

Rethinking the Public Interest in Japan

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BY WAY OF explaining my presence here today, I will briefly describe myself. I am neither a sociologist nor a political scientist; I am merely a journalist covering politics for the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper. As such, I have long been interested in the nature of Japanese governance.

I personally believe that democracy in Japan has made and is making progress, with many twists and turns along the way. Certainly, it is the twists and turns that more clearly reveal the reality of governance. And we now are undoubtedly twisting and turning as Kato Koichi, the secretary-general of the Liberal Democratic Party, honestly confessed yesterday.

Politics and the economy in Japan have been in turmoil for several years. During this period, cries for reform in politics and governmental administration have been repeated openly, loudly, and mostly in vain. Despite all the criticism, pork-barreling triumphs and excessive regulation survives. Collusion among bureaucrats, politicians, and businesspeople never ceases.

As for never-ending corruption, we are now witnessing the latest revelation—bribery in the Ministry of Finance (MOF), the very core of the Japanese government. (Yesterday, Han Sung-Joo pointed out the timeliness of this forum in the context of the Asian economic crisis. I would say today that we should also note the genius of the Japan Center for International Exchange in choosing this moment to discuss the problems of Japanese governance.) As a result, many voters are beginning to lose trust in the government, if they have not already done so, and political discontent is at historical highs.

During the past two years, I was involved in several projects at my newspaper that focused on reform issues. Over the course of these projects, I gradually became convinced that at the bottom of this governance turmoil lies a growing confusion about the definition and management of the public interest in society.

Although the central bureaucracy has maintained its de facto monopoly on decision-making authority and jurisdiction over the public interest, this long-standing governing mechanism has begun to show signs of fatigue and dysfunction. In my paper "Rethinking the Public Interest in Japan," I analyzed both those signs and the changes in public attitudes toward the government.

DEPARTURE FROM THE PAST?

The above-mentioned paper looks at the breakdown of traditional ways of managing the public interest. Traditionally, the public interest was defined, promoted, and protected by the government and its bureaucracy "from the top." A tenacious dependency on the government was the result and still continues; however, this conventional approach to the public interest has brought us to an impasse time and again.

In the paper, I discuss four policy failures and serious debates over the public interest that occurred in and around 1996. Since then, the same sort of deadlocks on public interest issues have recurred.

The recession and the failure of political party realignment clearly demonstrate the inability of politicians first to conceive, and then to convince people, of what constitutes the public interest. Similarly, in the bureaucracy a series of scandals, including the current disaster at the MOF, illustrate how confused bureaucrats have become about what public service is.

Governmental incompetence and dysfunction have prompted renewed attention to be given to the public interest and the role of government. Such nongovernmental entities as nonprofit organizations (NPOs) have increasingly challenged the bureaucratic monopoly on defining the public interest by advocating an increased role for themselves. More and more people have begun to believe that there are entities in society other than the government that can and should deal with the public interest. Such entities have tried to redefine and reduce the role of government and, in turn, rediscover a society independent from government. In the event, they have accelerated the breakdown of the traditional order.

A variety of definitions of civil society exist, one of which defines civil society as a "spontaneous, concerned group of citizens acting independently of government." I believe we are observing, amid the present chaos, the emergence of this kind of civil society.

The successful emergence of civil society would produce fundamental changes in the authoritarian political culture of Japan. Accordingly, we are on the verge of a qualitative change in governance, even though many difficulties remain to be conquered.

DOUBLE MEANING OF *KO*

One such difficulty is the Japanese tendency to see the government as the sole guardian of the public interest, a perceptual habit rooted deeply in the national consciousness. An eloquent explanation of this national psychology is the fact that "public" became conceptually equated with "official" or "governmental" in the process of Japanese modernization. Consequently, Japan is what I call a "public-equals-official" society.

I describe this equation taking the Japanese word *ko* as an example. Although *ko* can be translated as "public," it also has a somewhat opposite meaning. On the one hand, *ko* means monarch, government, state, bureaucrat, or, in essence, authority. On the other hand, *ko* can mean "the people" in a democracy, or "the public." This semantic split yields words as various as *ko-en*, a garden for public use, and *ko-yosha* a car for government use.

For a more detailed discussion of the history of this word, I refer you to my paper. Historically, *ko* as "government" has prevailed over *ko* as "public." This is so partly because the contemporary notion of public was imported from the West. Moreover, during the modernization process the government, through the bureaucracy, skillfully molded the society and its notion of public. Ever since, the concept of *ko* as public has never been free from the imprint of *ko* as government.

Ko-en, or public garden, is an illustrative example. The government decided to designate existing parks as *ko-en* at an early stage in the modernization process, which seemed to facilitate the popular acceptance of the word *ko* as public, along with the notion of the public. But in reality people regarded *ko-en* as "official gardens" and tended to think that the government was responsible for their management and care. This whole process helped foster the notion that government should control everything in the public domain.

It is this public-equals-official formulation still prevalent among the Japanese people that has allowed bureaucratic authority to outlive its usefulness. In other words, to come up with a new concept of the public interest and to reappraise what is really public would be truly historic. Consequently, Japan has not yet successfully formulated a consensus on what will be the new public interest, nor has it agreed upon how to redefine it.

THREE IMPASSES

Unfortunately, I have little comparative knowledge to draw upon to contrast the Japanese situation with that of other countries. In any case, I think that the signs of an emerging civil society visible today in Japan could provide information for those interested in such matters about how an authoritarian society can change. This is one reason I focus on societal consciousness in Japan.

As civil society emerges, the following question is likely to arise: Why has Japan come to rethink what is public and reexamine the role of its government now? To be frank, it is beyond me to answer this question. Some say that the globalization of the economy has pressed the government and society to change, or that the growing wealth of the society has produced a multiplicity of social values, and so forth. Maybe all are true; in any case, we still need more research and discussion on this issue.

For the moment, it is interesting to note that in Japan the government appears to have reached the limit of its capacity to determine and manage the public interest, as shown by three trends. In turn, these trends have ignited debates over the role of government and its relationship to the public interest.

The first trend is shrinkage of the government role. There are two reasons for this. Since the 1980s, the government itself has tried to reduce the scope of its activities mainly because of fiscal constraints arising from an aging society and expanding public works expenditures. In the future, this may necessitate that some social welfare programs be left to entities other than the government. In addition, advocates of smaller government and deregulation have forced the government from the outside to reduce its role. As a matter of fact, the main arguments made by the smaller-government advocates have revolved around what the public interest should be.

The second trend is the expansion of the public domain beyond its traditional government scope. For example, the need for cooperation between city governments and citizens in reducing or recycling waste has

highlighted an area in which traditional approaches to the public interest fell short. NGOs promoting international cooperation, growing rapidly since the 1980s, have also expanded the public domain.

The third trend is the growing public awareness of the quality of government. This is a qualitative change in what citizens consider the function of government itself to be. Since the 1980s, and especially during the 1990s, discontent with government performance has increased dramatically. Further strengthened by citizens' growing resentment of their tax burden, this discontent effectively toppled the long-standing government of the Liberal Democratic Party in 1993, and is ultimately responsible for the current political turmoil.

Looking at the three trends, one realizes that they did not arise abruptly. Despite their differences, all three trends have roots in the early 1980s and have since grown in impact.

Of the three trends, the most important in my opinion is the third—the public awareness of the quality of government—since it represents a direct challenge to the public-equals-official society. Let me take as an example the so-called public information disclosure movement. Public information disclosure in Japanese is *kobunsho kokai*, a combination of two phrases, each of which includes the word *ko*. The first phrase, *ko-bunsho*, means government documents, or more precisely the records compiled and/or kept by government officials for internal use; *ko* here clearly has its government meaning. However, the second phrase, *ko-kai*, literally means opening to the public; here *ko* is used for its public meaning. In short, the Japanese phrase for public information disclosure contains two *ko*, each with an essentially opposite meaning. As such, the information disclosure itself is a square challenge to the public-equals-official formula. It is indeed the battle of whether or not you can buttress and substantiate the *ko* as public against the *ko* as government.

Then what happened in the arena? The movement for a public disclosure system, which started in the early 1980s, has been successful at the prefectural and local levels. As of 1997, all 47 prefectural governments and more than 10 percent of the municipalities had instituted the system. Citizens' activities taking advantage of the newly established system in municipalities have recently revealed corrupt practices at the local level, thereby fueling public anger and sometimes toppling local governments as a result. Even the central government, which used to be reluctant to introduce the system, is now being forced to enact a new law for the disclosure of public information.

I am not entirely optimistic about Japan's ability to depart from the public-equals-official formula in the short term, although the information disclosure movement is definitely encouraging. We have to recall again that it has taken almost two decades for the spread of disclosure systems in Japan at the local level. What we need here is not only commitment but also patience, which sometimes we journalists tend to lose.