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The Local Political System and Symbolic Politics in Japan

While people celebrated the 21st century as the new millennium, at the same time, governmental systems' decentralization was progressing worldwide. In July 1997, 475 laws related to decentralization were revised to fit the spirit of local autonomy in Japan's new constitution. We call these the "package law of decentralization" for short. The revised local autonomy law is also called the new autonomy law. Many people accepted that Japan's postwar democracy had made a step forward. Recently, however, this way of thinking has begun to be reconsidered. We are noticing that system reform may result differently than intended.

Last year, I retired from a university in Japan. I was expecting to live my life quietly, as is. But I have become a little worried about a cross section of the recent global trend. To define my idea of what causes my worry, I wrote this paper. In short, I think a crisis of "reason" is imminent. But what is that reason? Here, I define it as the positive sensibility of accepting others within ourselves. Internally, we need a moral code to control ourselves, but we cannot ask everyone to develop it at the same level. Therefore, to compensate for diverse levels, we also require external norms in the form of institutional rules for ourselves, maintaining and changing them ourselves. Thus, reason is created by the combination of inner and external norms, which are an irreplaceable asset and an inheritance from modern civil society. Indeed, many people have empathy for my feeling that reason is now in crisis. My worry is this.

Against most expectations, on November 8, 2016, Donald Trump won the United States presidential election and on January 20, 2017, officially became the 45th president of the United States of America. During the election campaign, he used vulgar, violent words. However, most people thought that he would take realistic and reasonable actions if he formally became president. But it was not to be so. It seems that he is crushing all policies of the former president Barack Obama. But if we think carefully, such action tends to be common in political dictatorships. If we study history deeply, we will find that many cases support this idea.

Eight years ago, Barack Obama won the US presidential election because citizens expected and desired change. However, it seems that the hurdle was too high for them to be able to understand and accept Obama's changes. In contrast, Trump's promised changes, which aroused U.S. expectations, seemed to be a dangerously low hurdle – to withdraw the entire political legacy of the previous administration, for instance, the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (Obama Care). Now, Obama could not obtain the support of the Republican-dominated Congress. And Trump has no constructive policies. But Obama and Trump's policy languages seem to be abstract symbols in that both have been less than effective. However, Trump's policy is more uncertain. Thus, the crisis of reason: I worry that, by manipulating the masses, these symbols reinforce power to distort politics into an irrational, unstable direction. And in Japan, this process is also occurring, typically in local politics rather than in the central government.

Generally, it is said that people's behavior becomes unstable when social systems and culture change. In psychology, human behavior is explained by correlations between environment and personality. Thus, changes in personality are also necessary to explain

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changes in human behavior. Of course, many variables explain personality. First, we focus only on changes in the people’s collective consciousness as shown in statistics.

The survey “the Structure of Consciousness among Contemporary Japanese” has been a long-term, relatively reliable survey of the Japanese people’s consciousness. The NHK’s (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) Broadcasting Culture Research Institute has conducted this survey every five years since 1973, targeting people over the age of 16. It is also a continuous survey, conducted in the same way with the same questions. Its questions include a broad range, from basic values such as “life goals” and “human relationships” through “home” and “work” to “political activities,” “nationalism,” and others.

The latest survey, in 2013, was the ninth, and 40 years have passed since the survey began. Thus, changes in Japanese consciousness during this period can be traced chronologically. But I am concentrating here on the growing awareness of Japanese nationalism. Recently, as a reaction to globalization, nationalism has been emerging in various countries. At the same time, populism as a political pathology is spreading rapidly. Japan is no exception. We can read the trends from the NHK survey. In general, nationalism is said to have two aspects. One is an emotional sense of unity based on a feeling of belonging to one’s country. Some people call this “patriotism.” The other aspect is an emotion created with the consciousness that “my country and my ethnic group is superior” in comparison with other countries and other ethnic groups. Although such thinking is considered necessary at a certain low level, it becomes a politically dangerous phenomenon when it rises beyond that level.

In the 40-year NHK survey, consciousness of nationalism was lowest in 1998. But every five years since then, it has gradually increased. In this survey, the numerical value is almost as high as the survey in 1983. Then it was based on Japan’s strong economic power, termed “Japan as Number One.” In 2013, the survey results are based on respect for Japanese culture increasing in comparison with other countries.

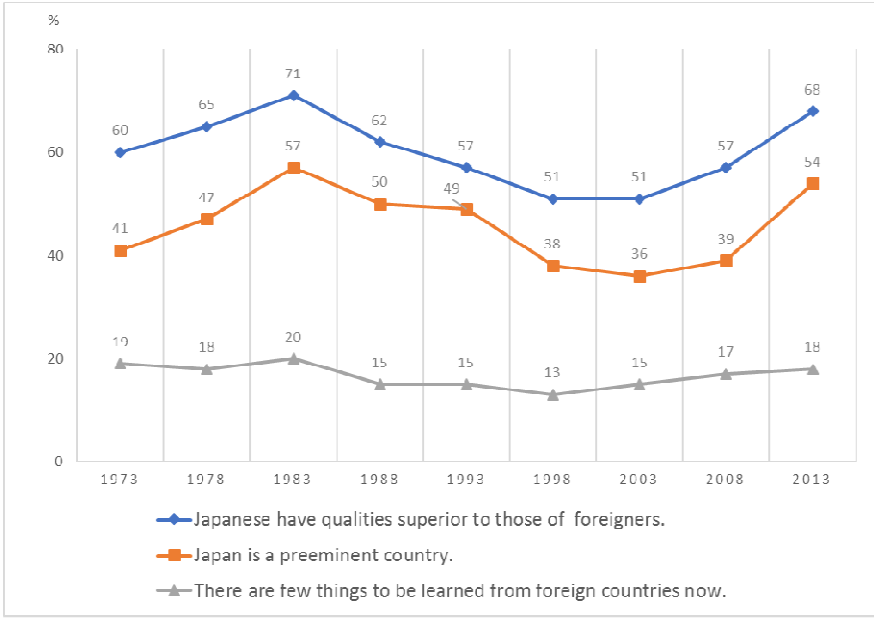


Figure -1 Confidence in Japan (yes)
Data Source: adapted from NHK, 2013:120

The turning point for local Japanese postwar politics is the establishment of the 1999 package law of decentralization. However, the term *populism* has also been frequently used in local politics before and after this law’s establishment. Interestingly, Shintaro Ishihara, a hard-conservative politician and novelist won the Tokyo governor’s election in 1999. In 2000,

Yasuo Tanaka, a novelist and popular celebrity was elected Nagano prefectorial governor. It is common for us to regard populism as behaviors only loved by the mass public. Because the concept of the masses is recognized as opposite to the concept of elites, politicians who are called populists usually anti-elite. Thus, Trump has criticized Washington's elite. During the election campaign in Japan, Ishihara gained people's support by concentrating the public's interest on the cognitive map of "the central government versus the anti-bureaucratic elite." Tanaka also won the governor's post as a citizens' representative of anti-authority by regarding the class with vested interests as enemies and by arousing citizens' expectations in Nagano prefecture. His declaration of "no more dam" was a powerful policy in words, but it was difficult to implement.

At the same time, a tendency toward populism was pointed out even in the central government, and it was regarded with anxiety. In 2001, Junichiro Koizumi became Japan's Prime Minister. His administration was regarded as the first populist administration, also called "theater politics" in Japan, after the war. For a while after the war, Japan was said to be economically first class but politically second class. Postwar Japan made economic development the top priority policy. Therefore, a stable regime was necessary, and the long-term administration by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) was selected by the people. Comparative political scientist Giovanni Sartori categorized it as a predominant party system. In Japan, it is also called the "1955 regime," meaning the regime from 1955, when the LDP came to power, to 1998, when it lost power. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi switched the rudder of policy priority from economy to politics. Further, the Koizumi administration placed its power base on the support of public opinion. He gave people the impression that, to respond to the public's true voice, politics was making a big transition from interest group politics between dominant elites to public opinion politics. Koizumi's behavior, that is, his exaggerated physical performance, resembled that of an actor in Kabuki, a Japanese traditional art, and the masses became totally drunk on it.

However, two institutional reforms largely enabled such mass behavior. One was the 2001 central government reform. This reform strengthened the Prime Minister's leadership. The other reform was the introduction of the single-member district system in the House of Representatives, instituted by electoral system reform in 1994. With these reforms, the power of the LDP's central authority was decisively strengthened. In Japan, there is the term *Souri-Sousai* (Prime Minister in cabinet, president in LDP), meaning the head of the LDP is simultaneously the head of the Cabinet. Therefore, the Prime Minister's power has been strengthened even more. However, although the Prime Minister's power has been institutionally strengthened, he cannot transform leadership into a dictatorship as in a presidential system because *Japan's governance system is a parliamentary cabinet system*. Former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone was said to be taking presidential-type leadership, but it was due to the strong support of public opinion. He is famous for making a talented playwright write a scenario and performing in a political show during Ronald Reagan's visit to Japan in 1983. But even so, it was impossible for him to use authoritarian power.

And even Koizumi could not become a dictator who ignored the Diet and deviated from the law. He told himself that he could be a demon, if necessary for the country. However, he did not perform formal illegal acts. One characteristic of a dictator is to exercise power that transcends the Diet and the law. Anyway, the parliamentary cabinet system has a clever trick for preventing authoritarian power and also a historical crystal of political wisdom. In short, the Prime Minister cannot become a symbol of (political) authority in Japan or the United Kingdom, because there is a monarch who holds that symbolic role:

the king/queen in the UK and the emperor in Japan. *Lacking a dynastic royal family, in the United States the president is the elected king*. Democracy does not work if the US political system does not balance power so that legislative and judicial branches can exercise power

equal to the president's. The presidential system is functionally an undifferentiated system of symbol and administration. Therefore, regarding the president, the U.S. has compensated with an election system that selects the leader carefully over the long term. Furthermore, jurisdiction is completely independent from administrative authority. *The question is whether checks and balances are working in the U.S. political system. Does Japanese democracy look healthier than its current U.S. counterpart?* If so, it is more because Japan is a parliamentary cabinet system rather than anything else. By the way, Germany does not have a dynastic royal family, but has both a parliamentary cabinet system and the president. And the president is supposed to be a virtuous person who is chosen as a good symbol of the country from federal and regional congresses. Both in Japan and Germany, deep reflection after World War II has supported democracy as "the spirit of the people," and their efforts to enhance it as a value are relevant to this parliamentary system.

The Japanese local governmental system is uniform at every level. The central government has adopted the parliamentary cabinet system, but local government has adopted a system close to the presidential system. The municipal chief is directly elected by residents. Meanwhile, local council members are also directly elected to the assembly by residents. The U.S. president has no right to submit a bill under a presidential system that strictly preserves separation of powers, but Japanese chiefs do have this right. Moreover, the chief also has the right to dissolve the assembly. Meanwhile, the assembly can call a no-confidence vote aimed at the chief. Therefore, some parts of a parliamentary cabinet system were also adopted. We call this a "dualistic representative system," which differs from the presidential system. *There are various arguments about why such a system was formed, but, here, I can only say that it is a compromise between prewar and postwar systems.* Although the Constitution may be the same, it can be said that both are involved in the Emperor System.

Prewar Japan's local political system was more diverse than the current system. From the Meiji era until the end of the war in 1945, local governments were frequently reformed; their forms were diverse, but prefectorial chiefs were fundamentally appointed by the central government. In the first place, prewar administrative officials were basically "officials of the Emperor," and their reason for existence differed from that of postwar "civil servants." After the war, since an American-type system of local autonomy was introduced in Japan, it was called a "dualistic representation system." Therefore, the Japanese chief's power is said to be institutionally stronger than that of the U.S. president. Nevertheless, autocratic chiefs did not emerge because the central government's authority, compared with the local government's, was overwhelmingly strong even after the war. Local government had charge of a few general, autonomous affairs. Similarly, even though some wordings give local assemblies the power to create ordinances, there was little scope for such application. Therefore, the actual work was only to communicate residents' voices to local Diet members and to help elect local Diet members.

However, because decentralization developed in Japan around 2000, a situation arose in which local governments were strongly required to manage and administrate autonomously. Furthermore, they had to take responsibility because many of the powers and financial resources were delegated from the central government to local governments. At the same time, mergers of municipalities were also beginning. The central government needed to strengthen local government's administrative and financial foundation to encourage basic municipalities' autonomy and thought a certain "scale" was necessary to do so. In 1999, the number of basic municipalities was approximately 3 200, but that has decreased significantly, to about 1700 in 2016. As municipalities' scale and authority became greater and the chiefs' power strengthened, many ambitious politicians appeared in local politics.

In recent years, almost no one in Japan has taken up sociologist Talcott Parsons's social systems theory, but I still like to think about politics based on his theory. Recently in

Japanese political science, empirical research has been mainstream, and theoretical research has been largely ignored, but this trend is very disappointing. As is well known, Parsons conceptualized the system of human behavior in four phases, i.e., the AGIL schema: A is *adaptation*; G is *goal attainment*; I is *integration*; and L is *latent pattern maintenance*. And Parsons generalized these four phases to other systems. Applying the AGIL schema to the political system, I positioned A as *national*, G as *parliament*, I as *administration*, and L as *political culture*, and I thought these four phases would circulate. *I further conceptualized the circulation of A → G → I → L as a tangible “power flow” and the circulation of L → I → G → A as a symbolic “authority flow.”*

Specifically, the political L phase includes symbols of history and culture, as indicated by the most prestigious elements of society. In Japan and the United Kingdom, the symbols are emperor or king/queen. In a republic, the symbol is the president. In Japan’s postwar local autonomy system, this L-dimension is the chief, but unlike the central government, this chief is not the natural king for eternity, but the elected king of four years for the first term. Unlike in the central government, the symbol can also be regarded as the most powerful person (Leviathan) in the region, with administrative and even legislative power, so the position can be considered as close to a dynast as is mentioned in oriental thought.

I further believe that there are two ways symbols work in political interaction. The first is a symbol with power, for example, the U.S. president or the Japanese local chief. Position and authority as symbol bring synergistic effect by involving administrative power. When seeking further expansion of power in modern times, we have the possibility of manipulating the symbol’s authority by using the mass media. The second is a symbol supported by culture and tradition; its status and authority are supported by the people’s voluntary respect or social movements. By conceptualizing the first political interaction of symbol as “manipulation of the symbol,” and the second as “political symbolism,” Yoshida Masanobu, former Professor of Tokai University, and I have analyzed aspects of contemporary politics using these concepts.

Currently, political populism is emerging in local politics in Japan. To prevent situations in which political populism distorts reason and leads to the tyranny of the prevailing emotion, establishment of a stable political system is necessary. However, there is a limit to what the system alone can do. Although it seems that Japan’s parliamentary cabinet system is still functioning well, I am a little worried about the populist movement that occurred due to introduction of the small constituency system and the birth of the Koizumi administration. On the other hand, the dualistic representation system in local politics is becoming increasingly populist as decentralization advances, contrary to its intended direction. Of course, the spirit that supports the institution is important, not the institution itself. This spirit is what we are calling political culture. Japan has adopted a parliamentary cabinet system, and its symbol is a symbol of authority. The United States has a presidential system and its symbol is one of power. *The Emperor of Japan has no political power.* A presidential system that combines power and authority into one person can also manipulate authority to amplify power. The concept of symbolism means that the symbol’s authority itself is independent. If decentralization is going to progress further, at the same time, we must also start reconsidering the dualistic representation system in local politics.

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