

Conflict and Democracy in Modern Japan*

Keiichi Tsunekawa**

National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies

บทคัดย่อ

กระบวนการเป็นประชาธิปไตยของญี่ปุ่นสมัยใหม่เป็นกระบวนการที่เต็มไปด้วยความขัดแย้งและเสี่ยงต่อความอยู่รอดของประชาธิปไตย บทความนี้ให้ความสำคัญกับความอยู่รอดของประชาธิปไตยในญี่ปุ่นซึ่งใช้เวลาประมาณ 90 กว่าปี ผ่านระยะเวลาหัวเลี้ยวหัวต่อของความอยู่รอดของประชาธิปไตยใน 3 ระยะคือ ช่วงที่หนึ่ง สมัยปฏิวัติเมจิจนถึงการเลือกตั้งสภาผู้แทนราษฎรครั้งแรก (ค.ศ. 1868-1890) ช่วงที่สอง สมัยประชาธิปไตยไทโช (ค.ศ. 1905-1932) และช่วงที่สาม สมัยประชาธิปไตยหลังสงครามโลก (ค.ศ. 1945-1958) กว่าประชาธิปไตยจะสามารถปักหลักในญี่ปุ่นได้เมื่อพลังทางการเมืองและสังคมที่เผชิญหน้ากันอยู่นั้นตระหนักรู้ว่าไม่มีเครื่องมือใดที่จะแก้ไขความแตกต่างระหว่างพวกเขาได้นอกจากวิถีทางแห่งประชาธิปไตย

คำสำคัญ

ความขัดแย้ง ประชาธิปไตย
ประวัติศาสตร์ญี่ปุ่นสมัยใหม่

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** Senior Professor, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS), ที่อยู่: 7-22-1 Roppongi, Minato-ku, Tokyo 106-8677, Japan, อีเมล: k_tunekawa@nifty.com

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Keiichi Tsunekawa^{**}

National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies

Abstract

The process of democratization in Japanese history has witnessed conflicts and vulnerable democracy. This paper focuses on the endurance of democracy in Japan, which has taken around 90 years to become endurable. This risky process can be divided into three phases. The first phase was from the Meiji Restoration to the first Diet election (1868-1890). The second phase was the period of Taisho Democracy. The Taisho era was between 1912 and 1926, but Taisho Democracy should be examined over a longer time span, ranging from 1905 to 1932. The last phase was postwar democracy (1945-1958). The endurance of democracy became a reality in Japan only when the social and political forces in contention finally realized that there would be no means other than accepting democratic rule to solve the differences among themselves.

Key words

Conflicts, Democracy,
Modern Japanese history

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^{**} Senior Professor, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS). Address: 7-22-1 Roppongi, Minato-ku, Tokyo 106-8677, Japan. e-mail: k_tunekawa@nifty.com

1. Introduction

The conflicts in the modern Japanese history have been related to the process of democratization. This paper is concerned with the endurance of democracy rather than a mere transition from a non-democracy to democracy.

In modern Japan, democratization was not an easy straight-forward process but was a process full of painful conflicts with advances and retreats. The endurance of democracy became a reality in Japan only when social and political forces in contention finally realized that there would be no means other than accepting democratic rule of the game to solve differences among themselves. I believe that the similar pattern has been observed not only in Japan but in many other historical cases as well.

Why is it difficult to have an enduring democracy? Because democracy only guarantees fair procedures such as voting rights and political freedom, but does not guarantee any substantial (material and ideational) benefits to the participants. There always remains uncertainty about concrete policies coming out of the democratic process. Historically, many people hesitated to accept such uncertainty of democracy and succumbed to the temptation to support individuals or organizations which

promised to deliver concrete results even if these individuals or organizations were not quite democratic players.

2. Three phases of democratization

How to analyze the democratization in Japan? It took around 90 years for democracy to become enduring in Japan. These 90 years can be divided into three phases of democratization. The first phase is from the Meiji Restoration to the first Diet election (1868-1890). The second phase is the period of the Taisho Democracy. The Taisho era was between 1912 and 1926 but the Taisho Democracy should be examined in a longer time span ranging from 1905 to 1932. The last phase is the postwar democracy (1945-1958).

In looking at each of the three phases of democratization, this paper focuses on 3 C's: conflict, constraints and compromise. I will first look at the nature of the conflict in each phase. Second, political and social forces in contention do not have free hands in their choice of strategies. Their behavior is constrained by structural factors, both domestic and international. We therefore need to look at what the structural constraints for democracy are. And third, I will discuss how the conflicts under structural constraints came to make people compromise and accept democracy.

2.1 First Phase

In the first phase (1868-1890), the main conflict was between those who attempted to build a modern centralized state and those who were adversely affected by such endeavor of modernization. The Meiji government wanted to build a strong state by using the tax revenue extracted from agriculture and the sake (rice wine) production. Such taxation hurt the rural population. At the same time, the government needed to reduce expenditures; so it first reduced and then abolished the stipend payment to samurai (the former dominant class) who shared about 5% of the population. Samurai lost their job, income and social status. Consequently, the Meiji government faced numerous armed rebellions of peasants and former samurai including the 1877 civil war.

One of the structural constraints in this period was the power relation between the government and the opposition. The central government was superior in the military capability to the armed rebels. However, the military weakness of the opposition was compensated by social and political weakness of the government. Most of the government leaders came from lower echelons of the samurai class and lacked authority as legitimate leaders. The authority of the Emperor, which the Meiji leaders wanted to take advantage of, had not yet been firmly rooted in society. Furthermore, there were serious divisions among

the Meiji leaders over foreign policy, economic policy and their institutional preferences. Internationally, the Meiji government attempted to renegotiate the unequal treaties with the western powers which had made Japan lost its autonomy to set import duties. Japan also was forced to give the extraterritorial right to the foreign governments. However, since the negotiation did not go smoothly, the Meiji government was subject to nationalism-based criticism from the opposition. In sum, the domestic and international structures placed the Meiji government in a politically weak position.

Mutual compromise and a partial democratization occurred due to these constraints of domestic and international structures. While the Meiji government crushed the armed opposition by force, the moderate leaders in the government sought for a compromise with moderate opposition. As a result, the constitution was enacted in 1889 and the first Diet election was held in 1890. Due to the limited suffrage, the Diet was an elite institution represented by only one percent of the population (the propertied class). However, it frequently embarrassed the Meiji government by rejecting government-proposed budget plans.

2.2 Second Phase

During the second phase--Taisho Democracy (1905-1932)--, the nature of conflict was no longer between state builders

and the opposition but the main conflict was fought between the conservative military/bureaucratic elites (successors to the Meiji leaders) and the urban masses/middle class people over price policy, tax policy, corruption of the government officials, and the lack of voting rights. By that time, political parties had grown through the parliamentary process and took advantage of the social discontent of lower and middle class people to snatch the government power from the conservative elites in 1918. Before that year, the cabinet was appointed from above in the name of the emperor, but in 1918, political parties were allowed to organize the government. Thereafter, partisan competition emerged as a new form of conflict and fostered patronage politics.

In this period, domestic and international structures strengthened the influence of political parties. First, due to the economic growth, new social forces such as family-business groups (zaibatsu), middle class, and industrial/tertiary-sector workers emerged and became counter-balancing forces vis-à-vis conservative elites. Business groups contributed to strengthening parties although they also maintained close relations with the conservative elites. Middle class people and urban masses went out to streets to make demands on the government; workers organized themselves and went into strikes. They provided counter-balancing forces against conservative groups.

Internationally, Japan regained complete sovereignty by 1911 and being confident of its power, Japan started to enhance its influence in mainland China. Now, both the conservative elites and political parties could appeal the nationalist sentiment of the people. So, the international structure allowed both sides to take advantage of expansionist foreign policy.

Political parties could take advantage of the discontent among the masses and the middle class and succeeded to form the first ever party-led government in 1918 and introduced the male universal suffrage in 1925. They continued to control the government until 1932 except for a short period of time. The military and bureaucratic successors to the Meiji leaders were now clear minority groups. They took externally expansionist policy but could not monopolize the nationalist credential. Being in a weak position, they were forced to accept the party-led government.

However, what Japan had was not a full democracy but a semi-democracy. Political parties were allowed to organize the cabinet but sovereignty was still in the hand of the emperor. In addition, political freedoms were restricted. Leftist parties and radical social movements were banned.

The demise of the Taisho democracy started in the early 1930s. By that time, structural conditions changed to the advantage

of military and bureaucratic elites. Political parties lost trust among the masses and the middle class due to many corruption scandals and undisciplined partisan struggles over power. When the military turned to strengthen militarily expansionist activities abroad, especially in China and Manchuria, political parties could not resist it because they themselves had attempted to refurbish public support by nationalist discourses. The result was the demise of the party government in 1932 and the enhancement of the power of the military, which eventually led the whole nation to the devastating war and defeat.

2.3 Third Phase

The third phase is the postwar democracy (1945-1958). The nature of conflict was multi-faceted and much more complicated than in the Meiji period or in the Taisho period. There were three kinds of conflict; (1) Class conflict between labor and capital represented by leftist parties and conservative parties; (2) Political conflict between those who endorsed the Taisho-Democracy-type semi-democracy and those who wanted to have a full democracy; (3) Policy conflict between those who urged a heavy rearmament of Japan and those who opposed it. A great majority of labor and leftist parties supported a full democracy and opposed a heavy rearmament; capital and conservative parties were divided in their preference on democracy and rearmament.

Structural constraints in this period were brought by the various reforms the American occupation forces implemented in Japan. These measures transformed the power structure of Japan by destructing several pillars of the prewar regime while strengthening new social forces. This process included the dissolution of big family-business groups; the dissolution of big landowners by the land reform; the dissolution of the imperial army, navy and air force; the introduction of many political and social rights into Japan which facilitated activities of labor unions, leftist parties, and liberal mass media. Moreover, power balance in Asia was totally transformed; conservative parties in Japan no longer could take advantage of nationalist appeal.

Weakened by the liberal reforms, facing active and broad resistance from leftist and liberal forces, and not being able to use nationalism to cultivate electoral support, the conservative forces which once hoped to recover the prewar semi-democracy eventually accepted the 1946 constitution and a full democracy by 1958. Some of the leftist forces intended to realize a socialist revolution, but were also forced to accept democracy because the Japanese public opinion did not support violent methods after having experienced heavy sufferings during the war. Finally, democracy became the only game in town in Japan.

3. Conclusion

Here, we have to recall that democracy only guarantees procedural fairness, but do not guarantee specific policy substances. Many atrocities (including human sufferings from environmental contamination) can occur under democracy. To correct such deficiencies, democracy must upgrade itself by improving the rules, institutions, and its *modus operandi* (method of operation). Such improvement will occur again through conflicts between those who demand reforms and those who insist on the status quo.

The above framework to explain democratization can apply to other historical cases. For instance, the Brazilian constitutions used to give the military the tutelage power to maintain law and order and the Brazilian military frequently intervened in politics. The military-led rule between 1964 and 1985 left a bitter memory of repression, the loss of free-

dom and economic distress. When the civilian rule was recovered in 1985, all political forces and civilian groups were ready to accept the democratic rule of the game. In Korea, the military-led government faced a persistent opposition during its rule between 1961 and 1987; the 1980 repression of the Gwangju uprising was especially harsh and substantially lowered the legitimacy of the military government. The international environment such as Gorbachev's conciliatory policy and the imminent hosting of the Olympic Game forced the Korean military to compromise.

In conclusion, democracy was born of conflicts. As our 3 C's theory indicates, democratization in Japan proceeded through a long process of conflict and compromise among social and political forces. Such process was fostered or impeded by constraints stemming from domestic and international structures.

