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Dynasties and Democracy in Japan

Abstract

One of the rules of democracy is that everyone can be a politician, but even in a democratic system there is a phenomenon called “democratic dynasties.” Democratic dynasties mean that multiple members of one family become politicians. In a democracy with long democratic traditions, normally 5%–10% of all legislators come from democracy dynasties and this phenomenon declines over time. Except Japan. After the Second World War, about 3% of the members of Japan’s Parliament were related to previous members of the pre-war government. Since then, the proportion of legacy MPs in the Parliament subsequently increased toward over 40% by the late 1980s. Moreover, in the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which has been the dominant party in Japan since 1955, nearly half of all members in the 1980s and early 1990s were legacies. Currently, the proportion is decreasing, but is still more than 25%. The author analyzes the democratic dynasties phenomenon in Japan, trying to understand why in Japan, unlike other countries, the proportion of legacies is so high.

Keywords: Japan, political dynasties, democracy, policy

1. Introduction

Robert Michels wrote in his book *Political Parties* that “At the antipodes of the monarchical principle, in theory, stands democracy, denying the right of one over others. In abstracto, it makes all citizens equal before the law. It gives to each one of them the possibility of the way for the rights of the community, annulling before the law all privileges of birth, and desiring that in human society the struggle for pre-eminence

should be decided solely in accordance with individual capacity" (Michels, 2001, pp. 8–9). In fact, there is a problem with the theoretical definition of democracy, what democracy means now, and what it meant in different times and countries. Ben Saunders noticed that democracy is often associated with majority rule and/or political equality. In his definition, democracy implies that decisions made by a group must express the wishes of the members of that group. Political equality emphasizes that every member of that group has an equal chance to influence the group's decisions. The majority rule, in turn, means that the decision made by the group must be a group decision (Saunders, 2010). In theory, every member of society can become a politician and influence the governance process.

Popular elections are the key mechanism of political selection and the main principle for distributing political power. Yet, even now, in the countries where democratic ideas are strong and have a long tradition, we can observe the phenomenon of "democratic dynasties." Kinship is still important in determining the ruling class. Recent prominent politicians all over the world are the best examples: Hilary Clinton in the United States, former South Korean President Park Geun-Hye, Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and Japan's Prime Minister Abe Shinzō. Democratic dynasties are a common phenomenon, but there is a problem if the proportion of dynastic politicians is high, as it raises questions as to whether democracy is functioning properly.

2. Political Dynasties in the Democratic System

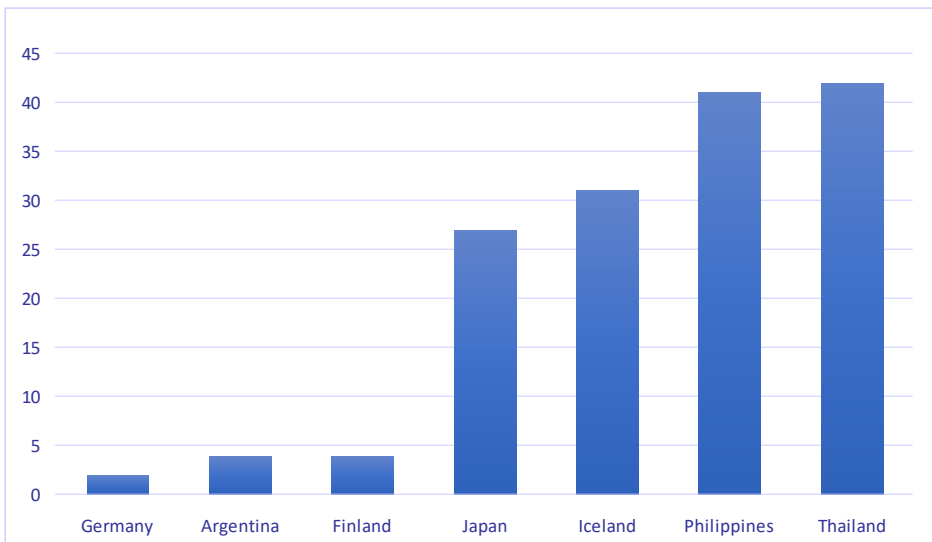
In nondemocratic regimes such as dictatorships and monarchies, dynastic rule means that an autocratic ruler often anoints a family member as his successor. In that case, selection mechanisms are weak and allow the limiting of power distribution to a broader elite. The best example is North Korea. Kim Il-Sung anointed his son Kim Jong-Il to become his successor in the position of the ruler of the state in 1994, and then, in 2011, the son of Kim Jong-Il, Kim Jong-Un came to power as the "Great Successor."

In democratic countries, a similar phenomenon exists as well. The difference is that even if a member of such a dynasty wants his or her successor to become a politician, that successor must ultimately be popularly elected. The democratic idea of equal chances means that no individuals

are more privileged by birth to enter into politics. That legal equality of all citizens should end the existence of dynasties in this system, but that has not happened. In many democratic countries, there are powerful families and their members become potent politicians at the national level (Smith, 2018, p. 3).

Benny Geys and Daniel M. Smith offer broad definitions of a dynastic politician. They defined such a politician as a person who is related by blood or marriage to other individuals who hold political office. This definition covers politician's children, siblings, spouses, grandchildren, and other members of the family (Geys & Smith, 2017). Depending on the character of the work, the framework of this definition can include a variety of family relationships and levels of government – most of them focused on the national level. This definition may change depending on the country. For example, Stephen Hess defines American political dynasties as “any family that has had at least four members, in the same name, elected to federal office” (Hess, 1996). He also limited this definition to members who share the same family name. That means that individuals who have the same roots but a different surname for some reason, like marriage, cannot be included in the analysis.

Figure 9.1. The Percentage of Democratic Dynasties Around the World



Source: Smith, 2018, p. 5.

Daniel M. Smith, in reference to Japanese political dynasties, defines this phenomenon as “any candidate for national office who is related by blood or marriage to a politician who had previously served in national legislative or executive office” (Smith, 2018, p. 4). This kind of definition is broad because it is not limited to the same name or a minimum number of politicians. Moreover, politicians can belong to different political parties and can run in various electoral districts.

There is no sufficient explanation as to why dynasties arise in democratic countries. One of the most popular theories formulated by F. Dal Bo and Snyder emphasizes that “power begets power” (Guarde et al., 2016). Politicians can accumulate power and influence and then easily pass them on to subsequent generations. However, even if most democracies have dynasties, they account for 5% to 10% of the parliament. This level of dynastic politics may be considered as an average level for healthy democracies (Geys & Smith, 2017). Democracies such as Germany, Canada, Finland, and Argentina have less than 5% of legacy members of the parliament. On the other hand, countries such as Japan, Iceland, Philippines, and Thailand have more than 25% of dynastic politicians at the national level (Smith, 2018, p. 5).

We can easily explain why the Philippines and Thailand have a high level of dynastic elites. In these countries, the idea of democracy is still young. They are developing what equality means, and the citizens are learning that they can also attend to the political life of their country. As research shows, when the country develops economic strength, and competitive and programmatic parties arise, more people from the outside can enter politics, and, over time, the percentage of legacy politicians is expected to decrease. In the United Kingdom in the 1800s, the proportion of democratic dynasty members was about 30% but it has declined to less than 10% in recent decades. Iceland is, in turn, a small country with a population of about 320,000 people and sixty-three seats in the parliament. There are a limited number of people who can become politicians, therefore, clearly small states are more likely to have bloodline as an important conditioning factor.

Gaetano Mosca pointed out that “Candidates who are successful in democratic elections are almost always the ones who possess the political forces above enumerated [resources and connections], which are very often hereditary. In the English, French, and Italian parliaments, we frequently see the sons, grandsons, brothers, nephews and sons-in-law

of members and deputies, ex-member and ex-deputies" (Mosca, 1939, pp. 61–62). These "resources and connections" may be strong name recognition, network connections, more significant campaign funds, familiarity with politics and the campaigning process, and experience in political life.

Probably one of the most essential and easily inherited advantages is name recognition. The family name can be used as a brand. If a former politician has a good reputation and did not lose his or her last election, there is a high probability that his or her successor will win the election. This is so because the electorate makes a connection between the former and present politician that the new one will continue the way of his or her ancestor. Another important fact is that if the offspring runs in the same electoral district, he or she already knows the most important people and has a connection with them. Voters are more likely to vote only for the names they are familiar with.

Network connections are not limited only to people from the district. If a potential successor has been participating in the professional life of his father or another person in the family who is a politician from a young age, then he or she knows the other members of the parliament or party, or even knows the representatives of the financial sectors. It is easier for him or her to build influential connections with people in the party hierarchy and may help to secure a party nomination. It may also be helpful in obtaining financial resources (Smith, 2018, p. 12–13). Political dynasties are also engaged in long-term planning and implementation of government projects, and that gives the impression of continuity of government. It is crucial, especially when the politicians change often, and there is no coherent policy (Guarde et al., 2016).

Dynastic politics is ubiquitous across all democracies; the proportion and the scale of this phenomenon can be different, but the fact is that, even in democracies, elites still exist, and power can be inherited. Japan is not alone in this, but there is a problem with the high proportion of legacy politicians in Japanese politics. Japan is recognized as one of the most democratic countries, but with 25% of dynasty politicians in the parliament, the reality seems to be quite different. What makes Japan so different is that the proportion of democratic dynasties has grown over time, in contrast to the pattern in other democratic countries, especially if we consider that Japan is an industrialized democracy with relatively low levels of inequality.

3. Japan's Political Dynasties

Out of all the candidates (10,060) who ran in Japan's House of Representatives general election or by-election from the first post-war elections in 1947 to 2014, only 3,065 succeeded. 600 candidates were legacies, which makes up 6%. It does not seem to be a lot, but of these 600, 477 were elected. That means that nearly 80% of all legacy candidates succeeded, and constitutes 16% of all candidates coming from democratic dynasties (Smith, 2019, pp. 52–53).

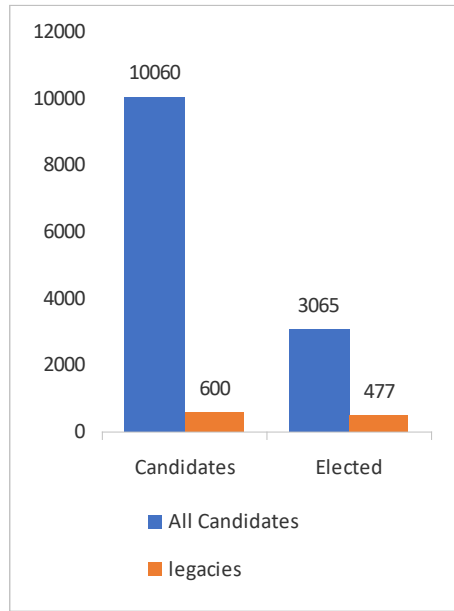
If we look at the first post-war election when the democratic constitution had been established, the proportion of legacy incumbents was less than 5%. Since then, the percentage of hereditary politicians in the House of Representatives has subsequently increased toward a zenith of over 30% in the 1980s. After the change of the electoral system in 1993, this proportion of legacies in the House of Representatives declined to 22% in 2009, which was the lowest proportion since the 1960s. Still, if we look at the other democratic countries, this percentage of legacies is relatively high (Iida, Ueda & Matsubayashi, 2011).

Another important issue is the proportion of legacy MPs in the Japanese political parties. The main party in Japan, which has been in power since 1955,¹ is the Liberal Democratic Party. At the beginning of the party's activity, in 1958, the proportion of legacies in that party was about 20% and had increased to over 40% by the early 1980s. In this time, almost half of the new candidates for the LDP were legacies. This high proportion might be the result of the size of the party – it was the biggest party in Japan. The Democratic Party of Japan, the largest opposition party, had “only” about 18% of legacy MPs in the period from 1947 to 2014. The smaller parties, like Kōmeitō and the Social Democratic Party, had about 6% of legacy MPs. Nevertheless, in general, the average proportion of legacies in Japanese political parties was a little over 22% (Smith, 2018, p. 275).

Researchers often use “3 ban” theory to explain the high proportion of the legacy MPs in Japan. “3 ban” are “jiban,” “kanban,” and “kaban.” *Jiban* means strong ties between a politician and his or her electoral district. One of the most important manifestations of such activity is *kōenkai*. *Kōenkai* is a private support group for a given politician, and the stronger a given group is, the greater its independence from the party's decision-making system.

¹ Except two short periods 1993–1994 and 2009–2012.

Figure 9.2. Number of Legacy Candidates and Elected Lawmakers



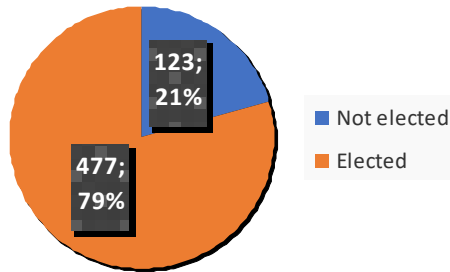
Source: JHRED.

An important feature of *kōenkai* is that it can be inherited between family members or members of the organization. *Kanban* means the rank of name recognition. Because the first and last name of the candidate should be entered on the ballot paper, it is important to know how to write the given surname. In the case of Chinese ideograms, this has an additional meaning. Therefore, if a politician has the same surname as his ancestor and runs in the same electoral district, he or she has a significant competitive advantage. *Kaban* means the funds of a given candidate. In the case of political dynasties, it is not only easier to obtain funds from outside, but also candidates themselves can inherit family money, which can help in sponsoring, e.g. an election campaign (Kimura & Takahashi, 2018, pp. 129–132).

In the post-war electoral system, a citizen had a single non-transferable vote in a multi-member district – each voter had one vote for an individual candidate. In one district, the parties typically held between three and five seats. Because voters voted for an individual, they chose one specific person, not a party – the top individual vote-getters would win

office. If a party wanted to have a majority in the parliament, it needed to win at least two seats per district. That created significant intraparty competition. The party put up several candidates who competed for a place in the parliament. Belonging to the party in such a case lost its importance. The individual features of the candidate became more crucial (Scheiner & Tronconi, 2011, pp. 91–111).

Figure 9.3. Legacy Candidates



Source: Smith, 2018, pp. 52–53.

Another advantage of legacy candidates is the heritage of the electoral district. Some of them have passed from generation to generation. One example is the Niigata second district. When Watanabe Yoshio, who ran in that constituency, died after eight terms, he was replaced by Watanabe Hajime, his younger brother, in 1967. In 1972, Watanabe Hajime retired and was succeeded by his nephew, and the district returned to the son of Watanabe Yoshio. This example is not an isolated case (Ishibanashi & Reed, 1992).

This kind of relationship may also have a different influence. Legacy politicians distribute advantages for their district. In Japanese, there is a term “*kinkikarai*” which means that a politician works from Monday to Friday in the parliament, and at the weekends, he or she returns to his or her district and cultivates relations with his or her *kōenkai* and the locals (Ishibanashi & Reed, 1992). That strong bond may also have another result: the legacy MPs might be more motivated to provide more benefits to their districts (Smith, 2018, p. 30).

After the revision of the electoral system, the situation changed. Since the 1990s, the proportion of legacy candidates has been declining, and some researchers estimate that it could be a result of the introduction of

single-member districts. In fact, in this new reality, the party must choose one strong candidate related to the party. That means that the party has become more centralized and chooses its candidates very carefully. Some of the legacy candidates with powerful *kōenkai* who are not nominated by the party might run as independent candidates. If the *kōenkai* and support base is strong, the candidate might win even without party support (Reed, 2011).

4. Advantages of Hereditary Politicians

There is no secret that legacy politicians have a larger opportunity not only to become politicians, but also in occupying more significant positions in the party and the parliament than other lawmakers.

Kōenkai is an organization of supporters dedicated to mobilizing the electorate on behalf of the candidate. We can find the beginning of that form of political organization even in the pre-war period, but it was not as popular as it is today. Politicians started to build *kōenkai* in the 1950s, and they quickly became a common form of election campaigning. *Kōenkai* is very useful to institutionalize a candidate's personal vote, because the politician creates strong relationships with his or her electorate. He or she gives favors, and does projects that benefit the local residents and constituency service. *Kōenkai* is not a homogeneous group. In fact, *kōenkai* might comprise multiple groupings that overlap. At the centre of the organization remains the leading politician, and around him or her are groups connected with him or her by geography, target of representation (e.g. women, youth), personal connection to the candidate, or other various interests (Krauss & Pekkanen, 2012, p. 37).

Moreover, even if the *kōenkai* is a beneficial organization and helps the candidate to win, the election is still incredibly expensive. The campaign period from 1952 to 1992 was extremely short – only twenty days. That short period of time required the politician to continuously cultivate close relationship with his or her supporters. Politicians usually organize regular parties, excursions to hot springs, informal discussions, and other forms of activity not only related to the election or politics, but especially to the personal lives of the members of the group. Members must pay nominal fees if they want to belong to *kōenkai*, but that is not enough to cover the costs of maintaining the organization. The average cost of creating *kōenkai* is between \$700,000 and \$1,000,000,

and that is only to establish the organization. A similar sum is required to maintain the organization each year. It is evident that only people with financial resources can create *kōenkai* and maintain them. In the context of legacy politicians, they are in a privileged position. First of all, they can inherit the *kōenkai* from relatives, which is very convenient – they do not have to create their support base from the ground up, and all they have to do is maintain the *kōenkai* and interest of the members. Secondly, even if they cannot inherit the *kōenkai*, they still come from wealthy families with connections, and they usually have the required financial resources to create the organization (Smith, 2018, pp. 121–122).

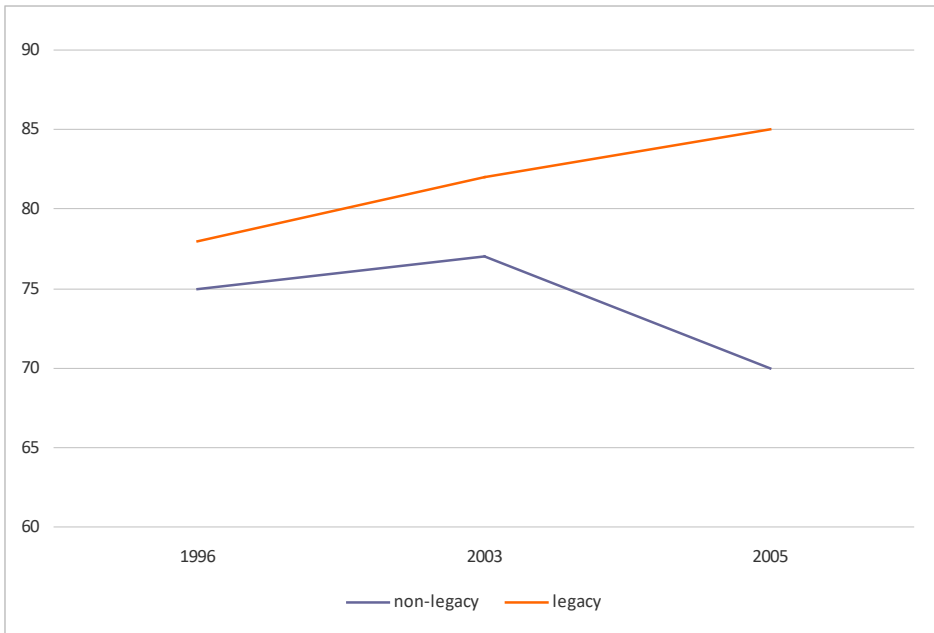
For Japan, it is hard to look for regions that are more dynastic than others. There is no such division, as in the case of the United States, where the south of the country is more dynastic than the north. In most prefectures, the level of dynasty varies from 10% to 40%. There are exceptions, however. The two most dynastic prefectures are next to each other: Yamaguchi Prefecture and Shimane Prefecture. In the Yamaguchi Prefecture, the dynastic percentage is 47%, this is the prefecture of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō. Moreover, the Abe dynasty is the largest dynasty in this prefecture, and the Japanese prime minister is a representative of the sixth generation of legacy MPs. In Shimane Prefecture, the percentage of dynasties is 53%. This high level may result from the small population and small number of seats in parliament – from 1947 to 1993, there was only one single five-seat district, and from 1996, two single-seat districts (Smith, 2018, pp. 60–62).

On the other hand, the least dynastic prefecture is Shiga Prefecture. Only 1% of hereditary parliamentarians have been elected from this prefecture since 1947. The reason is that this prefecture, like Shimane, is relatively small. Nara, Wakayama, Fukui, Okinawa, Oita, and Ishikawa have been represented by hereditary politicians at a level of less than 10%. The low percentage in each of these regions is related to the smaller number of seats in each of them and the fact that for many decades, these seats were occupied by first-generation MPs (Smith, 2018, pp. 59–61).

An important difference between hereditary politicians and non-hereditary politicians is the age at which they enter politics. The median age for first-term non-legacy politicians is forty-eight years old, compared to forty-two for legacy politicians. In the context of the Japanese seniority system, this fact matters. It is evident when we look at the current situa-

tion in the Japanese Cabinet. Only three² of Japan's Heisei-era prime ministers had no political background (Jain, 2019). The legacy politicians can accumulate more seniority than other politicians and even bureaucrats, which means there are more legacy politicians that have more power in the party and the parliament (North, 2005).

Figure 9.4. Percentage of Re-elected Politicians



Source: Iida, Ueda, Matsubayashi, 2011.

Hereditary politicians are more likely not only to win an election, but also have a better chance of being re-elected. In 1996, 80% of hereditary politicians were re-elected to the parliament. For non-hereditary parliamentarians, this rate was 75%. This was particularly evident in 2005, when this indicator for hereditary politicians increased to 85%, while for non-hereditary politicians it fell to 70% (Iida, Ueda & Matsubayashi, 2011).

Politicians who were not hereditary more often than legacy politicians had served as local politicians before the first term of office. Almost 30%

2 Naoto Kan, Yoshihiko Noda and Toshiki Kaifu.

of them were former local politicians, while for legacy politicians, it was less than 15%. Hereditary politicians more often gained political experience through serving as personal secretaries, most often to their relatives who were incumbent MPs (Iida, Ueda & Matsubayashi, 2011). Almost 85% of legacy politicians have such experience. On the other hand, both legacy and non-legacy politicians have gained national bureaucracy experience, which is a common pathway in the LDP (Smith, 2018, pp. 62–63).

Previous studies also noted that women often entered politics if they boasted close ties with male relatives who were politicians. Only 5% of all non-legacy politicians are women. In the case of legacy politicians, the number is just a little higher – 8%. Being part of a political dynasty helps women to lower the considerable barriers to entering politics. Even if a female politician does not have a very good reputation, it is still easier for her to inherit *kōenkai* or name recognition with a better opinion. It is because the name brand is more important than gender. That is another advantage of legacy politics – it can help overcome gender discrimination (Smith, 2018, pp. 245–246).

5. Conclusion

The phenomenon of political dynasties is a phenomenon commonly found in the world. Studies have confirmed that in countries with a long history of political thought, the number of dynasties will decrease. The economic condition and size of the state are important as well. It is also difficult to say that the existence of political dynasties is contrary to the very idea of democracy. Ultimately, these politicians, like everyone else, must win the elections – they must be elected by the electorate.

And yet, the case of Japan is fascinating. First, the high percentage of political dynasties in the parliament is unusual. Japan is a country with a relatively long democratic tradition, and also with high economic potential and a low percentage of social inequality. Nevertheless, political dynasties stand in contradiction to this. Looking at the Japanese political scene, it is easy to see that most of the post-war prime ministers were somehow connected to previous politicians. Ministers elected by the prime minister were also often associated with political dynasties. This is because they were chosen for their first term faster than non-hereditary politicians. As a result – by the principle of seniority – they could be quickly elected to important party and government positions.

Hereditary politicians have a significant advantage over non-hereditary politicians. This advantage is manifested primarily in financial resources, experience, and connections. Legacy politicians, often after graduation, come into the profession by serving as personal secretaries to their relatives who are politicians. Because of this, they gain valuable experience not only knowing what a politician's job looks like, but also how to organize election campaigns. Financial resources are also important, especially from the point of view of maintaining *kōenakai* and the election campaign.

However, it seems that connections are most important. By connections are meant here not only the commonly understood acquaintances in the party or the world of business, but also those with the electorate. *Kōenkai* serves primarily as an organization to make friends that are beneficial to both politicians and electorate. The voters receive various benefits if their candidate is elected, and a politician with a strong *kōenkai* is almost a certain choice by the party.

Political dynasties also act as peculiar brands. The higher the name recognition and the higher the reputation of a politician, the greater the chance for his or her good political career. An example of this is Koizumi Shinjirō, the son of the former Japanese prime minister, currently the Minister of the Environment. In public polls, he is often indicated as a potential future prime minister.

Do political dynasties stand in opposition to democratic values? Is democracy functioning properly in Japan? These are questions that researchers of political dynasties ask themselves and it is difficult to find a definite answer to them. Indeed, family plays a huge role in Japanese politics. Ruling elites often come from such dynasties. And yet, it is not a rule that only a hereditary politician can become prime minister. There are no written or unwritten rules that stand in opposition to democratic values.

It seems, therefore, most appropriate to take a position that Japanese democracy has a more Asian coloring. It is no secret that dynasties played a significant role culturally and historically in Japan. Some state positions were available only to a few or even only one family, for example the imperial family itself. Occupations were inherited from father to son, and also nowadays children often follow in the footsteps of their parents, although this is no longer the rule.

All evidence indicates that democracy in Japan is healthy, despite the high percentage of political dynasties. There is still a chance that the trend that arose after the change in the electoral system in the 1990s will

lead to a significant reduction in political dynasties, and in a dozen or so years, this percentage will fall below 10% as in other democracies. Until then, however, political families are an important element of the Japanese parliament, with social approval. Hereditary politicians still enjoy many privileges, and it is easier for them to enter politics.

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