The Challenges the Taishō Democracy Faced

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The democratization of Japan has been challenging throughout Japanese history. A society remaining used to the feudal order, Japanese norms and values as a result of the 200-years long sakoku (closed country) policy of the Tokugawa Shogunate and imperial order faced tremendous challenges in its path of democratization. Therefore, the question of why Japan failed to democratize itself but disguised its ambitions in the ideologies such as militarism, expansionism, and imperialism, is of significant value. Such a dichotomy in Japanese history, which lies in the gap between democratization and militarism, has more than one explanation to it, for it is plausible to analyze Japan's failure by investigating cultural, political, and economic causes altogether. Only then is it conceivable to recognize an inclination in the contemporary global agenda as well, by explaining why particular nations, such as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, are a far cry from other democratic nations of the globe.

First of all, to analyze what cultural implications of Japan had on the failing of its democratization period during the Taishō Era (30 July 1912–25 December 1926), the last 200 years of the Tokugawa Shogunate should be investigated. Maintaining a highly preserved and closed political system with the ranks of the Japanese society and feudal order based on the imperial system, Japan had long deemed itself as an isolated country on top of its truly insular nature due to its geography. Japan, as an island country, has its history, profoundly influenced by its geography, for an island due dictate an insular community. People feel protected, secure, and relatively isolated from the outside world; they feel safer and less threatened. The geographical nature and the cultural impacts of living on an island influence the social, economic, and technological developments, which prescribes that such social, cultural, and societal constructions in Japan have taken place later than it has done in any different nation that is more connected to other parts of the world. Although the Japanese islands are close to the Korean peninsula and the Chinese mainland yet located as a spot in the very middle of the Pacific Ocean, it is difficult to cross the channel. Moreover, Japan also faced many geographical challenges; Northern Seas face the danger of hurricanes named typhoons, which used to render it truly hard to cross the straits. Therefore, for instance, whenever the Japanese tried to go to China, they knew that they would not be able to make it. Consequently, the difficulty of communication and an insular lifestyle have always been indispensable constituents of Japanese history. Therefore, Japan’s stance and distance towards the idea of
democracy stem from this, first, geographical, and then, cultural insulation that it harbored since the very beginning of its history, and the cultural and social reasons as to why the Japanese felt unfamiliar and even reactive towards democratization as they advocated the idea that such a phase annihilated Japan’s old traditional customs.

The selections from the 1937 *Kokutai no Hongi (Fundamentals of Our National Polity)* clearly state that what Japan prioritizes in terms of its national policy—with an impact of increased nationalism—are *loyalty, patriotism, and harmony*. These notions are of tremendous significance since it sheds light on the chief motives as to why the democratization of the Taishō Period failed, and how it influenced Japan's relation with the idea of 'democracy.' First of all, loyalty indeed comes from the long tradition of the imperial system, based on the superiority of the ruling class. Therefore, the text suggests that commitment—to the emperor, to the nation, and the sacralization of the authority—is still a principal determinant in defining the national polity in the Japanese mindset. Another notion, patriotism, manifests itself in the overly increasing nationalism that the country harbored due to some reasons such as the Showa Restoration and the shunning of the Japanese by western nations. Nationalism prioritized the expansion and strength—both military and economic—of the Empire of Japan more than other elements such as the democratization, parliamentary ascendancy, and other reforms regarding the administrative system.

As might be expected, the military officers were, in the main, opposed to the ascendancy of democracy and party government. Through the mechanism of the “independence of the supreme command,” the army and navy maintained a degree of autonomy from the government. They had direct access to the emperor, and the officers actually considered themselves to be the emperor’s immediate retainers.

As is evident in the statements of Hane and Perez, *Kokutai no Hongi* shows a parallelism with the quotation above, for it explicitly reflects what Japan embraced in its shuffle between militarism and democratization. Historical factors are unavoidable components of Japan's adopting militarism over democracy as well, which manifests itself in the third notion highly accentuated in the *Kokutai no Hongi. Harmony*, the last one of the three concepts addressed in the present essay, reveals the significance of a stable, rooted, and firm nation, into which Japan should thrive to transform itself. Along with the final consequences of the post-

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World War I period, Japan strived to maintain its political, economic, and social power via its adoption of militarism and expansionism. Nevertheless, although the Empire of Japan had become a militarized country, it also sought ways of not delving into another war, for it would harm its stability and peaceful order. Harmony, in this view, goes hand in hand with the independent Japanese army, which formulated a new faction in Japan and contributed to the failure of the Japanese democracy.

Having mentioned the cultural inclination of the Japanese towards the adoption of any kinds of “new” systems, rules, and regulations and the political mindset that the Japanese harbored during that period, there are also concrete political results to Japan's not being able to democratize itself. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Japanese nationalism grew more immensely in the pre-World War II period, resulting in the adoption of the militarism by the Japanese government. Therefore, it is incontrovertible that where nationalism persists, universalism becomes harmed. Likewise, where nationalism grows in effect and acts similar to patriotism—which exists in Kokutai no Hongi—militarism also gains momentum. In this view, what we witness in Japan's pre-war period functions as a chain reaction—as shall be discussed. Yoshihito, ascending to the throne and taking the name Taishō, ushered the next era upon the demise of his father, Emperor Meiji. Among surging uncertainties as to Japan's future, most of the Japanese clung to the old, lasting traditions—as a manifestation of their loyalty to both the late Emperor Meiji and his son, Taishō. “For these reasons the Taishō era has also been called Taishō democracy as Japan enjoyed a climate of political liberalism unforeseen after decades of Meiji authoritarianism.” Moreover, to thoroughly grasp the ideational track Japan followed throughout the establishment of the Taishō democracy, Professor Kevin M. Doak also argues that it is essential to recognize that “nationalism, especially the popular ethnic version, was the central ingredient in what has come to be known as Taishō democracy.”

Worth mentioning is the Japanese Exclusion Act passed in 1924 by America to exclude Japanese immigrants. The Japanese Exclusion Act was also among the reasons why the Showa Restoration took place. The following passage elaborates on the Japanese Exclusion Act, and how it resulted in feelings of inferiority on the part of the Japanese and increased nationalism—and thus—militarism in the course of 1920s

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This [referring to the Japanese Exclusion Act of 2014] affected the Japanese attitude that they were being viewed as inferior by Western Nations. This view was strengthened further as a series of mishaps at the meetings at Versailles, where it appeared to Japan that Europe was not willing to surrender its possessions in Asia. The Japanese legislation was not used to compromising in situations where it was being viewed as weak and where negotiation acts seemed frivolous. Furthermore, the Japanese military had the conception that war with the west was inevitable, and a compromise was simply a waste of time and effort.5

The feelings of inferiority that the Japanese thought Westerners imposed on them also resulted in more aggression and reactiveness the Japanese had towards the westerners. Therefore, at this point, it is conceivable that the Japanese harbored negative stances towards anything Western—from ideologies to the implementation of political systems/ regimes. In this view, growing nationalism was too strong for the Japanese such an attitude by the Westerners.

The democracy—being a Western introduction and resulting in the eradication of Japanese norms and values, it is no surprise that Taishō Democracy failed, and Japan could not take its stand among the successfully democratized nations, where the old traditions still prevailed.

Matsuo Takayoshi, in his article The Development of Democracy in Japan, Taishō Democracy: Its Flowering and Breakdown elucidates the political atmosphere topped with economic anxiety Japan suffered during that period, which brings us to the next point, the Japanese economy.

[…] from the point of view of its diplomatic demands fair success was achieved in that imperialistic military expansion was considerably arrested until 1925. In 1927 the attitude of the Wakatsuki Cabinet of the Minseito towards the Northern Expedition of the Chinese Nationalists was considered to be too effete by the old ruling forces entrenched in the Privy Council, and hence consent was refused to temporary measures necessitated by the financial panic which happened to break out at the time.6

The term “Taishō Democracy” also refers to the flourishing of new ways of thinking, strengthening of social movements, and development of party politics in a period centered on the Taishō era (the reign of Emperor Taishō, 1912–26). However, in the aftermath of World War I, Japan concentrated on other branches in which it could blossom; the post-World War I period has brought about tremendous opportunities for Japan to resurrect its economy and enhance its military. Jansen underlines the rice riots and how economic advancement gained momentum in the Japanese history during this period. He states, “The ferment of the first decade

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5 InfoRefuge, “Failure of the Taishō Democracy,” n.d.
of the Taishō era included the capitalist boom of the war years followed by the rice riots of 1918, the collapse of empire in China and in central Europe, rising interest in anarchism and communist materialism brought to focus by the Russian Revolution, and the lofty rhetoric of Wilsonian internationalism.”

Economic advancement was vital for Japan, not only because it had to, now, compete with other industrial powers but also it would profoundly aid the Imperial Japanese Army, for the army was the fundamental source of income for the local Japanese people. In this view, Japan aimed at becoming a highly industrialized nation, which—in some ways—prevented a firm focus Japan would adopt for the new approaches of the Taishō Democracy. Japan's failure, while embracing the democratic system, apart from its economic disturbances at the time, has other reasons. It is plausible to see a trend where Japan maintained the most amount of land and climaxed its territorial expansion under the so-called “peaceful policies,” signified as harmony in the Kokutai no Hongi as well.

Therefore, the more Japan seized military aggression with an uninterrupted army, and the more it expanded its territorial borders, the less it became democratized. In other words, the democratization of Japan contrasted with its peak of imperialism throughout history. Accordingly, Japan allocated its fiscal, militaristic, social, and political means to expand and have a global claim to the Asian continent. The traces of Japan's imperialist and expansionist policies are in the railroad constructions, hospital/school establishments, and infrastructure buildings. Hence, democracy was not the prior item on the agenda of the Empire of Japan. Economic struggles, as well as the prioritization of imperialism and expansionism, topped with the escalating nationalism—even patriotism—distracted the country from becoming a democratic one. Furthermore, the increasing nationalism the Japanese carved in their mindset resulted in their reactivity and resistance to Western institutions—among which democracy exists. Last but not least, the long-lasting tradition of obedience and loyalty prevented Japan from fully appropriating democracy.

In conclusion, there are more than one approach, answer, and explanation as to why the democratization of Japan during the Taishō era failed. It is not only an intellectual but also a political, economic, cultural, and social debate. Therefore, one should analyze the deeply-rooted historical, political, and cultural roots and carefully elucidate political turmoil taking place during the relative period. The failure of democratization in the Taishō era, nevertheless,

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does not purport that Japan is not a suitable example for the adoption of democracy. On the contrary, it solely indicates Japan's priorities of growing into an established imperialist power overrun its ambitions of successfully practicing democracy, with various blockades in front of it, as discussed throughout the present essay. The time may have been unsuitable during the Taishō period. However, the historical trend does not grant the readers with adequate data as to why democracy would be a not-fitting system for Japan.
Bibliography


