Factions of the Jimintō: Intra-Party Democracy?

Abstract

The factions of Japan’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDP or Jimintō) have received ample attention from academics, given their position as the power holders and brokers of Japan, which has allowed them to shape and direct the political scene of post-war modern Japan. Factions have been described as tools of electoral success and career advancement, collecting and dispersing funds and votes within the Jimintō both for the sake of faction members and leaders. The dominant ways of looking at the state of factionalism within the Jimintō – and in Japanese politics in general – have tended to characterize and explain their existence as a manifestation of Japanese culture, a force of electoral necessity, or as a result of the political development of Japan. However, given the one-party dominance of the Jimintō in Japan, another point of view regarding factional politics should be entertained: intraparty democracy. This study aims to understand the factions of the Jimintō as forces of intraparty democratization, given their intraparty competition for power and position as connections between grassroots and party level institutions. Constructing a framework for intraparty democracy and comparing it to the practices of factionalism in Japan, this paper seeks to increase our understanding of whether, and if so how, can the factions of the Jimintō be characterized as forces of intraparty democracy.

Keywords: Liberal Democratic Party of Japan, intraparty democracy, factions, factional intraparty democracy
Introduction

“A house divided against itself cannot stand” proclaimed then senator-hopeful Abraham Lincoln, before the Illinois State Republican Convention in 1858 (*House Divided Speech*). Of course, his idea of a division rested upon a national conflict over slavery in the United States of America, yet it holds a certain larger truth: any body politic cannot last with prominent internal divisions existing within it. However, such has not been the case of Japan’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDP or Jimintō) – for much of its lengthy hold on power within the one-party dominant democracy of Japan – despite the institutionalized nature and extensive power of the factions it contained (Cox & Rosenbluth 577; Stockwin 161, 165). Since its inception in 1955, its embedded strong factionalism has served to make Jimintō the literal “divided house”, yet the party has not fallen apart as a divided house should.

This situation of rampant factionalism within the Jimintō has been studied under a variety of rubrics aiming either to uncover their development in the first place or to understand the roles they serve within party and politics. However, the factions of the Jimintō warrant exploration beyond these two fields, and as mechanisms of intraparty democracy. An exploration of Jimintō factions and factionalism, from the point of view of intraparty democracy is important because it would serve to increase our understanding of how Japanese democracy has functioned as a – by and large – one-party dominant democracy, despite the rise of new demographics and novel political stances, and bring to attention possible dynamics of intraparty politics which has facilitated this situation. As such, this paper is aimed at answering the question of whether the factionalism of the Jimintō, within the context of one-party dominant democracy of Japan, be classified as a form of intraparty democracy, and if so, in what ways it could be described as
such. It is my central contention, that the factionalism within the Jimintō, although in an imperfect manner, does function as a mechanism for intraparty democracy.

This paper will be structured into three sections. The first section will focus on formulation a framework of intraparty democracy, aiming to describe a model which would be sufficient enough in capturing the essential functions and structures of intraparty democracy in a party with institutionalized factions. The second section will seek to compare the practical realities and evidence from the factionalism of the Jimintō against the established framework, focusing on the conditions that satisfy the basis of intraparty democracy. The third section will focus on the opposite points, seeking to focus on and explain the points where the Jimintō factions do not satisfy the conditions for intraparty democracy.

Theorizing Factional Intraparty Democracy

For the discussion of this paper to make sense, a framework of discussion must be formulated, around which everything else will take place. In formulating a framework of the functions of intraparty democracy I will draw upon the works of Jan Teorell and Françoise Boucek, who focus on intraparty democracy and intraparty factionalism respectively. Writing about intraparty democracy, Teorell identifies a number of points and conceptualizations, both praised and criticized within the academic discourse, from which a number can be drawn upon as a general framework of what intraparty democracy should look like. The starting criterion here is that intraparty democracy turns parties “into principles with two agents – voters and members” (Teorell 366, italics in original). As such, one expectation out of a party where intraparty democracy exists is that it becomes a nexus for partisan and grassroots interaction and influence in politics. As such, this means that when observing parties, those mechanisms which connect the members and parliamentarians of a party to their voter bases should also exist (Teorell 373).
These structures and mechanisms should work towards fostering interaction between party voters and members, which would then be picked up by the party as feedback and guidance. These structures need not be confined to electoral primaries or party organizations such as those for youth and women, but also those non-party institutions that actively bring party members together with the voters, allowing active opinion canvassing.

Another criterion that can be drawn out is that intraparty democracy should help align the interests of the party with that of the people – although in this case, the more refined term “voters” is much more appropriate – by giving its members the power to hold party leaders accountable (Teorell 377). As such, another point which should be seen when looking for intraparty democracy should be whether the party holds its leader accountable for their actions and for legislative actions, which have a bearing on the way in which the voters react to the party label. Two key points emerge here as important checks, which should be kept in mind, because not every instance of member led accountability will count as intraparty democracy, which will mean a failure of intraparty democracy as defined by this criterion. First, party members may seek to take action against party leaders, when the actions of the leader are in accord with voter positions but not with member positions, resulting in a situation where intraparty democracy fails. Movement to restore accord between the party voters and members in such instance, may be construed as restoration of intraparty democracy. Second, the members may fail in holding their leaders accountable, which will also mean a failure of intraparty democracy. Here, personal action by the leader or voter action to ensure accountability – or at least make it appear as such – are actions for accountability, outside of the scope of intraparty democracy.

A third criterion is that intraparty democracy should facilitate in agenda setting, where solutions put forward by the voters are forwarded to the party through their connections to the
party members (Teorell 375). Under such an arrangement, the legislative agenda of the party should be highly responsive to the needs and calls of its voters, as well as to their ideas in response to the items on agenda. This means that situations where the party members do not have active control over the legislative agenda or where the public response is not taken into account in formulating a legislated solution indicate a failure or absence of intraparty democracy. However, one reservation that should be made here is that the type of agenda setting which matters here is not defined in relation to daily and immediate political concerns, but rather in terms of large scope – or grand – policy pronouncements or aims of a given administration.

Turning to the work of Boucek, which adds the more faction specific points of the framework here, the fourth criterion which emerges is that intraparty factionalism can increase intraparty cooperation, cohesiveness, and diversity (Boucek 469). This is because factions should be formed as a result of like-minded party members coalescing around those members with more power, prominence, or seniority, and then must engage other factions to pass legislation, allocate party posts, and determine policy. As such, what should become observable in a party with factional intraparty democracy is the successful integration and coexistence of a variety of groups. However, this should not be mistaken for a big tent party, because what is sought is not the collective action of actors from a wide range of ideological stances, but rather that of different sections of an ideologically similar party voter and member base. The essential point here is that the factions should be able to mobilize and become the voice of different sections of a party’s voter base, which should become the unified voice of the party after passing through the mechanisms of intraparty democracy. The failure to demonstrate such factional integration and especially the situations in which members bolt from the party or the party reaches a
deadlock over internal, legislative, or policy matters become instances in which factional intraparty democracy can be said to have failed.

A fifth and final criterion which emerges from here is that intraparty factionalism can become a force that reduces political extremism and facilitate cooperation between those party members that hold different views on a given issue by promoting moderation (Boucek 472). The implication here is that although, per criterion four, different points of view are brought under a single roof – by virtue of factional cooperation and coordination – they are also moderated, and made identical to a degree, so as to provide a common voice for the party. As such, what should be visible in a factional intraparty democracy is the existence of those members – if not entire factions – that are in representative of more radical or extreme points but the lack of such positions in the mainstream and the agenda of the party itself. However, at the point that a party, which has multiple factions contained within, can be observed as veering towards a position that is considered to be outside of the mainstream, one can also call for the failure of factional intraparty democracy because moderation has failed. Of course, this criterion excludes those situations where factions have mediated themselves – or have formed underneath – a position that is already outside of the mainstream, like the Nazi Party. Furthermore, parties where differences between the factions cannot be mediated at all are also out of consideration, like most communist parties of the Western Bloc.

In sum, what emerges is a five criteria model for “factional intraparty democracy” whereby a party is said to have such a model of intraparty democracy, given that it has a structure which: responds to both members and voters; allows for leader accountability by members; allows for members to set the agenda and voters to offer solutions; increases factional cohesiveness and allows for harmonious diversity; and moderates extreme positions. This is the
analytical framework – the “basic model” for factional intraparty democracy – for analyzing and discussing factional intraparty democracy over the test case of the Jimintō. The discussion will now progress into exploring aspects of policy and politics within the context of the Jimintō, so as to assess whether the party fulfills the conditions to be considered as possessing or exercising factional intraparty politics. The following section will first focus on discussing those criteria and those aspects of Jimintō’s internal structure, which satisfies the conditions for a factional intraparty democracy.

**Finding Traces of Factional Intraparty Democracy in the Jimintō**

Beginning with the first criterion, of whether the party responds to both its members and voters, through those structures that allow for the party voters and members to remain in contact and have an exchange of views and ideas, a familiar structure of the Jimintō emerges to the fore: the koenkai. The koenkai has emerged within the Jimintō as informal structures that allow for a personalized vote to be cultivated by party members standing for election, which has put them into close contact with their voters (Cox & Thies 273; Krauss & Pekkanen 29-30). Such connections have not simply been confined to impersonal alliances formed between faceless organizations, but have rather been cultivated by face to face activities, ranging from funerals to dinners, which has allowed for party members to meet with their voters in person (Krauss & Pekkanen 33-36). Thus, the factional intraparty democracy of Japan can be described as one that has been institutionalized at a level that reaches down to the voters in a personal and individualized manner, integrating them directly into the processes of intraparty democracy. As such, the koenkai has served as mechanisms that have on the one hand allowed for the Jimintō members to actively canvas and evaluate the needs and desired of their voters, and on the other hand, to relay voter sentiments upward within their factions and the party.
Understood in a narrower sense, parties responding to both the members and the voters, can be understood as a process in which immediate material or career benefits are derived as part of the factional intraparty democracy structures. On the side of the party members, what stands out is the established pattern of party position allotments, which are done per the seniority principle and through factional bargaining (Cox, Rosenbluth, & Thies 38, 47; Stockwin 161; Kohno 93). In this way, the factional intraparty democracy of the Jimintō also responds to the career goals of its members, by way of an institutionalized system of post distribution. On the side of the people, since the general aim of the party by itself is to provide a number of benefits to the voters and the electorate at large, even without intraparty democracy, it would be in vain to try to point towards any immediate material or career benefits to the voters. As such, this aspect of the Jimintō’s factional intraparty democracy should rather be seen as an auxiliary benefit that the system carrier towards the party members, which serves to further fulfill this criterion of factional intraparty democracy. In sum, the Jimintō can be seen as satisfying fully, the requirements of factional intraparty democracy.

Moving forward into the third criterion, of agenda setting and encouraging public response, the koenkai once again come to the fore as important organizations within which a public response to the agenda items at hand can be cultivated by the Jimintō. The koenkai, have not simply remained electoral tools and organizations seeking to cultivate voter support and canvas the needs and opinions of the voter base. By putting party members directly in contact with their voters, the koenkai have also worked to bring to the attention of the party – via its members – the ideas of the voters as solutions to problems and agenda items at hand (Krauss & Pekkanen 29. However, as in any such democratic institution where people are brought together to share ideas, the koenkai cannot be thought of as a one-way organization, where the flow of
information goes from voters to members. Flow of ideas from party members to voters must also be acknowledged as the second way in which ideas and information flows, which adds another layer to the Jimintō’s factional intraparty democracy. Keeping this in mind, it can be argued that the ideas that have emerged from the koenkai have themselves been a result of a democratic process of bargain and compromise, presenting both the inputs of the voters and the members. Thus, the koenkai have become the nexus within which the party – by virtue of its members coming into close contact with its voters – have been able to achieve an extra degree of intraparty democracy due to both the mediation between the positions of the voters and the members, and their upwards relay into the party itself. As such, what can be observed is that the Jimintō only partially fulfills the requirements of the third criterion, because – as will be discussed in the next section – the control of the agenda rests elsewhere.

Looking at the fourth criterion, of increased cohesiveness, cooperation, and diversity within a system of factional intraparty democracy, a couple of items stand out in the case of the Jimintō. The first factor that points to the nature of the Jimintō as a party where internal diversity and cohesiveness comes from the fact that it is essentially a merger of the Japan Democratic Party and the Liberal Party, which were conservative yet separate parties on their own until 1955 (Totten & Kawakami 113; Boucek 471; Kohno 75; Krauss & Pekkanen 14-15). However, their “conservatism” has only been a broad label under which integration has been achieved, with actual differences between the two parties forming along the lines of old party allegiances, and the political and bureaucratic backgrounds (Kohno 89-90; Krauss & Pekkanen 207, 209). The Liberal Party boasted men like Yoshida Shigeru, Satō Eisaku, and Ikeda Hayato that had not been subjected to Occupation era political purges, were from rather bureaucratic backgrounds, and their policies seemingly less tinged with nationalism. The Japan Democratic Party boasted
men like Hatoyama Ichirō and Kishi Nobusuke, who had political careers dating back before the war, with ties to the imperial war machine that had led to their purging, and – especially with Kishi – their political drives carried heavy tones of nationalism. However, these differences were overcome, leading to the longevity and success of the Jimintō in dominating the Japanese political landscape for as long as it did. Furthermore, the fact that the Jimintō has been a party that responds to both a rural agricultural and urban industrial voter base, can be taken as another instance in which factional intraparty democracy unites and harmonizes the divergent interests contained within the party.

The second factor here is that the Jimintō has rarely suffered instances of members bolting from the party, en masse and debilitating the party in its position as the dominant power in the Diet – with the exception being prior to the 1993 election (Kohno 91, 139-140; Gaunder 60). Of course, it is possible to point towards the high costs of leaving an existing party and establishing a new one, as Boucek does, in explaining why such actions has not taken place too much within the Jimintō (474). However, such an explanation is not sufficient in describing why candidates, with personalized voter and funding bases located mostly within their koenkai, have not been so ready to bolt from the party when they saw the internal differences rise and the party mainstream move away from them. What does explain such lack of action, is the existence of the factional intraparty democracy structure that has rather incentivized staying within the Jimintō for the members that might have otherwise left, by creating cohesion within the party and by ensuring that these members were a part of the internal party mechanisms. Moreover, as discussed before, the existing system of factional intraparty democracy also institutionalized and democratized a process by which party posts and career advancement could be achieved, further
incentivizing the members to stay within the party. Overall, what emerges is that the Jimintō can be acknowledged as satisfying the requirement for the fourth criterion.

Turning towards the fifth criterion, of factional intraparty democracy resulting in the moderation of extremism within parties, it is possible to observe such an effect within the Jimintō – which has been defined as a “brokerage party” of conservative policies – beginning with its earliest days and especially with a focus around the issue of security (Totten & Kawakami 114, 120; Gaunder 50). The single most salient piece of “extreme” political thinking in this regard has been focused on the revision of the Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution and the attainment of a level of equality with or independence from the United States in providing for Japan’s own security. However, whilst party leaders – and subsequently Prime Ministers – such as Kishi Nobusuke and Abe Shinzo have been known to hold such highly nationalistic views, which has reflected in their security and foreign policy pronouncements, their ideas have never really become the mainstream. This has been a result of the factional intraparty democracy actively working to integrate and mediate their views with those of the other factions within the Jimintō, who have not been as enthusiastic towards such actions being taken.

Furthermore, the crux of their argumentation, and their ultimate goal, which has been the amendment of the Article 9 of the constitution, has never materialized and, in fact, has been by and large a highly unpopular proposal on part of the voters (Council on Foreign Relations). Looking back into earlier discussion regarding the koenka, it can also be found that such distaste on part of the voters might have both informed party member positions and been carried upwards within the structures of factional intraparty democracy to influence policy. In sum, the moderation of the more radical elements within the Jimintō has been facilitated through the system of factional intraparty democracy, which has both actively brought about an ideational
integration within the party and a flow of voter sentiment and ideas into the party. However, as the next section will show, the Jimintō can only be said to partially fulfill the fifth criterion of factional intraparty democracy.

Where Jimintō’s Factional Intraparty Democracy Has Failed

Having discussed the criteria which the Jimintō’s internal structures and practical actions show evidence of – fully or partially – satisfying, those criteria in which the Jimintō fails to – fully or partially – meet the requirements fulfilling it should now be discussed. The second criterion, of factional intraparty democracy bringing about leader accountability, seems to be entirely missing from the Jimintō and has more often met the conditions of failure that has been set out earlier. This is not to say that the leaders have not been in discord with their party or with their voters. However, the development of events has largely been such that the actions of the party leaders have usually undercut any attempt to enact a measure of accountability. Two prominent examples could be entertained here in view of this point, the first showing failure due to the inability of the party members to act and the second showing failure due to party members standing in opposition to party leaders and voters.

First is the resignation of Kishi Nobusuke, in the aftermath of the revision of the security treaty with the United States, which had sparked large public outrage and had been settled by Kishi stepping down of his own accord after accomplishing revision yet suffering from a collapse in his popularity (Watanabe 98, 118). In this instance, the party leader and the party members had been in line with one another, however, large public outrage had occurred, which points towards a leader-voter discordance within the Jimintō that could have prompted a move to hold Kishi accountable for his actions. However, party members failed to hold Kishi accountable – and failed to maintain one tenet of factional intraparty democracy – both because they were on
the same position of discord with the voters, and because Kishi preempted such a move by stepping down on his own accord.

The second prominent example can be seen in the expulsion of Jimintō members, that had rebelled against Koizumi Junichiro’s postal privatization reforms before the 2005 elections and the endorsement new “assassin” candidates, called “Koizumi Children” (Gaunder 144-145; Krauss & Pekkanen 96, 248; Eldridge 49, in Translators Preface of Watanabe) This has been an instance in which the party leader, who had popular backing by the voters at large – evidenced by the sweeping electoral victory afterwards – was rebelled at by party members that had vested interests in the maintenance of the status quo of the postal order. As such, there emerged leader-voter convergence and the discordance of these two groups with the party members, signaling a situation in which factional intraparty democracy failed to function because the legitimate grounds on which a leader might be held accountable or acted against by party members did not materialize. As such, on both of the accounts which have been provided as instances of failure for factional intraparty democracy early on, the Jimintō – by providing examples of them – showed the failure of the second criterion of this study.

Turning towards the partially fulfilled third criterion, of factional intraparty democracy fostering the ability of agenda setting by party members and the contribution of solutions by voters, the Jimintō has rather been lacking on the former part. This is because by and large, as a survey of major policies suggests, agenda setting has rather been at the hand of the party president, who has been the Prime Minister (Krauss & Pekkanen 217). Examples of this can be found with leaders championing different causes for themselves. The major agenda item for Kishi was the revision of the security treaty with the US, for Ikeda it was doubling the national income, and for Koizumi it was postal reform. In each case, both the agenda and the single most
important item at top of the agenda has been set per the preferences or political vision of the party leader, rather than through the structure of factional intraparty democracy. As such, this aspect of factional intraparty democracy, which should mediate between the proposed agenda items of various factions and grassroots groups so as to determine the agenda and the order of importance in which items are listed within, has been missing from the Jimintō, being dominated largely by the leader of the party.

Finally, turning to the partially fulfilled fifth criterion on the mediation of extreme or radical views within the party, the Jimintō can be seen as being partially unable to fulfill this criterion because it is also fulfilling a condition previously described: rise of extreme points of view. This situation is best evidenced by the rise of the nationalistic rhetoric under the Jimintō, which has manifested itself in continuous international spats and accusation over Japanese erasure of history along nationalistic lines, and in visits to the Yasukuni Shrine which houses several people tried and executed as criminals of war (Togo 425-426). The rise of such nationalistic sentiments – which are by no means part of the political mainstream of Japan, especially given that their major goal of constitutional revision is highly unpopular – within the Jimintō signals a shift, which would provide for the failure of the structure of factional intraparty democracy. This failure would come about because, if the current ideological trend within the Jimintō continues there will emerge a schism between party and voters, because a situation will emerge in which the structure of intraparty democracy has not been and will not be able to moderate and weed out radical views within the party. Furthermore, such a dissonance, by alienating voters and disrupting the functions of other mechanisms such as the koenkai, might also bring about a much larger failure of the factional intraparty democracy which can be observed within the Jimintō.
In Conclusion

Before moving onto the concluding remarks, a couple of points of contention and future inquiry, which has been left out of the scope of this study should be briefly stated. On the one side, this study has ignored the schism between the pre- and post-1994 electoral reform in terms of the changes it has introduced into the Jimintō and the way in which it conducts its internal and electoral affairs. The main focus has been on those aspects of the party that have endured and spanned both periods, which have also satisfied the criteria set out as part of the analytical framework employed in this study. As such, this warrants further study which would take into account the changes that have occurred within the party, focusing to understand how the Jimintō has conformed to this model of factional intraparty democracy before and after electoral reform.

Second, the impact of the Policy Affairs Research Council and the oft cited claim that it is the bureaucracy that actually writes the bills proposed in the Diet, should be given specific attention as part of the third criterion of the framework of this study. Since the surrounding discussion would inevitable branch out into understanding the legislative structures and activities of the Jimintō, it has not been a part of the discussion of this study, because it would distract from the central discussion being made.

Looking back onto the discussion led in this paper, it can be seen that the Liberal Democrat Party responds to member and voter needs through the koenkai and the factions, and uses the same structure to allow voter participation in offering solutions to current problems and items on the agenda. The factional structure of the party allows for the greater integration and representation of the multitude of divergent views contained within itself, and actively moderates those views that remain radical to its own mainstream. However, the party fails to provide leader accountability or the power to set the agenda by its members and factions, and shows a clear
ascendancy of the extreme views, showing an inability to moderate these positions within itself.

Drawing upon this, it can be said that the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan does, for the most part - although imperfectly, conforms to the proposed model of factional intraparty democracy as defined by the five criteria set forward in this study. Starting from this point, the institutionalized factionalism of the party can further be scrutinized from the perspective of intraparty democracy, seeing as to why such factional intraparty democracy has emerged and how it has benefitted the Liberal Democratic Party and Japanese politics within the context of one-party dominance.
Works Cited


