

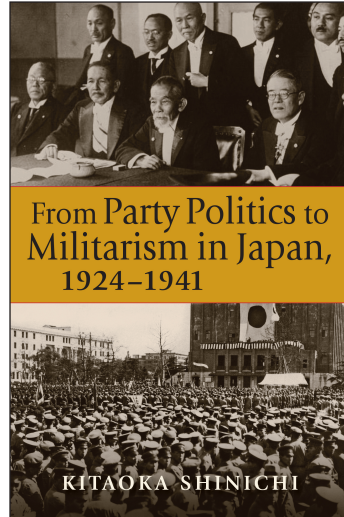
EXCERPTED FROM

From Party Politics to Militarism in Japan, 1924–1941

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ISBN: 978-1-62637-857-5 hc



LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

1800 30th Street, Suite 314
Boulder, CO 80301 USA
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fax 303.444.0824

This excerpt was downloaded from the
Lynne Rienner Publishers website
www.rienner.com

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1

The Beginning of the Shōwa Period



This book is concerned with the history of slightly more than seventeen years: from June 1924, when a coalition cabinet of three parties was established, to December 1941, when Japan commenced its war with the United States. At first glance, it would seem that two different historical periods are encompassed in these seventeen years: the 1920s, characterized by party politics and international cooperation; and the 1930s, marked by the rising influence of the military and war.

During the 1920s, Japan achieved a certain affluence and freedom. Particularly in urban areas, a prosperous and vibrant society and culture had taken root, anticipating postwar developments. But in the 1930s, and the latter years of that decade in particular, Japan entered a dark and oppressive era of warfare. The references to “party politics” and “militarism” in the title of this book are emblems of these two distinct periods.

Yet it would be a mistake to stress only the discontinuity between the two. The 1930s were born out of the 1920s; and the developments of the 1920s were not only inherited by the 1930s but also passed on to serve as the foundations of Japan’s postwar rebirth. Yet the military was far from impotent during the period of party politics—it was, in fact, a powerful presence. Nor did the political parties slip into insignificance in the 1930s. Until the end of the decade, as before, they wielded considerable power.

In this regard, it is important to note that neither the political parties nor the military existed as monolithic entities. Among the political parties, the Rikken Seiyūkai (Friends of Constitutional Government), Rikken Minseitō (Democratic Party), and proletarian parties were engaged in strenuous conflict with one another, and frequently riven by internal conflicts nearly as fierce.

Similarly, within the military, there were divisions between the army and navy; between the Ministry of Army and Army General Staff Office; between the Ministry of Navy and Navy General Staff Office; between the operations and intelligence bureaus of Army General Staff Office; and so on—and there were frequent conflicts and contention among and between almost all of them. In addition to the usual bureaucratic rivalries, there were also fierce disagreements over ideology and policy. And in fact, these internal conflicts within the parties and the military would play a major role in shaping the history of this period.

As the title makes clear, the focus of this book is on politics. A number of political decisions—or absence thereof—brought about immense disaster on Japan and its neighbors. The history of prewar Japan exemplifies the horrific damage that can result when a modern nation-state goes off course. Because of this, it seems obvious to place politics at the center of our discussion of this period.

But of course we cannot ignore economics, society, or culture. Politics cannot exist without an economic base. The failure of Japan's prewar politics, in a sense, originated in the attempt to leap beyond the country's actual economic foundations. Politics is also impossible without the support or at least the tacit acquiescence of the majority of the people. Because of this, it is important to understand exactly what sort of society and culture the Japanese people inhabited. The pages I can devote to them are limited, but I will do my best to give attention to economics, society, and culture as they relate to the politics of the period.

A History of Ideas

One of the most important aspects of politics is the interaction of foreign affairs with domestic policy. The question of “What if?” is generally taboo in the study of history—but if there had been no Great Depression, and if there had been no rise of Nazi Germany, then it seems likely that Japan would have pursued a far different course. It is impossible to adequately understand the history of modern Japan without paying close attention to the relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy.

So the fundamental aim of this book is to provide a comprehensive look at the two periods of the 1920s and the 1930s in Japan, paying particular attention to the interaction of domestic and foreign affairs and to the conflict not only between the political parties and the military, but also among the parties themselves and the factions within the military, while also devoting appropriate space to developments in the economic, social, and cultural spheres. In this sense, it is a completely ordinary history of

prewar Japan, centered on the political history of the era. But in fact there are not so many such “ordinary” books available to the general public—which is perhaps an indication of the shallowness of Japanese culture.

This book is not only a political history, but also one that focuses on the actions of political elites. When people hear the phrase “political elite,” many think of a handful of people with little relationship to the majority of the citizens. Many also regard politicians as individuals motivated by nothing other than their own interests. And to be sure, the actions of most people—not only politicians—seem to center on their own interests. But the real issue here is that it is not as easy as one might think for these people to discern what is advantageous or disadvantageous for themselves, their organizations, or Japan as a whole. When people look at their surroundings, they always see them through a particular framework or conceptual lens. To put it another way, people are motivated by their interests, and these interests are defined in large part by ideas. In the 1930s, as decisions were being made regarding the advantages of allying with Germany or with Britain and the United States, the value systems leaders embraced had perhaps as great an impact as their ability to read the changing international situation. When considered in this way, the history of prewar Japan is, to a surprising extent, a history of ideas.

Most significant among these ideas or ideologies were choices between a free or controlled economy; whether or not to cooperate with the United States and Britain; and whether or not the emperor should be regarded as an organ of the Japanese state—that is, as a limited, constitutional monarch—or as a more absolute and sovereign authority. On almost every occasion that a new prime minister was appointed, the emperor explicitly instructed him to exercise caution in foreign policy and to respect the constitution. The former was tantamount to ordering the prime minister to prioritize relations with the Anglo-American powers and respect the principles of the free-market economy. The latter was a recommendation that the cabinet, the Diet, the military, and the other organs of government all cooperate with one another in the policymaking process. Yet despite this clear statement by the emperor as the sovereign power, these two policies were ignored and swept aside. Why? This is the most important question in Japan’s prewar history, and one that we will encounter again and again in the pages of this book.

Japan at the End of the Taishō Period

When Does the Shōwa Period Begin?

As noted earlier, this book deals with the period from the three-party coalition cabinet of 1924 to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941—in other words, the prewar years of the Shōwa period.

The Shōwa period is ordinarily thought of as beginning on 25 December 1926 with the death of Emperor Taishō and the accession to the throne of Crown Prince Hirohito, later to be known as Emperor Shōwa. But it is also possible to place this starting point a bit differently.

For example, it might be possible to see the end of World War I on 11 November 1918 as the beginning of Shōwa. The Great War changed the world, and had a powerful impact on Japan. From an economic perspective, the development that took place during the war laid the foundations for the economy of the early Shōwa years down to the outbreak of World War II. And in terms of political thought, the victory of democracy in the Great War and of the revolution in Russia formed the basis for Japanese thought in the interwar period.

Politically, the Shōwa period might be regarded as beginning in November 1921, a month in which three epoch-making events occurred: the assassination of Prime Minister Hara Takashi on 4 November; the opening of the Washington Naval Conference on 12 November; and the appointment of Crown Prince Hirohito as regent for the ailing Emperor Taishō on 25 November. Moreover, all three events were interrelated.

The Constitution of the Empire of Japan (popularly known as the Meiji Constitution) articulated a very clear separation of powers. It declared that “the Emperor . . . combin[es] in Himself the rights of sovereignty, and exercises them,” but of course the emperor could not make all decisions by himself. If he did, and made a major error of judgment, he might be held responsible, and endanger the imperial house itself. Because of this, the emperor’s conduct of policy was fundamentally based on accepting the counsel of various institutions advising him: his cabinet, the Diet, and the military. But what happened when these advisory bodies contradicted or conflicted with one another? From the Meiji period onward, the elder statesmen, or *genrō*, had played an important role in coordinating and unifying these opinions. But as the original *genrō* aged and departed the political scene, it was the political parties that emerged as potential heirs to this responsibility.

The last *genrō* who could effectively wield such power was Yamagata Aritomo (1838–1922), and the first party politician to do so was Hara Takashi (1856–1921). For a number of years before Hara’s death, these two men were the most powerful forces in Japanese politics, vying with one another for leadership but also cooperating with one another when necessary. Hara was killed in November 1921; Yamagata died in February 1922. From this point of view, one could see November 1921 as the end of one era and the beginning of another.

It happens that the last issue on which Hara and Yamagata cooperated was one that ended in failure. A serious incident had arisen within the imperial court when it was alleged that Princess Nagako, the fiancée of Crown Prince Hirohito, might be a hereditary bearer of the gene for color blind-

ness. Yamagata and his associates argued that Nagako's family, the Kuni-nomiya, should withdraw her engagement on the grounds that the purity of the imperial family bloodline must be preserved. Hara supported Yamagata in this position. But there were others who attacked Yamagata and company vigorously, using the ethical argument that the sovereign must be a moral exemplar, and thus should not break a solemn vow. Since the Kuninomiya family was related to the Shimazu, former rulers of Satsuma domain, and Yamagata was a leader from the domain of Chōshū, old rivalries between the domains that had engineered the Meiji Restoration also came into play, increasing the gravity of the incident. In the end, the engagement stood, and Yamagata was defeated so bitterly that for a time he declined all honors due to him as an elder statesman. This incident concerning the imperial house was one that the two most powerful political figures of their time proved powerless to resolve.

Moreover, Emperor Taishō was sickly and frail. According to Makino Nobuaki, minister of the imperial household, in July 1921, not long before the decision was made to establish a regency, the emperor had to be supported by two retainers holding his hand on either side when he went on summer retreat at the Shiobara Imperial Villa in Tochigi prefecture, and despite having visited there every year when he was crown prince, did not remember having been there. He was also unable to recognize the crown prince of Korea when the latter paid him an official visit. The situation was grave.

Thus the Achilles' heel of the constitutional order was the imperial court. Under the Meiji Constitution, whose institutional framework possessed aspects of both a constitutional and an absolute monarchy, the imperial court was a very delicate issue. Hara believed that the court should stand apart from the political disputes of the day, and be maintained as a locus of a healthy political and international sensibility. This was why he arranged a European tour for Crown Prince Hirohito (the first ever for a member of the imperial house), and decided to have him installed as regent upon his return. Hara's opening move in this strategy had been to appoint his close friend Makino Nobuaki as imperial household minister in February 1921, in an effort to introduce Makino's open-minded and internationalist spirit into the atmosphere of the imperial court. The crown prince's European visit was a major success, and preparations for his regency began immediately upon his return to Japan.

Hara's leadership was also crucial to the other major event of November 1921, the convening of the Washington Naval Conference. This conference, along with the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, was essential to the creation of the international order following World War I, but there were many in Japan who were apprehensive about their country's participation. For many years the United States had been fiercely critical of Japan's expansion into continental Asia, and it was true that during the course of



Crown Prince Hirohito, later Emperor Shōwa

Hirohito in the midst of his five-nation European tour in May 1921, with British prime minister David Lloyd George and family. (© The Mainichi Newspapers Co., Ltd.)

the Great War, Japan had engaged in policies on the Asian mainland that were open to such criticism.

However, Hara was one of the earliest among Japanese statesmen and diplomats to perceive the power and influence of the United States. He was convinced that cooperation with the United States was of utmost importance for Japanese foreign policy, and worked hard to steer the country in that direction. It was primarily the groundwork laid by Hara Takashi that made it possible for Japan to maintain cooperation with the United States at the Washington Conference without seriously damaging its own interests, with regard to either naval disarmament or the issue of China.

So by November 1921, two major goals Hara had pursued—a pragmatic policy of cooperation with the United States and an imperial court with a more enlightened perspective on international affairs—had been realized. But in that month, Hara was assassinated. This was a harbinger of the difficult fate awaiting these two major themes of Hara's. And Japan would have to confront these difficulties without powerful leaders such as Hara and Yamagata.

The Political Situation After Hara

If we can consider November 1921 as a possible alternative beginning for the Shōwa period, then let's briefly review the situation of late Taishō Japan from 1921 to 1924, the year with which this book actually commences.

The cabinet formed in September 1918 (just prior to the end of World War I) by Hara Takashi and his party, the Rikken Seiyūkai, was an unusually strong cabinet for prewar Japan. In 1919, Hara's government successfully revised the electoral law to introduce a single-member constituency system, and in the snap general election called in 1920 won an overwhelming victory. Outside the House of Representatives, the largest parliamentary faction in the House of Peers, the Kenkyūkai (Study Group), was also favorable to Hara, and the Privy Council did not oppose him. The mainstream factions in both the army and navy were also well disposed toward Hara, and tried to avoid conflict.

But when Hara was assassinated in November 1921, the Seiyūkai suffered from a leadership vacuum. Takahashi Korekiyo (1854–1936) took over the prime ministership and leadership of the party after Hara, but he was a newcomer to the Seiyūkai (joining in 1913), and because he seemed to lack either the ambition or the ability to unify the party, it split into two factions—one supporting him, the other opposing his leadership. This internal factionalism led to a conflict over a cabinet reorganization, and in June 1922 the Takahashi government collapsed after only a little over half a year in office.

The second largest party in the House of Representatives was the Kenseikai (Constitutional Party), led by Katō Takaaki. Although the Kenseikai had an absolute majority in the House of 197 seats (out of a total of 381) upon its formation in October 1916, it had now fought two elections as the opposition party and its total number of seats in the House had slid to 108 (out of 464). This number did not bode well for the party's ability to form a government, even if a general election were called and it had an opportunity to increase its seats. Moreover, as foreign minister in the second cabinet of Ōkuma Shigenobu, Katō had damaged relations with both China and the United States by pressing the "Twenty-One Demands" against China in 1915, losing the confidence of Japan's elder statesmen in the process. For these reasons, the prospects for a Kenseikai cabinet were remote.

The Yamagata clique had shared political power with the Seiyūkai, but Yamagata Aritomo died in February 1922, seeming to follow Hara in death, and other political figures who might have unified the clique were also gradually fading from the scene. Taking advantage of this situation, and amassing considerable power in the late Taishō period, was the Sappa, or Satsuma faction, a group of politicians from the former domain of Satsuma that included Matsukata Masayoshi, Makino Nobuaki in the imperial court, Tokonami Takejirō in the Seiyūkai, and Yamamoto Gonnohyōe, then biding his time

outside public life. However, since it was their geographical origins that united them rather than shared ideals, principles, or even a party organization, they were unlikely to be able to extend their reach. The power of the Satsuma faction could never be more than temporary or supplementary in nature.

From the Takahashi Cabinet to the Katō Cabinet

When the Takahashi cabinet collapsed in June 1922, the figure proposed as his successor, Katō Tomosaburō, was not affiliated with either the Seiyūkai, the Kenseikai, or the Yamagata clique. In fact, he had no particularly powerful background in civilian politics—but he was a career naval officer who had reached the rank of admiral, and had served as navy minister. Katō had been instrumental in the success of the Washington Naval Conference, and was expected to be a steady hand in implementing the arms reductions it called for.

But the Seiyūkai expressed dissatisfaction with the idea of a cabinet headed by Katō. In response, Matsukata and Makino, the imperial household minister, began considering Katō Takaaki of the Kenseikai as a second choice. Learning of this, and determined to prevent their rival party from forming a government, the Seiyūkai suddenly threw its support behind Katō Tomosaburō, and a cabinet was formed.

At the time, the biggest issue in the world of politics was universal manhood suffrage. The third largest party in the Diet, the Kakushin Kurabu (Reform Club), had come out in favor of it. Katō Takaaki of the Kenseikai was a conservative and a very wealthy man who originally had opposed universal suffrage, but around 1920 shifted to a position supporting it. In 1919, under the Hara cabinet, the Seiyūkai had reformed the electoral law (introducing single-member constituencies and lowering the tax-payment qualification for voting to ¥3 or more in direct national tax), and in 1920 it dissolved the Diet, saying it would seek the judgment of the people in an election in which the party declared its opposition to universal manhood suffrage. In other words, despite some internal dissension, the Seiyūkai was generally negative toward the introduction of universal manhood suffrage. This was clearly a major and divisive issue, but there was no political force in sight that was powerful enough to make universal suffrage a reality. In this regard as well, party politics was reaching a dead end.

Arms reduction was another critical concern. The Washington Naval Conference placed limitations on new construction of battleships and brought about reductions in the number of existing capital ships. And in 1922–1923, during Yamanashi Hanzō's tenure as army minister, the army undertook various arms reduction measures, including a reduction in over-

all troop strength. In a Europe that had witnessed the horrors of the Great War, a great longing for peace was born, and its influence extended as far as Japan. If there was ever a time when military men felt uncomfortable walking about in uniform, it was the 1920s.

The Genrō and the Imperial Court

In the power vacuum following the assassination of Hara Takashi, the role played by the genrō was crucial in determining the direction of the government. The appointment and removal of the prime minister was ultimately one of the sovereign powers of the emperor, but in practice it was the genrō who made the recommendations. The genrō were not an official institution, nor did their recommendations have institutional status. The figure officially charged with advising the emperor on affairs of state and conveying the imperial will to his subjects was the *naidaijin* (lord keeper of the privy

Table 1.1 A List of the Genrō

Name	Origin	Date of Imperial Decree According Them Status of Elder or Senior Statesman	Died	Government Offices Held	Peerage
Itō Hirobumi	Yamaguchi	Nov. 1889	Oct. 1909	Councilor, prime minister, others	Prince
Kuroda Kiyotaka	Kagoshima	Nov. 1889	Aug. 1900	Councilor, prime minister, others	Count
Yamagata Aritomo	Yamaguchi	May 1891	Feb. 1922	Councilor, prime minister, others	Prince
Matsukata Masayoshi	Kagoshima	Jan. 1898	July 1924	Councilor, prime minister, others	Prince
Inoue Kaoru	Yamaguchi	Feb. 1904	Sep. 1915	Foreign minister, finance minister, others	Marquis
Saigō Tsugumichi	Kagoshima	—	July 1902	Councilor, navy minister, others	Marquis
Ōyama Iwao	Kagoshima	Aug. 1912	Dec. 1916	Councilor, army minister, others	Prince
Saionji Kinmochi	Court nobility	Dec. 1912	Nov. 1940	Prime minister	Prince

Source: *Kokushi daijiten* (Encyclopedia of Japanese History), Yoshikawa Kōbunkan.

seal). When consulted by the emperor on such matters, the *naidaijin* would then seek the opinions of the *genrō* and report to the emperor.

After Yamagata's death, only two of the *genrō* remained: Matsukata Masayoshi and Saionji Kinmochi. Matsukata was born in 1835 and was eighty-six years old when Yamagata died; Saionji, born in 1849, was fourteen years his junior. Neither of the two possessed the powerful political base that Yamagata had established for himself. But Matsukata was from Satsuma, and was surrounded by Satsuma men. As a result, even if he did not particularly strive to advance the interests of the Satsuma clique, it shaped the information he received and biased him in that direction. Something similar was true of Saionji, who had deep ties to the Seiyūkai and had served as its president. Even if Saionji subjectively believed himself to be impartial, his sources of information were largely people associated in some way with the Seiyūkai.

Matsukata served as *naidaijin* from 1917 to September 1922, when he was succeeded in the post by Hirata Tōsuke. This meant the office was no longer occupied by one of the *genrō*, and Hirata was a powerful politician in his own right, unlikely to be completely subservient to Saionji's leadership. If anything, he was also somewhat more sympathetic to the Kenseikai than was Saionji.

Another post of importance in terms of relations with the imperial court was that of president of the Privy Council. This position had long been occupied by Yamagata. In other words, both this post and that of *naidaijin* had traditionally been held by *genrō*. After Yamagata's death, Kiyoura Keigo, who had served as vice president of the council, was promoted to president.

The Concept of Normal Constitutional Government

On what basis did the *genrō* make their recommendations for the selection of the prime minister? Here we must consider the "theory of normal constitutional government" frequently debated at the time as the model for changes in government. Simply stated, this theory held that when a government collapsed, it should be replaced by one formed by the largest opposition party in the lower house (the House of Representatives) of the Diet. This seems reasonably clear and straightforward, as a concept. But in actual application, it proved to be quite complicated.

For example, if a cabinet collapsed as a consequence of the illness or death of the prime minister, there was no real reason for a new government to be formed by the opposition party. Nor should this apply to cases in which cabinets collapsed for reasons other than misrule or political failure. But when a cabinet did collapse, there might be ample room for debate as to whether this was the case.

The definition of “opposition party” was also unclear. For example, when the cabinet of Terauchi Masatake collapsed in 1918, the Seiyūkai could not really be regarded as an opposition party, for it had maintained a more or less amicable neutrality toward his government. But it did not support him on the two issues—the Siberian Intervention and the Rice Riots of 1918—that became the source of his cabinet’s failure, so the Seiyūkai could not be regarded as the ruling party, either.

In the end, the most vocal supporters of the theory of normal constitutional government—aside from journalists and pundits (and even they were not unanimous)—were the opposition-party politicians who stood to take power if and when there was a change in government. In other words, when a Seiyūkai cabinet fell, the Kenseikai would proclaim the theory of normal constitutional government; but once in power themselves, they would not think of simply handing it back to the Seiyūkai once again if the Kenseikai cabinet should falter.

Speaking somewhat cynically, the theory of normal constitutional government was an opposition argument. No politician had a consistent stance on this theory. But this is not to say that it was completely meaningless. The history of party politics in prewar Japan is, in fact, largely a history of the Seiyūkai. Hara Takashi’s strategy was to establish the Seiyūkai as a permanent ruling party, securing its position to determine the budget and the distribution of other benefits, and using this to cultivate an unshakeable power base in the countryside, making it nearly impossible for any political force outside the parties to form a government without the cooperation of the Seiyūkai.

As a result, Hara’s concept of party politics did not envision the transfer of power between parties; in fact, it worked to prevent it. Yet, as noted earlier, cohesive groups representing political forces outside the parties (such as the *genrō*) were gradually declining. If party politics was to move to the next level—where the parties alone would be responsible for the formation of governments—then a theory of normal constitutional government was meaningful indeed.

Yet by 1922, even Yoshino Sakuzō (1878–1933), formerly one of the most vocal advocates of the theory of normal constitutional government, had ceased to speak in favor of it. This was because, he said, money politics had rendered all of the parties incapable of expressing the will of the people. The dominant argument of the day was universal manhood suffrage, and that its reflection of the will of the people was the surest route to normal constitutional government. The argument for universal suffrage had gone beyond a simple issue of civil rights and was being propounded as a new and indispensable condition for achieving political unity. While not a particularly fresh perspective, the reason this book begins with the three-party

coalition cabinet of 1924 is to emphasize the importance of universal manhood suffrage as a new phase in Japanese politics.

Saionji and Normal Constitutional Government

If we think about it in this way, then Saionji's relationship with normal constitutional politics becomes a major issue—because as the figure most able to determine the formation of new governments, his views on the rules for cabinet successions were of crucial importance. It is well known that Saionji, at least at one time, was skeptical of the theory of normal constitutional government. For example, on 9 March 1922, he said to Matsumoto Gōkichi, “We hear a lot about ‘reason’ and ‘normal practice,’ but I’d like to know what books this is written in, and which countries are actually doing this at present. Sometime soon I intend to invite some scholars to tell me about this.” (Hayashi Shigeru and Oka Yoshitake, eds., *Taishō demokurashī-ki no seiji: Matsumoto Gōkichi seiji nissshi* [The politics of Taishō democracy: The political diary of Matsumoto Gōkichi]).

Yet this was not necessarily a consistent position of Saionji's, who changed his stance on a variety of issues many times. For example, during the Taishō period he frequently called the Seiyūkai a party of national significance, but in the Shōwa period stopped making such assertions. Moreover, while he was clearly antipathetic to Katō Takaaki and the Kenseikai in the period 1922–1924, after that he began to express strongly favorable sentiments toward them. Saionji was a man who made many mistakes, learned from them, and changed.

Saionji's most consistent criterion for selection of a prime minister was his commitment to peaceful diplomacy grounded in cooperation with Britain and the United States. Second was support for a candidate who could skillfully unify and aggregate the various organs and agencies of the government. But government is shaped by legislation and the budget, and without a majority in the lower house, neither was feasible. Because of this, a cabinet had to have the support of one of the stronger parties in the House of Representatives. Moreover, the budget and legislation also had to pass the House of Peers, and certain legislation as well as treaties and other international agreements required the approval of the Privy Council as well. But this was not too tall an order for a popularly elected party with the qualifications to form a government. In other words, the theory of normal constitutional government could be thought of as a powerful method for fulfilling the conditions necessary to meet Saionji's second criterion—a candidate who could unify the institutions of government. And in fact, Saionji's actual selections for the post of prime minister tended to accord with the theory of normal constitutional government.



Saionji Kinmochi (1849–1940)

Saionji's contacts with Katō led him to reevaluate the capabilities of both Katō and the Kenseikai. Photo courtesy of Kyodo News Images Inc.

The Great Kantō Earthquake and the Yamamoto Cabinet

Formation of the Yamamoto Cabinet

On 24 August 1923, Prime Minister Katō Tomosaburō died of an illness, and his cabinet resigned. Both the Seiyūkai and the Kenseikai had hopes of forming a party cabinet in the name of normal constitutional government. However, on 27 August, the genrō (Saionji, with the agreement of Matsukata) appointed Yamamoto Gonnohyōe, a navy admiral on reserve duty, as the next prime minister. Their rationale was that the term of the members of the House of Representatives was ending the following year, and in order to ensure that the upcoming general election would be implemented fairly, it would be better to avoid a party cabinet at that time.

Yamamoto had been prime minister once before; in 1913–1914 he led a cabinet that cooperated with the Seiyūkai to implement a series of bold reform measures intended to blunt the political ascendancy of the Yamagata

clique and the army: a revision of the rule that required the ministers of both the army and navy to be active-duty officers, allowing reserve officers to serve in these capacities (though none were actually appointed); a revision of the civil service appointment ordinance that relaxed the requirements for appointments to senior bureaucratic positions; and a liberalization of personnel policy for semi-governmental corporate entities in Japan's colonial sphere of influence, such as the South Manchurian Railway Company and the Oriental Development Company. However, the eruption of the Siemens scandal (involving bribery in navy armaments procurement) led Yamamoto to resign the prime ministership and be placed on the reserve list by the navy.

The second Yamamoto cabinet was a choice welcomed by Matsukata, since Yamamoto was also a Satsuma man. And Makino Nobuaki, minister of the imperial household, wrote in his diary for 27 August, "Personally I am delighted by the baron's [Yamamoto's] restoration." And in an entry for 29 August, Makino wrote that while people around Yamamoto had never stopped advocating for his return to public life, such sentiment broadened "as the current situation [became] more conflicted and popular feeling more agitated." He noted that it is human nature to seek strong and dependable leadership in times of social unrest, and concluded that "both *genrō* seem to have decided to recommend the baron's appointment for quite fair and honest reasons."

Having received the imperial command to form his second cabinet, Yamamoto ambitiously set about assembling a government of national unity comprising some of the most powerful politicians in Japan, figures who were themselves potential candidates for the prime ministership. These included the presidents of the three major parties (Takahashi Korekiyo of the Seiyūkai, Katō Takaaki of the Kenseikai, and Inukai Tsuyoshi of the Kakushin Kurabu); Gotō Shinpei, who had previously served as president of the South Manchurian Railway Company, as home minister, and as minister of foreign affairs; Den Kenjirō, former governor-general of Taiwan and a bureaucrat affiliated with the Yamagata clique; and former army minister Tanaka Giichi. But the presidents of both the Seiyūkai and Kenseikai refused to participate, making the process of cabinet formation difficult. And at that juncture, the Great Kantō Earthquake occurred.

The Shock of Natural Disaster

The earthquake struck the area of Tokyo and Yokohama just before noon on 1 September 1923. Damage was widespread throughout the Kantō region and extended even into Yamanashi and Shizuoka prefectures. Dead and missing totaled 142,807 people; 576,262 houses and other structures collapsed, burned, or were swept away.

Simply in terms of the numbers of dead and missing, this was a greater disaster than the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905; twenty times the number in the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake of 1995; and seven times that of the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. The number of victims was almost as large as that of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined, and more than that resulting from the terrible firebombing of Tokyo on 10 March 1945.

The monetary value of damages was estimated at ¥5.5 billion. This was 5.4 percent (8.0 percent excluding land) of Japan's total national wealth at the time, which was estimated at ¥102.3 billion (¥69.1 billion excluding land). If we consider that the three and a half years of the Pacific War (1941–1945) resulted in 3 million dead and the loss of a quarter of the national wealth, this gives a sense of how immense was the damage caused at a single stroke by this natural disaster (Nakamura Takafusa, *Shōwa shi* [A history of Shōwa Japan, 1926–1989], abridged translation).

Tokyo was plunged into anarchy, in the midst of which baseless rumors proliferated accusing Koreans of poisoning wells, resulting in the tragic massacre of what is believed to have been more than a thousand Korean



Crown Prince Hirohito surveys the earthquake damage

Photo taken 15 September 1923 on the main avenue of Ginza in Tokyo, with the scars of the quake still clearly visible. (From Kokusai shashin jōhō [The international graphic], September 1927)

residents. Martial law was declared to restore order, but the police and troops charged with this mission themselves engaged in illegal acts. In addition to the Koreans, a number of Chinese residents were murdered. A dozen or more workers regarded by certain elements in the military as a threat to the established order were murdered in the Kameido Incident. And on 17 September, army lieutenant Amakasu Masahiko murdered anarchist Ōsugi Sakae, his wife, Itō Noe, and Ōsugi's six-year-old nephew. Newly appointed home minister Gotō Shinpei protested to the army and placed known socialists under protective custody.

Formation of the Yamamoto Cabinet

Confronted with this disaster, a cabinet was quickly organized, and at 8:00 P.M. on 2 September 1923, the ceremony of imperial investiture was conducted, in the midst of aftershocks of the quake and without electric power. The cabinet lineup was as follows:

Prime minister: Yamamoto Gonnohyōe
 Minister of foreign affairs: Ijūin Hikokichi (Prime Minister
 Yamamoto concurrently held this post until 19 September)
 Minister of home affairs: Gotō Shinpei (House of Peers, Sawakai
 [Tea Talk Club])
 Minister of finance: Inoue Junnosuke
 Minister of the army: Tanaka Giichi
 Minister of the navy: Takarabe Takeshi
 Minister of justice: Hiranuma Kiichirō (Minister of Agriculture and
 Commerce Den concurrently held this post until 6 September)
 Minister of education: Okano Keijirō (House of Peers, Kōyū Kurabu
 [Friendship Club]; Minister of Communications Inukai
 concurrently held this post until 6 September)
 Minister of agriculture and commerce: Den Kenjirō (House of Peers,
 Sawakai; to 24 December); Okano Keijirō
 Minister of communications: Inukai Tsuyoshi (House of
 Representatives, Kakushin Kurabu)
 Minister of railways: Yamanouchi Kazuji (House of Peers,
 Kōyū Kurabu)
 Chief cabinet secretary: Kabayama Sukehide
 Director-general of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau: Baba Eiichi
 (to 19 September); Matsumoto Jōji

Here I should say a word about the composition of cabinets at this time. As we can see, there were a total of eleven cabinet ministers, includ-

ing the prime minister. The posts of chief cabinet secretary and director-general of the Cabinet Legislation Bureau, which in today's cabinets are held by ministers, were in those days seen as positions equivalent to ministers, for a total of thirteen cabinet offices in all.

Among them, the posts of minister of the army and minister of the navy had to be filled by individuals with the rank of general or lieutenant-general (admiral or vice admiral). Since the reform of 1913, these could also in theory be officers on reserve or secondary reserve duty, but appointment of active-duty officers remained customary. For this reason, there was no chance for members of political parties to hold these posts.

Moreover, since the concept of the foreign minister as a nonpartisan post was well-established, it was also customary to appoint someone without party affiliation. This did not pertain, however, to career diplomats who later became party members, such as Katō Takaaki, who served as foreign minister in the second Ōkuma cabinet (a career diplomat, but then president of the Rikken Dōshikai [Constitutional Association of Friends]). There were also cases in which the prime minister would concurrently hold the post of foreign minister, as in Tanaka Giichi's cabinet in the late 1920s.

There were eight other ministerial posts besides the three just mentioned. Of them, that of minister of home affairs was of particular importance, since this ministry controlled the police and appointed and supervised the governors of all the prefectures. Next in importance was the minister of finance, usually selected from among career bureaucrats in the ministry itself or from among the business elite. The minister of agriculture and commerce was also seen as an important post, for its role in the development of industry. The remaining ministerial positions—justice, railways, communications, and education—were seen as less significant, though this could be affected by the stature of the appointee.

The Yamamoto cabinet was an impressive lineup. Tanaka Giichi was serving for the second time as army minister and regarded at the time as a future candidate for the prime ministership. Den Kenjirō was a trusted associate of Yamagata Aritomo, had served as governor-general of Taiwan in Hara Takashi's government, and was also seen as a possible future prime minister, as was Minister of Finance Inoue Junnosuke. Inukai Tsuyoshi was a veteran politician since the opening of the first Diet session, and would also have been a reasonable choice for the top post. And Hiranuma Kiichirō was a powerful and capable justice ministry bureaucrat.

The posts equivalent to ministers were also filled by able individuals. Kabayama Sukehide, a Satsuma man, was a graduate of Yale and of Yale Law School, where he earned a doctorate in law, after which he worked in the Ministry of Colonial Affairs and the Ministry of Education, and served as executive director of the South Manchurian Railway Company. Matsumoto Jōji was a professor of commercial law at Tokyo Imperial University who in

addition worked for the Cabinet Legislation Bureau and served as vice president of the South Manchurian Railway Company. He is famous in the postwar period for his role in drafting a proposed revision of the constitution as a member of Shidehara Kijūrō's cabinet.

Planning for Universal Manhood Suffrage

Thus the Yamamoto cabinet was a cabinet of major political figures—almost all potential prime ministers in their own right—presided over by Yamamoto himself. In 1913, when the Katsura Tarō government was paralyzed by opposition from the Movement to Protect Constitutional Government, Yamamoto pressed him to resign and took over the reins of government himself, presenting a bold challenge to such strongholds of the Chōshū clique as the army, the office of the governor-general of Korea, and the South Manchurian Railway Company.

Now it was the Seiyūkai that Yamamoto was challenging. The Seiyūkai had won an absolute majority in the general election of 1920, but the party was riven with internal discord and not as strong a force politically as it might have been. Moreover, at a time when public opinion was turning decisively in favor of universal manhood suffrage, its stance continued to be that the time was not yet ripe for such reform.

Inukai was publicly criticized for agreeing to join the Yamamoto cabinet despite the refusal of the leaders of the other parties to participate, but said that his own participation was for the purpose of implementing universal suffrage. Gotō Shinpei made similar claims. Gotō had previously managed the general election campaign supporting the Terauchi cabinet, challenging the current Kenseikai majority as “unnatural,” and deftly fighting to demolish it. Now he appeared poised to use universal suffrage as the standard around which to rally a similar demolition of the Seiyūkai majority. And in fact, the political program announced by the Yamamoto cabinet in October 1923 included the implementation of universal suffrage.

Yokota Sennosuke of the mainstream faction of the Seiyūkai is said to have anticipated that Yamamoto's cabinet would dissolve the Diet and seek new elections, and remarked that “if there is a dissolution, the combination of Yamamoto's strength after having awaited this opportunity for a decade, Gotō's surging popularity, Inukai's latent power, and pressure from Hiranuma will probably mean that the Seiyūkai majority will be completely destroyed.” Even after the collapse of the Yamamoto cabinet, Yokota still said it was the most formidable he had seen, and lamented the fact that the old guard of the Seiyūkai did not seem to comprehend that the political parties not only had to change with the times, but in fact needed to lead such change (Oka Yoshitake, *Tenkanki no Taishō* [Taishō: Period of transition]).

The Issue of Reconstruction

The most pressing challenge facing the Yamamoto cabinet was that of reconstruction after the great earthquake. And it was Gotō Shinpei who was assigned primary responsibility for this task. Gotō had shown extraordinary skill as a colonial bureaucrat, serving as the chief civil administrator of the Government-General of Taiwan and as president of the South Manchurian Railway Company, and had then accepted new challenges as chief of the national Railway Bureau and minister of communications. From 1920 to 1923, Gotō had been mayor of Tokyo (now the governor of Tokyo), and he invited American historian and authority on urban administration Charles A. Beard to come to Japan to consult on an ambitious plan for urban renewal, beginning a relationship of deep mutual respect.

Gotō's plan for reconstruction was a bold one: simply put, he proposed using public bonds to buy up the devastated sections of the city, implement land readjustment and public infrastructure development, and, when the reconstruction projects were completed, sell or lease them as necessary to the private sector. To achieve this ambitious vision, Gotō created the Imperial Capital Reconstruction Council with Prime Minister Yamamoto as president, Gotō himself as director-general, and a membership that included the cabinet ministers, members of the Privy Council, and representatives of the two major political parties. The Bureau for Reconstruction of the Imperial Capital was also established, with Gotō as its director, to oversee the practical implementation of Gotō's plan.

However, there was fierce opposition to Gotō's plan from landlords and other stakeholders. No matter how beneficial this urban planning might be from a long-range perspective, it meant that even in the short term their land was expropriated, and also that issuing a large volume of government bonds to acquire land would almost inevitably lead to a sudden drop in the value of the bonds themselves.

Moreover, landholders had strong ties to the Seiyūkai. As noted, the Seiyūkai feared the Yamamoto cabinet and disliked Gotō. The result was that the Reconstruction Council cut Gotō's original proposal for a reconstruction budget of ¥3 billion (approximately ¥1.2 billion exclusive of land purchase costs) to ¥597 million, saying that rather than a hundred-year plan, what was needed were immediate relief measures. This represented less than one-fifth of what Gotō had asked for in total, and about half of the net costs.

Collapse of the Yamamoto Cabinet

Thus the Yamamoto cabinet experienced a serious blow to its plans in the Reconstruction Council, but took the resulting reconstruction budget to the Diet

anyway. An extraordinary Diet session was convened on 11 December 1923, and there again the Seiyūkai opposed the budget bill, claiming that the amount was still excessive. As a result, the budget was cut by another ¥130 million, to ¥466 million.

During a press conference in his later years, Emperor Shōwa would remark on the fact that Gotō's master plan for recovery after the Great Kantō Earthquake had failed to be realized, and that if it had been, the devastation caused by the war would probably not have been as great. The earthquake was the first major incident that had confronted Crown Prince Hirohito in his new role as imperial regent, and as Emperor Shōwa he looked back with regret on the failure of Gotō's plan, for which he had entertained high hopes (Takahashi Hiroshi, *Heika, otazune mōshiagemasu* [Your highness, a question please]).

Another point of contention in the Diet was the problem of earthquake insurance. Normal insurance policies stipulated that damages incurred from major natural disasters such as earthquakes of this magnitude would not be covered. But the government wanted to provide subsidies that would allow insurance claims to be paid at a rate of 10 percent of the total. This, too, did not pass the Diet, and as a result Minister of Agriculture and Commerce Den Kenjirō resigned.

In addition, the Satsuma faction in the cabinet wanted no further conflict with the Seiyūkai, and put the brakes on introduction of a bill for universal manhood suffrage. Yamamoto had an opportunity to fight the Seiyūkai by dissolving the Diet and calling for an election—which might shift things in a direction more advantageous to both the recovery budget and earthquake insurance. But Yamamoto was seventy-one years old, and the vigor of his earlier days was waning. Nor was he strongly convinced that passage of universal suffrage was necessary.

The extraordinary session of the Diet concluded on 23 December, leaving the cabinet battered and bruised. Two days later, the ordinary session of the Diet was convened. But on 27 December, the imperial procession of Crown Prince and Regent Hirohito, who was on his way to attend the ceremony opening the Diet session, was attacked by a young anarchist with a pistol just as it was passing the Toranomon intersection. This assassination attempt failed, but the Yamamoto cabinet resigned en masse to take responsibility for what came to be known as the Toranomon Incident. Among the cabinet ministers, Inukai had been especially vocal in calling for a mass resignation. Inukai joined the Yamamoto cabinet intent on achieving universal manhood suffrage and, discontented by the lack of enthusiasm for this goal among the other members of the cabinet, had been looking for a way out.