

Taisho democracy: Early attempts at creating a democratic government in Japan within the Meiji

Framework.

Introduction:

The modern history of Japan starting from the Meiji restoration, is usually framed as a story of progress, with a backwards and primitive Japan reforming itself to catch up with the west. After the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, Japan had certainly achieved parity with the west in Imperial and military terms. The Japanese also tried to catch up with the west by shifting its government to a constitutional, centralized, and semi-democratic system. In the end however, Japan regressed into totalitarianism and militarism most like the western powers of Germany and Italy as opposed to transitioning to a more democratic form of government along the lines of Great Britain in the 19th century. In this essay I'll be exploring the unique structure of Japanese government in the early 20th century and examine why democracy failed to take root.

The Beginnings of Party Politics:

The first election to the Diet was held on July 1st, 1890, according to the Meiji constitution. Also, according to the Meiji constitution was the stipulation that all authority and sovereignty lay with the emperor. However, the emperor needed to be protected from actively ruling the country lest he make a mistake and be found to be fallible and not a living god. Marius Jansen describes this situation as “a curious sort of pluralism in which many participated, and one was ultimately responsible.” The Prime Ministers at this time were very weak, even being on the same level as other cabinet ministers. Suffrage was initially granted to all males over 25 that paid at least 15 yen in national tax – skewing the electorate to rich landlords and urban merchants.

Throughout the entire period power was split between the elected Diet (with gradually expanding suffrage), The Genrō who were senior leaders of the Satsuma and Chōshū clans who installed the Meiji

government, the house of Peers which was comprised of government appointees or members elected by the existing peers, The Privy Council who's members were appointed by the emperor, and the military, which derived its power from the fact that the constitution stated that the military was directly responsible to the emperor, but in practice the emperor did not govern. The constitution stated that the emperor would appoint prime ministers, but in practice the emperor would appoint whoever the Genrō recommended. All legislation needed to be passed by the House of Peers, which tended to be very conservative, and the privy council was required for the approval of treaties, constitutional amendments, emergency degrees, and the organization of the government. The privy council was required for almost everything except budgets and bills. Which brings us to the main source of power for the Diet: the power to approve new budgets. This was especially important in a time of an expanding military.

Early Prime Ministers and Establishment of Political Parties:

The first prime ministers were drawn from the Meiji elite, and they started off with a very anti-political party attitude. However they had to work with the Diet to get budgets passed, so eventually the Genrō Itō Hirobumi formed his own political party: Rikken Seiyūkai. Following this, a balance was eventually established in which the Genrō Katsura Tarō with no political affiliation and Saionji Kinmochi (also a Genrō) president of Rikken Seiyūkai would alternate the Prime Minister's office. In this compromise, Saionji Kinmochi would provide the votes through Rikken Seiyūkai and Katsura Tarō would provide support from the unelected institutions. This arrangement lasted until the Taisho Political Crisis.

Taisho Political Crisis:

After the Emperor Meiji died, Katsura Tarō moved closer to the imperial court, becoming the emperor's political tutor. In 1912 after Saionji Kinmochi resigned the Prime Minister's office after refusing to fund two more army divisions, the army minister also resigned and the army refused to nominate a

replacement unless it got funding, throwing the government into paralysis. Eventually, the council of Genrō reappointed Katsura Tarō which enraged the Diet because he was neglecting his duties at court and dragging the court into politics. Also, they expected that the time had come for party-led government. As a reaction to Katsura's appointment, the Diet united to protect the constitution.

At this time Katsura Tarō founded the Rikken Dōshikai political party as a counterweight to Rikken Seiyūkai. Instead of ushering in party politics, the Genrō appointed an admiral as prime minister, who's cabinet fell after a year because of an arms sale corruption scandal. The Genrō then appointed Ōkuma Shigenobu who was senile at this point in his life, called new elections in which Rikken Dōshikai won a majority, taking the spot from Rikken Seiyūkai for the first time in over 10 years. After around a year and a half, in 1917, the army and Chōshū factions replaced him with Terauchi Masatake who attempted to govern without the support of either political party. This failed as a result of the Rice Riots.

Rice Riots and the Establishment of Party-Based Cabinets:

In 1918, the price of rice (and many other goods and rents) rose dramatically due to inflation. The rice supply was also depleted by the government buying up rice for troops in Siberia during the Siberian Intervention as part of the Russian Civil war. People reacted to the rises in prices by first peacefully protesting, but they quickly turned riots with strikes, lootings, and bombing of police and government offices commonplace. Around 25000 people were arrested and over 6000 were convicted in relation to these riots. This prompted the Genrō to finally appoint a political government, with popular support.

This first political cabinet was led by Hara Takashi of Rikken Seiyūkai who governed until his assassination in 1921. Another politician from Rikken Seiyūkai served out his term. However, starting in 1922, the Genrō appointed a series of non-political prime ministers culminating in Kiyoura Keigo, a career bureaucrat. None of these appointments satisfied the Diet and all failed to gain popular support which

increasing seen as necessary for governing. A Seiyūkai-Kenseikai(Kenseikai was formerly known as Rikken Dōshikai) brought Katō Takaaki of Kenseikai to power in 1924.

Soon after the tentative establishment of political cabinets, the political parties trended towards distinct policy: Rikken Seiyūkai was fiscally expansionist and socially conservative and Kenseikai (later Rikken Minseitō) which advocated for fiscal retrenchment and liberal social policy.

The High-Water Mark and the Signs of Breakdown:

The high-water mark for democracy in Japan came when the military started to view a political government as legitimate. In late December 1924 and July 1925, the army minister Ugaki wrote in his diary that party politics seemed like the best option out of bad ones and that party politics seemed to be the trend of the world at this point. Universal male suffrage was passed in 1925 and took effect in the 1928 elections, but this seemed to be too little too late to cement the legitimacy of political governments. Additionally, Universal Male Suffrage came with the banning of certain political parties, like the communist party, effectively stealing representation from large numbers of voters in the working classes. The lateness of this reform also stole an opportunity to reduce the power of the unelected House of Peers which would have enabled the Diet to pass more legislation to strengthen its legitimacy and therefore resist military coups.

The Zaikai (Business community) had traditionally focused its lobbying efforts on the bureaucracy as opposed to getting overly involved in the Diet, but the Zaikai for fiscal retrenchment and socially conservative, which put them at odds with both parties. They pushed for the establishment of the gold standard right after 1927 with a Minseitō government and fought bitterly against a Minseitō government promoting a bill legalizing Labor Unions. All these actions by the Zaikai made it more difficult for democratic government to obtain legitimacy.

The End of Democracy:

The clearest signal that Democracy in Japan was coming to an end was the Manchurian Incident in late 1931 and early 1932. By the late 20s and early 30s, the Japanese military was getting more and more involved in China with very much imperialist motives. The Manchurian Incident simply showed the world that the Representative Japanese Civilian Government had lost control over the military. In September 1931 the Kwantung Army (the Japanese army in Manchuria) invaded and occupied Manchuria and more of China under the pretext of a false flag incident in which a Japanese officer blew up a railway – but so feebly that a train passed over a few minutes later without stopping. The Civilian government issued repeated instructions for the military to halt military operations, but the Kwantung Army ignored them and started invading and occupying Chinese cities. The Civilian government could only order post-facto orders supporting the military's action in a desperate attempt to save face. The military would make their power even more obvious a few months later.

The May 15 Incident in 1932 with one in series of many coup d'états in which the military tried to overthrow the civilian government through assassinations. This particular coup was led by young Navy officers, who shot the last civilian Prime Minister, Inukai Tsuyoshi. The trial of the plotters was a national affair in which the plotters had substantial popular support. One oft-cited example of this is: Nine young men from Niigata asked to be tried by the court and put to death in the place of plotters and send their severed pinky fingers in a jar as a sign of seriousness. The plotters were given very light sentences, which paved the way for the February 26 Incident.

The February 26 Incident really marked the end of any pseudo-civilian government as democracy had already conclusively died with Inukai Tsuyoshi. The February 26 Incident was yet another attempted coup d'état by the radical wing of the army, but the plotters were executed after this incident. This coup was also against a 'Civilian' government led by an admiral, as opposed to a politician. The execution of the radical army officers enabled the other army officer faction to consolidate control of the army and then take control of the apparatus of state. And thus ended Japanese Civilian Government

Conclusion:

The Meiji constitution provided a very vague framework on what democracy in Japan could be. The Genrō Itō Hirobumi created the most dominant political party Rikken Seiyūkai because he was forced to participate in party politics to carry out policy. After the Taisho Political crisis, Rikken Dōshikai the counterweight to Rikken Seiyūkai was created. The Rice Riots allowed these political parties to secure the Prime Minister's Office through electoral victories. This lasted for about 10 years and ended because of the influence of the nonelected institutions in Japan. The military ultimately ended the experiment in party politics in Japan through the May 15th incident.

The failure of Democracy in Taisho Japan can be traced back the weakness of the founding document and the power it afforded to the unelected institutions of the House of Peers, Genrō, Privy Council, and most importantly, the Military. The experience of Japan shows the danger of an ambiguous constitution that gives too much power to a 'divine' ruler than cannot be expected to act for of risk of proving himself fallible. It's also interesting to learn about this time period because some similarities with modern day Japanese Democracy can be observed: like the power of personality and long time local connections in getting reelected from a district in perpetuity and the ideological incoherence in modern and Taisho-era political parties.