Changing Patterns of Civic Engagement in Constitutionalism in Japan
Timothy S. George, University of Rhode Island

presented as part of a roundtable discussion on
Constitutional Revisionism in Japan Today: Documentation and Analysis
at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies
Boston, March 25, 2007

Introduction

The current debate in Japan over revising the constitution is not a new phenomenon. We are now witnessing what is in fact modern Japan’s fourth round of civic participation in debates over constitutionalism. The first round peaked in the Meiji period, in 1880 and 1881, with groups of all sorts all over the country drafting their own proposed constitutions. The second was in the immediate postwar period, in the brief moment when the Meiji Constitution of 1890 had been discredited but not yet replaced by the current constitution, which was a product of the Occupation and took effect in 1947. The third round took place in the 1950s and 1960s in response to the establishment in 1956 by Japan’s ruling conservative elites of the Commission on the Constitution (Kenpō Chōsakai). This commission was disbanded in 1965 after submitting an inconclusive report that simply listed opinions on both sides of the revision argument. During its lifetime, however, the commission generated a great deal of fear in progressives that the “peace constitution” might be amended. Of the groups formed to prevent this, the best-known was the Constitutional Problems Study Group (Kenpō Mondai Kenkyūkai), founded by Ōuchi Hyōe and others in 1958 and disbanded in 1976.

The current situation differs from the previous round in three ways. First, there are probably more groups involved. At last check there were 32 groups in the Citizens’ Groups/NGOs category of our Constitutional Revision Research Project website. By my count 16 of them wish to protect Article 9, four want to change it, and the remainder either are unclear on the issue or
simply seem to be focused on other issues. Second, this is a new age for information technology. Third, this time some sort of constitutional change seems very likely, not immediately but within the next five years. Still, we should remember that while polls may show a majority not only expecting but also favoring constitutional revision (though of course the nature of the revisions desired ranges broadly), they also show that people rank constitutional revision at or near the bottom of the list of issues they want the new prime minister and cabinet to address.

Four Examples from the Broad Range of Civic Groups Joining the Debate

One of the largest and most active civic groups—which actually a network of groups—is the Article 9 Association (Kyūjō no Kai; www.9-jo.jp/), announced at a press conference in June of 2004 by nine luminaries. All born between 1917 and 1935, they include writers, critics, and activists such as Nobel Prize winner Ōe Kenzaburō, Tsurumi Shunsuke, Oda Makoto, Katō Shūichi, Umehara Takeshi, and Sawachi Hisae, as well as former prime minister Miki Takeo’s widow Miki Mutsuko. The group sells posters and videos, and holds regular press conferences and street lectures (with speakers such as Doi Takako, former chair of the Japan Socialist Party, which is now the Social Democratic Party). The have a five-page list of speakers available to local groups. Printed and e-mailed newsletters describe vigorous nationwide activities. A national meeting in June 2006 was attended by 1,550 people representing all 47 prefectures. The number of affiliated local groups is approaching 5,000, so if such local affiliates are counted as separate groups, the total number of groups involved in the movement is far greater than the number of citizens’ groups concerned with the environment that Margaret A. McKean counted in the early 1970s (see her 1981 book Environmental Protest and Citizen Politics in Japan). The Article 9 Association has affiliated groups in cities and towns from Sapporo to Saga; in universities, high
schools and temples; and it has groups for women, haiku poets, other poets, musicians, artists, architects, “persons of faith,” filmmakers, members of the mass media, and athletes. Clearly, this is an exceptionally broad network, but it follows an organizational pattern familiar from the citizens’ movements its aging leaders led a generation or more ago.

A group with a similar ideology but somewhat different focus and tactics is the Popular Sovereignty! Joint Appeal Group (Shuken Zaimin! Kyōdō Apīru no Kai; www.shukenzaimin.net/), which was established in May 2005 by progressive writers, journalists, and editors seeking to create a “New Pacifism.” One leading member is manga artist Ishizaka Kei, whose real name is Tachikawa Keiko and some of whose war-related work is familiar to Japanologists from the second edition of Sources of Japanese Tradition. As one might expect, this group is very good at getting itself covered in the media. An example is their trip to the site of the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2006. They visited Harvard on the same trip.

A third group of interest is the Women’s Constitution Year Liaison Group (Josei no Kenpō Nen Renraku Kai; www16.ocn.ne.jp/~fudanren/kenpou/kenpou.html), which holds regular meetings and circulates petitions with a special focus on preserving Article 9. Finally, a reminder that not all groups are left-wing or focused on protecting Article 9 comes from the Kenpō Mondai Kenkyūkai. Their literature and website refer to the “Greater East Asia Holy War,” laud the author Mishima Yukio as a “patriot,” and describe the current constitution as “the constitution that ruined the country.”

Does the Internet Age Make a Difference?
Does the extensive use of the internet make these groups different from earlier citizens’ groups? My guess is that while it helps them communicate with and mobilize their members, what really affects public opinion on the constitution—which presumably is their main goal—is their holding of public events, and the coverage these receive in the print and broadcast media. However, their use of the internet does make research on them incomparably easier, but only if it is done in real time. Websites change and vanish, and e-mail newsletters may not be stored, so harvesting, organizing, and archiving such digital information—much of which is never available in any other format—is essential. Without it, historians of the future will be unable to study twenty-first century movements as easily as today’s historians can study the movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

**Overlap between Governmental and Civic Participants**

As in earlier constitutional movements, the distinction between governmental and nongovernmental participants in today’s debate can be fuzzy. Aichi Kazuo (www.aichi-kazuo.net/kenpou/index.html), for example, is a Diet member and former Cabinet minister (and aspiring singer), who has drafted his own proposed new constitution. In a 2005 talk at Harvard with our Constitutional Revision Research Project, he discussed this draft, which has a strong focus on the emperor and the need for a “Self-Defense Army,” but also emphasizes the importance of protecting the environment.

Another activist who bridges the civic/government divide is Kina Shōkichi (www.kina-okinawa.com/), the Okinawan folk/folk-rock singer, anti-base and antiwar activist, who since 2004 has been a member of the Upper House of the Diet. He has spoken many times inside and outside the Diet on the need to preserve the “peace constitution,” and continues to lead three
lives as a politician (in the Democratic Party of Japan), a musician (who has recorded with Ry Cooder), and an activist. In the current constitutional debate, as in those of the past, therefore, it is not always easy to describe activists and groups as “nongovernmental.”

**Conclusions**

Any survey of these groups can as yet offer only tentative conclusions. There is no doubt that the movement is as broad and active as those of the past. But it is not yet clear that it has had a significant effect on public opinion, either by changing citizens’ views on constitutional reform or by persuading them to place it higher on their list of important issues. We can see that the internet is a useful tool for activist groups, and for those of us studying them, but it has not transformed the movement or magnified its political effects, as has been the case, for example, with some recent political issues in South Korea and China. Finally, it is clear that “civic” movements can include those within as well as outside of government.

Beyond this, however, it is too soon to make any conclusions as to the effects of any or all of these groups on the final result of the constitutional revision process. They may play their most important role when the time comes for the Japanese people to vote in the national constitutional referendum which will determine the ultimate success or failure of the amendments that pass the Diet.