Political Development in Modern Japan: Perspectives from Thailand

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1. Introduction

Apart from economic development, political development is a concept introduced by social scientists to study the societal changes of a certain country at a certain period of time. Political development concept was first introduced in the early 1960's by a group of leading American political scientists under the leadership of Professor Lucian Pye whose works were published by Princeton University Press.[1] Another series was later on published under the leadership of Professor Gabriel Almond by Little, Brown & Co., Ltd.[2] The meaning of political development was variously explained by different members of this group of political scientists. Whatever the definition may be, democratic political system was generally regarded by them as a politically "developed" system of government. We shall employ this definition in our discussion here. The term was used in a structural sense, that there existed the political institutions reflecting the principle of popular sovereignty. By this definition, the Meiji constitution and the political system of prewar Japan could hardly be characterized as "democratic" as we may more readily characterize the peace Constitution and the political system in postwar Japan.[3] There were several aspects, however, that call for our appreciation, particulary the existences of the structure and process of the people's participation, power, and a certain degree of the sovereignty.

In this paper, we shall discuss about the democratic development effort in prewar Japan from the perspectives or the experiences of Thai democratic development. Most studies by Japanese and western scholars tended to emphasize the shortcomings and the negative sides, but from the perspectives of Thai political history, certain aspects of the Meiji experiences deserve some appreciations. We shall discuss and evaluate the Meiji political system trying to understand and appreciate certain distinctive aspects of Japanese democratic developments in the following pages. Together with the economic development, the prewar Japanese political experience is a topic requiring a thorough investigation. Our discussion here will be presented from the angle of Thai experiences.[4]

2. The Philosophy of Nation-building

The Meiji leaders came to power in 1868 after overthrowing the Tokugawa shogunate. They replaced the old feudal system of government, called the Baku-han system, with a new centralized goverment under the restored Emperor. The coup d'etat in 1867-1868 was characterized by the restoration of

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an imperial institution, kept away from any executive powers during the 700-year feudal history. Approximately untill the promulgation of the constitution in 1889, this transition was called a period of Meiji Restoration (Meiji Ishin) which also included several major reforms following the assumption as head of the new government by the Emperor in 1868. The Meiji reforms differed a great deal from the Chakri Reform taken place in Chulalongkorn Siam (1868-1910). Two distinctive differences worth paying particular attention here are the leaders' attitudes towards the existing system of government and towards the western democratic institutions such as the constitution, parliament, election and political parties.

1. The Attitudes towards the Existing System of Government. In 1868 when they came to power, the new Meiji leaders were generally dissastified with the existing feudal form of government but they did not have a clear consensus as to how radical the reforms should be.[5] It took one civil war among themselves before the final decision was agreed upon that the reforms would be very radical. Saigo Takamori, one of the leading commanders of the imperial force in the war against the Shogunate, led a rebellion force of 40,000 discontented samurai in the so-called Satsuma Rebellion in 1877.

Despite the lack of the clear consensus at the initial stage, the new Meiji government quickly decided to do away with the system of hereditary elite and to introduce a new political system that would be more effective in mobilizing the people's participation and loyalty. Itagaki Taisuke, one of the Restoration leaders, pointed out as early as 1871 that "In order to make it possible for our country to confront the world and succeed in the task of achieving national prosperity, the whole of the people must be made to cherish sentiments of patriotism, and institutions must be established under which people are all treated as equals." Itagaki went further to say that, "We should seek above all to spread widely among the people the responsibility for the civil and military functions hitherto performed by the samurai... so that each may develop his own knowledge and abilities... and have the chance to fulfill his natural aspirations."[6] The new government leaders, all of whom coming from the military background, were resolute in gradually dissolving the privileges of their own class which included the superior education, possession ef bureaucratic office, stipends, sword bearings, and others.

In the case of Siam, renamed Thailand during the Second World War, the new leadership vigorously attempted at strengthening the absolute monarchical rule. The new king gradually centralized the powers in his own hands. The members of the royal family gradually monopolized the staffing of the highest echelon of the newly created bureaucracy. As a result, as time went by, there were little rooms for mobility at the higher leadership. The major instrument for the mobilization of the people's participation and patriotism was the fuedal one : loyalty to the monarchical institution. The existing political system was strengthened rather than weakened while the power holders shifted from the aristocrats to the royal family.[7]

2. The Attitude towards the Western Democratic Institutions. The Meiji leaders were surprisingly internationalized in their views towards the introduction of Western democratic institutions. They real-

ized that it was inevitable that sooner or later this must be done. A far-sighted Meiji leader. Ito Hirobumi, explained the inevitability of the adoption of Western political thoughts and institutions in the following words :

> "today conditions in Japan are closely related to the world situation. They are not merely the affairs of a nation or a province. The European concepts of revolution which were carried out for the first time in France about 100 years ago, have gradually spread to the various nations. By combining and complementing each others, they have become a general trend. Sooner or later, every national will undergo changes as a result.[8]

Not only recognizing the inevitability, Meiji leaders committed themselves to the institutionalization of political parties. In 1900, Ito Hirobumi, the architect of the Meiji Constitution, accepted the presidency of the Seiyukai Party. Saionji Kinmochi, the second generation **genro** and the representative of the Imperial Palace's views, also became the President of the Seiyukai. In 1913, Katsura Taro a military leader and the protege of Yamagata Aritomo formed a political party himself.

In the Thai case, competitive election system was not allowed until 1946. Even moving into the postward period, it was more often that the prime ministers did not come from the political parties. Pibun headed the Seri Mananka Sila Party but Sarit did not. During his 10-year prime ministership from 1963 to 1973, Thanom ruled the country with the martial law for 8 years and he tried the political party system for only a brief period during 1969-1971. During his 8 year-prime ministership (1980-1988) Prem Tinasulanonda had not headed or formed a political party. He set a pattern of having his technocrat team controlling the key ministerial posts and relegated the rest to a group of 4-5 political parties. Even though the present Chatchai Cabinet is virtually a full-fledge party cabinet, the pattern set by Prem during his eight years in power still has a good possibility of being repeated in Thailand given the lack of a dominant-party-system as seen in Japan or a two-party-system as seen in the United States, England, Australia, and Canada.[9]

3. The Background Behind the Positive Attitudes. There were several explanations to the question that why the Meiji leaders, in contrast to the Chulalongkorn leaders, were so decisive in their destructions of the old political system and also in their attitudes towards the introduction of the Western democratic institutions. As we all know, the Meiji constitution was promulgated in 1889, the general election was held in 1890, the elected House of Representative was convened in 1890 right after the election, and the political parties had long been recongnized almost a decade before the promulgation of the constitution. The leaders' young age, samurai background of lower ranks, and the tradition of borrowing in Japanese history were some of the reasons often explained to us. But in the Siamese case, we have also seen several of these factors.

One of the crucial differences is perhaps the absence of land ownership on the part of the samurai elite, or as one scholar explained, "Few ruling classes have been so free of economic bias against change".[10] Dr. Kenneth Pyle wrote "Their ties to the land had been broken in the seventeenth century

when they had moved from the countryside to the new castle towns. Their power was rooted in bureaucratic position rather than in land holding."[11] J.W. Hall explained further that these samurai.....

> "did not constitute an entrenched land-based gentry as in China, able to back up their interests in the face of modern change. Without an economic base, the resentment they felt toward the reforms, which deprived them of their feudal priveleges was soon dissipated. In stead, they were forced to ride with the times, to join the new government or to seek security in the new economic opportunites which were offered them..... In other words, they were a leaven for change rather than an obstacle".[12]

In the Thai case, the Chakri Reform leaders were the landed elite. Apart from the hereditary characteristics, they were given pieces of lands by the King who theoretically owned the entire land in the country. The political and social reforms in Chulalongkorn Siam might have been more radically carried out if the forerunners of the modernization were the landless elite. There were many reasons to this problem but suffice it to say here that, what Thomas C. Smith called "economic bias" and J.W. Hall called "economic base" was the crucial factor behind the contrastive degree of radicalism in the two countries' reforms, particularly in the attitudes of the two countries' leaders towards the existing political system and the introduction of Western democratic institutions.[13]

4. The State Ideology. In discussing the philosophy of nation-building in Meiji Japan, one can not avoid noting that emperor worship had been the state ideology throughout the history of modern Japan. After the last *genro*, Yamagata Aritomo, passed away, this state ideology was increasingly identified with militarist expansionism abroad and the attacks on democratic institutions at home. But the original idea of the adoption of the imperial ideology envisaged by the Meiji leaders was quite a different thing. Emerging from the disunited Tokugawa feudal system and deciding to carry out the drastic political reforms agaisnt the existing hereditary and class society, the Meiji leaders were seriously concerned about problems of maintaining order and re-establishing stability and unity. The Meiji leaders did not have institutions to rely upon in solving the above problems, except the imperial institution. They made the institution to function as a source of legitimatizing the executive power, mobilizing people's loyalty, self-devotion and patriotism and forming the "cornerstone" of the country. Ito Hirobumi, the architect of the Meiji political system, explained the justification in the following words :

> What is the cornerstone of our country? This is the problem we have to solve. If here is no cornerstone, politics will fall into the hands of the uncontrollable masses; and then the government will become powerless... In Japan (unlike Europe) religion does not play such an important role and cannot become the foundation of constitutional government. Though Buddhism once flourished and was the bond of union between all classes, high and low, today its influence has declined. Though Shintoism is based on the traditions of our ancestors, as a religion it is not powerful enough to become the center of the country. Thus in

our country the one institution which can become the cornerstone of our constitution is the Imperial House. For this reason, the first principle of our constitution is the respect for the sovereign rights of the Emperor... Because the Imperial sovereignty is the cornerstone of our constitution, our system is not based on the European ideas of separation of powers or on the principle enforced in some European countries of joint rule of the king and the people"[14]

What should be noted here is that the imperial institution had been kept by the Meiji leaders to stay away from power politics. The Emperor was to be a pure source of legitimacy of the government and the symbol of patriotism and self-devotion of the people.

In the case of Thailand, the monarchy institution had long involved in the power politics. After King Chulalongkorn passed away, there had been several attempts to limit the powers of the King : the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. King Rama VI himself engaged in several debates with the emerging reformist intellectuals and obstructed the proposals for the introduction of Western democratic institutions which had earlier been carried out successfully in Meiji Japan as a source of mobilizing the people's participation and patriotism. The democratic revolution came in 1932 and King Rama VII finally decided to spend the rest of His life in England after having abdicated in 1934. After a period of evolution, King Rama IX has begun to fully assume the noble functions of mobilizing the people's loyalty and integrating defferent sectors in the society and to serve as a pure source legitimacy of the executive power, closer to the Meiji emperor system a century before.[15]

3. The Surprising Degree of Continuity

Guided by the innovative and progressive philosophy of nation-building, the democratic institutions once established enjoyed a stable growth and continuity. We shall look into each of the major political institutions in prewar Japan in the light of its continuity from the perspectives of Thailand.

1. The Constitution. The Meiji Constitution was promulgated in 1889 as the earliest modern constitution in the entire orient. It also lasted very long over half a century. This is in contrast to the short-lived thirteen constitutions in Thailand during the same length of some 50 years. This piece of document was a great innovation at a time Japan was still a predominantly agricultural society. One of its interesting strength was its flexibility able to cope with the pressures from both the democratic and the militaristic forces. The Prime Minister could be appointed from a head of a political party with the most seats in the Lower House as realized in the case of Hara Takashi and others during the Taisho Democracy period (1918-1932), or from one of the military leaders during the showa militarism era of 1930's.

In the case of Thailand, this rule for the appointment of the Prime Minister is still respected nowadays. Surprisingly, the calls for a constitutional amendment after the appointment of Mr. Van Chansue as the President of the Upper House in April 1989, hardly went far enough demanding that the

Prime Minister must be appointed from members of the elected Lower House. In an interview to the press on May 18, 1989, M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, the former Prime Minister and the respected "fighter of democracy," expressed his view against such a move as unnecessarily rigid.[16] In today's Thai political context, the Meiji Constitution is by and large a viable piece of political document as its contents are in many ways similar to the present Thai Constitution which happend to have survived longer than any of the "unflexible" preceeding constitutions. Indeed, the Meiji Constitution could be regarded as a practical and far-sighted political document as viewed from the angle of the democratic development in Thailand.

Sarit Thanarat's decision to invite King Rama IX to travel abraod for a "world tour" in early 1960's was a sharp turning point. In a similar vein as the Restoration efforts carried out by the Meiji leaders, Sarit did his best in re-vitalizing the monarchical roles to mobilize the people's loyalty and patriotism while he himself launched a program of rapid economic development not unlike the Meiji industrialization program of **Chokusan kogyo.**

2. Political Party. In Japan, long before the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution in 1889, political parties had been active mobilizing the people's "participation and loyalty" to the nation according to their parties' platforms. After founding the Patriotic Party (Risshi-sha) in 1873, Itagaki Taisuke founded a full-fledge political party in 1881 called the Liberal Party (Jiyu-to). In the following year, Okuma Shigenobu founded the Progressive Party (Kaishin-to). For at least half a decade before the promulgation in 1889, these two political parties had organized tens of public meetings in several cities throughout the country. As a result, the newly established elected House of Representatives was quickly filled up by the dynamism of the political parties. The first general election in 1890, despite a limited number of the electorate due to the tax-paying conditions, was a direct election with competitions. The Liberal Party and the Progressive Party dominated the seats in the Lower House and they were the forces to be reckoned with since the budget bill must be submitted to their approval.

In the Thai case, however, political party was much more under-developed. The first general election was held in 1933 after the constitution's promulgation in 1932, but this was an indirect election : Local representatives were first elected and they later chose the Lower House members. Political parties were not permitted to be formed until 1946. The coup d'etat party had been the only de facto political party existed. It dominated the elected Lower House without oppositions or competitions from other political groups. On the other hand, throughout the entire history, the members of the Upper House had never been elected by the people. The present Thai Upper House is actually not different from the House of Lords in prewar Japan in the way its members are selected.

Indeed the strength of the political parties in prewar Japan could not be underestimated. This strength derived from the long evolution of party politics and the continuous election system both at the national and local levels. The parties were given due recognition from the Meiji leaders as we witnessed in the assumption of the presidency of the Seiyukai by Ito Hirobumi

and Saionji Kinmachi, and the establishment of a political party by Katsura Taro. During the period of Taisho democracy, parties assumed a "quasi-supremacy" in the political system.[17] It was a tradition that during this period the head of one political parties was appointed the Prime Minister. And during this period, we saw a kind of two-party system, the Seiyukai and a political party that finally assumed the name Minseito. Certainly, this 15-year-period of continuous party development and the comparatively stable two-party system served as the base for fuller democratic achievements in the postwar period. Actually, the Liberal Democratic Party which has ruled Japan since its establishment in 1955, could be traced back to the Seiyukai and the Minseito.[18]

3. The Parliament and Elections. The Japanese Imperial Diet was composed of the House of Representatives and the House of Lords. The power of the elected Lower House was balanced by the appointed Upper House. The power to appoint the prime minister and other important powers belonged to the Emperor. Despite these limitations, the Lower House had a crucial power of approval of the budget and other bills. Its members had organized several movements demanding that the head of the political party with highest seats in the Lower House be appointed the Prime Minister, the so-called Constitution Protection Movement (Goken Undo). Surprisingly, the parliament, once being inaugurated by the Emperor in 1890 became the widely recognized institution. The fact that the political parties had long gained popular supports made the parliament a meaningful ground for parties' activities, and the legislative functions. To the Meiji leaders, the Diet was so meaningful an institution. A conservative Meiji oligarch admitted the importance in the following words :

> "If we gradually established a popular assembly and firmly establish a constitution, the things I have enumerated above-popular enimity towards the government, failure to follow government orders, and suspicion of the government, these three evils-will be cured in the future."[19]

In the Thai case, parliamentary democracy has faced several difficulties during its half a century history. It had been declared dissolved by successive coup d'etats. For 12 years during 1958 - 1969 there existed no elected House of Representative. There had been other occasional disruptions during 1971 - 1973 and 1976 - 1979. The present House of Representatives has survived for a period of only 10 years. Indeed, compared to the Malaysian case, Thai parliamentary democracy is less stable and more vulnerable to the use of forces by the military. Prewar Japan's parliament had not been dissolved even once, and even during the wartime period, the general election was only extended for one year. This is certainly a surprising story.

4. Local Government. Basicly, prewar Japan did not have a system of local self-government. The heads of local government bodies were all appointed by the powerful Ministry of Interior. It is interesting, however, to note that there existed local assembly bodies at each level of the local government and that their members were elected by the people. Also to be noted is the surprising continuity of the elections of these local assemblymen. Never once was there any disruptions. There were thus a congruity of the national and local election processes.

The general election at the national level would be quite meaningless if it was not buttressed by the local elections at the prefectural, city, town and village levels.

In the Thai case, the elections of the local assembly members have been often disrupted in the similar way as the elections at the national level. The lack of continuity was a serious problem throughout our modern history. Even today, only the governor of the Bangkok Metropolitan is elected while the other 72 governors are all appointed by the Ministry of Interior, True, the village and tambon's heads in Thailand today are elected but they are elected until the retirement age. Dynamism of election politices was thus absent in the country-side of Thailand. There existed no politics of choices and no politics of opposition at the local levels.

4. Conclusion

We have long discussed the salient features of Japanese political development from the perspective of Thai political history. Our emphasis has been more in trying to understand and appreciating several aspects of the development rather than presenting a critical evaluation. True, there are numerous negatives aspects to be cited and there is also a necessity to present the' discussion in a balanced manner. This paper, however, has a limited purpose of pointing out some features from the angle of Thai political development.

Most studies by Japanese and western scholars tended to look at the Meiji political structure as a failure in Japanese democratic development efforts. In their views, Meiji constitution was undemocratic since the sovereignty did not rest upon the people, the Diet's lower house was seriously limited in its legislative power and there existed no principle of the supremacy of legislative power. The election of the members of the House of Representatives was not a mandate of the people for the appointment of the chief of the executive branch. Local elections were by far insignificant comparing to the postwar local elections. Moreover, political party's role was overshadowed by the Imperial rule and the rise of militarism in the 1930's The Pacific war and the military aggression overseas were inevitably the final outcomes of the un-democratic structure of Meiji political system. In conclusion, Meiji democratic institutions could not have developed until the coming of the Occupation's democratization reforms after World War II.

From Thai perspective, however, much of democratic development trends and potentials in prewar Japan deserve certain apprecations. On the constitution issue, we Siam failed to establish a kind of limited monarchy constitution during the reign of King Rama V and VI as a crucial "transition" to the full constitutional rule in the reign of King Rama VII. From the Thai perspective, the Meiji constitution is indeed an interesting political innovation. Its flexibility to cope with both the nationalistic military pressures and democratic forces was an extremely practical device. With only one exception during the wartime period, the Japanese electorates had never been denied their rights to elect their Diet representatives, a total of 21 elections from 1890 until 1942's Tojo cabinet. In the Thai case, the first election was held in 1933 and history told us that regular election process was interrupted by coups d' etat, 18 coups altogether from 1933 to 1985. The House of Representatives in Meiji Japan had never been declared dissolved

by a coup d' etat or by a military force. It had existed and functioned for a period of 55 years since its inauguration in 1890 down to the year 1945. All in all, the democratic development under the Meiji system must be duely appreciated. Throughout its modern history (1868–1945), Japan had undergone only one constitution, undisrupted election process, stable House of Representatives, continuous national and local elections and dynamic political party system.

The extensive borrowing of Western democratic institutions and their long continuity in the Meiji period made the postwar democratic reforms during the occupation period (1945–1952) possible with great stability. Lacking the political culture of liberal democracy, Japan's political system still has a long way to go towards its full development.[20] But we may say at the conclusion here that without the Meiji political reforms, the American Occupation's postwar democratization of Japan would have been very difficult. Constitution, partiament, political party, general election, and local elections have been the democratic institutions so familiar to the Japanese for a long period of time : over half a century.

Footnote

1. For the concept and works on political development, see the series published by Princeton University Press under the auspices of the Committee on Comparative Politics of the Social Sciences Research Council, 7 volumes, 1963–1966.

2. See the Little, Brown Series in Comparative Politics, 6 analytical studies and 7 country studies. See also Almond and Coleman (eds.) *The Politics of the Developing Areas*, Princeton University Press, 1960s.

3. For the criticism of the prewar Japanese politics, see the classic work, Masao Maruyama, *Thought and Behaviour in Modern Japanese Politics*, Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 123–28.

4. See also the discussions of each of the 6 aspects of the Japanese modernization from the Thai perspectives in Kunio Yoshihara (editor), *Thai Perceptions of Japanese Modernization*, Kyoto University's Center for Southeast Asian Studies, in association with Falcon Press Sdu Bhd, Kuala Lumpur, 1989. This included the religious, social, education, political, management and the economic aspects.

5. Kenneth B. Pyle, *The Makign of Modern Japan*, D.C. Heath and Company, Lexington, Mass., 1978, p. 90.

6. William G. Beaseley, *The Meiji Restoration*, Stanford University Press, 1972, pp. 384–85, quoted in Kenneth B. Pyle, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

7. This system of quasi-hereditary elite without the democratic institutions as the base for the "participation and patriotism" from the newly rising bureaucratic elite did not last long. In 1932, the democratic revolution was staged by the so-called people's party.

8. Quoted in George M. Beckmann, *The Making of the Meiji Constitution* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1957), p. 132, quoted in Kenneth B. Pyle, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

9. Prem Tinasulanonda reshuffled his cabinet four times. After the general election in 1988, he was invited by leaders of five parties to head the Sixth Prem Cabinet. The fact that he turned down the invitation was more due to his long rule of eight years in power, rather than the inviability of the cabinet composition he patterned.

10. Thomas C. Smith, "Japan's Aristocratic Revolution," *Yale Review*, L, 3 (1961), p. 379, quoted in Kenneth B. Pyle, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

11. Kenneth B. Pyle, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

12. J.W. Hall and M.B. Jansen (eds.), *Studies in the Institutional History of Early Modern Japan* (Princeton, 1968), p. 187, quoted in Kenneth B. Pyle, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

13. See more discussion in Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy : Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1967, chapter 5.

14. Quoted in Joseph Pittau, *Political Thought in Early Meiji Japan*, pp. 177–78, from Kenneth B. Pyle, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

15. For Sarit Thanarat's Thai style of political leadership, see Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand : The Politics and Despotic Paternalism*, Thammasat university Press, Bangkok 1979.

16. Kukrit said, "I prefer that the Prime Minister comes from the House of Representatives, but it is not necessary to commit ourselves to this strict rule," See, "Hiavan Phob Kukrit" (Brother Van Meets Kukrit), *Thairath Newspaper*, May 19, 1989, p. 1, 14.

17. Kenneth B. Pyle, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

18. For the background of the Liberal Democratic Party, see more details in Prasert Chittiwatanapong, *The Parliamentary Dictatorship in Japan.*, Graphic Art, Bangkok, 1979, pp. 18–20.

19. Quoted in George M. Beckmann, *op. cit.*, p. 130, from Kenneth B. Pyle, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

20. See Robert E. Ward, *Japan's Political System* Prentice–Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, p. 207.