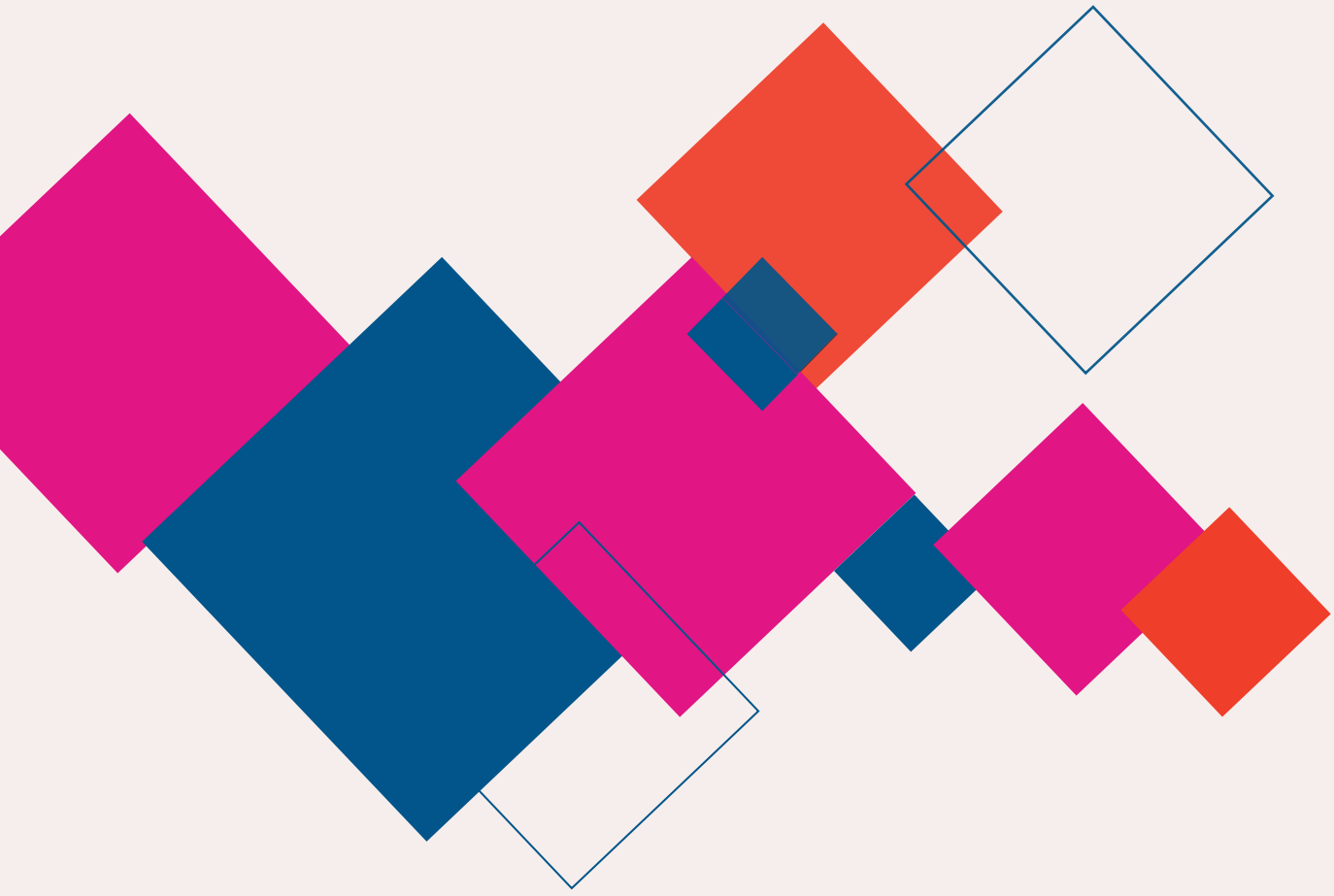
Japan's Democracy: Lessons and Reflections

日本の民主主義の再評価

Concluding Paper

Harukata Takenaka



Japan Center for International Exchange

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In 2021, the Democracy for the Future program of the Japan Center for International Exchange launched a new dialogue intended to create a platform for Japanese scholars, political and opinion leaders, and the general public to reflect on Japan's experience in building a democratic society in the postwar era. The dialogue, "Japan's Democracy: Lessons and Reflections," comprised a series of three discussions held on August 12, September 29, and October 27, 2021. The first was an overall assessment of the state of Japan's democracy, the second dove into Japan's governmental institutions and party politics, and the third focused on Japanese civil society, the media, and diversity.

This final report summarizes the arguments raised and offers a concluding assessment of the current state of democracy in Japan, touching on various issues and areas that may serve as a reference for other countries. The report begins with a summary of the discussions on the overall state of democracy in Japan, examined through the framework of the theory of democratization. The next section examines the enormous transformation that occurred in Japanese democracy in the 1990s and the impact that those changes have had. And the final section addresses the debate on three key issues in Japan's democracy today: political awareness among constituents, the role of the media, and the gender gap.

The State of Japan's Democracy

In the framework of democratization theory, the initial phase of the process is to look at the formation of and transition to democracy. The next step is to consider whether or not that democracy becomes firmly established. And the last step is to focus on whether the quality of that democracy has been enhanced.

During this dialogue, Professor Kensuke Takayasu emphasized the major role that the United States played in the introduction of democratic systems in post–World War II Japan. He explained how the United States first proposed a Constitution of Japan that was "built on the pillars of liberalism, democracy, and the principle of international cooperation," and that this constitution was accepted by Japanese society. There may have been a perception among the prewar ruling class that the constitution was forced on Japan, but Takayasu's sense is that ordinary people, in particular, quickly accepted it.

Professor Naoko Taniguchi, on the other hand, voiced her skepticism on the question of whether ordinary Japanese citizens truly accepted the principles of democracy. While she recognizes that the elite accepted the new democratic order, she has doubts on the extent of ordinary citizens' political awareness in the prewar to immediate postwar period. She believes instead that for ordinary people it was simply a case of seeing that the Empire of Japan had been defeated and thinking that the United States was "the next authority we must obey."

While it was not discussed at length in the three sessions, one factor behind the Japanese people's prompt adoption of the democratic Constitution of Japan after World War II, including ordinary citizens, may be the traditions of parliamentary government and party politics in place since the 1889

establishment of the Meiji Constitution. After the inauguration of the Imperial Diet in 1890, party politics grew mainly along two lines: the Constitutional Liberal Party line and the Constitutional Progressive Party line. One result of this was the establishment of a genuine party cabinet in 1918, which endured until 1932. For most of this period, both the House of Representatives and the cabinet were subject to political party power. The right to vote was limited under the Meiji Constitution, but suffrage was gradually expanded and universal suffrage for men was achieved in 1925. Democratization was thus progressing well in Japan.

The issue in prewar Japanese politics was that under the system of "independence of the right of supreme command" (*tosuiken no dokuritsu*), which vested titular authority over the military in the emperor, politicians were unable to establish civilian control over the military. With growing social unrest as Japan became engulfed in the Great Depression from the late 1920s, the military inserted itself more into politics. After the demise of the party cabinet as a result of the events of May 15, 1932,[1] military authorities exerted strong influence over the political process.

The military lost power after Japan's defeat in World War II. And with the enactment of the Constitution of Japan, institutionally, the armed forces no longer had a basis for influence over domestic politics. The removal of the armed forces as an actor from the political process effectively restored Japan to its previous path of democratization, and it is for this reason that the Japanese people accepted the democratic order with very little resistance. Ordinary citizens were already well acquainted with the traditions of a parliamentary system and elections from before 1945. It is important to recognize that such systems existed for a certain period when considering Japan's model of democratization and the smooth nature of the transition to democracy.

There was agreement among most of the academic participants in these dialogues that democracy is now well established in Japan. Takayasu shared his belief that the Japanese people had accepted this kind of liberal democratic order, while Professor Satoshi Machidori agreed that there is still strong general public support for democracy, adding, "There is common understanding among Japanese people that the ideals and principles of democracy are a good thing." Takayasu described the "institutional basis" for democracy as being well established, referring to electoral systems, the Diet, the justice system, and public services provided by local governments, among others. Machidori noted the absence of antiestablishment political parties as further evidence of strong support for the democratic system. In contrast, however, Taniguchi remains unconvinced that democratic consciousness has actually taken root among the Japanese people.

Why is democracy well established in Japan? The dialogues revealed a number of reasons. For one thing, it is significant that the Japanese education system has taught that "democracy is fundamentally a good thing." But for democracy to achieve broad legitimacy and take root among citizens, it is essential that democratic systems be accompanied by actual results. In that sense, there is no question that a major contributor to the establishment of democracy in Japan was the rapid economic growth in the postwar period that made the entire nation richer. As Professor Kenneth Mori McElwain noted, postwar

[1] An attempted coup d'état was carried out by elements of the Imperial Navy and Army, during which the prime minister was assassinated.

Japan's successful handling of social and structural conflict was a key factor. A related factor was the redistribution of wealth from cities to regions through public works projects. And although welfare for the elderly was given priority, Japan launched universal health coverage in 1960 and developed systems to ensure a standard level of social welfare through medical insurance and pensions. A final element that McElwain raised was the lack of provisions in the constitution regarding government organizations, which he credits for the "flexibility" Japan has had to respond to issues in the political system.

On the question of whether the quality of Japan's democracy has been enhanced since its establishment, two key areas of advancement were identified. The first is the expansion of civil society, which was boosted by the enactment of the NPO Law in 1998. Professor Rieko Kage notes that the enactment of that legislation led the number of NPOs to grow to approximately 50,000 in 2021. The NPO Law contains effective mechanisms that serve as an excellent reference for other countries.

Mr. Toshiki Abe further noted that the increase in civil society organizations after the introduction of the NPO Law was then followed from the mid-2000s by the appearance of social enterprises operating like businesses with service offerings. Abe noted that the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011 served as a major turning point, as Japan saw the emergence of NPOs being contracted to implement projects with budgets over ¥1 billion. Such enterprise-style NPOs are now also trying to have an impact on policy through the system of private member's bills. However, with these policymaking initiatives, he notes, "you can try ten times and maybe succeed once," underlining how critical it is for NPOs to have strong economic foundations. This highlights the importance of enterprise-style organizations, whose economic clout has strengthened to the point that some can now hire former bureaucrats. As to whether that has led to progress in their policymaking capacity, Abe says we are still only just seeing hints of that.

Advancements can be seen in a second dimension of Japan's democracy, namely, the decrease in corruption and graft because of political reforms in the 1990s. Machidori noted that corruption was rife in the days when Japan had a multi-seat constituency system. However, the Political Funds Control Act was revised in 1994 to strengthen regulations surrounding political funds, prompting Sunahara to commend the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to some extent for agreeing with the decision to improve the transparency of the political funding situation. Rather than amassing funds, politicians in the era of the multi-seat system were putting them toward services for their constituents. This was essential because of the competition among fellow LDP candidates. The electoral system reforms that created single-seat constituencies negated the need for that competition. The idea that political funds should be concentrated within the parties gave further impetus to these reforms.

When political funds stay in politicians' pockets, corruption makes it difficult to institute reforms. However, Japan's example serves as a lesson to other countries that it is possible to dismantle political corruption if you create a system where the money does not remain in individual politicians' hands.

Transformation of Japan's Democracy

Independent of the improvements to Japan's democracy, an important consideration in the analysis of Japan's democracy is the implementation of numerous reforms to Japan's system of government from

the 1990s onward. These reforms effected great change in Japan's democracy. The scholar Arend Lijphart explains that there are two types of democracy: the Westminster model and the consensus model. The Westminster model, or majoritarian democracy, is characterized by centralized executive power in a one-party cabinet, a two-party system, and single-seat constituencies. In a consensus model, in contrast, you find coalition cabinets, multiparty systems, and proportional representation.

Prior to the reforms, Japan's democracy resembled the consensus model, but it became more like a Westminster-style democracy after the reforms, in particular because of the Prime Minister's strengthened power. As noted above, the political reforms instituted in 1994 replaced the multi-seat constituency system with a hybrid system of single-seat constituencies and proportional representation. Because ruling party legislators require an official party endorsement, the prime minister, as the head of the ruling party, is able to keep them in check. Further, revisions to the Political Funds Control Act strengthened regulations for political funding, making it harder than before for individual politicians and factions to raise political funds. The result of this change and the simultaneous implementation of a system for political party subsidies was a concentration of funds in the parties.

These two reforms served to strengthen the power of the prime minister within the governing party. They were followed by the reorganization of the central bureaucracy in 2001. Prior to the reorganization, the prime minster had no legal authority to spearhead policymaking. In Japan's parliamentary system of government, it was the ministers who prepared policy measures. However, these new changes handed the prime minister the legal authority to draft policy. The powers of the Cabinet Secretariat—the organization that assists the prime minister—were also enhanced, and a new organization called the Cabinet Office was even formed to assist the prime minister.

After these reforms, the prime minister used the Cabinet Secretariat and Cabinet Office to advance policymaking in areas the administration regarded as most important. The Cabinet Secretariat, in particular, bears great responsibility for the most critical policies. This is evident in the increased number of Secretariat personnel and departments now in charge of policy.

Since those changes were instituted, there have also been ongoing reforms to the organizations governing national security. In 2007, the Defense Agency was promoted to the Ministry of Defense, and the National Security Council was created in 2013.

Many other reforms were made to organizations responsible for Japan's governance from the 1990s onward, including changes toward decentralization, and reforms to the justice system and central bank. What should we make of these diverse reforms? Machidori's comprehensive research on the issues can be found in his book *Seiji Kaikaku Saiko* (Reconsidering political reform), in which he describes three key features of the reforms: their comprehensive nature, inconsistencies in direction, and areas of no change. In other words, the reforms impacted widespread areas, but on the question of whether they contributed to the concentration or dispersion of power overall, there was no unified direction. For example, reforms were made to centralize power in the national government, but an examination of the relationship between the capital and other regions of the country shows how other reforms boosted the autonomy of local governments vis-à-vis the central government, thereby causing a dispersion of power. Moreover, there were areas not subject to reform at all. The National Diet, with its bicameral system,

was left untouched, and no changes were made to the systems and structures of local governments.

What were the conditions that made such sweeping reforms possible? Machidori points to the 1980s and the strength of the postwar socioeconomic situation, which created a sense of optimism that politics could be transformed. The reforms were achieved because this confidence tied into the logic of "liberal modernists" that Japanese society must be more rational and modern. Further, as McElwain emphasized, "One of the most striking aspects of the Japanese constitution is that, while it provides a general framework for government institutions, many of the details are prescribed by law"—a situation that further facilitated the reforms. In other words, implementing a series of reforms would have been far more difficult if details on government structures had been stipulated by the constitution, with its stricter requirements for amendments, rather than by law.

Did the reforms improve Japan's capacity to deal with socioeconomic issues? The greater weight of the prime minister in the political process was accompanied by a decline in the influence of pork-barrel politicians and interest groups. An especially important factor was that it became easier for the prime minister to devise policies in multiple fields. During the TPP negotiations, for example, the administration of Shinzo Abe accepted lower tariffs on other countries' industrial products and agreed to lower tariffs and expand imports of agricultural products. Such bargains came about due to the prime minister's enhanced power and concomitant ability to curb opposition from agriculture and forestry groups and other related interest groups. The Abe administration also promoted the concept of a "free and open Indo-Pacific." At the outset, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was responsible for many of the policies related to this vision, but gradually the Cabinet Secretariat and Cabinet Office came to play key roles, and policies of the Ministry of Defense and Coast Guard Agency also began to conform with the vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific.

However, there were still policy areas in which the government could not respond adequately. This became glaringly apparent in its handling of COVID-19. The central government has virtually no authority to deal with infectious diseases, and so local governments have been the primary actors. In addition, decentralization reforms put the central government and local governments on an equal footing, making coordination difficult for both sides. Because true authority in this case rested with the local governments, both the Abe and Suga administrations struggled to implement measures to expand testing and the like.

Sunahara spoke about the handling of COVID-19 and how the central government and prefectural governors "became rivals, setting off a bidding war on who could impose stronger measures." Machidori considers the COVID-19 crisis as a kind of test of the political reforms, and it revealed just how little coordination there was.

Furthermore, many of the participants in these dialogues agree that the reforms of Japanese politics did not bring about the expected change—i.e., the creation of a two-party system where the administration could change hands between rival parties. During debates among politicians on reforms in the late 1980s and 1990s, some politicians predicted that the reforms would strengthen the prime minister's power, and as expected, the prime minister did gain expanded leadership powers. Politicians, academics, and journalists also expected that the implementation of an electoral system centered on single-seat

constituencies would spur the emergence of a political party to oppose the LDP and that power would change hands between the two parties. Certainly, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which formed in 1996, evolved into a political party strong enough to rival the LDP from 2003 onward, and it came to power in 2009. But the opposition has been divided ever since the LDP regained control in 2012.

During the one-party LDP administrations under the 1955 system, the prime minister wielded little power, and LDP Diet members reined in the authority of the prime minister and cabinet. Although the prime minister's power within the ruling party was strengthened as a result of the political reforms, it also made it challenging to hold the ruling party in check with the possibility of a change in government. Takayasu warns of "an incredibly dangerous situation. They centralized power but did not properly lay the groundwork for the type of competition between political parties that can provide control of that power."

One factor raised by many researchers to explain the divisions in the opposition parties and their failure to mobilize is Japan's unique electoral system.[2] The House of Representatives adopts a combined system with single-seat constituencies and proportional representation, and the House of Councillors has those two systems as well as districts where three to five candidates can be elected. Many regional assemblies have systems incorporating single-seat districts, districts of three to five candidates, and even larger multi-member districts. As a result, Japan's electoral system is pulling the political party system in completely different directions, between two-party and multi-party systems.

Sunahara argues that the debate on the combined systems emerged in 2000, and it would have been difficult to predict such outcomes from Japan's electoral system while those discussions were going on. His assumption is that the arguments were probably straightforward: in a single-seat majoritarian system, one party becomes too powerful, so combining it with proportional representation can mitigate that. Sunahara draws attention to Osaka and the one-party-dominant system led by Nihon Ishin no Kai as an example of the single-seat constituency system not always working in the LDP's favor.

Machidori attributes the LDP's strong position not only to the single-seat constituency system but to their policy focus after returning to power in 2012. During security legislation debate in 2015, a segment of the opposition determined that if they gave up on winning administrative power, they could secure a "safe haven" by relying on the support base of the former Socialist Party. In other words, a major reason for the LDP's dominance is that the opposition was content to simply gain a certain number of seats.

Taniguchi raised a very interesting argument on the state of interparty rivalry in Japan. She pointed out that, "in contrast to the LDP, whose policy stance has not changed, the Socialist and Communist parties and Komeito are continuously moving toward the center," such that even the Communist Party has its sights on being part of the administration. Based on this assessment, even though there appears to be division among the opposition parties, the conditions may be more favorable than in the past for

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[2] Y. Sunahara, *Bunretsu to Togo no Nihon Seiji* (Party system institutionalization in Japan: Between fragmentation and integration) (Tokyo: Chikura Publishing, 2017), and M. Tatebayashi, *Seito Seiji no Seido Bunseki—Maruchi Reberu no Seiji Kyoso ni okeru Seito Soshiki* (Comparative institutional analysis of multi-level party politics in Japan) (Tokyo: Chikura Publishing, 2017).

mobilizing opposition to the LDP.

The experience of the reforms from the 1990s onwards demonstrate to other countries that Japan is capable of self-reform, and it shows the enormous impact that electoral system can have on political power.

Issues Facing Japan's Democracy

Now we turn to the issues facing Japan's democracy today. As argued in the preceding section, insufficient interparty rivalry at the time of the LDP's return to power in 2012 has resulted in an inability to curb that party's power ever since. But there are three additional issues that Japan must address as well.

First, we must consider political awareness among Japanese citizens. In the discussions, questions were raised about Japanese people's identity as constituents. Taniguchi believes that "self-determination—the idea of people being the sovereign because they uphold their country—has not been developed among the Japanese." This can be seen in opinion polls: there is very little interest in voting and people do not show a willingness to fight for their country should it come under attack. Japanese people are more like "consumers" of government who think, "I pay my taxes, so you provide my services." According to this explanation, the element of civic culture is weak within Japan's political culture. Such features of Japanese political culture are supported by data shared by Professor Hikotani regarding a Pew Research Center survey that found Japanese people have a high tolerance for leaving matters in the hands of experts. Put another way, they have very little awareness of themselves as autonomous political actors.

Why is that awareness so low? The material in the Pew Research Center survey offers some hints as to the causes. Japan ranked last among participating countries on the question of feeling a sense of political efficacy. If people do not think they can personally exercise influence in some way, their sense of sovereignty is weakened. Hikotani believes the complicated electoral system could be tied to this low sense of political efficacy, noting that the confusing voting systems make it hard for constituents to see how their vote counts. One example of the complexity of the system is how losing candidates can make a comeback because they can simultaneously run for single-member and proportional representation seats.

A sense of political efficacy takes many years to cultivate. The fact that the prime minister has changed many times in postwar Japan unrelated to elections could also be causing a poor sense of political efficacy. Since the LDP's formation, the president of the party—and consequently the prime minister—has changed far more due to internal party disputes than to general election results. The only three general elections in which the results clearly caused a change in leadership were in July 1993, August 2009, and December 2012.

Issues surrounding the Japanese media were also raised in the discussions. A prerequisite for sustaining democracy and keeping the exercise of power in check in democratic systems is that constituents are able to access accurate information on politics, policy, the economy, and social issues. Professor Kaori Hayashi believes the Japanese media is highly accurate and a trustworthy source of primary information. She also acknowledges that the media can take a critical stance on the administration.

However, Hayashi raises several issues, the biggest being that when a certain story is in the news, every outlet covers it in a similar way. And she laments a lack of persistent investigative journalism to proactively uncover societal issues.

Abe raised the issue of inadequate online strategies among Japanese media outlets and said he fears they have not been able to switch from the traditional advertising model to a subscription-based one. He sounded the warning that no outlet will have the capital required to maintain journalists who write good stories. Abe also highlights the problem of the media distancing itself from policy proposals: its role should not be simply monitoring authority but also examining possible solutions to issues revealed in that process.

Takayasu is extremely wary about the relationship between media and government. He shared data from the Reporters without Borders World Press Freedom Index showing that Japan's ranking has been falling in recent years. Takayasu also expressed concern about attacks on the media by politicians and attempts to curb coverage that is critical of the government under the pretext of the Broadcast Act's requirement for politically fair coverage.

And finally, the third cause for concern in Japan's democracy is diversity, and most notably the gender gap. Japan ranked 120th in the World Economic Forum's 2021 Gender Gap Index (March 2021). Kage calculated that the proportion of female candidates for the 2021 House of Representatives election rose only very slightly to 17 percent from 15 percent in the 2000 general elections, and she pointed to the large burden of servicing a local electorate in the single-seat constituency system as one reason for this.

Another issue raised during the discussions was the extremely low ratio of female students at the University of Tokyo. Currently, just 20 percent of the undergraduate student body is women, and while the university aims to raise it to 30 percent, there are many barriers to accomplishing even that goal. Some of the reasons offered were the difficulty women have in envisioning a career path, the higher costs for women living alone in Tokyo, and the scarcity of elite junior high and high schools for girls.

An underlying factor for the gender gap is the rehashing in television dramas and news programs of the traditional roles expected of women. Hayashi pointed to news programs with a sweet young female weather reporter saying, 'It is fine weather today!' as an example of how we are surrounded by expressions that influence the image of women's roles. She also rebukes the ruling class in Japanese society—elderly Japanese men—for how they forever "hold on to this Showa Era dream of an old-fashioned nuclear family with the office worker father, housewife mother, and two children, and they refuse to think about anything else."

Another problem is how the state continues to systematically peddle what Hayashi calls illusions as ideals. Specific examples are the pension and taxation systems, which clearly incentivize women to become housewives. This has created an enormous dilemma in the efforts to introduce reforms because of the great number of housewives among constituents. Unfortunately, as Abe noted, "Japan has very little to be proud of when it comes to the gender gap."

Improving the Quality of Japan's Democracy

During the discussions that were held across three sessions, participants assessed the current state of Japan's democracy and identified Japan's challenges and lessons for other countries. The governing mechanisms and exercise of power in a representative democracy were systems originally developed in the West, but Japan serves as an example of the successful implementation and establishment of democracy in the non-Western world. Some academics expound the difficulties of instituting democracy in Asia, with its differing political culture, but Japan's experience is a valuable rebuttal to those claims. Japan's democratic journey further demonstrates to other democratic nations as well that self-reform and system change is possible. And it also shows the promise of improving the quality of democracy through steps such as reducing corruption and expanding civil society.

There is no doubt that Japan's democracy still harbors challenges related to interparty rivalry, political awareness among constituents, the media, and the gender gap, as highlighted in this paper, and thus there is still scope to improve. As noted democracy scholar Robert Dahl stresses, not a single perfect democracy exists in our world. Nevertheless, Japan must press forward to further improve the quality of its own democracy, and its efforts should serve as a useful reference for other nations around the globe.