



Democracy Is Not Forever: The Eventual Destruction of Democracy by the Fears of the Masses

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Japan Is a Global “Sub-leader”

In December 2019, Japan Akademeia, of which I am the co-president, hosted the First Tokyo Conference. Japan Akademeia is an organization founded in 2012 for the purpose of being a hub through which politicians, business leaders and bureaucrats can network and the different spheres become interconnected.

2019 was a critical juncture commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the Cold War. In connection with this, we held a discussion on the theme “Changes in the Global Power Structure and the Future of Global Governance,” with the participation of Dr. Jacques Attali, a French economic scholar and thinker, and Dr. Graham Allison, an American political scientist and professor at Harvard University. It was extremely edifying to meet these intellectual giants of Europe and North America.

Dr. Allison’s analysis was that newly emerging states would attempt to become the new hegemons, which history has shown frequently leads to warfare. He referred to this as the “Thucydides Trap” and pointed out the risk of a future war between the United States and China, which became a hot topic around the world.

Early on in Dr. Allison’s remarks, he praised Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo for taking leadership with the TPP Agreement and getting the other countries onboard. Some might have interpreted this unexpected praise as lip service, but I saw it as more than just flattery.

This is because I feel that the EU and other countries have come to have high expectations for Japan, starting in early 2019. The EU functioned as a single economic power, but it can no longer be considered stable. With the United Kingdom deciding on Brexit, it is easy to imagine difficulties in German–French relations as well. While Germany has deepened economic ties with China, they do not want to become reliant on China. It is in this context that they rediscovered Japan.

Countries in Europe and North America are increasingly hoping for Japan to take more leadership in building global partnerships, especially with regard to TPPs and other international collaborative efforts. At the very least, Prime Minister Abe is recognized for



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maintaining a long-term administration and actively engaging in diplomacy. His efforts to facilitate reconciliation amid deepening antagonism between the United States and Iran is something we have not seen from previous prime ministers. This is hardly discussed within Japan, but it is safe to say that international expectations are higher than before.

Prime Minister Abe has been recognized as a leader of the world. In the first place, Japan does not possess that much national power. What has happened is that there are now fewer cooperative leaders in other countries, which has increased relative appreciation for Japan. In reality, what the world wants from Japan is not global leadership but rather that Japanese becomes a sub-leader that acts as a mediator. Let there be no mistake about this.

The United States Is Withdrawing Too Quickly

At the Tokyo Conference, Dr. Attali pointed out that European and North American “politicians’ quality is deteriorating,” a phenomenon that closely resembles what happened in the early twentieth century. He wrote the following in a short text titled “In Preparation of the Tokyo Conference.”

“The world situation is extremely perilous. It very much resembles that situation of the early twentieth century. At the time, the world was enveloped by progress, liberation and democracy, and all the conditions were right for inaugurating a wonderful era, but we then saw the appearance of many dictators in the wake of the two global financial crises and the two world wars.”

The deterioration of politicians discussed by Dr. Attali was a reference to how the American President Trump, the British Prime Minister Johnson, and other national leaders, whom we have previously expected to take international leadership, were now advocating policies of putting their own countries first.

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria caused an unexpected chain reaction that expanded to become the tragedy that was World War I, and this happened because the alliances had the adverse effect of inciting antagonism between enemies and friends as well as repeated poor decisions from politicians who were far from being of good quality.

Dr. Attali pointed out that “The American withdrawal is astoundingly quick.” In particular, the American presence in the Middle East, where they have been deeply involved for many years, is disappearing in many locations, which is having the hopeless effect of opening up too many “gaps.” Apparently, that is how things look from a European perspective.

As regards trade, they have withdrawn from the TPP Agreement. As regards global warming measures, they have withdrawn from the Paris Agreement. As regards Middle East policy, they have withdrawn from the Iran nuclear deal. At the G7 meeting in France in August 2019, they participated only reluctantly, saying that it was “a waste of time,” displaying an attitude unbecoming of the leader of a hegemonic state.

Two “Fears”

If the United States, which has been the hegemon for so long, keeps saying “I’m leaving,” then it is only natural that they will lose influence in certain parts of the world, opening up gaps both here and there. One of the roles Japan is asked to take on now is that of filling those gaps. The world is full of issues that need to be addressed beyond the interests of a single country, such as climate change, migration, marine pollution and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The ability of international agencies like the United Nations, the WTO, the World Bank and the IMF is also shrinking.

The United States is not the only country to advocate a policy of my country first. A tendency toward “my country first” is evident in all developed countries, without exception.

The impetus for this was the Lehman Shock (2008) and the Euro crisis (2009) that struck against Europe and North America. These two events may be termed “shocks of developed countries” since they brought to the fore the harsh reality that the lower middle class has been left behind by economic growth in developed countries previously thought as affluent. Just like there was resistance to immigration from South and Central America in the United States, Europe experienced a sense of crisis in response to economic stagnation and a surge of refugees from the Middle East.

Amid such developments, parties advocating international collaboration and globalism quickly lost steam in all of these countries, and the influence of populism could no longer be ignored. Populism is a word with many meanings and it is sometimes used to mean “pandering to the masses” to criticize a politician’s stance, but in South American and other places, it can also be used in a positive sense like about the Peronism incited by Argentinian President Perón in the 1950s. To begin with, democracy is designed to reflect the will of the majority, so we should consider it inseparable from the risk of populism getting out of hand.

The wellspring of populism is the various “fears” that people have. “Livelihood fear” is what gives rise to leftwing populism, while “identity fear” is what gives rise to rightwing populism.

Leftwing populism is calling for unemployment measures and social security policies in Greece, Spain and other South European countries, while rightwing populism is fueling anti-immigrant movements in the United States, Germany, Hungary and elsewhere. Dr. Attali was increasingly anxious that “The world will get more and more out of control.”

When I gave a talk on “Democracy and Populism” at the Japan Academy in 2019, it gave me an opportunity to think about this topic again. If you get to the bottom of the question “What is populism?” you will find that it has the two essences of “anti-elitism” and “election absolutism.”

In most cases, the elite of anti-elitism means the ruling class or bureaucrats in control of the central government.

For example, in the EU, the elite bureaucrats working at the headquarters in Brussels have become suitable targets. The EU headquarters has as its mission to think about the stability

and development of the EU. In particular, the European Commission, which consists of 28 commissioners representing the member states and about 35,000 staff members, are tasked with prioritizing the interests of the EU as a whole before those of their own countries.

However, the general public of the various European states do not trust the people in Brussels. The EU headquarters instruct the national governments to “reduce the fiscal deficits.” In response to this, the general public become dissatisfied and ask why their own governments have to obey the EU bureaucrats. They are angry because they feel that their elected politicians are treated like subordinates by the EU bureaucrats.

The Only Absolute Authority Is the Election

In the same way, there is deep-seated populism in the United States, revolving around the dichotomy that “the elites in Washington D.C. are crooks and the people in the Midwest are good people.”

The word “deep state” that has come into fashion since the start of the Trump administration collectively refers to bureaucrats who sabotage or do not follow the orders of President Trump. It is unclear how much of reality this is, but President Trump’s ardent supporters are calling for an overthrow of the deep state.

Ideally, elites are expected to manage policy based on long-term vision and plan of action, but when people’s lives become more difficult and the existing society and culture is threatened by an increase in immigrants and refugees, elites are more and more perceived as not fulfilling that role. That is why the elites come under attack.

What is the other essence of “election absolutism”?

Populism rejects all power that is not based on elections. The administration of justice by judges and prosecutors is also bashed. Both the media and university professors are bashed. Sometimes, as in the case of Turkey, soldiers are also bashed. It is all of those elites with “a dignified air” who are thoroughly treated with scorn. There is only one reason for the attacks against them and it is the fact that they are in those positions despite not having been elected in an election.

From the perspective of populism, the only absolute authority is the election. The election is seen as absolute and no other authority is recognized. In that sense, it is a view that makes the election all-powerful and could perhaps be termed the “wild child of democracy.”

Ancient Greece and Rome

What starts coming into view when we think about “anti-elitism” and “election absolutism” is perhaps the rage of the masses who think “Listen more to what we are saying!” This is why people keep chanting “Spend! Spend!” no matter how indebted the country gets. Somewhat vulgarly put, populism can be called “politics that doesn’t think ahead.”

To begin with, democracy always contains the risk of the majority going berserk. This was an everyday occurrence already in Ancient Greece, the birthplace of democracy, and the populace demanded bread and circuses in Ancient Rome. At the time of the founding of the United States of America in the eighteenth century, there were fears about the Congress running wild. The separation of powers, the House of Representatives and the Senate, and the party system that came about during the founding period were all carefully thought-out measures conceived in anticipation of and to prevent the majority running wild.

Democracy is by no means eternal. The reason why democracy gave way to the aristocratic republic and imperial rule in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome is none other than the limitations of democracy. The fact that populism has now emerged from the advanced democracies of the United States and the United Kingdom suggests the very real possibility that democracy may retreat in the twenty-first century.

President Trump is attacked for his egotistical remarks and behavior, but if it receives the support of the American people, then it is no longer a personal problem. President Trump overturned the prediction that the impeachment trial would corner him and has still enjoyed the people's support. If this is the general trend in the United States, then regardless of whether President Trump gets reelected in the 2020 presidential election, we need to prepare ourselves for the possibility that his is not the last administration with a Trump-like nature.

The Words of Hamako

There is little consensus when it comes to Japanese populism. A populist party like the ones in Europe has yet to appear. Someone once said that “There appears to be no populism in Japan.” When asked about the reason, they responded, “That’s because there are no elites in this country.”

It is true that bureaucrats had lost the social trust they previously enjoyed and that their powers had been considerably diminished prior to the launch of the current Abe administration. It was twenty-two years ago that the corruption at the Ministry of Finance (MOF) came to light. After that, the Koizumi and Noda administrations were ridiculed as the “MOF administrations,” but the fall of the bureaucracy became a consistent theme in the Heisei period as the powers of the Prime Minister’s Office were strengthened and criticism against the bureaucracy remained deep-seated.

The “political initiative” advocated by the DPJ (Democratic Party of Japan) government also had an aspect of focusing on restricting the power of the bureaucracy rather than the politicians seeking to control all dimensions of politics. In any case, the feeling was that all would be well as long as the bureaucracy could be controlled.

It was then that the second Abe administration formulated a clear policy of Prime Minister’s Office initiative. It did happen that some bureaucrats were drafted as if pole-fished to be aides of the prime minister or the chief cabinet secretary, but we cannot deny the fact

that the bureaucracy lost a lot of its power in Kasumigaseki as a whole.

In the past, it is true that there were some elite bureaucrats in Japan. Looking back at the LDP at the beginning and end of the Heisei period, you will notice a clear difference.

The Heisei period started in January 1989, and consumption tax was introduced in April. The Takeshita administration had boldly forged ahead with the consumption tax despite being pressed about the Recruit scandal at the National Diet in the fall of the previous year and having the House of Councilors election coming up that summer.

I cannot forget the words of Hamako (Hamada Koichi, former member of the House of Representatives). He said that “If we start with consumption tax at a time like this, [the House of Councilors] will be up in arms. It has to be stopped somehow.” Looking back now, I realize that Hamako must have captured the minds of the voters quite well. His fears proved to be right and the number of seats held by the ruling and opposition parties flipped in the House of Councilors elections, also partly owing to Doi Takako’s Madonna boom. This was how the LDP’s foundation started shaking, and people started resigning from the party in the 1990s, culminating in the loss of political power and the birth of the Hosokawa administration four years later.

What really fascinates me right now is what outlook on the future Prime Minister Takeshita and other LDP leaders at the time had when they decided to introduce the consumption tax. I remember how some bureaucrats back then said that “The leaders of Japan are amazing. It normally wouldn’t be possible to introduce consumption tax when you have a storm like the Recruit scandal raging.” I asked them “Which office do you belong to?” and they said MOF. Even the bureaucrats promoting the consumption tax thought the LDP would lose.

The Conceit Went Away

It was well-known that MOF officials were standing behind Prime Minister Takeshita. I am sure such backing of prominent politicians happened in all time periods, but up until the early Heisei period, I think there was always a kind of “guts of shouldering the nation” there. That started disappearing because of the various things that happened in the Heisei period. Today, that kind of fervor has gradually vanished in Kasumigaseki and in the Prime Minister’s Office.

The administrative reform advanced in the 1980s by the late Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro, who recently passed away, centered on the establishment of a council headed by Doko Toshio, former chairman of the Japan Business Federation. He sought to promote reform by selecting elites not from within the LDP but from the outside. Since Hamako was not the only politician sensitive to public opinion, it might have been that Nakasone sought to realize reform from a long-term perspective by bypassing the LDP.

Conversely, if we look at the current Abe administration, whether it is promotion headquarters for key policies set up in the Cabinet or important meetings in the Cabinet Office, it is all headed by the prime minister himself. Under such an arrangement, the policy issues

discussed will be restricted to the “here” and “now,” and they cannot avoid a tendency to policymaking for the sake of the next election. The problem is how to deal with issues that cannot be solved that way. During the thirty years of the Heisei period, the Japanese brand of elites disappeared, but can we claim that democracy is functional at this time? I believe that “Japanese-style populism” has also started in this country.

Compared to his first administration, Prime Minister Abe is clearly making fewer “enemies” now. Despite being a conservative party, they are coming up with policies unheard of in other countries, such as social security for all generations, free high education and work-style reform. They are incorporating so many so-called “leftwing” policies so that the opposition parties are losing their footing, and have become deft at striking the “balls” of policy. They are the first to take the kind of policies that American Democrat presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren would suggest, doing some kind of “total reaping of issues.”

In a manner of speaking, perhaps the result of incorporating leftwing populism is *Abe ikkyo* (the extraordinary stability of Mr. Abe’s power base within the LDP). If we see this as populism, then we should consider populism as advanced in Japan as well. It might allay the livelihood fear and satisfy the population for the time being, but the future is exceedingly uncertain. It seems to me that we have witnessed the start of “politics that doesn’t think ahead” that is equally or even more problematic than what exists in North America.

Beware the Crisis Within

This short-term thinking in Japan was also there before the war. As a later modernizer, Japan belatedly joined a world order created by Europe and North America, and when that order was shattered during World War I, Japan fell into complete panic.

Which side should we be on? Which one is the correct path? The unrest of the world outside was directly affecting domestic politics, and they set out on a risky attempt before deciding on a course, advancing into the Chinese continent and rushing into all-out war with the United States.

In the sense that the order created by the United States is starting to shake, it is true that the 2020s are reminiscent of the early twentieth century. However, Japan’s power is limited and we must not have a repetition of that pre-war domestic unrest instigated by foreign powers. Japan must clearly discern its vital interests and find spheres with foreign friends with whom we can cooperate.

Issues like North Korea, immigration, the huge deficit of public finance and the Nankai megathrust earthquakes constantly require serious thought by at least some people. Yet since it is not possible to suddenly produce elites, we have no choice but to start with everyone reconsidering the balance of merits and demerits for various matters. We Japanese must also be wary of populism “from within,” so that we do not end up missing that time when Europe and North America had expectations of us.

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