The Politics of Japan: Will the Past Predict the Future?

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I. Introduction

The goal of this intensive research paper is to accurately define the present status of the Japanese political system. Throughout the paper a number of issues will be raised that will help the reader to further understand the government that exists in Japan. A closer look at Japan's political culture, political institutions, parliament, political parties, and politicians will be discussed in detail. A small emphasis will be placed on explaining the political heritage, but mainly the research that culminates this paper focuses on the last five to ten years.

- **Overview of Political Heritage**

At the close of the Meiji Restoration in 1868, political parties gradually gained support. This occurred simultaneously with the opening of the Imperial Diet in 1890. After World War I, influence declined and it was not until the end of World War II that political parties re-emerged and flourished under the U.S. Occupation and the new constitution of 1947. "By the time the Occupation ended in 1952, the institutions of representative government had become fully operative and the central actors in Japanese politics."[i]

II. Political Culture

- **Group Identity / Group Objective of Japanese**

It is understood, by the American sociologist Robert N. Bellah, that the Japanese believe "the value of sacrificing oneself for the goal of the group transcends everything else."[ii] In reading Bellah, three characteristics of modern political culture are outlined.

Bellah first defines the meaning of what it means to be a member of a group. Bellah states that:

> it is difficult for political principles such as natural rights, liberty, equality, and fraternity to be understood as universal principles that transcend the particular groups to which people belong. Since group identity is seen as the highest value, once a group is established, it will call on all its members to exert their utmost for the realization of the group's goals, and if one is a member of the group, one tends to give one's all for the group.[iii]

Second, Bellah discusses collective goals of the Japanese, the main objective. He states that, "The greater cause of the state transcend all personal loyalties. To attain the goals of each collective, it was necessary to recruit men of ability which paved the way for worldly success in a rigidly hierarchical society."[iv] Third, Bellah defines the weakness of an individual's pursuit in relation to the objective of the group, he says:

> The pursuit of a group objective that transcends all other values has tended to result in unprincipled behavior vis-à-vis the external environment. Total dedication to the group tends to weaken one's independent political spirit. The opportunism, the diffusion of responsibility and the sectionalism that characterize modern Japanese politics are corollaries of these tendencies.[v]

As demonstrated by Bellah, Japanese men and women place their faith in a collective body. The tendency for an individual to put his or her "natural rights, liberty, equality, and fraternity" in front of the collective body is rare. "Political authority demands that the people be subservient to the government in the name of the public good while at the same time the people exert pressure on the government to take heed of public opinion."[vi]

- **Academic Training for Political Leadership**

"In modern Japan, an alternative route to political leadership has lessened the importance of political parties as a vehicle for upward mobility. The new road is by means of academic training culminating in graduation from an imperial university."[vii] It

has become increasingly popular for individuals to receive a degree from a well known school and then enter the government as a politician.

- **Bureaucrats, Elite Businessmen, and Industrialists**

"The conservative parties were transformed into a superstructure of bureaucrats and elite businessmen and industrialists who had graduated from elite universities."[viii] It is apparent that the members who compose the conservative parties had taken the "new road". These individuals integrated into the political system after they had studied at the elite universities. "The political parties are composed of elites and cadres of their suborganizations and are actually the superstructure or political organ of these organizations. The preponderance of the conservative party is assured because of the wide range of its suborganizations and above all because of the bureaucracies and whole educational system under their patronage.[ix]

- **Managerial Society – Technocrats Gain Power**

The 'managerial society' highlighted above refers to the redistribution of power that has taken place between elite bureaucrats and technocrats. "The central social force was being transferred from primary to secondary groups. In place of elite bureaucrats who had formerly wielded influence, technocrats with expert knowledge and formidable academic credentials gained power in government and legislative private organizations."[x]

III. Political Institutions

- **Emperor as a Public Figure**

In the book, The Japanese Today by Edwin O. Reischauer, it is stated that the Constitution of 1947 defines the emperor as "the symbol of the state and of the unity of

the people, deriving his position from the will of the people with whom he resides sovereign power."[xi] The functions that the emperor are implored to carry out are described as symbolic and it is stated that the emperor "shall not have powers related to government."[xii] Where it was once popular, it has been said that " 'unity under the emperor' paralyzed the modern state system and finally transformed it into 'tennosei fascism' (fascism under the emperor system).[xiii] Today the emperor remains "a symbol of national unity, a token of stability, and a comforting emotional link with the past…The 1947 Constitution not only stripped the emperor of all claim to political power but also made clear where actual power did lie – in the hands of the Diet, or parliament."[xiv]

- **Constitution and Possibility of Future Amendments**

On May 3, 1947, Japan's present Constitution was established. In the past 50 years, there have been no amendments to the document; however, there are two schools of thought that differ on the future of the Constitution. Two former prime ministers, Nakasone Yushiro and Miyazawa Kiichi, present arguments from both sides of the coin.

Nakasone Yushiro firmly believes that "the idea of collective security ought to be incorporated into the Constitution. Japan should be able to send troops overseas if it has to, and should be prepared if there should be casualties, depending upon the circumstances; the nation cannot otherwise expect to survive in the international community."[xv] Yushiro, along with other Japanese, feel that Japan should not be as dependent upon the U.S. umbrella as it has in the past. Instead of relying on the U.S., Japan needs to rely more heavily on its own security.[xvi] Yushiro is also keen on revising the much-debated Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution. Article 9 of the Constitution states:

> Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes. 2) In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.[xvii]

Yushiro says, "I believe the revised article should clearly state that Japan may posses armed defense forces to maintain Japan's independence and peace and contribute to U.N.-led international cooperation endeavors."[xviii] The last comment that Yushiro had to make about the present Constitution and why it should be revised was, "The present Constitution evokes no trace of Japanese history and traditions; it is a 'nationless' law without any sort of recognizable cultural face."[xix] Yushiro is referring to the fact that the Constitution that the Japanese abide by was drafted by Occupation authorities and not Japanese leaders.

Miyazawa Kiichi feels very differently about the present Constitution and does not favor revision as does Yushiro. Kiichi says:

> I would therefore say that the Constitution is just fine as it is. It could be more elegantly phrased and easier to understand if its wording were changed. Otherwise, though, revision would be of little merit, especially considering the enormous amount of national energy such changes would consume. The effort would yield too little gain for too great cost.[xx]

In response to Yushiro's last comment Kiichi says, "To be sure, the Constitution was not written as a direct expression of the will of the Japanese people, but over the past 50 years, we have broken it in and molded it, making it our own."[xxi] Kiichi too addressed the issue of Article 9 as did Yasuhiro. Kiichi ultimately believes that no change would be made at all after much debate. Kiichi raises an interesting point about revision of the Constitution. He says, "the attitudes of these nations toward Japan might also change if Japan were to decide to amend its Constitution-especially Article 9-and alter its defense

policy. We do not want to do anything that would arouse antagonism or suspicion among our neighbors."[xxii]

- **Prime Ministers and the Cabinet**

Although the prime minister is chosen by the lower house, he is ultimately chosen by the party who is presently in power. The longest reigning prime minister was Sato Eisaku from 1964-1972. While the reign of prime minister varies, most cabinet members tend to be in office for only one year.

The prime minister and his cabinet oversee the Diet. They oversee the preparation of most bills which is then handed over to the Diet. The Diet then discusses the legislation, votes on it, and hardly ever makes changes on it.

IV. Parliament

- **The Diet / Lower and Upper House**

The Diet is at the top of the hierarchical government structure. The Diet holds the power to select prime ministers. The prime minister is elected from the current members of the Diet, by the lower house in the event of disagreement with the upper house, and he then selects the ministers of his cabinet along with other appointed officials. "The lower house of the Diet always has the right to a vote of non-confidence in the cabinet, in which case the prime minister must resign or else dissolve the lower house and hold new elections in an effort to gain majority support."[xxiii]

The House of Councillors has 252 members that are elected for six year terms, half every three years. Of the 252 members, 152 are elected from Japan's 47 prefectures. Each prefecture has at least two seats in order to have at least one seat contested at each

election. The more popular prefectures, for example, Tokyo, have eight. The last 100 seats are elected by the entire nation.

The upper house has a very similar make up to that of the lower house, or House of Representatives. The lower house is the first to view the budget that is presented to them. Actions on the budget by the Diet begin in late January and decisions on it must take place before the beginning of the fiscal year in April. Whatever decisions are made by the lower house on the budget are made final in thirty days even if the upper house does not agree but stays in session. This same procedure takes place with the ratification of treaties. On all other legislature, the lower house has the power to override a negative vote in the House of Councillors by a two – thirds majority. The only true important power of the upper house is that a two – thirds vote is required in both houses for an amendment to the Constitution, but as of the present time, this has yet to occur.[xxiv]

The House of Representatives is elected for a four - year term. It is not rare, however, to find that it has been dissolved before the end of the four years. This dissolution is most popular when it is politically advantageous to the prime minister or his party.

In comparison to the United States political system, the Japanese legislature and executive branches are not "balanced as conflicting political forces…The result is that most laws, including all important bills, are drafted not by the Diet but by the bureaucracy in behalf of the cabinet."[xxv]

- **Decision – Making Process under new coalition governments**

The end of the Liberal Democratic Party's 38 year reign came to a close in 1993. Since this time four coalition governments have led the country: the eight-party, non-

LDP coalition led by Hosokawa Morihiro; the minority government led by Hata Tsutomu; and the LDP-Japan Socialist Party (JSP)-New Party Sakigake coalitions under first JSP leader Murayama Tomiichi and later LDP President Hashimoto.[xxvi]

The end of the LDP's 38 year reign came to a close when the House of Representatives passed a no-confidence resolution against the LDP government led by Miyazawa Kiichi. Soon after a non-LDP coalition government was put into effect in August of 1993 and Hosokawa Morihiro of the Japan New Party became Prime Minister.

Once in office, Morihiro enacted a new decision-making process outside of the cabinet: the Council of Representatives of the Coalition Parties. Secretary-generals, second in command, constituted this Council whereupon major political issues were raised and discussed. Concerning coalition governments Morihiro said, "Under the coalition government with eight different political parties, the centralization of policy making was the only choice. It was impossible to have issue-specific committees."[xxvii] It is due to this new system that "bureaucratic officials were able to play an even more important role in the decision-making process than under the LDP governments."[xxviii] On January 29, 1994, Morihiro and his coalition government passed the political reform bills in both houses of parliament. The reform instituted a new single-member district electoral system in the lower house. This was the one goal that Morihiro ultimately fought for.[xxix]

- **Elections and Electoral Reforms**

With the establishment of the first reform in 1994, more promises were made by reformers who said that "the single-member districts of this new system would lead to the creation of two centrist political parties. They also promised that these two parties would

contest elections based on issues, presenting voters a real choice between two mainstream parites."[xxx] Ray Christensen, author of the article, "The Effect of Electoral Reforms on Campaign Practices in Japan", explains three reasons for why the reforms did not occur:

> First the continuity of many strict campaign regulations in Japan that make it difficult for candidates to make any general appeal to the voters. Second, the drawing of district boundaries for the new single-member election districts created opportunities for politicians to switch parties opportunistically in order to secure a party nomination in ther preferred district. Third, new district boundaries separated many candidate support organizations from the candidate that they had previously supported.[xxxi]

- **Features of new system: Single and multi-member districts / Proportional Representation**

A portion of the members of the House of Councillors are elected according to the American electoral system. The 100 members of the upper house who are elected by the nation are chosen through party slates (a system which is popular in continental Europe). The lower house, remaining members of the upper house, and the members of the local assemblies are elected by multiple – seat electoral districts whereupon each voter has only one single vote. This is the same electoral system that was adopted back in 1925. The members of the lower house are elected from 3-to-5 seat districts and about half of the members of the upper house from 2-to-4 seat districts.

Explained by Reischauer, in lower house elections, close to 20% of the vote in a five-seat district will elect a member. This allows for proportional representation to a certain extent for minority parties but shuts out most small 'splinter groups'. Reischauer points out a weakness of this type of electoral system, he says, "A small party naturally runs only one candidate in a district, but a large party can hope for more than one seat. However, if it runs three candidates in a district, where it has the votes to elect only two,

it may so dilute its vote as to end up with only one elected."[xxxii] Another weakness is when one candidate is too popular, that individual has the ability to gather an exuberant amount of votes which will cause other candidates to fail even though they had a chance of winning if only the party vote had been more equal.[xxxiii]

V. Political Parties

- **Newly formed parties and coalitions**

The idea of political parties was not too popular in pre-modern Japan. Reischauer writes that it "suggested disharmony or even subversion. Commoners were supposed to have no role in politics and samurai to serve their lords without question."[xxxiv] It was not until late Tokugawa times and the Meiji that the Japanese became favorable to political parties.

The first political party was started by Itagaki in 1874. This party became known as the 'freedom and people's rights movement'. Okuma started a second party movement in 1882. Out of these two sources Japan witnessed two major traditional party currents. Itagaki controlled the early Diets under the Liberal Party and then in 1900 formed the Seiyukai. The Seiyukai continued to dominate Diet politics and in 1918 produced the first full party prime minister in Hara. After the war it became known as the Liberal Party. The other party became known as the Democratic Party after the war. In 1955 this party and the Liberals combined to form the Liberal Democratic Party or Jiminto (a name that reveals its double origin).[xxxv]

In 1922 the Communist Party emerged only to be banned two years later. In 1925 a number of socialist parties were founded which later coalesced to form the Social Mass

Party in 1932. In 1940 these parties were forced to dissolve and enter the officially sponsored Imperial Rule Assistance Association. Soon after the end of the war the Communist Party started up again and the Social Mass Party also reemerged as the Socialist Party. The party split a few times and eventually formed the Democratic Socialist Party in 1960.

In spite of the long reign of the Liberal Democrat Party and its incredible strength, a number of factions frequently arose. Normally four or five major ones would take place ranging in size from 40 and 100 members in the two houses together. It must be noted, however, that "only a few members of the Diet refuse to join factions, and they usually have little personal success."[xxxvi]

VI. Politicians

- **Recruit Scandal / Money Laundering**

An owner of a professional talent-search firm was accused of providing generous 'loans' and 'gifts' of new stock issues to the entire LDP leadership along with 13 of Japan's highest ranking civil servants. Due to all of the offerings that had been accepted, the prime minister at the time had to resign and for this he received a million dollars a year. Once the Recruit Scandal was publicly known, the long domination of the LDP fell apart.[xxxvii]

Lucian W. Pye, author of the article, "Money Politics and Transitions to Democracy in East Asia" writes, "Prior to the Recruit Scandal, the Japanese public was aware of the money raising practices of their politicians but they had accepted them as part of what is normal in public life. It was believed to be natural for those with

resources to honor the nation's leaders with gifts that in turn made democratic politics possible."[xxxviii] The LDP lost for the first time in the upper house elections in 1989. Finally, in 1993, the LDP was brought under fire and ultimately lost their monopoly of power. The end result of the Recruit Scandal was that it made a more "vibrant multiparty system"[xxxix] but it has also, as Pye writes, "made the public more openly critical, even somewhat cynical and disgusted with their politicians. The leaders are no longer seen as respected authority figures, nor are they to be unquestionably trusted with power."[xl]

VII. Conclusion

- **Japan's Future for a Stable Democracy**

Now that there is no longer one dominant party, the LDP, the Japanese citizens are able to get more involved in the political system. Especially with the media's focus on the Recruit Scandal, from the standpoint of the Japanese citizens who are eligible voters, Japanese men and women are now more vocal about their discontent with the system and politicians. It is due to the media's involvement that I feel that the Japanese will take a greater interest in political issues and the politicians that run in the campaigns previous to the elections. With this resurgence of interest, Japan is likely to secure a stable democracy as long as the people of Japan remain on top of their political system and continue to be active in elections.

From the standpoint of politicians, it is not likely that business matters will be able to take place behind closed doors as it once did. The public is fully aware of the individuals who were corrupt in the past and it is sure to make a stable democracy that

future politicians remain intent on focusing on political issues aside from money laundering issues.

It does not seem too favorable of an opinion that the public of Japan wishes to return to the reign of one dominant party. If the people of Japan remain focused on a stable democracy, it can be accomplished if the newly organized coalitions fight for seats in the Diet and not lose sight of the fact that the days of the LDP's dominance are part of the countries past and not the future.

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[xi] Reischauer, 242 Reischauer, Edwin O. 1988. *The Japanese Today*. Massachusetts: Belknap Press.

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