

Politicians and Bureaucrats in Contemporary Japan: New Twists on a Tumultuous Relationship

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On January 18, 2018, Arnaud Grivaud, a postdoctoral researcher at the French National Institute of Asian Language and Civilisation (INALCO), addressed a session of the DIJ Social Science Study Group.

Grivaud began by noting the threat to democracy when bureaucrats do not implement the policies of the politicians who appoint them. To address this challenge in Japan, reforms were introduced in the 1990s, and then in 2009 the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) was elected on a platform of promoting leadership by politicians. Grivaud's studies focus on the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats, which he investigates for evidence of change.

In Grivaud's account, in the decades after the Second World War, a "theory of bureaucratic supremacy" (*kanryo shihai ron*) emerged which held that bureaucrats were in charge. In those days, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) actively recruited former bureaucrats as politicians because their expertise was valuable in the effort to establish solid electoral bases.

Then in the 1970s a "theory of political party supremacy" (*seito yui ron*) emerged. After years of LDP rule, the political party was now deemed to be dominant. This era saw the emergence of *zoku-giin*, "tribes" of politicians with specific areas of interest, such as agriculture, who associated with related bureaucrats and business representatives.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, various changes were undertaken, ostensibly to strengthen the primacy of the prime minister and politicians. The outputs included electoral reform and consolidation of the ministries.

In the postwar years, many bureaucrats saw themselves as true defenders of the national interest, above the vested interests of the politicians (era of "bureaucratic supremacy"). Later a view emerged of bureaucrats as coordinators (era of "party supremacy"). By the time reforms were being introduced in the 1990s, many bureaucrats had come to see themselves as public servants. More recently, younger bureaucrats have been positioned as leaders of reform.

When the DPJ came to power in 2009, new reforms were implemented to further weaken the authority of the bureaucrats and to place them under the supervision of politicians. But Grivaud suggested that the DPJ made two key mistakes. One, it attempted too much institutional reform too quickly. And two, the DPJ attempted to expel the bureaucrats from positions of authority. He argued that in fact many bureaucrats were potentially sympathetic to the DPJ after years of LDP dominance, but the DPJ lacked a nuanced understanding of this reality.

Current Prime Minister Shinzo Abe learned from these errors, and from his own errors during his first term in office (2006-2007). Since coming to office again in 2012, he has made a conscious effort to bring into his immediate circle bureaucrats who can keep him up to date on news within the ministries.

Grivaud pointed out that this actually mirrored the strategy of former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi, one of the more charismatic LDP leaders of recent times. But one key original move by Abe, according to Grivaud, was the establishment in 2014 of the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs (*Naikaku Jinji Kyoku*), which concentrates in the Cabinet the power to nominate nearly 700 senior bureaucrats. This makes possible the political selection of bureaucrats who are likely to be facilitators of government policy. While such decision-making power had previously been possible in theory, Abe was the first prime minister to implement this selection process.

While Grivaud suggested that bureaucrats are warier in this new reality, he stressed that it should be viewed in the broader context of the reforms that began in the 1990s, and of ongoing changes in the mindsets of both bureaucrats and politicians.

Answering questions after his talk, Grivaud said that while information (and the ability to leak it) remains one source of power for bureaucrats, their freedom to engage with the private sector, for example, is now more strictly circumscribed. Among other changes, he noted that a higher proportion of bureaucrats with economics expertise are being recruited from Keio and Waseda universities, whereas in the past the Law Department of the University of Tokyo dominated the intake. And while more women are being recruited as bureaucrats under the Abe administration, as yet very few are working in senior positions.

by Adam Fulford