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## Understanding Japan's Civil Service System: Norms, Meritocracy, and Institutional Change<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article aims to elucidate the tradition of Japan's public administration emphasizing the civil service system. A number of studies explain the impact of the tradition (norms, values, and institutions), in shaping the process and result of public administration reform. By applying the historical institutionalism perspective, this study reveals how the legacy of the past, the tradition promoted by the Meiji Restoration, creates the new tradition of public administration. This study selects Japan as a typical case representing Asian developmentalists. The remarkable Meiji restoration marked the process of adoption and adjustment of the Germanic traditions in the bureaucracy modernization. Norm institutionalization has established the new norms and civil service system. The basic norms consist of legality, consensus, and seniority. It develops the "kyaria" denoting recruitment, selection, and promotion influenced by seniority, long term performance, and prestigious university recommendation and produces competent and dominant mandarins in the policy process. However, the parliament continuously initiates the reform to reduce the mandarin's domination and heighten political control over the bureaucracy. The reform has not yet changed the power balance of two institutions since the "kyaria's" embeddedness in Japan's polity produces two consequences. First, it contributes to public administration modernization. The mandarin's outstanding performance increases political legitimacy and social acceptance to the "kyaria" system. Second, the parliament cannot drastically reduce the mandarin's role since the lifetime employment model enriches them with knowledge and experience of the government affairs. Conducting cautious reform and, at the same time, working closely with the mandarin are the primary reform strategy of the parliament.

### Keywords:

public administration reform; meritocracy; civil service system; the historical institutionalism

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## Introduction

The basic idea of civil service reform emphasizes the need to develop fundamental values and institutions that conform with the democratic principle. However, the reform for creating professionalism, integrity, and competent civil service is not a simple process, even for the advanced democratic countries. Belief systems and norms embedded in policymakers as well as the civil servant, social, and political context (as well as the existing institution of the civil service) have shaped the process and results of the reform (Massey, 2011). Consequently, the focus of reform, strategy, and its impact vary among countries (Horton, 2011). Responding to the dynamic nature of civil service reform, many public administration scholars have been studying civil service system reform beyond the scope of the civil service system as a personnel system of the government (Raadschelders, Toonen, & Van Der Meer, 2015).

Painter (2010) and Drechsler (2013) reveal the impact of the tradition, or so-called norms, values and institutions, in shaping the process and result of public administration reform. Further, they conclude that Western traditions (Anglo-American and European Continental) shape the administrative reform in Asia, Africa, and Latin America countries. However, the reform does not take place in a vacuum situation. Existing public administration traditions of the countries, indeed, determine the reform minded-actors' preference in adopting the reform project promoted by the Western polity (Yesilkagit, 2010). In this sense, civil service reform and its result designates the combination between the existing norms, values and institutions and the imported Western tradition (Raadschelders, Toonen, & Van Der Meer, 2015). Such norm interfusion creates new norms of the civil service through the institutionalization process.

Following the argument, this article explains how Japanese traditions determine civil service system development? Studies on public administration reform, particularly the civil service system, have shown Japan's civil service system as the typical case. The combination of local norms and the Western (European Continental) has resulted in distinctive features of public administration (Painter, 2010). The remarkable restoration of the Meiji era (1868-1912) marked the process of adoption and adjustment of the Germanic tradition in the bureaucracy modernization (Akizuki, 2010). The combination of two traditions produced a vital role of a central bureaucracy that later contributed to the success of the Japanese developmentalist state (Painter, 2010). This study approaches Japan as a case representing Asian developmentalist states, such as South Korea (Minns, 2006; Burns, 2015). Pivotal roles of senior Japanese bureaucrats (the mandarin) carry out three basic norms: legality, consensus, and seniority. Such norms create the "kyaria" system

designating senior officials' recruitment and promotion system based on seniority and long-term performance (Wright, 1999; Mishima, 2013; Mishima, 2017).

Studies on the contribution of norms and belief systems to develop the civil service system have been academic concerns of many scholars. Nakamura (2003) reveals how the historical development of Japan's elite-based bureaucracy undermines civil service reform. Painter (2010) concludes that the interfusion between Japanese and Western tradition has resulted in Japan's hybrid characteristic's civil service consisting of bureaucracy's transcendence and sectionalism. Furthermore, Akizuki (2010) and Imanaka (2010) analyse the impact of the past legacy, which was marked by the Meiji Restoration, to modernize Japan's public administration. Meanwhile, Burns (2015) elucidates how Confucianism, which is the belief system of the Japanese polity, and the developmentalist state orientation produce the central role of the bureaucracy in economic development. This article aims to enrich the civil service system study using historical institutionalism by studying previous research on the civil service system. The approach reveals how the legacy of the past, which is norms, values, and belief system promoted by the Meiji Restoration, creates the new tradition of Japan's public administration. Emphasizing the civil service system determines the civil service system (Raadschelders, Toonen, & Van Der Meer, 2015)

Studies on civil service systems in various countries, both in the advanced as well as the developing democracies, show a variation in the norms-belief system, institution, as well as the operational-managerial level of the human resource (Massey, 2011). In fact, the differences also exhibit themselves among the Western democratic countries, such England (Sylvia, 2011; Parry, 2011; Sausman & Locke., 2004) and the United States ( Jay M. Shafritz, Riccucci, Rosenbloom, & Hyde, 2001); (Halligan, 2003;

Anagnoson, 2011) . The civil service systems of Asian, African, and Latin American countries have its distinctiveness, although they adopt the universal merit principle.

The variation of civil service systems cannot be separated from the tradition, institutional evolution, history, as well as external pressure (Mahoney, 2001; Painter & Peters., 2010; and Horton, 2011). Painter and Peters (2010) explained that the regime development and institutional evolution denote a path-dependent change. The institutional reform does not automatically replace the established institution but creates the institutional imprint that designates its norms. The institutional imprint or so-called as the legacy of the past will determine the subsequent reform (Mahoney, 2001; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Following the premise of path-dependent, Painter and Peters (2010) concluded that the distinct feature of the civil service system in Asian countries is the result of the combination between local norms-belief system and the Western. The combining tradition has shaped the ingredient of the civil service system, such as Japan (Kim, 2002; and Nakamura A. , 2003).

For examining how the tradition of Japan's public administration contributes to the reform and creates distinctive features of the civil service system, this article consists of four parts. First, theoretical discussion on historical institutionalism, meritocracy, and civil service reform. Second, the institutionalization of the Japanese public administration norms advocated by the Meiji Emperor; third, sequential public administration reform as the response to the mandarin domination in the policy process; and the last part, explaining the impact of the "kyaria" system to the civil service system.

### **Meritocracy, the Civil Service Reform, and the Historical Institutionalism Perspective**

Studies on the civil service system have extended beyond the focus of human resource

management. Many prominent scholars, such as Bekke, Perry, & Toonen (1996); Raadschelders & Meer (2007); and Raadschelders, Toonen, & Meer, (2015) explained that the new institutionalism had provided a comprehensive analytical framework in studying the civil service system. One of the influential conceptions was described by Morgan and Perry (1998) as quoted by Bekke, Perry, and Toonen (1996, p. 2):

“...civil service system formally as mediating institutions that mobilize human resources in the service of the affairs of the state in the given territory. ...civil service systems are structures, that is, a combination of rules and authority relationships that act as bridges between the polity[ies] or state and specific administrative organizations.”

Following the conception of the civil service system, one should understand the essence of the new institutionalism perspective, particularly the historical institutionalism. Institutions can be defined, “...as the formal or informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the polity or political economy”. Following the definition, thus, institutions can be formed as (Hall & Taylor, 1996), “...range from the rules of a constitutional order or the standard operating procedures of a bureaucracy to the conventions governing trade union behavior or bank-firm relations”. In the same token, Kasner (1998), quoted by Bekke, Perry, dan Toonen (1996, p.3), describes an institution as follows: “the derivative character of individual and the persistence of something—behavioral patterns, roles, rules, organizational charts, ceremonies—over time.” From such perspective, Bekke, Perry, and Toonen (1996) elucidate that studies of civil service systems highlight how the system determines public officer behavior and how citizen perception of the civil service and other social institutions shape the development of the civil service system.

The historical institutionalism perspective stresses a reciprocal relationship between the social-political context, the existing institution, and the actor’s behavior. Such a relationship denotes the evolution of established institutions and actors in responses to a changing political landscape in a temporal manner (Thelen, 2004). In the same token, Pierson (2000) and Thelen (1999) explain that continuing reciprocal relations throughout time will determine the institutional development that produces formal rules, policies, and norms.

A civil service reform intends to institutionalize merit principles into public servant behavior and the institutional arrangement of civil service. Reforming the civil service system in many countries is a significant part of a democratic transformation (Shepard, 2003). Universalism, professionalism, and public integrity are the primary principle of meritocracy that supports public performance in delivering services. Shepard (2003, p. 7) provides a solid definition of meritocracy, as described below:

“...insulation from undue political influence and – to the extent possible – arrangements to promote the productivity of civil servants...entrance to the service based on competitive exams; protection of civil servants from arbitrary removal; protection of their political neutrality; policing of this service by an independent body.”

Historically, meritocracy was promoted to transform public administration following the political change of continental European countries and the United States at the beginning of the 19th century. The changing social-political-economic context had created a basic idea of meritocracy (Shepard, 2003). First, creating government efficiency and public integrity in delivering public services, and second, developing a just government and free from the political parochialism in maintaining public affairs. The idea has been influenced by the success of the



French revolution that diminished the absolute monarchy (Horton, 2011).

In the modern era, the development of meritocracy is addressing the impact of political interference on the civil service. New democratic Asian countries have been striving to deal with the patron-client relationship that shapes the relationships between politicians and bureaucrats. The critical issue is the prevalent authoritarianism that shapes the belief system of the civil service institution. Thus, the reform is not automatically replacing the old norms since it has embedded in the public bureaucracy (Brinkerhoff & Goldsmith, 2002). The interaction between the embedded norms and institutions and the new value of meritocracy in the reform process becomes a critical issue in Asian democratic countries, such as Japan and Indonesia. As Peters and Painter (2010) and (Drechsler, 2013) explain, the interaction has resulted in a distinct feature of Asian public administration. Thus, understanding the realm of Asian civil service should apply a framework covering not only the human resource management level but also a macro and mezzo level of analysis.

Bekke, Perry, and Toonen (1996); Raadschelders, Toonen and van der Meer (2007), and van der Meer, Raadschelders and Toonen, (2015) promote a framework underlying three levels of the civil service system. First, the constitutional level highlights the civil service system as the belief system, norm, or a symbol. According to Boin & Christensen (2008), norms can have three forms as follows, first, cognitive describing how the practice and routine help actors to meet the objective. The second form is the regulative. It guides actors to exercise the existing practice routine, and third, normative denoting the appropriateness of the practice routine. The norm institutionalization is taking place through an agreement process in which actors reach a consensus of norms validity and functionality. Thus, the consensus will lead to

the norms appropriateness within the social and political context (Finnemore and Sikkink, quoted by Boin and Christensen, 2008).

The norms institutionalization is a dynamic process involving actors' preferences and their response to the social and political context. At least three conditions will determine actors to accept the norm (Boin & Christensen, 2008). First, actors believe that the norm is representative of the prevalent practice routine. In this context, the actor will adopt the norm when they ensure that the norm's advocate has social-political legitimacy and knowledge. Second, the norm should exhibit its validity and functionality in its relations to tradition and fundamental values of organizations since it represents the organization's objective. Furthermore, last third, the norm institutionalization satisfies the power constellation among competing actors within an organization or polity.

The norm institutionalization will produce a new practice-routine of the organization. Thus, to ensure the embeddedness of norms to the organization, the actor will translate it to various organizational instruments, such as policy, operational-routine, control mechanism, training manual, recruitment, dismissal, and promotion mechanism. Further, the embedded norm leads to organizational coherency (Boin & Christensen, 2008). Such argumentation stresses that a civil service system marks the dominant norms or values of society.

The belief system, thus, will shape the idea and objective of the civil service system. However, the norm institutionalization is not a linear process but dynamic in nature. The process invites the pros and cons of competing actors. The resistance arises due to the norm's incompatibility with the existing culture and practice routine of the organization (Boin & Christensen, 2008). Such dynamic nature takes place through the institutional mechanism of the change (Immergut, 1998).

Second, collective choice level or institutional level. The framework approaches the civil service system as a political institution that provides an arena for competing actors to promote their intention. As an institution, the civil service system designates norms, roles, and rules of the game shape the actor's behaviour and performance. The system consists of four aspects: authority, public servant functions, accountability, and the roles of public servants in the policy-making process. Third, the operational level stresses human resource management. The level concentrates on recruitment, selection, promotion, training-development as well as individual performance. One of the pivotal reforms in this level is improving public servant competency through an open selection for filling a public position.

From the historical institutionalism postulate, the change at the institutional and operational levels denote the dynamic institutional mechanism. According to Immergut (1998, p. 18), institutional mechanism designates "...structuring options, calculating of interests and formation of goals by rules, structures, norms, and ideas." Thus, institutional changes relate to changing social and political landscape that allows the competing actors to utilize the existing institution to gain their preferences. The institution has an essential role since it shapes actors' choice and action, but at the same time, actors' maneuvers will impact the fate of the institution shortly. Therefore, actors' preferences should not be seen as static but dynamic since their preference and action respond to the existing institutional setting (Immergut, 1998; Thelen, 1999). Thus, institutional change is taking place due to the actors' decision to adopt the change.

## **Methods**

In studying the civil service reform and outcome of Japan, this research applies to a case study. Gerring (2007, p.20) defines a case study as follows, "...may be understood as the intensive

study of a single case where the purpose of that study is – at least in part – to shed light on a larger class of cases (a population)." This study selects Japan's meritocracy and civil service system by using the typical case method. The typical case study emphasizes a case representing similar cases. This study intends to reveal the causal mechanism in the observed phenomena (Seawright and Gering, 2008). Japan represents cases that describe how the combination of endogenous public administration tradition and European Continental, notably the Germanic tradition, create the merit system of Asian countries, mainly the East Asian region (Painter and Peters, 2010). Such a combination has resulted in Japan's strong central bureaucracy and contributed to the success of the developmentalist state (Minns, 2006).

## **Results and Discussion**

Institutional configuration of Japan's public administration has resulted in a strong central bureaucracy denoting the dominant roles of the mandarin (the senior bureaucrat) in the policy process (Nakamura, 2003; and Mishima, 2017). The institutional evolution can be traced from the Meiji Emperor modernization's initiative to diminish the samurai feudal system and to establish a new bureaucracy to support the empire. To end the samurai's dominant role, the emperor urged to recruit a young-talented employee to serve the empire. The modernization or known as the Meiji restoration involved prominent scholars from Europe who promoted the vital role of bureaucracy and the Japanese constitutional monarchy. One of the significant decisions of modernization was the appointment of the first prime minister who managed the empire's interests along with the establishment of the imperial university. The university was dedicated to train and educate the cadre of a public servant (Akizuki, 2010; Shimizu, 2020). These two imperial decisions stressed Emperor Meiji's

intention to replace the samurai's predominant political influence over the empire. Nonetheless, modernization did not diminish the basic norm of the samurai that is to serve the empire. Instead, the restoration utilized the norm to build public employees' mental models.

A combination of the Meiji's norms and the Western produced a new characteristic of the bureaucracy. The institutionalization of the bureaucracy's roles and function had resulted in the dominant mandarin roles in the future (Mishima, 2013). Later on, features of Japanese bureaucracy triggered parliamentary members' actions to decrease the extending roles of the mandarin. Members of Parliament (MPs) argued that the mandarins are too exclusive and tend to devote themselves to their ministerial interest instead of obliging to the elected government mission (Painter, 2010). Thus, reducing the central bureaucracy's dominant role was the pivotal issue of civil service reform, particularly after the 1918 national election. The election established the ruling party to run the cabinet. Having the parliamentary majority, the government strengthened its power to control the public bureaucracy and displace the emperor's predominant power over the civil service system (Kim, 2002; Imanaka, 2010).

Public administration reform has been a national political agenda that has shaped the MPs and the mandarin relationship since the 2000s. Reconfiguring the delegation-accountability model denoting politics and administrative relations, reducing the mandarin's dominant roles in the policy process, and re-arranging the civil service system, particularly the "kyaria" system, are primary objectives of the reform (Mishima, 2017). Nonetheless, the reform is not an easy task due to the mandarin's persistence and the predominant "kyaria" system in shaping Japanese bureaucracy. As a result, the public administration reform has not yet succeeded in reducing bureaucracy's pivotal roles.

From the historical institutionalism point of view, this article reveals how the dynamic nature of reciprocal relations between the prevalent dominant roles of the senior bureaucrat and the MPs determine the civil service reform. First, the central bureaucracy's vital role has its roots from the long tradition of the Meiji and institutional evolution of the bureaucracy (Akizuki, 2010; Nakamura & Kikuchi, 2011; Burns, 2015). Second, the Meiji restoration marked the institutional evolution leading to the creation of the "kyaria" system. The system produces the mandarin who dominates public bureaucracy and policy processes in its relations to MPs (Nakamura, 2003; Painter, 2010; Mishima, 2017). Third, the development of the "kyaria" shapes Japan's public administration's distinctive characteristic: ministerial loyalism. It represents the strong commitment of bureaucrats to their home ministry at the expense of the whole elected government. Further, it undermined the prime minister's political authority in maintaining ministries since the mandarin control the bureaucracy (Nakamura, 2003; Masujima, 2005; Painter, 2010; Mishima, 2017).

### **The Norm and Symbol of the Civil Service**

The collapse of the predominant samurai's feudal system had opened the opportunity to modernize Japanese bureaucracy. Emperor Meiji and his local lords developed the bureaucracy to serve the empire and strengthen the emperor's power over the bureaucracy (Akizuki, 2010; Shimizu, 2020). The internalization of the new norm to displace the samurai domination was the principal objective of the restoration. Following Boin & Christensen (2008), the internalization through modernization can be explained as follows: first, displacing the dominant samurai role and recruiting the young talented employee to work in the bureaucracy gained societal acceptance. The Meiji's leading role in advocating the new norm of a public servant was the main factor of the acceptance.

Second, the Japanese empire was the Japanese belief system; thus, becoming a public servant is part of the societal obligation. The end of the samurai era and the role of a public employee in serving the emperor evolved into new bureaucracy norms. Third, to bolster the foundation of the new norm, the emperor appointed a prime minister for the first time whose task was to manage the bureaucracy for delivering Meiji's interest. Furthermore, the Meiji Emperor established the imperial university of Tokyo, known as Tokyo University, to train and educate the public servant cadre. Such new recruitment and education efforts were part of the Meiji's restoration mission to replace the samurai and enhance the role of a public servant. As a result, the Tokyo University's function marked the institutionalization of Japan's new civil service system.

The Meiji government era (1868-1912) marked the modernization of Japan's public administration. In 1885, the emperor endorsed the first cabinet system and appointed its prime minister. Further, the new cabinet started to build a centralized public administration across the empire (Imanaka, 2010). The restoration also emphasized three basic norms of public bureaucracy, which are legality, consensus, and seniority. Later on, seniority had resulted in the vital role of senior bureaucrats in the policy process and development (Akizuki, 2010). The modernization of Japan's public administration can be traced from the Meiji era in the 19th century. Before the restoration, the samurai (the administrative class) controlled the monarchy was the samurai aristocrat<sup>2</sup> (Akizuki, 2010).

The dominant role of samurai gained its glory at the end of the Edo era. Shogun (military general) Tokugawa (the prominent clan)

developed the government's feudal system to run the monarchy. However, the system undermined the power of the emperor over the empire's affairs and the bureaucracy. Following Tokugawa's collapse due to conflict among its local lords, the major local lords initiated to displace Tokugawa's system and built a new government under the direct emperor's control. However, the reform known as Meiji restoration did not diminish the prevalent rido tradition of the samurai. Instead, the emperor and his supporters utilized it to establish a new centralized government system under his control. Under the new government, the emperor appointed his local lords to post at the highest bureaucracy level. The highest position the local lords hold is the stronger trust of the emperor to them. As a result, they became a new elite of the monarchy bureaucracy (Akizuki, 2010; Imanaka, 2010).

The Japanese civil service system began to adopt the merit principle in 1877, remarked by the competitive examination for joining the Japanese empire. The recruitment aimed to fill the senior public official (*kountoukan*) and the middle-lower level of public officials (*hanninkan*) (Kim, 2002; Imanaka, 2010; Shimizu, 2020). In 1885 the first prime minister (PM), Hirobumi Ito, declared that recruitment of the empire employee (the bureaucracy) should apply to a competitive selection. A year later, the emperor established the Tokyo Imperial University to educate young talented public employees, develop knowledge, and improve human resource competency to serve the monarchy. For centuries, the recruitment process was directly under the emperor's control, and even the prime minister could not intervene in the process (Imanaka, 2010).

A school for public bureaucracy education had started before the university opened. In 1882, the school invited a prominent expert of law (*staatsrechtswissenschaft*) from Germany. Karl Rathgen delivered the German *cameralist* ('art of the state secretariat') (Akizuki, 2010; Imanaka,

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<sup>2</sup> Samurai are the military officials who have held high-class status since the Edo Era (1603-1863). Literally, samurai means "saburau" or "to serve." See Imanaka (2010) and Akizuki (2010).



2010). Further, PM Ito had also invited Lorenz von Stein, the German scholar, who helped the prime minister strengthen Japan's constitutional monarchy. Acknowledging von Stein's idea, the prime minister translated the idea into the Japanese language and published it in the book as guidance for bureaucrats (Akizuki, 2010).

The adoption of Germanic tradition during the modernization of Japan's public administration had resulted in distinct features of the bureaucracy. The distinct features designate, first, absolute loyalty to the emperor; thus, the bureaucrat's function is "the emperor's servant;" second, the degree of the emperor's trust to the bureaucrat determined its position in the bureaucratic ladder. The strongest trust the higher position in the bureaucracy. Third, meritocracy in terms of competitive selection in the recruitment process; and fourth, Japan's public administration did not have a central agency to manage the public servant. The authority of human resource management is in the hand of each public agency or ministry. Therefore, such a model gives broad authority to the ministry for managing its employees. One of the significant policies is a tendency of senior bureaucrats in each ministry to look for public employee candidates from prestigious universities and their alma mater.

The distinct feature of bureaucracy adopted three basic norms: legality, consensus, and seniority (Akizuki, 2010; Burns, 2015). Legality stresses that public agencies' activity should follow the rule; therefore, the bureaucrat could only decide if only allowed by law. Consensus denotes the process of policy-making in which bureaucrats tend to accommodate various interests, particularly voiced by MPs. The consensus became the basic norms since the national election in 1918 when the parliament initiated the reform to balance power relations between parliament and the bureaucracy and to take control over civil service from the emperor. Meanwhile, seniority represents a prevalent

tradition of the ancient Japanese village. It was translated to the bureaucracy entailing the restoration. Seniority does not describe the biological age of the bureaucrat but the year of recruitment. Bureaucrats who enter the ministry in a recruitment year will group a class (*doki*). They compete to gain the highest level of the ministry, which is the administrative vice minister. Further, part of the seniority is senior bureaucrats' vibrant role in the recruitment process, selecting the candidate to work in the ministry.

The evolving characteristics and norms had resulted in the "kyaria" system of civil service. The system places the bureaucrat who graduated from the prestigious university, such as Tokyo and Kyoto University, and seniority to obtain a privilege for reaching the top of the bureaucracy ladder (Mishima, 2017). It becomes the embedded norm of the bureaucracy as well as the Japanese polity. For instance, after World War II in 1947, the US delegation promoted civil service reform. Nonetheless, the parliament rejected the proposal and argued that the US initiative did not match the Japanese bureaucracy that adopted lifetime employment and seniority-based promotion principles. Meanwhile, the US' reform initiative emphasized the flexible labor market (Akizuki, 2010).

During the Meiji era, the modernization of Japanese public administration created prestigious college graduates' dominance in the bureaucracy. For recruiting competent and qualified employees, PM Ito delivered the emperor's intention to establish the Imperial University of Tokyo as a school for prospective public servants. The employee later became the bureaucratic elite that determined the Japanese government (Imanaka, 2010; Mishima, 2017). This tradition is institutionalized and becomes the primary norm in the Japanese civil service system. Further, the tradition was part of the Japanese belief system that places academic credentials as social prestige. Thus, the dominance

of the alumnus from a prestigious university in the bureaucracy increased public trust over the government (Mishima, 2017).

Public acknowledgment regarding the bureaucracy is a response to senior bureaucrats' vital role (the mandarins) in Japan's development. As a result, six out of nine prime ministers from 1945 to 1972 were senior bureaucrats who served in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI), and Ministry of Transportation (Akizuki, 2010; Imanaka, 2010). The mandarin played essential roles in leading the nation out of severe crisis after World War II. Even in the 1970s, the success of Japan's development became a model of industrial countries (Akizuki, 2010).

### **The Civil Service Development: Embedded Norms and the Institutional Mechanism**

After the 1994 electoral reform, which highlighted politicians and voter relations and the two-party competition system, MPs pushed the reform regarding parliamentary and bureaucracy relations (Mishima, 2017). Following the reform initiative, the parliament sequentially has been initiating public administration reform since the 2000s. The Central Government Reform of 2001 marked the parliament's reform initiative, and for more than a decade, the parliament sequentially enforces the reform. In 2014, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe conducted a significant revision on the National Public Service Law/Civil Service Law (*Kokka Koimun Ho*). Its main objectives are reconfiguring the delegation-accountability model in terms of politicians and the mandarin relation, decreasing the mandarin's dominant role in the policy process, and rearranging the civil service system focusing on "kyaria" system change (Mishima, 2017).

According to historical institutionalism argumentation, the "kyaria" system's embeddedness designates the institutional evolution of the civil service system. Applying

institutional mechanisms postulate, the norm institutionalization of Japan's bureaucracy occurs in a social and political context providing a favorable opportunity for the actor to build the norm. Therefore, in Japan's cases, the Meiji restoration was a starting phase to institutionalize the norm, entailing the collapse of the samurai feudal system that had weakened the emperor's power over the bureaucracy (Akizuki, 2010; Shimizu, 2020). Gradually, the embedded norm grows to be the "kyaria" system.

Later on, the Japanese bureaucracy system establishes mandarin domination over national affairs. The mandarin's success in leading the countries to be one of the advanced industrial countries after World War II bolstered public support for them and heightened their political and social legitimacy. The growing power of the mandarin at the expense of the parliament triggered politicians to reform the bureaucracy. They intended to put the mandarin under parliamentary oversight (Nakamura, 2003; Masujima, 2005). Thus, the civil service reform results from reciprocal relation between "kyaria" and politicians in reconfiguring the parliament and the bureaucracy relation and reducing the mandarin domination.

The need to conduct civil service reform has been a primarily political agenda of the nation following the electoral reform of 1994. A high-ranking member of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) stressed that the reform could start with the civil service's reorganization. The former minister in charge of administrative reform, Watanabe Michioi, emphasized the severe public bureaucracy problems that demanded the reform (Nakamura and Kikuchi, 2011; Mishima, 2017). Nakamura and Kikuchi (2011) note that the agenda for civil service reform has been a public concern in the past ten years. The civil service came under attack due to its dominant roles (Masujima, 2005). However, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) indicated that the LDP government's

inertia in promoting reforms was more due to the strong influence of the bureaucracy and the lack of understanding of high-ranking officials in the cabinet in implementing the reforms.

Imanaka (2010), who observes the Japanese civil service, explains that the government has been promoting the civil service since the 2000s. The Japanese reform agenda emphasized four focal points; first, restructuring the civil service system. This policy covered job classifications, improving the recruitment, the performance evaluation, and payroll system, developing a performance-based organization, creating the civil service “fast-track” model, and building an education-training system to support the civil service to increase knowledge and competency. Second, the reform promoted the open recruitment of civil service. The objective was to attract talented people to work in the government. Part of this policy was recruiting the best employee from the private sector, increasing the woman’s quota in the civil service, and promoting a work and family time balance. This policy also allowed the public employee to work in the private sector for a certain period as part of the learning process to improve individual capability (Imanaka, 2010). Third, the reform set clear rules regarding the mechanism for re-employing civil servants who have been working in the private sector to conduct an anti-lobbying mechanism. Fourth, institutional performance improvement. It underlined a “national strategy staff” to provide input for the prime minister when recruiting a public official to assist policy development (Imanaka, 2010).

As the first step, the GCR of 2001 highlighted strengthening the function of cabinet office in maintaining the civil service system, particularly the selection and promotion of senior bureaucrats and increasing the number of ministries’ political appointees. The law also stated a new system of ministry that assigned a parliamentary vice-minister (*seimukan*). It intended to increase the number of the political appointee and balance the

power relation with the mandarin. However, the reform has not yet satisfied the intention due to senior bureaucrats’ resistance in each ministry (Mishima, 2013; 2017).

The mandarin’s persistence in responding to the reform is the impact of the “*kyaria*” system in the civil service system that stresses a ministry’s authority in recruitment-selection and a closed-career model. In Japan’s system, the National Personnel Authority (NPA), established in 1948, recruits and selects public employees. Nonetheless, the final decision to accept or reject the candidate belongs to each ministry. Once a candidate passes the examination, the NPA will ask the respective ministry to conduct an interview, and the senior bureaucrat holds the authority to decide the result (Imanaka, 2010).

As a result, the system establishes a closed-career model in which a public servant spends a career in the ministry and strives to reach the highest level in the organization. Seniority and long-term performance determine a public servant’s promotion in the ministry (Jun & Muto, 1995; Mishima, 2017). The employee who achieves the top level of the bureaucracy is the one who passes the level 1 examination (Nakamura & Kikuchi, 2011). This type of bureaucrat will be labeled as “*kyaria*” officials, and they will have a clear path to post senior and upper-middle positions in the ministry. Therefore, “*kyaria*” officials will post in the strategic position, strengthening their roles and influence in the ministry. Consequently, a minister or political appointee officials who post in the ministry will depend on their mandarin to formulate and execute policies (Mishima, 2013, 2017).

The privatization was part of the civil service reform. For that purpose, the government stipulated the Outline of Civil Service Reform (*Kohmuin Seido Kaikaku Taiko*) in December 2001 (Nakamura & Kikuchi, 2011; Mishima, 2017). The outline underscored the intention to increase bureaucratic professionalism (Imanaka, 2010).

The intention was to challenge the generalist type of mandarin in dealing with the dynamic change of social and economic context. The domination of the “kyaria” official tends to hamper the non “kyaria” officials to lead a strategic assignment though they have the competency required (Mishima, 2013; 2017).

Further, in 2004, the government issued the Policy of Future Administrative Reform to improve the coordination mechanism amongst agencies for implementing the reform (Imanaka, 2010). The poor coordination represents ministerial loyalism, which is a strong commitment of bureaucrats to protect and promote their ministerial interest above all. Such behavior has its origin from the “kyaria” closed-career model and cohesive relation of senior and upper-middle bureaucrats (Nakamura, 2003; Mishima, 2017). The career model urges bureaucrats to strive for their organizational interests since it will protect their careers. Meanwhile, the cohesive relation is the impact of bureaucrats’ collective action to secure their ministry policies and programs (Jun & Muto, 1995) Thus, ministerial loyalty ensured that bureaucrats held common goals and policy agendas promoted by the ministry (Painter, 2010; Mishima, 2017). A senior middle-up bureaucrat is the main actor who controls and maintains ministerial interests (Mishima, 2017).

The sequential civil service reform had resulted in a new Law of National Public Service Law of 2007 (the NPSL) or known as the Civil Service Law (the CSL). Prime Minister Abe established ‘Discussion Group for Comprehensive Reform of the CSS,’ a non-government committee to design the reform plan, concomitantly, the parliament initiated a revision of the NPSL. As a result, the committee recommended a policy paper on Civil Service Reform that initiated a special committee of civil service reform. The committee served the prime minister by providing advice and recommendation to maintain the reform (Imanaka, 2010).

Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda took over the reform after Abe’s resignation. Fukuda urged the parliament to enact the Basic Law for Reform of the CSS in June 2008 (Imanaka, 2010; Mishima, 2017). The law stressed that the government should provide a civil service reform blueprint as the committee recommendation. Nonetheless, the reform has not yet appropriately worked because from 2009 to 2012, the parliament did not succeed at stipulating the blueprint. Eventually, the returning of Abe to the prime minister’s office in 2014 had resulted in the new NPSL (Mishima, 2017).

### **Meritocracy and the Japanese Mandarin**

The development of Japan’s public administration shows the institutional change and formation in civil service reform. The “kyaria” system results from the norm institutionalization that began in the Meiji restoration that, in turn, creates a distinctive feature of Japan’s public administration. On one side, the system represents the success of public administration modernization. It enhances the government’s capability to maintain development policy bringing the nations out of severe crisis post World War II and becoming an advanced industrial country. On the other side, the system has resulted in senior bureaucrats’ vital role in the policy process and its relation to the parliament. Sequential reform since 2000 exhibits the intention of the prime minister and elected official to reduce the mandarin’s domination and heighten the parliamentary control over the bureaucracy.

Such dynamic institutional reform shows not only the resilience of the mandarin in protecting their interest but also the contribution of the “kyaria” in creating a persistent civil service system. The “kyaria” produces four elements shaping the civil service system: autonomous and centralized personnel administration, seniority promotion, professional socialization, and post-retirement employment (Mishima, 2013; 2017).



First, an autonomous and centralized personnel administration denotes ministry authority in managing its employees (Mishima, 2013, 2017). The NPA holds the authority for recruitment and selection, but the final decision belongs to the ministry. Within the ministry, mandarin plays an essential role in the recruitment process since the minister relies on senior bureaucrats' recommendations before issuing the result. Such a mechanism designates the centralized decision making in the hand of ministry and the mandarin. Second, seniority and long-term records of performance determine the career promotion of bureaucrats. Seniority represents a recruitment year of the employee, and it takes about twenty years for an employee to reach the highest level in the bureaucracy. The long term career model aims to have the track-record of the bureaucrat's performance and loyalty to the ministerial interest (Mishima, 2013; 2017).

Third, professional socialization intends to internalize norms, policy paradigm, and ministerial interest to public employees. In doing so, the ministry conducts on-the-job training continuously and builds employees' collective behavior (Mishima, 2013; 2017). Part of the on-job training, every two years, an employee has different assignments aiming to enhance knowledge and experience. As a result, such an assignment model will create a generalist employee. Thus, the tour of duty inclines the level 1 employee or the "kyaria" official to reach the top level of bureaucracy (Nakamura and Kikuchi, 2011). Meanwhile, in promoting collective behavior, the ministry designs the teamwork for the assignment. Consequently, Japan's performance system emphasizes team performance rather than individual one (Imanaka, 2010). Such performance assessment leads to organizational collectiveness.

Fourth, amakudari is a tradition to help the retired employee work in non-government

agencies (Mishima, 2013; 2017). In Japan's civil service system, the competition among bureaucrats to reach the highest position will result in an advantaged and disadvantaged group. Those who are disadvantaged face the end of their career; thus, they choose to resign from the office. By promoting the retired to work in non-government agencies, the tradition keeps the senior bureaucrat's loyalty and secures the ministerial interest. In the parliament and bureaucracy relation, politicians often persuade the retired senior bureaucrat to support the parliament in dealing with the mandarin. This maneuver is part of the politicians' intention to heighten political control over the senior bureaucrat (Nakamura, 2003; Masujima, 2005).

The prevalent "kyaria" system has its roots from the public administration modernization of the Meiji restoration. Educating and training public employee cadre is one of the significant modernization initiatives. The establishment of the Imperial University of Tokyo, and later Kyoto, marked Japan's new civil service system. Since the restoration, the respective and prestigious universities play essential roles in the recruitment of employees. The student who graduated from the prestigious university becomes a public servant and gains privileges in the career promotion. Further, the relation between the bureaucrat and the newly recruited employee denotes the university's clique. The most prestigious university graduates will have a clear career path to post the top level of bureaucracy (Imanaka, 2010; Nakamura & Kikuchi, 2011).

Most of the high-ranking officials graduated from the prestigious universities to show their favor for recruiting a new candidate for a public employee from their university. The tradition denotes the alumnus's obligation, who posts a high-ranking level in the government, supervises, and provides an opportunity for the new graduate to join the respective agency. In turn, such a new tradition had established the senior and junior

relationships that shaped public employee recruitment in the new Japanese civil service. (Nishikawa, 2006 in Nakamura dan Kikuchi, 2011). The Japan civil service system has designed a career model supported by a recruitment process.

The career model denotes three civil service classes consisting of the first class or the elite bureaucrat, the second and the third classes (Kim, 2002; Nakamura dan Kikuchi, 2011). The government prepares the first class for a high position in public bureaucracy. The elite class has a fast track for its career promotion; therefore, the public acknowledges the first class as “bullet trains.” The term refers to the fast and definite career path once the first-class employee starts his/her career. Most of the first-class members graduated from the prestigious university.

Meanwhile, the second-class positions are filled by applicants who hold a degree from the college or have a diploma degree. Their assignment supports the first-class bureaucrat by providing a policy analysis based on their expertise (Kim, 2002; Nakamura & Kikuchi, 2011). Unlike the first class, the second-class employee has a minimal opportunity to reach the highest level in the agency. It is casuistic that the second-class employee accomplishes his/her career as the top-level bureaucrat. Though the second-class track provides a spare change for a public employee to reach the agency’s highest position, most university graduates tend to choose the second class position for their career path. Two factors drive their motive; that is a job assurance and incentive.

The competition for promotion in the second-class position is not too intense, unlike the first class. Further, having a secure position in the second-class allows the employee to gain an adequate incentive (Kim, 2002; Nakamura and Kikuchi, 2011). The lowest-level in civil service is the third-class that has an assignment for a clerical job. The primary qualification for

the position is a senior high school graduate. The government assigned most of them to a junior staff position in many government agencies (Kim, 2002; Nakamura & Kikuchi, 2011).

Classification of rank and position in the Japan civil service system describes not only roles, functions, and job grading of the civil servant but also defines the privilege of the public official. The first-class public official that is a “kyaria” official is known as the “the bullet train,” because he gains a high chance to reach a top-level position in agencies.

Furthermore, the domination of graduates from respected and prestigious universities has shaped the civil service system’s tradition. The senior and junior relations in the civil service tradition, who graduated from the same university, affect recruitment, selection, and promotion. The tradition contributes to creating a strong central bureaucracy and the mandarin’s domination in the policy process.

## **Conclusion**

Meiji’s modernization initiative has resulted in Japan’s distinctive public administration features. Under the Meiji restoration, modernization designates a combination of Japanese and Germanic norms in establishing a new bureaucracy. Germanic tradition supports Japan’s constitutional monarchy and the design of a robust central bureaucracy aiding the empire. The combination of two traditions produces a new bureaucratic norm replacing the samurai’s domination that undermines the emperor’s control over the empire and its bureaucracy.

During the Meiji era, norm institutionalization has established the new norms and civil service systems leading to substantial and dominant roles of senior bureaucrats (the mandarin). The basic norms consisting of legality, consensus, and seniority become pillars of “kyaria” denoting recruitment, selection, and promotion of the bureaucrats influenced by seniority, long term performance,

and prestigious university recommendation. The “kyaria” system produces competent and dominant senior bureaucrats in the policy process. Bureaucrats’ competencies represent the influence of prestigious universities in educating and training the public employee cadre.

The mandarin’s leading roles have brought Japan out of severe crisis post-World War II and developed Japan as an advanced industrial country. Though the mandarin’s vital role exhibits a success story of the country’s development, the parliament continuously initiates the reform to reduce the mandarin’s domination and heighten political control over the bureaucracy. The embedded norm and established “kyaria” system determine the reciprocal relations between the prevalent institution and actors in Japan’s civil service system development. The reform has not yet changed the power balance of parliament and the bureaucracy.

In this sense, the “kyaria” system’s embeddedness in Japan’s polity produces two consequences that shape the reform initiative. First, the system contributes to public administration modernization by establishing a new civil service system and recruiting the competent and talented public employee cadre. The “kyaria” officials perform the leading role in the development, and their outstanding performance increases political legitimacy and social acceptance to the “kyaria” system. Nonetheless, second, the strong central bureaucracy creates the unintended consequences in which parliamentary control over the public bureaucracy is low, which challenges the democratic system.

The reform initiative to reconfigure parliamentary and bureaucracy relations needs to address senior bureaucrats’ influence. Though the politicians believe that the mandarin’s domination has degraded the parliamentary role in the policy process, they cannot drastically reduce the senior bureaucrat’s role since the lifetime employment model enriches them with

knowledge and experience of the government affairs. Thus, conducting cautious reform and, at the same time, working closely with the mandarin are the primary strategy of the parliament in reforming the bureaucracy.

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