

THE IMPOSITION OF DEMOCRACY: JAPAN AFTER WWII

Miguel Angel Lara Otaola

Abstract

Democracy can always be imposed by a foreign power, especially when this country is the supreme victor after the war; however, its success and rooting in society will depend on two factors: the existence of favorable internal conditions in the defeated country and the conditions of the imposition. As for internal conditions, these are related to the previous existence of democratic values, institutions and processes in the country. On the other hand, the conditions of the imposition have to do with the logic of defeat and the way constitutions, institutions and new ways of governing were imposed. This essay will develop this argument by using the case of Japan during the post-surrender to the Americans after World War II. As for the first set of conditions, Japan had already lived a democratic experience before Second World War and the American occupation, specifically since the Meiji Restoration and through the 'Taisho democracy' period. In particular these periods, by changing the country's social and political structures and guidelines, crafted democracy and made it possible for it to be the successfully 'imposed' by a foreign power later on. As for the second condition, the American victory and the terms of the 'imposition' were somewhat respectful and consensual. Therefore, by accommodating the interests of the winners and losers, the 'imposition' of democracy had more chances to be successful. However, and as this essay shows, when an 'imposition' is successful it stops being an imposition. When models of government are implemented as a result from negotiations and take place where there is already a related historical experience, impositions stop being a top down process and become something less alien and more natural, they merely speed up the process.

Keywords

Democracy, imposition, US, SCAP, Japan, World War II

To what extent and on what conditions might democracy be imposed (hence undemocratically) by foreign power?

The important thing about this question is not whether democracy can be imposed, but on whether this imposition can be successful. Democracy can always be imposed by a foreign power, especially when this country is the supreme victor after the war; however, its success and rooting in society will depend on two factors: the existence of favorable internal conditions in the defeated country and the conditions of the imposition. As for internal conditions, these are related to the previous existence of democratic values, institutions and processes in the country. On the other hand, the conditions of the imposition have to do with the logic of defeat and the way constitutions, institutions and new ways of governing were imposed. This essay will develop this argument by using the case of Japan during the post-surrender to the Americans after World War II. As for the first set of conditions, Japan had already lived a democratic experience before Second World War and the American occupation, specifically since the Meiji Restoration and through the ‘Taisho democracy’ period. In particular these periods, by changing the country’s social and political structures and guidelines, crafted democracy and made it possible for it to be the successfully ‘imposed’ by a foreign power later on. As for the second condition, the American victory and the terms of the ‘imposition’ were somewhat respectful and consensual. Therefore, by accommodating the interests of the winners and losers, the ‘imposition’ of democracy had more chances to be successful. However, and as this essay shows, when an ‘imposition’ is successful it stops being an imposition. When models of government are implemented as a result from negotiations and take place where there is already a related historical experience, impositions stop being a top down process and become something less alien and more natural, they merely speed up the process.

Internal Conditions

The origins of democracy in Japan can be traced back to the Meiji Restoration and consist of both socio-economic and political changes. In 1868 there was a coup d’état to restore the power of the Emperor in Japan after removing the Tokugawa Shogunate. However, this was more than a move to return the power to the Emperor who had been excluded from government for many years. “The year 1868 marks a turning point in Japanese history

comparable with 1789 in France or 1917 in Russia” (Sims, 2000:1). In general the guiding ideas of this new period were “productive industry, expansionary nationalism and *guided democracy*” (Banno, 2001:1) and in order to accomplish this, Japan’s economic and political structure had to undergo many changes. These, along with the proclamation of a new constitution in 1889, the creation of new political parties and the advent of Taisho democracy in 1912, account for the origins of democracy in Japan. However, by 1932 democracy collapsed reappearing until after the Second World War.

As for the social structure changes, only a few years after the original restoration, a feudal and formally stratified country became a more equal and open society. This changed the interrelationship between the traditional structures of power and favored democracy. Lands were removed from Tokugawa control and were now property of the Imperial Government. Also all the feudal domains that belonged to the daimyo (the ruler of a feudal domain) were returned to the Emperor and transformed into prefectures (Banno, 2001:1). By changing the ownership, control and distribution of the land, the power structure was modified and with it the relations between classes were more equal, paving the way for democracy. In addition, the quasi-caste system was abolished: “the four-class system of samurai, peasant, artisan and merchant- in which the samurai, the Japanese hereditary military elite, enjoyed special status - was jettisoned” (Sims, 2000:1). These changes meant that a society that used to be tightly controlled by its feudal rulers and that was based on privileges and in-born status was coming to an end. These were favorable conditions for democracy. Democracy is, as Robert Dahl indicates, about intrinsic and political equality: therefore, you can’t think about democracy in a society that is ruled by a feudal system based on quasi-castes. In sum, by eliminating subjection to the land and class privileges, these reforms stimulated ‘self-determination’ and ‘equality’, components needed either to create or to improve a democracy. Plus, and as Barrington Moore would say, these reforms helped develop democracy by meeting some of its conditions, chiefly by ‘weakening the landed aristocracy’ and ‘turning towards an appropriate form of commercial agriculture” (Potter, 2000:20).

These social changes, in turn, were accompanied by political developments that advanced the institution of a constitutional government with democratic principles. These

developments strengthened political equality and freedom of expression and assembly and enabled voting. First of all, the Meiji repealed some laws that prevailed under the Shogunate, chiefly: laws that restricted discussions, limited public gatherings and prohibited press criticism of the government. Furthermore and as early as 1868 there was an important imperial pronouncement called 'Five Articles Oath' that encompassed several key political developments, in fact "the Emperor's Charter Oath of Five Articles publicly promised Democracy from Above" (Banno, 2001:1). In particular some of its main articles stated:

1. "Deliberative assemblies shall be widely established and all state affairs decided by public opinion (...).
2. The common people, no less than the civil and military officials, shall be allowed to pursue whatever calling they choose so that public apathy may not beset the land.
3. The evil customs of the past shall be abandoned and everything based on the just laws of Heaven and Earth"

(Sims, 2001:15)

Although rather abstract, these three articles demanded to remove feudal class divisions, to empower the common people and to give citizens a new power in state affairs.

In second place, Japan's Imperial Constitution, promulgated in 1889, contained democratic elements. This constitution incorporated notions of the Emperor as the centre, but at the same time "balanced this against the need to prevent the possibility of despotic rule and the desirability of at least some measure of popular participation in the political process" (Sims, 2000:67). Also, the Constitution created two Houses of Parliaments (Diet), allowed for political parties to compete, limited the Emperor's freedom of action, and created "guarantees for freedom of religious belief, publication, public meeting and association (...) as well as other basic rights such as freedom from unlawful arrest" (Sims, 200:68). Also, "almost half a million men aged twenty-five years and over who paid 15 yen a year in tax" (Sims, 200:68) could now vote. Finally, and although open to many interpretations as to the exercise of power, the constitution favored checks and balances between the

Emperor, the Cabinet and the Diet. Therefore, by enabling elections, having political parties, creating checks and balances and protecting civil rights, these political developments furthered democracy in Japan. In the following years and especially after the 1912 crisis (the death of the Meiji Emperor and the political change it brought with it) Japan experienced a democratic phase that lasted until before the War. This was a period (“Taisho democracy”) of democratic normality with changing cabinets, expanding suffrage (Sims, 2000:128), shifting forces in the Parliament, and expressions on the streets by political and social movements. However by the 1930’s economic and political problems, along with international trends and the importance of military priorities (Sims, 2001:162; Stockwin, 2008:25) led to democracy’s demise. Finally, by 1940 “all political parties were merged into the monolithic Imperial Rule Assistance Association” (Stockwin, 2008:26) which also absorbed many other associations in a corporatist way, thus signaling the end of the democratic period.

Conditions of the Imposition

After its defeat and surrender in the Second World War, Japan was put under the control of the American forces under the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP). SCAP commanded by the American General Douglas MacArthur, wanted to impose two key objectives for defeated Japan’ *democratization*’ (Stockwin, 2008:50). However, this imposition was more consensual and negotiated than forced. In particular, the reforms of the Allied Occupation respected some Japanese symbols and government arrangements and involved “much referring back to a body of national experience going back over several centuries” (Stockwin, 2008:56), making it easier for democracy to succeed.

Allied reforms were a mix between change and continuity. Actually after the defeat, and for legitimizing the upcoming changes, the Emperor recurred to the spirit of the Oath of 1868, justifying the “opening of the country to foreign influences, braking with past customs, and recognizing the need for wide consultation” (Stockwin, 2008:56); therefore “drawing continuities with a previous experience of discontinuity” (Stockwin, 2008:56). In the first place, although Japan was on its knees in 1945 and democratization ‘à la American’ could have been imposed easily, “strangely, (...) no attempt was made to introduce an American-style system based on the separation of powers between the executive and legislative

branches” (Stockwin, 2008:50). Instead, the occupation leaders designed a model that was closer to the Japanese experience (and the Westminster model, since it was closer to the pre-war model in Japan). Actually, “in choosing a system for Japanese government based on the fusion of powers, therefore, the Occupation authorities ultimately had the effect of further directing Japan along the centralizing path pursued by governments since the mid-nineteenth century” (Stockwin, 2008:58). Secondly, although the Emperor was no longer the sovereign of the country (sovereignty now resided on the people), the Americans retained him as a “symbol of the state and of the unity of the people”¹. Actually, General MacArthur went so far and ‘publicly praised him as the leader of the new democracy’ (Dower, 1999:27), therefore easing the changes for the Japanese population. Thirdly, although important elements of the previous regime were removed, such as the dismantling of the army, others, such as the traditional bureaucratic element in politics were kept in place. Along these reforms, other changes that also helped democracy were instituted, mainly: land reform, decentralization and suffrage for women (Stockwin, 2008:53).

In sum, the military defeat, by preserving the emperor but reinstalling democracy, by keeping the bureaucracy but dismantling the army, among other mixed processes is an example of a negotiation rather than an imposition. In reality, “military defeat led not to the razing of the political edifice, but rather a partial dismantling of it within a wider reconstruction of state and society” (Anderson, 1993). The defeat of the Japanese to the American forces, although military overwhelming, was not overpowering in the moral sense. Actually, and although what is usually “emphasized in the imposition of America’s will on an alien land” (Dower, 1999:24), it was the Japanese ‘embrace of defeat’ (Dower, 1999) that defined the moment. Without this mix of change and continuity the democratization process wouldn’t have enjoyed the sufficient legitimacy to prosper in the long run. The imposition was more a consensus.

Conclusion

Democracy by ‘imposition’ cannot thrive if it doesn’t derive from past historical experiences and if it is imposed by sheer force. Japan’s democratic experiences from the Meiji Restoration and the Taisho democracy as well as the consensual and negotiated ‘imposition’ by the SCAP prove this. The past experience of reforming the feudal system,

of enabling elections and of having democracy as one of the Restoration's goals, among others, were the seeds that the Americans reaped in the aftermath of WWII; "This almost wholesale adoption of a 'foreign' model owed much of its success, however, to Japan's own democratic tradition" (Banno, 2001:i). At the same time these seeds would have been worthless if they would have been ignored or stumbled upon; actually "much that lies at the heart of contemporary Japanese society (...) derives from the complexity of the interplay between the victors and the vanquished" (Dower, 1999:28). A mix of history and future, change and continuity was the recipe for Japan's redemocratization.

During the last years of pre-war Japan, its democratic system and constitutional government "dissolved in a moment. However, they resurfaced in post-war politics, exerting a definite influence on today's constitutional regime" (Banno, 2001:84). This is the proof that there was no real imposition but a negotiation between the interests of the winners and the historical background, ideas and values of the losers. Therefore, to address the central question of this essay, the lesson from this particular historical experience is that democracy cannot be imposed undemocratically; it has to have connections with the past and has to be negotiated and derived somehow from the consensus of people.

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¹ 1946 Constitution, article 1. Quoted in (Stockwin, 2008:51)