



WORRYING INDICATORS IN JAPAN – AND ELSEWHERE – ABOUT DEMOCRACY

BY BRAD GLOSSERMAN

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Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo rang in the new year by repeating his vow to reinvigorate the national debate about constitutional revision. Constitutional reform is a distant possibility – forging consensus on a draft will be difficult and procedures to change the national charter will take considerable time – but there is anxiety nevertheless, a fear that reflects a belief that a new constitution will alter Japanese politics and policies in disturbing, if not dangerous, ways.

Many observers (me among them) are baffled by this concern. It betrays a disturbing lack of faith in Japan's commitment to democracy and its commitment to restraint in the use of force as an instrument of state power. Virtually all evidence suggests that those fears are ungrounded. And yet, events around the world provide ample proof that certainties must be questioned; despite Japan's impressive postwar record, nothing can be taken for granted. It, like other democracies, must continue to nurture its democratic instincts and ideals.

Anxiety about Japanese constitutional reform stems from an imperial, militarist past that dragged the country into war and ruin. There is fear that “casting off the shackles of the past” and the pursuit of “normalcy” would somehow resurrect that ugly history. Critics point to provisions in draft constitutions that eliminate the current charter's emphasis on individual rights and instead privilege – in the name of Japanese heritage and culture – responsibilities to the group and the nation. Revisions to Article 9 that loosen restraints on the use of force by the Japanese government, in this logic, facilitate foreign entanglements and irresponsible behavior by Tokyo.

This argument is hard to take seriously. It assumes that Japanese leaders have not learned obvious lessons of history. It ignores Japan's record of peace since the end of World War II. (A record that has frustrated allies and

friends when Japan rigorously abided by its pacifist constitution.) It dismisses claims that constitutional change will allow Japan to be a more responsible state, better able to contribute to the region and the world in ways that are commensurate with its own status and to repay benefits it has received. It discounts government claims that democracy is a core value and that Japan's distinctive culture must fit within a larger commitment to universal rights, diversity and tolerance. Finally, it presumes that the will of the majority is irrelevant. If a majority of Japanese oppose a minority determined to foist a new, illiberal constitution on the nation, then they should be able to stop it. Opponents of revision seem convinced that the majority's will cannot prevail.

There is considerable polling data that reinforces this confidence in Japanese democracy. Pew Research polls show that 50 percent of Japanese are satisfied with how democracy works in Japan (vs 47 percent who are dissatisfied). For those who assert that 50 percent is a low number – although just 46 percent of Americans profess to be satisfied with how their democracy works – Pew adds that “Japanese are solidly supportive of democracy,” with 77 percent agreeing that representative democracy is a good way of governing Japan.

Survey data from Japan's Cabinet Office is also reassuring. If we assume that the belief that voters' opinions are reflected on government policy is a good proxy for faith in democracy, the Japanese people's confidence in democracy is at its highest level in three decades. In its annual survey on “Public Opinion Survey on Social Awareness,” the Cabinet asks if “the people's opinions’ are reflected in government policy.” Positive responses have been steadily climbing since 2012. In the last survey, conducted early in 2017, 34.6 percent said yes; that might seem low, but that number has only been topped in 1985 and 1987.

Similarly, there is little reason to fear that constitutional reform that loosens restraints on the use of military force will lead to abuse, foreign entanglements, and militarism.

Powerful structural constraints – Japan’s demographic trajectory and its debt problems – will continue to check adventurism. An aging population will ensure that more money goes to social services than defense – guns vs butter will become guns vs. wheelchairs – and society will be increasingly reluctant to send its most precious resource – young people – into war. And older voters vote: In the July 2014 Upper House election, 68 percent of citizens in their 60s went to the polls, but only 32 percent of those in their 20s took the time to vote.

Another Cabinet survey reveals that most Japanese believe the Self-Defense Forces are for disaster relief, maintaining national security (defending against foreign invasion) and maintaining internal order. Just 42 percent of respondents agreed that the SDF should support international peace cooperation activities – historically been conducted under strict conditions that ensured that they engaged only in *peacekeeping* rather than the more dangerous *peacemaking* – making it the fourth priority. In short there is little appetite for engagement that could entangle Japan in foreign affairs.

A kernel of doubt persists. Dig deeper and data reveals troubling indicators. In the 2017 iteration of Genron NPO’s “Asia Democracy Survey,” 43.3 percent of Japanese said that democracy is functioning well in their country; 36.2 percent believe that it isn’t, and 20.5 percent don’t know or won’t say. While a solid majority (45.7 percent) agreed that democracy is the best political system and only 18.9 percent said that a nondemocratic government is OK “in some circumstances,” there are reasons to be worried: 32.3 percent said “they don’t know” and supporters of democracy decreased 1.3 percent from the previous year’s poll. A similar decrease was evident among those who accepted nondemocratic governments – but all those who changed their minds seem to have become undecided, not democrats.

A growing number of Japanese are prepared to accept strong leadership in a nondemocratic manner if it will help develop Japan’s economy and society. While just 21 percent put themselves in this category, the growth in the number of respondents prepared to stomach this option (a nearly 4 percentage point increase from 2016 to 2017) is almost exactly equal to the decline among Japanese who want strong leadership *within* a democratic framework. Pew data reveals a similar outlook: 31 percent of its Japanese respondents favor a strong leader who can make decisions without interference from the Diet or the courts. That sentiment has its limits, however: a mere 15 percent support military rule and 49 percent say this would be a *very* bad way to rule the country.

Most alarming is a seeming fall in support for democracy among the young. In the Pew survey, Japanese aged 30 to 49 are most unhappy about the state of Japanese democracy, with 50 percent saying that they are dissatisfied. (Only 32 percent of Japanese aged 18-29 pronounce themselves dissatisfied.) That trend is also evident in the fifth and sixth waves of the World Values Survey, which reveal a “significant decline by birth cohort” in Japan of approval of democracy as a governing system, as well as the importance of living in a country that is governed democratically. Researchers highlight the fact that respondents aged 15-24 have become critical of democracy at a faster rate than people aged 65 and over.

This last trend has political scientists concerned. Political development is thought to be a one-way street: once a set of threshold conditions is obtained, the stability of democracy is assured. That belief is subject to challenge. Scholar Larry Diamond reckons that there have been 25 “breakdowns in democracy” in the world since 2000. Growing criticism of democracy and heightened tolerance for nondemocratic options in democratic societies is called “democratic deconsolidation” – and it looks to be spreading throughout the democratic world. These trends, along with the number of Japanese who are on the fence regarding the value of democracy, suggest that concern about the future of Japan’s democracy is not complete fantasy.

This is not reason to panic or to reject constitutional reform: that should proceed on its own merits. But it does indicate a need for Japan (like other democracies) to actively nurture and promote democratic ideals and practices. It cannot take them for granted. This mission assumes greater relevance and urgency given the centrality of values, especially democracy and human rights, to Japanese foreign policy. Prime Minister Abe Shinzo has put those tenets at the heart of his foreign policy to make the case for Japanese leadership as well as to distinguish his country from its rivals.

It’s a wise choice. The Genron NPO poll showed that while a little over 48 percent of Japanese want their country to exhibit strong leadership on democracy, more than 57 percent of Indonesians, and 64.5 percent of Indians look to Tokyo to play that role. They have faith in Japan’s democracy: so should we. Japan’s postwar record gives us hope. But developments here and abroad suggest that democracy can never be taken for granted.

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