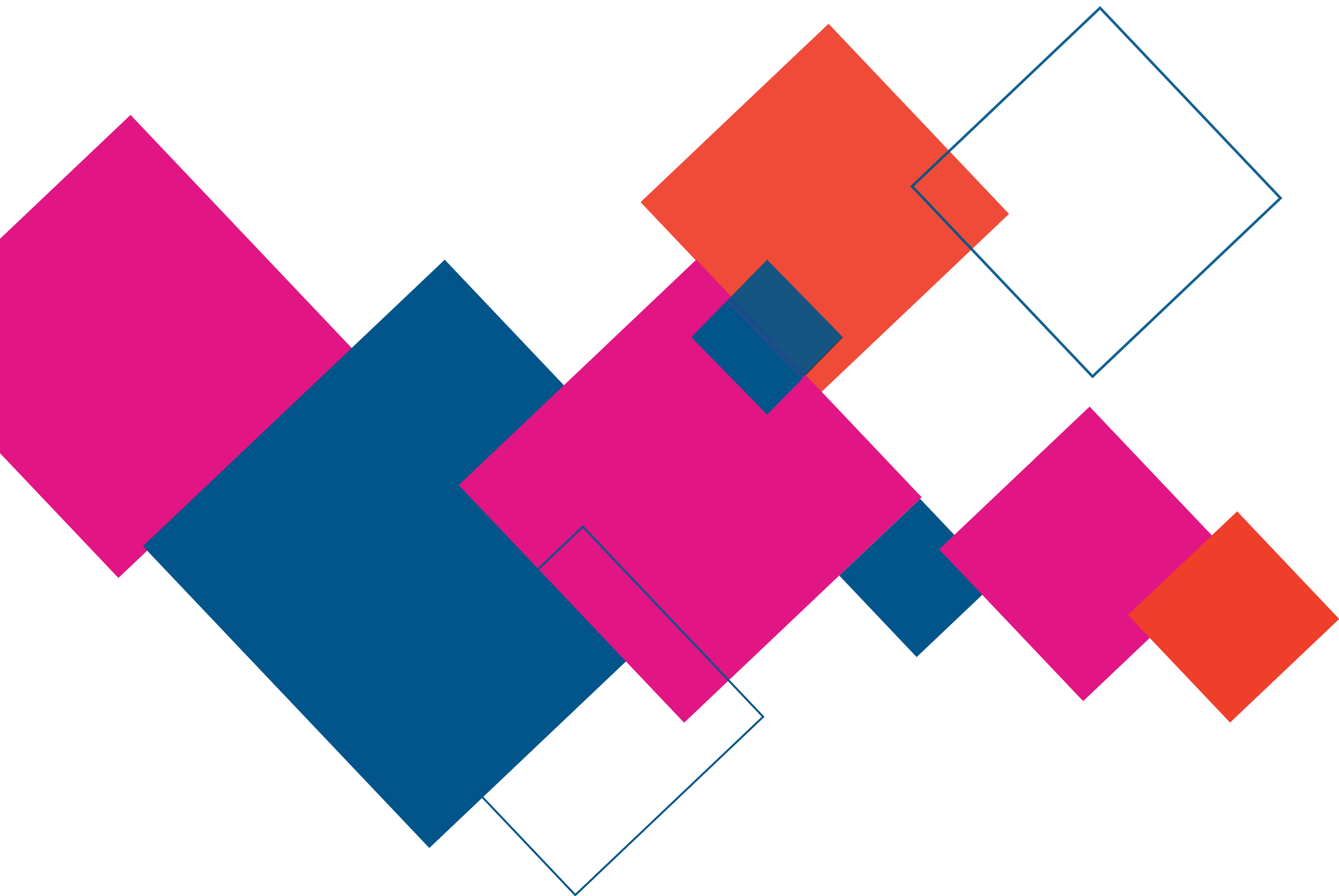
Japan's Democracy: Lessons and Reflections

日本の民主主義の再評価

2nd Panel Discussion
Government Systems



Japan Center for International Exchange

About the Democracy for the Future Project

In 2018, JCIE launched a multipronged initiative to explore and expand Japan's support for democratic governance that is based on the values of liberty, accountability, the rule of law, and individual dignity and empowerment. The initiative, known as "Democracy for the Future," is designed to engage Japanese leaders in dialogue with domestic and overseas experts on ways of strengthening the building blocks of democratic governance in Asia and elsewhere. The program convenes a study group of Japanese experts to identify strategies on how support for these values can be incorporated in Japan's foreign policy and development assistance. These ideas will be shared widely to raise awareness about the importance of democratic governance among policy makers and opinion leaders. The program also engages Japanese Diet members and other senior leaders in international dialogues on issues related to democracy, and it serves as a platform to involve Japanese experts, civil society leaders, and others in international forums on the topic.

As part of Democracy for the Future activities, in June 2021, JCIE launched a new project, "Japan's Democracy: Lessons and Reflections," to create a platform for Japanese scholars, political and opinion leaders, and the broader Japanese public to reflect on Japan's own experience in building a democratic society post-WWII, examine the resilience of the elements that support democratic governance in Japan today, and identify possible ways to strengthen it further into the future. JCIE has partnered with Dr. Harukata Takenaka, a leading scholar in Japan, to organize a series of three discussions with Japanese scholars and policymakers to conduct this reassessment: This report is a record of the second of these discussions.

About JCIE

Founded in 1970, the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE) is an independent, nonprofit, and nonpartisan organization that works to strengthen US-Japan relations and build international cooperation. Operating with partner organizations in Tokyo and New York (JCIE/USA), JCIE sponsors a wide range of projects in collaboration with institutions around the world. These include policy research and dialogue on cutting-edge issues in international relations, leadership exchanges, and efforts to strengthen the contributions of civil society to domestic and international governance. Through these initiatives, JCIE aims to create opportunities for informed policy discussions that can contribute to a more peaceful and stable world.

Japan's Democracy: Lessons and Reflections
2nd Panel Discussion—Government Systems

The following is a record of a discussion that was originally conducted in Japanese on September 29, 2021, as part of JCIE's Democracy for the Future Program

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Japan's Current System of Government

Takenaka: I would like to discuss with you Japan's current system of government. Since the 1990s, a number of reforms have been undertaken, from electoral system reform to reform of political financing, reorganization of the central bureaucracy, and changes to the civil servant system. I would like to ask each of you to share your assessment of this series of reforms, starting with Professor Machidori, who just last year published an excellent book, *Seiji Kaikaku Saiko* (Reconsidering political reform).

Machidori: There were initiatives that started a little earlier, but the actual reforms took place from the 1990s through the early 2000s. The changes, which can be described overall as "government system reform," led to changes in essentially every aspect of the government and public sector: electoral system reform and administrative reform took place alongside other reforms for reorganization of the central bureaucracy and strengthening of the cabinet function. Reforms for decentralization of power and of the legal system also took place during that period. You can see that there were scarcely any areas that did not undergo reform at the time. Parallel to that, reforms were also carried out with regard to special public corporations and corporate governance. So, we had these substantial and wide-ranging changes.

One notable aspect was the comprehensive nature of the changes. It is no small task to take on all these reforms, so that accomplishment alone is worthy of praise. However, there was considerable deviation in the direction of the specific proposals, with the centralization of power in some areas and decentralization in others. This occurred because considerations for reform had to be based on the political decision-making mechanisms and processes at play up to the 1980s; without that, agreement would never have been reached. You cannot get a majority unless you say, "We have this type of problem right now, so let's change it," and even if there is a consensus on the need to change the status quo, the specific courses of action people want to take will vary.

Some areas did not undergo reform. In particular, the National Diet processes hardly changed at all. Issues surrounding the House of Councillors or whether to change the relationship between the two chambers were completely untouched. Another area that did not change was systems and structures within local government. It was administrative reform only in the literal sense, with emphasis on reducing the number of local civil servants and expanding outsourcing. That is of course important, but nothing changed in terms of the decision-making processes in local governments. No reforms were made to the electoral system or to the kinds of power and resources available to leaders and assemblies.

In essence, the three major distinguishing features of the government system reforms were their comprehensive nature, inconsistencies in direction, and areas of no change, and this is the reason for a general lack of alignment. High marks can be awarded for taking on such big initiatives, but I think the efforts were wasted because they failed to gain alignment. This idea that energy was expended for no result, I think, led to a general feeling of distrust. Last year, Professor Takenaka published the book *Korona Kiki no Seiji* (The politics of the coronavirus crisis), and I felt the COVID-19 response served as a kind of verification of these political reforms, and it revealed just how little coordination there was.

Takenaka: Thank you for summarizing those three key factors, Professor Machidori. You are singularly qualified to provide this comprehensive overview of the political reforms from the 1990s onwards. Professor Sunahara, can you please share your thoughts with us?

Sunahara: I think the challenge with changing government structures is that even if systems are changed, norms and habits are not. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) presidential election to be held today, September 29, is the perfect example. I take great interest in the proposal by one of the contenders, Fumio Kishida, regarding executive terms of office. That proposal essentially serves to underscore pre-reform conventions. The previous LDP party model called for the party president and secretary-general to come from different factions. Since the reforms, the party has been criticized for choosing a secretary-general from the president's faction or someone favored by the president. This was especially the case when former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi chose Tsutomu Takebe and Shinzo Abe for the secretary-general role. In reflection, Koizumi was centralizing power. The conventional model was based on an unwritten rule to try and embed the segregation of the roles of president and secretary-general, and Koizumi challenged that. Kishida's assertion now is that it is not ideal to have one person in an executive role for a long time. I think this was mostly directed at Toshihiro Nikai (secretary-general at the time) and Taro Aso (LDP vice president), and more importantly, is based on the concept of distributing power to avoid it being concentrated in a certain group's hands for too long. The key aspect of the original government reforms in the 1990s was, on the contrary, to consolidate the power of the prime minister while simultaneously seeking to strengthen the counterpart to that power—the opposition. But because the latter has not gained sufficient strength, the LDP looks like a single dominant power. Now, watching the events unfold around the LDP presidential election, it appears that the party is once again considering a separation of powers—not between it and the opposition, but within the LDP itself.

Professor Machidori has frequently criticized the media for its reporting on the political situation, and from the perspective of those who conduct analyses based on the current system, it appears the media does not understand the current rules. But from their perspective, the media finds several aspects of the previous rules that appear reasonable. With ongoing weak opposition, the media feels that it is undesirable for power to be concentrated in the hands of the LDP president, but instead of talking about strengthening the opposition, I think they resort to, and base their coverage on, the idea that the traditional LDP factional rivalry is preferrable for achieving the balance of power.

The ideals and objectives of political reform are not necessarily shared by all, so the players tried to take advantage of the governing structure in an opportunistic manner in order to ensure their own survival. I think the past 10 years have been about sleeping in the same bed but having different dreams. Particularly since the start of the Abe administration, there has been a lack of healthy rivalry with the opposition, and I think within the LDP they are trying to restore the system under traditional norms and habits.

Viewed over a 30-year span, you can see how these developments are less than desirable, but the fact is that there are some people who just look at the past 10 years and conclude that they are reasonable. Personally, I believe we must look at the longer 30-year span, but the issues being raised now all focus on problems from the past decade. People like me claim that the problems today result from unresolved issues over the last three decades, but this is not necessarily a persuasive argument, and I think many people believe that different solutions are needed to address the problems of the most recent decade. I appreciate that this sentiment is perhaps gaining strength because of the LDP's recent single-party dominance.

It is hard to say whether the government system reforms were a success or failure. However, I understand that the logic behind the previous reform is not sufficiently convincing when Japan tries to make further reforms to the current situation.

Machidori: That is exactly right. Because things have reverted to their original positions over the past 10 years, there is a clear trend to interpret events based on the original rules. The media in particular has been undergoing a generational changing of the guard, so there are reporters who do not know what things were like 10 years ago, and the correspondents assigned to cover the prime minister or the opposition party may have still been

high school students during the Democratic Party of Japan's (DPJ) time in power. It is hard for them to imagine an opposition that could seize power. They take calls to "follow the Constitution and open the Diet" at face value and just say, "What a great idea!" We are seeing a clear trend toward that.

Takenaka: I have heard that recently within the LDP, the argument that there is no alternative but to carry out this type of intra-party pseudo regime change has seriously been gaining strength. Professor Hikotani, could you please share with us your assessment and understanding of the government system reforms?

Hikotani: For five years, up until this past summer, I taught Japanese politics at Columbia University in America. Speaking from my experience teaching overseas, I wondered if my students felt the LDP administration was long lasting or if they had a negative view about how infrequently government changes hands in Japan. But what I found was that students were more interested in the fact that the prime minister changes so frequently and how the Japanese people seemed to accept that. In that sense, students typically had positive views about the 10-year-long Abe administration, and discussions focused on whether that trend would persist. This relates to our later topics, but students showed very deep interest in Japan's abnormally complicated electoral system. It forced me to reconsider how the lack of clarity in the system's underlying principles and resultant difficulty in explaining them stifles a proper understanding of Japan's democracy.

Regarding the reforms of the past 30 and most recent 10 years, my experience teaching at Japan's National Defense Academy from 1999 to 2016 showed me that major structural reforms to national security—both institutional and normative—came very late. The Japan Defense Agency did not become the Ministry of Defense in the initial reforms to central government ministries and agencies even when others were totally revamped, and my impression is that once defense matters were solidified under the prime minister's control, everything changed all at once. Particularly in organizational terms, the creation of the National Security Council (NSC) effected a change in the role of the Ministry of Defense and ensured the Ministry's proximity to the prime minister at the institutional level. Prior to the formation of the NSC, it was not the norm for Japan Self-Defense Force (JSDF) officials to set foot in the National Diet or Prime Minister's Office. One account in Yoichi Funabashi's famous work *Domei Hyoryu* (Alliance Adrift) describes the time that Prime Minister Hashimoto invited former Joint Staff Council Chair Tetsuya Nishimoto and Chief of Maritime Staff Takeo Fukuchi to visit the Prime Minister's Office. They were the first JSDF officials to ever visit the office without the presence of administrative staff, and they were moved to tears as they shared a drink with the prime minister. Such officials are now so deeply engaged at the office and the National Security Secretariat (NSS) that such a scene is unimaginable—proof of how different the norms and institutions are today.

Looking instead at what has *not* changed, however, I would point to the roles of the government and of the Diet. In the fields of security and crisis management, the reforms of the last 10 years have centralized power in the Prime Minister's Office, speeding up the decision-making process. However, reforms related to the Diet have not been sufficiently thorough, and in some cases, we have even seen backsliding. This has something to do with relations between the political parties and the policy divisions, which are particularly striking in the field of security. The recent Afghanistan withdrawal strategy showed how a lack of discussions in the Diet to date on how much risk will be tolerated in JSDF dispatches meant that while the current framework enables more rapid dispatch than in the past, political and practical challenges remain.

Takenaka: There have been many discussions on electoral system reform, reorganization of the central bureaucracy, decentralization, and judicial system reforms, but I do not think there has been much talk about changes such as the presence of JSDF officials at the Prime Minister's Office in the context of systemic reform, so please allow me to probe a little further. When did that change come about? Was the formation of the NSC the major factor, was it more of an institutional change, or did the standards change

when it became possible to send troops overseas? Or was it perhaps connected to the upgrade in Defense's status from an agency to a ministry?

Hikotani: The pace at which the Defense Agency became the Ministry of Defense was a factor, and I would suggest there are many who did not even notice that the change had occurred. Around 2000, when the central government reforms were being debated, they passed on the idea of promoting it to ministry status. But that was later realized in 2007 after very little discussion. Further, the NSC, which had been shelved by the 2007 Fukuda cabinet, came up again in discussions under the DPJ administration, but was not established until 2013, under the second Abe cabinet. Because the focus of debate

had been the Legislation for Peace and Security, very little airtime was given to topics of the framework and processes for the NSC or how to staff the NSS to support it, even though these were critical reforms. Delving deeper into the details, if you look at the daily published schedules of the prime minister's meetings, we see increasing numbers of JSDF personnel among the officials who offer briefings in regular meetings, such as those of the four key ministers (prime minister, chief cabinet secretary, foreign minister, and defense minister). This relates to the normative changes I raised earlier, but it was also done in the context of the formation of the NSS and the creation of the processes of these four-minister or extended nine-minister* talks. However, the changes in politics were not in step with these reforms, so I think we need to consider more carefully where this mismatch stems from.

Takenaka: Thank you very much. People occasionally point out some specific changes, but I do not think there has been any systematic analysis of the transitions that took place. That may be an indication of, as Professor Machidori mentioned earlier, just how comprehensive the reforms were.

Next, Professor Machidori, I would like to ask you how it was possible to implement such comprehensive reforms. I know you have written about this in your books, but the changes also covered the central bank and the justice system, so how was it possible to make such broad reforms?

Machidori: The first factor is that there was self-awareness in many respects around the 1980s. That decade was the peak of Japan's success story. Now we know that it was the closing act of the postwar success story, but at the time, there was this incredible confidence about the postwar socioeconomic situation, which translated into a sense that politics could also be transformed. People had faith in the ability to reform in the face of new challenges, and there was room for trial and error. If the same ideas were put forward now, you could not do it because the confidence is not there.

I described the leadership ideal at the time in my book as "liberal modernists" (*kindaishugi uha*). The thinking that Japanese society must be more rational, modern, and to use a somewhat outdated phrase, "European" or "Western," did not stem from the postwar period but existed continuously from Meiji times. But those using it as the logical basis for structural reform were not in the majority. Only in the 1980s did that logic gain sufficient strength to sway the majority. It became an incredibly powerful driving force as a single shared ideal, bolstered by experience and confidence. There is no comparison today for the level of prestige afforded when, for example, a businessperson spoke out in the 1990s. Nowadays, such people are instantly accused of speaking out for their own interests, of pursuing their own self-interest in the name of the public good. Then there is the added impact of the internet. Back in those days, it was natural for successful businesspeople to be dissatisfied with government and governance, and while there may have been some personal gain, I think the general

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*In addition to the four above, this refers to the deputy prime minister; minister of finance; minister for internal affairs and communications; minister of economy, trade and industry; minister of land, infrastructure, transport and tourism; as well as the chairman of the National Public Safety Commission.—Trans

feeling was that their actions were largely for the public benefit.

The same can probably be said for mass media. These days, when the media has something to say, they are always criticized for putting a spin on issues. Even though they behaved in the same way back then, there was not the same impression. That was because there was this propulsion stemming from confidence in success and a shared sense of the logic and concepts behind the reform to government systems.

Takenaka: You are saying that the earlier successes became a driving force for change?

Machidori: That is right. There was a saying, "First-rate economy and third-rate politics." In terms of the series of reforms that were undertaken, from the bureaucrats' perspectives, they were in some ways like victims of an accident. Initial discussions were about the poor state of politics, but in the process of centralizing power, administrative problems naturally emerged. When those issues erupted in the 1990s, discussions turned to the need to reform the government administration as well.

Linking into what Professor Hikotani was talking about, for the agencies and offices at the heart of that process, it translated into a loss of autonomy. On the issue of a defense agency or ministry, creating a direct link to the Prime Minister's Office weakens the organization's autonomy in the field of conventional national defense, which is essentially the same as placing it entirely under the prime minister's control.

This kind of thing happened in all sorts of areas. There was a significant decline in autonomy in educational governance, a field dear to all of us, with governors and mayors making appearances at local levels and the Prime Minister's Office inserting itself at the national level. The issues around the Japan Science Council seem to me like a perfect and timely example of this loss of autonomy. Problems related to the COVID-19 response by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) also made many aware that, left to act autonomously, things will go wrong. People will no longer accept talk of specific policy areas and administrative fields unless they can be persuaded as to clear links to the bigger picture.

Takenaka: Thank you. Professor Sunahara, you said Japan sped ahead without unified principles. Can you tell us a little more about why that was the case?

Sunahara: I completely agree with Professor Machidori's comments, and I also see a need to consider the power of traditional norms and habits, which I raised earlier.

One thing the last 30 years has shown us is the pervasiveness of so-called "lifetime employment." Put simply, up to the late 1980s, we saw the completion of the Japanese style of management with lifetime employment and the seniority system. The reforms crafted by what Professor Machidori refers to as the "modernist right wing" are based on strong assumptions of individual autonomy. The modernist right wing image is of someone who makes their own choices, who will switch jobs if they are not happy, and who will not work several hours of unpaid overtime a day—working for one's own happiness rather than clinging to an organization. Perhaps reform advocates were thinking that autonomous individuals were becoming the dominant type in society, and the reform would endorse such changes.

However, what the past 30 years have shown anew is that norms and habits such as lifetime employment have incredibly strong sticking power. When I was invited to this discussion, I was asked about the distinguishing feature of Japan's

government system and answered that its a low level of corruption was noteworthy. It is rather questionable whether that is based on morals alone, and I believe more a case of the extremely high cost of engaging in corruption because the benefits of lifetime employment are so great. For example, even if you look at corruption cases in local governments, often the cases involve people who are non-regular employees or people who quit their jobs after a relatively short time. A long-term employee would be extremely fearful about losing their all-important job were they to engage in corruption of some kind, and that serves as an enormous restraint.

The idea behind the political reforms of 30 years ago was that they could change reality, and people imagined an incredibly bright future where even norms and habits like lifetime employment would change. What followed was economic stagnation, and rather than the system serving to change reality, it was reality that brought about a wide range of changes. To put it another way, I take that as signifying that nothing else will change unless the reality of circumstances changes first. Professor Hikotani spoke earlier about the presence of JSDF personnel. Even if there was conflict or tension over that kind of thing at first, either complicitly or forcibly, it was accepted as the new reality. Then the new reality leads the system to change. If the reality does not change, in the end, the system will not change. This is particularly problematic when it comes to the area of digitalization.

"Digitalization" covers extremely important areas including business reforms. For example, it includes such topics as how to manage documents, what should be disclosed, and what should be kept confidential. As I am sure you will recall, such substantial topics were not seriously discussed in 2013 when the Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets became law. The explanation then, which cannot be described as logical, was something along the lines of "because these items are currently kept confidential, we will keep these items confidential." Ultimately, the current digitalization effort is not transforming reality; it is more a case of somehow making reality digital. I personally think that going paperless is an excellent idea, but their concept of digitalization is simply going paperless without changing any of the actual business processes.

This style of digitalization has been going on for the past decade. I know there is a lot of effort being expended, but those engaged come from backgrounds in central government ministries, so their approach is about digitalizing existing tasks little by little; they simply are not able to think comprehensively about how best to reform document management and work volume. Consequently, extremely inefficient components are being preserved in the process of digitalization. I think this is the underlying factor in why no one has any clear idea about what the new Digital Agency should be doing. For example, the use of personal information by emerging companies like the big four of GAFA (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon), is a major issue. Even though the government has been warned that it should be concerned about how corporations are gathering personal data and the extent to which they should be using that information, the kinds of things the Digital Agency is being tasked with include the in-house production of information systems and incorporating slight digital advancements to current systems. It is the manifestation either of reality or of old norms and habits being too strong. And recently I have been thinking about how that is perhaps the product of an entrenched working style built on lifetime employment.

Takenaka: So you are saying that because there is lifetime employment, that results in reforms that prioritize the current reality? And because the people still in these organizations are those who have been working there for a long time, reforms will only ever be an extension of the status quo?

Sunahara: Of course, there are many younger people who can take their skills and find new work, and that is especially the case in the digital world. But for most people, changing jobs does not necessarily mean better pay. Particularly in the case of longer-term public servants, the risk in changing jobs is very high, and once you have broken into that world as a public servant, there is very little incentive to leave it behind. I think having to continue under those conditions creates enormous problems.

Takenaka: Thank you very much. I will turn now to Professor Hikotani who has been teaching in America for a long time. In America, the systems are consistent from top to bottom, correct? Whereas in Japan, at the upper levels we have a parliamentary cabinet system, and at the lower levels it operates like a presidential system. Now, citizens complain, "The prime minister must decide, or no one can," but then when moves are made to centralize power, they complain, saying, "Decentralization is at the very foundation of democracy." This is the issue raised by Professor Sunahara, but why are the opinions about Japan's system so disparate and why do we not see people calling for a unifying principle?

Hikotani: Rather than having a unifying principle from top to bottom, and this is going to sound somewhat contradictory, in America we see unifying principles in areas where there is no intentional consolidation between central and state governments. There are both strengths and weaknesses in that. I was fascinated by how COVID-19 revealed those strengths and weaknesses almost like a case study. In America, there is a certain level of shared understanding about what is decided at the federal or state level. Whereas in Japan, there is pushing back and forth and frustration about why no one is making a decision without knowing the precise limits of responsibility of the central and local governments in various situations. That game of push and shove in America occurs within the context of an understanding of the rules.

Takenaka: Japan talks about the importance of decentralization, but in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, all the criticism about preparing hospital beds and questions about a lack of testing have been directed at Prime Minister Suga. Despite authority being almost entirely in the hands of the prefectures, very little criticism was laid on Tokyo's Governor Koike. Of course, Japan's health center system is complicated. But I get the sense that there is actually not a great deal of consensus among Japanese citizens. Professor Hikotani, you were living in America during the COVID-19 pandemic. Was there consensus among New York State residents around an expectation and understanding that their actions be determined under the state governor's authority?

Hikotani: What I found to be unique about the COVID-19 situation was that Donald Trump was the president at the time. Here was someone who would suddenly come out with statements like "you might get better if you drink bleach," so there was total divergence in the message coming from the federal government level and the presidential level. Had the president been a different person, I think the disparate messages from the central and local governments would have suggested systemic issues. Of course, at the federal level, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), Dr. Fauci, was informing the public, and vaccine development was kickstarted at the federal level, but there were very few opportunities in daily life to get a sense of the federal government's message.

For better or worse, responses in America differ immensely by state. When infection was spreading very fast, for comparison I watched the governors' press conferences for the states of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut on television every day. And even though these states share borders, their measures and what the governors communicated were different. I had no way of judging at the time whose response was the right one, but it was clear that each state governor was doing the best they could. The fact that the virus can easily cross state borders made implementing state-based countermeasures challenging. There were even efforts to prevent the influx of COVID-19 by monitoring the license plates of cars crossing borders, but there are limits to that approach. In hindsight, there are many areas where it would have been better if the federal government had acted from the outset, but the very personal element of Mr. Trump as president had a huge impact, perhaps making it hard to frame the issues in terms of state-federal relations. Further, partisan differences became even more striking once vaccinations began. The fact that these differences surfaced as disparate state responses is related to the extensive authority of the states, but also to the issue of partisanship itself, so it is difficult to say whether the cause was the system or partisanship.

Decentralization as Seen in the COVID-19 Response

Takenaka: Thank you. Next, I would like to turn our discussions to the topic of decentralization and COVID-19. Earlier, Professor Machidori said it served as a verification, a kind of cross-check. Counter to the reforms for further amalgamation at the very center of the central government level, there were simultaneous moves to decentralize and abolish agency-delegated functions (*kikan inin jimu*).* Why did it go in this direction?

Machidori: The reason for the divergent courses is relatively clear. The perception among stakeholders was that the pre-1980s style went too far with centralization. There were many who had been asserting for a long time that the government should decentralize because centralization had gone too far. I believe that the argument for decentralization that they had been mulling over merged with discussions of the benefits of decentralization based on the assumption, as Professor Sunahara raised, of the emergence of autonomous individuals.

To put it a bit simplistically, it assumes that even though the systems may be different in Japan, society, customs, and practices are fairly homogeneous. In America, there is the idea that because there is a great deal of variation among communities and individuals' habits, there should be a degree of uniformity in the systems. Japan's situation is the opposite. The thinking in Japan is that everyone is basically on the same page, so things are bound to work out even with diverse systems. The successful formation of a nation-state from the Meiji era on and the realization that Japan has strictly limited resources are the likely explanations for these homogeneous views. Irrespective of where authority and resources reside, this common thinking has essentially enabled Japan to operate until now by pooling resources and working together. It is similar to the open plan office theory (*obeya-shugi*) of administrative and corporate organizations.

What the COVID-19 response showed was that there has been considerable decay over the past three decades in the assumption that everyone holds the same ideas. Professor Sunahara mentioned the tenacity of old ideas because of systems like lifetime employment, and I completely agree, but I think we are seeing even that system crumbling now. There is more diversity in ideas between rural and urban people and between elderly and young people. This means that discrepancies in the systems, which became more pronounced with the reforms of the 1990s, have become increasingly apparent. My point about the COVID-19 response serving as a cross-check was meant in the sense that it showed how in the past you could get things done because individuals walked in step on nonsystemic issues, but that is becoming increasingly difficult because of greater diversity in the way people think. That being the case, we need to acknowledge the fact that the systems are not streamlined and that there was a disconnect in the reforms.

By way of a slight supplement to Professor Hikotani's comments just before, while there may normally be a lot of diversity in America, when everyone works toward the same idea, what functions is the element of uniformity in system principles, similar to centralized planning. I think it goes some way to explaining why, in the case of COVID-19, the mechanisms for vaccination could be created so quickly. Conversely, that all collapses once you think of everyone as different, as we saw in the large numbers of people choosing not to vaccinate, putting an immediate stop to that process in some areas. That is a very simplistic explanation, but these are the things I see when I compare Japan and America.

Takenaka: Professor Sunahara, can you please share your assessment of the decentralization reforms? I believe you are also a participant in the Asia Pacific Initiative (API)'s Independent Investigation Commission on the Japanese Government's Response to COVID-19. I felt that confusion was born on various fronts from the fact the central government launched its COVID-19 response even though it did not have sufficient authority to do so. I think it may have unfolded very differently had people in the prefectures been prepared to take it on themselves and to carefully monitor the governors' actions, but the citizens of Japan turned their attention to the

*Under the agency-delegated system, which was in place up until 2000, local governments were expected to implement functions delegated to them by the central government agencies. This facilitated the country's postwar economic policies, but eventually eroded local autonomy. —Trans

national government, paying no attention to what was happening closer to home in their own prefectures. What do you think?

Sunahara: Local governments are of course working very hard to address COVID-19. Nonetheless, the national government says it cannot take effective action because the local governments do not cooperate. On the other hand, local governments believe the national government can do so much more. This situation makes it very difficult to evaluate the response of the whole government.

Similar to what Professor Machidori was just saying, I think there was an expectation that decentralization would place more emphasis on smaller units. If I argue this in the context of the modernist right wing political reforms, crucial to decentralization would be the formation of units responsible for specific functions within each local government. A health unit for health issues, a water unit for water services. It was very optimistic, but I believe that was the vision of the modernist right wing. However, when we look at what occurred through the process of the decentralization reforms, there has been virtually no functional decentralization of this type. Central authority decentralizes a particular function to a department, allowing the managers to make decisions as experts using their own authority and resources. This is how decentralization works in a post–new public management (NPM) world. The key public figures are the managers of each division rather than the governor. They need to be people with professional skills who can manage the division's tasks. What we see instead, and this relates to my earlier point on lifetime employment, was an almost total failure to foster loyalty to the profession or to the skills in the individual units. People identify not with their profession but with the broader local government organization. For example, public health center staff are working extremely hard, but instead of their loyalty being directed at their healthcare work, it is primarily linked toward the city or ward that employs them.

And if I may make one more point, it is that we are seeing a centralization of power in the governor's or mayor's offices in local governments. Some are behaving like miniature central governments and strengthening those offices to help the local leader achieve their goals. Early in the 2000s, some local governments tried to promote decentralization within their organization, but it is hard to find progress on decentralizing power to each level and operational department. This can of course be explained by traditional norms and habits such as lifetime employment and commitment to the organization itself, but also by the structure of Japan's local government bodies, the combination of the presidential-style executive system and the single non-transferrable voting (SNTV) electoral system. This combination provides the governors and mayors with unifying power that local assembly members do not have, and so those members have no option but to work with the governor or mayor. As a result, a considerable amount of power is concentrated in the hands of the governor and mayor.

Furthermore, cooperation and coordination between local governments is very tricky. Assembly members tend to have such specific interests that it is difficult for them to come together under the party banner and work across regions. And leaders asserting their personal achievements are reluctant to rely on other leaders. This tendency hinders consultation between departments—for example, between the waterworks experts in neighboring towns—and reduces efforts to build solidarity. That is an aspect of decentralization that has not gone well. The governors and mayors who put themselves out there in the COVID-19 response appeared very strong, sometimes arbitrarily utilizing voices of regional health experts. I believe the reason regional

experts do not function well at this time relates to the lack of change in government structures at the local level, as Professor Machidori raised, which has only served to fortify existing norms and habits.

Takenaka: Does that mean that decentralization is becoming more extreme? With more powerful governors, do the prefectures have growing cohesive power as a force to rival the central government?

Sunahara: Correct. In fact, the conflict between governors and the central government was the focus of my research for the API report, titled, *The Independent Investigation Commission on the Japanese Government's Response to COVID-19: Report on Best Practices and Lessons Learned*. It was particularly important that the Tokyo gubernatorial election was taking place at that time, and in Osaka there was a referendum. I wrote in the API report about how the two cities became rivals, setting off a bidding war on who could impose stronger measures, like one city had called for a lockdown, so we had to implement stronger measures. That place said they reopened economic activity, so we should start that tomorrow. This all came about because governors and mayors viewed the central government and other local governments as rivals. I think there is a perception that public support can be gained by showing a strong face to the central government, which also serves as an advantage in competition with other municipalities.

Takenaka: I suppose that is what happens with a direct election system. Professor Hikotani, what are your views on the centralization of power, the disparities among the regions, as well as the power of governors and their ability to compete?

Hikotani: My viewpoint is a little different. During one of my lectures in the United States on the mechanisms of Japan's local government, one issue raised was why there are even 47 different units (prefectures) anyway. The students wondered if the units were too small to expect decentralization to progress. I explained to them that there was a proposal in the past for integrating the prefectures into a smaller number of states (*doshu*).

Takenaka: That is absolutely right, there was talk of that, but there have not been any reforms to the system of 47 prefectures. This relates to Professor Sunahara's point that reforms are implemented within the context of the current reality. They played around with the prefectures considerably after the formation of the Meiji government, but by around 1887, they were largely fixed on the present regional lines. The gist of Article 3, section 1 of the Local Autonomy Law enacted in 1947 was to preserve the current prefectural system, and there are no moves to change it.

Sunahara: My current research looks at these matters, and the idea of resolving issues by making the units larger has become outdated in advanced democracies, and particularly at the city/town/village level. Integration into regional governments, as mentioned by Professor Hikotani, is within the realm of possibility and has indeed been introduced in countries such as France and Italy. But what we see in many cases at the metropolitan or municipal level is a focus on collaboration among local governments. They sometimes create an agency to take on specific responsibilities, but rarely fully merge. For example, in the case of general water supply work or transportation work, sometimes they create companies, or they establish what we call in Japan "special district authority" (*ichibu jimu kumiai*). But there has been little advancement in the formation of such units in Japan. There is a concept called the "full set principle" mentality in which each local government must do everything within its own jurisdiction. This way of thinking is very strong in Japan, making it difficult for local governments to work together.

When we look at the nature of coordination overseas, there can be political party linkages, and we can find solutions by bringing people together with the relevant job-related expertise, as discussed earlier. If the issue is water supply, you gather professional people who work in that field. In contrast, municipal mergers are a conventional way of resolving coordination issues in Japan, but further mergers are unrealistic after the Great Heisei Consolidation in the 2000s. There is quite a lot of talk on driving economic development from

the level of larger regional blocs under systems like the *doshu* (regional governments) concept raised by Professor Hikotani, but that is no easy task in the current context.

Political Party and Electoral System Reforms

Takenaka: Thank you. Next, I would like to discuss the political party system. Professor Machidori has been talking about how centralization has consolidated the power of the prime minister, who is kept in check by the opposition. I believe that was the assumption of many people involved in designing the political reforms. The reality, however, is very different. From 2003, when the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and the Liberal Party merged, until 2014, when the Democratic Party of Japan began to fall apart, I believe we had a two-party system. Now we are in 2021, so if we look at the situation from 1994 up to today, the opposition has been disorganized for a majority of that time. Professor Sunahara, I know you have published a book on these matters, *Bunretsu to togo no Nihon seiji (*Party system institutionalization in Japan: Between fragmentation and integration*)*, so please share your thoughts on why it turned out this way. Was this outcome foreseeable when the proportional voting system was adopted in the House of Representatives?

Sunahara: Of course that is not the only factor, but I would say a totally different situation would have emerged if a different electoral system had been adopted, for example, the mixed-member proportional system. However, back in the early 1990s, I do not think anyone could have predicted the result we have now from the current mixed-member majoritarian system. The book *Presidents and Assemblies: Constitutional Design and Electoral Dynamics* by Carey and Shugart had just been released. It basically only analyzed the Lower House electoral system, and the mixed system had only just been implemented. Debate on contamination of the mixed system emerged around the year 2000 (Contamination effect: an effect, in a mixed election system, where behaviors in one electoral system affect electoral behavior and outcomes in the other system), but back in the 1990s, the feeling was that the mixed system would take the best of both worlds, majoritarian and proportional. The arguments were, I think, very straightforward. In a majoritarian world with only single-seat constituencies, one party becomes too powerful, but we can mitigate that with the implementation of proportional representation, even if in a limited fashion. I do not believe even researchers anticipated major issues with it. There was talk of changing the voting system for local elections too, but they were left unchanged based on an overly optimistic view that all the hard work and the creation of the newly established opposition, the New Frontier Party, meant change would naturally occur. From the present perspective, the lack of consistent reform has resulted in a very poor combination of new and old institutions.

With the LDP as the dominant player, the electoral system is seemingly making the opposition weaker, but on the question of whether only the LDP stands to gain from the system, I am not so sure. If you look at Osaka, it is a one-party dominant system led by the Osaka Ishin no Kai, and the LDP local branch in Osaka Prefecture keeps losing ground, unable to get a win. It seems to be a bad combination whereby assembly members are elected through the SNTV system and the executive office is chosen by the majoritarian votes. For example, Afghanistan also adopts this combined presidential system and SNTV. I think because it is a multiethnic nation, Afghanistan had to adopt a low barrier to entry system like SNTV. However, looking at Japan's example, it is hard to see how they can achieve integration among ethnic groups.

I do not think the poor combination we see today was even considered at the time, and I do not think it is really fair to criticize that aspect. But I woud say now there needs to be more thorough debate on these issues. Who should argue for further reforms? Of course, those who stand to lose through the reforms are not going to step forward. I do not know how intentional it is on the part of the LDP administration, but maintaining the current combination is in many ways the most rational path

for the LDP. For that reason, I think the argument is emerging about reorganizing LDP single-party rule, as I mentioned at the beginning.

Takenaka: This issue you point to, is it a mismatch of electoral systems? In other words, is the idea that it is fine to use the single-seat constituency and proportional representation systems for the House of Representatives at the national level, but it creates a mismatch in relation to local electoral systems? Would you mind speaking on this issue in a little more detail?

Sunahara: In my book, *Party System Institutionalization in Japan,* I paid particular attention to the impact of local elections on political party competition. My analysis was premised on the fact that the Mixed-Member Majoritarian system for the Lower House is making the proportional section smaller, so the electoral system is almost identical to a majority voting system. It would be preferable in that case for the opposition to have a somewhat substantial local base, but what we see is that the opposition is extremely weak in local elections. The LDP has held about half the seats in prefectural assemblies for a long time, and a great number of seats at the municipal level are occupied by conservative candidates who run as independents but have ties to LDP assembly members.

In considering why this imbalance has occurred at the local level, I have pointed to the complete lack of reforms to local electoral systems and the persistence of SNTV as a key factor.

Under that current electoral system, the threshold for gaining a seat is set very low. It strengthens the position of conservative members, who tend to provide personalized service to their constituents. Opposition candidates standing on a platform of policy programs, especially related to universalistic policies, have trouble garnering votes. This is because supporting a policy program is different than supporting an individual member. Votes are split between many candidates who are running on the same platform, making it extremely difficult for coordination among candidates. It is very hard for the opposition parties to build a local base because they lacks the personal support for each candidate, which allows the LDP to create a base for national politics at the local level. The basic point I want to make here is that this kind of inequality in the current political party system forces the opposition into extremely unfair contests.

Takenaka: Professor Machidori, what are your thoughts on the points raised by Professor Sunahara? Also, please tell us about your views on the lack of coordination among opposition parties.

Machidori: Regarding the logic behind the system, I find Professor Sunahara's explanation very reasonable.

However, when looking at the way in which political parties are divided, we need to consider both the system and the issues. The issues are very closely linked with the question of the support base. We see almost no continuity in terms of the relationships between political parties in Japan, and particularly, as you mentioned before, Professor Takenaka, in terms of having competition between two major parties in Japan. I think we can calculate the start as the emergence of the New Frontier Party, so say the end of 1994, which means 20 years at the longest or just 10 years on the shorter end.

In any case, the reason that disappeared is not only because of the logic behind the system; the logic behind the issues also comes into play. Frankly speaking, the opposition—the second party—dug up some old issues in the security legislation debate and used that as a way to appeal to supporters of the former Socialist Party on foreign relations and security issues. Those supporters are not very responsive to economic issues. They are the elderly who reaped the benefits of rapid economic growth in the postwar period and the period of stable growth, and I hate to say it, but many of them have plenty of money and enjoy a steady living. This is the generation that gained the full benefits of the lifetime employment system, precisely as Professor Sunahara said. They have little interest in economic issues but are very sensitive to issues of security and diplomacy. As Japan's society ages, their presence grows.

That is precisely where the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) found their so-called "safe haven." I think they realized that going down

that path would allow them to remain as opposition but still gain one-third of the seats. We talked earlier about how there is no other option but to have a pseudo "regime change" within the LDP, but I wonder if even the opposition thinks that would be best. It is the easiest option.

But when you get to a situation like that, many things get reversed. There are multiplier effects from things like the differences in political systems at the local and national levels, the differences in the electoral systems for the Upper and Lower Houses, and the contamination effect produced by the combined electoral system for the Lower House, and that has weakened the two-party political rivalry, locking in the relationship between the governing and opposition parties. If we flip that around, then if you just give up on the idea of taking power, you are promised that "safe haven" that had previously been guaranteed.

In typical circumstances, a party must appeal to constituents on the topic of economics to gain control of the government, but the center-left is really struggling on economic matters right now. Perhaps the singular positive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been at least a temporary postponement of fiscal constraints. Simply put, there is potential for this to raise the issue once more of the best way to redistribute finances, which could help resurrect the center-left. In the recent German election, the Social Democratic Party became the leading party once more after a long time. This was likely the manifestation of a return to the question of distribution of resources to some degree. And in that respect, I believe there could be change once again to the composition we have seen over the past decade in Japan. However, one very serious issue for the opposition is its total lack of awareness of that possibility.

In the pursuit of power, the opposition is now trying to create a left-wing coalition with rediscovered supporters and the citizen groups they belong to, focusing on criticisms of security legislation and other issues of mutual concern. However, I do not believe this to be the appropriate tactic. It is like desperately trying to solve one or two sides of a Rubik's cube while giving up on the idea of ever solving all six. You cannot solve all six sides unless you disrupt the first one, but what they are doing is trying to solve all six while fiercely guarding that completed side. I really feel that is impossible.

Takenaka: Listening to you speak, Professor Machidori, makes me think of the rapid coming together of the Communist (JCP) and Socialist (JSP) Parties, and how we could perhaps interpret current moves as an effort to survive by sharing that safe haven.

Machidori: Setting aside whether that is what they are aiming for, in reality that is what is happening. If nothing is done, the JCP will continue to put forward candidates, so getting them to stop that may be the first step in the CDP strategy. However, because the JCP has a very systematic worldview on which their position on individual issues is based, the moment they perceive a partner's concessions to be tactical and that their worldviews are in fact incompatible, they will resume fielding their own candidates. It will be impossible to get the JCP to stop long-term without a considerable commitment to the worldview they advocate. The Komeito Party of course has its own worldview, but they are able to separate that from their judgment on individual policies. The LDP has succeeded in that regard, but that means that they are negotiating at the micro level on every single policy. That probably would not work with the JCP. I do not think they would abandon the territory they have been battling for after just one or two elections.

Takenaka: Thank you. In the lead-up to today, we heard from Professor Hikotani about the complicated electoral system and how that ties in to constituents' interest in politics. Would you mind talking about that further? In addition, would you share with us your thoughts on whether the current opposition is seriously considering a regime change and how that connects to the situation known as "Abe domination" that we have had for the past 10 years?

Hikotani: It was incredibly unfortunate that the security-related structural reforms were conducted just as the opposition found its safe haven

by turning back to security policy, as mentioned by Professor Machidori. When the new systems were devised, the LDP administration paid very little thought to the possibility of being on the opposition side again, and likewise, the opposition was not really considering that it might assume power. That the designs were instituted when the nature of the rivalry between the ruling and opposition parties had largely regressed to its original state was very poor timing.

With regard to the complicated electoral system and how that relates to constituents' interest in politics, a Pew Research Center survey shows that democracy is a given in the eyes of the Japanese but that there is surprisingly a lot of dissatisfaction with the system. Japanese people's level of satisfaction with democracy is unexpectedly not very high. Also, there is high tolerance for the idea of leaving matters in the hands of experts. Further, on the question of whether voters feel their vote has an impact on policy, the measure of "a sense of political efficacy," Japan ranked last among the 32 countries where the survey was conducted. Japan was the only country where more people answered "No" than "Yes," with 55 percent of respondents saying "No." Why do people feel their vote is insignificant even though they view democracy as the reasonable course? I think one reason is the complexity of the electoral system.

To my American students, the complicated electoral system looks like a plot by the LDP. Elections allow us to choose representatives, but also confer the right to not choose someone, so some of my students found it hard to swallow the concept of three people being voted in from the same electoral district.

Takenaka: Security policy became an issue, then we saw the system reforms, and the agenda was set on the NSC and the right to collective defense—this all happened right at the time when the opposition was floundering and searching for a way to survive, right?

Hikotani: Yes, it was often said that the security legislation would make Japan a country that can go to war, and while that may be true in some respects, if that happens, it makes the decisions around matters of procedure extremely important. Of course, procedural issues were part of the debate, but there was a lack of awareness on both sides of what would happen should power change hands. No doubt there were people in the opposition at the time who were aware of the related risks and issues, and such matters are included as supplementary items in the text of the legislation, but I believe there should have been a greater level of concern about the overall process, and especially the role of the Diet.

Takenaka: By process, do you mean that there should have been firmer decisions about inserting the Diet more into decisions on the dispatch of JSDF personnel overseas?

Hikotani: Yes. Authorization of the circumstances, be it an armed attack, a threat to national existence, or some other situation of significant impact is a huge step. Those categories were established in the Legislation for Peace and Security on the basis of existing laws, and I do not think there is sufficient understanding of the role of the Diet and the timing of its involvement in authorization of each of those circumstances, or even what kinds of events correspond to each of those categories. Under a parliamentary cabinet system, there is always that element of the Diet serving as a rubber stamp for the ruling party, but there is scope for objection even within the LDP. Some people say one possible resolution is to consolidate the situational categories, while others suggest reconsidering the role of the House of Councillors.

The extent of parliamentary involvement was a topic of considerable debate in the UK when it reflected on the Iraq War. And in America, there have been issues around deployment of troops since 2001, because of the failure to enact new laws or revise the existing ones regarding the authority to declare war.

I get the feeling that you, Professor Takenaka, find it problematic that despite the mechanisms being created for action, the House of Councillors can easily block it, thereby stifling action.

Takenaka: Yes, but rather than finding it problem-

atic, I am of the understanding that it just turned out that way. I have been saying, “Isn't that just one way to curb power?” for which I get into trouble with Professor Machidori who says, “One minute you're all for expanding the prime minister's power, next for constraining that power—what's up with that?”

In fact, the House of Councillors has a high degree of independence, and I get the sense that a great many things must be decided by law in Japan. I think we should create a research project just to investigate what is considered to be a legal matter. There is no other nation in the world that must create so many laws just to mobilize its troops. In addition to that, one issue that does not garner much attention is the fact that the power of the House of Councillors has an extremely inhibitory effect. There are between 20 and 30 bills tabled each year in the UK compared to around 80 in Japan. It is not so much the number that is important but the fact that Japan requires so many matters to be decided through laws. For example, administrative organizations in the UK can be determined by government ordinance, unlike in Japan, which has the added burden of having to consider the law for the establishment of each ministry. Why is that? These are the kinds of issues I think we should be researching.

How about political parties? How much distance is there between citizens and political parties? In America, it is the Democrats or Republicans; in the UK, you support either the Conservatives or Labor. How great is the distance between the parties and citizens in Japan, by comparison?

Machidori: From a global perspective, I do not think there is an incredibly large gap in terms of political party support in Japan.

I do not think the parties lack a presence in the eyes of Japanese constituents, but the degree varies greatly if seen from the perspective of those who cast their votes at elections based on the political party as compared to those who participate regularly in party activities by becoming party members and making donations. Very few people do more than simply vote. Despite there being tremendous support for the system of democracy, the reality is that most people do nothing more than just vote.

The political party system, society's relationship with the parties, and how established they become all assume that the parties are stable and not continually changing. It is impossible to permeate the minds of constituents when new political parties are constantly emerging. Related to the earlier point about the opposition, most of the current opposition parties at the moment reorganize or change their names before they have become fully entrenched with constituents, leaving the LDP and JCP to appear the most stable.

If you ask whether that is good for Japanese politics, or a good lesson in accordance with today's theme, I would say that is questionable. Perhaps the biggest lesson is not changing the party's name. Practically speaking, a party that does not continuously use the same name cannot easily gain traction with constituents nor will it get people coming out to do more than just vote for it. That voters come out in response to specific issues shows they are not sympathetic to the parties themselves. The fact that many constituents come out to vote on diplomacy and security issues but not on economic policy shows, I believe, that they do not support all the policies of that political party.

Takenaka: Professor Sunahara, why are the parties constantly changing their names?

Sunahara: Perhaps because they feel that changing their name gives them a fresh start. To achieve a two-party system with majoritarian voting, players need as much support on their side as they can get. What happens is that the opposition starts to say things that only certain types of supporter will accept. This is similar to what we see in the pre-reform electoral system, whereby the opposition parties found their raison d'être in taking a position opposite to the government party. The problem lies in the fact that the government party has power precisely because it gained a certain degree of public support, so if their actions and those of bureaucrats were truly off the mark, there would be major trouble. However, the opposition tends to perceive that the administration is always taking the wrong path and builds their platforms on that premise, meaning much of the content is

somewhat excessive for the general public. They have no trouble putting forward frankly unrealistic ideas, such as abolishing consumption tax or eliminating income tax on incomes under ¥10 million per year. This happens because they take the perspective that everything the current administration is doing is wrong. It amounts to a declaration that they take no responsibility for politics at present, nor do they intend to. A group of supporters love those kinds of assertions—those are the people that the opposition party targets with their claims.

I agree completely with what Professor Hikotani mentioned earlier, and Professor Masahiko Tatebayashi made some important points related to this issue in his book, *Seito seiji no seido bunseki—maruchi reberu no seiji kyoso ni okeru seito shoshiki* (Comparative institutional analysis of multi-level party politics in Japan). The combination of the current electoral systems makes voters confused about the meaning of their single vote. In the single-seat constituencies at the national level, voters are being asked to choose between the government

party and the opposition camp for the House of Representatives. For the House of Councillors elections, there are some single-seat constituencies with only an LDP candidate, multiple LDP candidates for some multi-seat constituencies, and in Tokyo, we even see an electoral district with around 30 candidates. In gubernatorial races, we often see the LDP and CDP form a coalition against the JCP; in prefectural and municipal assemblies, there are many candidates running as independents but who come across as LDP, and a whole lineup of candidates for whom voters really have no idea where their party affiliations lie. Voters can no longer envision whatsoever the political consequences of the vote they cast. Being told to go and vote without knowing the significance of my ballot? If I was not doing this kind of work, research on politics, I do not think I would be able to vote. I still find it so strange that, despite all this, so many people still go to vote.

The complexity of the combination of electoral systems is a consequence of the lack of a common understanding of how one's own individual vote works. Unfortunately, Japan's politicians make absolutely no effort to improve people's understanding. Instead, there are countless cases in which politicians take advantage of that lack of understanding and utilize it in opportunistic ways. That is the biggest problem, in my opinion.

Takenaka: If so, Japan is doing the exact opposite of what is laid out in the Gary Cox book, *Making Votes Count*.

Machidori: Local elections have become like those instant lotteries you enter in the local shopping street: the prize is pretty lackluster even if you win, and yet you want to feel that excitement of a possible win. I think voters participate especially in elections for municipal assemblies for that kind of feeling. The system—including the extremely tenuous presence of political parties—demands and expects that sort of sense of participation.

Sunahara: I suspect that if we took a survey asking people, "Who did you vote for in the previous municipal election?" only a tiny number of people would remember. Even after just one year on, it would probably be tough even for political scientists.

Machidori: I cannot answer that either.

Takenaka: It seems many people view elections more as an obligation than a right. From what you are saying, Professor Hikotani, is the low sense of political efficacy a product of too much variation

in electoral systems and extreme confusion around candidates?

Hikotani: The complexity of the electoral system is what makes it difficult to see where your vote goes. In America, when voters register,* they are asked which party they support, so they are expected to have a partisan identity. Of course, not everything can be cleanly split in two, and having to affiliate with one group is not necessarily a good thing. I think it is incredibly difficult in Japan to think about which party will help realize a certain policy and vote on that basis.

The LDP presidential election is taking place today and I am very interested in how voters feel about the idea that if you become a party member you can have a say in that election. For people who typically feel that one vote does not lead to specific outcomes, would they become an LDP member just to be able play that game? I think in this presidential election, each party member's vote is far more decisive than in other elections, and the media's coverage of it as such is also having an influence. Watching the events unfold around this presidential election, I think it would be fascinating to look more into what kind of people the party members are.

Takenaka: That is a very interesting point. Irrespective of whether that was their intention, I think LDP members are of the impression that their one vote is very important, and that fact could serve to amplify the strength of a party. If you think about actually getting to choose the prime minister if you become a party member, even if it is just one vote out of one million it is significant as a direct election, almost like choosing the prime minister by popular vote.

As the party with the most flexible internet strategy in many regards, the LDP is using the internet to garner support from voters in their 20s and 30s, so this may translate into quite a lot of people in those age groups who feel a certain affinity for the LDP.

Lessons from Japan's Democracy

Takenaka: Our next topic is lessons to be learned. When it comes to Japan's government structure and the political party system, I think Japanese people have high expectations to begin with, so I suspect there is quite a strong desire to improve Japan's democracy. I think that explains why we see debate on the myriad electoral systems, people questioning the effectiveness of their vote, and a desire for a stronger opposition party. This has not come up yet today, but in our preparatory meeting there was praise for Japan's government for the low levels of corruption. Are there lessons from Japan's democracy for other advanced democracies, for competitive authoritarian regimes, or for authoritarian states embarking on a process of democratization? Please share your thoughts.

Machidori: There is a common understanding among Japanese people that the ideals and principles of democracy are a good thing. When the Japanese government or politicians declare that they will do something "for freedom, democracy, and human rights around the world," people in Japan often complain, saying, "How laughable it is that Japan looks out at the world and proudly declares it is doing something when that's not even happening in Japan." I can see that to some degree, but overall, democracy is clearly well-established in Japan.

Democracy in Japan today is criticized, for example, for insufficient advocacy and expansion of minority rights. This argument emerges precisely because the rights of the majority are being protected; in countries where that is not the case, such an argument would never arise.

As such, there is unmistakable meaning in the fact that children have been taught "democracy is fundamentally a good thing" throughout elementary and secondary schooling. This is the first lesson.

However, there has been insufficient consideration and education in terms of taking democracy as a set of principles and applying that to the creation of a specific system. My sense is that while there is strong support for the system and reliance on its efficient functioning, we have been weak on the thinking around system design. The approach for so long had been "it will work out in practice" and "we can leave it up to the people on the ground," but then you are just relying on their accumulation of experience and have no idea where the faults are

*In Japan, there is no voter registration; all eligible citizens registered as residents with their local ward office are mailed a voting place entry ticket that enables them to vote. —Trans

or why something is not functioning as expected.

From that perspective, the reforms of the 1990s represented an extremely bold attempt to turn our back on the former approach and tackle this challenge. People started saying, "Let's design it well from the start," and "If there's a problem, let's think about where it stems from and, if necessary, change the design." They attempted to change the whole structure of the debate to no longer cover up the unworkable parts, and adopted the mindset that it is better to know where the problems lie. I do not believe that has come to a complete standstill, but I also do not think that the past 10 years have been great when you look at where the discussions began.

One further lesson is the idea of democracy taking root as a package deal with economic growth and social stability. There is no mistaking that the way in which that package is created is an extremely important factor.

Returning to the discussion of Japan today, I think we are seeing backsliding, as democracy is now packaged with diminished socioeconomic confidence and a deterioration of trust in the government. System design is a necessary and crucial component, but that alone will not solve everything. On the question of where Japan will go from here, the lack of socioeconomic confidence has an enormous negative impact on the political system, so I feel the situation is somewhat grave.

Takenaka: How about the fact that there are no antiestablishment political parties?

Machidori: At this stage, there are basically no antiestablishment parties. There is still strong general public support for democracy, which is why we do not see the emergence of political parties outside the system. But given the loss of socioeconomic confidence, we cannot rule out the possibility of xenophobic parties surfacing. Perhaps it was purely coincidental that we have not seen such parties in the past, or maybe it was because things were going well. But our experience over the past 70-odd years shows that we have made it thus far with basically no parties of that nature.

Takenaka: That is because, regardless of what is said, Japanese people's trust in democracy is solid. I think it is very positive that we are having such serious discussions about whether decentralization is good, and if consolidating the power of the prime minister is beneficial or harmful, all in a bid to improve Japan's democracy. Would you like to speak on this point, Professor Hikotani?

Hikotani: Based on what I heard while teaching in America from students from developing countries or not yet fully established democracies, my strong impression is that the lessons are about Japan's postwar story and how, with relatively no corruption, competent bureaucrats worked to set the country on a trajectory of economic growth. On the other hand, according to students from the elite classes of countries where one political party is dominant, there are also lessons to be learned on how to maintain one-party dominance in the game of democracy. Further, as Professor Takenaka mentioned, the ongoing debates about reforms over the past 30 years can themselves serve as a lesson as well in the sense that they demonstrate the diversity of opinions that exist on the shape democracy should take.

For students from developed countries and places with declining populations, Japan's experience of how to allocate resources in an aging society and how to run the government of a shrinking state may offer a very interesting precedent. We have high voting rates among the elderly but low rates for young people, and limited resources—all issues relevant beyond Japan going forward. I think if there was more interest in how to maintain democracy and the systems for creating policies that reflect future generations, Japan's experience could be a helpful guide for other countries.

Takenaka: Professor Hikotani, which areas do you personally think are good lessons and which do you think are not very helpful?

Hikotani: I was asked to participate in a project on "The 150th Anniversary of Meiji" and had an extremely hard time when I served as a panelist at a public seminar reflecting on Japan's democracy

in the 150 years since the Meiji Restoration. It goes without saying that Japan has not embarked on a continuous exercise of democratization over

150 years. But looking at the positives, Japan is often pointed to by other countries as an example of successful transplantation of democracy into a Confucian, Eastern system. Whether Japanese people are aware of it or not, Japan serves as a good example to rebuff the claims of those who declare "democracy is impossible" on the grounds of cultural differences.

Takenaka: That is true. Japan was the first of the Confucian cultures to democratize. Most look to 1945 and 1946 for that background, but I think we need to let the world know that the traditions go back to the Meiji Constitution and successful management of a parliamentary government, even if that was not a full democracy. Professor Sunahara, what are your thoughts on all of this?

Sunahara: My comment is very similar to the point rasied by Professor Machidori, that Japan should be recognized for having had the capacity to self-reform once. Moreover, it should especially be noted that politicians took initiative for those reforms in a time of peace, not in an extrajudicial manner like the military taking the initiative. One focal point of the reforms was the extent to which corruption could be stamped out, and I believe Japan has had considerable success in achieving this goal. Several issues arose during the Abe administration, but they were of a completely different magnitude than the corruption of the past, so I would say this is one area that should be commended.

However, when it comes to whether that reform capacity can be sustained, that is a tough question. The ability to reform is in itself a difficult thing to start with, but what is greatly required is the capacity to continuously reform. As Professor Hikotani said, I feel Japan's politicians heavily depend on the sense among voters of the importance of democracy. Since successfully reforming once, Japan's politics is coasting along on a system with a certain level of ongoing trust, and the LDP has adapted itself to that. The major problem is that there has been no movement to restore trust in the overall system. Sure, reforms were achieved once, and regular reassessments by scholars and the media reveal various problems in the current system. Nevertheless, it is difficult to provide that feedback into the political sphere. There will likely be lessons that apply to other countries going forward in terms of how Japan revives its reform capacity, or if that is even possible.

When it comes to local elections, I wonder, even with the voters' trust in democracy, how much longer unified local elections can be held legitimately. Due to the lack of candidates, many local assembly members are elected without a race. The declining voter turnout reveals the reality that many people do not feel motivated to cast their votes in a local election. Even if the unified elections can be done twice more, I am wondering whether a third time would really be possible. This goes back to something I said right at the beginning, but does the coming reality shift the system, or will we see reforms attempting to change the reality once more? I believe that is the question that will be asked going forward.

Takenaka: On the corruption issue, this is a theme that students from developing countries are extremely interested in, far more than we appreciate. You could take the view that the politicians did well to institute reforms to stamp out their own corruption. Professor Sunahara hypothesized that the low level of corruption among bureaucrats is thanks to the major penalty one faces in the context of the lifetime employment system. It seems only natural

to us, but for people who do not know about the process that led to it, Professor Sunahara, can you please share your thoughts on how politicians were able to enact regulatory reforms of political funding in which they essentially placed constraints on their own actions? We are very hard on our own democracy, but I think we should recognize just how little political corruption there is compared to the days of the multi-seat constituency system.

Sunahara: I think luck had some part to play. What I learned through interviews with politicians is that the political funds that were often thought to be associated with LDP factions were in fact flowing to individuals in large amounts. I think perhaps the difficulty came in carrying those kinds of political funds over to the next generation. The period from the late 1980s through to the early 1990s coincided with a generational shift as those who had been receiving the funds handed the reins to the next generation. While difficult, politicians might find ways for this generational switch to take place within a faction. However, I think it went through perhaps because the arguments about regulations around political funds and this generational change happened at basically the same time, and because the business sector tried to avoid opaque financial contributions. Funders too increasingly felt it not appropriate to have their wishes met by channeling funds to politicians. There was probably also a feeling that politicians would halt a rival, next-generation politician's funding. I believe that a combination of factors came into play, but it is laudable to a certain extent that the LDP agreed with the decision to change the opaque political funding situation.

Machidori: I believe corruption was rife in the days of the multi-seat constituency system, but rather than the politicians amassing those funds, they put them toward services for their constituents. From a politician's perspective, it is rather bothersome to accumulate lots of money and then have to distribute it. I think one of the reasons for the reforms at the time was that politicians had a sense that it would be better if they could get away without going through that arduous process. Of course, a part of the funds remain in the politicians' pockets, which is why they have been able to lead such affluent lives, but the amounts are small by international standards. There was an enormous amount of money flowing through, but a large portion was directed to constituents through supporter associations and the like.

There is a lot of research on corruption, which I believe Professor Hikotani is well acquainted with, but if the system allows funds to remain in the hands of politicians and other public officials, it is hard to dismantle because those funds are the support funds for those individuals. So perhaps the lesson to be learned is that in systems where the money does not stay in the hands of those officials, there is a possibility for change.

Takenaka: Ichiro Ozawa touched on the issue of political funding a little in his book, *Nihon Kaizo Keikaku* (Blueprint for a New Japan: The Rethinking of a Nation), in which he makes clear that there were incentives to consolidate the funds in the party, and they clearly wanted to weaken the factions. In that sense, the result of this political calculation was that it helped move the country in the direction of wiping out corruption.

Thank you all for the very meaningful discussions today. A lot of thought has been put into these issues, so I wondered if any new points would even emerge, but I do believe that research could look more into these ideas of the timing of security legislation and the opposition finding a "safe haven." I also feel that conducting a survey on the link between election results and a sense of political efficacy could reveal some interesting findings. I know you are all very busy, so I appreciate you sharing your research and contributing to these substantive discussions. Thank you very much.

2nd Panel Participants

Harukata Takenaka [Project Lead/Moderator]

Professor, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS)

Harukata Takenaka is currently a professor at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo, where he specializes in comparative politics and international political economy, with a particular interest in democratization in prewar Japan and changes in the Japanese parliamentary system. His recent publications include *Korona Kiki no Seiji: Abe Seiken vs. Chiji* (Politics of the COVID-19 crisis: The Abe administration vs. governors) (2020) and *Failed Democratization in Prewar Japan: Breakdown of a Hybrid Regime* (2014). Professor Takenaka formerly served in the Ministry of Finance between 1993 and 1995, and later joined the Headquarters for the Reorganization of the Government in 1998. He joined GRIPS in 1999 first as an assistant professor, and then taught as an associate professor until assuming his current position in 2010. He received his BA from the Faculty of Law at the University of Tokyo, and his MA and PhD in Political Science from Stanford University.

Satoshi Machidori

Professor, Kyoto University Graduate School of Law

Satoshi Machidori first joined Kyoto University Graduate School of Law as an associate professor in 2004 and became a professor in 2007. Prior to joining Kyoto University, Professor Machidori served as an associate professor at Osaka University School of Law and as a visiting researcher at the University of California San Diego. His research is focused on humanities and social sciences, and recently he has been working on analyzing political parties and parliamentary relations through the theoretical framework of comparative politics in order to better understand the characteristics of American and Japanese politics. Professor Machidori is a graduate of the Kyoto University Graduate School of Law.

Yosuke Sunahara

Professor, Kobe University Graduate School of Law

Yosuke Sunahara joined the Graduate School of Law at Kobe University as an associate professor in 2017, and became a professor in 2018. He formerly served as an associate professor at the Graduate School of Law and Politics, Osaka University (2013–) and visiting associate professor at University of British Columbia Institute of Asian Research (2016–2018). Professor Sunahara specializes in the study of political institutions, public administration, and public policy and has written on Japan's democracy, including on democracy in Japanese local government. His research interests include housing policy and its consequences, multi-level political institutions and electoral politics, urban boundaries and local governance, population decline, and disaster preparedness. He completed both his undergraduate studies and his doctorate in advanced social and international studies at the University of Tokyo..

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Takako Hikotani is currently a professor at the International Centre, Gakushuin University. Prior to this position, she was assistant professor at the Faculty of Policy Management, Keio University, associate professor at the National Defense Academy of Japan, and the Gerald L. Curtis Associate Professor of Modern Japanese Politics and Foreign Policy at Columbia University. Her recent publications in English include, "The Japanese Diet and Defense Policy-Making," *International Affairs*, 94:1 (July 2018), and "Trump's Gift to Japan: Time for Tokyo to Invest in the Liberal Order," *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2017). Professor Hikotani received her BA from Keio University in 1990, MAs from Keio University and Stanford University, and a PhD in Political Science from Columbia University, where she was a President's Fellow.

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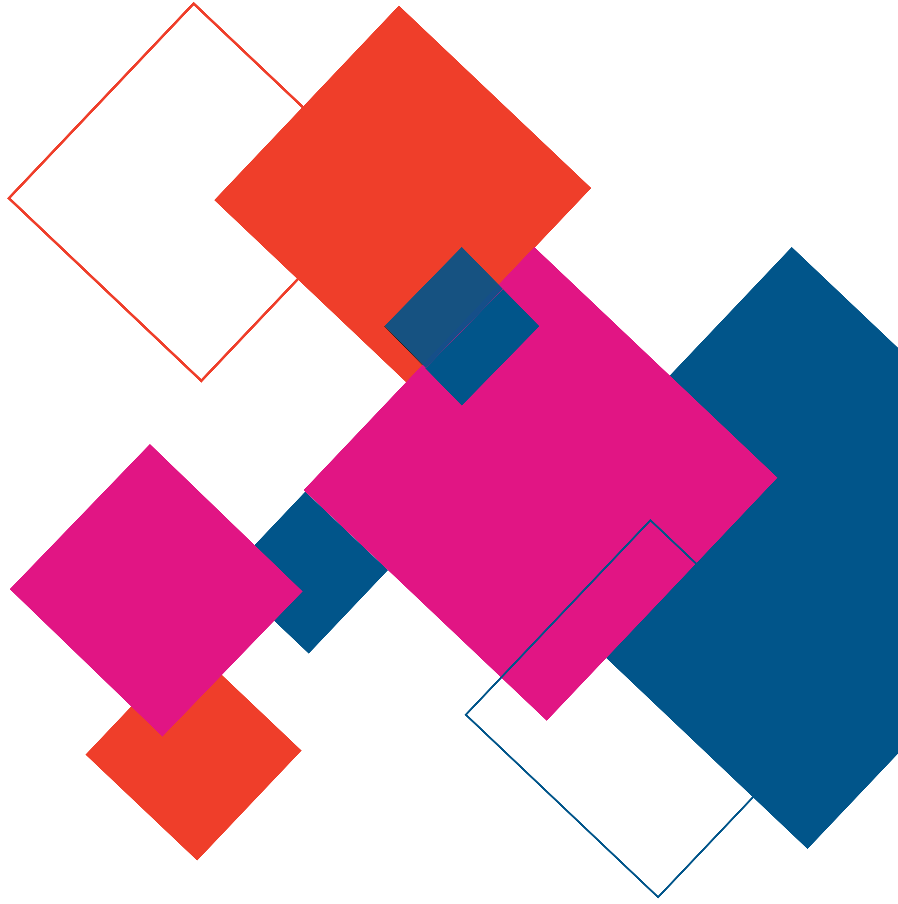

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