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10

Crisis of Political Community

The Meiji Period, one of the most remarkable epochs of modern world history, came to a close in 1912 with the death of the Emperor whose reign had witnessed Japan's emergence as the leading power in Asia. His passing was mourned by literati as well as by the masses, in a striking display of emotion that showed how deeply the new nationalism had touched the Japanese people. "A dense mass of humanity again thronged the great open spaces outside the Palace walls last night," wrote the correspondent for the London *Times*, "continually moving up to the Emperor's gate, there to kneel in prayer a few minutes and then pass on once more. The crowd was drawn from all classes, and all preserved the highest degree of orderliness and silence save for the crunching of the gravel under wooden sandals and the low continuous murmur of prayers. . . . One who looked over the sea of bowed heads outside the Palace wall could not desire better proof of the vitality of that worship of the Ruler. . . ."[1] Feelings were further heightened on the day of the funeral, September 13, when General Nogi Maresuke, the military hero of the Russo-Japanese War, and his wife committed ritual suicide in the manner of the classic samurai who loyally followed his lord even in death. The most significant novelists of the time, Natsume Sōseki and Mori Ōgai, found that the emotional experience of these events changed the course of their writing. They were drawn away from preoccupation with the Western world back to their own cultural traditions for the thematic material in their subsequent novels.

The new Emperor Yoshihito, who gave the name Taishō to the years of his reign (1912–1926), was a weak and uncertain figure. It was a poorly kept secret that the Taishō Emperor's illnesses frequently involved mental aberrations. On one occasion while reading a ceremonial message to the Diet he rolled up the scroll and began peering, as through a telescope, at the startled legislators. Such behavior seems not to have diminished reverence for the imperial institution, yet it was perhaps symbolic of the nation's passage into a time of trouble.

This was not to say that the early years of the new Emperor's reign did not bring substantial new national achievements. The outbreak of World War I in Europe in the summer of 1914 provided extraordinary opportunities to advance the twin objectives of empire and industry, which the nation had pursued through the Meiji era. The preoccupation of the European powers allowed Japan to seize German holdings in Shantung and German islands in the South Pacific: the Carolines, Marianas, Marshalls, Palau, and Yap. More important, conflict among the great industrial nations meant that new markets and new demands for Japanese goods brought sudden economic expansion and prosperity. Exports nearly tripled during the war years, reflecting an unprecedented boom in industrial production.

But the period after World War I witnessed a succession of crises in Japanese society, and the problem of maintaining a stable political community sorely tried Japanese leadership. During the preceding fifty years the Japanese masses had slowly been awakened to political experience. By the first decades of the twentieth century it was becoming clear that they could no longer be kept out of political life. Industrialization and universal education contributed to this end; by the turn of the century there was a large number of newspapers and magazines designed for a mass audience. The increasing involvement of the populace in the issues of the day caused the leadership growing concern.

One result of this activation was that the political parties began to call for a broadened suffrage—ultimately, universal male suffrage. Many of the Meiji leaders desperately feared this demand, believing that it would threaten the existing social order. Yamagata had warned his colleagues that universal suffrage would be tantamount to a socialist revolution. His fears were fed by evidence that industrialization was engendering new tensions and divisions in society: the labor movement grew more militant, landlord-tenant disputes multiplied, and radical groups proliferated. Those antagonisms were greatly intensified by the economic expansion during World War I and by the influence of socialist ideas from abroad. The basic question posed by events in the 1920s was whether the political system formed in the early Meiji Period had the resilience and the flexibility to absorb the newly awakening groups into its processes, and to accommodate satisfactorily the tensions and antagonisms of a burgeoning industrial society.

Evolution of the Political System

There is no question that the Meiji political institutions had the capacity to change, at least up to a point, for in the decades after the establishment of the new governmental structure in 1890 the system evolved in largely unexpected directions. The Meiji Constitution envisaged a political community directed by a small elite at the head of an extensive bureaucracy. In theory, this elite would consult public opinion as it was expressed in the Diet, but the elite would be fundamentally neutral, standing above the groups and factions represented in the legislature and acting in the interests of the whole nation. Although the Japanese state never lost its elitist character, the conditions of the several decades after 1890 created a much more complex and often unwieldy group that controlled the fortunes of the state.

The most noteworthy change in the political system was the growth in the power and influence of the parties. None of the oligarchs in 1890 accepted the idea of party cabinets. Instead they spoke of "transcendental cabinets"—comprising members of the oligarchy whose interest and loyalty supposedly transcended narrow party and factional interests and loyalties. Itō seems to have felt that party cabinets were possible some time in the distant future, when the parties had become truly national bodies; others, such as Yamagata, saw nothing of the kind. Yamagata confided to the Emperor in 1899: "My interpretation of the constitution differs from that of Itō and Ōkuma. I am absolutely opposed to a party cabinet. My only hope is that Imperial authority will be extended and Imperial prestige will not decline."[2]

But all the oligarchs were wrong in their expectation that the parties could be circumscribed. There were several reasons why, almost from the beginning of the new Meiji constitutional order, the parties were able to develop new power. In the first place, while the elected House of Representatives lacked any legal control over the prime minister and his cabinet, it did have the negative power to withhold support from legislation proposed by the cabinet. More important was the veto power that the House exercised over the budget. Although the framers of the constitution had provided that, should the House prove recalcitrant, the previous year's budget would automatically come into force, in a time of rapidly mounting government expenditure, particularly at the turn of the century, this provision was little help. The Diet could greatly damage the plans of a cabinet by its refusal to sanction a proposed budget.

Although the cabinet had extensive powers to dissolve the Diet, it was forced to deal carefully with the parties and not to resort too often to arbitrary dissolution, else constitutional government would simply break down. The nation had invested its pride in making the new system work. Even after treaty revision had succeeded, the oligarchs were still anxious to demonstrate to the West—and to themselves as well—that they were equal to the challenge. As late as 1899, Itō remarked that, "If there is one mistake in the progress and direction of constitutional government, there will be those who question the suitability of constitutional government for the Orient. This is what concerns me."[3] In short, it was a national goal that constitutional government should be made to work in Japan.

The lack of unity and the ambivalence among the oligarchs with regard to the workings of the new system provided opportunities for expansion of party power. Although Yamagata was in many respects dead set against concessions to the parties, Itō was willing to seek accommodation with them—particularly with the more moderate forces within the Diet. Moreover, the parties had already by the 1890s gained some measure of public support, which also provided stimulus for the oligarchy to meet some of their demands.

The parties went through a number of distinct phases in their gradual rise to a share in power. The first phase, from the opening of the Diet in 1890 to the beginning of the Sino-Japanese War in 1894, was characterized by implacable hostilities between the oligarchy and the parties. The latter posed repeated obstacles to the passage of government budgets, and the oligarchy responded by frequently dissolving the Diet. During the second phase, from 1895 to 1900, tentative short-lived alliances were struck between the cabinet and elements in the House. This was a time of rapid expansion of armaments, and the oligarchs were willing to make limited concessions to the parties in order to gain the passage of budgets. Those alliances, however, tended to break down once the oligarchs had won their way.

Nevertheless the realization was taking hold among the top members of the oligarchy that they had no recourse but to put such coalitions on a firm and stable basis. A third phase, therefore, of determined mutual accommodation between the two groups ensued from 1900 to 1918. This phase was inaugurated by Itō's decision to join a parliamentary party. In 1900 he accepted the presidency of the *Seiyūkai* (Friends of Constitutional Government Party). In 1913, another oligarch and protégé of Yamagata, Katsura Tarō, followed suit by forming his own party. It was during this phase that parties acquired the form and organization characteristic of Japanese conservative parties ever since. Having found party support indispensable to their power, the oligarchs now brought many of their followers in the bureaucracy into the parties they headed. Not only did the parties become "bureaucratized," but the reverse process was also taking place. Government agencies gradually came to be interpenetrated by party men.

In the working out of this process of accommodation between party and bureaucracy, no one was more important than Hara Kei (Takashi), perhaps the most astute politician in modern Japanese history. Hara, who had served in the bureaucracy but left it to pursue a distinguished career in journalism and business, helped Itō form the Seiyūkai and soon became the mastermind behind its emergent power. By making concessions to the Yamagata faction, which dominated the government in the early 1900s, Hara gained access to key appointments within the bureaucracy. The most important concession he could offer was Seiyūkai support for the budget of the government, which was particularly hard-pressed financially at the time of the Russo-Japanese War. In return, he had himself appointed to the office of home minister, a position that brought with it control of the entire network of local government, including power to appoint prefectural governors and to allocate government funds for public works. Hara used these powers to build Seiyūkai support at the local level. To potential followers he could offer local office and the pork barrel. He built up the strength of Seiyūkai supporters in the provinces by channeling resources to build dams, schools, and railroads in their areas. In the face of this growing power, other parties in the Diet were forced to coalesce out of self-defense, forming an anti-Seiyūkai coalition in 1913 called the *Dōshikai,* renamed the *Kenseikai* in 1916 and the *Minseitō* in 1927. In this development we may find the origins of two-party politics.

The stage was now set for a fourth phase in the development of the parties, which began in 1918 with the naming of Hara as prime minister. During this phase, which lasted until 1932, the parties attained a position of quasi supremacy in the political system. That is to say, it became common during this period to give the prime ministership to the head of one of the parties. It was, of course, not constitutionally necessary (from 1922 to 1924 there were in fact three nonparty cabinets), but rather represented the acknowledgment by the elder statesmen (*genrō*), who advised the Emperor in the selection of the prime minister, that the balance of power in the political system had shifted in favor of the party elites. Their rise to power did not involve the parties' making a fundamental change in the political structure; instead, they succeeded in the shrewd infiltration and conciliation of the institutional forces established by the Meiji Constitution—the oligarchy, the bureaucracy, and the military. Because they were compelled by the constitutional order to turn inward for power, particularly to the bureaucracy, the parties did not become mass-based organizations. They built up their strength at the local level with men of influence who could be rewarded with office and with governmental benevolences. Nonetheless, this fourth phase seemed to optimistic observers to augur a trend toward the ascendancy of parliamentary politics and a growing influence of the common man over his government. Such observers therefore called this phase the era of Taishō democracy.

The Elitist Nature of the Taishō Political System

For a brief period in the 1920s it appeared that the trends of the time, quite contrary to the intentions of the Meiji oligarchs, favored the emergence of a democratic political system. Two-party politics, responsible party cabinets, extension of civic rights to larger numbers of citizens, and the rise of democratic political philosophies were important developments. But they should not be mistaken for the entire system. The optimists who proclaimed the emergence of Taishō democracy were focusing their attention on a new but limited aspect of the political system in the post–World War I period. The system was dominated by a complex interplay of elites of whom the party leaders were only one part. For a brief time the party leaders were able to coordinate and accommodate the different elites, and to that extent the political system in the Taishō Period might be regarded as becoming an elitist democracy. In the end, however, hopes for democratic politics proved evanescent and no breakthrough to a new political structure was achieved.

There was, as Taichirō Mitani writes, a built-in ambiguity in the constitutional structure: "The Meiji constitution, in somewhat ambivalent fashion, emphasized the emperor as the supreme constitutional monarch and granted him imperial sovereignty, yet at the same time it rejected the idea of direct imperial rule."[4] The Emperor, "sacred and inviolable," as the Constitution said, was above and beyond politics. The various organs of state were independently responsible to an Emperor who was in practice politically aloof. The result was to create an extraordinary division of powers. The Ministers of State were individually responsible to the Emperor, thus weakening the prime minister, because the Meiji Constitution neither mentioned a cabinet nor provided for the concept of collective responsibility. The army, the bureaucracy, the judiciary were all separately responsible to the Emperor. To manage this plurality of power centers, some kind of extraconstitutional means had to be found to coordinate them. The Meiji oligarchs could make the constitution work because their factional ties cut across the various organs of state. Having created the system themselves they naturally had a pervasive web of personal ties through which they could maintain a coherent and stable system.

By the Taishō Period, however, government had grown in size and complexity, the founding fathers had passed from the scene, and elite factions were becoming more discrete and competitive. Let us consider the fragmentation of power and the different elite interests.

In addition to the newly emergent party elites in the Lower House, there were the members of the Upper House, the House of Peers. As the constitution provided, they were "composed of members of the Imperial Family, of Nobles, and of Deputies who have been appointed by the Emperor." Intended as a conservative force, it had powers almost equal to those of the Lower House and therefore could exercise a virtual veto over legislation forwarded to it. Its ability to block legislation was a powerful check on the Lower House.

Another conservative group consisted of various advisors to the Emperor. They were consulted in many issues of state but most important in the choice of prime minister, which the constitution gave to the Emperor. The genrō, an extralegal group of Meiji leaders, was the key consultative group. It had formed in the 1890s, but after the death of Yamagata in 1922 and Matsukata in 1924, only Saionji Kimmochi remained as "the last of the genrō." He together with a group of former prime ministers performed this critical advisory function. Other influential advisors close to the Emperor included the Imperial Household Minister and the members of the Privy Council.

Bureaucratic leaders were also powerful. Proud and prestigious, they styled themselves servants of the Emperor, disdainful of private interests and devoted to the nation's well-being. Their expertise and technical competence at drafting legislation and administering the laws was based on their meritocratic selection and durability. On balance they were conservative, but they could also be reformist when the national interest seemed to require it.

Another powerful elite was the military. Owing to Japan's growing imperial commitments and the complexity of strategic planning and organization, the army and navy emerged as strong political forces. The constitution placed them directly under the Emperor with direct access to him and not responsible to the cabinet. They jealously guarded their independence, or "the right of autonomous command" as they called it. This autonomy gave them a powerful role in foreign policy, and the military maintained its own overseas representatives independent of the Foreign Ministry. The army and navy elites exerted great leverage over the formation and the life of cabinets through ordinances that limited those eligible to serve as Minister of War or Minister of Navy to certain high-ranking military officers, as we have seen. A threat to resign gave them sway over policy-making.

The final group was the business elite, comprising leaders of the great business combines, the zaibatsu, whose power had grown rapidly as a result of the recent industrial growth. They had cultivated close ties with the government in order to receive subsidies, preferential treatment, and legislative favors; and as political campaigns became more expensive, political leaders looked to them for contributions.

It was an unwieldy political system. Moreover, the elites who led this plurality of power centers were not themselves monolithic. Factions existed within each of them. In the bureaucracy, for example, turf battles and intramural struggles over jurisdictional issues arose among the various ministries. The army had a Chōshū faction and an anti-Chōshū faction. And so on.

For a time in the 1920s, the conservative political parties succeeded in mediating among the elites, thereby dominating the political system. They managed to orchestrate the different power centers in the system by controlling the budget and permanent legislation. They created alliances in the Upper House to neutralize its power. They recruited former bureaucrats into positions of party leadership and collaborated with the key groups in the Home Ministry and the Justice Ministry to win them over. The army, needing party support for its budget request, struck alliances and, as a consequence, bonds between the military leadership and the parties grew closer. In 1925 an army general, Tanaka Giichi, became president of the Seiyūkai. In such fashion, the parties interpenetrated the various power centers at a time when the influence of the Meiji leaders as advisors to the Emperor was waning.

The party leaders, for a brief time, thus became the spider at the center of a web of elite groups. They became the core body able to coordinate the fragmented constitutional structure. The supposedly popular parties had actually turned inward to the various centers of elite power created by the Meiji Constitution in order to establish their control. In this sense we may term the structure of Taishō democracy an elitist democracy. All democracies were more or less elitist in this period, but Japan's was more so.

The intellectuals who were the theorists of Taishō democracy in fact conceived of it in this elitist way. They did not advocate popular sovereignty, government by the people. That would be unconstitutional because the Meiji Constitution placed sovereignty with the Emperor. They favored government for the people. They were ambivalent toward the masses. On the one hand, the goal of government should be the welfare of the people. On the other hand, the people were not yet ready for full political participation: the people had to be prepared through "political education" and a "transformation of their knowledge and morality." The most famous of the Taishō democratic theorists, Yoshino Sakuzō, was a professor at Tokyo Imperial University. His term for democracy was *mimponshugi,* which literally translated means "the principles of people centeredness," and it carried the connotation of government on behalf of the people. Intellectual liberals such as Yoshino "expected the representative process to produce a moral elite (or a meritocratic elite) not unlike themselves."[5]

Turmoil in Society

The term *Taishō democracy* is used in two senses. It is used, as we have just seen, to refer to the emergence of party cabinets and the possibility of revising the political structure. But it is also used in a broader social sense to denote the awakening of the masses to politics and the appearance of liberal and sometimes radical movements for reform.

The political parties gained their dominance at one of the most difficult periods in Japanese history. This was not auspicious. The parties, battling each other and seeking to maintain their position vis-à-vis the other elites, scarcely had the time or the objectivity required to resolve the multiple crises that wracked society in the post–World War I era.

The economic impact of the war had created a far more complex society than the one the oligarchs had sought to manage at the beginning of the twentieth century. Then, as we have seen, the bureaucracy had been hopeful that, by acting early before industrialism created the severe problems of Western societies, Japan could avoid similar unrest and conflict. Such sanguine views were quickly dashed in the postwar period. Social unrest, militant labor, and radical ideologies were all present for everyone to see. One could no longer speak of "prevention" and "acting early." The choice was now either to enact immediate social reforms to alleviate unrest, or else to resort to intensified national mobilization and suppression. The elites, gripped by a sense of crisis and fearful of social disintegration, usually chose the latter alternative.

The postwar period began with the Rice Riots in August 1918, when demonstrations swept the country in protest over a sharp increase in the price of rice. Riots involving more than 1 million people were reported in forty-two of forty-seven prefectures. The Rice Riots were the largest popular demonstration in Japanese history prior to the Anti-Security Treaty demonstrations in 1960. Troops were called out in twenty-six prefectures to quell the attacks on rice dealers and profiteers. The elites were fearful and alarmed by the activization of the masses and the appearance of incendiary thought. Yamagata wrote to the conservative journalist Tokutomi Sohō expressing his fear of chaos; and Tokutomi responded: "The rise in prices and the importation of anarchism fan each other and will give rise to social revolution. . . . You cannot imagine how much the thinking and ideals of the young today are confused. . . . Please destroy this letter."[6] Further evidence of the volatile nature of the people when aroused by social and economic issues came in the sudden rise in 1919 of labor disputes, numbering 497—ten times the number five years earlier. The number of labor unions mushroomed, and among the most important ones there was a trend toward radical thought and militant proposals. By 1920 the wartime boom was spent, a sharp recession had set in, and the nation began a decade of recurrent economic upheavals.

This unrest spread to the countryside, ordinarily regarded as the foundation of a stable order. Yokoi Tokiyoshi, a leading spokesman for conservative rural values, had written in 1913 that in the face of rising radicalism in the city "we can only depend upon the peasants. The city will forever be a factory of revolution, while the country will always be the protector of the social order." Yet in the postwar period tenancy disputes became more numerous than industrial labor disputes, escalating from 256 in 1918 to more than 2,700 by 1926. Nearly one-half of the arable land was worked by tenants, and, particularly in areas where the number of absentee landlords was increasing most rapidly, the high rate of rents stirred resentment. In some areas tenant unions organized and multiplied with startling rapidity. From 173 tenant unions in 1917 the movement grew to 4,582 unions a decade later with a membership of 365,322. These unions engaged in collective bargaining with landlords, presenting demands for improving the lot of the tenants. What was the significance of the striking rise of these tenant unions?

Few issues in modern Japanese history are debated with greater intensity than the significance of changes in rural society in the interwar period. Not only among historians in Japan, but also among Western scholars we find a wide range of disagreement. Barrington Moore, for example, sees the incomplete nature of the Meiji Restoration—that is, the lack of land reform—and the commercialization of agriculture as impoverishing the tenant farmers who worked nearly one-half the arable land. The resulting radicalism of this class, in this view, was repressed by the landlords and the government and channeled into support for fascism and militarism in the 1930s. In sharp contrast, the historian Richard Smethurst sees industrialization creating a substantially improved standard of living for the typical farmer, including the tenant, and his emergence in the Taishō Period as "not merely a pawn to be buffeted by an unjust market system . . . [but as] a positive actor, an 'economic animal,' a small entrepreneur, if you will, who increasingly made every effort to maximize profits by using new techniques to produce more and better cash crops. . . . Commercial agriculture and other parts of Japan's modernization process allowed the cultivator to take greater and greater control of his own destiny."[7] Tenant unions, rather than being centers of radical protest, were pragmatic means to pursue a better living.

However we interpret the militancy of tenant farmers, as victims of exploitation or as profit-maximizers, their membership in unions underscores our fundamental theme about the Taishō Period—that the growing activization of the masses posed a challenge for the elitist political structure. The countryside was changing. In the Tokugawa Period, only certain members of the wealthy peasant class were literate. By the 1920s schools and literacy, magazines and newspapers, military service and mobility raised the sights of most small farmers and tenants, loosened their reliance on the local elite, and changed their attitudes. "Poverty was no longer their fate," writes one authority on the period, "but the product of circumstances that they had the power to change."[8]

What in particular heightened the crisis atmosphere then was the extraordinary influx of radical thought. The Russian Revolution, the popularity of Wilsonian democracy, the growing alienation of intellectuals from the social order in Japan, and the unrest in society that we have just mentioned, all led to a striking diversity of ideologies that could not but be worrisome to government leaders. Their nervous concern was demonstrated, for example, by the hounding of a young Tokyo Imperial University professor, Morito Tatsuo, for publishing a rather innocuous article on the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin's social views. In 1922 the Japanese Communist Party was established and became at once the subject of unremitting police repression. On the campuses liberal democracy and socialism were popular. The parties were not unaffected by those trends, and particularly among the opposition members, support for universal manhood suffrage grew. Hara Kei blocked such a proposal in 1920, confiding in his diary that enactment would have brought on revolution.

It is of course possible to exaggerate the extent of social unrest. For example, despite the signs of turmoil among industrial laborers, almost 60 percent of the industrial workforce was composed of women, primarily young peasant girls who, prior to marriage, would work on short-term agreements in the textile industry. Occasionally these women participated in or even led strikes in the textile mills, but their usual way of protesting conditions was to run away. Because they were short-term and highly vulnerable workers, they lacked incentive to struggle for long-term improvement of factory conditions. At the high point of the prewar labor movement in the 1930s, fewer than 6 percent of unionized workers were women. Male industrial workers also were not easily drawn into radical labor movements. In fact, a sizable number of the male workers were fresh from the village and still imbued with traditional values of loyalty and obedience. In the countryside, despite the new unrest, it was still true that the great majority of tenants were not members of the tenant unions and were not involved in disputes. Even among the intellectual class, only a small minority favored radical change of the existing order.

Nonetheless, the ruling elites were fearful. Left-wing activities seemed incendiary, and there was no telling how high the flames of unrest might be fanned. Moreover, was not the revolution in Russia the product of only a small group of people? The situation was rendered even more critical by the great Kanto earthquake, which struck Tokyo, Yokohama, and the remainder of the Kanto Plain moments before noon on September 1, 1923. The intense shock brought the collapse of tens of thousands of buildings and the death of thousands, and far greater destruction was wrought by the fires that began everywhere in the aftermath of the quake. By the time the flames burned out, more than 130,000 people were dead, billions of dollars of damage had been done, and more than one-half of Tokyo and most of

Yokohama were laid waste. In the ensuing chaos and confusion, rumors spread that Koreans resident in Japan were committing acts of sabotage. Vigilante terrorism resulted in the slaying of thousands of Koreans. Matsuo Takayoshi, the most careful student of this pogrom, sets the figure at somewhere between 2,500 and 6,000 Koreans murdered. Police were involved in the slaughter, as they also rounded up scores of radicals. In one police station nine alleged Communists were shot to death; in another, Ōsugi Sakae, the leading anarchist, and his wife and nephew were strangled in their jail cell by a police captain. The paroxysm of violence left little room to doubt the volatility of the new mass society. As political leaders set about laying plans for reconstruction of the capital region, their apprehension over the social unrest was noticeably heightened. As a kind of aftershock from the earthquake, in December the Prince Regent Hirohito was shot at by a young radical angered by the antileftist violence after the earthquake. The cabinet that had taken office only the day after the quake immediately resigned.

Among the elite there was a division of opinion as to whether their proper, safest response to this unrest ought to be some kind of progressive adjustment of social and political institutions that would accommodate the new forces or whether, on the contrary, it was necessary to depend on a tightening authoritarianism that would control not only political behavior but also thought. The issue of universal male suffrage illustrated this division. When it surfaced in the first decade of the century, conservatives such as Yamagata opposed it as destructive of the social order. Other leaders, however, saw it as a "safety valve" for unrest and believed that if the masses continued to be excluded from participation they would end up alienated and revolutionary. After World War I the opposition Kenseikai Party took that position and used it against Hara, who opposed extending suffrage, fearing that it might weaken Seiyūkai power. Popular support for universal manhood suffrage continued to build, and many conservatives came to favor it, arguing that it would broaden political support for the state and contribute to national integration. Shortly after the earthquake, the Seiyūkai decided to back universal male suffrage. It became law in 1925. At one stroke, the size of the electorate was made four times larger, numbering in excess of 12 million.

In spite of their backing the suffrage bill, the conservative elites did not regard the prospects of a mass political community with equanimity. Rather they felt the need for further measures to limit the range of political debate and for intensified efforts to mobilize the populace to instill deeper commitment to national loyalties. Makino Nobuaki, an influential elder statesman, for example, said that universal suffrage would lead to social disintegration if it were interpreted as supporting egalitarian ideals. It was necessary, he concluded, to organize a league of all the semigovernmental organizations, such as the youth groups, military associations, and women's auxiliaries to cooperate with the shrines, temples, and schools in emphasizing national spirit and traditional values of respect for hierarchy and social harmony.

More important, the same session of the Diet that passed the new suffrage bill also approved by a vote of 246 to 18 the Peace Preservation Law of 1925, which greatly narrowed the range of permissible political debate by outlawing groups that sought to alter the form of government or to abolish the system of private ownership. In the ensuing years the police used this law to round up members of the Communist Party, their alleged sympathizers, and others of left-wing persuasion. Such pressure contributed to the weakness of the new leftist parties that were attempted after 1925, but those parties suffered as well from internal squabbling and from a certain intellectual orientation that divorced them from the mass support they sought.

The crisis atmosphere deepened in the latter half of the 1920s as the economy slid toward the depression. Government planners had been beset by recurrent economic crises, none of which were settled in a satisfactory long-term manner, with the result that chronic instability and a general malaise plagued the economy throughout the 1920s, exacerbating tensions and unrest in society. Policymakers had failed to restore equilibrium after the unprecedented surge of growth and inflation during the war. "The basic problem," writes Hugh Patrick, "was that prices in Japan had risen more than they had abroad; once the war ended, Japan was not able to compete sufficiently in international markets, despite the war-induced growth and diversification of her industry."[9] At the highest level there was a costly indecisiveness in dealing with this problem with the result that growth lagged.

The small shopworker and farmer particularly encountered hard times. Agriculture stagnated and farm prices declined, because of both the import of cheap rice from Korea and Taiwan and the declining world market for Japanese agricultural goods, particularly silk. The recurring crises and government ineptness proved, however, but a prelude to the disaster that befell the industrialized world, including Japan, in 1929. The onset of the world depression brought collapse of the export market. Most damaging was the collapse of the international market for silk, Japan's principal export commodity and a product upon which most farm families depended for part of their income. By 1930 two-thirds of the net income produced in agriculture was spent on rents, taxes, and farm debt. Policymakers continued to flounder, compounding the effects of the depression by returning Japan to the gold standard at the end of 1929. Real farm income fell precipitously, with a calamitous effect on the standard of living in the villages. By the end of the 1920s social unrest in both cities and countryside had created a pervasive political malaise.

Women's Groups and the State

The attempts of the state to preserve a stable political community in the midst of the disruptions of rapid industrialization is a key theme of the Taishō Period. The government continuously reinforced the ideology of the family state and assimilated groups activated by rapid economic and social change. Since early in the Meiji Period it had been a firm principle that the governed should be brought into the governing process, not as a natural, innate right but rather as a means of achieving national unity. We have seen the techniques that the government used to integrate farmers, youth, veterans, and other groups into loyal service to the state. We have also seen how the government undertook reforms that would forestall the alienation of groups. The reforms designed to protect factory laborers and to extend male suffrage were based not on theories of innate rights but rather on the state's need to maintain the cohesiveness of society.

In some ways the most surprising reform initiative by the government was its 1931 proposal to give women voting and officeholding rights at the local level, in cities, towns, and villages. The proposal was surprising because for decades the government had sought to keep women away from all political matters and engaged solely in domestic responsibilities. In laws issued in the Meiji Period it was explicitly stated that only males could vote or serve in government positions. On the eve of the opening of the Diet in 1890, legislation prohibited women from joining political groups or even attending meetings where political issues were discussed. Again, in the Police Law of 1900, Article 5 forbade women and minors from attending political meetings.

The ideal of femininity in the ideology of the Meiji state is summed up in the slogan "good wife, wise mother" (*ryōsai kembo*), which was widely promoted by government leaders. Women were exhorted to contribute to the nation through efficient management of the household, responsible upbringing of children, frugality, and hard work. This ideology was a Japanese version of contemporary Western ideals of female domesticity. In contrast to the Tokugawa definition of a woman's dutiful role in samurai tracts where the woman was admonished to obey her husband and parents-in-law, the Meiji woman now had a part to play in nation building. More than duties, she now had a mission.

Female education therefore had a clear focus on training for domestic roles, or what we might call home economics, in order to serve the nation. As one of the Meiji Period's elite male educators wrote in 1909:

> Our female education, then, is based on the assumption that women marry, and that its object is to fit girls to become "good wives and wise mothers." The question naturally arises what constitutes a good wife and wise mother, and the answer requires a knowledge of the position of the wife and mother in the household and the standing of women in society and her status in the State. . . . [The] man goes outside to work to earn his living, to fulfill his duties to the State; it is the wife's part to help him, for the common interests of the house, and as her share of duty to the State, by sympathy and encouragement, by relieving him of anxieties at home, managing household affairs, looking after the household economy, and, above all, tending the old people and bringing up the children in a fit and proper manner.[10]

In the Taishō Period the role of women in society and in politics was reopened partly as a result of the spread of women's education, the emergence of women's organizations, and the rise of a small but noteworthy women's movement. By 1920 virtually all girls acquired the compulsory coeducation of six years. More than 150,000 were attending the higher girls' schools (secondary-level institutions). Beyond that, for the select few, there were women's schools such as Tsuda College founded in 1900 by Tsuda Umeko, who had earlier studied at Bryn Mawr College in the United States. An emergent class of professional women in teaching, nursing, clerical positions, white-collar work, and other professions was evident in the post–World War I period.

Observing this emergence of middle-class working women, journalism responded with discussions of new roles for "the new woman." In 1911 Hiratsuka Raichō, a graduate of Tsuda, founded the magazine *Seitō (Bluestocking)*, initially intended to be a literary magazine for women. As Hiratsuka wrote, however, she soon discovered she could not avoid politics: "That our literary activities would put us in direct opposition to the ideology of 'good wife, wise mother' was not totally unexpected. What we did not expect was to have to stand and fight immediately all of the traditions of feudalism in the society."[11] In the opening issue of *Seitō,* Yosano Akiko in a poem entitled "The Day the Mountains Move" declared that: "All the sleeping women/Are now awake and moving."[12] The journal quickly became a forum for the advocacy of new social and political roles for women. In the 1920s feminists turned their energies toward political activism through new women's organizations that demanded gender equality and political rights. The movement drew encouragement from the contemporary extension of the franchise to women in Western countries.

In light of the forces that were giving women a more conspicuous social role, the political elite changed its mind about excluding women from the political world and concluded that integrating women in the political community would strengthen the Japanese state. Official

Poet and feminist writer Yosano Akiko. *Kyodo News Service of Japan*

gender ideology therefore began to change in the 1920s. Diet members asserted that women must be taught to be "members of the State" and "a woman cannot be a good wife and wise mother without a knowledge of politics." In 1922 the Diet revised Article 5 of the Police Law and permitted women to attend and sponsor political-discussion meetings, though they still could not belong to political parties. This step also triggered the determination of the bureaucracy to mobilize women for other, more traditional purposes of the state: to encourage their support of saving and frugality, family discipline, and patriotic training of children. The Home Ministry formed women's organizations at all levels of society, just as it had done earlier for youth, veterans, and other groups.

At the end of the 1920s bureaucrats and party leaders agreed that women should have the suffrage in local elections. They crafted legislation that would grant adult women the "civic rights" to vote and hold office in local governments. Home Ministry bureaucrats believed, as one put it, that women's participation in local government was logical because "cities, towns, and villages are to a certain degree extensions of the household when it comes to, say, schools, sewers, or public toilets." The Home Minister's views were expressed more carefully. "Women think conservatively," he said. "Thus it will be enormously beneficial for women to take part in local government to maintain the order of State and Society by blocking radical change."[13] Lest there be any mistaken notion that the proposal was based on gender equality, the ministry inserted a provision in the government's legislation requiring a successful woman candidate to obtain her husband's consent before taking office. In 1931 the bill passed the Lower House but was overwhelmingly defeated in the highly conservative House of Peers by a vote of 184 to 62. Suffrage for women became a dead issue until 1945.

Despite the failure of suffrage as a means of integrating women into the political sphere, considerable evidence indicates that mobilization of women for purposes of the state was in a measure successful, not simply as a strategy of assimilating the women's movement but also because there was in actuality a pattern of cooperation between middle-class women's groups and the state. Many of the middle-class women's organizations chose to work with bureaucrats and their officially sponsored groups. As one historian contends, "to many women's leaders the road to power and influence lay in assuming public roles, often in alliance with the state."[14] They joined with bureaucrats to encourage other women to take the lead in public causes that appeared to lie within the special domain of women. Middle-class women leaders gained visibility in the political world through campaigns to increase household savings, improve welfare and health measures for mothers and children, and other civic-minded causes. Later, in the militarist 1930s, even liberal feminists began to collaborate with the state as women's groups grew to play a prominent role in wartime mobilization, dealing with problems of factory women, families of deceased servicemen, and conservation of scarce materials.

Vulnerability of the Political Parties

We have seen how the political parties steadily gained unexpected power within the Meiji constitutional system in the first decades of the century. They had achieved this position not by championing popular causes or by seeking reform of the political system, as some of the diehards in the parties would have liked, but instead by accommodating to the needs of the bureaucracy, by trading party support of government programs for positions in the bureaucracy, and by regional development projects that built up party support at the local level. This process of mutual accommodation opened the corridors to political power, and not a few writers in the 1920s saw Japan traversing the path toward political democracy that Western industrial nations had followed earlier. On closer look, this rise to power—that hardheaded realists such as Hara had achieved—was bought at some considerable cost to the integrity and independence of the parties. Yet, to be fair, one may well conclude that, given the institutional structure within which the parties found themselves, there was no practical alternative to the course that they followed.

What characteristics had the established parties acquired by the 1920s? In the first place, they were not organizations with which the masses were affiliated or in which people could readily identify their own interests and aspirations. Rather, the parties were highly elitist groups, membership in which required payment of dues, sponsorship, and the like. At the local level, therefore, their power was not in grassroots organization but rather in ties with district bosses, local officeholders, and families of influence whose loyalty and effectiveness in delivering the vote could be amply rewarded.

We should emphasize as well that the record of the parties' in enacting reform legislation, in times that cried out for remedial measures, was unimpressive. The two major parties were broadly similar in their conservative orientation. They both supported imperial sovereignty, empire, and the capitalist foundation of society. They also both favored some degree of popular participation in the political process, not from a belief in popular rights but because it would serve to ensure social cohesion, maintain the system, and thereby strengthen the nation. Beyond this broad similarity, however, the two parties were clearly different in the means that they advocated to achieve these ends. The Seiyūkai, in power from 1918 to 1922 and 1927 to 1929, was the more conservative. As we have seen, Hara built the Seiyūkai's power by accommodating the bureaucratic, military, and business elites. At the local level the party was dependent on landlord support. The Seiyūkai's instincts were therefore decidedly conservative, and it resisted many reform proposals. In 1925 it elected Tanaka Giichi, an army general, as its president, and the party took an increasingly hard line in foreign policy as well as in domestic. The rival party, the Kenseikai (renamed the Minseitō in 1927), which was in power from 1924 to 1927 and 1929 to 1931, was somewhat more liberal in both domestic and foreign policy. It drew support from liberal elements in the bureaucracy and the business community, and its power base was more urban. It offered an agenda of moderate reforms designed to accommodate some of the newly activated social forces. It won passage of a Tenancy Conciliation Law in 1924 to help mediate disputes and passage of universal male suffrage the following year. The Minseitō proposed further reform legislation that eventually came before the Diet for decision in 1930 and 1931. There were bills to establish rights of labor unions, to recognize the right of tenants to negotiate reductions in years of poor harvest, to lower the male voting age to twenty, and as we saw, to permit women to participate in local government. As Sheldon Garon writes, "these controversial bills would have faced formidable opposition under the best of circumstances from employers, landlords, the Seiyūkai, and conservatives in the House of Peers and the Privy Council."[15] In the course of their deliberations, these bills all had to be watered down to satisfy the vested interests. The Minseitō succeeded in shepherding these bills through the Lower House, but they were defeated in the House of Peers in 1931. Thereafter even this mild reform agenda was overwhelmed by the events of the Manchurian crisis, the depression, and rightist attacks on the parties.

The parties by their nature were heavily committed to satisfying the major interest groups—particularly the landlord and business classes. From the beginning, landlords had exercised great power in party headquarters, for they had the funds and local influence that party strength was built on in the provinces. The most notable phenomenon in the 1920s was the apparent degree of influence that the new business combines, the zaibatsu, acquired. Influence by industrialists within the government and the political parties was not new; it extended back to the early Meiji Period when, as we have seen, government played an important role in initiating industrialization and established close ties with the new captains of industry. What was new was the enormous concentration of capital that took place during and after World War I. Nothing exemplified the dual structure of the economy better than these giant combines, highly modern and efficient, towering above the rest of economic society, which was still largely organized in small shops and farms. Zaibatsu such as Mitsui and Mitsubishi encompassed a great variety of enterprises, including extractive industries, manufacturing companies, transportation networks, and banking and trading firms. The industrialists were a politically alert group, profoundly interested in many government issues, such as taxes and subsidies, patent and labor laws. They tried to control legislation by influence peddling—gift giving, entertainment, intermarriage with the other elites, and the like—and by financial support to the political parties. Bribery and other forms of corruption were widely charged against the parties in the 1920s. It is doubtful that Japanese political parties were any more corrupt than parties in the other industrial states, but the important point was their vulnerability at a time when quasi-Confucian suspicions of commerce were still alive and quasi-Confucian moral standards were still expected of the political community.

This brings us to a final and perhaps the most important characteristic of the parties, namely, their ultimate failure to justify or to legitimize themselves within the realm of Japanese values. The prevailing nationalist ideology stressed social harmony, selfless dedication to the state and society, loyalty and obedience to superiors. We have seen how government had taken that collectivist ethic, which had its roots deep in the cultural history of the Japanese people, and built it into an effective ideology to help overcome the strains of industrialism. It was inculcated in primary education textbooks and a variety of quasi-bureaucratic organizations—the youth groups, the military associations, and so on. This ideology resonated with the values of society. In the village this ethic had never died out, but was still the way of life. Cooperation, deference to authority, conformity with the needs of the community, subordination of individual interests to the consensus, maintenance of harmonious relations with fellow villagers—these values remained of transcendent importance. As our discussion of the dual economy has shown, agrarian society had been *relatively* little changed by industrialization. In the 1930s more than one-half the labor force was still employed in agriculture. Moreover, even in the cities the influence of the village could hardly be forgotten, for "three quarters of the politically participant adults in 1930 were born in villages."[16] The government, therefore, had a broad base of collectivist values upon which to build an ideology that likened the state to a harmonious family with the Emperor as the father figure.

In the face of such powerfully rooted ethical assumptions, parliamentary politics was always suspect. The hurly-burly in the Diet of competing interests, majority rule, influence peddling, partisanship, and open conflict ran sharply against the grain of that collectivist ethic. It was one thing to accept the turmoil and tensions of party rule in "normal" times, but economic instability and social unrest mounted in the late 1920s. Finally, there came as well a crisis in Japan's foreign relations. The result was a crisis in the political community that party supremacy could not survive. One moderate military leader, Ugaki Kazushige, wrote in his diary in June 1931, "Two-party politics can be a meaningful way to generate good policy for a wealthy, advanced nation. But a weak, poorly endowed late developer needs to seek the welfare of the people not only at home but in development abroad. This requires national unity, and two-party conflict is not welcome."[17]

The Meiji constitutional system had been predicated on organic unity and on the perseverance of shared values, that is, the consensus among the bureaucrats, the military, and the Diet members. Prior to 1918 that system had worked tolerably well under the tutelage of the oligarchs, but by the mid-1920s they had disappeared from the political scene and centrifugal forces had weakened the pattern of leadership and decision-making that had guided the Meiji state. For a brief time the parties picked up the task of coordinating the various elites, but the parties' grip on power was always tenuous and, in a state dedicated to imperial sovereignty, they were terribly vulnerable. In the midst of severe social and economic problems, the political community was characterized by drift and a loss of mastery. What was more, the activation of the masses had added a disturbing new element to politics. Following the institution of universal manhood suffrage, the labor and socialist movements turned to the organization of proletarian parties, which, although they gained only 2 percent of the membership in the House in the 1928 elections, nonetheless were a source of concern in the midst of unrest and circulation of radical thought. This sense of drift and loss of mastery in the political community, in conjunction with a major crisis in foreign relations, set the stage for the demise of party supremacy and the rise of militarism.

Notes

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