

Democracy in Japan

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Brief Background

Most people seem to be under the impression that democracy was introduced to Japan at the end of World War II. Well – not so much introduced as imposed upon the Japanese people by the Allied Forces.

While this may be true to some extent, it is important to note that the seeds of democracy already existed in Japanese society in the early 20th century, which explains the relative ease of transition to democratic processes and receptivity of democratic institutions.

Another factor that facilitated the transition from an ultranationalist, militarist government was the retention of the imperial system. Although now mostly symbolic, it nevertheless had a stabilizing effect for the Japanese people at a time of great turbulence and change in the aftermath of war.

Democracy Takes Root in Japan

It has now been more than 60 years since democracy firmly established itself in Japanese society. What is the quality, reality, and effectiveness of this democracy? Is there any cause for concern?

Looking at some of the common measures of democratic states, we find Japan rates quite respectably among stable democracies in terms of its democratic principles, structures, and processes:

1. the educational and literacy levels are high for both men and women;
2. the Japanese Constitution guarantees the rights of both men and women to participate equally in the political process, the labor market, and education.
3. civic movements have been quite active, resulting in the emergence of recognized NGOs and NPOs
4. freedom of the press – combined with high literacy levels, the Japanese people have had easy and regular access to news media;

5. regular participation in an established electoral process; the elections are generally regarded as being fair and free of corruption or violence;

Areas of Concern

I do not wish to dwell too much further on the ‘working’ aspects of our democracy, for I believe some of the problematic aspects will be of much greater interest and value to delegates from other countries.

1. Complacency of Japanese citizens

This may perhaps be expected of any stable democracy. One might say that democracy has become so well rooted in Japanese society and in the consciousness of its people that few perceive a need to take concerted action to protect it.

But as we all know, democracy is not a fixed, immovable state; even when it has been firmly established, it can deteriorate over time – it must be vigilantly and actively safeguarded.

It seems there is a natural trajectory for democracies – the struggle to take root, the expansion and fortification of democratic institutions. But then, the more a democracy becomes firmly rooted, the greater the likelihood that the next generations, not having experienced the hard labor of securing that democracy, will become complacent.

There are two types of complacency or passivity among the Japanese:

- An approving complacency:

Due to the long-standing rule of the majority party, the LDP, its supporters know what to expect – business as usual.

- A cynical complacency:

The other reason for not being actively engaged in the political process is disillusionment. Again, because of the one-party dominance for more than 50 years, voters, particularly younger voters, are feeling it would be useless to vote, as this situation will never change.

2. Effective disparity in voting rights

The Japanese electoral system is a combination of proportional representation and small constituency districts. As first conceived, this system was meant to ensure that the number of Upper House members reflected the population size of each district.

But of course, as in many countries there have been demographic shifts away from rural areas to urban areas such that we see, for example:

- a rural district of 700,000 with 2 Upper House representatives
- an urban district ten times the size, 7,000,000, with only 10 UH representatives.

In other words, strictly from the standpoint of population statistics, the rural district has twice the representation per capita in the Upper House as compared with the urban district.

As a result, we find that the Japanese political base is to be found:

- in rural, not urban areas;
- in agricultural, not industrial areas;
- in more traditionally conservative, rather than progressive areas.

This weighted representation explains the extent of government subsidies to farmers and the disproportionate allocation of public works to these areas. As one might expect these rural areas are also where you will find the more conservative constituencies.

Having spent part of my childhood and serving as a mayor in one of the most politically conservative prefectures of Japan before going into national politics, I am quite familiar with the fact that the communities in these rural areas are still significantly dominated by Confucian values of obligation and duty, of avoiding conflict and preserving the status quo.

The shift in demographics has had an impact not only on the effective weight of each vote, but on voting patterns as well. As I mentioned earlier, the complacency of Japanese citizens has led to lower voter turnouts overall, but the decrease is more prominent in urban areas than rural ones. From the start, the rural, agricultural areas always recorded the highest voter turnouts. In the last 30 years, this number has dropped from roughly 80% to 70%.

This contrasts with the older generations living in urban areas, which has fallen 20% over the same period, from 70% to 50%. There is an even greater drop in the voter turnout of younger generations in urban areas – a 30% decrease, from 60% to 30%.

There is not much surprise in these figures – I am sure similar patterns emerge in other countries as well. There is usually a higher voter turnout in those areas where the median age of the voting bloc is high, where there are strong generational ties to local politicians. The lower voter turnout is common in those areas with little ties to political families, where there is a higher concentration of younger voters. However, it is problematic when we combine the two points:

1. the disproportionately high representation per capita in rural areas;
2. the relatively larger decrease in voter turnout in urban areas.

Together, they combine to effectively give the rural districts 3 times the voting power of urban areas.

Implications of these developments

What is interesting to note here is that the Japanese democratic structures and procedures were originally conceived to provide the greatest level of equality among voters. Indeed, the United States had conceived of this ideal model of democracy for Japan at a time when the same equalities, such as equal voting rights, equal access to education, etc., did not even exist in their own country. Mechanisms to ensure the protection of individual rights and to prevent the abuses of power were also thoughtfully designed and put in place.

Despite the original intent and structural safeguards, we now see that the system has also produced some unforeseen, undesirable consequences. The demographic shifts have resulted in a significant portion of the Japanese political power base resting in those less-populated, more traditionally conservative areas.

This, in turn, adversely affects the likelihood of breaking the status quo of the longtime one-party governance in Japan.

It is, in fact, a dangerous downward spiral unless we make a concerted effort now to stem this gradual erosion of democracy:

- the longer we allow this trend to continue, the more difficult it will become to reverse;
- the longer the status quo remains, the more disillusioned the younger urban voters will be, the less inclined they will be to engage in the political process;
- this, in turn, gives even more weight to those voters in the rural areas;
- and the cycle continues

Obvious breaches of power, intentional acts of disenfranchisement are, in a sense, much easier to fight. In the case of Japan, the erosion of democracy has been masked by all the democratic structures, laws, and procedures.

Necessary next steps

First, it is necessary to bring this resulting inequality to the attention of the public. The opposition parties have been working on this, but the media should also become more actively involved in heightening the public's awareness.

Next, we urgently need to develop the appropriate measures for the equitable allocation of votes based on the changing demographics. There are, in fact, mechanisms already in place, but these are under the control of the governing party – which makes no sense at all.

The present circumstances have only served to undermine the public's faith in the value of their vote. Ultimately, we must dispel the disillusionment, frustration, and cynicism in order to restore their faith in both the value of each and every vote, as well as the democratic system as a whole.

There is still great hope – according to recent opinion polls, the opposition parties enjoy a level of popular support that significantly exceeds that of the governing administration, thus giving us reason to believe that the time is approaching for real change.

To conclude, let me just say that we must be duly vigilant, not only in the establishment of democratic practices and systems, but also in their maintenance. I hope that the lessons learned in Japan can be of value to other countries approaching this stage in the course of democracy.