

## Chapter 2. Rise and Fall of the Party Politics in Japan

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The Liberal Democratic Party, which was founded in 1955, was, I think, the most well-known political party and achieved long dominance in the political sphere.

However, the end of the Cold War created the awareness among the Japanese people of the future rapid and frequent change of the international society, and therefore the need to establish a more dynamic political decision system.

At the same time, the LDP regime faced a severe challenge from the political scandal related to the Recruit company, which was going to have their shares get listed on the stock market. That company was suspected of distributing those shares to many politicians in and outside the LDP, which became a huge challenge for the government.

Those events generated a series of political reforms through the 1990s.

The basic aim shared by many was a realization of the change of government among multiple parties instead of one-party dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party.

And some intellectuals and scholars at that time remembered the prewar experience of two-party system.

If you look at the prewar era, you can find the origin of the LDP. And in the meantime, you can find the experience of the multi-party system. There was a big change from the prewar constitution to the postwar constitution. How has it accompanied discontinuity as well as the continuity?

### **Section 1: Two Wars - Boshin War Satsuma Rebellion**

Let me talk about two wars to explain the birth of two political parties.

One is the Boshin War, the civil war following the Meiji Restoration or Revolution.

The other is the Satsuma Rebellion which erupted in 1877.

If you look at the Boshin War, the simultaneous gun fires of rifles were decisive to decide the winners and the losers, which means that the complicated division of army based on the status of the society would work no more.

And throughout the turbulence, which led to the throw out of the Shogunate government, people felt a kind of anomie. They desperately made efforts to find a new linkage among them in place of the status of the society. In many cases, the answer was voluntary association.

The idea came from the Western society. And many countless voluntary associations throughout the country became the sub organizations of political party which was going to emerge in Japan.

The idea that led the party to get born was constitutionalism. It existed from the last era of Shogunate. Therefore, it functioned as the logic to criticize the monopoly of the power by Shogunate. It, of course, functioned as the logic or ideas to criticize the oligarchy of the Meiji government.

The government was gradually dominated by the leaders from four clans: Satsuma, Choshu, Tosa, and Hizen.

One of the leaders Itagaki Taisuke from Tosa clan submitted his opinion to the government, claiming for the introduction of the Diet in 1874 and made it in public, which was called the Freedom and People's Rights Movement. And by mobilizing the support from many voluntary associations, that movement succeeded in rapid expansion.

The other type of protest against the Meiji Government was the discontent samurais and their claim for the militaristic actions against the neighboring countries like Korea, China, and Taiwan. Saigo Takamori, the militaristic charisma in the Boshin War from Satsuma clan was supposed to be the leader of those discontent samurais.

In 1877, Saigo himself finally started the Satsuma Rebellion Civil War. As the government oppressed that, there was no possibility of success for the militaristic resistance against the government.

Therefore, the Satsuma Rebellion was significant in the sense that it excluded the militaristic protest. Therefore, the only way of protest left for the people was political protest, which made the idea and the system of party politics indispensable for the Japanese society.

That war, Satsuma Rebellion, was important in another sense. Because that war was severe and huge, it caused deterioration of the government finance and inflation. On top of inflation was the rice price, which let the landowners prosper and gain financial backgrounds to join the Freedom and People's Rights Movement.

The movement expanded its power base again, which gave trouble to Okuma Shigenobu from the Hizen clan who was the Minister of Finance at that time. He faced severe criticism not only from outside, but also from inside the government. He had to start the budget cutting and because of that, he had to face another type of criticism. He had to add rapid introduction of the constitutionalism and the establishment of the Diet to authorize tax raise he needed, which further isolated him within the government.

Through the political incident in 1881, he was expelled from the government. But in the meantime, because the government was afraid of further criticism from the Movement, it promised in the form of the imperial edict the establishment of the Diet by 1890.

After that political incident, Itagaki and Okuma formed their own parties which was the birth of the political parties in Japan.

## **Section 2: Two Parties Established - Liberal Party & Progressive Party**

After that political incident, Itagaki Taisuke established the Liberal Party, Jiyuto, and Okuma established the Progressive Party, Rikken Kaishinto, the Constitutional Progressive Party to be more precise. They are the origins of the two major parties of the prewar Japan.

The government was dominated no doubt by the leaders from the other two clans, Satsuma and Choshu, which were called the Han clique government, Han meaning clan, as the major leaders from Tosa and Hizen, namely Itagaki and Okuma, formed their own parties outside the government.

The main leaders of the Han clique government, were called Genro in Japanese, the founding fathers. Among those founding fathers, the most notable one was Ito Hirobumi from Choshu han. He undertook the job to draft the Constitution to let the promise of the

emperor to realize itself.

Therefore, from that time, you can see the clear distinct picture of the political opposition: the Han clique government on one side and the two parties on the other.

But the most important question for the political parties at that time was: How to spend nine years before the establishment of the Diet; how the political parties should behave; and how the political parties should grow up themselves.

The Liberal Party as a whole regarded nine years as long enough, therefore they put their heaviest emphasis on their organization.

Meanwhile the Progressive Party thought nine years was short enough and they prepared for specific policy making. The background of that was that Okuma used to be the Minister of Finance in the government before he got expelled. Therefore, he was proud of his ability of making policies.

And the Progressive Party lacked a strong power base because that party was a newcomer into the Freedom and People's Rights Movement. They did not have a strong organization except for some civil rights associations in the urban areas.

It is very curious that those parties had to follow different courses because both of them originated from the Freedom and People's Rights Movement and their idea were the same, constitutionalism. But still, through the nine years before the Diet, those two parties formed different types of tradition and when the Diet was finally open, it was quite difficult for them to modify or abandon their own traditions and get unified even in front of their common enemy, the Han clique government.

### **Section 3: Party Politics under Meiji Constitution**

The Meiji Constitution was promulgated in 1889. It was secretly drafted within the government and that was a collaboration of the leader, Ito Hirobumi, and bureaucrats like Inoue Kowashi, who had grown up in the profession of legislation. Hired foreign lawyers like Roesler certainly played an important role and supplied important clues and hints.

Ito Hirobumi was an optimistic leader with talent and confidence. He very well understood the necessity and significance of power of the Diet. But his idea was to govern the country,

with the Cabinet where the founding fathers like him and the followers were at the core.

Inoue Kowashi's opinion was basically similar, but he was more pessimistic. He was afraid that if the Constitution failed to satisfy the Japanese people, they may request modification of the Constitution and that may destabilize the politics. Therefore, to remove such possibility, Inoue Kowashi asked for the sufficient legal power of the Diet.

In the meantime, Inoue Kowashi thought the bureaucracy or administration should be a clean and efficient organ to support the government. To do that job best, they should be ready to change their formation or organization flexibly. Therefore, anytime Ito or others tried to insert the word, "cabinet" into the draft of the Constitution, Inoue Kowashi kept on removing that word. And at the end of the day, you had a Constitution which did not have a single mention to the word "cabinet."

The Constitution became a very short constitution. The Diet was quite strong. And the stipulations about the administration were quite limited. That was a short constitution. Each stipulation of the Constitution was most influenced by the German states. But as I said, political parties had already traditions in Japan. Those parties, especially Okuma's Progressive Party asked for the British styled parliamentary cabinet.

Therefore, I think Japanese Constitution, Meiji Constitution was a hybrid constitutionalism. By hybrid, I mean the sentences of the Constitution were influenced by the German states, but, in the meantime, the actual practice of that Constitution was gradually influenced by the British idea.

In accordance with where you stand, how the picture looks like to you is different. If you see the level of the organization, the scheme of the opposition was between the Han clique government and the Liberal Party that developed the party organization including the radical militant. But if you look at the level of specific policies, you see the substantial opposition was more the Progressive Party which was keen on specific policies and therefore had a capability to follow substantial oppositions against Han clique government.

What happened a few years after the establishment of the Diet was that the Progressive Party mobilized the support and collaboration of the Liberal Party, and continued budget

fight in the House of Representatives, which caused the stagnation.

The Han clique government in the Meiji Constitution, was allowed to implement the budget of the year last, when the budget was not approved in the Houses. But because there were tendencies of inflation at that time, the national economy as well as the government budget had a tendency to expand. That privilege was not adequate to let the government keep running.

So, it embarrassed the Han clique government a lot. The House of Peers did not approve the ideas of the Liberal Party and the Progressive Party in the House of Representatives, for the reduction of land tax. So, even if those two parties could cut the budget, since the power of the House of Representatives could, their final goal of the financial policy which was a huge cut of land tax could not be realized because of the opposition in the House of Peers.

That caused severe confrontation and stagnation. As early as the second session of the Diet, the House of Representatives had to be dissolved, which was followed by severe intervention by the police at the general election.

However, the Sino-Japanese war erupted in 1894 because two countries confronted over the Korean Peninsula and Japan won next year, which excited the people in Japan. And people got even more excited when triple intervention occurred which was the intervention by France, Germany, and Russia, asking Japan to return a part of cession to China.

Because of that victory and humiliating intervention, nationalism rose within the Japanese society and many people started identifying themselves with the destiny of the Japanese empire.

Therefore, after the war, you find less resistance and the opposition against aggressive spending for the military and industrialization. Therefore, the political parties including the Liberal Party and Progressive Party became more appeasing.

But because of the expansion of the government project and budget, they had to raise taxes this time. Before the Sino-Japanese War all the government had to do was to resist against the tax cut, but after the Sino-Japanese War, the government had to raise taxes.

Therefore, the veto power which rested in the House of Peers was transformed to the House of Representatives because the raise of tax needed approval of both Houses as legislative

body. Because of that, the Han clique government had to allow two parties or at least one party to get participated in the government.

In 1898, the first party cabinet took place, and the Prime Minister was Okuma. The Interior Minister was Itagaki. It was the first party cabinet, and it only lasted a few months. Besides, from around that time, the relations between those parties got worse.

Some leaders of the Liberal Party, like Hoshi Toru, became more frustrated because, even though the Liberal Party was bigger, the Progressive Party, because of its capability of policy making, had excessive influence. Therefore, the Liberal Party gradually compromised and approached to the Han clique government, especially Ito Hirobumi. Even the background of the rapid collapse of the Okuma-Itagaki Cabinet was the maneuver by Hoshi Toru.

Consider the position of Ito Hirobumi. Through the frequent collisions with the House of Representatives, he fully understood the need of permanent relations with political parties. In 1900, Ito finally established his own party, Rikken Seiyukai, the Constitutional Association of Political Friends, which later became, in the opinion of many historians, the foundation and origin of the LDP. It was a striking event because the leading figure of the Han clique government threw himself into the sphere of political parties based on the Freedom of People's Rights Movement.

After trials and errors, Seiyukai was recognized as the government party.

How the Seiyukai became the government party? If you look at the international situation again, in Korea, Japan this time had to face the confrontation with Russia thanks to its victory against China.

In 1904, Russo-Japanese War erupted. That was a severe war and, because that was a close victory or miserable victory, the Japanese government was left with the heavily deteriorated finance and the government's debt as a national bond.

After Ito went into the political party, the leadership within the Han clique government was shifted to the more conservative leader like Yamagata Aritomo, Choshu clan, or his aide, Katsura Taro. And Katsura Taro became the Prime Minister before the Russo-Japanese war.

But even for Yamagata or Katsura, to sustain and manage the heavy debt, and have the

budget approved in the Houses under the difficult situation, they needed the support and cooperation of Seiyukai, the House of Representatives.

Ito retired from the leadership of Seiyukai and his position was succeeded by Saionji Kinmochi, who was not from Choshu clan or Satsuma clan and was a noble man in Kyoto and had less passion for the politics compared to Ito Hirobumi, which means that it was easier for Katsura to negotiate and coordinate with Saionji.

Therefore, after the Russo-Japanese War, the era came in which Katsura and Saionji took the government one after the other, which was called “Katsura-Saionji Era.”

On the other hand, the party led by Okuma Shigenobu could not control its rivalry against the Han clique government and the radicalism within their own party. That party was excluded from the power and had to continue to play a role as the opposition.

But through the course of the Katsura-Saionji Era, or you can call it Katsura-Saionji Regime because of its stability, Katsura like Ito realized that he needed to have his own party.

Because Seiyukai’s main policy was interest politics or pork barrel, the cooperation with Seiyukai made it difficult to sustain the finance of the government.

The corruption caused by Seiyukai disgusted many Japanese audience. Hoshi Toru, who played a major role in the establishment of the Seiyukai and the pre-negotiation with Ito, was assassinated by old samurai who got outraged with the political corruption. It took place only a year after the establishment of the Seiyukai.

In 1912, when Katsura faced a mass upheaval against the formation of his third cabinet, he decided to make his own party by joining with Okuma’s party, which was called the Association of Believers of the Constitutional Government. Which later became the Constitutional Association, Kenseikai.

No doubt there were a lot of dramas, surprises, and unexpected events, but I think the basic story is very simple. The power of the House of Representatives was quite strong thanks to Ito and Inoue Kowashi. Therefore, when the parties requested the change of the practice of the Constitution, it was difficult to resist for the Han clique government. So, even Ito, the top leader of the Han clique government, had to join the Liberal Party to make Seiyukai. And even Katsura Taro had to join Okuma’s party to make his own party which later became



the Constitutional Association.

#### **Section 4: Rise and Fall of Party Cabinet System**

The rise of people's power helped the rise of two-party politics. The "Genros", founding fathers, found it hard but had to ask Okuma to form his own cabinet with Doshikai, Katsura's party as the government party to restrain the political upheaval which started since 1912.

Continuous misfortune of Okuma, as the politician, made the public very sympathetic for him. After getting the power, Okuma dissolved the House of Representatives and during the election he became the first Prime Minister to travel around Japan to make speeches to ask people to support the government.

All those maneuvers and events made his party and cabinet very popular, and caused a big victory in the election and, therefore, Okuma's party could merge the Seiyukai from that time. And three years after Okuma's retirement, Genros, founding fathers, had to ask the president of Seiyukai, Hara Kei, to form his own party cabinet. Hara was not from Han clique but common people. And he was from Han, a feudal domain, which acted against Satsuma or Choshu at the time of the Meiji Restoration.

The background was again people's movement. Because of the inflation through the First World War, especially the rapid rise of the rice price, there took place rice riots through the country. Some of them even resisted against the army mobilized to oppress the movement, which was very rare in the Japanese society at the time.

It does not mean, however, that the party gained the power according to the result of the general election of the House of the Representatives. Saionji Kinmochi, who used to be the president of Seiyukai, became the last Genro, founding father, because the other Genro passed away. Saionji played the role to recommend the next minister to the Emperor. Therefore, what he did was to select and recommend the leader of one political party as the prime minister to the emperor and once that cabinet failed, to recommend the leader of the opposition party as the next prime minister. So, that was substantially a party cabinet system.

Those party cabinets principally took the course of cooperated diplomacy and that was beneficial for them because the cooperated diplomacy reduced the need of the military

expansion and military budget. Therefore, it gave more opportunities to political parties to sustain the power of the army and the navy.

In 1925, the male universal suffrage was introduced and in 1928 the first male universal election took place. Still, substantial party cabinet system was not a complete party cabinet system. And it was unfortunate era because bubble economy during the First World War was over, and Japan faced series of severe recession and even depression. So that situation made party politics itself very unpopular among people, especially in agricultural areas.

Then, military moved to get rid of dominance of the political parties. In 1931, the Japanese Kwantung Army in Manchuria, the northeastern part of China, generated what people called the Manchuria Incident without the consent and the instruction of the Cabinet at the time.

That kind of behavior was imported back to Japan. Terrorism and coup d'état damaged and threatened the party politics. In 1936, the Emperor's vassals that supported the party cabinet system faced the physical assault, in other words, assassinated, by the radical officers of the army.

Through those events, those who tried to diminish the power of the political parties claimed themselves that they were trying to clarify the national polity of the fundamental character of Japan. They did not claim to abolish their royal constitution, the constitution promulgated in the name of the Emperor. But they claimed that they were trying to modify the bad practice of the constitution, which gave too much power to the political parties and make them prosper and corrupt.

If you take the incident of 1936 when the emperor's vassals were assassinated and which was called February the 26th incident, it was forty-seven years after the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution in 1889. So that was nearly a half century.

Therefore, after a half century's experiment of the constitutional practice, there arose a kind of fundamentalism, which denied such practice. Military became powerful. But military did not take a role to integrate and unify the whole government because the Constitution was there. The parties still held the power in the House of Representatives for legislation and the budget.

Therefore, Japan fell into the politics without leadership. In case the military, or the army namely, made ill-behavior in the Chinese Continent, there was no leadership to reverse such course. Japan gradually fell into total war, first with China, and eventually from 1941 with the United States, which led to the collapse of the Japanese Empire itself.

## **Section 5: Party Politics under Postwar Constitution**

Japan surrendered in 1945 and American occupation got started under the command of Douglas MacArthur. Under his regime, prewar two major parties revived. Socialist Party and Communist Party joined the political sphere.

The biggest reform during the occupation was the new constitution which was implemented in 1947. Again, that was a short constitution because it was hastily drafted by the officers of General Headquarters for Occupational Forces.

On the other hand, because it was under the American occupation, the divided government of the United States influenced some regulations or rules especially about the legislative body.

If the prewar Constitution was German-British hybrid, the postwar Constitution is British-American hybrid.

The trouble was that, because the Cabinet could not control discussion in the Diet, there were many legislations right after the war, which accompanied the need to raise the new budget for the implementation.

That heavily embarrassed the Cabinet and the Ministry of Finance. In 1955, LDP was established and reigned the government for long time. Then, under LDP, or within LDP, the system called prior screening by the government party was developed, in which LDP's Policy Research Council, its subcommittees, was arranged and organized in accordance with arrangement of the ministries.

And it was basically a similar arrangement with the permanent committees within the Diet. So, you have a kind of triangle in accordance with the topic or field of policies in LDP, the Diet, and the administration. When the Cabinet want to submit the legislative bill to the Diet, it had to go through the screening process inside LDP starting from the Subcommittee of the

Policy Research Committee, and its General Assembly. That process of coordination was long and painstaking.

In return, once any bill was submitted to the Diet, a member of LDP was strongly expected to cooperate with its approval in the Houses. In case he or she betrayed, he or she had to expect severe punishment by the party.

Bureaucrats and business sectors understood that system, so they put their requests, opinions, and interests into the Policy Research Committee of the LDP. Therefore, the coordination system, called Iron Triangle of bureaucracy, politicians, and business sectors took place in the Policy Research Committee of the LDP and became the venue for interest politics.

That was how LDP established its capability of governance. The written articles of the Constitution were British model Parliamentary Cabinet, but the practice was LDP's long dominance accompanied with the prior screening system. And it was to overcome American residues, American influence in the Constitution.

Such a constitutional system was suitable for detailed or sophisticated coordination or modification of interest politics. But drastic decisions like heavy budget cut were quite difficult in this kind of democratic or bottom-up process.

As we saw at the beginning of 1990s, we had political reforms. The most important one was the introduction of single constituency system combined with proportional-representation in 1994, which was aimed to realize the change of the government between two parties.

The year 1994 was again 47 years after the implementation of the post-war constitution, which took place in 1947.

Then again, it is about a half century. After that, there was a return to stipulations of the constitution, and modification of the practice of the half century. Like the prewar experience, do you think you can call it fundamentalism? In a sense, yes, if you see the second administration of Abe Shinzo, you can observe the high profile of the government and LDP after the victory in the election, on the one hand. On the other hand, you see the opposition's adherence to the idea of the postwar constitution like the 9th article that stipulated the abandoning of war as the national policy and pacificism.

I don't say the basic direction of the political reform is wrong, but if you look at the experience of the prewar Japan, you have to watch the possibility of fundamentalism.

To sum up, both in prewar and postwar, Japan had tradition of short constitutions which means that Japanese constitutionalism is hybrid. Prewar hybrid constitution was German-British. The stipulations were influenced by German states, but the practice was influenced by the British styled two party-system and party cabinet ideals. And postwar constitution was British-American hybrid. The sentences were based on British styled parliamentarism, but there was the mixture where there were British ideas and American rules.

To overcome the confusion stemmed from that, they developed prior screen system of LDP. Both in prewar and postwar eras, there was a significant development of practice apart from the stipulations themselves. If the political parties were accused of having illegitimate benefits from that practice, there aroused and will arise fundamentalism which is the return to the constitution itself. That does not guarantee healthy management or smooth practice of constitution. Both in prewar and postwar eras, after 47 years practice, that kind of fundamentalism became dominant in the political sphere.

It is very important that we remember the mistakes of the prewar Japan and we will not repeat it. In the meantime, it is good time that we compare the prewar system and the postwar system more objectively and find the repeated pattern.

That would be very interesting. Through those studies, I think we can learn how the Constitution works for politics and how the political party should behave under such a system.

Note: This transcript has been edited based on the recording of the lecture of Chapter 2. Rise and Fall of the Party Politics in Japan.