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Hereditary Succession Politicians in Japan: It is Time to Reconsider

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What is hereditary succession?

Hereditary succession refers to the inheritance of a specific position such as official rank or peerage, occupation, property, etc., from generation to generation. Hereditary succession is a phenomenon that is widely seen in Japan, such as the imperial family system, court nobles, traditional cultures such as tea ceremony and flower arrangement, traditional crafts, traditional arts, sports, medical doctors, pharmacies, legal professions, diplomats, executive corporate management, merchants, temples and shrines, and agriculture and forestry.

Hereditary succession is part of the traditional authority that Max Weber defined as one of the legitimate rules. The imperial family system is legitimated in the constitution of Japan, saying that, “The Emperor shall be the symbol of the State and of the unity of the People, deriving his position from the will of the people with whom resides sovereign power (Article 1)” and “The Imperial Throne shall be dynastic and succeeded to in accordance with the Imperial House Law passed by the Diet (Article 2).” This is the public system by law and others mentioned above are private systems, which are categorized as a unique skill, privilege, or property succeeded from generation to generation, or a traditional family-run business.

When Japan had the household legal structure system (family system) in the previous civil code (1898 to 1947), a succession of the household was considered the most important in lives, so it may be possible to consider the primogeniture heritage system to be part of the hereditary succession system. If it is so, Japanese people lived in a hereditary succession system nationwide. The family system was abolished in the civil code of 1947; however, some hereditary traditions and businesses remain unchanged by their mission. It implies that these hereditary traditions and businesses have a unique culture in the foundation that has never been changed as time goes by.

Everybody recognizes with respect the value of inheriting traditional skills or businesses through hereditary succession and one of the unique examples in Japan is *kabuki* actors. They are hereditary succession actors of

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Japanese traditional performing art, who succeed in their stage names from the grandfather to the father and from the father to the child for 400 years. Nobody complains about such hereditary succession in *kabuki* actors.

In contrast, people tend not to like hereditary succession when they are in public office. A typical example is a hereditary politician. This type of hereditary succession is seen not only in Diet members but also in local assembly members nationwide. Why are there so many hereditary succession politicians in Japan? This essay focuses on hereditary succession politicians and discusses their characteristics and impacts on politics in Japan.

What is a hereditary succession politician?

There are approximately a total of 35,000 political professions in Japan (Statistics Bureau of Japan as of March 2021). Of these, 713 are members of the Diet (i.e., the House of Representatives 465, the House of Councilors 248). In addition, 47 prefectural governors, 1,737 municipal mayors, 2,598 prefectural assembly members, and 29,423 municipal assembly members. Below, members in the House of Representatives are focused.

The Diet members are often a group of people who ascended office through hereditary succession. In the period 1970 to 2000, it was an average of 25% of hereditary succession politicians in the House of Representatives (Tamura 2007, 93). The remaining 75% of members are ex-bureaucrats, representatives of trade unions or some industry groups, celebrities (in entertainment, sports, etc.), and ex. local parliament members.

It is considered typical of hereditary succession politicians that the position of a member of the Diet is inherited from the grandfather to the father and from the father to the child like a *kabuki* actor. There are cases where the politician's position is inherited by an adopted child or a son-in-law. The politician's position is taken over one generation, sometimes two generations to the succession. There are cases in which children run for office in the House of Representatives single-seat constituencies within the constituencies whose fathers or relatives are members of the House of Councilors (Tamura 2007, 88).

The current Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida, is the third generation of hereditary succession politicians. His Cabinet members have 12 hereditary politician ministers out of 20 ministers. Kishida appointed his son as the executive secretary to the Premier. Before that, Yoshihide Suga was not a hereditary politician and emphasized it for his rare characteristic. In other words, "non-hereditary" is rare in the ministers appointed among the members of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in the Diet.

Shinzo Abe was a typical hereditary succession politician. The father of Abe was former Minister of Foreign Affairs Shintaro Abe (1924-1991), his grandfather was former Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi (1896-1987), and his great-uncle was former Prime Minister Eisaku Sato (1901-1975). His brother Nobuo Kishi was the former Minister of Defense. Abe's profession was part of the family business. Abe was first elected to the House of

Representatives in 1993. After serving as deputy chief cabinet secretary, secretary-general of the LDP, and chief cabinet secretary, Abe served as prime minister from 2006 to 2007 and from 2012 to 2020 for eight years and eight months as the longest record in the postwar.

Current status of hereditary succession politicians

The number of hereditary politicians does not appear in official statistics but appears in private research. The number of hereditary succession politicians depends on the definition of hereditary. A hereditary succession politician is hereby defined as “a person whose parent, stepparent, or grandparent is a member of the Diet, or who has a member of the Diet among relatives within the third degree of kinship and who runs from the same constituency.”

According to the recent research blog as of September 2021, 91 are hereditary members (i.e., 79 in the House of Representatives and 12 in the House of Councilors), which is equivalent to 14% (i.e., 19% in the House of Representatives and 5% in the House of Councilors). It shows that the ratio of hereditary politicians in the House of Representatives slightly downed from 25% (1970 to 2000) to 20% now.

Of the 91 hereditary members, 46 are second-generation members, 28 are third-generation members, and three are fourth-generation members. There are 2 members who succeeded their spouses after their husband's members' deaths, and 12 others such as succession to relatives including a son-in-law. The number of hereditary members by Diet faction is 78 LDP and 9 members of the Constitutional Democratic Party. There are no hereditary members in *Komeito*, another coalition ruling party, and the Communist Party.

It is apparent that hereditary succession politicians appear mainly in the LDP in the House of Representatives. They mostly occupy prime ministers and ministers in office. In fact, among 33 prime ministers in the post-war, 16 were hereditary politicians at 48% (Nakagawa 2022). Particularly, after 1989 when the Showa emperor passed away, 11 prime ministers were hereditary politicians out of 18 at 61%. This fact makes people believe that Japanese politicians are mostly by hereditary succession.

Considering heredity, including the cases where there are governors or mayors and local assembly members among relatives, the number of hereditary politicians is even greater. In Asia, hereditary succession politics in top leaders is seen in North Korea, India, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, and Japan (Thompson 2012). In the case of Japan, hereditary politics covers the national and local assembly members, which is unique in the world.

What impacts do hereditary succession politicians take on politics?

Hereditary succession is a system that places the highest priority on blood ties or alternatives and does not necessarily emphasize the capability and efforts of politicians. This is based on pedigree legitimacy, which was seen

in *samurai* society before the 19th century. This system is closely related to the traditional culture of Japanese rule.

In hereditary succession, politicians inherit the support groups and individual supporters of the single-seat constituency system. In general, this method brings the interest of maintaining vested interests for both politicians and supporters. The ties between politicians and supporters lead to a distribution of wealth from the centre to the periphery. Such a mechanism has been at the heart of the LDP politics since 1955 when the LDP was founded.

As hereditary politicians are so strong in the election being supported by inherited support groups and individual supporters. Consequently, eight House of Representatives elections have been held since October 1996, and only about 20% of the 8,803 candidates who have run for single-seat constituencies are newcomers (Nikkei 2021). Hereditary succession politics, therefore, create a negative effect that prevents new entrants from politicians.

Hereditary succession politics contributed to a distribution mechanism during economic growth. There is however an analysis that attracting subsidies to local industries by hereditary succession politicians weakened the industrial competitiveness of the region overall (Asako et al. 2015). Japan is turning the corner into a super-aged society, and the social system, industrial structure, and working environment must be renovated. In this regard, the importance is wisdom and leadership of politicians, not just hereditary.

Crisis in Democracy

Hereditary succession politicians have played an important role in postwar politics in Japan. They can share the mission spirits of the political professions that have been succeeded from generation to generation. After generation changes, they seem to have lost mission spirit on what they must do and instead are satisfied with what they are in their Diet.

As a behaviour pattern, it is conspicuous that hereditary Prime Ministers tend to ignore proper constitutionalism, disregarding the Diet debate. They are sometimes not so diligent to respect the ethics of politicians such as accountability, honesty, and fairness that they behave like a tycoon. Many of the politicians who act in this way are hereditary succession politicians. In this sense, it is the time to review everything from scratch, from the ethics of politicians to the national electoral system.

The crisis in democracy is happening not only in the United States but also in Japan. In the U.S., it is due to a division between two political parties and citizens. In Japan, it is due to little mobility of able human resources into politics in part because hereditary succession politicians occupy 20% of the House of Representatives. Consequently, the young generation sees politics as something out of their reach and irrelevant to them. This is a crisis in democracy, not just anomie or apathy.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that hereditary succession politics is undoubtedly one of the root causes of the stagnation of politics such that the young generation particularly is not interested in Japanese politics. The time has come to reconsider whether this is the right thing to do about hereditary succession, which is a crucial issue in Japanese politics (Nakagawa 2022).

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