Democratic Trends in Meiji Japan

By Daniel A. Métraux

When the victorious United States and its allies occupied Japan between 1945 and 1952, they imposed a new democratic constitution on the Japanese that placed popular sovereignty in the hands of the Japanese people. This was not the first time, however, that the Japanese had encountered such concepts as democracy, representative government, or the fundamental equality of all citizens. During the Meiji era (1868–1912), Japan was exposed to many Western ideas concerning democracy and popular sovereignty and experienced an open debate over whether the nation should adopt a constitution that made the cabinet responsible to the national assembly or to the emperor. Among those debating these issues was a group of influential Japanese, who were deeply enamored with such Western notions as freedom and the dignity of the individual and who exercised significant influence among many educators. Their earlier experiences laid the foundation for the transition to a stronger democratic system in postwar Japan.

The democratic tradition in the West, with its emphasis on the rights of the individual, representative government, and laws delineating the power of government, had no counterpart in Japan until Western ideas entered Japan early in the Meiji period. The Tokugawa Shogunate (1600–1868) featured a highly centralized, semi-feudal system where the national government exercised strict authoritarian control over the country.

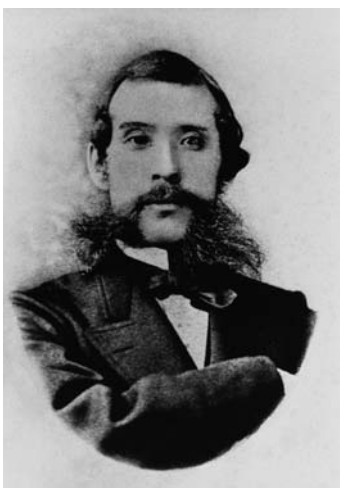
By the late 1860s, anti-Tokugawa forces dominated by young nationalistic samurai from the western domains of Satsuma in southwestern Kyushu, Chōshū in southwestern Honshu, and Saga and Tosa in Shikoku overthrew the Shogunate in 1868 and formed a new government. Japan's Meiji Restoration, narrowly defined, was a coup d'etat instigated by these anti-shogunal forces. They seized the Imperial Palace in Kyoto on January 3, 1868, and announced the return of political power to the emperor from the Tokugawa Shogunate. However, in a larger sense, the Restoration represents a political, economic, and social revolution, whereby the Japanese transformed their nation from a weak, isolated, agricultural state into a modern, centralized, industrial and military power during the Meiji era.

Photograph of the Meiji emperor, Mutsuhito, taken by Uchida Kuichi in 1872.
Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Meiji_ tenno3.jpg.

The Meiji Restoration theoretically returned sovereign power to the emperor, whose office had not wielded it for centuries. The sixteen-year-old crown prince Mutsuhito (reigned 1868-1912) played an active role in ruling Japan together with a tight cabal of former samurai from Satsuma and Chōshū. These officials (often called *genrō,* or "oligarchs") inaugurated all of the reforms and ran the government in the name of the emperor. The Meiji Restoration was in some respects a "revolution from above" where the genrō, led by such stalwarts as Itō Hirobumi (1840-1909), Yamagata Aritomo (1838–1922), Ōkuma Shigenobu (1838–1922), and Ōkubo Toshimichi (1830–1878), inaugurated a broad series of programs to modernize and Westernize Japan and to open the country for normal relations with the outside world.

The goal of the Meiji oligarchs was to create a powerful centralized government that would realize the slogan *fukoku kyōhei* ("enrich the country—strengthen the military"). Their primary goal was the preservation of their nation's independence by modernizing the state and building a powerful military.

However, it is important to remember that the new government was a coalition rather than a single united force. Japan's new leaders were a grouping of diverse interests in a common cause, and as a result, there were often disagreements and sharp debates. By the early 1870s, those forces favoring centralization and modernization were politically dominant. They abolished the domains, terminated administrative localism and domain armies, and divided the country into prefectures. They also instituted a uniform land tax; formed a modern military, based on universal male conscription; and



From left to right: Itō Hirobumi (1840-1909), Yamagata Aritomo (1838–1922), Ōkuma Shigenobu (1838–1922), and Ōkubo Toshimichi (1830–1878).
Source: The website of *Portraits of Modern Japanese Historical Figures* at http://www.ndl.go.jp/portrait/e/indexes/category03.html.



From left to right: Etō Shimpei (1834–1874), Itagaki Taisuke (1837–1919), and Gotō Shōjirō (1838–1897).
Source: The website of *Portraits of Modern Japanese Historical Figures* at http://www.ndl.go.jp/portrait/e/indexes/category03.html.

eliminated distinct social classes, including the samurai class, in the mid-1870s.

Once the new government consolidated its power, it became clear that political and military power rested with the samurai from Satsuma-Chōshū and that the Restoration leaders from Tosa and Saga would have to take second billing. The governing coalition split in 1873 when the oligarchs from Tosa and Saga proposed a military expedition against Korea but were overruled by the leaders from Satsuma-Chōshū. Leaders from the losing faction, including Etō Shimpei (1834-1874) of Saga and Itagaki Taisuke (1837–1919) and Gotō Shōjirō (1838–1897) of Tosa subsequently resigned from the government.

The losers in the Korea debate quickly sought a variety of paths to regain some degree of political power. Etō and another dissident Satsuma samurai, Saigo Takamori (1828–1877), opted for armed revolts in 1874 and 1877, but the actions were decisively quashed by the government's new conscript armies. Other rivals, such as Gotō and Itagaki, looked to the political traditions of the West as a means to regain influence. During the early Meiji era, Japan was inundated with products from the West that many Japanese saw as superior and desirable. Western political ideas also permeated Japan, and a small but rapidly growing number of educated Japanese thought that Japan should consider adopting such practices as a means to strengthen the Japanese nation.

Gotō and Itagaki spent much of the 1870s organizing several local political societies that sought to tap forces of discontent by advocating a liberal ideology of power sharing, an idea staunchly opposed by the ruling clique. Although their efforts were more geared to regaining power than any deep advocacy of democracy per se, their efforts developed in time into a truly national drive that became known as the Popular Rights Movement (*jiyū minken undō*). As early as 1874, Itagaki formed the Public Party of Patriots (*Aikoku Kōtō*) and various other "patriotic societies" that "combined ultra-nationalism and a concern for the welfare of ex-samurai with the egalitarian slogans and radical reformism of the French Revolution."[1]

The Popular Rights Movement

During its first years, the Popular Rights Movement was neither especially democratic nor very popular. Its narrow base of support included mainly small groups of elites. Most of its members were former samurai from Itagaki's old domain of Tosa who had little confidence in the wisdom of the common people or in their experience and ability to participate in the political process. They also had a strong penchant for violence, proclaiming that the "people" had the right to revolt against a tyrannical government. Government authorities arrested a number of the more radical members for what were regarded as seditious activities.

By the late 1870s and early 1880s, however, the nature and character of the movement changed dramatically. After the removal of its more radical elements, the movement began to gather broader support from men of most social classes, including well-to-do peasants, merchants, some government officials, journalists, teachers, poorer peasants, and even a few common laborers. The politicization of the well-to-do peasants, who were paying very high taxes and who felt that they were getting very little back from the government, was further accelerated by the formation of prefectural assemblies in 1878, whose elected members expressed increasing hostility toward the government and greater support for the democracy movement.[2]

Ōkuma Shigenobu broke with his fellow ruling oligarchs when he submitted a proposal to his colleagues that Japan should adopt a British-style responsible cabinet system with a national assembly under the control of political parties.

The growth of a popular press, including many newspapers that opposed the policies and actions of the Meiji government, helped to spread the ideas of the Popular Rights Movement. These writers sent a clear message: the people should have some degree of political and governmental power, and Japan must have a constitution based on a contract between the people and the government. There was much excited talk of "people's rights" and "popular sovereignty."

This continued agitation led to the formation of numerous regional organizations, and in 1880, an impressive national movement, the League for Establishing a National Assembly, was formed, which claimed to represent more than 100,000 members of local or regional organizations. Over the next year, the League presented the government with dozens of petitions demanding a representative national assembly and a constitution, and many members wrote their own draft constitutions.

The emergence of a nationwide Popular Rights Movement signaled the broadening of political consciousness as a growing number of commoners were joining the wealthy and elite members of the cause. Itagaki and some of his supporters organized a political party, the Liberal Party (*Jiyūtō*), in October 1881. Almost simultaneously, Ōkuma Shigenobu broke with his fellow ruling oligarchs when he submitted a proposal to his colleagues that Japan should adopt a British-style responsible cabinet system with a national assembly under the control of political parties. Japan's other rulers, almost all of them from Satsuma and Chōshū, rejected Ōkuma's petition and forced him to resign from the government. Ōkuma then organized his own political party, the Constitutional Reform Party (*Rikken Kaishintō*).

The key question then became what kind of constitutional monarchy the oligarchs would present to the Japanese people. Essentially, there were two models under consideration: an authoritarian Prussian version or a more liberal popular-sovereignty system.

The government sought to diffuse the political crisis of 1881 by having the emperor stipulate that Japan would have a constitution and national assembly by 1890. The oligarchs convened a commission chaired by Itō Hirobumi that would design a constitution, including a House of Representatives whose members would be elected by popular vote. The genrō hoped not only to counter the rising popularity of the popular rights groups, but also to demonstrate to the West that Japan was now a modern nation based on the rule of law and that it therefore should be accepted as an equal by the major powers.

Although the political elites who moved the country toward the 1889 constitution were much more authoritarian than democratic in their political outlooks, they, like the popular rights leaders, believed in a form of secular nationalism based on a Western view of government predicated on two fundamental democratic ideals: representative government and the rule of law. Their fundamental disagreement was on how much power to give to the "people." Both groups were opposed by another group of activists who espoused a radical form of Shinto ultranationalism based on a theory of absolute divine monarchy. The ultranationalists, who gained considerable power in the 1930s and during World War II, had little tolerance for the German-inspired theory of constitutional monarchy that underpinned the Meiji constitution framed by the oligarchs in 1889.

The Constitutional Debate of the 1880s

Joseph Pittau has noted,"The Meiji political system both in theory and practice was a mixture of authoritarianism and constitutionalism, a hybrid 'absolute constitutional monarchy.'"[3] All of Japan's political leaders determined that the emperor was to be the focus of political power. There was also general agreement that there would be a legislative branch of government that would permit some form of popular participation in the affairs of state. Their main disagreement was over such questions as whether the cabinet would be responsible to the national assembly or to the emperor and whether sovereignty rested with the people.

The key question then became what kind of constitutional monarchy the oligarchs would present to the Japanese people. Essentially, there were two models under consideration: an authoritarian Prussian version or a more liberal popular-sovereignty system. The more conservative oligarchs supported the Prussian constitution where the ministers of state were responsible to the emperor and not to a popularly elected assembly representing the people. The legislature in this Prussian form of government was not designed to function as a true legislative organ of government,

> *but as a kind of mediating organ between the executive and bureaucracy, on the one side, and the masses of the people outside the government, on the other side. It was seen as a useful representative organization to channel potential organized opposition to the state into an acceptable form of participation in government.*

The oligarchs also presumed that a popularly elected legislature could potentially be a powerful vehicle for mobilizing broad public support for state programs and policies.[4]

Iwakura Tomomi.
Source: The website of *Portraits of Modern Japanese Historical Figures* at http://www.ndl.go.jp/portrait/e/indexes/category03.html.

Advocates of the English and French model argued that the strength of these Western states rested on the notion that ultimate political authority resided with the people. Sovereignty resided jointly with the emperor and the people following the British tradition of "King-in-Parliament." Any constitution based on this approach would specify that the cabinet would be responsible not to the emperor, but to a popularly elected parliament that would hold real legislative power.

The 1880s saw a national debate between proponents of both models. One of the leading oligarchs, Iwakura Tomomi, framed the question,

> *If we plan to establish a constitutional government in our country and open a parliament, we will be creating something new. The problem is, shall we follow the English model and establish a party government, making the parliamentary majority responsible for the administration? Or shall we, following the principle of gradualism, grant only legislative power and reserve executive power to the Emperor, according to the Prussian model?*[5]

The subsequent debate focused on the source of sovereignty and the role of the emperor in the future governance of Japan. Itō Hirobumi, principal architect of the Meiji Constitution, wrote that "the Emperor on His Throne combines in himself the sovereignty of the state and the government of the country and of his subjects."[6] The constitution would be the emperor's gift to the people of Japan and would allow his subjects to have a voice in public affairs even though ultimate power rested with him.

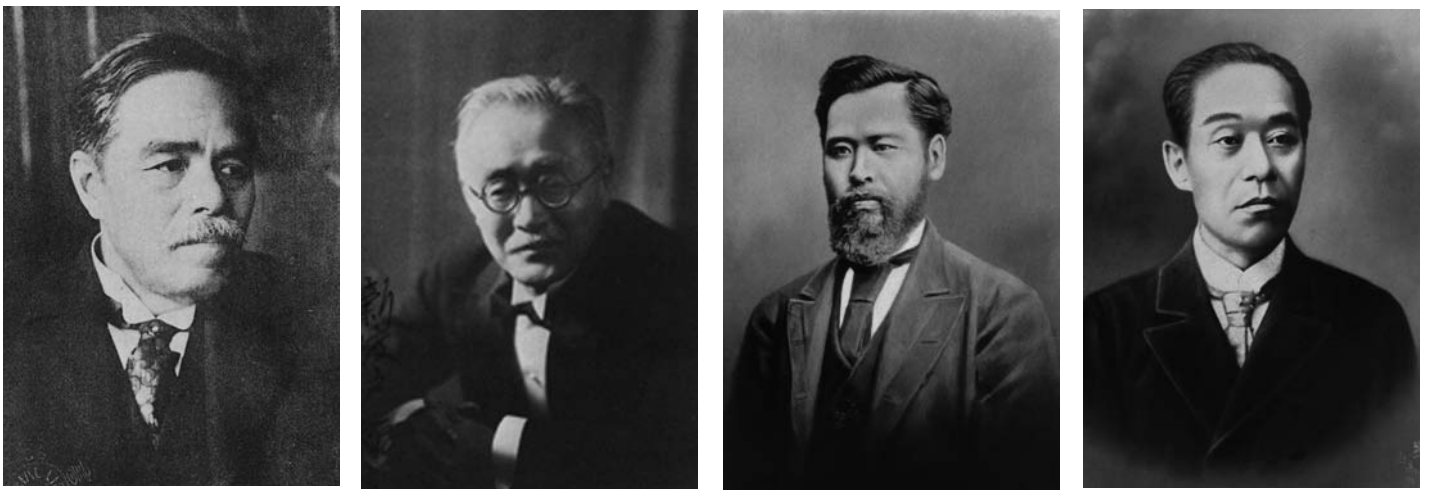
Supporters of the popular sovereignty model, however, had very different ideas. The editorial staff of the *Kōchi Shimbun* declared in October 1881 that,

> *In the words of Rousseau, society is built upon a social contract….[W]e firmly believe that society should not exist without a social contract. Thus, we are convinced that sovereignty must reside in the people. Since the people are the nucleus of the state, without the people the state cannot exist. If there are the people, even without a king, society can exist.*[7]

Other intellectuals carried the debate further by challenging the very idea that the emperor was different from an ordinary citizen. Their concerns over the position and role of the emperor clearly parallel those of Japanese citizens and leaders of the Allied Occupation, who persuaded the Shōwa emperor to renounce his divinity in 1946 and who reduced the position of the emperor to that of a symbol of the Japanese state in Japan's postwar constitution.

Ultimately, the oligarchs chose the Prussian model. The 1889 constitution made a number of concessions to Western liberal theory, including the creation of a parliament to be chosen by a small, wealthy, male electorate. But the essentials of power rested with the oligarchs. Robert Scalapino notes that by writing this document, the genrō,

> *succeeded in riveting upon the nation a status quo which was more strongly oligarchic than representative and one which perpetuated and strengthened the myth of Imperial absolutism, thus making party control of government extremely difficult.*[8]



From left to right: Uchimura Kanzō (1861–1930), Nitobe Inazō (1862–1933), Mori Arinori (1847–1889), and Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901).
Source: The website of *Portraits of Modern Japanese Historical Figures* at http://www.ndl.go.jp/portrait/e/indexes/category03.html.

The government's decision to write a constitution with a national assembly ultimately diffused the Popular Rights Movement because their key demand for a representative body had been met. By 1884, both the Jiyūtō and Kaishintō had dissolved themselves as the debate switched from whether Japan should have representative government to one over where the ultimate source of power lay, with the people or the emperor. The end of the nascent political parties, however, did not mean the end of political agitation by popular rights supporters, who maintained their struggle through demonstrations, the press, and other avenues of popular expression.

Democratic Thought and Japanese Education

Western ideas about liberty, the importance of the individual, and the rights of the individual had a more profound impact on many of Japan's educators and intellectual elite than on its political leaders during the middle and later years of the Meiji era. Many of these men had lived and studied in the US or Europe for considerable periods and brought Western ways of thinking back with them. They admired the progress and openness of the West and felt that Japan would only become a vibrant and strong member of the world community if its leaders would adopt the liberal open spirit and accomplishments of countries like the US. These Japanese progressives sought radical reformation of their nation's social order through education, including the fostering of education for women. Unfortunately, their innovative, liberal thinking was not always acceptable to Japan's core political leaders.

There are certain distinct characteristics that Japan's progressives shared. One key factor was the influence on their thinking of Protestant Christianity. Many educators, like Uchimura Kanzō (1861–1930), Naruse Jinzo (1858–1919), and Nitobe Inazō (1862–1933), were Christian converts, while the father of modern Japanese education, Mori Arinori (1847–1889), was deeply influenced by Christianity. They were also fascinated with the liberal spirit and rapid economic development of the US, and even some educators with no great affinity for Christianity, like Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901), were attracted by ideas emanating from America. Benjamin Duke notes,

> *Many Japanese progressives who studied in America became infected with this Protestant approach to education in which all human beings were equal before their Maker and the individual alone was responsible for his religious convictions and the consequences thereof.*[9]

Fukuzawa, a leading member of this group, became one of the great writers and philosophers of the Meiji period and a key advocate of the Westernization of Japan. He firmly believed that the success of the West rested not only in the education of many of its citizens but also in its emphasis on the development of the individual and the freedom that individual had to pursue his own dreams. Fukuzawa's multivolume *Gakumon no Susume* (*An Encouragement of Learning*) advocated his most important teaching of "national independence through personal independence." Japan could only become strong through the hard work and education of its people, and this could only occur if every person, however rich or poor, was given the chance to study and to excel. Success in life could only come from personal effort—an idea Fukuzawa stressed through his motto "heaven helps those who help themselves."

Mori Arinori, who became minister of education in 1885, was a staunch supporter of individual rights, religious freedom, and the rights of women. He felt that education must focus on the intellectual, moral, and physical development of the individual and provide students with the opportunity to develop their own way of thinking. Mori promoted a secular view of moral education that emphasized equality among all members of society, eschewed Shinto or Confucian-based indoctrination of citizens, and called for fidelity to the Japanese nation rather than to the reigning emperor himself.[10]

Uchimura publicized a set of principles that he regarded as essential to Japan's emergence as a modern nation: political leaders who respected justice beyond their own personal interests; social reform that would increase personal productivity without exploiting other people; agricultural reform based on morality, honesty, and diligence; education that respects the rights of the individual; and respect for religious freedom.

Nitobe, through his teaching and extensive writing, felt that the key factor in higher education is a liberal education that develops the personality and character of the individual. Duke describes Nitobe as a "consummate educator who devoted a lifetime to the advancement of liberal and democratic ideas in education at a period in the history of Japan when this pursuit was fraught with difficulties." He stressed that students should see themselves as independent, self-conscious, and free individuals who need to think for themselves and pave their own path through life. Nitobe felt that higher education in Japan, the main purpose of which was the preparation of the student for public service, should also focus on the liberation and emancipation of the individual. Japan's leaders would be stronger individuals if they experienced a "process of self-formation in the development of personality."[11]

The influence of educators like Nitobe and Uchimura may have been somewhat muted during their own lifetimes and the militarist era of the 1930s and World War II, but a number of their students who shared their liberal ideas obtained positions of prominence in Japanese society after the war. They

Nambara Shigeru. Source: From the cover of *War and Conscience in Japan: Nambara Shigeru and the Asia-Pacific War* by Richard H. Minear.

Nambara and his committee sent a proposal to Allied authorities advocating a new educational system for Japan "that was designed to reach the masses, enlighten them through education and instill democratic ideas in the minds of young Japanese."

resurrected many of the democratic arguments of prewar Japan and inaugurated reforms in education that the earlier Meiji intellectuals had worked so hard to address.

Several prominent Japanese educators, influenced by their Meiji mentors, kept the liberal spirit alive during the darkest days of Japanese militarism in the 1930s and 1940s, and contributed to the postwar democratization of Japan. One of the most eminent members of this group was Nambara Shigeru (1889–1974), president of Tokyo University beginning in 1945 and a leader of the committee that worked with the Allied Occupation to liberalize postwar Japanese education.

Nambara was deeply influenced by teachers like Nitobe and Uchimura and carried their liberal ideals into his work as a professor of political science and as dean of the faculty of law at Tokyo Imperial University (renamed Tokyo University after World War II). His emphasis on the rights of the individual and his forceful defense of academic freedom during the war years, as well as his promotion of democratic values after the end of the war, had a profound effect on many of his students who would become leaders of postwar Japan. After the war, Nambara and his committee sent a proposal to Allied authorities advocating a new educational system for Japan "that was designed to reach the masses, enlighten them through education and instill democratic ideas in the minds of young Japanese."[12] The fact that Occupation authorities ultimately adopted a postwar educational system for Japan that strongly reflected the ideas of Nambara and his colleagues demonstrates a strong link between the growth of democratic ideals in the prewar period and the expansion of Japanese democracy after World War II.

Conclusion

Supporters of the Popular Rights Movement, although determined, failed in their goal to secure a government based on the ideals of popular sovereignty, yet they were still able to force the Meiji oligarchs to write a constitution that had a representative assembly. They established a tradition of legitimate political dissent and constitutional government that survived the military authoritarianism of the prewar and war periods and became the foundation for Japan's postwar democracy. The very fact that there was an open debate over the nature of government was an important step forward in the modernization of Japanese political thought. Also, many of the leaders of the movement, as well as their successors, went on to become professional party politicians after the opening of the Diet in the 1890s and the establishment of party cabinets several years later.

The Allied Occupation that began in 1945 brought Japan a new constitution that promoted the sovereignty of the people. While this was a major shift from the emperor-centric constitution of 1889, Japan already had some experience with representative government and democratic thought in the Meiji period. Thus, Japan's postwar democracy has its roots in the liberal and democratic ideals so rigorously espoused by Japan's prewar thinkers and educators. ■

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