

Meiji Era and Political Modernization in Japan

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Abstract

In 1867, Meiji ascended to the command of Japan and the power of emperor was restored, however he was only fifteen years old the true governing power was rested with the new government comprising of a small and supportive cabinet of consultants. The new cabinet instantaneously began realizing a series of reforms to both fortify and unify Japan. One of the largest anxieties was that Japan would not be able to reclaim its sovereignty, if it did not modernize. The objectives of the early leaders of the Meiji era were determined, as they formed new political, economic and social foundations that regulated Japan through World War II.

Keywords: Meiji, Tokugawa Shogunate, Charter of Oath, Feudal, Economy, ITO Hirobumi, Development and Politics, Elections, Political party.

Introduction

The downfall of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1867 which was exited since 1603 led to the change of Japan from a feudal nation into a modern industrial country. Japan developed the political institutions under Meiji era with a parliamentary form of government and a world power through military enlargement of the country. The Meiji government first began as a coalition between Satsuma and Choshu, the two territories responsible for the overthrowing of the Tokugawa Shogunate with support from Tosa and Hizen. The new Meiji government fragmented the Tokugawa and the insurgent forces during the civil war in Japan in late 1880s.

The Tokugawa forces were crushed and the former shogunate capital Edo was retitled as Tokyo and labeled as the new capital of Japan in May 1889. Later, Japan announced its first constitution in 1889, based the European approach. A parliament, called the Diet was founded, while the emperor was retained as the sovereign figure head. The emperor stood at the top of the army, navy, executive and legislative powers. Political parties were feeble due to the absence of unity among the members of parliament. The Meiji government modernized the education system as French and German way, and the compulsory education system was introduced as well.

The Meiji government presented widespread recruitment and a new army was patterned after the Prussian force and a navy after the British marine. In order to transmute the economy from an agricultural to a developed industrial nation, Japanese intellectuals went abroad to study Western science and language. The Meiji leaders participated severely in public works such as railroad transport and transmission networks. This move directly endorsed the flourishing industries, especially the powerful family-owned enterprises called as zaibatsu. The enormous expenses for industrialization led to the economic crisis in the mid 1880's, which ensued the reforms of banking system.

Political Change

The Meiji government enhanced the quality of the existing financial institutions by creating a modern banking system to control the political economy. Therefore, the economic development in Japan was thus in an advanced position in the Tokugawa period, which has the legacy of improved economic condition in the country, has become more institutionalized. The political developments in the Meiji period were far behind in comparison to the modern political institutions, which were based on the institutions of the western style. The Meiji Restoration was a political revolution that promoted widespread economic renovation and brought a measure of social liberation to the populace that had been constrained in many ways during the Tokugawa period.



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Furthermore, the Meiji period was more moderate in contrast to the Tokugawa period as far as central government was concerned. The Meiji leaders were content to work for some twenty years based on temporary administrative arrangements. Meanwhile, pressure for the sharing of political power was build up in some sections, has resulted in the birth of political parties during the 1870s. A popular rights movement, seeking to preserve Western perceptions of popular rights into the political party, was an essential feature of Japanese politics.

After reestablishment of power by emperor, the new government assured the Japanese people it would ascertain a constitutional government. In 1889, the Japanese Constitution was proclaimed, and various freedoms and rights were recognized. Later in 1890, a national assembly, the bicameral Diet, was convened and the constitutional government was formed. The members of samurai sect of the Tokugawa period, as elder statesmen, realized that the implementation of a constitutional government was crucial for strong Japan to compete with the powers located in west. Consequently, it allocated all its resources to attaining the best from government system.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the study of the 'Meiji Era and Political Modernization' is to deal with the changes related to development appeared in all sphere directly affecting the society of Japan after the end of Tokugawa rule and with the beginning of Meiji rule in 1868. The Meiji era was one of the successful eras in political development in Japan. This not only established the political system, however opened the opportunity for Japanese to learn from west and give back to the society, which was feudal and inequitable.

The Meiji constitution modeled the European nation, as the German style. The 1889 Constitution was essentially the concept of Ito Hirobumi, who studied in Europe. The constitution provided the emperor the full sovereignty. Emperor, commanded the military, managed peace and declared war, and dissolved the lower house of the parliament when elections were necessary. Efficient power was with the genro (oligarch), however the power of genrowas distantly specified in the Constitution, appeared ambiguous with total sovereignty of the nation and power of emperor.

The new system of government had its problems at first, although, the genro was decided to make the institutions for national pride, foreign approval, and political stability. Nevertheless, war with China became unavoidable in 1894, political discrepancies have been avoided and national unity was prioritized. The expression "people" was limited for the time being to the peasants and was not intended even by the liberals to include the obviously unequipped lower classes. Despite the use of terms Koto (public party), the Aikokukoto (Public Party of Patriots, formed on 14 January 1874) was nothing more than an association of a few samurai, without organizational structure and popular support. In the later progress for functional politics, the formation of

political parties (seito) began in earnest, hard on the heels of the imperial rescript of October 1881 proclaiming that a national assembly would be convoked in 1890. The Jiyuto (Liberal Party) and RikkenKaishinto (Constitutional Reform Party, founded in 1881 and 1882 respectively) began parliamentary activities as soon as the Imperial Diet (Teikoku Gekai) was established.

The assent of both the Diet and the Emperor was required for the passing of bills or any amendment in the laws. This meant that while the Emperor could no longer legislate by decree, he still had a veto over the Diet. The Emperor had the freedom to choose the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, and sometimes the Prime Ministers were not chosen from the Diet. The Imperial Diet was also limited in its control over the budget. While the Diet could veto the annual budget, if no budget were approved, the budget of the previous year continued in force.

The first cabinet formed under the Meiji constitution, however, was a 'transcendental' cabinet put together by members of the powerful clan-based cliques who had been instrumental in bringing about the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and had put in place the institutions of the modern government of the era. Political parties had almost no power or prestige. As far as their ideas were concerned, all political ideologies were based on Western models such as Prussia and Britain. Words such as jiyu (liberty), byodo (equality) and yuai (fraternity) proved so popular that they went on to become the many names of district parties. It is evident that the developments of political processes in the Meiji period were a beginning of political reforms as whole. This provided space for the political parties to execute their ideas based on varied thoughts that were present outside of Japan.

The most important symbol of political development is the active participation of masses in political events mainly in elections. Even though they are under different whatever ideological and institutional rubric, such elections have become the foremost method of seeking legitimization on the parts of government and the political elite. Citizens use their democratic rights, which provide them options to select the government by means of elections.

First general election in Japan for members of the House of Representatives was held in July 1890, in accordance with the Meiji constitution, which had been promulgated the previous year. This had created the bicameral Imperial Diet consisting of the lower house or the House of Representatives and the House of Peers.

The right to vote for members of the House of Representatives, meanwhile, was limited to male citizens 25 years of age and over, who had paid Yen (¥)15 or more in tax, for at least a year. Only male citizens 30 years of age and over were permitted to be candidates. In July 1890, the first elections gave a majority in the lower house (160 votes out of a total of 300) jointly to the three parties led by GotoShojiro, Itagaki Taisuke, and Okuma Shigenobu, all former

members of the Dajokan (Imperial Japanese Council of State), who were willingly at odds with the men still in office.

Conclusion

The Meiji era made major changes in the political sector along with economy, which became the basis of modern Japan. First and foremost, from the political aspect, Japan adopted a Constitution and implemented a parliamentary government. The foundation of current style of Japanese government was founded in the Meiji period by imitating the Western powers. Moreover, emperor became a prominent and powerful figure. The domain was an efficient mechanism for establishing and maintaining the national unity. Significantly, it instituted the connection among the central and local government, as well as between central government and the Japanese people. Reasonably, the family-owned large businesses, called zaibatsu led to the development Japanese industry and economy. Even though, these zaibatsu corporations were abolished after World War II, a remarkably similar multinational system still exists in Japan. The samurai class squandered its ruling and restricted power and there was a collapse of firmly divided social section. Meiji Japan was the foundation of the existing compulsory education system. The high-level literacy and level of educated people was the result of education system of modern Japan. Though the current state of the Japanese armed forces is less imperialist, the Meiji's military advancement to overtake the West did impact

imperialistic role of Japan in World Wars. The Meiji era, the foundation of modern Japan could be imagined of as the first step of the nation in its goal to achieve modernization due to strong political will.

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