

Trace and explain Japan's political development in the period 1900-45.

In the period 1900-45, Japan was politically in a gradual transition from autocracy to democracy, but such democracy was not genuinely entrenched and the country even ended up in the dark era of militarism. On the whole, Japan's political development in the period concerned can be divided into three stages, namely the period of constitutional autocracy (1900-18), the period of party politics period (1918-32) and the militarist era (1932-45).

The first stage of Japan's political development was the period of constitutional autocracy (1900-1918). Despite transforming into a constitutional country, Japan remained autocratic at heart during this period. In terms of constitution, Japan adopted the *Meiji Constitution* 明治憲法 as early as 1890 and became the first constitutional country in Asia, having a cabinet and the National Diet that was partly elected (the *House of Representatives* 眾議院). However, with regard to its nature, Japan's politics remained very autocratic. The Meiji Constitution guaranteed that the Emperor was sacred and inviolable, and his power was even above the Constitution as he held the authority to amend it. This was rule of man instead of rule of law. In addition, the *Genro* 元老 also enjoyed so much power that they could influence cabinet formation. For instance, *Yamagata Aritomo* 山縣有朋 was dubbed the 'Prime Minister Maker 首相製造者' because several Prime Ministers in the early 20th century assumed their presidency with his nominations. This showed the Genro's superior status. Moreover, the House of Representatives was not representative enough because in 1902 voting rights were confined to men who were aged above 25 and paid more than 10 Japanese Yen in taxes every year and the electorate made up only 2% of the total population. It was clear that in the period 1900-18, there was a constitutional government in Japan but autocracy persisted.

The lack of democratic tradition and centralization of authority led to the period of constitutional autocracy for Japan's politics between 1900 and 1918. It was true that Japan enacted the Meiji Constitution as early as the late 19th century and transformed into a constitutional monarchy; however, Japan had been under *military rule* 軍人統治 for more than 600 years by 1868, as compared to some ten years of the constitution. Resting on the weak foundation for this new democracy, the House of Representatives was just for discussion of political affairs with no legislative and decision-making power as well as its limited elected element. Also, the Japanese government wanted to maintain centralization of authority in order to enhance governance efficiency and defend the interests of the Genro and military, being reluctant to devolve power as exemplified by the *Cabinet* 內閣 that needed support from the Genro as the prerequisite for its formation. As a result, in the early 20th century, the Cabinet was dominated by royal or military affiliated members and Japan became an autocratic oligarchy. It can be concluded that the lack of democratic tradition and centralization of authority shaped Japan's political development in the period 1900-18.

The next stage of Japan's political development was the period of party politics (1918-32). At this stage, political parties had increased participation in Japanese politics and the electorate base also expanded, but the development of party politics still faced many challenges. In terms of participation, *Hara Kei* 原敬 became the first civilian appointed as the Prime Minister with no royal or military affiliation in 1918 and the office of the President was then mostly taken by party politicians. This marked the beginning of party politics. In terms of electorate base, the government passed the *General Election Law* 普通選舉法 in 1925 that guaranteed the right to vote of all men aged above 25, and the electorate expanded from 5% of the population to 19%, which illustrated the increase in the electoral element of the House of Representatives. But it was worth noting that the development of party politics was in fact unstable. There were frequent cabinet reshuffles, 11 times to be exact, that demonstrated the Cabinet's instability and unpopularity. Also, party politics were interrupted during 1922-24 when *admirals* 海軍大將 were appointed to the Cabinet three times under the Genro's recommendations. The political party influence was not unstoppable. Therefore, the period 1918-32 was when Japan's party politics became dominant but its development was unstable.

Such unstable development and the rise of party politics were the results of the discontent with the government. As for the rise of party politics, the middle and lower classes were upset by the government's bias in favor of the zaibatsu, its failure to let them enjoy the results of economic development and the high retail price of rice. Their discontent led to the *Rice Riot* 米騷動 in 1918 and the downfall of the Terauchi cabinet, providing an opportunity for Hara Kei to end the Meiji oligarchy and form his cabinet as the first party administration under the permission of the Genro. However, the party administration was rocked by corruption scandals and the disaffection with party politics also led to the frequent cabinet reshuffles. There were as many as 15,000 cases of violating the Election Law in 1924 and some political parties were accused of favoring the zaibatsu for political donation. The unsavory reputation of the government led to frequent changes of cabinet, 11 times to be exact in the period 1918-32. As a result, party politics were set on an insecure foundation. Therefore, the discontent with the government did shape Japan's political development in the period concerned.

The third phase of Japan's political development was the militarist era (1932-45), in which the country was manipulated by the militarists and its political system became more autocratic. This period was the dark ages for Japan. In terms of militarists, since Prime Minister *Inukai Tsuyoshi* 犬養毅 with political party affiliation was assassinated in the *May 15th Incident* 五一五事件 of 1932, the post of the Prime Minister of Japan had been held by military personnel and militarists such as Tojo Hideki until 1945. This marked the beginning of military rule and the end of party politics. In terms of political system, after the *February 26th Incident* 二二六事件 of 1936, the imperialist Imperial Way Faction lost their influence and the fascist Control Faction took full control of China and the Cabinet. For example, they restored the *Military Ministers to be Active-Duty Officers Law* 軍部大臣現役武官制 in 1936 to regain their control over the formation of the Cabinet. They also established the *Imperial Rule Assistance Association* 大政翼贊會 in 1940 to replace all political parties, putting Japan under one-party dictatorship. The constitution existed in name only. It was clear that Japan underwent the militarist era and entered the '*Dark Valley* 黑暗幽谷' in the period 1932-45.

The failure of party politics and internal struggles of the military shaped Japan's political development in the third phase. The Japanese were upset by the weaknesses of the party administration in economic and diplomatic aspects. For example, economically speaking, it failed to solve problems brought by the *Great Depression* 經濟大蕭條(1929), including serious unemployment with more than 3 million people involved. Diplomatically speaking, it failed to preserve Japan's naval strength at the *London Naval Conference* 倫敦海軍會議 and did not support the establishment of the *Manchukuo* 滿洲國 in China. The public discontent encouraged a member from the extremist Brotherhood of Blood League to assassinate Inukai Tsuyoshi. Known as the *May 15th Incident* 五一五事件, this assassination marked the fall of party politics. Meanwhile, despite the military's growing political influence, it was divided into the imperialist *Imperial Way Faction* 皇道派 and the fascist *Control Faction* 統制派. However, the Imperial Way Faction made an unsuccessful coup attempt named the February 26th Incident and gave the Control Faction an edge. As a result, Japan leaned towards militarism and there was one-party dictatorship as exemplified by the establishment of the *Imperial Rule Assistance Association* 大政翼贊會. The military took complete control of the country and party politics officially came to an end. Therefore, the failure of party politics and internal struggles of the military shaped Japan's political development in the period 1932-45.

In short, Japan's politics in the first half of the 20th century underwent three major phases, namely the period of constitutional autocracy (1900-18), the period of party politics period (1918-32) and the militarist era (1932-45). After the militarists' rise to power in the 1930s, Japan started its ruthless territorial expansion that led to its all-out war with other countries, and the Japanese eventually took the consequences of their aggression.

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