

THE EMERGENCE OF A CIVIL SOCIETY IN JAPAN

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1. INTRODUCTION

Japanese society has often been portrayed as fundamentally “harmonious” and the Japanese themselves have often been described as hard-working, docile, and politically rather passive, preferring to leave the important decisions about the future of their nation to bureaucrats and politicians. Japanese postwar history has seen its fair share of conflict and protest; however, most of these occurrences are generally considered “exceptions to the rule” because protests and demonstrations have, for the most part, remained singular and local occurrences. Labor union protests in the 1950s, opposition movements against AMPO (*Nichi-bei anzen hoshō*, Japan-US Mutual Security Treaty) and Narita airport, the students’ movement in the 1960s, or the environmental-, peace-, or women’s movements were, however, significant factors in expanding a social stratum of socially or politically interested and active citizens. In the 1960s, it seemed as if one were witnessing the formation of an efficient civil society that could provide a social balance against the dominance of the bureaucracy-based political power structure and one-party rule. By the mid-1970s however, it seemed as if the movements had lost their momentum and the alliance between ruling party and bureaucracy was never in real danger of losing its grip on power.

The end of the Cold War and new political opportunities in the former Communist-block states, in Latin-America, in African and Asian countries have triggered renewed political science debate about civil society, its meaning and function, and its importance not only for the political development of newly democratizing states, but also for established democracies, as in the debate about “*democratic consolidation*”¹. This article will analyze the changing relationship between citizens and state in Japan and the prospects for a strengthening of civil society. The concept of civil society is still vague and has been defined in many different ways; therefore this article will first examine the development of this concept in Western as well as in Japanese discourse.

¹ See among others: DIAMOND 1994; LINZ and STEPAN 1996; O’DONNELL 1996; SCHMITTER 1992.

It will be argued that Japan has not yet fully developed into a civil society that can comprehensively be considered an effective counterbalance to the state and its bureaucracy-dominated system. However, the social and political development since the end of the Cold War has provided ample evidence to argue that the Japanese society has begun to transform itself into a more citizen-centered society based on a pluralistic and independent citizenry. Supporting factors are the increased distrust of political parties and the bureaucracy and the way in which citizens' demands have been advocated in recent years. These tendencies indicate fundamental changes of Japanese society as it moves into the 21st century.

2. THE CONCEPT OF A CIVIL SOCIETY

What do we mean when we use the term civil society? The concept reappeared in mainstream social discourse in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the end of communist or state socialist rule in Eastern Europe, along with other concepts such as the consolidation of democracy. The notion of a civil society developed by Italian communist theorist Antonio Gramsci in his notebook and letters written in prison in Mussolini's Italy has experienced a revival in recent years². Gramsci emphasized the importance of cultural, grassroots or citizen-based political activity to counter monolithic state power which at the time was Fascism. The idea that citizens should and must provide a balance to state power was an important underpinning in the case of the revolution in Eastern Europe in the 1980s, just as it was an important concept in the intellectual debate that formed the backbone of the students' movement of the 1960s, and the citizens' movements in the 1970s and 1980s in Western Europe. In Japan, the writings of Gramsci promoting the empowerment of citizens have been very influential, particularly among the many social scientists for whom his concepts provided an important theoretical and practical tool for analysis of, and opposition to, the dominating Japanese state³.

Then, in 1995, the American sociologist Robert Putnam, inspired by his own findings on the working of democracy in Italy (1993), published an

² David KALLICK (1996) mentions a series in the *New York Times* by the columnist Flora Lewis in the late 1980s about civil society in Eastern Europe that, probably unknowingly, used the concept civil society in a similar way as Gramsci.

³ Important representatives are, among others, the social scientist Hiroshi Matsuda and the educational scientist Kurosawa Nobaki. On the importance of Gramsci's writing for intellectual thinking in Japan, see e.g. ANONYMOUS (1998: 6); MATSUDA (1996).

article entitled “Bowling Alone” (1995) in which he blames the decreasing unwillingness to engage in associational organizations in the United States on the declining level of civic culture or social capital. Although his work has provoked renewed debate about civil society and civic virtues in the USA and Europe as well as in Japan, the underlying idea behind his argument is, however, predominantly based on the democratic values first emphasized by Alexis de Tocqueville, and the concept “social capital” has, therefore, more than once been criticized for being merely another term for “attitudes, norms and values that stood at the center of empirical democratic theory of the 1950s” (EDWARDS and FOLEY 1998) and, consequently, for adding nothing new to democracy theory in the 1990s.

Over the last two decades, a wide variety of uses of the term civil society have been developed. These include projects of social autonomy against dominant state power, as in the Solidarity movement in 1980s Poland; Latin American concepts developed in the struggle against dictatorship; and, in Western Europe, in the citizens’ movements and new social movements as a concept against neocorporatist policies and favoring grassroots-based concepts of democracy. In the case of the United States, the concept reappeared during the crisis of the welfare state in the 1970s, where civic groups and other organizations were encouraged to set up nonprofit organizations that could fill in the gaps left by economic liberalism and market-driven economies. Most analysts therefore complain about the weak definition of civil society, a concept that is highly dependent on the society for which it is used and the ideological school that is trying to redefine it, from post-Marxists to liberal market-economists, from neo-Tocquevillian Republicans to political opposition movement strategists.

The author proceeds from the following general definition of civil society as outlined by Larry Diamond: the “realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous of the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules” (DIAMOND 1994: 5). Its important functions include, among others, “control of the state by society”, the education towards democratic citizenship as well as leadership, and the creation of channels for the “articulation, aggregation, and representation of interests” (DIAMOND 1994: 8) as well as the strengthening of pluralistic values. This notion of civil society that particularly emphasizes civil influence as a balance against state hegemony will be taken as a guideline to analyze the current, and estimate the potential future, development of any civil society in Japan.

3. THE NOTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN JAPAN

In the late 1990s, the notion of civil society for most Japanese is expressed as *shimin shakai* or is sometimes directly taken from English as *shibiru sosa-etī* which is clearly dominated by concepts such as volunteer and volunteer movement, NPO (Nonprofit Organization) or perhaps the nonprofit sector, and sometimes includes a general notion of citizens' movements. Notions of civil society that stress its independence from state power, as well as more political notions particularly in relation to domestic politics as imagined by Gramsci, are hardly ever mentioned in daily conversation, the media, or in academic research concerned with the emergence of civil society in Japan.

The number of appearances of the word *shimin shakai* in the *Asahi Shinbun*, for example, has not significantly increased since the Hanshin earthquake of 1995⁴. The current Japanese debate about civil society has its roots in the 1980s, when volunteer movements in the field of social welfare and public service began to become more widespread. These movements often consisted of former company employees who had been laid off in their mid 50s and were attracted by general service work⁵. By 1995 the number of voluntary welfare workers and housewives who had registered with municipal centers rose to more than 5 million (*Economist* 12.4.1997: 34), including 150,000 welfare commissioners (*minsei i'in*) (TAKAHASHI and HASHIMOTO 1997: 306). This is one important reason why the word civil society is predominantly used in the context of citizen volunteers, voluntarism, social welfare, and communal building and local development⁶. On other occasions, politicians of the reform parties or of newly formed networks of local politicians who want to broaden citizens' participation, such as the "J-network" or the "List of 500" (see below), also use the expression *shimin shakai* frequently, as do representatives of NPOs and NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) on many occasions. The word is often used to attract new members; therefore, the general notion of civil society is obviously rather positive and something many Japanese want to support and enhance in some way. In the discussion about information disclosure and the new NPO law, *shimin shakai* has often been portrayed as

⁴ The number of occurrences of the word *shimin shakai* (civil society) in the *Asahi Shinbun* between 1985 and 1998 was as follows: 105 (1986), 221 (1990), 143 (1993), 201 (1995), 190 (1996), 121 (1997), 125 (1998).

⁵ These volunteer groups can still be found in the form of so-called "silver service" organizations, which recycle goods or repair them, put bicycles in lines in front of train stations, or help in public welfare centers.

⁶ The author has analyzed the use of the word *shimin shakai* in the *Asahi Shinbun*, particularly 1996 to 1998.

a necessary counterbalance against bureaucratic ignorance of citizens' demands.

Civil society has also entered the domain of social science research in Japan. A recent comparative survey entitled "Emerging Civil Society in the Asia Pacific Community", conducted under the auspices of the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE) and its president Yamamoto Tadashi, provides the first, and exceptionally comprehensive overview of the various activities of non-governmental organizations in a number of countries in the Asian Pacific region, but its main focus is limited to organizations that are active in the international arena, particularly in development assistance⁷. Although the study covers, apart from policy-oriented intellectual activities and organized philanthropy, also non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the importance of such movements and citizens' activities for the development of a more balanced exchange between citizen and society on the domestic level is only mentioned in passing. The nonprofit sector is considered the central and most important element of civil societies, particularly volunteer movements and established nonprofit organizations which are directly and practically engaged in improving living conditions and public welfare or assisting in crisis situations. Grass-roots citizens' groups which advocate greater citizen influence in policy decisions at the local as well as national level have not been considered sufficiently in this empirically based research project, something seen by this author as exemplifying the Japanese social science discussion on civil society.

As far as the activities of NGOs in Japan are concerned, YAMAMOTO (1995) mentions the increased importance of voluntary organizations, which have gained attention and increased their membership, particularly among women and younger people, in the face of a perceived failure of the Japanese government to address a number of emerging issues such as the influx of foreign workers or the aging society (YAMAMOTO 1995: 12). The Japanese government has begun to take the activities of a number of NGOs in the field of development assistance more seriously by providing grants and subsidies to finance their activities, mostly in developing countries (YAMAMOTO 1995: 14). Other sectors where NGOs that are tackling

⁷ The objective of this was the "survey of 'non-governmental underpinnings of the Emerging Asia Pacific Regional Community' ... in order to assess the state of indigenous development of civil society in each nation in Asia Pacific; to study the present state of development of regional interactions among non-governmental efforts through the identification of existing networks of collaborative arrangements; to identify major actors ... and to explore ways and means of further developing such nongovernmental regional underpinnings in the future" (YAMAMOTO 1995: xii).

global problems have gained the benevolent attention of the general public and, to some extent, the Japanese government are global environment protection, refugees, human rights, and women's rights. In many cases the Japanese government has encouraged and supported the activities of certain, mostly larger and well established NGOs or NPOs, but it has at the same time neglected, discouraged, and even disapproved of the legitimacy of demands and policy proposals made by the many smaller citizens' movements.

Nevertheless, YAMAMOTO (1995) also emphasizes once more the difficult and unsatisfying situation of the non-governmental and nonprofit sector in Japan. The apparent difficulties of NGOs in gaining legal status and official recognition in Japan are a clear indication of the long-held attitude of the government bureaucracy, which perceives itself as the sole and ultimate authority in all matters of public life: "In spite of the growing recognition concerning NGOs' role in Japan, they are not receiving treatment by the government equal to the degree of current recognition and contribution to society. The government's attitude towards NGOs has been very curt ..." (MENJU and AOKI 1995: 149).

The legal situation of NGOs in Japan may, in the long run, at least partly be improved by the 1998 enactment of the "Bill to Promote Citizens' Activities", which significantly facilitates the application and recognition process to become a nonprofit organization. So far the vast majority of smaller NGOs have suffered from a severe lack of members, funds, and general public recognition, to an extent that this has significantly prevented them from effectively working towards their specific goals. The improvement of the legal situation can certainly be considered as one of the decisive decisions in recent years in relation to the nonprofit and non-governmental sector and particularly smaller and local citizens' movements. In this respect the Japanese government has recognized, or has been forced by social pressure to recognize, especially after the government mismanagement of the Hanshin earthquake in 1995, that it needs the help of citizens and citizens' organizations to tackle many of the current social problems.

The established nonprofit sector in Japan has traditionally been comparatively large in terms of overall revenues and employment. In 1990, the nonprofit sector as a whole had revenues of almost 75 billion Euro, the second largest amount after the USA, and a workforce of more than 1,4 million (SALAMON and ANHEIER 1994: 126-127). However, the nonprofit sector was overwhelmingly dominated by only three subsectors: education and research, health, and social services. This is because the majority of universities, many schools and research institutions, hospitals and welfare centers are private institutions that are recognized as nonprofit or charitable

organizations. To a large degree, the private nonprofit sector has taken over responsibilities formerly covered by the state, and the vast majority of these nonprofit institutions have no relation to grassroots civic groups. Subsectors concerned with the natural environment, civil advocacy⁸, philanthropy, as well as international exchange and cooperation had an almost negligible share of the nonprofit sector. The following section will highlight some distinctive aspects of the development of political participation and the notion of political activity since the early 1970s in order to estimate their significance for the development of a socio-political substructure in contemporary Japan.

4. DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ACTIVITY BETWEEN THE 1970S AND EARLY 1990S

Tsurutani Taketsugu (TSURUTANI 1977) and Watanuki Jōji (WATANUKI 1962; 1967) were among those political scientists who attributed the changes in political activity and political participation that had taken place during the 1960s to the fact that Japan was transforming itself into a post-industrial society. After a period of high economic growth, which brought not only relative wealth and prosperity to virtually all socio-economic strata, but also, for example, environmental destruction and urban congestion, the general perception or “political ecology” changed, and many related “social and environmental costs became unacceptable” (TSURUTANI 1977: 178). The negative effects had finally become visible and, more importantly, had a cross-stratal impact, unlike most traditional (industrial) socio-economic issues and problems. However, even in the 1970s, it was already clear that the process of increased politicization and critical awareness had not fundamentally diminished the “desire for more benefits from modern industrialism”, indicating a “rising ambivalence regarding the benefits and costs of industrialism” (TSURUTANI 1977: 178–179).

Other developments typical of post-industrial societies could also be found: an increasing dominance of the tertiary sector, growing importance of leisure and personal life, and a rising level of education. Therefore, it was assumed that a gradual (generational) value change from material to post-material (immaterial) values (INGLEHART 1982; 1987) would also occur in Japan. Flanagan (FLANAGAN 1982; 1987; KAJIYAMA 1995), however, argued that the latter development in Japan followed only life-cycle patterns of change, whereas he had observed a prevalent generational change from “authoritarian” and “group-centered” ideals towards “libertarian

⁸ Particularly citizens' and protest movements.

values". However, all value theorists argued that such change would eventually broaden democratic values and political participation (CURTIS and STRONACH 1992). The assumption of a smooth shift to a post-industrial society was further underpinned by the fact that Japan had virtually no regional, cultural, linguistic, racial or religious divisions, and 90% of the population considered themselves "middle class"⁹.

Politically relevant is the fact that the Japanese enjoy a wide range of political rights which go far beyond voting; these include the demand for legislation or revisions, dissolution of an assembly, or the recall of elected officials. In practice, however, political activity even today is mostly confined to the local level¹⁰. One major reason for this imbalance between local and national political opportunity structure for ordinary citizens is the lack of a decentralized party system. Local party branch offices are merely support groups for candidates or incumbents. Furthermore, until the 1980s, national political parties were still dominated by ideological rivalry that was essentially unattractive and irrelevant to the basic concerns of ordinary citizens.

For a growing number of citizens, in fact, the established political parties had lost the attractiveness as a framework for political participation, and the number of people "disengaged from parties" began to rise. After the 1960s an increasing number of ordinary citizens began to become involved in citizens' movements, laying the foundation for a revival of civil society values in postwar Japan.

From a political culture point of view, the development in the late 1960s and early 1970s indicated a rise of civic awareness that went far beyond isolated objectives, such as peace, environmental protection, or gender

⁹ The observation that more than 90% of the Japanese consider themselves middle-class has frequently been criticized and has to be put into perspective. It should be noted that this is a self-assessment which may not reflect the actual financial position of the person. Traditionally, peer-group, work place, and neighborhood do have a significant impact on self-ascribed social status. Survey results in Japan are, to a certain extent, misleading because of the questions and limited number of choices presented. The Japanese in general prefer to be in the mainstream than on the fringe of society. Finally, comparative data, e.g. the international ISSP surveys, show that the majority of citizens in most industrial countries consider themselves middle-class, making Japan not such a special case. Survey results always reflect the industrialization process in a particular country; in Japan there has never been a clearly definable working class with typical associated attitudes and culture.

¹⁰ Political activity on the national level usually requires activists and an office in Tōkyō, which most citizen activists cannot afford. Even more important, most do not consider themselves politically effective enough. However, local officials and politicians are easily contacted, and protest can easily be organized.

equality, and expanded into much broader themes, greater citizens' participation in public decision-making, for example, as a human right. However, the real impact of actual citizens' social and political involvement was mostly confined to the local level. Politics on the national level was still dominated by industrial interests and ideological differences.

4.1. Declining Level of Socio-Political Activity and Commitment

Political culture studies in the 1970s showed that political activity and participation in general, and informal political participation in particular, had risen significantly since the late 1960s. Formerly politically detached and inactive social groups had become politically active, and it was therefore assumed that this trend would continue and lead to a politicization and further democratization of Japanese society.

However, actual political activity and participation did not generally develop as anticipated. Since the early 1970s, the percentage of citizens who have not been active in any way has been stable at around 60%¹¹. Most of the actual activities favored by the Japanese in the early 1990s did not require a high level of engagement or ideological commitment: cooperating in signature campaigns (1993: 21%), joining meetings or gatherings (1993: 12%), donating money (1993: 8%), and buying and reading a newspaper or newsletters of a political organization (1993: 6%). Apart from a slight increase in people's willingness to sign petitions, commitment in other activities did not change significantly between the early 1970s and the early 1990s.

On the other hand, activities which require a higher level of involvement and commitment, such as participating in demonstrations or rallies (1993: 1%), organizing a petition or protest (1993: 3%), and being an active member of a political organization (1993: 3%), either drastically declined or remained at the same level as in the 1970s. Political demonstrations since their heyday in the 1950s and especially the early 1960s (AMPO protest, etc.) have become very rare in Japan, and those that take place do not in most cases attract many participants¹².

¹¹ This and the following figures have been taken from HASHIMOTO and TAKAHASHI (1994b) and NHK HOSŌ BUNKA KENKYŪJO (1996).

¹² According to TAYLOR and JODICE (1983: 22), the number of protest demonstrations in Japan has fallen from 39 (1948–1952), to 27 (1953–1957), 94 (1958–1962), to 13 (1963–1967), and to small single digit figures per year since 1970. The same pattern applies to riots, as well as political strikes, which have virtually disappeared since the 1950s.

Given the fact that citizens have changed their attitude towards political rights and have begun to find political ways to express their dissatisfaction with a number of negative effects resulting from the high-growth period, it is necessary to ask whether the evaluation of explicit political activities and people's attitude towards Japanese democracy in general have developed as post-industrial society theorists anticipated. Specifically, have they changed from a traditionally rather passive attitude to a new preference for more active and demanding political activities?

On the local level, readiness to become active, for example when faced with environmental pollution in one's own neighborhood, has even declined between the 1970s and the 1990s¹³. One reason is certainly an overwhelming unwillingness to become involved with the authorities. Even when confronted with an obvious problem, this was the attitude held by the majority throughout the 1970s and 1980s¹⁴. In the 1970s, the younger generation preferred a more active, the elderly a more passive approach towards the authorities. This generational division has more or less disappeared in the 1990s¹⁵.

4.2. High Degree of Political Efficacy

Nevertheless, according to RICHARDSON's (1974: 71) findings in the early 1960s Japanese believed themselves to have a very high level of citizen or political efficacy. Between 73% and 80% believed that citizens' interests and votes had an impact on local, as well as national, politicians. The belief in the power and influence of ordinary citizens was very high; 71% responded that "politics is moved by our general power" and 62% emphasized the importance of elections: "the people's vote decides the operation

¹³ Asked in 1973 what they would do if threatened by environmental pollution in their neighborhood, 36% of respondents preferred direct action in the search for a solution, another 36% favored a more moderate approach (i.e. to settle the situation through appeals to the persons responsible), and 23% preferred to remain passive. Only five years later, by 1978, the percentage of respondents favoring direct action had declined from 36% to 28%, and the share of those preferring to remain passive had increased from 23% to 31%, a level that remained consistent until the early 1990s.

¹⁴ In 1973, 63% considered remaining passive the most desirable approach, whereas 12% preferred to appeal to the person responsible, and a mere 17% considered a direct-action approach desirable. These figures have not changed significantly even today.

¹⁵ In 1973, 50% of those under 30 but only 20% of those over 60 preferred a direct-action approach when faced with pollution problems in their neighborhood.

of the nation's affairs"¹⁶. In a seven-nation comparative study (VERBA, NIE and KIM (1971; 1978) conducted in the late 1960s, the Japanese scored the highest level of efficacy among all other countries¹⁷. Given the choice in the early 1970s between elections, demonstrations, petitions, or public opinion, 65% considered elections, 45% demonstrations and petitions, but only 20% public opinion as politically effective. Since then, the belief in such a high degree of efficacy has gradually declined and by the mid 1990s elections are only favored by 50%, demonstrations and petitions have dropped from 45% to 30%, and public opinion has remained low or has even declined from 20% to about 16% (HASHIMOTO and TAKAHASHI 1994b)¹⁸.

A look at the age-patterns reveals that, throughout the last 20 years, those born after 1945, hence raised and socialized during the high-growth period, believe to a significantly lesser degree than those born before 1945 in the efficacy of the above mentioned political activities. With the generational increase of those born after 1945, the percentage of those believing in the effectiveness of elections, demonstrations and public opinion has gradually declined and is likely to do so in the future, which gives reason to believe that, once again, a political generation that does not believe in the efficacy of basic political activities is growing.

4.3. Low Level of Political Participation and Commitment

Between the early 1970s and the early 1990s, a growing number of Japanese withdrew their interest and commitment from classical political institutions. Political analysts have long observed that a sizable part of the Japanese electorate belongs to the "non supporting stratum" (*shiji seitō nashi sō*), or "non-committed voters", in other words people who cannot

¹⁶ Results taken from three different surveys conducted in 1961, 1963, and 1964.

¹⁷ VERBA, NIE and KIM (1978). The other countries in this seven-nation comparative study were: Yugoslavia, USA, India, Austria, Nigeria, and Holland.

¹⁸ The percentages given here are those for the answers for "strong" and "fairly strong". The questions wording was: Q39: "To what extent are our ordinary citizens opinions or wishes reflected in national politics? Please choose from the list" (HASHIMOTO and TAKAHASHI 1994b). Given answers were: "Sufficiently reflected" (strong), "Fairly reflected" (somewhat strong), "Not quite reflected" (somewhat weak), "Not at all reflected" (weak). Time-series studies by the Prime Ministers Office show the same pattern of a declining sense of being represented on the national level (NAIKAKU SŌRI DAIJIN KANBŌ KOHŌ-SHITSU 1969).

identify with any political party¹⁹. Party dealignment has mainly been taken place on the left, leaving the support for the LDP substantially unchanged. In the 1980s, it was still unclear whether dealignment on the left would lead to realignment on the right (CURTIS 1988). Recent survey findings clearly show that the level of non-committed voters has risen to levels unprecedented in postwar Japan. Over the last 20 years, according to one study (HASHIMOTO and TAKAHASHI 1994b), the level has increased from about 31% to over 40%. Recent surveys conducted by the same institute have found the percentage even higher, supposedly reaching 55% in 1996. To a significantly higher degree, younger Japanese have no party affiliation. Surveys in 1996 put the percentage of 20 to 30-year-olds without any party affiliation as high as 70% (MONDEN 1996), and time-series data suggest that this is a generational trend, with the political generation affiliated with any one political party slowly dwindling. Political parties have become fundamentally less attractive for an increasing number of Japanese, particularly the younger generation. However, until the mid 1990s, this did not translate into increased attention to other options of social or political commitment, such as social movements.

5. INDICATIONS FOR RENEWED CIVIC AND POLITICAL ACTIVITY IN THE LATE 1990S

Despite the decrease in actual political involvement and the still rather negative image politics and politicians have in Japan, in recent years a number of developments have indicated renewed interest on the part of ordinary citizens in various forms of public involvement in, and opposition to government decisions. The interest does not have to be political in the narrow sense, but it is potentially capable of broadening the public sphere and civic involvement in general. The following are a few examples which seem to indicate this renewed confidence in civil movements.

¹⁹ The rising number of “non-committed voters” is a phenomenon that has long been observed in most Western democracies and is called the “dealignment phenomenon”. TSURUTANI (1977) describes such people as “disengaged from party identification” (*datsu seitō*), in accordance with Western terms, they are currently often called “non-committed voters” or “independent voters” (*mutōhasō*), e.g. (MONDEN 1996).

5.1. Referenda

Referenda are mentioned in the Japanese Constitution as a way for citizens to recall public officials and elected assemblies²⁰, provided they are successful in collecting the large amount of signatures required (one fifth of eligible voters) to file a petition or demand renewed elections. For the most part of postwar history, recall initiatives have not been used very often, and referenda to prevent or support specific legislative decisions have been introduced only very recently. A famous example of a recall campaign is the case of the mayor of the city of Zushi (Kanagawa Prefecture), Tomino Kiichirō, who opposed the construction of a housing project for US soldiers in a forest near the city throughout the 1980s. He survived two recall campaigns organized by construction proponents due to strong support from residents' movements (JAIN 1991; RUOFF 1993; TOMINO 1991; 1996). Although the residents' movement ultimately failed to halt construction, due to the fact that the city did not own the proposed site and as a result of immense pressure from the central government, Ruoff has concluded that this movement nevertheless fundamentally changed local politics, enhanced citizens' influence in Zushi, and provided "evidence of the strength of democratic ideals among the Japanese citizenry" (RUOFF 1993: 32). After Tomino Kiichirō stepped down as mayor in 1992 to take up a university teaching position, he became a symbolic figure of hope for many local groups in Japan. Many civic groups and movements now invite him for lectures or ask him for advice.

Since the mid 1990s, the number of citizens' groups that have used referenda has dramatically increased. The first example of a citizens' movement successfully forcing a local government to hold a prefecture-wide referendum was on September 8, 1996, in Okinawa. The issue was land leases for U.S. military bases after then-Governor Ōta had been forced by the high court to sign the proxy papers. In the case of Okinawa, this was not only a decision about military bases but also a sign of protest against Tōkyō and the central government. Sakugawa Seiichi, a professor at Ryūkyū University, said at a rally in August 1996 that the fate of Okinawa had always been determined elsewhere. The coming vote would be a great

²⁰ The right to use referenda is mentioned in the Japanese Constitution. Art. 95 refers to a special local law (*chihō tokubetsu hō*), and art. 79 allows the review of the nation's Supreme Court judges by the people at the polls, the recall of the chairman of the local assembly as well as the town mayor, and the dissolution of an elected assembly. Fundamentally, the Japanese system is a representative democracy, and referenda are only meant to complement this system for certain purposes.

opportunity for Okinawans to make history (INAI 31.8.1996: 13). As expected, more than 89% decided against the renewal of the lease of private property for U.S. military bases; however, since the turnout was a disappointing 59%, this represented only 53% of all eligible voters in the Okinawa prefecture. In the face of this surprisingly low turnout, immense pressure from the central government in Tōkyō, and the probable introduction of special legislation that would have robbed the government in Okinawa of all bargaining power, Governor Ōta agreed to a deal with Tōkyō only three days after the referendum was held (ELDRIDGE 1997). Nevertheless, the fact that the organizers of the referendum in Okinawa triggered a prefecture-wide debate, not only about the fate of the U.S. bases but also about security issues and the position of Okinawa in relation to Tōkyō, has to be considered an important example of a strengthening civic commitment.

The referendum in Okinawa was actually preceded in August 1996 by a referendum in Maki-chō, Niigata Prefecture, a small town with a population of 30,000 inhabitants. A citizens' movement²¹ organized a successful campaign against the construction of a nuclear power plant and forced the town to hold a referendum, which they won by a large margin. This was also encouraging because of the voter turnout of more than 88%, far higher than most elections. The Maki referendum is often considered a watershed decision that encouraged many other citizens' movements to follow suit (TAKUBO 1997). The will of the people was unequivocal, with 61% voting against the nuclear power plant. This should have meant the end of any construction plans. However, by March 1999 it was obvious that, despite the clearest of democratic decisions, and despite having elected a major who also opposed the project, the judicially nonbinding referendum did not have the effect the citizens had hoped for. Soon after the referendum, Mayor Sasaguchi was denied a meeting with the director of the Agency of Natural Resources and Energy, who, it was claimed was "too busy" to see him (SAKAI 1998: 35), and none of the central governmental bodies in Tōkyō showed any indications that plans would be changed. Nevertheless, the referendum movement created in the town's citizens a far more participatory attitude, and a large number of them now participate in "creating a town" (*machi tsukuri*), a movement that particularly emphasizes local autonomy and self-sufficiency, and a movement for the development of the town that "doesn't depend on a nuclear power plant" (SAKAI 1998: 35).

In 1998, however, proponents of the project began a campaign for a second referendum on the project, and the issue again became prominent in

²¹ The Association for a Referendum (*Jūmin tōhyō o jikkō suru kai*).

the April 1999 elections for the town assembly, where the eleven members who support the proponents face an equal number of opponents. Meanwhile, the Tōhoku Electric Power Company has officially announced that it will begin construction of the power plant in 2002.

Since 1996, referendum movements have sprung up in many places in Japan, particularly in response to plans to construct industrial landfills and river dams. Another important and widely influential referendum against the construction of a large industrial waste landfill was in Mitakechō (Gifu Prefecture). The June 1997 referendum was not only successful for the referendum movement because over 87% voted against construction, but also because more than 87% of eligible voters took part. In the beginning, a relatively small number of people in Mitake managed to galvanize many ordinary citizens into helping collect signatures to press the town assembly, which was in favor of the construction, to hold a referendum. The case shows very clearly that, when given the opportunity to express their own opinion, even when this means opposing the majority of the town assembly, citizens in rural and rather conservative areas are happy and willing to participate in such a campaign²². Similar referenda against industrial landfills have since taken place in other cities: Kobayashi City (Miyazaki Prefecture) in November 1997, Yoshinaga City (Okayama Prefecture) in February 1998, Shiroishi City (Miyagi Prefecture) in June 1998, and Unakami-chō (Chiba Prefecture) in August 1998. All of these were decided in favor of the referendum movement and against the construction of the disposal facilities.

There are other examples, however, of local assemblies rejecting citizens' demands for referenda. In Kōbe, more than 300,000 voters signed a petition in November 1998 asking for a referendum on a 314-billion Yen project to build a municipal airport. But despite the very high number of signatures and the large efforts invested by many citizens' groups, the city assembly rejected the proposal. The same is true of the city assembly in Tokushima, where residents petitioned for a referendum on the construction of a dam on the Yoshino River.

These examples demonstrate that a referendum is increasingly considered a useful tool to organize protest against legislative decisions and make legislators and the authorities aware of public discontent. In most cases where a referendum movement has sought to organize support, the local community has openly begun to discuss the issues at stake. This has made citizens realize that their votes count not only in elections and that there are sometimes other ways to mobilize citizens to oppose a govern-

²² For documentation on the Mitake referendum movement, see ASAHI SHINBUNSHA (1997).

ment decision. An organizer of the Mitake-chō referendum said it most clearly after the bill to enact the referendum had been passed by the local assembly: “Until now I have always felt that politics was something far removed from us, something we could not touch. But now ... it seems the politics of Mitake-chō have become closer to us” (IMAI 1998: 28). Referenda may be one way to achieve a more balanced relationship between state and society; on the other hand, given the frequency of the cases where the outcome of a referendum is simply disregarded by local or national government, people may just as likely be discouraged from taking this form of action.

5.2. *Politics Schools*

Many ordinary Japanese still consider politics something they do not personally get involved in, although they have a lot of complaints and perhaps ideas how to improve certain situations²³. However, the financial and personal investment to enter active politics, as a local assembly member, for example, is often considered too high. Additionally, low membership of political parties in Japan and a system of personalized politics which makes it difficult to enter the “political profession” both serve to deter citizens from involvement in the parties themselves or from running independently. This is particularly true for women, who do not have close enough connections to the mostly male incumbents and who believe they lack the knowledge to run for office or understand how the system actually works. In order to fill this gap, a number of so-called politics schools have been founded in recent years in all parts of the country to enable ordinary citizens to “learn the trade” (*Asahi Evening News* 4.6.1994: 5). The majority of citizens who attend these schools and seminars are women, many of whom were encouraged to become politically active in the late 1980s in protest movements against the introduction of a consumption tax in Japan. These schools are certainly a very important way to learn how the political process actually works and are places where particularly women are encouraged to turn their complaints and ideas into practical political work. Although the percentage of female politicians in Japan is still one of the lowest in the world, particularly at the local and prefectural

²³ Surveys conducted by the Prime Minister’s Office and by NHK regularly support the view that the Japanese are often dissatisfied with local and national governments in general or with concrete policy decisions, but they still do not consider it worth the trouble to organize, or participate in, any form of protest.

level, the recent increase can at least partly be attributed to these politics schools.

5.3. Volunteer movement

The relatively sudden rise of the volunteer movement has been one of the decisive factors that seems to have convinced the Japanese government that it has to promote the nonprofit sector and to broaden general citizens' involvement in matters of public concern. Although the lack of any provisions for tax deduction in the newly enacted NPO legislation can only be explained by the continuing fear among many politicians and bureaucrats that any real power in the nonprofit sector may eventually be used to oppose government policies. However, the law is certainly an important first step towards enhancing citizen activity. So far, civic groups have hardly played any role within the nonprofit sector, and it still remains to be seen whether the growing attractiveness of volunteer activities will actually benefit smaller civic groups or whether the larger, established organizations will use this energy for their own enhancement. After the first wave of volunteer movements involved in crisis situations, the improvement of domestic problems, or the development of countries in Southeast Asia, a second stream of activities can be observed on the domestic political level. A lively civil society cannot only be based on volunteers, but also needs citizens' groups and organizations which will eventually become involved in the public policy process.

6. CONCLUSION

The first broad wave of political activity that was triggered by the AMPO crisis, the Vietnam war, and environmental pollution in the 1960s and 1970s mobilized a whole new generation and new social strata that had formerly not been present in the social and political discourse in Japan. Summing up the findings from the period between the early 1970s and early 1990s, however, one becomes skeptical as to whether the anticipated socio-political broadening of political opportunities and citizens' participation was actually fundamental enough to balance the relationship between state and society. Although volunteer activity in the form of communal associations has always been important in Japanese society, in many cases this has been more out of a sense of social obligation than due to individual commitment.

Activity aimed at challenging or changing decisions made by the government or the bureaucracy, that is, political activity in the broader sense and its evaluation, actually declined after the 1960s and until at least the mid 1990s. The perceived distance between government and society, particularly on the national level, broadened, partly due to a declining belief in the efficacy of most common social and political activities, and a decreasing level of trust in the government (HASHIMOTO and TAKAHASHI 1994a; 1994b). A growing number of younger people refrained from traditional but also new forms of political activity, for example, social movements, and the data used here clearly suggest a trend towards a new, more apolitical generation²⁴.

A fundamental precondition for any civil society is a stable democratic system with political and legal institutions that are accessible, open to citizens' demands, accountable, and responsible. Hence, citizens need to find access channels where they can express their opinions, whether as individuals or as representatives of larger organizations. In order to do that effectively, information between state and society has to flow freely so that citizens can interact with the state on an equal informational level. If these preconditions are met, social democratization will also grow and further the consolidation process "by which democracy becomes so broadly and profoundly legitimate among the citizens that it is very unlikely to break down" (DIAMOND 1994: 15).

In the case of Japan, some of these factors are still not fully developed, notably the openness of the Japanese state in terms of information and public responsiveness. Although today most local and all prefectural governments have, since 1983 when Kanagawa Prefecture enacted an information disclosure ordinance, enacted similar ordinances, comparable national information disclosure was enacted only in early 1999. The long delay in the implementation of a national law certainly hindered the advance of free public discourse about state policies and stymied effective opposition.

Since the mid 1990s, however, one can find clear indications of a revitalization of social and political activity. The Hanshin earthquake that hit

²⁴ The idea of a political generation has been suggested before by RICHARDSON (1974: 198–200) who, concerning age and political culture in the 1960s, argued that people who were over 45 years of age, hence who had come to maturity before or during the war, were exposed to different kinds of political socialization influences. However, RICHARDSON also stressed that empirical research had shown that there are normal life-cycle patterns in political attitudes which may blur any clear political generation pattern (1974: 190). RICHARDSON concluded in 1974 that "generational effects attributable to the general differences in prewar and postwar political climate were at work" (1974: 224).

Kōbe and parts of Ōsaka in January 1995 triggered a wave of dissatisfaction with the way the Japanese government handled the crisis, but it also revived a sense of community and social autonomy, encouraging citizens once more to take matters into their own hands. Additionally, the economic crisis that began in the early 1990s and has been reinforced by the severity of the economic situation in Asia since 1997, has shaken the forty years of trust in, and reliance on, the way the Japanese government has managed the economy.

Finally, the number of younger politicians and politically active women is increasing. Most of these are independent local assembly members who have formed a movement, "Rainbow and Green List of 500" (*niji to midori no 500-nin risuto*), that aims at changing national politics from the local level²⁵. These local politicians do not want to establish a new political party and, by naming it a list, they are following the example of the German Greens (*Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*), who preferred in the beginning to set up a forum for citizens' debate and a grassroots movement.

Since the early 1990s, one can observe a renewed increase in the number of movements which have raised their voices and debated their concerns and ideas about a great number of social and political issues in Japan. Examples of this are the growing interest in social movements (e.g. environmental movements, volunteer movements, even protest movements), and the revived search for ways to influence policy decisions from outside political parties through various means: referenda (e.g. in Maki-chō, Mitake-chō, or in Okinawa); signature campaigns and petitions; and law-suits against local government bodies, a strategy frequently employed by opponents of waste facilities (waste landfills and waste incinerators). One can dismiss some of these referenda as expressions of NIMBYism, or not-in-my-backyard politics (LESBIREL 1998), because the primary objective of the referenda has been to prevent the construction of such facilities in the close vicinity of the voters. However, the referenda movement has indeed triggered a renewed debate within local communities, not only about the issues at stake in the referenda, but also about political style and enhanced citizens' participation in general. Whether successful or not, the growing number of incidences seem to indicate a tendency towards more contentious politics and more demanding and party-independent citizen activity at all levels (political, social, volunteer activities, nonprofit, non-governmental, etc).

Over much of the last fifty years, the Japanese bureaucracy has kept citizens and their demands at bay and claimed a right to rule the country in

²⁵ For an introduction to the aims and objectives of this list of 500, see CHIHŌ GIIN SEISAKU KENKYŪKAI (1998).

line with their own elitist government style. Particularly national elitist government bureaucrats are still hesitant to give up influence and power to local government branches and citizens; however, the recent wave of political reform bills have certainly contributed to decentralization and enhanced citizens' influence in all public matters. It seems as if the Japanese government, in its recent reforms, has finally given in to decade-long demands for more openness and recognition of contributions from within Japanese society. In all, there is ample evidence that the relationship between citizens and state is gradually becoming far more equalized, so that the Japanese society of the 21st century will be in a far better position to challenge government decisions and to promote a pluralistic discourse about all matters of public concern.

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