

CHAPTER II

THE ADVENT OF DEMOCRACY

Among the causes operating to restrict the military power and to reduce Japanese chauvinism, the democratization of government is the most instrumental. We cannot hope to appreciate the significance of the new manhood suffrage law in Japan without understanding how deeply autocratic theory is rooted in the constitutional structure of the nation.

Most Americans who reflect at all on how their government came into being, instinctively single out the oppressive exercise of royal authority as the actuating force leading to the fight for independence from Great Britain. Judging from our own brief history as a nation, we have built up an implicit belief that any progressive constitutional movement postulates a restriction or elimination of the "divine right of kings" idea. Many of us have only a very vague idea of what the feudal system was, and do not realize that at one stage of European history—as much our history as Europe's—it was essential to political progress that autocratic monarchies should be established in order to curb the powers of rival nobles, each of whom was sovereign in his own sphere.

In Japan the constitutional movement was not launched with any idea of restricting the power of the Emperor. On the contrary, the obvious necessity after the fall of the feudal Shogunate was to restore to royalty the political authority which the heads of the great families had withheld from it for nearly a thousand years.

Indirectly, it is useful to recall, the United States helped to force political absolutism on Japan. The "black fleet" of Commodore Perry, acting under instructions from Washington to insist upon abandonment of the Japanese policy of isolation, was the agency which unwittingly pushed the outworn medieval Shogunate into the discard. Amid turbulent times, and with no experience in self-government, it was inevitable that a majority of the Japanese people should be as eager as was Joan of Arc five hundred years before to see authority concentrated in royal hands. Not the emperor but the over-powerful feudal nobility, responsible for the serious civil war of 1877, was the agency most dangerous to political progress. It was equally inevitable that, faced with the necessity of solidifying the aristocracy behind the ruling house, Japan should choose Prussian political institutions as the only western model at all suitable to her own domestic conditions.

Consequently, it is not surprising that the Constitution, promulgated in 1889, idealizes the Emperor in a manner which at first glance seems somewhat exaggerated to American eyes. The first article announces that: "The Empire of Japan shall be reigned over and governed by a line of Emperors unbroken for ages eternal." The third article supports this somewhat positive assertion with the comprehensive statement that: "The Emperor is sacred and inviolable." Not until the fifth article—"The Emperor exercises the legislative power with the consent of the Imperial Diet"—is there any mention of popular limitation to the royal authority. Altogether no fewer than seventeen articles dealing exclusively with monarchical powers appear in the Constitution before a word is written on the rights of the subject. The section devoted to these last, however, is not far from being as comprehensive and enlightened by our standards as is the case in American organic law.

Mingling the theory of divine right with certain definite constitutional checks and safeguards has resulted in a compromise between ancient and modern which seems peculiarly suitable to the present stage of Japan's political development. The powers actually exercised by the Emperor are no greater than those remaining to the King of England, but in theory he is absolute and is so regarded by the masses of the people. It is a common Japanese belief that the Prime Minister is merely the spokesman of the monarch, a conception not without constitutional importance. On occasion, astute premiers have been known to utilize the name of the Emperor in a way which has dissipated much of the popular support for a dangerous opposition. To be coupled with this is the fact that the Japanese Cabinet need not be representative of the majority party in the House of Representatives, and has the power to dissolve the House and call a general election on any plausible pretext if it is thought that obnoxious parliamentary critics can be unseated by that step.

Unquestioning popular reverence for the Emperor is a great asset to the bureaucracies which shelter behind his mantle, and in particular to the army and navy chiefs who through the Supreme Council of War exercise a considerably greater influence in the government than is the case with their counterparts in the United States. The Premier and the Foreign Minister must share the ear of the monarch with generals and admirals, and under the division of power between military and civilian heads it is conceivable that the former may act independently of civil authority. There is a common report that the War Office took upon itself authority for greatly augmenting the number of troops authorized to participate in the Siberian expedition. Certainly, the Diet has never been able to obtain a satisfactory accounting of all the money spent in that venture. Since

1914 both army and navy have been allowed an "extraordinary military expenditure" amounting to \$450,000,000 for the eleven years up to 1926. Over these outlays elected representatives have little or no control.

There are, moreover, many factors indicating that modification of the general attitude toward the ruling house, and the military bureaucracies tied up with it, is going to be a slow process. The fervent patriotism of the Japanese people combines with Shinto doctrine to focus the Emperor as the embodiment of national spirit. This attitude is fostered by remembrance of the truly great achievements of the Emperor Mutsuhito,¹ who came to the throne as a boy of sixteen, in 1867, successfully guided his country out of the feudal period, ruled during the two successful wars with China and Russia, and saw the unilateral treaties completely abolished in the Japanese interest before his death in 1912. The simple open-air tomb of this great sovereign, close to the ancient capital of Kyoto, is not a mausoleum like those of British rulers in Westminster Abbey, but a national shrine visited daily by hundreds of Japanese who come to reverence a religious leader whom death has deified. Here may be seen the propitiation of the spirit of the national ruler or guardian which is the culmination of the deep-rooted cult of ancestor worship.

The Japanese system of education, the stereotyping effect of two years of compulsory army service on coming of age, the depth and intensity of a religious belief which is tied up with social custom and patriotism, and the absence of independent viewpoint among the women are all calculated to support political conservatism, particularly when we remember that these people are much more skilled in careful adaptation than in philosophical initiation. Then again, it is within the memory of many who

¹ Since his death known as "The Emperor Meiji," as the posthumous designation of his era.



FUJIYAMA

The majestic mountain which speaks the beauty and the spirit of Japan.



are still active that Japan struggled safely out of the period of feudal collapse by her ability to unite the spirit of patriotism with worship of the ruling dynasty. In spite of widespread social unrest springing from unsatisfactory economic conditions, it would take a bold prophet to visualize Japan as anything but a monarchy during the lifetime of any who read these lines.

None the less there are tendencies which show that in politics, as in all other lines of organized endeavor, modern Japan is caught by the same stream which has swept all the white nations toward democracy, regardless of whether or not they are content to regard that system as a final goal. The Constitution may state that the Emperor is "inviolable," but the populace cannot be kept ignorant of the fact that Yoshihito, successor to the Emperor Mutsuhito, is a hopeless invalid who, in 1921, of necessity proclaimed the Crown Prince Hirohito as Regent in his stead. The anomalous situation weighs against continuation of the popular belief that the Emperor is absolute, though collapse of this idea, of course, would not lead to abolition of the monarchy any more than it has done in England.

A very much more important dissolvent of absolutist belief, promising in time not merely to dissipate the awe in which royalty is held as a political factor, but also to modify and alter Japanese policy in many ways, is the coming of fairly complete manhood suffrage. The law bringing this great change went into effect in 1925, though the new voters will not be able to exercise their right of franchise until the next general election. Seldom in history has there been an enfranchisement act of greater magnitude than this one, increasing the electorate of the country more than threefold at a single step.

Under the original Election Law of 1890, the qualified voters of Japan numbered only about 500,000 out of a population of 42,000,000—less than 1.25 per cent. The

minimum voting age was twenty-five, which has been maintained, and there was a drastic property qualification, limiting a voice in government to those who paid at least 15 yen (\$7.50) per annum in direct national taxes. A revision of the law in 1900, lowering the property qualification somewhat, increased the electorate to about 1,500,000. In 1920 the requisite national tax payment was reduced again, to only 3 yen, and the electorate augmented thereby to nearly 3,000,000. Under the new law of 1925, eliminating the relationship between enfranchisement and property ownership, it is estimated that the total electorate will number well upwards of 11,000,000, or nearly 20 per cent of the total population of Japan proper.

Inevitably, the sudden addition of 8,000,000 new voters will mean far-reaching changes in Japan. Many are now learning for the first time that the machinery of representative government exists for them in their country. Among the millions in whom a rigid social system and perpetual poverty have combined to induce a fatalistic outlook there is dawning the realization that they have in their own hands the means to shape destiny somewhat. If there is still tremendous political apathy and ignorance among the Japanese working class there is at least none of the disillusionment and cynicism found where suffrage after long trial has proved no panacea for human ills. Politically speaking, Japan is very youthful and naïve. Her newly enfranchised voters are on the whole disposed to enter the untrodden field of democratic experiment hopefully and with enthusiasm.

The implications of the new manhood suffrage law appear equally important to the traditional governing class, though in this case the feeling is one of doubt and anxiety rather than optimism. The Japanese House of Representatives has not the same constitutional power as our own, and it is open to question that a more radi-

cal parliament, if elected, would be able to exercise very positive power in the control of national policy. The negative power of the House, however, is sufficient to cause a bureaucratic government great annoyance. The old freedom of the military leaders in determining policy cannot be recaptured now that there is a watchful electorate ready to check up on any ministry that places swashbuckling above national welfare. One evidence of the change is the probability that the famous Council of Genro, or Elder Statesmen, will not be revived after the death of its sole surviving member, Prince Saionji. Until the death of Marquis Okuma, in 1922, the influence of this extraconstitutional and strongly conservative body in influencing national policy was very great, but the efforts to create a new Council of Genro have met with strong opposition from all liberal spokesmen. The new suffrage act, in all probability, will assist the quiet abolition of this totally undemocratic device.

No class in Japan, however, has greater personal interest in the working out of manhood suffrage than those who are primarily concerned with commerce. The Japanese business man, for all that he has contributed so mightily to the strength of his nation, is still apt to be regarded as a social *parvenu*. Though the tax burden falls most heavily on his class, he has had in the past little political control over the spending of his money. Recognizing that Japan must compete more actively and successfully in world markets in order to maintain adequate national living standards, the leaders in trade nevertheless have been powerless to prevent a huge expenditure on armaments which the country can ill afford. It is with growing discontent that they have watched the national debt increase from \$1,120,000,000 in 1912 to \$2,500,000,000 in 1926.

There is a real clash of interest between the military and business groups, the former still believing that they

are the authentic heirs of the *Samurai* spirit; the latter maintaining that it is not great armies and fleets which make a modern nation strong, but commercial organization. At present, government in Japan is still largely in the hands of the aristocracy. Business men, who favor economic expansion rather than military aggression, are anxious to see the balance shifted to the middle class. And if the wage earners agree with the thesis that employers and employed have a solidarity of interest as against those who are anxious to sink all surplus revenues in armaments, the new enfranchisement act will greatly forward political domination by the *bourgeoisie*.

There are, however, Japanese who feel that the interests of employer and employed are far from being common and who would utilize the millions of new voters to develop a strong Labor, rather than a strong Liberal, party. Their effort is sufficiently significant to merit close attention, both in its political and economic aspects.