girard's mimetic theory. The central premise of this theory posits that human desire is inherently imitative, often leading to rivalry, conflict, and violence. This framework is particularly relevant for exploring the role of religion in managing societal tensions and the mechanisms through which societies channel or mitigate violence. Girard's concept of the scapegoat mechanism—where collective violence is redirected toward a real or symbolic sacrificial victim to restore social order—offers profound insights into the intersections of religion, violence, and politics. By applying mimetic theory to the study of Nippon Kaigi and its ideological underpinnings, this research aims to offer a novel perspective on the resurgence of religious nationalism in Japan. Through this lens, we seek to clarify a phenomenon that has thus far remained elusive, providing a deeper understanding of its implications for contemporary Japanese politics and society.

This work will begin by exploring the historical roots of religious nationalism in Japan, tracing its development from the Meiji era to the present. This exercise will reveal the ideological foundations of right-wing movements and organizations, focusing on the role that religion, mimesis, and violence have played in shaping Japan's political and social identity. It will show how the historical precedents laid the groundwork for the emergence of religious nationalism as a powerful force within Japan's political culture, ultimately giving rise to contemporary organizations like Nippon Kaigi.

The study then turns to Nippon Kaigi, examining its formation and ideological development. It discusses how Nippon Kaigi combines religious and nationalist rhetoric to promote a vision of Japan's future, drawing heavily from State Shinto and Emperor worship. Through this framework, the study will also delve into the mechanisms by which Nippon Kaigi is able to influence and shape the political landscape, fostered by the very idiosyncrasies of the Japanese political system. Next, the focus shifts to Nippon Kaigi's influence on Japan's political elites. The study explores how the organization has cultivated relationships with key political figures, gaining access to critical decision-making processes. It looks at the group's role in shaping the careers of influential politicians and its broader impact on political discourse in Japan. By examining its connections with political leaders, the research highlights how Nippon Kaigi has contributed to shaping Japan's political strategy and the direction of its governance. The extent of this influence is explored by considering the group's involvement in shaping key areas of public policy, such as education, military affairs, and constitutional reform, where its nationalist and religious agenda is most prominently expressed.

In addition to analyzing the direct influence of Nippon Kaigi, the study situates its ideological impact within the broader context of religious nationalism in Japan. By examining both historical antecedents and contemporary manifestations, the research seeks to illuminate the complex ways in which religious nationalism has evolved and continues to shape Japan's political and social dynamics. The thesis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the ideological framework of Nippon Kaigi is contributing to Japan's political trajectory in the 21st century. In doing so, it also considers the long-term implications of this influence, exploring potential political scenarios for Japan's future. The growing influence of Nippon Kaigi may lead to significant shifts in domestic policy, Japan's role in global politics, and the delicate balance between nationalism and internationalism.

Building on these premises, this research is organized into seven chapters, each structured to progressively address the general objective outlined above. Chapter 1 introduces the theoretical framework of the thesis, grounded in René Girard's mimetic theory, which serves as the basis for interpreting the nexus between nationalism, religion, and violence. Chapter 2 explores the historical and ideological development of religious nationalism in Japan, tracing its roots from the Meiji era to the present. Chapters 3 and 4 critically examine the characteristics of Japan's political system and the thought of Masao Maruyama, emphasizing how informal and concealed mechanisms of power remain embedded in the present. Chapter 5, the core of this thesis, analyzes the emergence and ideology of Nippon Kaigi. Finally, Chapters 6 and 7 investigate Nippon Kaigi's concrete influence on public policy formulation and its relationship with political elites in contemporary Japan. This structure reflects a methodological decision to articulate a theoretical, historical, and political-religious analysis that provides a comprehensive understanding of religious nationalism in Japan today.

Chapter 1: Mimetic Theory & The Scapegoat Mechanism

Before delving into the study of religious nationalism in Japan and the case of Nippon Kaigi, it is essential to briefly introduce the key components of the theoretical and conceptual framework that will shape this investigation. This framework will allow us to substantiate a premise I have also previously sustained in my past work (Moreno Villanueva, 2023), which—without this necessary context—might otherwise appear arbitrary. That premise is that the fundamental element of the Japanese political system is the scapegoat mechanism. Let us now examine the foundation of this argument.

René Girard's mimetic theory posits that the defining characteristic of human existence—and, consequently, the basis of socialization and an individual's integration into a given community—lies in humanity's mimetic nature (Girard, Oughourlian, & Lefort, 1982, p.231; Oughourlian, 2016, p.37). Unlike mere imitation, mimesis primarily operates on an unconscious level. Through Girard's lens, human coexistence depends on the dynamics of mimetic relationships and expressions. In analyzing the intricacies of socialization, Girard observed that an individual's behavior, language, conduct, values, and norms exist only because they are reproduced through an external model—the "other". Within this framework, culture itself emerges as the product of a vast network of mimetic relationships between individuals. However, this very mimetic nature, which enables communal life, simultaneously contains within it the primary catalyst of violence: desire.

Desire does not arise spontaneously; it is not an independent or self-generated phenomenon. Rather, it is the result of a process in which individuals adopt the desires of others. As Girard explains: "Man is the creature who does not know what to desire, and he turns to others in order to make up his mind. We desire what others desire because we imitate their desires" (Imitatio Institute, n.d). This logic reveals the foundational structure of mimetic theory: a triangular relationship in which two subjects establish an imitative bond, replicating each other's desires and directing them toward a third element—the object of desire. Let us illustrate this concept through the following figure:

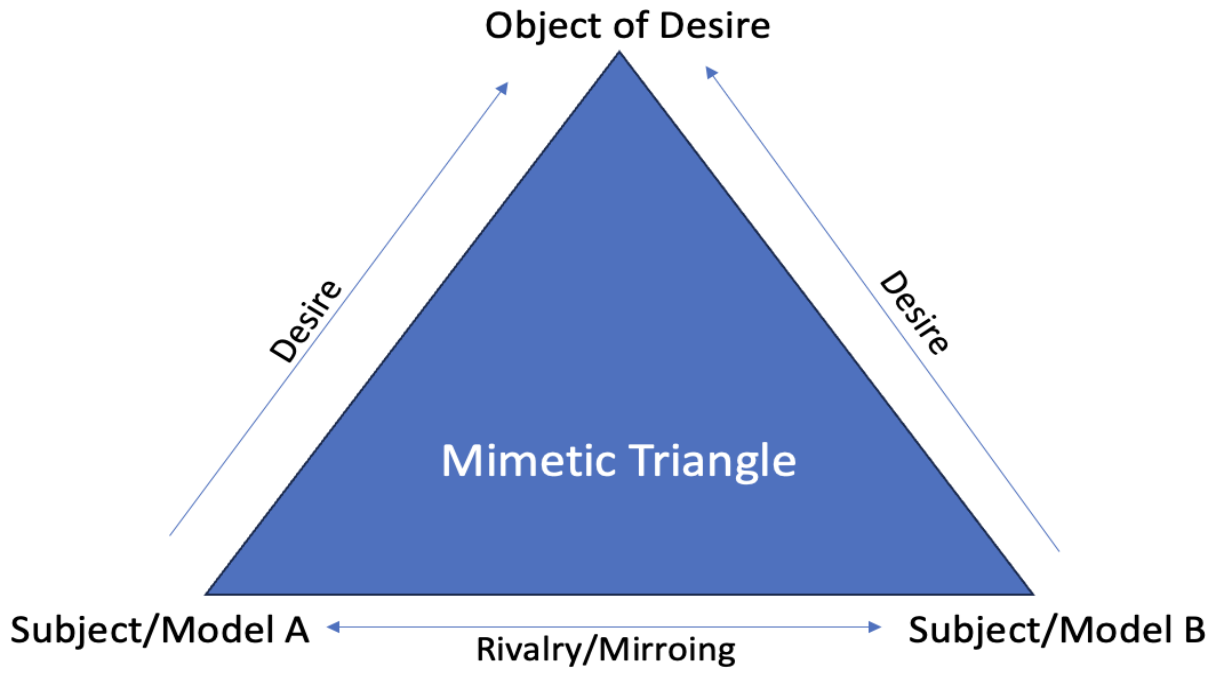

Figure 1: Mimetic Triangle

Bonds between subjects, however, are not identical in every individual case. A bond between siblings is not the same as the one of a student to a professor or of a citizen of any given country to their respective representative of the executive power. The crucial elements in distinguishing such bonds are the distance and the attitude between subjects which can be understood as positive/negative and as internal/external. Internal positive mediation is perhaps the most common type of bond, one we can find in reciprocal bonds on non-conflicting identification, for example, a bond between friends, a mother and daughter, or any kind of romantic relationship. Internal negative mediation on the contrary is constructed through a deep desire towards the other's possessions or identity. These are typically the most violent type of mimetic relationships as the distance between subjects enables direct confrontation.

On the other hand, external mediation is characterized by respect and admiration for models that stand far from our own position, such as professors, monarchs, or role models. External negative mediations are observed with the complete dehumanization of the "other", this means that such subjects could be completely ignored or annihilated (Márquez Muñoz, 2020, pp.48-51). Just as any kind of relation among individuals, mimetic bonds are fragile and can quickly switch from positive to negative and from internal to external, one only requires a change of attitude towards the goods of

the other. Girard explains the idea through a particular concept: "double bind". The mirror/rivalry binary is essentially the difference between emulation and envy (Nirenberg, 2015, p.27).

However, this attitude towards the goods of the other will inevitably lead to conflict, as its finite nature does not allow all subjects to possess it simultaneously. This is the crucial characteristic to understand the violent nature of mimetic –and therefore- human relationships. Objects of desire—both material and immaterial—are inherently limited. Material examples include resources such as capital, land, and romantic partners, while non-material ones encompass power, prestige, status, popularity, and honor.

Given this reality, in which the universal attainment of desired objects is impossible, conflict naturally arises as individuals compete to obtain them. It is within this competitive struggle that we encounter the very origins of violence, which can escalate from a simple rivalry between individuals to a full-scale war. This, as Girard describes, constitutes a "mimetic crisis." Such crises have the potential to destabilize and even annihilate entire communities, culminating in internal warfare (Márquez Muñoz, 2020, p.68).

However, a paradoxical resolution exists—one that arises from the very nature of violence itself. After analyzing the foundational myths of various cultures, Girard observed a striking pattern: they all revolved around an act of murder, a victim whose death ultimately restored peace and harmony. This phenomenon, which he termed the scapegoat mechanism, operates in a specific way. When a mimetic crisis erupts within a community and violence permeates social relations, this aggression is redirected toward a single victim. Despite their innocence, the victim is held responsible for the turmoil, allowing society to channel and expel its collective violence.

> Insofar as mimesis unites all members of the community against a single enemy, a feeling of collective reconciliation is engendered throughout the mob. All violence, all hatred that was previously interspersed throughout the community in the form of individual rivalries is now directed at a single victim. In the eyes of the mob, the victim is responsible for the emergence of the crisis and is thus the incarnation of all evil. The monstrosity of the preceding crisis is now manifested in one single monster; we are dealing with one victim, which has become the scapegoat for the entire community (Palaver, 2013, p.151).

Once the scapegoat mechanism is activated and the sacrificial victim is purged, peace is restored within the community. However, this process holds significance not only in terms of restoring peace but also

in understanding the foundational principles of religion and culture. The act of sacrificing the scapegoat must be understood in its dual nature: the victim, initially perceived as responsible for all societal ills, is subsequently transformed into an entity that is regarded as the source of peace and order. According to Girard, this transformation marks the origin of the concept of divinity and, by extension, the emergence of religion.

In this framework, religion is conceived as arising from the collective act of violence against a scapegoat—an individual or group upon whom societal tensions are projected and from whom they are eliminated, thus facilitating temporary social cohesion (Girard, 2005). The murder of the victim not only restores peace and provides temporary unity but also plays a pivotal role in the creation of human institutions. These institutions emerge from efforts to maintain the order established through violence. They are manifested in the form of myths, rituals, and taboos, which function as follows:

- Myths depict the violence of the scapegoat mechanism from the perspective of the persecutors and represent the viewpoint of the mob.

- Rites are the community's controlled repetition of the scapegoat mechanism and can be defined as a "mimesis of an initial collective founding murder". Peace and unity in the community are thereby continually restored.

- Taboos or prohibitions have the function of preventing any new outbreak of the social crisis. The crimes for which the sacrificial victim was held solely accountable during the original crisis are now absolutely forbidden within the community (Palaver, 2013, p.154).

This logic similarly allows us to delineate the stages or a mimetic cycle that defines a community's trajectory in relation to violence. It begins with an intensifying mimetic crisis that escalates to the point of contagion and generalization within a group. Once violence erupts, the initial steps are taken to identify a victim—the scapegoat—toward whom the violence can be redirected in an attempt to externalize it. With the victim or victims identified, the process moves toward sacrifice, that is, the killing of these individuals. At this stage, violence is externalized, thereby restoring order and bringing about a temporary cessation of conflict. It is through this act of killing that the dual nature of the victim, as previously discussed, emerges. The scapegoat, initially perceived as the cause of the crisis, is transformed into the very entity that has brought peace and restored order—a reconciliatory deity. To preserve this newly established order, institutions are created to regulate violence, namely, myths, rituals, and taboos that commemorate the original act of sacrifice and prohibit behaviors that led to

the mimetic crisis. Finally, this order persists until new mimetic conflicts begin to erode it, as the mimetic nature of individuals remains unchanged. Consequently, the cycle recommences once again.

The mimetic nature of human beings can also be understood on two levels: individually and collectively. An individual's particular mimetic tendencies become collective in nature when a group unites in pursuit of a common objective. This can manifest in a constructive manner or, more prominently, in the form of a scapegoating dynamic—a lynching mob. Similarly, collective mimesis extends beyond dyadic imitation to interactions between groups, communities, nations, or cultures. This form of collective mimesis is most evident in rivalries, such as political party competition, conflicts between nations, warfare, or even in less complex representations, such as sports rivalries. Mimesis at this level operates in two ways: first, through the internal imitation among members of a group, often centered around a leader; and second, through the group's relationship with another group (Márquez Muñoz, 2020, pp.55-56).

René Girard's mimetic theory, briefly summarized in this chapter, thus provides a framework for understanding human nature through intersubjective and collective processes of reproduction. It reveals that both individuals and collectives operate according to the same foundational mechanisms. In the following chapters, we will continue to develop a mimetic reading of religious nationalism in Japan, examining how it originates through a mimetic process with a foreign "other" and how the scapegoat mechanism has been instrumental in shaping a specific political system and the formulation of public policies characteristic of organizations such as Nippon Kaigi.

Chapter 2: Historical and Ideological Foundations of Japanese Religious Nationalism

Starting with the concept of religious nationalism might seem like the combination of two fields of study that have little to do with each other. However, nationalism and religion in Japan emerge as two cultural products that are hardly comprehensible without one another. This is perhaps the most essential characteristic of Japanese nationalism: its backbone is a religious idiosyncrasy that allows us to place nationalist sentiment within a particular understanding and religious practice unique to Japan. Unlike its ancient and long history in the Western context, nationalism as a political and cultural phenomenon in Japan is of relatively recent nature. Let us then briefly recap its origins before addressing the main focus of this work: the state of Japanese nationalism today.

Japan, as a properly unified nation, dates back to the relatively recent year of 1603. Prior to that, the archipelago now known as Japan was marked by the presence of numerous independent domains, each governed by its own *daimyō*—a term that can be loosely translated as "feudal lords," though the comparison is not entirely accurate. These domains often coexisted amid recurring periods of conflict. There was no notion of a single state or a unified country under a nationalist ideal. This political fragmentation eventually led to the period known as *Sengoku*, or the Warring States period. It was not until 1600, under the leadership of Tokugawa Ieyasu and his victory at the Battle of Sekigahara, that for the first time in history, a dominant power was established, resulting in a unified political structure.

The consolidation of power in 1603 gave rise to the Edo period, also known as the Tokugawa Shogunate. This era marked a prolonged time of peace and stability, often regarded as a golden age in Japanese history due to the flourishing of cultural traditions and artistic expression. The shogunate established a rigid social hierarchy, placing the samurai at the top, followed by peasants, artisans, and merchants. This structured order played a crucial role in mitigating violence and maintaining political control throughout the archipelago. However, this relatively stable and prosperous order would be threatened by an external entity that, for the first time, would introduce nationalist discourse into Japan's collective imagination and *ethos*: the threat of invasion by a foreign power.

In 1856, the famous sails of the American warships commanded by Commodore Perry revealed Japan's position in the world, exposing it as just another entity in an emerging international order. The arrival of the Americans came with a clear message: either Japan opened its doors to trade and international exchange, or it would be invaded by the evident superiority of this new "other," which now forced it to make comparisons.

The looming threat of an unwelcome foreign visit ignited a previously inexistent nationalist sentiment. The process of constructing a national identity forced the Japanese people to return to their origins and construct a unifying national narrative capable of counteracting the presence of foreign powers. This return to origins led them to reclaim an institution that had been relegated to the background during the Edo period: the imperial institution. The emperor, who had been reduced to a mere ceremonial figure since 1588, was now positioned as the pillar of movements seeking to formulate a national identity and a unifying political project. Here, we observe the two foundational elements of Japanese nationalism. First, the construction of a common enemy—enmity arising from contact with foreign powers. Second, the creation or reconfiguration of a national myth centered on the veneration of the imperial institution, which promoted unity under a single banner.

This combination of factors even had its own slogan: *sonnō jōi*, which conveyed a clear and concise message, a set of directives defining the national project: "revere the Emperor, expel the barbarians"(Maruyama, 1969, p.382; Guthmann, 2024, p.9). The intersubjective mimesis, previously limited to social and cultural reproduction, now shifted to a collective plane, taking on a dual character: an initial mimesis between subjects who now united in pursuit of a common goal—the expulsion of a new foreign "other" that threatened their very existence.

The most natural counterargument to this composition of Japanese nationalism is that nationalism, in general, is constructed in the same way—through a bond between peers against a common enemy. However, one of the most significant works on Japanese nationalism, *Thought and Behaviour in Modern Japanese Politics* (1969), provides a detailed analysis that highlights the elements distinguishing Japanese nationalism from its Western counterpart. In previous works (Moreno Villanueva, 2023), we have briefly touched upon these characteristics but let us now explore them in depth to understand them in the context of Nippon Kaigi and the resurgence of a nationalism that seemed to have been forgotten.

Manufacturing Loyalty: State-Enforced Nationalism in Japan

Although it may seem like an obvious observation, Maruyama (1969) states that nationalisms are shaped by the ideas and institutions of the society in which they emerge. Nationalism in the West, for example, arose in a context where a notion of universalism and an international society already existed. Thanks to the efforts of the Roman Empire and the Catholic Church, there was already a project of a corporate European body. The later development of so-called "nation-states," from the Renaissance through the Reformation, was merely an atomization of this original order. In East Asia, however, this notion of universality and international society was not fully developed. Despite a certain degree of diplomatic exchange, the countries in this region remained relatively isolated and separate existences. This isolation was even more profound in Japan, as it was reinforced by an official policy known as *sakoku* (locked country), which sought to restrict foreign intervention in national territory. Japanese ships were prohibited from leaving the country, trade was restricted to only a few exclusive ports, and Christian missionaries were expelled from Japan (Hane & Perez, 2015, p.289).

What does this mean in real terms? When Japan confronted Western power, it was not merely an encounter with a single state but rather with the entire existence of an international society that now

forced it to open up—either through direct threat or outright violence. Its nationalism, then, did not originate as an internal political project but as a direct response to a threat, a reaction to an attack. In other words, a forced nationalism. Its objective was reduced to self-preservation, the defense of a specific way of life (Maruyama, 1969, p.138).

This introduction to the international framework was also marked by the complete absence of an egalitarian notion. Maruyama highlights how the proponents of *sonnō jōi* understood international relations through a hierarchical order—that is, through superior and inferior nations. This was due to a direct transference of the internal and national hierarchy characteristic of Japanese society to the international arena. As a result, Japan's role in the face of foreign powers was reduced to a single, violent dynamic: conquer or be conquered. Under this logic, the expansionism that would later characterize Japan becomes explainable—it was the product of a nationalism formed through a relationship with other states based on violence.

Another characteristic of Japanese nationalism, which further reinforces its mimetic nature and is highlighted by Maruyama, is that this rejection of Western powers was more complex than a simple and abrupt refusal; it was a process composed of both resentment and admiration. The Japanese nationalist project faced the harsh reality that, in the face of the clear superiority of the West in virtually all aspects—military, economic, technological—the only viable option for self-defense was to adopt those very same Western developments. It was, then, an attempt to replicate the material prosperity of the much-hated enemy. This mimetic attitude toward the presence of the enemy even had its own banner: *Wakon Yōsai* (和魂洋才), which translates to "Japanese spirit, Western techniques" (Guthmann, 2024, p.73) and perfectly describes the mimetic nature of this relationship—a bond formed through both envy and admiration. The enemy is despised, yet imitated, adapted and replicated.

The growing nationalist fervor, combined with a certain degree of crisis and economic discontent, led to the so-called Meiji Restoration of 1868, which dismantled the old feudal system in favor of a centralized monarchy, with the emperor as the ultimate representative and symbol of a new national unity project. Unlike European bourgeois revolutions, the Meiji Restoration was not driven by a grassroots popular movement but rather by the ruling classes—a "revolution from above" (Maruyama, 1968, p.141), a characteristic we will see repeatedly in the Japanese context.

This political mobilization of elites also differs from bourgeois experiences when we examine the political project it promoted. The Bourgeois revolutions were centered on a political vision that sought, above all, a form of popular emancipation—freedom and equality before the law. The Meiji Restoration did not propose any such political or civil aspirations; its objective was strictly material: positioning Japan on the same level as the Western foreign powers. In this sense, Maruyama highlights that the Restoration was never a case of popular mobilization; on the contrary, its promoters actively suppressed the proliferation of genuinely popular movements, relegating the masses in favor of the absolute necessity of modernization, industrialization, and the formation of a strong state (Maruyama, 1969, p.145; Fukase-Indergaard & Indergaard, 2008, pp.361–364).

The political project—or the absence thereof—was also accompanied by its own founding myth, a cultural sponsorship that justified its existence: Shintoism. However, it is essential to emphasize that understanding Shinto as an autonomous and unified phenomenon constitutes a historical and conceptual misinterpretation. The history of religious phenomena in Japan is characterized by constant syncretism between various beliefs. Since the Nara period (710–794), Buddhism had established itself as the dominant religion in Japan, receiving backing from both the emperor and the aristocracy. From this period onward, the various Buddhist schools not only controlled their own temples and monasteries but also administered the shrines dedicated to the kami, that is, the spirits, deities, or sacred essences within Shintoism.

This syncretism was not merely a matter of logistical or organizational subordination to Buddhism; rather, the beliefs themselves underwent a process of mutual influence. The doctrine of *honji suijaku* (本地垂迹) posited that the kami were interpreted as *suijaku*—manifestations of Buddhist entities. The kami, characteristic of Shintoism, were thus identified as manifestations of different Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (Kuroda, Dobbins, & Gay, 1981, p.3).

This historical reality illustrates both the long-standing subordination of Shinto to Buddhism—being influenced and administered by Buddhist institutions—and the broader nature of religious phenomena in Japan, where these two traditions coexisted without contradiction or rigid boundaries. The syncretic coexistence becomes even more evident when considering that it was not limited to Buddhism and Shintoism alone; Taoist and Confucian traditions were also part of this dynamic (Kuroda, Dobbins, & Gay, 1981). The autonomy of these traditions in Japan was blurred—there was no contradiction in

professing a religious belief system composed of multiple traditions, a reality that continues to this day.

Given this historical context, how was it then possible for the Meiji Restoration leaders to promote Shintoism as the new state religion? As mentioned earlier, Shintoism does not constitute a unified body of beliefs; in fact, referring to it as a single entity obscures the vast diversity within this tradition. Like any other religion, Shintoism has undergone a historical process of fragmentation, which today allows us to identify at least seven distinct currents.

The branch most relevant to this study is known as State Shinto (itself a subdivision of Shrine Shinto, or Jinja Shintō), which did not fully develop until the 19th century (Kuroda, Dobbins, & Gay, 1981; Fukase-Indergaard & Indergaard, 2008). Facing the need for a founding myth to legitimize the new state they sought to construct the Meiji leaders promoted the separation of Shinto and Buddhism through a policy known as *shinbutsu bunri* (神仏分離) (Kuroda, Dobbins, & Gay, 1981, p.19). This policy sought to sever the ties between Buddhist figures—Bodhisattvas and Buddhas—and those of Shintoism, the kami. The objective was clear: to establish Shinto as the official religion by creating an indigenous and autonomous discourse that framed it as the true and original tradition of the Japanese people, completely disconnected from foreign beliefs such as Buddhism (Kuroda, Dobbins, & Gay, 1981, p.21).

This deliberate political separation resulted in the artificial formation of State Shinto (国家神道, *Kokka Shinto*), which can be understood through a series of stages. In 1868, following the official separation of Shintoism and Buddhism with the *Shinbutsu Bunri* decree, an open persecution of Buddhism—known as *Haibutsu Kishaku* (廃仏毀釈)—also began (Kuroda, Dobbins, & Gay, 1981, p.19). This movement promoted, among other measures, the expulsion of Buddhist monks who administered Shinto shrines, as well as the destruction of Buddhist statues. This initial phase was also marked by an attempt to systematize Shintoism through the establishment of a state-administered shrine system. It is through these policies that we can observe the true politicization of religion, which ceased to be confined solely to the domain of belief and instead assumed a new role as a political and state instrument. This transition from a religious to an ideological and political spectrum became explicit when the Meiji government declared that Shinto was not merely a religion but the highest expression of Japanese national identity. (Shimazono, 2009, p.113; Fukase-Indergaard & Indergaard, 2008, pp. 336).

From 1889, and especially between 1890 and 1910, State Shinto began taking its first steps toward authoritarianism (Fukase-Indergaard & Indergaard, 2008, pp. 361–364). This was achieved by reinforcing and promoting the idea that the emperor was a genuine deity as a direct descendant of Amaterasu and by fostering absolute loyalty toward him. To instill this loyalty, a series of worship rituals was introduced and propagated through public institutions, making the veneration of the emperor a mandatory practice in schools and government offices (Fukase-Indergaard & Indergaard, 2008, pp. 367–368).

This kind of symbiotic interaction between politics and the imperial institution was formalized through the ideological concept of *kokutai* (国体) — often translated as "national polity" or "national essence" — which emphasized that the divine and unbroken lineage of the emperor represented the unique identity and structure of Japan. The emperor, therefore, was not merely understood as a political leader but as a divine figure from whom all authority emanated. He was to occupy the religious, political, cultural, and spiritual center of the nation (Fukase-Indergaard & Indergaard, 2008, pp. 366).

Based on this reality, Maruyama identifies two principal elements of the psychological structure of pre-war nationalism: first, a tendency to symbolize the state as a direct extension of the primary social group—whether family or village—and second, an attachment to the environment based on love for one's native land. What does this mean in political and material terms? It signifies that Japanese nationalism of this era was characterized by the natural supremacy of the collective over the individual. There was no notion of emancipation or autonomy; rather, it was primarily based on an "irrational attachments to the primary group" (Maruyama, 1969, p,45). The feudal and traditional structure of Japan was thus transferred to this new paternalistic nationalism, with the emperor serving as the ultimate patriarchal figure. Maruyama even compares this attachment to the environment to a fundamental characteristic of tribalism—the original stage of nationalism (Maruyama 1969, p.145).

The state apparatus to promote Shintoism as a core component of national identity, along with the objectives set forth by the Meiji Restoration leaders, bore fruit within a relatively short period. Shintoism became deeply embedded in the daily life of Japanese citizens as the central ideological and cultural pillar of the nation. In terms of industrialization and modernization, Japan experienced unprecedented success. The country achieved its long-sought industrialization and modernization, establishing a powerful industry alongside an advanced infrastructure—including railways and telegraph lines—which quickly made Japan the dominant state in East Asia. By the early 20th century,

Japan had become a genuine economic and industrial power comparable to Western nations (Yamamura, 1997).

Unrestrained Nationalism: The Rise and Fall of Imperial Japan

Japan's rapid growth from the late 19th century inevitably had consequences. Beyond the subordination of the individual to national and state objectives, Japan faced an unforeseen challenge: the inability to sustain its own population and the lack of natural resources necessary for its industry. Unable to resolve these problems internally, nationalism provided a means to channel violence through the search for scapegoats. This led the newly formed Japanese Empire to embark on territorial expansion in Asia, starting with the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894, which resulted in the annexation of Taiwan, followed by the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 and the annexation of Korea in 1910. By 1931, Shintoism had become the ideological pillar and totalitarian instrument of Japan's military campaigns, culminating in the invasion of Manchuria in China and the establishment of the puppet state of Manchukuo.

Continuing this legacy, the 1930s were marked by a militaristic campaign that can aptly be described as fascist. Notable among the atrocities committed during this period is the Nanjing Massacre of 1937, in which the Imperial Japanese Army carried out the mass murder of Chinese civilians. Groups such as Nippon Kaigi refuse to acknowledge these events as historical fact, instead promoting a revisionist interpretation that downplays or denies the extent of such atrocities. This imperialist frenzy led Japan to occupy most of the Asia-Pacific region and ultimately enter World War II following the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Without delving too deeply into historical details beyond the scope of this study, Japan's participation in World War II came to an end with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, leading to its formal surrender in August of that year. Following the surrender, American forces under the leadership of General Douglas MacArthur assumed full control of the country, overseeing the occupation until 1952. As we will explore in the following chapters, although the official absorption of Shintoism into nationalist ideology was abolished during this period, the narrative that had transformed Japan into a violent, expansionist empire subordinate to the imperial institution did not entirely vanish. Rather, it remains subtly embedded within the state apparatus, posing an ongoing threat of ideological resurgence.

Chapter 3: Distorted Power: A Critical Examination of Japan's Political Landscape

If one examines global rankings on the quality and status of democracy, Japan consistently appears among the leading nations. It is often described as a successful democratic state, characterized by strong institutions, high levels of political representation, regular elections, and a robust rule of law. On the surface, Japan seems to possess a democracy comparable to that of its Western counterparts. In fact, it was the first Asian country to adopt a Western-style democracy in the 1880s, drawing inspiration from Bismarck's Prussia (Curtis, 1999, p.231). Japan's current constitution, drafted exclusively by the Allied occupation forces after World War II, further entrenched a Western model of governance.

The postwar constitution redefined the emperor's role, relegating him to that of a symbolic head of state without governing powers. His duties were limited to ceremonial functions and serving as a symbol of national unity. The adopted system became a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary democracy, structured around the three standard branches of government. The National Diet (*Kokkai,* 国会) operates as a bicameral legislature, consisting of a House of Representatives (lower house), which has the authority to select the Prime Minister, and, under certain conditions, override decisions made by the House of Councilors (upper house), which serves primarily as a regulatory body.

The executive branch is led by the Prime Minister—usually the leader of the majority party or coalition in the lower house—who is appointed by the Diet. The Prime Minister heads the cabinet and, in theory, wields the most political power, overseeing public policy and directing foreign affairs. The judiciary, following the Western tradition, is designed to function independently, with the Supreme Court at its apex.

This political arrangement—briefly outlined above—clearly aligns with democratic ideals. Based on its formal structure and the international indicators mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it would be difficult to argue that Japan's system does not exemplify a strong democracy. However, this is precisely the argument we aim to advance in the following pages. Like many institutions in Japan, the outward appearance of the political system may seem well-constructed—even exemplary—but

upon closer inspection, a vast realm of informality, corruption, power diffusion and political stagnation emerges.

The objective of the following chapters is not to analyze or describe the formal structure and institutional organization of Japan's political system; this has already been thoroughly examined in a wide body of literature that far exceeds what we could provide here (Hayes, 2017; Hrebenar & Nakamura, 2014; Sasaki, 2012). Rather, our intention is to delve into the dimensions of political power that lie beyond institutional frameworks and explore how power is actually exercised in practice. It is only through such an exploration that we can begin to understand how groups like Nippon Kaigi have managed to infiltrate the government to such an extent that they now operate as influential actors in the formulation of public policy—posing, consequently, a threat not only to Japan itself but to the international community at large. The very mechanisms that once propelled Japan toward violent imperialism, underpinned by fascist and militaristic ideologies during the first half of the twentieth century, have endured and persist within a political system that was ostensibly designed to prevent their reemergence but that refused to eliminate the main mechanisms and actors responsible for such outcomes.

The Hidden Mechanics of Power

When addressing the question of how a political system functions—whether in Japan or any other country—the essential task is to understand how power is exercised and who the key actors are in that process. At its core, this involves studying the complex dynamics of power relations. As previously noted, the issue is not as simple as describing the institutions of government and their formal actors; one must look beyond the official structures of Japanese public institutions. However, the task of thoroughly analyzing Japan's political system has proven to be considerably challenging and remains far from reaching a consensual conclusion.

The literature speaks for itself: the Japanese political system is frequently characterized by descriptions such as "elusive state," "power diffusion," "colossal system of irresponsibility," "non-decision-making system," "politics of complacency," and "the neglected role of power." In his classic work *The Enigma of Japanese Power* (1989), Karel van Wolferen encapsulates this situation in the following way:

> Japanese life often seems like a play that has suffered a bad mix-up in its staging. The lines the actors speak do not fit the characters their costumes indicate they portray. Institutions,

> processes and behaviour related to the exercise of power suggest one thing at first sight but something quite different on closer acquaintance. At the most basic level of political life Japan is of course no different from anywhere else. Some Japanese love power, and some achieve it. The vast majority, as everywhere, submit willingly to the exercise of power for fear of personal punishment or social chaos. The Japanese have laws, legislators, a parliament, political parties, labour unions, a prime minister, interest groups and stockholders. But one should not be misled by these familiar labels into hasty conclusions as to how power is exercised in Japan. The Japanese prime minister is not expected to show much leadership; labour unions organise strikes to be held during lunch breaks; the legislature does not in fact legislate; stockholders never demand dividends; consumer interest groups advocate protectionism; laws are enforced only if they don't conflict too much with the interests of the powerful; and the ruling Liberal Democratic Party is, if anything, conservative and authoritarian, is not really a party and does not in fact rule (Van Wolferen, 1989, p.25).

As we can observe, the challenge ultimately comes down to identifying the primary agent in the exercise of power. Political scientists and other close observers have frequently pointed to a set of recurring actors—a formation of "usual suspects"—typically comprising politicians, bureaucrats, and corporations. This triad, commonly referred to as Japan's "iron triangle," is, however, of limited utility in understanding the idiosyncrasies of the Japanese political system. The close relationship among politicians, bureaucrats, and capitalists is hardly unique to Japan; rather, it constitutes a common feature of political systems around the world (Curtis, 1999, p.10). It is therefore necessary to delve more deeply into the intricate dynamics among these players in order to truly grasp a system that intentionally diffuses the exercise of power.

Gerald L. Curtis, in *The Logic of Japanese Politics* (1999), outlines several dominant theories concerning this triangular relationship. The first, which aligns with Marxist and materialist perspectives, sees the state as an instrument serving the interests of the ruling classes. According to this view, conglomerates—known as *zaikai*—are favored by the state through the mediation of politicians and the administrative bureaucracy. Often labeled the "Japan, Inc." model, this theory presents Japan as a corporatist system designed to serve the objectives of its elite. However, like the general notion of the iron triangle, this approach proves insufficient, as a similar Marxist diagnosis could be applied to virtually any modern nation-state under capitalism.

A second theory posits the dominance and hierarchical superiority of the administrative bureaucracy over other political actors—namely, politicians and corporations. In this model, the bureaucracy formulates a "developmental state," administered through its various ministries and realized through

the cooperation of the private sector. Yet this theory, as Curtis notes, also falls short, as it significantly overstates the political strength of the state relative to the market. This is especially evident when compared to continental European countries, where the proportion of the GNP accounted for by nationalized and state-run industries is substantially higher than in Japan.

A third theory, having rejected the dominance of both capitalist elites and the bureaucracy, emphasizes the hegemony of politicians. Curtis draws a parallel between this perspective and rational choice theory. According to this view, politicians—particularly party bosses—respond to political demands by strategically designing policies to win elections, using the bureaucracy as an instrument to implement these policies. This is a rationalist explanation of the acquisition and maintenance of political power, which depends on electoral success. Yet this theory also proves inadequate, as it underestimates the influence of both the bureaucracy and corporate interests while overestimating the power of politicians. It is difficult to sustain this interpretation when examining Japan's political history, where political parties have generally exerted little control over the bureaucracy. Not only have politicians possessed limited authority over bureaucrats, but the bureaucracy has, on occasion, acted in direct opposition to the will of the very ministers who are formally in charge of them (Curtis, 1999, p.9). The Western model in which politicians govern and issue orders to bureaucrats is largely absent in Japan, as will be further explored later in this chapter.

Curtis, in the apparent unsolvable task of properly describing the Japanese political system, states his own perspective within the understanding of a "refractive state":

> A refractive state absorbs demands from society and it produces policies in response to them. But in reaching public-policy decisions, the managers of the state—its bureaucrats and political leaders—endeavor to bend and mold those demands to conform as much as possible to their own values, priorities, preferences, and organizational interests. Demands emanating from society in the refractive state are plural and competing. It is a system characterized by the existence of strong private-sector associations. The preferences of bureaucrats and politicians are plural as well. The state is not a unitary actor. Inter-and intraministerial rivalries are rife in the Japanese bureaucracy. So, too, are rivalries among politicians and between politicians and bureaucrats. It is a system of multiple strong-state institutions (Curtis, 1999, p.60).

This citation alone cannot fully capture Curtis's nuanced position, but when compared to the other theories outlined above, his argument can be summarized as suggesting that each contains partial truths—though none alone is sufficient. In effect, Curtis implies that the reality of Japanese politics is best understood as a mixture of all these frameworks, albeit in a far more complex and multifaceted

form. While this conclusion may be more accurate, it is also of limited analytical utility: if everything is partly true, then no single explanatory model provides real clarity. Nonetheless, Curtis's work offers an important corrective to political analyses that rely on oversimplified models. He emphasizes a point that may seem self-evident but is often neglected: the Japanese political system cannot be adequately described using standard Western concepts or reduced to catchy labels that attempt to condense a vast and intricate system into a few words.

In this same sense, it is crucial to stress that the difficulty in identifying the main agent of power in Japan is not simply a challenge for researchers—it is a structural feature of the system itself. It is no coincidence that scholars have long struggled to locate clear centers of power in Japan's diffuse political landscape. The works of Curtis and van Wolferen are therefore significant in underscoring this peculiar aspect of the Japanese political system. In pointing to the dispersion of power, both authors expand the cast of political actors beyond the oversimplified "iron triangle." Politicians, bureaucrats, and corporations are joined by a range of other players, including pressure groups, gangsters, lobbyists, syndicates, and unions. The exercise of power must thus be understood as an interaction between formal and informal institutions, each advancing its own particular interests. To Curtis, the system can thus be characterized by how

> ...formal institutions, those that are stipulated by law, and informal institutions, those that are the product of custom and precedent, are linked in providing a context for political action. Linkage involves the use of informal institutions to circumvent constraints of formal ones, and of formal institutions to validate decisions made in the context of informal ones (Curtis, 1999, p.4).

The task of reaching a definitive conclusion about the nature of the Japanese political system lies well beyond the scope of this work. Therefore, the aim here is not to settle that debate, but rather to highlight the structural elements and characteristics that have allowed for the emergence and entrenchment of lobbying and pressure groups within the political system. More specifically, this analysis will focus on the conditions that enable such groups to actively participate in the decision-making process. With that objective in mind, our examination of Japan's power structure begins with its modern origins in the post-World War II era and the creation of its most emblematic political institution: the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

Japanese Nationalism and the Birth of the LDP

As previously mentioned, following Japan's defeat in World War II, the country was occupied by American forces until 1952. During this period, Japan adopted a new constitution (1947), which established a government featuring all the Western and modern characteristics outlined at the beginning of this chapter. The ideological backbone of the prewar Japanese state—rooted in State Shinto and emperor worship—was formally dismantled. The postwar government was constitutionally prohibited from administering or endorsing this politico-religious framework in any capacity (Guthman, 2024, p.10). In theory, this meant the purge of both Shinto influence and militaristic elements from public institutions.

In practice, however, the process proved far more complicated. The International Military Tribunal for the Far East, commonly known as the Tokyo Trials, extended over nearly three years, as identifying the individuals responsible for the war effort and assigning guilt proved to be a nearly impossible task. In a previous study (Moreno Villanueva, 2023), I analyzed this dynamic through the work of Masao Maruyama, particularly his *Thought and Behaviour in Modern Japanese Politics* (1969). The trials were marked by the defendants' consistent denial of personal responsibility, often claiming that decisions had been made collectively, reflected the national polity, or were already accepted by the public. Not one of the accused accepted individual responsibility. Nevertheless, scapegoats were needed to satisfy the Allied demand for accountability. Twenty-eight individuals were charged with representing the guilt of an entire nation. Notably, Emperor Hirohito was excluded from prosecution. Among the 28 defendants—primarily military officials—only seven were sentenced to death. Of the remainder, several were paroled or did not serve their full sentences. Remarkably, Shigemitsu Mamoru, a convicted Class A war criminal, was released just two years after his conviction and later reintegrated into government as Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister (Fujioka, 2006).

The case of Shigemitsu Mamoru aptly illustrates the outcome of the Tokyo Trials, where responsibility was scarcely assumed by the accused. If assigning blame among the imperial and military elites proved elusive, the task of purging the wartime bureaucracy was exponentially more difficult. As Karel van Wolferen explains, General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), actively sought to preserve the wartime bureaucratic structure:

> The most momentous decision the occupation authorities made when they set about transforming Japan's political leadership was to leave practically the entire bureaucracy intact.

> The usual explanation for this is that SCAP had no choice but to work through the existing organs of state. But as a specialist on Japanese politics points out, this overstressing of United States dependence ignores the realities of power.5 The vast majority of those involved in occupation policies were not even aware that any significant decision had been made. The Americans in charge simply assumed that bureaucrats everywhere behaved as they did in the USA, that is to say, as apolitical technicians (Van Wolferen, 1989, p.348).

In simpler terms, the wartime system remained largely unchanged after the American occupation. The absence of a clear sense of responsibility allowed bureaucrats, politicians, and other administrators to retain their positions and, in many cases, reintegrate into the system later on. This historical context is crucial for understanding why power diffusion remains a constant feature of Japanese politics and how nationalist sentiments have found fertile ground within the institutional framework of government.

By the 1950s, Japan had entered the political landscape the United States desired, characterized by a competitive party system. Reflecting the American model, political disputes were framed around a bipartisan contest of opposing ideologies. On one side was the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), formed in 1955 from the merger of the Liberal Party and the Japan Democratic Party, and on the other was the Socialist Party. In its early years, the LDP included factions that sought to overturn the American-imposed order and constitution. These groups pushed for a return to the prewar political system, which they believed had successfully made Japan the dominant power in East Asia. The Socialist Party, aligned with the growing Marxist and leftist trends of the time, represented the direct opposite (Curtis, 1999, p.29).

Initially, the Socialist Party attracted more attention than the LDP. Much like in the West, educated elites, student movements, and organized labor embraced the progressive ideals of the political left, especially Marxist thought. This strong leftward shift alarmed both the LDP and the United States, particularly as tensions from the early Cold War intensified. As their influence began to wane, neither the LDP nor the U.S. was willing to sit idly by. This led to an ideological transformation within the LDP. The party moderated its previously conservative, anti-American impulses in favor of a more centrist agenda designed to maintain its hold on power. It no longer sought significant changes to the system but focused instead on preserving the status quo. The LDP evolved into a catch-all party, aiming to win support across all sectors of society. Its primary goal was to industrialize Japan and

elevate the country to the same level as the West, much like its Meiji-era predecessors (Curtis, 1999, p.31).

Simultaneously, the United States, preferring the dominance of nationalist and conservative influences in the Japanese government over its leftist and Marxist counterparts, naturally supported the LDP's intentions. This support was materialized through direct financial assistance to the LDP. It is now widely acknowledged that the LDP received financial backing from the CIA during the 1950s and 1960s (Hayes, 2018, p. 63). By this time, all of the United States' efforts to purge the Japanese government – which had never been particularly impressive – had effectively vanished. The wartime bureaucracy, notable figures, and advocates of nationalist sentiments were now fully integrated into the system, with the United States itself sponsoring their inclusion. Not only did these actors integrate or reintegrate into the political system, but the LDP's strategy proved to be an extended success, practically monopolizing party politics in Japan. Since its victory in the 1955 general election, the LDP has remained in power for almost the entire postwar period. Of the nearly 70 years that have passed since 1955, the LDP has held power for an impressive 65 years.

This political reality inevitably raises questions about the true nature of Japanese democracy. Japan's rapid and astonishing success after WWII has, in some ways, overshadowed any serious questioning of the quality of its democracy. However, were it not for Japan's significant economic and industrial achievements and its close relationship with the United States, it would not be unreasonable to assume that Western powers might not have been as lenient toward a democracy that, historically, has been governed almost entirely by a single party.

As we shall explore in the following chapters, Japan's political system and its democracy are characterized not only by the LDP's overwhelming electoral success but also by a series of elements and features that challenge the democratic standards set by Western nations. Not only is the LDP extraordinarily dominant, but it also appears to lack any substantial competition or real threat to its hegemony. Further analysis reveals that governmental institutions are just the final stage in a lengthy process of legitimization and formalization, where political decisions and even public policy are largely the product of informal political arrangements carried out behind the scenes. These processes have little, if anything, to do with the intricacies and characteristics of a democracy. It is within this very context that our object of study—both as a specific case and as a general phenomenon of unofficial group interference in politics—comes into play.

Understanding Japan's Political System

American patronage of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was only one characteristic of what is commonly referred to as the "1955 System." According to Curtis (1999), the post-war Japanese political system rested on four key pillars. The first, as previously noted, was the revival of the Meiji-era spirit of "catch-up" with the West, reflecting a mimetic orientation toward Western institutions and practices. The second pillar, which is central to this study, involved the emergence of powerful and expansive interest groups that developed reciprocal and deeply embedded ties with political parties and politicians. A third defining feature was the bureaucracy, which operated as a semi-autonomous actor within the political arena. This bureaucracy was not only prestigious but wielded considerable influence in policy-making. Finally, in connection with the LDP, party politics became defined by prolonged one-party dominance.

It is essential to highlight that the pillars identified by Curtis represent one overarching political objective, that is to catch-up with the West, and three primary actors instrumental in achieving it. While these actors have been previously mentioned, a more in-depth analysis is warranted. Let us begin with party politics—a domain that, in the Japanese context, presents an apparent contradiction. Although elections in Japan are widely regarded as clean, fair, and law-abiding, they do not necessarily embody a system in which the electorate effectively holds the government accountable or where political outcomes accurately reflect the popular will (Howe & Oh, 2015, p. 74). This reinforces the argument that Japanese political dynamics cannot be fully understood solely through formal institutional frameworks.

To unravel this contradiction, we must first explore the nature of party politics, which in postwar Japan is virtually synonymous with the LDP. The party's overwhelming electoral success should not be mistaken for unqualified popular support; rather, it stems from a lack of viable alternatives. As discussed, the LDP has only briefly lost power—from 1993 to 1994 and again from 2009 to 2012. Its enduring dominance is partly a function of incumbency: it is inherently difficult to displace a party that has held power for the majority of the postwar period. Moreover, the LDP has excelled in cultivating clientelist networks by leveraging public funds. Pork-barrel politics—the allocation of government spending to benefit specific constituencies—though not unique to Japan, has reached an

unparalleled intensity under LDP rule. This entrenchment of party-voter ties, supported by significant financial and administrative advantages, severely constrains the competitiveness of opposition parties.

This rather weak opposition should not be understood as a genuine political alternative. Japanese political history, particularly the two brief periods when the LDP was not in power, demonstrates that such outcomes were primarily influenced by internal dynamics within the LDP, including its own factional struggles. As Howe and Oh (2015) note in their assessment of Japanese democracy, voters are presented with a range of competing parties in elections. However, these parties do not arise from popular or grassroots movements; instead, they are formed through "top-down" dynamics within existing parties. This lack of differentiation is evident not only in their origins but also in their public policies and political agendas. The opposition parties are notorious for co-opting the LDP's conservative agendas, making only superficial changes that do not represent substantial shifts in the status quo.

To truly understand party politics in Japan, one must focus on the LDP itself, where power is primarily concentrated. The LDP is not a unified, homogeneous entity; rather, it is constructed around the interplay of multiple factions, each vying for control of the party and, consequently, the government. Factions should be understood as the central components of the power struggle within the LDP:

> The LDP divided into factions immediately on its formation in 1955 (...) Factions keep membership lists, which are a matter of public record, although the exact size of any given faction is not completely clear because politicians who are temporarily out of office are included in the membership. Factions hold regularly scheduled meetings, have leadership positions that mirror those of the LDP itself and publish their own newspapers. (...) Factions consist of members of the Diet who commit themselves to the leadership of a senior party figure. To attain such a leadership position requires influential connections with the business community and the bureaucracy and the ability to raise money. (...) An effective leader must also be involved in the personal lives of the members of the faction, looking after their needs. Membership in a faction is necessary not only for support in getting elected but as a channel for political advancement. Factions are also decisive in the process of selecting the party leadership, especially the party president; top party posts are usually shared among factions in proportion to their strength. Factions fill the strong psychological requirement among all Japanese for participation in a group (Hayes, 2018, p.64).

However, it is crucial to note that these factions -*habatsu*- do not represent distinct political ideologies or agendas. Rather, they are political networks aiming to amass as much power as possible. The natural objective of any faction is to obtain the prime ministership. Occupying this position guarantees two other significant sources of power: first, it provides leverage in deciding cabinet members; second, it offers direct access to the bureaucracy, a key element in delivering public policy, most notably through pork-barrel promises (Curtis, 1999, p. 139). Historically, the most powerful factions have controlled the LDP by appointing a senior member of their faction as the LDP's Secretary-General, who has the final say in candidate nominations and the administration of the party's funds (Curtis, 1999, p. 83). Although party factions may appear formal, they are, in fact, informal institutions that have no official existence within the party's internal structure. As such, they highlight the prevalence of informal or diffused power dynamics within the party.

Once a faction has secured a substantial amount of power within the LDP, it shifts focus from internal party politics to engaging with other players in Japan's broader political power struggle. As previously mentioned, politics in Japan may appear formal and clean, but in reality, informality prevails. Despite this, all decisions made in informal contexts must still be processed through formal political institutions and procedures to be materialized and, naturally, legalized. Even with its majority in the Diet, the LDP still needs to negotiate with opposition parties to successfully pass bills and implement public policies.

Negotiations among parties are conducted through informal channels, specifically through a type of political negotiation known as *kokutai seiji* or "kokutai politics." In these negotiations, each party, led by the chairperson of its Diet-strategy committee, works to secure agreements for advancing legislation in the Diet. The goal of these meetings is not to discuss policy or its content but to negotiate political deals that will move certain policies through the Diet. In simple terms, these are meetings aimed at making political deals between the LDP and opposition parties. Given the LDP's hegemonic position, which leaves little room for opposition parties to contribute meaningfully to policy-making, these meetings are typically held in informal settings:

> *Kokutai* negotiations emphasize informality, privacy, implicit understandings, and a willingness to make gestures that enable the other side to save face or to maintain an ostensible posture of opposition while in fact facilitating the passage of legislation. It follows that they are conducted not in the public glare of committee rooms but out of public view, in private rooms

> in expensive restaurants and in the even more exclusive geisha houses in Akasaka and Shimbashi. Singing, drinking, eating, and a demonstration of informal intimacy are all part of the process of creating a mood conducive to compromise between the LDP and the opposition. It is alleged that so, too, are financial payoffs given in the form of year-end presents or monetary gifts to opposition party leaders traveling overseas (Curtis, 1999, p.119).

These arrangements, carried out through informal channels, demonstrate that by the time a bill, policy, or reform attempt reaches the Diet, its success has already been determined. Parties and their parliamentary caucus organizations, known as *kaiha*, maintain these informal arrangements with a high degree of discipline. Surprises are rare in Japanese Diet sessions, as votes are typically decided in advance. As a result, the procedures in the Diet often serve as the final step in a long political negotiation, where decisions are formalized, legalized, and materialized (Curtis, 1999, p. 175).

A Symbiotic Relationship: Politicians and Bureaucracy in Japan

So far, we have briefly described how the LDP and the Japanese Diet function through both formal and informal institutions. However, it is equally important to further explore how these institutions relate to the bureaucracy and, finally, how politicians manage to hold on to power and secure their positions within the Japanese government apparatus. It should come as no surprise that the intricacies relating to the bureaucracy and the politicians' positions are as informal, opaque, and diffused as the dynamics we have discussed so far.

The Japanese bureaucracy, as mentioned earlier, was one of the few institutions left almost entirely intact after WWII and during the American occupation. Not only was it largely preserved, but it also became one of the pillars from which the United States rebuilt the Japanese government. General MacArthur explicitly stated that he intended to maximize the use of existing governmental agencies and organizations.

In the complex landscape of Japanese politics, many have argued that the bureaucracy is truly the most powerful institution in Japan, and in many cases, this seems to be the case. Historically, Japan's bureaucracy has been formed by national elites. During the Meiji period, it was largely composed of the samurai class, which directly motivated and carried out the Meiji Restoration. Today, Japan's bureaucracy is predominantly made up of top students from the country's most prestigious universities, particularly the University of Tokyo. This dynamic has historically dominated the Japanese

government, ensuring that the government is not necessarily ruled by politicians who come and go but by the offices of the administrative bodies. Consequently, the Japanese bureaucracy has become so powerful that, while it may not control the entire legislative and administrative functions of the country, it holds near-absolute dominance.

Since the Meiji period, through the military and imperial eras and into the present, the Japanese bureaucracy has played a central role in monopolizing legislative functions, defining regulatory frameworks, and, above all, executing public policy across the various ministries. This reality is further explained by the fact that when a new politician—often from the LDP—assumes control of a ministry, they do not bring with them a personal legislative or bureaucratic team. Instead, they must rely entirely on the pre-existing bureaucratic structure of the ministry they are nominally appointed to lead. The relationship between ministers and bureaucrats has not always been harmonious, revealing instead the ongoing power struggle between two key institutions. There are well-documented cases in which bureaucrats have openly defied the will of ministers and acted in direct opposition to their directives (Curtis, 1999, pp. 8–9).

Importantly, the Japanese bureaucracy should not be seen as a monolithic entity. Each ministry possesses its own bureaucratic apparatus, and inter-ministerial rivalries are common. Career bureaucrats enter these semi-autonomous structures with the expectation of progressing through a rigidly hierarchical internal system. The enormous power and influence of the bureaucracy in Japanese politics can also be attributed to the considerable political capital it has accrued. Bureaucrats are widely regarded as one of the principal architects—if not the principal architects—of Japan's economic and industrial success throughout the twentieth century. This reputation has rendered attempts to reform or diminish the bureaucracy's power extremely difficult, if not outright impossible.

Despite moments of friction and antagonism, the broader relationship between the LDP and the bureaucracy is best described as symbiotic. Together with the business sector, they form the three structural pillars of Japan's political system—mutually reinforcing institutions that aim to divide resources and benefits among themselves in a relatively stable and equitable manner. As Curtis (1999, p.114) notes, the bureaucracy helps maintain the LDP's political dominance by enabling the fulfillment of campaign promises. The much-discussed pork-barrel politics operate through this channel: politicians pledge public works and development projects to their constituents, but these promises are only realized through bureaucratic approval, funding, and execution.

The LDP, for its part, ensures that it does not disrupt this relationship, nor does it attempt to reform the structure or position of the bureaucracy. Finally, regarding the relationship between the state and the corporate sector, there exists a phenomenon—among others of a similar nature—known as *amakudari*, which literally translates as "descent from heaven". This practice refers to the tradition in which high-ranking career bureaucrats retire from public service to assume senior executive or advisory roles in corporations and private companies belonging to the same industries they once oversaw through ministerial administration.

LDP politicians and bureaucrats interact through a specific institutional channel known as the Policy Affairs Research Council (PARC). Although formally part of the party's internal structure, the PARC functions primarily as the venue for informal negotiations between politicians and bureaucrats, which are later formalized and submitted to the Diet for approval. The PARC is divided into sections that mirror the structure of government ministries, each chaired by a senior LDP politician with expertise in a given policy area—such as agriculture, finance, or health. The Council plays a crucial role in shaping legislation, as no government-sponsored bill supported by the LDP can reach the Diet floor without the PARC's approval.

This gatekeeping role has made the PARC one of the most significant arenas for informal political negotiation in Japan. When a politician becomes the head of one of the PARC's divisions, they gain access to what are known as *zoku*—informal policy tribes or factions within the LDP that specialize in specific policy areas. These politicians develop and maintain strong networks with bureaucrats, industry representatives, and interest groups, effectively becoming the connective tissue linking all three key actors in what is commonly referred to as Japan's "iron triangle" (Howe & Oh, 2015, p. 73).

The strong and enduring alliance between the LDP and the bureaucracy has resulted in a structural disadvantage for opposition parties. On the rare occasions when an opposition party has succeeded in occupying the Prime Minister's office, it has found itself operating within a political environment devoid of the institutional mechanisms necessary to formulate public policy or establish effective channels of communication with the bureaucratic apparatus. Consequently, these governments have been largely impotent in their efforts to enact systemic reforms, lacking both the institutional support and the administrative resources required to carry out such initiatives.

A clear illustration of this structural vulnerability can be found in the only two instances in recent history when the LDP was removed from power—in 1993 and in 2009. In both cases, the incoming governments attempted to curtail the power of the bureaucracy and implement reforms aimed at recalibrating the balance of power between elected officials and administrative elites. These governments clearly recognized the bureaucratic dominance within the Japanese political system and sought to address the imbalance. Unsurprisingly, both efforts ultimately failed. The governments were unable to weaken the entrenched position of the bureaucracy and, more broadly, struggled to implement any meaningful public policy initiatives:

> The lack of an autonomous capacity for developing policies is an even more serious problem for parties that are not in power. Opposition parties do not have access to bureaucratic expertise, nor do they have a research capability of their own. Moreover, there is a relative scarcity of institutions in civil society that play the role that, in the United States and some other countries, think tanks play in the policy process and in providing expertise to parties when they are in opposition. Universities have only recently begun to develop graduate programs of "policy studies," and there are few career paths outside of the government's administrative bureaucracy for people interested in issues of public policy. Consequently there is a relative scarcity of public intellectuals to debate important public policy issues (Curtis, 1999, p.231).

As we have seen thus far, it is hardly surprising that the Japanese political system remains an enigma—particularly from a Western perspective, though this may apply to any external viewpoint. The system is built upon a complex web of formal and informal institutions, each composed of various actors pursuing their own agendas. Despite this fragmentation, the system has shown remarkable cohesion and functionality. It must be emphasized that the analysis provided here offers only a limited glimpse into the broader intricacies of Japan's political architecture and does not claim to capture its full complexity.

What this chapter has aimed to underscore is the diffuse nature of political power in Japan—an arrangement that creates the conditions for organizations such as Nippon Kaigi to effectively influence and penetrate official governmental institutions and political figures. In the following chapters, the focus will shift to a deeper examination of how such groups have managed to gain prominence and

embed themselves within what continues to be one of the most opaque and layered political systems in the world.

The Politics of Lobbying: Politicians and Interest Groups in Japan

We begin this chapter by noting that, when it comes to politicians and elections—particularly within the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)—the party functions less as a unified political organization and more as a franchise model (Curtis, 1999, p. 143). When an LDP candidate runs for office, the party typically provides its endorsement and financial support but delegates the rest of the campaign entirely to the candidate. This structure places the burden of electoral strategy, outreach, and voter mobilization squarely on the shoulders of individual politicians. As a result, LDP candidates are compelled to develop and maintain strong relationships with organizations capable of delivering votes (Curtis, 1989, p.56-57).

The LDP's lack of grassroots structures further deepens this dynamic, creating a scenario in which politicians often become dependent on external groups for electoral survival. These networks of personal political support are known as *koenkai*—local support organizations that serve not only as vote-gathering mechanisms but also as campaign staff, fundraisers, and intermediaries between candidates and the electorate. Pressure groups that have cultivated strong ties with individual politicians often serve as highly effective *koenkai*, leveraging their organizational capacity to mobilize voters, raise funds, and extend the candidate's political reach (van Wolferen, 1969, p. 56).

In this context, the relationship between politicians and pressure groups becomes one of mutual benefit. In exchange for electoral support, campaign assistance, and funding, politicians are expected to advocate for the specific interests of these groups once in office. This *quid pro quo* arrangement shapes legislative behavior, budget allocations, and policy decisions, as elected officials prioritize the demands of their support networks over broader public interest. Consequently, Japanese politicians often find themselves in a position of dependency, beholden not to the general populace but to informal organizations that prioritize narrow agendas. This dependency undermines democratic responsiveness, as political leaders are incentivized to serve particularistic interests rather than the collective needs of society.

The Japanese political system, which openly allows interest groups and non-governmental organizations to exercise significant influence over decision-making and governmental actions, is not the product of coincidence or accidental development. Rather, it is the result of two fundamental

causes that trace back to the very origins of the postwar political order. In other words, the power that interest groups have wielded until the present day stems from deliberate policy choices and enduring historical tendencies. Let us now examine these two causes.

The first is rooted in the American occupation of Japan. As discussed earlier, the occupation forces made only superficial changes to the structure and logic of the Japanese political system and, in fact, actively promoted the creation of interest groups. Believing that such groups would function similarly to their counterparts in the United States, the American authorities encouraged their formation, assuming they would represent a healthy manifestation of civil society's involvement in democratic governance. Interest and pressure groups were thus welcomed as indicators of a vibrant democracy, born from organized efforts by citizens to engage with political institutions (Curtis, 1999, p.45).

The second and arguably more important cause is that, over time, interest groups and unofficial organizations became one of the few available channels through which ordinary citizens could promote their interests within the political system. As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, analyses of Japanese politics often omit any meaningful role for the general public. The actors most consistently involved in the decision-making process have been the bureaucracy, politicians, and corporations—while the voice of the average citizen remains conspicuously absent. This marginalization is no accident; it is the outcome of deliberate institutional arrangements designed to restrict direct popular influence. To further clarify this point, let us briefly recapitulate the decision-making process in Japan through the lens of citizen exclusion.

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) holds an almost absolute hegemony over the Japanese Diet and electoral processes. This dominance has persisted despite some of the lowest voter turnout rates among developed democracies and an increasingly unpopular LDP (Howe & Oh, 2015, p.75). On the rare occasions when an opposition party has succeeded in displacing the LDP—an outcome that has occurred only twice in over seventy years, and for no more than five years in total—it has represented a weak alternative, often composed of splinters from the LDP itself. These opposition governments have shown only modest intentions for change, and any reforms they attempt are quickly overturned. Moreover, they typically lack the capacity to generate public policy, as they do not control or influence the institutions dominated by the LDP and the powerful bureaucracy. The bureaucracy, which is almost entirely responsible for policymaking, is composed of Japan's academic elite—primarily graduates of the University of Tokyo—and has historically maintained its status by fostering mutually beneficial relationships with the LDP and major corporations.

If party politics offer little space for genuine opposition, citizen participation, or meaningful reform; if the bureaucracy is composed of a narrow elite and serves its own interests and those of its political and corporate allies; and if there are no formal institutions through which citizens can express their preferences—then through what means can ordinary people participate in political life? The answer to this question lies in informality. It is primarily through interest groups, lobbying efforts, and pressure organizations that citizens have found ways to channel their interests by exploiting informal negotiations and arrangements.

However, it is crucial to clarify that these pressure groups should not be seen as mere victims of exclusion or powerless actors pushed to the margins. On the contrary, it is precisely through their engagement in informal political channels that the Japanese political system becomes even more opaque and complex. This complexity often leads scholars to overlook or underestimate the true role of pressure groups. While they may acknowledge the influence that pressure groups exert, they are hesitant to consider them as central actors within the so-called "iron triangle" of Japanese politics. These groups—often conflated with corporate lobbies or capitalist interests—are thus dismissed as peripheral, when in reality, their function and influence extend far beyond narrow economic concerns.

Although undeniably influential and powerful, pressure groups in Japan are not confined to pursuing purely financial or economic interests. Many operate within the realm of politics, aiming to influence the cultural, political, and social fabric of the country. These groups seek to reshape Japan according to their own visions of how power should be exercised and under what ideological frameworks. The political pluralism that is absent from the LDP and the Diet is, in many ways, found within these lesser-known organizations. Though they often lack visibility, their capacity to reshape the Japan of today echoes the powerful roles similar groups played during the early twentieth century. This historical continuity is frequently ignored by political scientists examining contemporary Japan, yet it may hold critical insights into the current dynamics of political power in the country.

Chapter 4: The Logic of Non-Democracy: Pressure Groups in Maruyama's Political Thought

Masao Maruyama is arguably the most renowned modern Japanese political scientist. Having lived through Japan's transformation into East Asia's first imperial power, his contributions are regarded as foundational to the field of Japanese political thought. Despite this legacy, his work is often

overlooked in current analyses of Japanese politics. One of the objectives of this study is to revisit the very phenomena Maruyama warned against nearly sixty years ago—dynamics we believe are still crucial for understanding the political landscape of present-day Japan. This exploration will ultimately reconnect with mimetic theory and the foundational—if not essential—role played by the scapegoat mechanism in Japanese political behavior.

In *Thought and Behaviour in Modern Japanese Politics* (1969), Maruyama examines Japan's political culture from the late 19th century through the end of World War II. Focusing on the political and intellectual climate before, during, and after the war, this work is one of the most significant efforts to analyze the historical conditions that led to the rise of the Japanese Empire—an era marked by intense militarism and violence. The book, composed of a series of essays, remains essential reading for anyone seeking to understand this period in Japanese history. For the purposes of this chapter, however, we will focus specifically on Maruyama's observations regarding Japan's political system.

Fortunately for us, Maruyama was explicit in identifying key characteristics of how power was exercised during the imperial era in Japan. Some of these traits have become common reference points in broader analyses of Japanese society beyond politics—such as the predominance of a vertical and hierarchical social structure, the absence of individual autonomy, a deep dependence on authority, and a strong group mentality. Among these now-familiar characteristics, however, Maruyama made several crucial observations that reinforce the arguments we have developed thus far. According to him, power under Imperial Japan operated through three primary mechanisms: a "system of irresponsibility," "the rule of the higher by the lower," and "power-dwarfing."

The system of irresponsibility refers directly to what we have described as the diffusion and fragmentation of authority in Japan's current political system. Just as in the present day, Imperial Japan lacked a single political institution, structure, or actor that could be held accountable for directing the decision-making process. Maruyama identified a landscape in which authority was dispersed across the bureaucracy, the military, the emperor, politicians, and even non-governmental organizations (Maruyama, 1969, p.125). This portrayal of the imperial political system—if we may even call it a "system"—closely mirrors the present configuration of power in Japan. Aside from the obvious absence of the military as a leading actor today, the diffusion of power described by scholars such as Curtis and Van Wolferen aligns remarkably with Maruyama's analysis from over six decades ago. While the specific actors may have shifted, the structural logic remains largely the same.

Power-dwarfing, closely linked to this system of irresponsibility, refers to the tendency of rulers to "edge forward with fear and trembling," acting hesitantly and defensively rather than with confidence and initiative. These actors deliberately avoid accountability by depoliticizing, fragmenting, obscuring, concealing, and minimizing their own authority (Maruyama, 1969, p.113). Within this logic, it is no surprise that the Japanese political system has come to appear so enigmatic—so resistant to clear interpretations. The diffusion of power is therefore not the unfortunate consequence of unconscious or accidental processes, but rather the outcome of deliberate strategies enacted by the system's very architects. It is not that political scientists and scholars have failed to decipher Japan's political system due to a lack of analytical tools, but rather that the system itself is constructed in such a way as to prevent it from being fully understood. Its opacity is not a flaw, but a feature. Hence, our task is not necessarily to "solve" the puzzle of Japanese politics—as the answer may well be that there is no single answer—but instead to ask why the system has been designed to operate this way. In other words, we must shift our focus from the how to the why of Japanese political life.

It is precisely within this logic that we return to the final characteristic of power described by Maruyama and to mimetic theory. Based on the above, it becomes imperative to ask: Why do politicians and other actors within the Japanese political system choose to exercise power in such an anonymous and diffuse manner? For us, the underlying reason for this political behavior is exclusively a defense mechanism, one that has become deeply internalized. The actors within the Japanese political system protect themselves as intellectual authors of the decision-making process in order to shield themselves from potential criticism, but more importantly, from the consequences that these decisions may bring.

Let us examine this reality through the lens of the last characteristic described by Maruyama: "the rule of the higher by the lower." Maruyama described this phenomenon as one in which individuals lower in the social or political hierarchy were able to exert power or pressure over their supposed superiors. This phenomenon was not limited to merely exerting pressure or control from subordinates over their leaders; in some instances, these subordinates would go so far as to completely replace their leaders (Maruyama, p.382). Maruyama notes that this phenomenon has been almost endemic to Japan, highly characteristic of the many armed conflicts that have marked the country since the fourteenth century. It became particularly relevant once again during the Japanese Empire, when low-ranking officers held direct control and power over their superiors (Maruyama, 1969, p.113)

The reasoning behind this phenomenon is, as we have previously expressed, that there were simply no other available channels for lower-status individuals and the lowest classes within the rigid hierarchy to participate in or influence the decision-making process. The situation that Japan was experiencing at the time of the Empire, and continues to experience today, can be summed up briefly as a democracy that severely lacks opportunities for citizen participation. Maruyama also exemplifies how politicians in standard democracies are legitimized in their power and rule because they were elected by the people. However, in countries where politics and elections are practically decided in advance, or in electoral scenarios that lack alternatives, politicians and candidates can easily become fearful or overrun by their subordinates. Without specific channels for citizens to voice their desires and frustrations, they must consequently "make room" through informal mechanisms and institutions. For Maruyama, this represented a direct threat to societal and cultural orders, as these informal channels could easily be influenced or even consumed by reactionary organizations and outlaws:

> ...frustrations of those on the lowest rung of the hierarchy have no place to which they can be transferred, and so they are inevitably directed outwards. People in an undemocratic society are consequently liable to become the slaves of fanatic xenophobia, the frustrations of their daily lives being effectively sublimated into jingoism. The rulers of such countries are only too ready to encourage these tendencies in order to counter the backwash of dissatisfaction from below; yet in time of crisis they are them-selves mastered by this irresponsible type of 'public opinion' and end by losing their autonomy of decision (Maruyama, 1969, p.114).

This last remark by Maruyama is also crucial for understanding the lack of attention or recognition that this phenomenon generates. In times of prosperity and peace, these informal structures remain largely invisible, silenced by a general atmosphere of affluence. However, when a crisis occurs or is imminent, the visibility and power of these structures and channels can consume the system entirely, as they did during the Japanese Empire. Politicians and other leaders, well aware of this dynamic that now subordinates them to the interests of others, are quick to display docility, surrendering the power they theoretically should exercise.

Looking at the system of irresponsibility, power-dwarfing, and the rule of the higher by the lower through the lens of mimetic theory proves useful when we highlight a parallel between these characteristics and the scapegoat mechanism. This parallel is evident through two components: the transfer of oppression and, secondly, the sacrifice itself—or more precisely, the fear of sacrifice.

The transfer of oppression is a concept that Maruyama himself explores, and surprisingly, it aligns almost exactly with mimetic theory. This phenomenon refers to the impossibility for the lower strata of society to successfully channel or transfer their frustration. As a result, they are left with no choice but to direct it outward (Maruyama, 1969, p.114). Just as mimetic theory posits, Maruyama recognizes that violence and frustration are natural components of human activity and, therefore, must be channeled or transferred to another entity; they cannot simply disappear. This logic is the very premise of mimetic theory: the transfer of oppression underscores the prevalence of the scapegoat mechanism in society. Political systems that lack channels for expression are, consequently, vulnerable to the proliferation of outward or informal mechanisms through which frustration and violence can be redirected.

On the other hand, if leaders and politicians refuse to take responsibility for the exercise of power, this can only be understood if doing so represents a detriment, a threat. When political actors openly deflect responsibility, avoid leadership, and obscure authorship of decisions, it is not due to a dysfunction of the system; it is a protection mechanism against being singled out—that is, against becoming the sacrificial victim. This is no coincidence: kings, leaders, and rulers are, according to mimetic theory, natural potential entities for sacrifice. Kings, unlike ordinary citizens, are sacred figures. This sacred status, however, is ambivalent. Kingships function in the same way as the scapegoat mechanism described in earlier chapters: they represent the community's need to both adore and eventually destroy the subjects that embody natural mimetic tensions. Being king is, therefore, not the safest or most advantageous position to hold—it is, in fact, the most dangerous. Kings are the perfect victims-in-waiting. When a crisis strikes and a community is unable to channel the generated violence, it naturally tends to look upward, finding blame in the individual who, in theory, is responsible for their well-being (Girard, 1977, p.115). The best mechanism to protect against this potential threat is, therefore, a complete system of irresponsibility that ensures no politician, leader, or bureaucrat can be targeted: “When no one is to blame, everyone is to blame”.

With this last remark, this chapter has come to an end. We hope that by this point, it has become clear how Japanese politics thrive on a system of diffusion and irresponsibility that has allowed informal actors and non-governmental organizations direct entry and protagonism within Japan’s political system. The nature of this system, likewise, is not the result of unpredictable causes—it is a conscious and deliberate decision that serves the direct purpose of protecting political actors from becoming the next victims of the scapegoat mechanism. In the following and final part of this research, we will focus

on one of these informal actors that has managed to exploit this rather obscure aspect of the Japanese political system and stands today as the most powerful right-wing and nationalist organization deeply embedded in Japan's political elite: Nippon Kaigi.

Chapter 5: Religious Nationalism and the Birth of Nippon Kaigi

Nippon Kaigi, which can roughly be translated as the "Japan Conference," is the largest and most powerful right-wing nationalist organization in Japan. According to their own figures, they have more than 38,000 members and around 150 affiliated organizations (Shibuichi, 2017). Nippon Kaigi gained prominence and accumulated significant attention during the administration of Shinzo Abe, especially during his second term, when nearly 75% of his ministers were affiliated with the organization. This included notable figures like Shinzo Abe himself and Tarō Asō, who has served formally as Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, and President of the Liberal Democratic Party (Weiss, 2018, p.20).

Nippon Kaigi has its origins in 1997, which, as we will later see, coincides with the so-called "lost decade" of Japanese history. That year, two former organizations—the *Nihon o Mamoru Kai* (The Association to Protect Japan) and *Nihon wo Mamoru Kokumin Kaigi* (National Conference to Protect Japan)—merged to form Nippon Kaigi. Their objective was clear: they sought to unite and federate nationalist organizations under a single banner. Nihon wo Mamoru Kai, formed in 1974, already functioned as an umbrella organization for conservative and right-wing religious groups, most notably *Seichō no Ie*, one of the few religious organizations that was not persecuted before or during the war due to its support for the imperial house and the military government. On the other hand, Nihon wo Mamoru Kokumin Kaigi was composed of business, political, academic, and religious elites with conservative and right-wing views (Tawara & Yamaguchi, 2017).

As can be observed, understanding Nippon Kaigi without acknowledging its religious influence is impossible. Not only is Nippon Kaigi heavily influenced by its religious origins and administrative body, but nationalism in Japan—especially within right-wing organizations—tends to rely on its direct ties to Shinto, and most notably, State Shinto. Therefore, reflecting on nationalism in Japan naturally involves a discussion surrounding the place that religions and religious thinking have within this construction.

Apart from Seichō no Ie, which played a pivotal role in the formation of Nippon Kaigi, it is religious organizations that, to this day, represent the backbone of the organization. These religious groups are responsible for the theoretical and administrative duties of Nippon Kaigi, as well as being the primary entities responsible for mobilization and financing. The most notable religious groups with strong, if not fundamental, ties to Nippon Kaigi are *Jinja Honchō*, and the Meiji, Ise, Atsuta, and Yasukuni Shrines (Guthmann, 2024).

Jinja Honchō is especially relevant. This organization was formed as a result of the "Directive on Shinto," an order from the American forces during the occupation that prohibited the Japanese government from establishing connections with Shinto shrines and organizations of the time. Foreseeing this potential prohibition, the directors of these Shintoist organizations opted to create a private law structure, free of any public connections, in order to continue operating as they had before and managing all the shrines in the country. The power of this organization is exemplified by the fact that, out of the 85,000 shrines that exist in Japan, nearly 79,000 are affiliated with Jinja Honchō (Guthmann, 2024, p.24).

Today, the main leaders and directors of Nippon Kaigi are to be found within this organization:

> an executive of Jinja Honchō is one of the three councillors of the nationalist lobby. The president of this religious organisation, Tanaka Tsunekiyo, is one of the two vice presidents of Nippon Kaigi. Among the administrators we find also the president of Shintō Seiji Renmei, which is the political arm of Jinja Honchō. If we add here the head of the Tokyo branch of the Shinto organisation, it clearly appears that Jinja Honchō is omnipresent in the ruling structures of the nationalist lobby (Guthmann, 2024, p.132).

The Meiji Shrine, to mention another example, is another key player that, although not affiliated with Jinja Honchō, remains a key component of Nippon Kaigi. This can be observed by the position of the principal priest of the Meiji Shrine, who simultaneously serves as a board member of Nippon Kaigi. This shrine is also institutionally connected to other organizations dedicated to promoting the Imperial House and fostering an imperial education based on the values of Emperor Meiji (Guthmann, 2024, p.136).

The Yasukuni Shrine operates in a similar manner, with the principal priest of this shrine acting as one of the administrators of Nippon Kaigi. The Yasukuni Shrine is also highly relevant in the Japanese

right-wing nationalistic context as it commemorates Japan's war dead, ranging from the Meiji Restoration through World War II. Not only does it commemorate these individuals, but it also enshrines war criminals from the Pacific War, including 14 Class-A war criminals from the Tokyo Trials. Shinzo Abe was notoriously condemned by China, South Korea, and the United States for visiting the shrine in 2013, as it is seen as an act of historical revisionism or a glorification of these criminals (BBC News, 2020). Nippon Kaigi and other right-wing organizations naturally support official visits from politicians to the shrine in their attempt to revise the historical narrative that denies Japan's crimes and glorifies war "heroes."

As we mentioned, these religious organizations—among others—form the fundamental structure and backbone of Nippon Kaigi. However, it is imperative to highlight that all attempts to clearly define the concrete administrative and political structure of Nippon Kaigi are, at best, just that—attempts to understand an organization that, unsurprisingly, fosters a culture of secrecy. Just like the general tendency in Japanese politics, Nippon Kaigi is notorious for not openly expressing who exactly controls and runs the organization. Power in non-governmental organizations, much like in their official counterparts, also mirrors the diffusion and obscuring of power.

Nippon Kaigi: Objectives and Ideological Pursuits

Having described the origins and structure of Nippon Kaigi, let us now move on to its objectives. We believe that by analyzing its objectives, the description of Nippon Kaigi's ideology will naturally come into light. Surprisingly, describing this organization's goals and objectives is perhaps the easiest and most readily available piece of information, in contrast to the general culture of secrecy. On Nippon Kaigi's website, especially in their homage section, one can openly read their objectives with a clear description—albeit in Japanese—which are as follows:

1. Moving the Japan of tomorrow towards its beautiful traditional character.
2. A new Constitution suitable for a new era.
3. Politics that protect the honor of the state and the lives of its citizens.
4. Building an education that nourishes "Japanese feeling".
5. Increasing the nation's safety and contributing to world peace.
6. Building friendship with the world through a spirit of coexistence and mutual prosperity (Nippon Kaigi, n.d.).

At first glance, these objectives may not appear harmful, as they employ terms such as "beautiful tradition," "honor," "world peace," "friendship," and "co-prosperity," which could easily be misconstrued as indicative of a peaceful and conciliatory organization. However, a closer examination of the details provided by the organization itself quickly reveals a contrasting agenda, one that diverges from these superficial values and instead advocates for a revisionist vision of history and the restoration of the imperial cult.

The first objective, which emphasizes aligning Japan with its traditional culture, must not be conflated with general Japanese culture. Nippon Kaigi is explicit in identifying the reverence for the Imperial family as the central and foundational element of Japanese history and culture—in simpler terms, the Imperial cult. According to Nippon Kaigi, "the emperor, and more broadly the imperial family, would seem to constitute the conditions *sine qua non* of the existence of the Japanese nation" (Guthmann, 2024, p.48). This insistence on placing the Emperor and the Imperial family at the center of national identity reflects a clear intent to revive State Shinto. The organization is also outspoken about the continuity of the imperial line, which it asserts has remained unbroken for 126 generations, a unique distinction globally.

The need to return to a national ideology centered around the Emperor, according to Nippon Kaigi, stems from their belief that these traditions—seen as instrumental in shaping Japan's cultural richness and national success—are being neglected by younger generations, particularly following the conclusion of World War II. Furthermore, they express concern regarding the encroachment of international values, which, while not explicitly named, likely refer to policies divergent from conservative frameworks, such as feminism. In this regard, Nippon Kaigi argues that these foreign values should be subordinated to Japan's "unshakable" and "proud" traditions.

The second objective, which is perhaps more tangible than restoring a national tradition, is the reform of the constitution. This objective has become standard within right-wing organizations, of which Nippon Kaigi is no exception. The typical narrative refers to the Constitution of 1947 as the source of everything that is wrong in Japan today, viewing it as a purely foreign imposition—something that, to be fair, is true—imposed by the American occupation. Nationalist circles in Japan thus exploit a discourse in which this imposed institution does not reflect the values, traditions, and culture of Japan. The goal, therefore, is to restore the old Meiji constitution or write a new one aligned with Japan’s true identity. Among the general disapproval of the 1947 constitution, certain articles are frequently reiterated, such as the famous Article 9, which concerns Japanese war forces and is typically at the

forefront of constitutional reform attempts. Nationalist organizations see this article as a symbol of the loss of Japan's independence in securing its defense from other countries. They also emphasize how the constitution generally presents an "imbalance of rights and obligations, the neglect of the family system, and the excessive interpretation of the separation of state and religion" (Nippon Kaigi, n.d.). We will see more details of Nippon Kaigi's constitutional reform plan in the following chapters.

Nippon Kaigi's third objective, "politics that protect the honor of the state and the lives of its citizens," is essentially a poetic synonym for historical revisionism. The organization heavily criticizes Japan's official apologetic stance toward actions committed during World War II. They regard this attitude as disregarding and dishonoring Japan's history and the war dead who bravely fought for the country. The "actions" that Nippon Kaigi seeks to revise—or more precisely, deny—are very specific and are best defined as authentic war crimes and crimes against humanity. These crimes are concentrated around Japan's actions during the first half of the 20th century, nearly the entire span of the Japanese Empire. During this period, the Imperial Army was responsible for the Nanjing Massacre, during which about 200,000 individuals—many of whom were civilians—were massacred. Simultaneously, the Japanese Imperial army organized a system of forced prostitution, notably involving Korean women, which Nippon Kaigi openly denies, highlighting the lack of apparent proof for such an event (Guthmann, 2024, pp.59-60).

The last two events that Nippon Kaigi is also emphatic about revising are the forced suicides during the Battle of Okinawa and a general condemnation of the Tokyo Trials. The forced suicides refer to the suicides committed by the civilian population of Okinawa when American troops landed on the islands as part of the Pacific War. The Japanese Empire has been held responsible for coercing and forcing suicides among the civilian population. Nippon Kaigi insists that this mass suicide order never happened and was simply fabricated by the Allied forces (Guthmann, 2024, pp.60-61).

The condemnation of the Tokyo War Trials, which constitutes a topic of its own since it is not only condemned by nationalist forces, stems from the overall understanding that the trials were entirely "victors' justice" and based on a series of illegal judicial premises. This point of view was famously shared by one of the judges at the trial, Indian Judge Pal, who throughout the trials argued the illegality of the proceedings. Judge Pal is, naturally, admired by nationalist and right-wing organizations to the extent that a statue of him can now be found at the Yasukuni Shrine.

The fourth objective, focusing on a reform of the education system to nourish a "Japanese feeling," is, in reality, an attempt to remove the liberal elements of the system and the vision of history that portrays the Japanese Empire as guilty. Nippon Kaigi frames this objective as a necessary shift to instill a sense of pride and honor in Japanese identity, aligning education with the values they emphasize, such as reverence for the Imperial family and the restoration of traditional Japanese culture. Through this reform, the organization seeks to replace what they see as a flawed historical narrative with one that glorifies Japan's imperial past and downplays or outright denies the war crimes committed during the Japanese Empire's expansionist period:

> In particular, an excessive emphasis on rights, self-deprecating history education that condemns our country's history in a negative way, and the rampant spread of gender-free education are numbing the fresh sensibilities of the children who will carry the next generation and robbing them of their pride and sense of responsibility in their country (Nippon Kaigi, n.d.).

As we will later see, it is in this intention to reform the education system where Nippon Kaigi has proven to be quite successful in comparison to its other objectives. Instead of fostering the "self-deprecating" view of national history and eliminating anything that sounds remotely liberal, they propose an education system built around generating a love for Japan and a strong spirit of public service. This love for Japan, as emphasized in the first objective, is to be rooted in reverence for the Imperial family and the Emperor.

Nippon Kaigi's focus on "safety and contributing to world peace," as represented in its fifth objective, is directly related to the revision of the constitution, particularly Article 9, as previously mentioned. One of the major objectives of nationalist and right-wing organizations, extending beyond Nippon Kaigi, has notably been the creation of a self-defense force. With the end of World War II, Japan was forced to forfeit its right to have an army, and its security became the responsibility of the Allied forces, particularly the United States. Japanese forces were thus transformed into strictly self-defense forces, limited to internal affairs and occasional participation in UN peacekeeping operations. This agreement has remained in place to this day, but nationalist organizations see it as profoundly problematic and as undermining the country's independence. Nippon Kaigi shares a rather pessimistic or apocalyptic vision of the future, highlighting the direct threats posed by China and North Korea, and the inability to properly defend themselves due to the lack of autonomy in military and defense matters.

Finally, the last objective, which focuses on building friendship and mutual prosperity with the world, is perhaps the most ambiguous. The wording of the objective certainly seems positive, but the description of such an objective begins once again with an apocalyptic tone, stressing how ethnic, regional, and religious conflicts have flourished ever since the end of the Cold War. It then expresses Japan's desire and willingness to participate in creating a new world of co-prosperity. Without being explicit, this could potentially open the door for Japan's armed forces to reassert themselves. One should not forget that Imperial Japan's official justification for conquering much of Pacific Asia and invading China was to liberate these regions from Western imperialism and to create the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere."

As we have seen, these objectives have a significant degree of nationalist, conservative, and imperial influence, if not a complete dependence. The phrasing used to express their desires effectively hides a very nationalistic and right-wing revision of history, as well as a strong intention to restore the figure of the Emperor and, consequently, return to an order centered around the political ideology of State Shinto.

Nippon Kaigi as a Political Engine

Let us now continue to explore how Nippon Kaigi actually functions and situates itself as an actor in Japanese politics. In Thierry Guthmann's investigation of Nippon Kaigi (2024), he identifies the main channels and approaches through which Nippon Kaigi is able to fulfill its goals or at least interfere within the Japanese government. As we shall see, this very precisely matches the strategies typically carried out by pressure and informal groups, as described in the last chapter concerning the Japanese political system. The principal strategy employed by Nippon Kaigi is, needless to say, lobbying.

Lobbying by Nippon Kaigi is done primarily through the use of petitions. The strategy is the following: Nippon Kaigi will decide on a reform or proposal they wish to materialize through the government, then they go out to the streets in signature campaigns, hoping to get the maximum number of participants. Once a large quantity of signatures is obtained, thereby gaining a certain amount of force and popular support, the organization will reach out to parliamentarians and request to deliver their petitions to the Diet.

One might ask why politicians and parliamentarians are so open to receiving petitions and requests from Nippon Kaigi. As we described in our analysis of the Japanese political system, one of the

primary reasons for this phenomenon is the electoral benefits that organizations like Nippon Kaigi represent. Guthmann likewise describes the Japanese electoral system, which benefits these kinds of symbiotic bonds among pressure groups and electoral candidates:

> In fact, regional assemblies are elected from multi- member districts of enormous size, with a single ballot. This electoral peculiarity, as well as weak electoral participation, leads to fierce struggles between the candidates to obtain a few hundred votes that can make the difference. This is a context in which different civil society organisations, such as Nippon Kaigi, are in a position to convert their support into advantage (Guthmann, 2024, p.35).

This direct channel to politicians is also exemplified by two main sources: Nippon Kaigi's regular meetings with politicians and their very own parliamentary association within the Diet, officially known as the "Japan Conference Diet Members Roundtable." This association naturally serves as the primary conduit through which Nippon Kaigi's goals are transmitted and introduced into the legislative process. As can be expected, there is no official list of members of this association, but approximations indicate around 289 members from both houses of the Diet, consisting mostly of members from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). This same structure is replicated at the prefectural and municipal levels, with nearly 1,000 local-level legislators (Shibuichi, 2017, p. 183).

In terms of direct meetings with politicians, it is no coincidence that Nippon Kaigi has its permanent offices situated very close to the Diet. There is a recorded history of politicians openly receiving representatives from Nippon Kaigi, including Shinzo Abe, perhaps the most important Japanese political figure of the century and the longest-serving Prime Minister. Lastly, another strategy employed by the organization, which supports the political ideal of power diffusion, is the creation of subordinate militant organizations. Guthmann highlights how the existence of different organizations that share the exact same objectives and structures as Nippon Kaigi is no coincidence; there are at least three separate organizations that are informally run by Nippon Kaigi. This strategy not only serves the purpose of diffusing power, but it also helps artificially enlarge the popular demand for certain petitions by channeling it through different sources (Guthmann, 2024, p. 33).

Nippon Kaigi has thus embedded itself deeply within the Japanese political system, operating effectively as a pressure group through acts of lobbying, electoral alliances, parliamentary associations, and the mobilization of subordinate groups. Its influence extends to both national and local politics. In the following chapter, we will further explore Nippon Kaigi's actions by examining its tangible

influence on public policy and through an analysis of political elites that have established close ties with the organization.

Chapter 6: Nippon Kaigi's Influence on Political Elites and Public Policy

Based on the objectives outlined in the previous chapter, Nippon Kaigi, since its formation in 1997, has worked intensively to influence politics and ensure that its objectives and goals are materialized through legislation, reforms, and public policies. It would be incorrect to claim that they have achieved exceptional success in their legislative endeavors. Nevertheless, Nippon Kaigi's influence—or at least policy attempts reflecting their ideology—has gradually been incorporated into the Japanese government's policies and reforms, which we will examine in the following pages. However, before delving into such an analysis, it is important to note that when a policy or legislative attempt aligning with Nippon Kaigi's agenda is successful, it would be erroneous to assert that it was the exclusive work of Nippon Kaigi. Given the informal nature of Nippon Kaigi, there is no official statement in which the government explicitly attributes any specific policy to the influence of a particular organization, politician, or party.

Nippon Kaigi's Hand in Policy-Making

Based on the objectives outlined in the previous chapter, Nippon Kaigi, since its formation in 1997, has worked intensively to influence politics and ensure that its objectives and goals are materialized through legislation, reforms, and public policies. It would be incorrect to claim that they have achieved exceptional success in their legislative endeavors. Nevertheless, Nippon Kaigi's influence—or at least policy attempts reflecting their ideology—has gradually been incorporated into the Japanese government's policies and reforms, which we will examine in the following pages. However, before delving into such an analysis, it is important to note that when a policy or legislative attempt aligning with Nippon Kaigi's agenda is successful, it would be erroneous to assert that it was the exclusive work of Nippon Kaigi. Given the informal nature of Nippon Kaigi, there is no official statement in which the government explicitly attributes any specific policy to the influence of a particular organization, politician, or party.

With this intention in mind, during Abe's first administration, his government successfully pushed through a revision of the Fundamental Law of Education, marking the first modification since the law

was established in 1947. This revision introduced significant reforms that altered the education system to emphasize patriotism and traditional values. Let us now examine some examples:

- 1947 Law: “Education shall aim at the full development of human beings, and their enrichment, in accordance with the democratic principles."
- 2006 Revision: "Education should aim at fostering patriotism and love of the country, while developing respect for the traditions and culture of Japan." (Lebowitz & McNeill, 2007).

As we can observe, the previous liberal model based on individual freedom and democracy was completely altered to now focus on patriotism and pride in Japanese culture. Another example is the following:

- 1947 Law: "Education shall promote the harmonious development of the individual, respect for human rights, and peaceful coexistence among nations."
- 2006 Revision: "Education should aim at cultivating a sense of belonging and pride in the country, fostering a national identity that respects the historical and cultural achievements of Japan." (Lebowitz & McNeill, 2007).

Some sources even indicate that the drafting of this new law was directly produced by the “Association to Demand a New Fundamental Law on Education,” which was directed by a member of Nippon Kaigi (Weiss, 2008). Abe's intentions to reform the education system did not end with this revision; he also implemented "moral education" as a mandatory and official subject in both elementary and junior high schools, in which, among other criteria, students are evaluated based on their "degree of patriotism” (Tawara & Yamaguchi, 2017).

Lastly, in 2014, Abe’s government focused on the textbooks used in schools. All textbooks must undergo screening by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) to ensure they align with national guidelines. However, in 2014, the Abe government became significantly involved in this process, successfully influencing and imposing its own agenda. The government encouraged textbooks to emphasize patriotic values, reject the victimhood narrative, and as expected, revise or reduce mentions of controversial historical events such as forced prostitution during WWII and the Nanjing Massacre (Tawara, 2015).

In terms of Nippon Kaigi’s aspirations regarding the constitution, explicitly mentioned in their second objective, it must first be noted that this goal is, in fact, the most crucial to the organization. All of the

other goals and objectives outlined by Nippon Kaigi are highly dependent on the successful reform—or more precisely, the complete rewriting—of the constitution. Throughout its history, Nippon Kaigi has openly expressed its desire to draft a new constitution and has campaigned to gather signatures for a petition calling for amendments to the 1947 constitution (Shibuichi, 2017, p.189). However, it is important to note that this objective has proven to be the most challenging to date, with no successful attempts. Consequently, it is not surprising that the Japanese constitution has undergone no changes since its enactment in 1947.

However, despite the absolute lack of success in reforming the constitution, numerous attempts have been made by various organizations and political parties. Among these, the most notable in the context of our research is the constitutional draft presented by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in 2012, a draft overseen by Shinzo Abe, who was then the president of the party. From the very preamble, the draft represents a substantial departure from the 1947 constitution, which emphasized postwar internationalism, shifting instead to focus on nationalism and cultural essentialism (Liberal Democratic Party, 2012).

The draft introduces several changes, but the most significant are concentrated in five key areas. First, the role of the Emperor is modified. In the current constitution, the Emperor is described as a symbol of the state, whereas the draft redefines him as the "head of state." This seemingly small change is crucial, as it re-establishes the Emperor's formal political role, positioning him once again at the very center of the nation. Additionally, the draft includes obligations to honor the national flag and anthem, respect traditional values, uphold family roles, and fulfill the duty to defend the country. These modifications clearly reflect a nationalistic and State Shinto ideology.

Regarding Article 9, often regarded as the most significant in Japanese nationalist agendas, the draft naturally proposes modifications. The LDP draft renames the Self-Defense Forces as the "National Defense Force" and removes Japan's constitutional prohibition against maintaining land and sea forces, which would pave the way for the creation of a full military. The draft also expands the role of this force, not only for self-defense but also for national security, maintaining public order, and responding to emergencies both domestically and internationally. It further grants emergency powers to the Prime Minister, allowing for the suspension of laws and the issuance of emergency decrees. The draft emphasizes that rights will be protected "to the extent that they do not interfere with the public interest, public order, or public morality." Finally, the draft simplifies the process for constitutional reform by reducing the requirement for a two-thirds vote to a simple majority. The 2012 constitutional

draft presented by the LDP, therefore, aligns closely with many—if not all—of Nippon Kaigi's objectives, making it difficult to dismiss the possibility that Nippon Kaigi influenced or even participated in the drafting process.

Besides the successful educational reforms and the attempts to revise the constitution, Nippon Kaigi has also achieved several other "wins" in public policy that reflect its ideology, providing room for speculation regarding its influence on such policies. A clear example is Shinzo Abe's reinterpretation of Article 9. Article 9 explicitly states that Japan renounces war and prohibits maintaining armed forces, limiting the country's use of force strictly to individual self-defense. However, Abe's government reinterpreted the article to allow Japan to engage in collective self-defense, meaning that Japan is now capable of using its military force to defend an ally—even if Japan itself is not attacked—and can thus participate in international military operations (Sieg, 2019).

Another example is the defense budget increase and military expansion in 2022, in which the Japanese government, under Prime Minister Kishida, significantly raised military and defense spending, aiming to double the budget to 2% of GDP by 2027. This would place Japan as the third-highest spender on military expenditures, just behind the United States and China (Reuters, 2025; Yamaguchi, 2024). Finally, to conclude this section on public policy, Shinzo Abe successfully formulated the state secrecy law, known as the "Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets," in 2014. This law expanded the government's ability to classify information related to national security and penalized journalists who inquire about or obtain such information with up to five years in prison (Howe & Oh, 2015, p.79).

Networks of Power: Nippon Kaigi and the Political Class

Having discussed the influence and links of Nippon Kaigi to certain policies and reform attempts, we now turn to a statistical analysis of its influence within the Japanese political elite. In this case, we will examine the cabinets and their respective ministers, starting from Shinzo Abe's second cabinet to the present day. Before proceeding, it is important to clarify that, given the nature of the unofficial groups involved, which largely fall under the phenomenon of political lobbying, claiming direct affiliation between ministers and Nippon Kaigi would be insufficiently substantiated. There is no official registry explicitly linking politicians to Nippon Kaigi. Therefore, we will limit our analysis to politicians who have, in one way or another, been associated with the organization.

For the purposes of this study, we define "association" as any instance in which a politician or minister has directly collaborated with Nippon Kaigi. This includes attending conferences or events as a speaker or guest, participating in forums, being present at commemorations, or engaging in any other joint activities. To begin, let us examine the percentages of association among cabinet members since 2012. To obtain these numbers, we have analyzed each cabinet and minister individually to determine if, at any given moment, they were associated with Nippon Kaigi.[2]

Cabinet	Term	Percentage of Ministers Linked to Nippon Kaigi
Second Abe Cabinet	26/12/2012-03/09/2014	58%
Second Abe Cabinet (1st Reshuffle)	03/09/2014-24/12/2014	71%
Third Abe Cabinet	24/12/2014-07/10/2015	71%
Third Abe Cabinet (1st Reshuffle)	07/10/2015-03/08/2016	48%
Third Abe Cabinet (2nd Reshuffle)	03/08/2016-03/08/2017	38%
Third Abe Cabinet (3rd Reshuffle)	03/08/2017-01/11/2017	40%
Fourth Abe Cabinet	01/11/2017-02/10/2018	38%
Fourth Abe Cabinet (1st Reshuffle)	02/10/2018-11/09/2019	24%
Fourth Abe Cabinet (2nd Reshuffle)	11/09/2019-16/09/20	64%
Suga Cabinet	16/09/2020-04/10/2021	61%
First Kishida Cabinet	04/10/2021-10/11/2021	33%
Second Kishida Cabinet	10/11/2021-10/08/2022	29%
Second Kishida Cabinet (First Reshuffle)	10/08/2022-13/09/2023	29%
Second Kishida Cabinet (Second Reshuffle)	13/09/2023-01/10/2024	38%
First Ishiba Cabinet	01/10/2024-11/11/2024	60%
Second Ishiba Cabinet	11/11/2024-Present	55%

Figure 2: Percentage of Ministers Linked to Nippon Kaigi by Cabinet (2012–2025)

[2] Full list of cabinet members with affiliations to Nippon Kaigi is available in the appendix.

As observed, the percentage of ministers linked to Nippon Kaigi has never fallen below 29%, reaching a peak of 71% during Shinzo Abe's second cabinet. Based on this analysis, the overall average association between 2012 and 2025 stands at approximately 47%. This indicates a strong and consistent presence of Nippon Kaigi within Japan's governmental and political elite. Such sustained influence positions Nippon Kaigi as the most powerful and prominent organization among Japan's right-wing, nationalist, and conservative groups.

However, it is also crucial to further analyze these figures, as each cabinet is composed of ministries that vary in their level of political influence. Naturally, the Prime Minister holds the top position, as the head of government and the most influential political figure in shaping government policy. The second most important role is that of the Deputy Prime Minister, a non-permanent position appointed at the discretion of the Prime Minister. From 2012 to 2021, this role was consistently held by Tarō Asō, though it has remained vacant since 2021 under the leadership of Kishida and Ishiba.

The third most influential position is the Chief Cabinet Secretary, who oversees the Cabinet Secretariat of Japan. This role is responsible for coordinating public policies and managing the actions of various ministerial offices and agencies. Finally, and of particular relevance to this study, we must highlight the office of the Minister of Defense. This ministry is directly linked to one of Nippon Kaigi's primary objectives, as discussed in the previous chapter: the revision of the constitution and the restructuring of the armed forces. The Minister of Defense is responsible for the management of the Japanese Armed Forces, holding the second-highest command over them, subordinate only to the Prime Minister.

Position	Percentage Linked to Nippon Kaigi
Prime Minister	100%
Deputy Prime Minister	100%
Chief Cabinet Secretary	87%

Minister of Defense	75%

Figure 3: Percentage of Ministers by Position Linked to Nippon Kaigi (2012–2025)

This identification of four key positions reveals a clear, and in some cases absolute, trend. Every single one of the four prime ministers who held office between 2012 and 2025 has been associated with Nippon Kaigi. Similarly, the office of the Deputy Prime Minister—held exclusively during this period by Tarō Asō—has also been directly linked to the organization. As a result, the two most powerful political offices in Japan have consistently been occupied by individuals associated with Nippon Kaigi since 2012.

The position of Chief Cabinet Secretary, which was held by Yoshihide Suga—another Nippon Kaigi affiliate—from 2012 to 2020, has since been occupied by politicians with similar affiliations in every cabinet, with the exception of the current administration under Shigeru Ishiba. As for the Ministry of Defense, it has been held by individuals with ties to Nippon Kaigi in 75% of the cabinets, with Gen Nakatani standing out as a particularly notable figure. A former officer of the Self-Defense Forces and a staunch advocate for constitutional revision, Nakatani has repeatedly attempted to submit drafts for constitutional amendments and currently serves as the Secretary-General of the LDP's Constitutional Revision Promotion Headquarters (Japan Digital Research Center, n.d.).

Moreover, in 7 out of the 16 cabinets during this period, Nippon Kaigi has simultaneously occupied the offices of Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Chief Cabinet Secretary, and Minister of Defense. Given these figures, it is impossible to overstate the extent of Nippon Kaigi's influence within the government. Rather, the question that arises is how such an organization has accumulated sufficient political capital to secure 100% affiliation in the highest offices of the state—the Prime Minister's office—while maintaining near-majority presence in other key ministries.

When examining the overall trend across the multiple cabinets held by each individual Prime Minister since 2012 (as illustrated in the following figure), it is notable that, on average, at least 50% of the members in these cabinets have been associated with Nippon Kaigi. The only exception to this trend is found in the cabinets under Fumio Kishida, which can likely be explained by the aftermath of Shinzo Abe's assassination in July 2022. Following intense public scrutiny over the connections between the Unification Church and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Kishida was compelled to "purge" his cabinet on two occasions, removing ministers who had associations with the controversial

organization. Not surprisingly, many of these individuals were also linked to Nippon Kaigi (Associated Press, 2022; Yamaguchi, 2022).

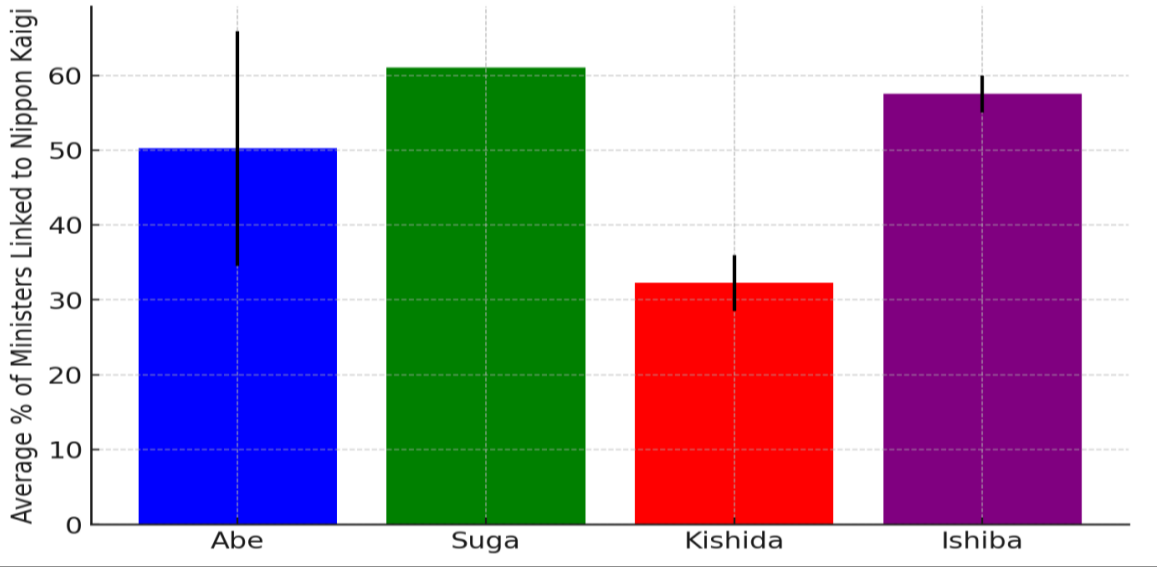

Figure 4: Percentage of Ministers Linked to Nippon Kaigi by Cabinet (2012–2025)

In conclusion, while it is challenging to establish a direct and official connection between Nippon Kaigi and specific government policies, the consistent alignment between the organization's political agendas and objectives strongly suggests a significant influence on Japanese politics that cannot be dismissed as mere coincidence. Since Shinzo Abe's government in 2006, Japan has progressively moved towards a nationalist, right-wing, and conservative agenda, centered around the imperial cult. This shift is evident in key instances such as the 2006 education reform, the 2012 LDP constitutional draft, and the reinterpretation of Article 9, among other less visible initiatives. Furthermore, the high percentage of cabinet members with ties to Nippon Kaigi indicates a sustained presence and influence within Japan's political elite.

Chapter 7: Japan in the Face of the Apocalypse

Up to this point, we have sought to describe the foundations and historical origins of Japanese nationalism—which is unintelligible without its religious component—and how it has been reproduced and intensified since the late nineteenth century. Its most prominent expression, seen during the era of the Japanese Empire, was theoretically dismantled with the American occupation in 1947. However, a deeper analysis of the period from the end of World War II to the present reveals that many of the actors, institutions, and mechanisms that placed religious nationalism at the core of

imperial ideology remained intact or were concealed beneath the façade of a purported modernity, shaped through a mimetic relationship with the West, particularly with the United States.

Within this context, we can also observe a growing visibility and resurgence of nationalism in the present day, both through the proliferation of groups adhering to this ideological agenda and through public policies that fulfill the objectives and aspirations promoted by such organizations. Nevertheless, a series of unresolved questions remains regarding this reality. Chief among them is the question of how to explain this nationalist proliferation: Why are we witnessing a growing visibility of nationalism and conservative politics in contemporary Japan? And why have such manifestations emerged most prominently since the late 1990s? In this chapter, we will attempt to shed light on the reasons behind the emergence and proliferation of this phenomenon. Let us begin, therefore, with a brief analysis of Japan's current situation, keeping in mind the following premise: in times of crisis, communities tend to return to their origins.

A Silent Crisis: Japan's Tenuous Future

Japan is often regarded as one of the greatest economic, industrial, and social success stories in modern history. Beginning with the Meiji Restoration, the country rapidly transformed into a global power and, by the first half of the twentieth century, had become the leading industrial and economic force in Asia. This accelerated growth led Japan to establish itself as an imperial power that would go on to conquer much of the Asia-Pacific region and stand toe-to-toe with the Western powers. Similarly, following its defeat in the Second World War, Japan once again underwent a remarkable process of industrialization, ultimately becoming one of the world's top three economies—a genuine example of post-war recovery and reinvention after the violent era of the Japanese Empire.

However, after nearly four decades of extraordinary growth, unmatched by most of the world, Japan came to an abrupt halt in the 1990s—a turning point from which it appears not to have fully recovered even after more than thirty years. The so-called "Japanese miracle" came to a sudden end in 1992, marking the beginning of what has since been referred to as the "lost decade." From this period onward, Japan experienced deep economic, demographic, and geopolitical stagnation, significantly weakening its standing within the global order.

Before this downturn, Japan had seemed poised to become the world's next great superpower, closing in on the United States as the second-largest economy. Its electronics industry—and especially its

automotive sector—appeared unstoppable. Yet the economy that once accounted for 15% of global GNP now represents slightly less than 5% (The Asahi Shimbun, 2024), while neighboring countries such as China and South Korea have gradually assumed the regional leadership role Japan once held. Despite numerous attempts to revitalize the economy—such as the much-publicized "Abenomics," alongside various strategies including fiscal stimulus and an artificially weakened yen—these efforts have largely proven ineffective. Japan's economy has effectively ceased to grow, while its core markets are increasingly dominated by more competitive nations.

A profound demographic crisis is also unfolding. Since 2008, Japan's population has been in steady decline, and its birth rate remains among the lowest in the world. Projections for the future are far from encouraging nearly 30% of the population is already elderly, and the working-age population is rapidly shrinking (Yokoyama, 2025; Edmond & North, 2023). This demographic shift implies severe financial burdens, a labor shortage, and a decreasing number of taxpayers. In short, the country is facing a scenario in which there will be many elderly citizens, fewer workers, and an even smaller capacity to financially sustain this reality.

Japan's geopolitical standing has likewise raised serious concerns. The country's long-standing economic and security dependence on the United States has become increasingly fragile, particularly in light of the political volatility introduced by Donald Trump. During his presidency, Trump openly questioned the value of massive American military investments in Japan and criticized trade imbalances, particularly targeting Japan's core industry: the automotive sector (The Asahi Shimbun, 2025). Parallel to this, Japan finds itself threatened both by the declining reliability of its traditional alliance with the U.S. and the growing assertiveness of regional powers such as China and North Korea. While China continues to expand its military presence in the East China Sea—where territorial disputes remain unresolved—North Korea poses an ever-present threat with its missile tests, some of which have violated Japanese airspace.

Without resorting to a fatalistic narrative, the reality is that there are few areas in which Japan can currently claim a position of optimism or promise. Economic stagnation, industrial decline, demographic collapse, weakened alliances, and mounting security threats from neighboring countries all point toward a national trajectory that is nearing—if not already in—a state that can reasonably be described as a crisis.

Reiterating the premise of mimetic theory introduced at the beginning of this study, in times of crisis, communities tend to behave in historically recurrent and patterned ways. The internal unrest and the violence that spreads among members of a community seek, above all, a target to blame. The violence generated by mimetic crisis cannot be eliminated—it can only be redirected. This dynamic inevitably leads to the search for and persecution of a scapegoat. Simultaneously, a longing emerges for a past perceived as stable and secure—a time before the crisis. In the midst of uncertainty, communities often turn to their origins for solutions, and these origins are frequently framed in religious terms.

The global rise of far-right movements reflects this reality. Slogans such as "Make America Great Again" evoke a desire to return to a pre-crisis past, a nostalgic vision of a time assumed to hold the answers to present challenges. This is why contemporary far-right ideologies tend to be nationalist and religious in nature, emphasizing ethnically, culturally, and spiritually "authentic" demos. Christianity and nationalism have become prominent not because they are inherently aligned with far-right ideologies, but because they represent foundational narratives and identity markers in many nations—particularly in the West.

These discourses are also frequently accompanied by overt xenophobia and anti-immigration policies. Just as Mexican and Latin American migration is demonized in the United States, African and Middle Eastern displaced populations face similar stigmatization in Europe. Far-right governments have found in migrants and minorities ideal scapegoats—entities onto which internal tensions and crises can be projected, blamed for supposedly disrupting the nation's order and cohesion.

Japan is no exception. The proliferation of nationalist groups and their growing influence on government policy—both through public initiatives and close ties with prominent politicians—reflects the same global trend of far-right resurgence. Nippon Kaigi embodies this nostalgic longing for Japan's past, advocating a return to the country's "true origins." Its discourse explicitly references the desire to restore an idealized version of Japan, one rooted in supposedly inherent beliefs, values, and rituals. While Christianity plays a central role in Western far-right movements, in Japan, this foundational religious narrative is replaced by Shintoism. For Japanese ultranationalist groups, the solution to national decline lies in an all-encompassing nationalism and a culturally exclusive model anchored in imperial cult traditions.

Similarly, organizations like Nippon Kaigi identify scapegoats in individuals and institutions that do not conform to their idealized model. Today's Japan—trapped in the crossfire of a political, military,

and economic struggle between the United States and China—assigns responsibility for its perceived decline to these very powers. The rejection of the postwar order, expressed in efforts to revise the current constitution and denounce the norms, values, and institutions imposed by the Allied occupation, points to the West—particularly the United States—as a primary scapegoat. At the same time, the absorption of markets, economic subordination, and the clear military superiority of China are perceived as existential threats to Japan's national identity. Both the United States and China, therefore, are portrayed in nationalist rhetoric as key contributors to Japan's internal crisis—external threats that must be symbolically sacrificed in order to secure national survival.

Japan's Tomorrow: Exploring Possible Futures

Without attempting to engage in speculative forecasting, it is nonetheless useful to briefly outline the scenarios Japan may face in the near future. While it is true that Japan is on the verge of crisis, it is also important to note that current indicators are not yet entirely negative. Despite its prolonged stagnation, the Japanese economy has not entered a phase of contraction; it remains, for now, in positive territory. The demographic crisis, although undeniably real, will not reach its full impact until the current population ages further, and—given persistently low birth rates—Japan faces a severe labor shortage and mounting fiscal strain. As for China, the United States, and North Korea, despite rising tensions and political hostility, a full-scale conflict has not yet materialized.

Nevertheless, the current order and situation Japan is experiencing remains extremely fragile and thus highly susceptible to disruption. Despite more than two decades of fiscal and economic policies aimed at restoring stability, the Japanese economy has largely failed to recover. The government has only managed to keep the system afloat through heavy intervention, including manipulation of its own markets and currency to sustain key strategic industries. This fragile equilibrium would be further destabilized should Donald Trump's economic and trade policies remain in place. In such a scenario, Japan's deep economic dependence on the United States—its main export destination—would likely serve as the catalyst for a large-scale national economic crisis. Similarly, the demographic crisis represents a ticking time bomb, one that Japan has persistently refused to defuse by maintaining extremely restrictive immigration policies.

Within this context—and as has been observed globally wherever far-right discourse has gained traction—there would be greater political space and visibility for nationalist groups and politicians

espousing such ideologies, including Nippon Kaigi. Economic stagnation alone has already emboldened voices seeking to exploit public anxieties, promoting a retreat into nationalist encapsulation. The identification of scapegoats, therefore, could offer a glimpse into potential future scenarios.

If Japan remains in the same state it has endured for nearly thirty years, it seems likely that nationalist discourse will continue to gain ground in Japanese politics. In the worst-case scenario, a profound crisis may not necessarily result in an open break with the United States, given Japan's military and economic dependency. However, Trump's policies could significantly bolster the voices and political projects seeking to dismantle the postwar order, initiating a process of symbolic and material disengagement from U.S. influence on Japanese soil.

Another scenario—one seemingly overlooked by the current U.S. administration—is that Washington's open hostility toward virtually all nations may ironically produce the opposite effect: the unification of countries, even historic rivals, in opposition to the United States. Trump may inadvertently achieve what has long eluded the Asia-Pacific region: a unified front. Signs of this possibility have already emerged. In March 2025, for the first time in five years, a trilateral economic dialogue was held between China, Japan, and South Korea, where all three countries agreed to coordinate their responses to the tariffs and restrictions imposed by Donald Trump (Reuters, 2025a; Reuters, 2025b).

Whichever scenario ultimately unfolds, it is crucial to recognize that Japan's far-right and nationalist agenda is already an active political force that must be taken seriously in our analyses. It should not be dismissed under the pretext of lacking formal or tangible evidence. In fact, this very ambiguity is what distinguishes Japan from other contemporary far-right movements worldwide. Unlike other international cases, the possibility that Japan and its government may be overtaken or deeply influenced by such agendas is far more plausible.

Openings for Influence: Why Japan Yields to Pressure Groups

The assertation that Japan is more susceptible to the influence of pressure groups is not grounded in speculative argumentation, but rather in comparison with the only historical precedent in which Japan was entirely consumed by a violent ultra-nationalist and religious fervor. Only through this historical legacy can we begin to identify indicators that show how such political agendas once managed to

infiltrate and transform the entire nation into a militaristic empire. Looking closely at that process, it becomes difficult not to be alarmed by the reemergence of similar conditions in the present.

It is worth reiterating that analyzing Japan's political system through the same lenses we use for Western democracies is a mistake. Those who argue that there is insufficient evidence to consider these agendas a risk in Japan are either severely underestimating or outright ignoring the reality of a system of power designed to be ambiguous—and a historical legacy that offers its clearest warnings.

Thus far, we have attempted to describe the informal mechanisms that shape Japan's political system. However, to understand how ultra-nationalism once managed to conquer an entire nation, we need only revisit the insights of Masao Maruyama, who confronted a similar context more than 80 years ago. His analysis urges us to reflect on the present. Maruyama observed that Japan's far-right movement, prior to becoming hegemonic in the 1930s, was never a popular movement. It was always confined to small, informal, non-governmental groups that succeeded in forging ties with the military, the bureaucracy, and key politicians. It never represented a mass movement, nor was it broadly embraced by the public (Maruyama, 1969, p.74).

As was the case during the Meiji Restoration, the movement that ultimately overthrew the existing government and seized power did not do so through a popular revolution, but rather through a top-down process. Fascism, the far right, and religious nationalism were able to transform Japan into a highly violent empire precisely because these ideologies had already permeated the state apparatus. Their influence spread through the personal relationships and institutional ties between military officers, bureaucrats, and politicians with groups that actively promoted such ideologies.

> The distinctive characteristic in the development of Japanese fascism was, as we have seen, that it never took the form of a fascist revolution with a mass organization occupying the State apparatus from outside the administration. The process was rather the gradual maturing of a fascist structure within the State, effected by the established political forces of the military, the bureaucracy, and the political parties (...) The leaders of Japariese fascism were not obliged to manipulate or counter any strong proletarian movement; and, in the absence of a bourgeois democratic background, they were able to effect a comparatively smooth consolidation of State power from above by amalgamating supporting groups that were already in existence (Maruyama, 1969, p.65).

Maruyama also warns us about the main catalyst for the usurpation of power and the signs of danger to which we must remain vigilant. The primary cause of the acceleration of the fascist movement in Japan in 1930-31 was the global crisis of 1929, which in turn triggered a crisis in Japanese agriculture

(Maruyama, 1969, p.44). It is in times of crisis that these movements manage to invade the public sphere and take control of the country's reins. Regarding the warning signs, Maruyama asserts that:

> Secondly, will the old national sentiments that reverted to the social base reappear on the political scene and remobilize around the former symbols of Empire? If there is such a re-mobilization, the structural laws of Japanese society will probably funnel these emotions back into the old channels like water flowing into a ditch. For this reason it is only natural that flying the national ensign, reviving the national anthem, and worshipping at Shinto shrines have become hotly debated subjects. This applies in particular to the recent tendency to-wards reintroducing the old symbols into national education. Certain people laugh at the over-sensitivity of someone who reads into every such event a revival of ultra-nationalism or fascism. (...) But from the dynamics of political behaviour we know that an accumulation of everyday acts, at first glance unrelated to politics, can suddenly be transformed into great political energy. The horizon on which these storms appear in the political world is extremely hazy. Flying the national colours and reviving the national anthem do not have much import as isolated events. When they are placed beside other events (...) they acquire a certain significance. To recognize the germination of a familiar political tendency here is far from groundless (Maruyama, 1969, p.152).

Reading this reality described by Maruyama in light of Nippon Kaigi and the current state of religious nationalism should, in itself, serve as a major warning sign. Just as it happened with the Japanese Empire, far-right and nationalist groups are already visible entities, and although they may not be necessarily popular, they are deeply embedded in the Japanese government. The imperial symbolism has also re-established itself in society through actions such as reforms in the education system. The only missing element, yet one that seems to be rapidly approaching, is the crisis. All the elements and mechanisms that the American occupation chose not to eliminate, along with the circumstances that once made Japan a nation overtaken by the frenzy of fascism, are once again a present reality.

Conclusions

This research has examined the proliferation of religious nationalism in contemporary Japan, situating it within a broader context through a case study of one of its most prominent proponents: Nippon Kaigi. Although Japan is often perceived globally as a secular state with a national project that has delivered notable democratic, economic and social outcomes, this study has revealed that behind the façade of institutional modernity lies an informal and complex interplay between religion, politics, and national identity. By conducting a detailed analysis of the ideological foundations of this system and

its key political structures—alongside the case study of Nippon Kaigi—this research has fulfilled its primary objective of exposing how religious narratives and nationalist sentiments continue to shape political discourse and influence policymaking through a variety of mechanisms beyond formal institutional frameworks.

The historical dimension of this analysis has demonstrated that Japanese nationalism is inseparable from its religious component, which serves as a guiding axis. Japanese nationalism emerged as a mimetic reaction to the threat posed by a new foreign "other" that endangered national sovereignty. Within this context, nationalism was reconfigured through the revaluation of religious myths and symbols—particularly during the Meiji Restoration, when the cult of the emperor and the imperial institution were revitalized to function as unifying symbols of national identity. The creation of State Shinto and the sacralization of the emperor played a critical role in forging a cohesive national identity; one focused on the glorification of a divine ancestry, cultural homogeneity, and, above all, total loyalty to the state. These values were not merely rhetorical discourses; they were institutionalized through public policies, reforms in the education system, and the establishment of rites that culminated in a forceful nationalism defining the era of Imperial Japan. This historical analysis—often overlooked in previous studies focused primarily on cotemporary institutional analysis-—offers a new perspective that demonstrates how religious nationalism in Japan cannot be understood without its historical and ritualistic origin.

Despite the devastating defeat in World War II and the subsequent American occupation—which, in theory, dismantled the ideological apparatus built around the emperor—the new political order allowed many of these nationalist sentiments and structures to persist. The bureaucracy was never replaced; various political and military elites were reintegrated into the system, and although the emperor's divinity was formally abolished, he remained a symbol of national polity. Within this new framework, the rise and eventual hegemony of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) provided an ideal platform for the preservation and resurgence of nationalist ideologies. The LDP was not only fertile ground for such agendas but was also openly supported by American forces for strategic purposes during the Cold War. The LDP further consolidated its grip on power through a combination of factionalism, bureaucratic cooperation, and an extensive network of informal political associations.

Another key argument advanced in this thesis is that, although Japan's political system is formally democratic, it is fundamentally characterized by diffuse and opaque power structures. The overwhelming dominance of the LDP has made electoral competition weak, while internal power

struggles within the party serve as more effective channels of influence than formal democratic processes. The bureaucracy, in turn, operates with a high degree of autonomy, enabling it to shape public policy independently of elected officials. Moreover, interactions among politicians, bureaucrats, and interest groups often take place in informal and non-transparent settings where critical decisions are made.

It is precisely this characteristic of the political system that has allowed the emergence of groups like Nippon Kaigi, which seek to restore what they consider to be Japan's authentic national identity. Founded in 1997, the organization promotes a revisionist view of history, a return to traditional values, and sweeping constitutional reforms aimed at re-establishing Japan as a unified and culturally homogeneous nation. Among its objectives are the reintroduction of patriotic education, the reinterpretation—often amounting to denial—of Japan's war crimes, constitutional revision, and the reinforcement of the country's military posture. These goals are synonymous with a restoration of imperial ideology, State Shinto, and the hierarchical structure that characterized Japan's prewar era.

The extent of Nippon Kaigi's influence can best be understood through its close ties with the political elite. Since the rise to power of Shinzo Abe, the organization has maintained direct connections with several cabinet members and privileged access to public policy makers. While its legislative impact remains a subject of debate, its ideological influence is already evident in the education system, the normalization of military activities, and a public discourse that nostalgically recalls the imperial past. This case study of Nippon Kaigi offers an original contribution to the field by providing empirical evidence on how religious-nationalist movements can operate within opaque political contexts to reshape national identity narratives.

Within this context of diffused power, this study has also emphasized that analytical frameworks focused solely on formal institutions or material interests are insufficient to fully grasp the impact and significance of groups like Nippon Kaigi. Understanding this phenomenon requires an inquiry into opaque power dynamics, cultural frameworks, symbolic representations, and historical contexts that are integral to national identity. Studying religious nationalism, therefore, demands attention to these often invisible yet crucial dimensions of Japanese political life. This insight responds to a significant gap in the field by formulating an analysis that integrates religion, culture, and violence into political phenomena.

Given the challenges of analyzing a political system such as Japan's, mimetic theory—particularly the scapegoat mechanism—has proven useful for interpreting how internal tensions and violence within a community are managed through processes of exclusion, the creation of myths and rituals and, ultimately, sacrifice. While not a deterministic framework, mimetic theory sheds light on recurring patterns of political unification, mimetic rivalry, and crisis that have historically shaped Japan—from the foreign threat and subsequent adoption of the Western model during the Meiji period, to twentieth-century military expansionism, and now the resurgence of a nationalist and revisionist movement represented by groups such as Nippon Kaigi. This theoretical approach enriches the interdisciplinary dialogue between political science and religious studies by offering a nuanced lens through which to analyze nationalism.

Finally, this research has argued that the ideological current represented by Nippon Kaigi is in fact part of a broader global phenomenon in which religious, far right, and nationalist narratives have re-emerged in response to perceived crises of identity, sovereignty, and national tradition. While the Japanese case presents specific characteristics, it must be understood within this global context in which nationalist and religious discourses are reactivated to generate symbolic cohesion in times of political uncertainty.

Building on these findings, future research could undertake comparative studies of religious nationalism in other contexts, particularly those where historical legacies continue to shape contemporary political ideologies. Another promising avenue would be to explore how younger generations in Japan engage with nationalist discourse, as well as to analyze the reception of such discourse across different sectors of Japanese society. This would further illuminate the influence of nationalist narratives beyond the formal political sphere.

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Appendix

List of cabinet members with affiliations to Nippon Kaigi from the Second Abe Cabinet (2012) to the Second Ishiba Cabinet (2025):

Second Abe Cabinet	**Second Abe Cabinet (1st Reshuffle)**
26/12/2012-03/09/2014	**3/09/2014-24/12/2014**
Shinzō Abe*	Shinzō Abe*
Tarō Asō*	Tarō Asō*
Yoshitaka Shindō*	Sanae Takaichi*
Sadakazu Tanigak*	Midori Matsushima
Fumio Kishida*	Yōko Kamikawa
Hakubun Shimomura*	Fumio Kishida*
Norihisa Tamura*	Hakubun Shimomura*
Yoshimasa Hayashi	Yasuhisa Shiozaki*
Toshimitsu Motegi*	Koya Nishikawa
Akihiro Ota	Yūko Obuchi
Nobuteru Ishihara	Yoichi Miyazawa
Itsunori Onodera*	Akihiro Ota
Yoshihide Suga*	Yoshio Mochizuki*
Takumi Nemoto	Akinori Eto*
Keiji Furuya	Yoshihide Suga*
Ichita Yamamoto	Wataru Takeshita*
Masako Mori	Eriko Yamatani*
Akira Amari*	Shunichi Yamaguchi*
Tomomi Inada	Haruko Arimura*
	Akira Amari*

	Shigeru Ishiba*

Third Abe Cabinet	Third Abe Cabinet (1st Reshuffle)
24/12/2014-7/10/2015	**7/10/2015-03/08/2016**
Shinzō Abe*	Shinzō Abe*
Tarō Asō*	Tarō Asō*
Sanae Takaichi*	Sanae Takaichi*
Yōko Kamikawa	Mitsuhide Iwaki
Fumio Kishida*	Fumio Kishida*
Hakubun Shimomura*	Hiroshi Hase
Yasuhisa Shiozaki*	Yasuhisa Shiozaki*
Koya Nishikawa	Hiroshi Moriyama
Yoshimasa Hayashi	Motoo Hayashi
Yoichi Miyazawa	Keiichi Ishii
Akihiro Ota	Tamayo Marukawa
Yoshio Mochizuki*	Gen Nakatani*
Gen Nakatani*	Yoshihide Suga*
Yoshihide Suga*	Tsuyoshi Takagi
Wataru Takeshita*	Taro Kono
Eriko Yamatani*	Aiko Shimajiri
Shunichi Yamaguchi*	Akira Amari*
Haruko Arimura*	Nobuteru Ishihara
Akira Amari*	Katsunobu Katō*
Shigeru Ishiba*	Shigeru Ishiba*
Toshiaki Endo	Toshiaki Endo

Third Abe Cabinet (2nd Reshuffle)	Third Abe Cabinet (3rd Reshuffle)
03/08/2016-03/08/2017	**03/08/2017-01/11/2017**
Shinzō Abe*	Shinzō Abe*

Tarō Asō*	Tarō Asō*
Sanae Takaichi*	Seiko Noda*
Katsutoshi Kaneda	Yōko Kamikawa
Fumio Kishida*	Taro Kono
Hirokazu Matsuno*	Yoshimasa Hayashi
Yasuhisa Shiozaki*	Katsunobu Katō*
Yuji Yamamoto	Ken Saitō
Hiroshige Sekō	Hiroshige Sekō
Keiichi Ishii	Keiichi Ishii
Koichi Yamamoto	Masaharu Nakagawa
Tomomi Inada	Itsunori Onodera*
Yoshihide Suga*	Yoshihide Suga*
Masahiro Imamura	Masayoshi Yoshino
Masayoshi Yoshino	Hachiro Okonogi
Jun Matsumoto	Tetsuma Esaki
Yōsuke Tsuruho	Toshimitsu Motegi*
Nobuteru Ishihara	Masaji Matsuyama
Katsunobu Katō*	Hiroshi Kajiyama
Kozo Yamamoto	Shunichi Suzuki*
Tamayo Marukawa	

Fourth Abe Cabinet	**Fourth Abe Cabinet (1st Reshuffle)**
01/11/2017-02/10/2018	**02/10/2018-11/09/2019**
Shinzō Abe*	Shinzō Abe*
Tarō Asō*	Tarō Asō*
Seiko Noda*	Masatoshi Ishida
Yōko Kamikawa	Takashi Yamashita
Tarō Kōno	Tarō Kōno
Yoshimasa Hayashi	Masahiko Shibayama

Katsunobu Katō*	Takumi Nemoto
Ken Saitō	Takamori Yoshikawa
Hiroshige Sekō	Hiroshige Sekō
Keiichi Ishii	Keiichi Ishii
Masaharu Nakagawa	Yoshiaki Harada
Itsunori Onodera*	Takeshi Iwaya
Yoshihide Suga*	Yoshihide Suga*
Masayoshi Yoshino	Hiromichi Watanabe
Hachiro Okonogi	Junzo Yamamoto
Tetsuma Esaki	Takuya Hirai
Teru Fukui	Mitsuhiro Miyakoshi
Masaji Matsuyama	Toshimitsu Motegi*
Toshimitsu Motegi*	Satsuki Katayama
Hiroshi Kajiyama	Yoshitaka Sakurada
Shun'ichi Suzuki*	Shun'ichi Suzuki*

Fourth Abe Cabinet (2nd Reshuffle)	**Suga Cabinet**
11/09/2019-16/09/20	**16/09/2020-04/10/2021**
Shinzō Abe*	Yoshihide Suga*
Tarō Asō*	Tarō Asō*
Sanae Takaichi*	Ryota Takeda*
Katsuyuki Kawai	Yōko Kamikawa
Masako Mori	Toshimitsu Motegi*
Toshimitsu Motegi*	Nobuo Kishi*
Kōichi Hagiuda*	Koichi Hagiuda*
Katsunobu Katō*	Norihisa Tamura*
Taku Etō*	Kōtarō Nogami*
Isshu Sugawara*	Hiroshi Kajiyama
Hiroshi Kajiyama	Kazuyoshi Akaba

Kazuyoshi Akaba	Shinjiro Koizumi
Shinjirō Koizumi	Katsunobu Katō*
Tarō Kōno	Katsuei Hirasawa*
Yoshihide Suga*	Hachiro Okonogi
Kazunori Tanaka	Yasufumi Tanahashi
Ryota Takeda*	Tarō Kōno
Seiichi Eto	Tetsushi Sakamoto*
Naokazu Takemoto*	Yasutoshi Nishimura*
Yasutoshi Nishimura*	Takuya Hirai
Seigo Kitamura*	Seiko Hashimoto*
Seiko Hashimoto*	Tamayo Marukawa
	Shinji Inoue*

First Kishida Cabinet	**Second Kishida Cabinet**
04/10/2021-10/11/2021	**10/11/2021-10/08/2022**
Fumio Kishida*	Fumio Kishida*
Yasushi Kaneko	Yasushi Kaneko
Yoshihisa Furukawa	Yoshihisa Furukawa
Toshimitsu Motegi*	Yoshimasa Hayashi
Shun'ichi Suzuki*	Shun'ichi Suzuki*
Shinsuke Suematsu	Shinsuke Suematsu
Shigeyuki Goto	Genjiro Kaneko
Genjiro Kaneko	Shigeyuki Goto
Koichi Hagiuda*	Koichi Hagiuda*
Tetsuo Saito	Tetsuo Saito
Tsuyoshi Yamaguchi	Tsuyoshi Yamaguchi
Nobuo Kishi*	Nobuo Kishi*
Hirokazu Matsuno*	Hirokazu Matsuno*
Karen Makishima	Karen Makishima

Kosaburo Nishime	Kosaburo Nishime
Satoshi Ninoyu	Satoshi Ninoyu
Seiko Noda*	Seiko Noda*
Daishiro Yamagiwa	Daishiro Yamagiwa
Takayuki Kobayashi	Takayuki Kobayashi
Noriko Horiuchi	Kenji Wakamiya
Kenji Wakamiya	Noriko Horiuchi

Second Kishida Cabinet (1st Reshuffle)	**Second Kishida Cabinet (2nd Reshuffle)**
10/08/2022-13/09/2023	**13/09/2023-01/10/2024**
Fumio Kishida*	Fumio Kishida*
Minoru Terada	Junji Suzuki
Takeaki Matsumoto	Takeaki Matsumoto
Yasuhiro Hanashi	Ryuji Koizumi
Ken Saitō	Yoko Kamikawa
Yoshimasa Hayashi	Shun'ichi Suzuki*
Shun'ichi Suzuki*	Masahito Moriyama
Keiko Nagaoka	Keizo Takemi
Katsunobu Kato*	Ichiro Miyashita
Tetsuro Nomura	Tetsushi Sakamoto*
Yasutoshi Nishimura*	Yasutoshi Nishimura*
Tetsuo Saito	Ken Saitō
Akihiro Nishimura	Tetsuo Saito
Yasukazu Hamada	Shintaro Ito
Hirokazu Matsuno*	Minoru Kihara*
Taro Kono	Hirokazu Matsuno*
Kenya Akiba	Yoshimasa Hayashi
Hiromichi Watanabe	Taro Kono
Koichi Tani	Shinako Tsuchiya

Masanobu Ogura	Yoshifumi Matsumura
Daishiro Yamagiwa	Ayuko Kato
Shigeyuki Goto	Yoshitaka Shindo*
Sanae Takaichi*	Sanae Takaichi*
Naoki Okada	Hanako Jimi

First Ishiba Cabinet	**Second Ishiba Cabinet**
01/10/2024-11/11/2024	**11/11/2024-Present**
Shigeru Ishiba*	Shigeru Ishiba*
Seiichiro Murakami*	Seiichiro Murakami*
Hideki Makihara*	Keisuke Suzuki
Takeshi Iwaya*	Takeshi Iwaya*
Katsunobu Katō*	Katsunobu Katō*
Toshiko Abe	Toshiko Abe
Takamaro Fukuoka	Takamaro Fukuoka
Yasuhiro Ozato*	Taku Etō*
Yoji Muto*	Yoji Muto*
Tetsuo Saito	Hiromasa Nakano
Keiichiro Asao*	Keiichiro Asao*
Gen Nakatani*	Gen Nakatani*
Yoshimasa Hayashi	Yoshimasa Hayashi
Masaaki Taira	Masaaki Taira
Tadahiko Ito	Tadahiko Ito
Manabu Sakai	Manabu Sakai
Junko Mihara*	Junko Mihara*
Ryosei Akazawa	Ryosei Akazawa
Minoru Kiuchi*	Minoru Kiuchi*
Yoshitaka Itō*	Yoshitaka Itō*