

**Institutional Change and Political Reform:
Back to Basics**

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ABSTRACT

Despite all the talk of political reform in Japan, there has been little significant change. Politicians want one system, and the bureaucrats want another. With this debate going on for decades, the unfortunate result is a weakening of what was once a well-functioning system of informal coordination. One major problem in Japanese politics today is the relationship between the Prime Minister's office and the Cabinet. In the U.S., Cabinet appointees are supporters of a President's ideas, but in Japan's case, they can be opposed to the Prime Minister's wishes. This exemplifies the core of what is troubling about the current political system; instead of figuring out ways to make policy decisions easier, the debate is constantly focusing on the balance of power, whether within a party, Cabinet, Parliament, or bureaucratic agency.

Now more than ever, there's a system in place that is characterized by stand-offs between major power centers and by the growing popularity of assumptions about strong executives and weak bureaucracies. This, no doubt, has the potential to create problems in the policy making process which are far more serious than the ones the reforms are supposed to cure. Japan still has a long, painful road ahead when it comes to political reform.

Institutional Change and Political Reform: Back to Basics

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When it comes to policy specifics, controversy surrounds just about everything related to the question of what Japan should do about political and administrative reform. However, when it comes to matters of political structure, there is a virtually universal consensus that the party system has become dysfunctional and the government policy making system is in need of a major overhaul.

Over the past decade, there have been administrative reforms to merge ministries, to introduce a system of parliamentary vice-ministers, and to strengthen the Cabinet Office and the prime minister's leadership over the making of policy. Earlier in the 1990s, the electoral system that had been in effect for the Lower House almost uninterruptedly since 1925 was abolished. It was replaced by a system in which 300 Lower House members are elected in single member districts and another 180 in regional proportional representation districts. The ostensible purpose of this reform was to move Japan toward a two party system. In doing so, the goal was to transform election campaigns from contests between candidates relying on personal ties for support into contests between parties representing different policy positions, strengthening political accountability, and imposing political control over the bureaucracy. These reforms seem to have been driven by a number of assumptions that comprise a kind of Japanese conventional wisdom about what is wrong with the political system and how it should be fixed.

The first assumption is that the bureaucrats rule, which is bad. The flip side is that politicians need to get control over the policy process and if they do so, the result will be better policy. Not only does this present an inaccurate picture of what has been historically a far more complex relationship between bureaucrat and politician; it has produced surprisingly little discussion about what an appropriate division of labor between elected politicians and the administrative bureaucracy should be or about the role the Diet and the party organs should play vis-à-vis the prime minister.

Another assumption is that a two-party system is better than a multi-party system because it offers the voters a clear choice between two parties offering different policies. The belief in the supposed advantages of a two-party system run so deep and are so widespread that there is virtually no debate over whether it is based in reality or not. In a society like Japan's where there is an absence of sharp social cleavages, a two-party system is more likely to become a contest between Tweedledee and Tweedledum than a choice between parties standing for sharply different policies. Nonetheless, faith in the benefits of a two party system remains unshaken.

Another assumption is that Japan has a lot to learn from the United States, including the importance of a strong executive, the desirability of bringing outsiders into

government through political appointments, and the benefits of having politicians directly involved in the details of policy making. The problem is that a lot of discussion about the U.S. is based on an idealized model of American practices that has little in common with how U.S. politics and government actually work.

To some extent, reforms also seem to be inspired by European and especially British practices, such as the system of parliamentary vice ministers. However, there is much less attention paid to European (and Canadian and Australian) practices than there should be considering that Japan has a parliament, rather than a U.S.-style presidential system, and that the British and continental European models were so important in shaping Japan's modern governmental system.

What seems to be lost in this enthusiasm for policy making system reform is an objective and systematic analysis of what it is that is broke and needs to be fixed. In this short paper, I want to address the following question: what is it that turned a political system, which until the 1980s was widely regarded as effective and functional, into a critical problem requiring radical reform? The basic argument I want to present in answering that question is as follows.

The core characteristic of the '55 system cannot be grasped by arguments about whether the bureaucracy was in charge or politics led, whether Japan has a "strong" state or whether well organized social groups drive the policy agenda, and all the other related arguments so popular with specialists on the Japanese political economy. The key characteristic of the '55 system was the existence of well-functioning informal coordination mechanisms between major power centers: politicians and bureaucrats, the prime minister's office and the Liberal Democratic Party, the ruling and opposition parties, big business (zaikai) and the political leadership, and the press and the political/administrative elite. These informal mechanisms have gradually lost their effectiveness, first as a result of the social changes generated by economic success, and then in the nineties as a consequence of changes generated by economic failure.

As a result, the reforms of the past decade have been groping to replace this informal coordination system with a more formal, transparent, rule-based system. Since this transition is currently ongoing, it is not surprising that the transformation is incomplete. But the "groping" aspect of the change is an indication that the political and administrative reforms themselves are not the result of a careful analysis of what needs to be done to introduce new and more effective coordination mechanisms. Instead of recognizing that coordination is the key to effective policy making, reformers either say "put the politicians in charge!" or "give more power to the prime minister!" However, in the world's complex economically-advanced democratic countries, there is not one in which "the politicians are in charge" in the way many Japanese reformers seem to believe they should be in charge or in which the chief executive is all powerful in the manner in

which many Japanese seem to believe their prime minister should be.

The result is that the weakening of what was once a well-functioning system of informal coordination has produced a system that is characterized by stand-offs between major power centers and by the growing popularity of assumptions about strong executives and weak bureaucracies that have the potential to create problems in the policy making process far more serious than the ones the reforms are supposed to cure.

What was the '55 System?

I do not believe there is another country where well-informed observers disagree so fundamentally about what they see about the political system than in Japan. In general, what scholars see pretty much depends on where they look. Those who have studied interest groups and mass movements have found lots of evidence that they had a huge impact on policy, as indeed they have. Those who studied bureaucratic institutions like the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) found powerful evidence that the bureaucracy played an extraordinary leadership role in guiding Japan's postwar economic recovery and expansion, as indeed it did. And those who focused on the role of political leaders and the LDP could find compelling evidence that on critical domestic and foreign policy issues, it was the politicians who had the final say, as they surely did. One cannot count the number of Ph.D. dissertations that have tried to demonstrate by case studies of policy making in the Japanese government that one of these theories was the right one. Unfortunately, the debate over who governs Japan has taken on a life of its own over time, with scholars mostly arguing with and citing each other's works rather than taking a fresh look at what is going on inside the Japanese system itself.

I think that this debate, with its sometimes emotional and nasty overtones, has exhausted whatever usefulness it once had. It has also led scholars to ignore asking the important question of why so many intelligent and well-informed observers could come to such diametrically opposed views of the Japanese political system and the way it processes policy decisions. I think that what has been lost is the understanding that the true genius of the '55 system was not bureaucratic dominance, political leadership, or the power of well organized interest groups, but the elaboration of an intricate system of informal elite coordination.

The breakdown of the informal elite coordination mechanisms in the political system is part of a larger pattern of social change evident in contemporary Japan. Implicit understandings, habitual rather than formal rule based patterns of behavior, non-transparent but widely understood rules of the game are weakening across virtually all sectors of Japanese social life. If you walk around Chiyoda Ward in downtown Tokyo, you will come across the same signboard in every neighborhood posted by the local police

department. On the right side, from top to bottom, it has in large red letters the title “Manaa Kara Ruuru E.” Translating these foreign words freely back into English, this title means “From Implicit Understandings To Formal Rules.” The signboard then goes on to enumerate what these new rules are: discarding empty bottles on the street is prohibited; smoking while walking and throwing cigarette butts on the street is prohibited; posting signs on walls without permission is prohibited. The message ends with the notice that “In accordance with the law passed in November 2002, violators will be subject to a fine.” What was once expected as customary behavior is now governed by formal rules.

Here is another example of the weakening of traditional institutions. A couple of years ago I was living in Toshima Ward when a questionnaire came in the mail from the ward office relating to the latest census. Apparently it has been the custom in the neighborhood where I was living for the head of the local neighborhood association to go around and collect the filled-out questionnaires and deliver them to the ward office. Things did not work out that way this time. The lady in the apartment next to mine refused to give over the questionnaire when the association head came to collect it, saying it was an invasion of her privacy for someone to be able to read her questionnaire. The foreign couple living upstairs could not fill out the questionnaire because they did not read Japanese. The head of the neighborhood association, who was the local rice dealer, was furious with my neighbor, saying that it was outrageous that he would be accused of reading someone’s questionnaire. He was too busy to waste his time doing that. All he was doing was trying to be helpful to people in the neighborhood. The upshot was that the ward office has decided to include self addressed envelopes when they send out questionnaires in the future and bypass the neighborhood association altogether.

The point of these stories is simply to underscore that social changes have weakened traditional, customary institutions and are creating pressure for the introduction of more legally formal rule-based institutions. It is unavoidable that as that process proceeds, there will be a need for more lawyers, certified public accountants, even journalists who are trained in more formal settings rather than through the kind of apprentice system practiced by the major newspapers. So it is not surprising that higher education reform involves the creation of law schools, graduate programs to certify Certified Public Accountants, and new graduate schools of journalism.

Let me briefly review the major informal coordination mechanisms that linked major power centers in the Japanese political system: politicians and bureaucrats, the prime minister’s office and the ruling party, the ruling party and the opposition parties, the big business community and the political leadership, and the government and the press.

Politicians and Bureaucrats

Politician-bureaucratic coordination under the '55 system was first facilitated first by the presence in the LDP of former high-ranking bureaucrats. These men did not simply turn the LDP into the mouthpiece for the bureaucracy. Communication and influence was two-way. Former high-ranking bureaucrats had knowledge, experience, influence and power vis-à-vis their former subordinates who now occupied the upper ranks of the ministries in which they served. The bureaucrats for their part had prestige and the public's confidence that they were an elite band of the best and the brightest that could be counted upon to govern effectively.

Coordination also was facilitated by the presence of the so-called "toujinha," the professional party men who for the most part rose up from careers in local politics. While the cerebral former bureaucrats had policy expertise, these professional party men had their finger on the public's pulse and the skill of knowing how to get things done. There was a lot of tension and conflict between the former bureaucrats and the toujinha during the heyday of LDP power, but it was this combination of policy-wise former bureaucrats and street smart professional politicians that was the key to the LDP staying in power through decades of rapid economic development and huge social changes.

This coordination has totally collapsed. There are fewer and fewer high ranking bureaucrats entering political life and the toujinha have virtually disappeared. Over time, leadership recruitment patterns in the LDP became routine, with election to the Lower House for six terms becoming the norm for recruitment to cabinet office. Occasionally, someone would get in earlier and there were some politicians who had to wait a little longer, but these were the exceptions to the rule. The rule meant that an LDP politician had to be in office for roughly fifteen years before he could expect to become a cabinet member. There was no incentive to enter politics for a retiring bureaucrat in his fifties if he could not expect to have senior policy making responsibilities until his seventies. This is quite a different situation than in the early postwar years, when Ikeda Hayato, for example, became Finance Minister in his first term in office. Koizumi has moderated the six term rule in recruiting his cabinet ministers, but the importance of seniority in leadership recruitment remains strong, not only in the LDP, but in the Democratic Party as well.

There are still a lot of bureaucrats entering politics today but they are younger people who make the decision rather early in their bureaucratic life that they would prefer a career in politics. They may be as bright as their predecessors but they have neither the experience, connections, or influence within the bureaucratic system to provide the kind of informal elite coordination that was a critical feature of policy making in the '55 system. Moreover, many of them, sensing new winds of change, are opting to run on the Democratic, rather than the LDP ticket.

Similarly, the professional party man is disappearing for much the same reasons that the fabled machine bosses of U.S. politics no longer exist. Nonaka Hiromu may have been the last samurai in this group of interesting and colorful figures. To a large extent, they have been replaced by their offspring – though Nonaka is one who adamantly refused entreaties to run a family member. These so-called second generation Diet members probably account for close to half of the LDP Diet contingent. The great majority of them had no political experience before running for their Diet seat except perhaps to serve for a few years as secretary to their father or another Diet member. Many of them are very talented and worked in large Japanese companies and studied abroad, especially in the United States. So they bring a salaryman perspective and a cosmopolitan sensibility that was lacking in the old LDP. But they do not have the skills to sustain the kind of informal coordination mechanism between politicians and bureaucrats that characterized the '55 system.

This raises all kinds of interesting and complicated questions about how to reform the decision-making system that I do not have the space to go into here. For example, in my opinion, there are far too many younger politicians in both the LDP and the Democratic Party who seem to think that the job of a politician is to do what bureaucrats do. It amazes me how much younger Diet members like to discuss the technicalities of complex issues, including on television when the audience wants to understand the big picture issue and not get a technical lecture. It is as if the politicians are trying to say, look at me, I can talk about these issues better than any bureaucrat.

This implies a misunderstanding of the division of labor between bureaucrats and politicians, the role of the latter being to set the direction of policy and make sure the bureaucrats carry it out. It also reflects a misunderstanding of how policy is made in the United States. There is little recognition of how powerful Congressional staff members (the Congressional bureaucracy) are and how much the system depends on professional expertise. There is a danger in Japan of a kind of bureaucratization of politicians (the Japanese expression is catchier: *seijika no kanryoka*). But if politicians act like bureaucrats, then who is going to lead the politicians?

The Prime Minister and the Ruling Party

The increasingly popular answer to the question of who is going to lead the politicians seems to be the prime minister. Public opinion polls show growing public support for the idea that Japan needs a “strong prime minister.” Prime Minister Koizumi has argued that as long as the LDP has chosen him as their president then it has an obligation to support his policies. Since Koizumi has come into office, a virtual dual-power structure has emerged between the prime minister’s office, the *kantei*, and the

LDP, with the head of the executive council and the policy affairs research council regularly opposing the policies of the prime minister.

A lot of the discussion for the need to strengthen the hand of the prime minister proceeds from the argument that a strong president is what makes the American system somehow “better” than Japan’s. There seems to be a remarkable lack of awareness that the U.S. system, with its separation of powers and federal structure, was designed to prevent the emergence of a strong executive. Richard Neustadt’s definition of presidential power as “the power to persuade” underscores the point that presidential leadership means the ability to convince Congressmen and the public to support what the president wants to do. In Japan, however, the current mood is to move toward a system in which constraints on the prime minister are removed so that he can govern without having to make compromises with the “opposition forces” in his own party. Thus there is much support for the direct election of the prime minister and ending the practice of getting LDP support for cabinet legislation before it is submitted to the Diet.

In the past, informal coordination between the prime minister’s office, the cabinet, and the ruling party was facilitated in large part by factions. In the old days, when the party was divided into mainstream and anti-mainstream factions, there was a unified factional coalition that dominated both government and party posts. Mainstream factions acted as a coordinator when differences between the government and the party emerged, since both cabinet ministers and the relevant party officials came from the same factional coalition.

This informal coordination was necessary because there is a tradition of government-ruling party relations in Japan that appears to be unique among parliamentary democracies. In other parliamentary systems, when a party comes to power, its most important figures join the government. But in Japan, there is a tradition that goes back to the 1920s that views the government and the ruling party as equals. In this system, the government negotiates with the powerful figures that retain leadership positions in the party after it forms the government. That tradition is only now beginning to break down.

When it comes to the relationship between the prime minister and the ruling party, suddenly the American model disappears from the discussions on Japanese political reform. In the United States, one of the most difficult and important jobs for the president is to convince the members of his own party in Congress to support his programs. He cannot simply assume that they will do what he wants. The problem with the Japanese system is not that the prime minister has to negotiate with his own party, but that he has so little authority over his own cabinet. If a cabinet member opposes the prime minister in other parliamentary systems or the President in the U.S., he can expect to be forced out of the cabinet right away. Koizumi has been trying to change the cabinet culture to turn the cabinet into the prime minister’s rather than the LDP’s cabinet but old traditions die hard.

The breakdown of the informal coordination mechanism between the prime minister and the party created serious policy making problems.

In this respect, reform efforts to strengthen the prime minister's office and especially the coordinating role of the Cabinet Office and the Chief Cabinet Secretary in particular, seem to me to be pointed in the right direction. Under the current administration, Chief Cabinet Secretary Fukuda has emerged as the key figure in coordinating the policy process, in some ways making him more powerful than the prime minister himself because he is more engaged in the actual policy process on a day to day basis. It is too early to say, however, whether this system will continue to evolve in the present direction under a different prime minister and chief cabinet secretary.

The proposal to make the ruling party's chief party officials (the head of the executive council, policy affairs research council, and secretary general) ministers without portfolio may make a considerable amount of sense if the idea that the cabinet must be loyal to the prime minister takes hold. It would mean that if the prime minister were to dismiss cabinet ministers who opposed his policies and if the key party leaders were in the cabinet, then he would be able to dismiss a party leader who opposed him.

Overall, however, I find the discussion in Japan of prime ministerial power and the relationship between the prime minister and the ruling party unsettling because it seems to be driven mostly by the idea that somehow the time consuming, messy business of making compromises in democratic political systems needs to be dispensed in favor of a more efficient, coherent policy making process. Taken to its extreme, that makes for an institutional arrangement that can undermine democracy itself. Fortunately, despite all the talk about strengthening the prime minister, Japan is a very long way away from running into such dangers.

The Ruling Party and the Opposition

When the LDP regained power in 1994 after a brief eight month hiatus, it did so in coalition with the Socialist Party. This shocked a lot of people, who found it hard to believe that the party that had been the main opposition force to the LDP since the beginning of the '55 system would now join hands with it. But the path toward coalition had been paved by a long history of informal coordination through a process known in Japanese as kokutai seiji, or the politics of Diet management committees.

Each political party has its kokutai (kokkai taisaku iinkai), a committee responsible for planning the party's Diet strategy. The chairman of the kokutai is invariably a powerful figure in the party, whichever one it is. I have written about kokutai seiji in my book, The Logic of Japanese Politics, so I will not repeat myself here. The point is that the chairmen and key members of the LDP and JSP kokutai regularly met

in the tea houses and private clubs in Akasaka and Shinbashi where they made informal but binding agreements on how to manage the Diet session. It is often said that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, but the lack of power, and the expectation that it never will be attained, is even more corrupting. The Socialist Party became resigned to its position as the permanent opposition, and in so doing it worked out private understandings with the LDP to keep the system functioning and to benefit from a system in which it did not take part in the government.

This system of informal coordination through kokutai seiji is no longer a feature of Japanese politics. The Diet management committees are still important and the chairmen are important figures in their parties. But the informal, behind the scenes wheeling and dealing seem pretty much to have been relegated to the past. Kokutai chairmen meet and conduct their business in more open settings and coordination between the LDP and the major opposition Democratic party is generally nothing like it was when the LDP and the JSP interacted in a system of one-party dominance. A party that has the hope of eventually defeating the ruling party and coming to power itself is not susceptible to the kinds of incentives the LDP was able to offer the permanent opposition Socialists.

The breakdown of informal coordination mechanisms between the LDP and the opposition means that a new system of managing relations between parties needs to be innovated. So far, little has been done in that regard. In the late 1990's, it looked as though the Diet itself would emerge as the site for inter-party negotiation and compromise. With the LDP lacking a majority in the Upper House, the Democratic Party was able to force the LDP to revise the bills it submitted to deal with Japan's banking crisis. The bargaining was carried on in public view.

Prime Minister Obuchi saw this as a direct threat to the LDP and to its traditional ways of doing business. He moved quickly to abort this evolution of policymaking and did so by bringing the Komeito into the coalition. This meant coordination among the coalition parties would be handled in non-transparent, informal way while the opposition and the Diet could be shut out of the decision-making process. If the Komeito had not joined the coalition and kept open the option to swing to the LDP or the Democrats depending on the issue at hand, the role of the Diet in policy making would be considerably greater than it has become.

It is quite likely, however, that the Komeito will move to this position sooner or later and there is a good possibility that the Democrats will win.

As more seats than the LDP grows stronger, the Komeito probably will start to put some distance between itself and the LDP so that it can be free to join whichever party is in a position to form a government. In the meantime, however, the informal system of elite coordination between the LDP and the opposition has broken down without a new, coherent set of rules that emerged to take its place.

Big Business and the State

I am quite certain that if someone went to the trouble to check, the mass media's use of the term zaikai has declined greatly over the last decade or so. Even when it is used, it does not have quite the same meaning it used to have. Zaikai used to refer to a relatively small band of identifiable big business leaders who spoke on behalf of the business community. Today it is used more generally to refer to the business community's leadership group as a whole. And that zaikai is nowhere near as powerful as it once was.

In the '55 system, the chairman of Keidanren was called the Prime Minister of the zaikai. The zaikai provided political funds to the LDP and its faction bosses, assigning quotas for financial contributions to each industrial association and company member in Keidanren. In 1993, facing increasing resistance from its members and increasing criticism from the media for supporting "money politics," Keidanren ended its role in political funding. As the Japanese economy became larger and more complex, the ability of a small group of zaikai leaders to represent the diverse interests of the Japanese business community naturally declined. Legal reforms of political funding rules set limits on contributions and made it more difficult for faction leaders to raise funds. The informal system of business-state coordination broke down.

Nippon Keidanren, which is the new name for the merged organization of Keidanren and Nikkeiren, decided last year that it would get back into the political funding business. Frustration among some of its top leaders at the inability of the business community to get Prime Minister Koizumi to do what they believe is needed in the way of economic reform led to the decision to put their money where their mouth is. But it ran into a lot of resistance from Keidanren members and public criticism. The result is that Nippon Keidanren has decided to issue a kind of annual report card on the LDP and the Democrats and suggest to its members that they make contributions in line with Keidanren's evaluation without actually assigning quotas. This is something of a throwback to the old system, and to the extent it is, it is bound to fail for the simple reason that what facilitated the system of informal elite coordination between business and politics in the past no longer exists.

Yet the business community has not yet come to grips with this reality. There is a good argument to be made that instead of increasing its contributions to political parties it would make more sense to develop think tanks, support university policy programs, sponsor public forums and other activities to generate alternative policy ideas and proposals and generate public support for the business community's policy positions. But this does not get much of a response from Japan's business leaders, who are still hoping to resurrect the old system of business-state coordination even though such a quest

is bound to be futile.

The Press and Politics

It may be that the least changed of relationships among Japan's power elites is that between the state and the press. Here the system of informal coordination remains surprisingly intact though it is fraying at the edges. It is sustained by the system of press clubs and even more so by the informal practices of news gathering known in Japanese as *asakake* and *yomawari*, chasing after the politicians early in the morning and visiting them at home late at night.

This system still functions with surprising vigor. Political reporters regularly visit the home of the politician they are covering – cabinet minister, key party official, important faction leader – in the evening, sipping tea or if they are lucky drinking beer while waiting for the politician to come home and then having an informal, usually off the record conversation with him. Since access is the name of the game for this kind of reporting, there is a strong incentive to avoid writing things that will anger the source. It always amazes me how often reporters tell me that they have such and such information from impeccable sources that they can't use.

The way in which the political desk is organized in Japanese newspapers creates another problem. Political reporting is invariably about political maneuverings (*seikyoku* in Japanese) and rarely about policy. The national budget or pension reform are intense political issues in any country. In the United States, political reporters in Washington write about them. In Japan they are the responsibility of the economic desk. The political page in Japanese newspapers is filled with gossip and speculation about what the "opposition forces" are planning to do to stop Koizumi from doing one thing or another or when the Diet is going to be dissolved, and have very little in the way of hard news.

The press clubs also serve as a mechanism of elite coordination, in this case, especially with government ministries. Press club reporters are pretty much prisoners of the ministry they are assigned to, spending the day waiting for briefings and handouts from officials and writing pretty much the same story at the end of the day.

To the dismay of the LDP, there are changes underfoot in the system of press-state relations, especially in television news entertainment programs that do not respect the traditions of reporting the way the newspapers do. Nonetheless, the press as an institution in its relations with government and political parties has changed relatively less than other institutions.

Conclusion

What I have described in these pages is a pattern of institutional evolution that is incomplete, confused and meandering, but one that defines the importance of the informal mechanisms of elite coordination and the development of a more transparent, formal rules based system. Things would move faster if political reformers could break out of the constraints imposed by tired clichés about the advantages of a two-party system, the importance of party manifestos, the need for politicians to do what bureaucrats are best equipped to do, and so on. That is not likely to happen, however. The process of institutional change is likely to be slow and not very pretty. More dramatic institutional change is conceivable, but only in the event of a major crisis. For those who believe it is best if countries avoid major dislocating crises, then evolutionary change is far preferable to the revolutionary kind.