

Local Government System and Welfare Policy in Japan

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Abstract

The development of Japan justifies the reliability of local government. It connects people and involves them in local development issues, which help Japan to strengthen its democracy. Strong mayor system and high uniformity in Japan, brings change at local level. The Local Government Law stipulates that the basic units of local government shall be the prefectures and the municipalities. Local government in Japan is founded on an arrangement announced by the national government as part of its ambition to modernize the country at the end of the 19th century. The constitution of Japan provides the authoritative power to local bodies to carry out various welfare programs at lower level.

Keywords: Local Government, Tokyo, Municipalities, Wards, City, Council, Tax, Development, Rural and Urban Japan, Autonomy.

Introduction

System of local government in Japan is comparatively straightforward in comparison to other parts of the world. Japan continued as one of the leading economies internationally for several decades and nowadays plays a progressively large role in global affairs after a decade since World War II ended. Government affairs frequently take a prominent role in a country for its socialized approach and local government plays an important role in it.

The local body government relishes precise legal status in the legal framework of Japan, exactly through the 'Local Autonomy Law', which was enacted in November 1946. The moralities of this law include a respect for local level government, and the description of local councils and their status in relation to the Japanese government. The Japanese local government system is based and influenced by the United States of America. Additionally, local government in Japan is designed as a two-tier setup, one is prefectures, and another is municipalities.

Prefectural system of Japan is based on past societies before the country started its nation-building process in the 19th century and prefectures has their own elected executive Governors. Since the Meiji period (1868-1912) the number of prefectures has remained at 47. The prefectural boundaries and characteristics are firmly preserved in the aspects of Japanese society and government structures. Modern local body system in Japan is a much more recent creation, having caused from the unions endorsed by the central government in the early 1950s, which witnessed their number decreased. Partially, this expansion was determined by the necessity for improved autonomy, nonetheless prominently by quick urbanization that followed the post-war reconstruction in all parts of Japan. It is important to mention that the Japanese local government is fixed with accountabilities that would normally be the sphere of central government in various countries.

The local government is loaded with obligations for social insurance and healthcare schemes with prefectures and municipalities acting together with the central government, for the welfare of the people of Japan. There is separation in the execution of the policies, for example local bodies are accountable for basic healthcare delivery provisions while the prefectures have to manage hospitals. Japanese roads are designated National Expressways, National Highways, Prefectural Roads and Municipal Roads with different controlling authority. While local government has a role to play in strategic planning, development control is considerably less controlling. Local government bodies are responsible for police and fire service matters and disaster management as well, which undertakes a significant role in people's life in Japan. The police forces are administered through prefectural Public Safety Committees while the fire services are a municipal concern. The education administration in Japan is independent from local councils, though



Mahendra Prakash
Assistant Professor,
Dept. of Political
Science,
Government Degree
College, Pachmohani,
Siddharthnagar, U.P.,
India

the council is under the supervision of governors and mayors, as they approve council.

Aim of the Study

Aim of the study was to analyze the local government functionaries in Japan. The system of local bodies in Japan is old and got constitutional support, which undeniably carry out all the important welfare policies locally. The study considers the importance of the local authority, which exists for the welfare of people and their involvement directly in the local government system. The study aims to evaluate the local government system, which is often modified by the law for more efficient service delivery.

The Local Government in Japan

The Local bodies in Japan are headed by a directly elected executive mayor and having an elected municipal assembly, these features also exist in prefectures though with different nomenclature. The 20 designated cities are exceptions, which have more autonomy than basic municipalities and Tokyo, which as capital has the special arrangements of having an elected Metropolitan Government headed by a Governor and 23 Wards as sub-councils for the central Tokyo area. The activities of Japanese local governments are dependent on the various taxes, which are collected from the people for the services they get. In Japan the prefectures are able to levy taxes on tobacco consumption, fuel, car, and a general sales tax, while local bodies collect tax for the property, residence and planning of the city with amenities.

Employees of the Japanese local government are known as local civil servants and enjoy the same benefits as their national counterparts. The local authorities working in local bodies remain in the same local domain with fixed three-year tenure, though in April they get the opportunity to work in other departments as well. Prefectural Assembly members are elected for four-year terms and are restricted from holding other public office or working as a local civil servant. While Japanese local government features an absence of party discipline characterized by a comparably high number of independent candidates elected, assembly members tend to be elected from one of the political parties in Japan. These days local government in Japan enjoys the same levels of local autonomy that existed in its constitutional halcyon days; however, this is in a changed political environment.

Japanese national financial burdens determine that the local services have to be more accountable for the funds they spend. As part of the former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi administration's reforms, decentralization was interlinked with municipalities to attain more productivity and economies of magnitude. Presently the number of upper-tier prefectures is clear and unchanged at 47 in numbers. As an alternative, it has sought to administer the wider area services through intended service partnerships between these local authorities. In December 2006, the Japanese government began a pilot for the island of Hokkaido, which is far from the Japanese mainland, to be admitted in the decentralization process.

As far as the welfare policies through local bodies of government are concerned, Japan is facing an ageing population faster than anywhere else internationally. Intrinsicly, the local government must consider how its welfare capacity and housing policies could manage the situation. The local government is moving more and more into the cultural service sector and the promotion of tourism has become the utmost in stimulating the economy, especially in Tokyo. Japanese local authorities pay attention to the value and importance of their international links, which in a gradually global society should be of interest to all involved with the future of local government.

The system of Local Bodies Government

In Japan, the first category in local bodies consists of municipalities, which are further fractured down into cities, towns, and villages. The second classification consists of prefectures. Under this two-tier system, all districts of the country belong to one of the 3,229 municipalities and at the same time fall within the boundaries of one of the 47 prefectures. Prefectures are the regional authorities comprising municipalities and they possess mainly the regional administration. Japan is made up of 47 prefectures and Tokyo is one of these regional authorities. The local towns are local public bodies that have a strong and direct relationship with residents and manage affairs directly associated

with the residents. These days there are 790 cities, 745 towns, and 183 villages in Japan and there are no essential differences between cities, towns, and villages in their responsibilities. To be identified as a city, a municipality must have a population of 50,000 or more, and must meet various other requirements too. Towns must also meet certain conditions prescribed by prefectural ordinances.

Additionally, there are special local bodies which have been created for specific purposes linked to the local government. These include special wards, cooperatives, and public property districts. The 23 wards of Tokyo are special wards, in principle subject to the same guidelines that apply to cities. The special ward system, however, has been designed to meet the distinctive needs of a large metropolis. The Local government in Japan is further characterized as the governing entity based on the local community under its control, instead of as administrative body performing specific functions, and it is strongly oriented to the local community for welfare norms. This norm operates not only for municipalities as the basic units of local government, although the prefectures serving broader areas. Governors, mayors, and members of local assemblies are directly elected by the people they service. Japanese prefectures and municipalities have complete administrative powers within their respective jurisdictions. Local agencies in Japan are completely enabled by the Local Autonomy Law to operate the unique tasks and public services which represent the intention of their presence.

Local Government and Its Role of Public Welfare

The regulation and rules, structural organization, financial administration, and elections are a few of the main concerns of local government. Japanese Local Autonomy Law was revised in July 1999, this ensued in a clarification of the division of obligation between central and local government. The dissection of accountability between the central and local government was explained by making local government answerable for a broader role realized individually and expansively in regional administration. While making the central government accountable for functions concerning the existence of Japan as a nation in international society, roles regarding the numerous actions implemented uniformly across the country, and roles relating to the basic legal structure for local government.

After the amendment in the local body government system, the functions of local authorities were restructured into local government roles and statutory assigned roles. Statutory assigned roles are legitimately allocated to local authorities, which were initially the responsibility of the central government or prefectures. Local government roles consist of all other accountabilities of local authorities apart from statutory assigned roles. This includes the public functions which have been the accountability of local authorities in the past, administrative and body delegated roles. Apparently the local range of roles of government is exceptionally broad, and it is no embellishment to say that local government by its responsibilities covers all aspects of the domestic life of Japan other than foreign policy and national security. Local government spending is similarly high, with the merged spending of local authorities in Japan nearly matching that of the general account of the central government. Though the central government takes in roughly half more tax revenue than local government, the enormous financial transfers from central to local in the form of the Local Allocation Tax, Local Transfer Tax, and national government disbursement support a level of local government spending nearly half more than that of the central government for welfare of the Japanese public.

The Japanese Local Autonomy Law creates several provisions for distribution of functions between prefectures and municipalities. Prefectures are to assume all the roles concerning an area greater than that of municipalities or towns, as well as those requiring prefecture-wide or nation-wide consistency. Towns carry out all other functions, however, this line of separation is not so clearly specified, and each tier of government shares accountability for functions in the same area. Even Though local authorities differ in terms of population and area, the Local Autonomy Law provides them organizational and operational consistency with the exclusion of central districts of Tokyo. The elevated level of consistency is the result of two basic views: one, that the quality and level of the facilities delivered should be similar throughout Japan, in line with those delivered

by the central government; and second, that the circumstances specific to any one area should anywhere possible be dealt with by affecting nationally unified solutions.

Reasonably, it is essential to accommodate local body incomes to accomplish the consistency of service, with substantial alteration in local body size and the consequent financial ability. The local allocation tax system where the central government redistributes a certain percentage of national tax revenues to local governments based on financial capability was established for this purpose. In Japan, the local bodies are located within a unified system of national government encompassed by central and local components. Consequently, central and local governments depend on and complement one another at both the prefectural and municipal levels within a region.

In Japan, the central and local government are reciprocally dependent. Locally there is no longer any noticeable difference in policies between political parties. It is usual to see candidates for governor or mayor jointly recommended by parties that are in opposition at the national level. In rural areas, local assembly members are often independent conservatives. It could be taken that local government is politically separate from central government, though they are in fact closely connected via the election mechanism. Conservative electorates are affiliated both at the national and local levels, and Diet members and local council members of Japan must collaborate to win elections. This basically applies to political parties supported by labor unions and other organizations. Diet members and local council members from such parties cooperate during the elections as well.

Moreover, the governors and mayors perform leading roles in policy and decision-making and have tough relationships with the elected councils. Most governors these days are either civil servants, Diet members, high-ranking officials of local government, local councilors, or local businessmen. In the 1970s, several governors were elected with the support of the reformist political parties when Japan faced rapid development related problems. Most local assembly members in Japan come generally from organizations concerned with agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and commerce and industry, as well as from a political party or trade union background. The pollution and urbanization problems of the 1970s led to the growth of resident action groups in many areas of Japan. The action groups are inclined to direct their demands from governors, mayors and other executive bodies. Their association with the elected council is generally not strong. Nonetheless, their demands have steadily been reflected in local policies. These Days, the concerns of these groups mainly focus on environmental issues, and several local governments have held local polls concerning these problems.

Function of Tokyo Metropolitan Government and Special Wards

The metropolitan authority makes monetary adjustments both between itself and for the 23 special wards. In the ward area, the metropolitan authority or government and wards allocate accountabilities for managing affairs and administration, and therefore share the tax revenue sources required for the costs acquired too. The corporate inhabitant tax, fixed assets tax, and special land ownership tax, which are municipal taxes, are collected by the metropolitan government, and a fixed proportion of the revenues is allocated to the ward administrations. The financial adjustment among the 23 special wards is also designed to remedy inequities in an individual fiscal revenue of a ward due to unequal distribution of financial resources. When a basic fiscal need exceeds its basic fiscal revenues in the wards, the discrepancy is managed in the form of allocations from the metropolitan government.

In addition to the 23 special wards, the Tokyo Metropolitan authority contains 39 municipalities, 26 cities (*shi*), 5 towns (*machi*) and 8 villages (*mura*) as well, which are ordinary local public entities. In addition, the administrative and financial systems for the metropolitan government and its municipalities are the same as other prefectures. The government and its individual municipalities work equally in accomplishing their respective roles; the former managing the broader administrative work and the latter offering services closer to the everyday lives of residents for welfare norms. There are management services which are controlled by the local government. Firefighting services and waterworks are commonly described under law as the municipal service. In the Tokyo Metropolitan area, nevertheless, from the view that these services could be handled more effectively on a broader scale and such an attempt would also serve to reduce the financial burden, the metropolitan government provides all the services except in certain municipalities.

The local taxes are the backbone of development work completed by local bodies and the taxes are collected by local governments. The taxes are transferable as well and the local transfer taxes are national taxes, in which a fixed proportion of revenue is collected and transferred to the local governments. Local transfer tax is an umbrella term covering taxes such as the local gasoline, special tonnage, petroleum and gas, automobile weight, aircraft fuel, and special local corporate transfer taxes. After the amendments to the tax system in fiscal 2016, the national government decided to eliminate the special local corporate tax, which has been transferred to local governments as a provisional measure. The allocation of taxes outlines the core of the local financial adjustment system of the nation. The system is expected to maintain general revenue sources and to appropriate fiscal unevenness among local body authorities, to ensure that all local governments could provide an adequate level of services.

The local taxes are collected for the welfare of the local people and the expenditure delivers social welfare services, including the development and operation of welfare facilities for children, the elderly, and people with disabilities, and serves to implement programs to provide public assistance, etc. The expenditure for public health services maintains and promotes the health of residents and improves the living environment. There are expenditures to promote agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, and to maintain a stable supply of foods. The expenditure for the promotion of local commerce and industry helps to develop small and medium-sized enterprises and to attract companies to local areas, and to carry out consumption and distribution measures, among others. The tax is utilized in the development of the local living environment and urban infrastructure. Spending is made for broadening education and culture through schools and social education programs as well.

Conclusion

It should be noted that the system of local self-government in Japan is instituted on two major principles—it offers the right to constitute autonomous local public entities that to a certain extent are independent of the national government; it embraces the idea of self-government of citizens by which populaces of the local areas participate and handle the activities of the local public entities. The Japanese government in April 2000 brought the revisions of decentralization law and this delegated a wide range of administrative operations from the central government to local governments. The decreased role of the central government to control the local administration, a significant portion of the Local Autonomy Law was revised as well. It must be noticed that the Japanese local body have the better consistency and accountability, which continues due to the involvement of active aware citizens and political parties, and the existing check and balance for the welfare of the local society.

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