Between Empire and Democracy: Japan’s Taishō Experience

Beginning under the reign of the Taishō emperor, with the cabinet of the first commoner Prime Minister Hara Takashi in 1918, the Empire of Japan experienced a period of democratic and liberal ascendancy until 1932, when Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi was assassinated on May 15 by young naval officers wherewith a definitive slide towards militarism took hold. Looking at the rise and fall of this section of the Taishō Democracy period, which lasted for fourteen years between 1918 and 1932, I would argue that the rise and decline of democracy and liberalism in Imperial Japan coincided with the fall and rise of an aggressive empire building campaign in Asia. Furthermore, despite being a “failure” in the practice of democracy and liberalism, the experience of the Taishō Democracy does not show that democracy and liberalism have been – and/or still are – incompatible with and are fundamentally alien to Japan. What the Japanese experience in this period rather shows is that democracy in this period rested on shaky grounds with a weak defense, which allowed it to be washed aside by more aggressive forces bent on imposing their will on Imperial Japan.

Looking into the rise of democratic and liberal political trends in 1918, one thing that can be seen definitively is that these developments came at a time when the peacetime empire of Japan reached its greatest extent, the pursuit of empire calmed down, and equality with the West was thought to be achieved. Japan was a victorious Allied power and a party to the Paris Peace Conference that would follow in 1919, the empire stretched from Korea to “South Seas” in Micronesia, and there was a noticeable lack of immediate enemies to the empire with the West in alliance, Russia in turmoil, and China crippled as it had been for the past half century. As such, one can argue that Imperial Japan had entered a period where militarism and calls for the expansion of the empire were not high on the list of priorities or were the main paths to solving
the crises being faced by Japan – and would not be until 1931-32 – most of which were primarily of a domestic nature in this period. The pressing issues of the day was not to combat foreign pressures that seemed to challenge Japan’s standing in the world but to put the house in order, and the domestic political scene reacted to this need by turning towards a degree of democracy, liberalism, and party politics.

On the domestic side, the economic boom of the wartime was coming to an end, and the rapid inflationary rise in the price of rice leading to rice riots of 1918 served as a key event in bringing Hara Takashi to power as Prime Minister in the first place because the preceding cabinet of Terauchi Masatake collapsed, unable to deal with the riots. The impact of economic recovery across the globe as the war ended also hit the Japanese economy harshly, which had experienced growth by filling in the gaps in global demand that had been left by the other industrialized nations who had mostly converted to wartime production or lost their workforces. As such, Japan had less need for militaristic policies and politics, and especially so, in order to deal with the rising economic problems and public unrest after the war. What emerged was the combination of external stability and security with internal unrest, which resulted in a brief withdrawal of militarism from the Japanese political landscape and was replaced by rather more democratic and liberal politics and policies in governing the empire. This situation also made it possible for the Japanese governments of this time to sign onto the treaties which emerged out of the Washington Naval Conference, participated in the League of Nations, and softened colonial policy which saw in Korea an elevation of Korean culture in status. However, these earlier

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attitudes were lost in time and the policies and actions of these parliamentary governments soon became the failures of civil government to put the empire on the right track.

The decline of democracy and liberalism came in time as pressures, both internal and external, mounted and militarism increasingly began to offer a viable way out of the woes of the empire through mass mobilization and organization, expansion, and unity brought about by war. On the domestic front, ever since the end of the war Japan had been experiencing protracted economic crises, where the fallout from the war was followed by and merged into the impact of the Great Depression in 1929. Urban and rural populations alike suffered from economic downturn, but it was the suffering of the rural Japanese that especially came to fuel the turn away from democracy and into militarism. This was because it was their sons that manned the military, which meant that the military felt the impact of the rural economic crunch the most and was highly motivated to offer solutions to it.

In response, many military men had come to find a desirable solution to the internal demographic and economic woes of the empire – which the civilian governments had been unable to sufficiently solve – in further expanding it, especially to Manchuria as a first move. Thus, the same militarism which had first been cast aside as domestic problems gained ground, now went through a resurgence as the remedy to those problems that had become chronic with the failure of the interim parliamentary measures to affect change. Moreover, the political scene itself had been highly conservative and restrictive of democracy to serve its own ends moving democratic reform ahead not by leaps and bounds but by inches at a time. This meant that the parliamentary leaders of the empire were taking steps such as the enacting of universal manhood suffrage in 1925 but doing so in conjunction with the Peace Preservation Law which came to be

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3 Hunter 93; Hane & Perez 247-248
4 Hunter 97; Hane & Perez 252
a tool of ideological control over the populace.\textsuperscript{5} As such, the practice of democracy itself had always been lacking and the so-called “democratic” party politicians ultimately produced and reinforced the laws that would bring about an end to the period of Taishō Democracy in full.

Externally, the Japanese had been facing a number of snubs, and treaty restrictions, from its once allies and neighbors that increasingly placed it on a path of aggression to take and keep what it needed to sustain its empire and its security. The earliest snub to the Japanese had come during the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, where the racial equality clause had been rejected by the West.\textsuperscript{6} This showed to the Japanese that the equality that they had achieved with the West was at best an illusion that they had convinced themselves of, whereas the Western powers had no desire to accept such a situation in real terms at this time. This situation was only made worse by the rise of the “Yellow Peril” discourse in the West and especially in the US, which exacerbated racial tensions which had already pricked the Japanese leadership.\textsuperscript{7} In both cases, what resulted was the rise of nationalist and militarist discourses, which carried a tone of disillusionment with the West and saw a solution to proving Japanese greatness in a return to aggressive imperialism and militarism.

Treaty restrictions were felt most in the form of the Washington and London Naval Treaties, which the parliamentary governments had signed onto when the domestic and international situation of Japan was much more peaceful but the more military-minded leaders of the empire were discontent with. For these military-minded leaders, through their adherence to such treaties the Japanese found themselves agreeing to weaker naval positions than the military planners and the Navy would have wanted to have in order to defend the empire.\textsuperscript{8} Thus, there

\textsuperscript{5} Hunter 222, 251-252; Hane & Perez 246, 251; Jansen 506-507
\textsuperscript{6} Hane & Perez 212
\textsuperscript{7} Hane & Perez 209-210; Jansen 521-522
\textsuperscript{8} Hunter 274, 276; Hane & Perez 213, 253-254
emerged a feeling that Japan was being disarmed, and was being left weak and unable to fend for itself while in the care of “democratic” and “liberal” party politicians, in between two major naval powers in the open swaths of the Pacific. Another blow to Japanese security came from the effective revocation and replacement of the alliance with the United Kingdom, with a Four Power Treaty which also included France and the US and aimed more at maintaining the status quo in the Pacific than being an alliance.\(^9\) This meant that the Japanese lost the security net provided to them by an alliance with the British, which led to an increased need to not only firmly entrench but also expand the capabilities of the military to fight and defend, which became a source of renewed political militarism at home. Ultimately, the definitive turning point for the rise of political militarism and aggressive imperialism in Japan, and the concurrent decline of democracy and liberalism, came with the invasion of Manchuria in 1931, which brought into public eye and the political mainstream militarism and imperial expansion as a panacea for the ills of Imperial Japan. Beginning with the invasion of Manchuria in 1931, the idea that a return to the use of military might and empire building in Asia, rather than the use of democracy, liberalism, and diplomacy, to address the crises faced by Japan gained currency.

However, it should be recognized that the ultimate fall and decline of the Taishō Democracy was not necessarily to the discredit of democracy in Japan. In the first place, the “democracy” and “liberalism” that Japan experienced between 1918 and 1932 was built on flawed foundations that were not meant to bring about or sustain such rule and when the militarists push came to shove the party politicians, they failed to offer any meaningful resistance. In this sense, one reason for the failure of this first experience of Japan with democracy came about because the Japanese politicians failed to defend both democracy and parliamentary

\(^9\) Hane & Perez 213; Jansen 520
politics. Moreover, many politicians rather bandwagoned with the militarists, choosing to ride
the popular tide – especially while in opposition – in order to gain access to the power such a
move would bring about. The same politicians also passed the laws that would come to form the
backbone of militarist and oppressive rule, by politicizing and policing the thoughts of the people.
Here, it can be seen that the Japanese politicians ultimately not only failed to defend democracy
but rather aided in its destruction by choosing to tie their own fates to that of the militarists who
displaced them and carried the day.

Ultimately, the era of the Taishō democracy failed not because democracy and liberalism
were – or still are in contemporary Japan – incompatible with the Japanese culture or psyche but
because when the rise of militarism and imperialism came to threaten them, neither were
adequately defended. Interestingly, looking at the Japanese democracy today, one can find that
the very roots of the Meiji political order, and hence the Taishō Democracy period, are today
once again at the very foundations of Japan’s democracy. This is especially so for the Charter
Oath of 1868, which not only justified the promulgation of a constitution during the Meiji period,
but also became the foundation of democracy in the Shōwa period.10 As such, it can be seen that
parts of the foundations upon which the Taishō Democracy stood on, with proper interpretation
could sustain democracy in the long run given that there is the will and power to do so.

In conclusion, it can be seen that the main cause for the rise and fall of democracy and
liberalism in Japan, between the years of 1918 and 1932, was the result of a corresponding fall
and rise in militarism and imperialism in imperial politics. When Japan was relatively secure and
seemingly in possession of parity with the West, militarism declined and a democratic political

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movement began. Conversely, when the security of the empire and its power to sustain itself was jeopardized, democracy went into decline and militarism experienced a resurgence. However, the failure of democracy in Imperial Japan was not a definitive sign for the incompatibility of democracy to Japan in entirety, but rather a sign that democracy was neither properly built nor protected in the empire. Japan has had the foundations for democracy, albeit provided not for the very reasons they have come to be hailed for, which still form the foundations of and sustains the foundation myth of the Japanese democracy.

Bibliography


