

Japan — Va-PoReg Country Report

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11/29/1890 Start Autocratic Monarchy: From 01/03/1868 to 11/29/1890, Japan was governed as a non-electoral oligarchic autocracy in which political authority was concentrated in the hands of the *genrō*, a small group of Meiji leaders who exercised collective control over the state. The emperor functioned largely as a source of symbolic legitimacy, providing the ideological foundation for centralized rule, while the oligarchs shaped policy and dominated the emerging bureaucratic and military institutions. Decision-making was informal and elite-driven, with no representative bodies, electoral mechanisms, or legal checks on executive power. This configuration allowed the regime to pursue rapid modernization while maintaining strict political control, fusing traditional legitimacy with the administrative techniques of a modern state (Beasley 1972, Totman 2000). The promulgation of the Meiji Constitution in 1890 marked the institutional codification of this power structure, transforming it into a formally constitutional yet substantively autocratic monarchy. According to the Meiji Constitution from 02/11/1889 the emperor was granted supreme control of the army and navy, it came into effect on 11/29/1890.¹ A privy council composed of the Meiji *genro*, created prior to the constitution, advised the emperor and wielded actual power.² Sovereignty was vested in the person of the emperor who was authorized to exercise them. The constitution was not seen as a „mystical power hovering over the State” but rather as any other law that to be enacted and changeable (Kenneth 1932). The emperor held the authority to appoint the judges to the courts and the cabinet including the ministers and the prime minister. The constitution created a bicameral imperial Diet which was made up of the House of Representatives and the House of Peers. The former was elected by the Japanese citizens. However, only about 1,1% of the population were eligible to vote. This can hardly be considered a considerable amount of the population. The Diet was required to give its consent to legislative projects of the emperor. According to the constitution maker, however, it could also initiate projects of law (Kenneth 1932).³ Only multiparty legislative elections were held until 1917 according to LIED. From 1918 onward, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held according to LIED. However, universal male suffrage was absent (LIED). In the 1920 general election voting was limited to men over the age of 25 who paid at least three yen annually in direct taxes, a decrease from the ten yen requirement in the 1917 elections. This change raised the percentage of the population eligible to vote to 6%.⁴ Political liberties are coded as absent per LIED and can be interpreted as ambiguous per V-Dem’s PCLI in this time. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive was subordinate to or held equal power with other institutions, indicating executive parity or subordination. For the period 1900-1917, V-Dem’s JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem’s LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate. From 1918-1925 V-Dem’s LCE increased to robust.

05/05/1925 End Autocratic Monarchy/Start Constitutional Monarchy: On this date the General Election Law was passed by the Diet of Japan (Quigley 1926: 392).⁵ It introduced universal adult male suffrage for males over 25.⁶ The Meiji Constitution continued to be enacted but the House of Representatives was now actually elected by a considerable number of citizens. According to LIED multiparty executive and legislative elections were held until 1935, from 1936 to 1939 only multiparty legislative elections were held and from 1940 onward only legislative elections, which were not multiparty were held. In the 1930s a large rift between the parliamentary government and the military formed. The military distrusted the government highly and

held, though restricted by the government, a considerable amount of power. Throughout the 1930s, the army plotted to get rid of the parliamentary government. V-Dem's PCLI indicates an ambiguous state of political liberties until 1930. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive was subordinate to or held equal power with other institutions, indicating executive parity or subordination. For the majority of the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating robust constraints on the executive.

11/14/1930 End Constitutional Monarchy/Start (Monarchical) Military Autocracy: On this date, Prime Minister Hamaguchi was assassinated after attempting to curtail military power. In March 1931, high ranking military officers planned a coup but then abandoned it. By this point, the civilian government no longer had control over the population.⁷ On 09/18/1931 Japan invaded Manchuria, which was captured by the Kwantung Army without authorization from the government. Japan established at the end of the war in February 1932 the puppet state of Manchukuo. Prime Minister Inukai tried to stop the army by imperial intervention but failed.⁸ On 05/15/1932, a terrorist attack was carried out in Tokyo led by naval officers. On 05/15/1932, Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi was assassinated by naval officers. This event marked a turning point, leading to a heightened military presence in governmental affairs, ultimately diminishing the role of civilians. The abortive coup of February 1936 further consolidated the military faction's power, particularly under Tojo Hideki's leadership. Subsequently, the regime developed a robust security apparatus dedicated to combating political opposition (Shillony 1981: 1, Worden 1992: 44-45, 56, 58, Tipton 2002: 116, Cullen 2003: 254, 261-69, Goto-Jones 2009: 77-80, James 2011: 169, Hofmann 2015: 63, 69-70, Ward 2019, Casey et al. 2020: 11). On 02/26/1936 a coup was organized by a group of young Imperial Japanese Army officers with the goal of purging the government and military leadership of their factional rivals and ideological opponents. Despite the failure of the coup, it had the effect of significantly increasing the military's influence over the civilian government. Downtown Tokyo was held by the army for three days. Several statesmen were murdered. However, the leaders of the revolt were quickly captured and executed. The Okada cabinet resigned on 03/09/1936 and a new cabinet was formed by Kōki Hirota, Okada's foreign minister.⁹ Although this period beginning at the start of the 1930s showed significant military influence as well as a lack of government control over the military, it is not coded as a military autocracy seeing as the attempts by the military to oust the government and obtain full power all failed sooner or later. LIED continued to code political liberties as absent. According to V-Dem's PCLI political liberties were not really present from 1931 to 1939 and absent afterwards. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive was subordinate to or held equal power with other institutions, indicating executive parity or subordination. V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating robust constraints on the executive with the exception of 1933-1944, which we interpret V-Dem's LCE as decreasing to moderate.

08/15/1945 End (Monarchical) Military Autocracy/Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Allied Powers]: After the unconditional surrender Japan was occupied by the Allied Powers. While it was theoretically an international occupation it was carried out almost entirely by US forces under General Douglas MacArthur. A new constitution (promulgated 1947) vested power in a democratic government and replaced the Meiji Constitution. In it the emperor was reduced to ceremonial status, and women were given the right to vote. For both sexes the voting age was reduced to 20.¹⁰ According to LIED no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held.

04/25/1947 End Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Allied Powers]/Start Indirect Rule Occupation Regime [by Allied Powers]: The parliamentary elections on 04/25/1947 were held still under US occupation.¹¹ According to LIED no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held. Political liberties were still coded as absent (LIED) and can be interpreted as not really present in 1945, as somewhat present from 1946 to 1947 and as present from 1948 onwards according to V-Dem's PCLI. In 1945 and 1946 V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating robust constraints on the executive. For the remaining relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating comprehensive constraints on the executive.

04/28/1952 End Indirect Rule Occupation Regime [by Allied Powers]/Start (Monarchical) Liberal Democracy: On this date the Treaty of San Francisco took effect. The government continued as a partially US-inspired bicameral parliamentary democracy after US-occupation ended. Convention prescribes the president of the elected party in the House of Representatives becomes the prime minister and thereby the chief executive. The Emperor of Japan remains the ceremonial and symbolic head of state. Japan holds regular fair and free multi-party elections with universal suffrage (limited by age) and enjoys constitutionally guaranteed liberties such as the freedom of speech and press.¹² Ever since the country's democratic transition political liberties were present according to LIED and V-Dem's PCLI. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. V-Dem's EF&FI and CEI score elections as free, fair and clean. FH lists the country as free since the start of their timeline in 1972. The presence of strong and independent institutions such as the Supreme Court, with the power to interpret the constitution, limit executive power. Based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive was either equal to or subordinate to other institutions, demonstrating strong constraints on decision-making authority. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating comprehensive constraints on the executive. We classify Japan as a democracy in the whole regime period. However, besides its strong democratic characteristics, its democratic quality is sometimes criticized due to the weakness of the opposition. The currently ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has almost exclusively been in power since the 1950s. However, the elections are and were nonetheless overbearingly fair and free, thereby still warranting the classification as a full democracy.¹³ It is noteworthy that the LDP's governmental dominance was not unchallenged, in the year 1993 a coalition of seven parties (i.e. JNP, SHIN, SDP, KOME, DSP, SAKI and SHAM) formed, but it was evidently unstable and lasted only for about half a year.¹⁴ Additionally, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the LDP was subjected to numerous scandals involving corruption which led to Prime Minister Sosuke Uno's resignation and several LDP politicians leaving the party.¹⁵ This indicates that civil society control over the government is intact. Gender equality continues to be an issue in Japan: in the 2023 Global Gender Gap Index, it ranked #125 out of 146.¹⁶ In 2016 the voting age was reduced to 18.¹⁷ As per FH's classification for this regime period, the country is considered free with a score ranging from 2 to 4, which we also interpret as free in our framework.

(Monarchical) Liberal Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional Sources (Dolan/Worden 1994, Klein 2001)

Notes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meiji_Constitution

² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Meiji-Constitution>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meiji_Constitution

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1920_Japanese_general_election

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_Election_Law

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_suffrage#cite_note-centralasiainstitute.org-37

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Japan#Modern_Japan

⁸ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Japan/The-rise-of-the-militarists>

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/February_26_incident#Change_of_government

¹⁰ <https://www.britannica.com/event/occupation-of-Japan>

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1947_Japanese_general_election

¹² <https://www.hudson.org/democracy/first-democracy-japan-jun-isomura>

¹³ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/09/democracy-japan>

¹⁴ <http://www.chisols.org/narratives.html>, see narratives for version 5.0, Japan_V: 4

¹⁵ <http://www.chisols.org/narratives.html>, see narratives for version 5.0, Japan_R: 5

¹⁶ <https://www.statista.com/topics/7768/gender-equality-in-japan/#topicOverview>

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