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## UNIT 4 THE MEIJI POLITICAL ORDER

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### Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Establishment of an Imperial Government
  - 4.2.1 No to Privileges
  - 4.2.2 A National Army
  - 4.2.3 Tax on Land and Pensions
- 4.3 Towards Constitutionalism
  - 4.3.1 Meiji Constitution
  - 4.3.2 The Debate
- 4.4 Protest and Revolts against the Meiji State
  - 4.4.1 Against Dismantling of Privileges
  - 4.4.2 Freedom and Peoples' Rights Movement
- 4.5 The Nature of the Meiji Political System
  - 4.5.1 The Emperor
  - 4.5.2 Bureaucracy
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Key Words
- 4.8 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this Unit, you will be able to:

- familiarise yourself with the steps the Meiji leadership took to establish a new political order based on a constitutional monarchy,
- know about the demands of the opposition groups for a constitutional representative government, and
- understand the nature of the Meiji state and the meaning of the Emperor System.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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The new Meiji government built on an alliance of leading domains led by Satsuma and Choshu which initiated far reaching changes between 1868 and 1890. In the early decades it put down opposition, moving the emperor away from Kyoto to Edo, renamed Tokyo to get away from the old orthodoxy, used force to put down opposition, and began the process of re-organising the political and economic system and building their military strength. In the 1880's they had established the new institutions along European lines, and in 1899 when the emperor announced the new constitution all the main features of the Meiji political order were in place.

These rapid changes were carried out to show the Western powers that Japan was a mature and civilised nation that should be treated equally. Japan soon

emerged as a power in the world with a developed economy and a powerful military capability.

In this Unit the nature, characteristic and process of the political structure that was created will be examined. In this Unit we are concerned with the principles by which the Meiji oligarchy as well as those in opposition were motivated. This Unit also discusses the Peoples' Rights Movement. The demand for a democratic system and the nature of the Meiji State.

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## 4.2 ESTABLISHMENT OF AN IMPERIAL GOVERNMENT

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The Meiji leaders had ideas but their programme developed over a period of time. Their immediate concern was to dismantle the structure of the old government. As early as January 3, 1869 the old offices were abolished and a new council formed with an Imperial prince at the helm. These changes were not final. Various changes followed as the power of the new rulers expanded and their control increased. The new rulers crossed certain hurdles by initiating some major steps.

### 4.2.1 No to Privileges

The first major hurdle in consolidating the new basis of power was to abolish the rights and privileges enjoyed by the Daimyo and samurai. The Daimyo enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy. Abolishing the privileges of the Daimyo was perceived as the dismantling of an outmoded feudal structure and a confirmation of the power of the Emperor. The fear of opposition held the leaders back but an initial step was taken when a decree requiring the Daimyo to separate- "public" and "private" business and select officials on the basis of talent and not birth was issued. Subsequently the leading han (Satsuma, Choshu, Tosa and Hizen) offered to surrender their privileges and asked that "the court issue such orders as it may deem necessary, disposing of the lands of the great domains and deciding changes in them .... so that state affairs, both great and small, may be in the hands of a single authority."

This created the opportunity but it took more negotiations and political manoeuvring till finally the Emperor issued an Edict on August 29, 1871:

"We deem it necessary that the government of the country be centred in a single authority, so as to effect a reformation in substance as well as in fact. ... "

The abruptly worded document putting an end to an age old system was of profound significance. The abolishing of the *han* laid the basis for extending the prefectural system all over Japan and creating a centralized authority. This time, the inspiration for these steps was the West and not China as it had traditionally been.

### 4.2.2 A National Army

The second major step in the building of the nation state was the creation of a national army. Traditionally the privilege of bearing arms had been monopolized by the samurai ever since Hideyoshi carried out a sword hunt in the sixteenth century which disarmed the peasantry and ushered in a period of relative peace.

The closing years of the Tokugawa saw both the Bakufu and the han improving their military organization. In Kii and Choshu irregular forces of commoners, peasants, and even monks, and in continuation of these trends Omura Masujiro (1824-1869) of Choshu put forward a proposal for a conscript army in July 1869. This was met with hostility as it struck at the age old privileges and moreover. His proposal required that the recruits sever all connection with their domains.

The proposals to reform the military forces were supported by Yamagata Aritomo (1838-1922), one of the leading Meiji leaders. He saw the importance of western training and organizational methods and he also saw that the trained recruits would return to their villages and become a reserve force. He wrote that stability at home and defence against foreign attack “were aspects of a single problem”.

On January 10, 1873 a conscription law was promulgated requiring adults of twenty years to put in three years of active military service and four years of reserve service. The country was divided into six army districts with a combined strength of 31,000 men. The conscription law introduced uniformity and centralization to what had been a piecemeal approach. Since 1853, because of the multiplicity of political power centres, a number of approaches had been tried. But it was only when the Meiji came to power it became necessary to have an effective force to quell internal disturbances and protect the nation from the foreign threat. The han, now prefectures, were also facing financial problems and this coupled with the fear of internal unrest led them to accept this centralized military structure. A Ministry of Military Affairs (Hyobusho) had been created in 1869 and it was fully integrated into the bureaucratic structure. It was staffed by professional officers.

The commonly held view is that Japan was influenced by the success of Prussia in the Franco-Prussian war (1870-71) and switched from following the French model to the Prussian system in organizing the army. But in actual fact it adopted the French model one month after the war. Conscription was instituted not because there was a dearth of recruits for the military forces. Even if half of the 450,000 unemployed samurai were recruited there would have been more than the troops Japan had in the 1880's.

### **4.2.3 Tax on Land and Pensions**

The third major step in the creation of a centralized political system was the institution of a land tax. Tax had been paid, during the Tokugawa period, in rice and there were many local customs and practices. Moreover, land could not be sold. The complex problem was debated and in March 1872 the ban on the sale of land was abolished and after a period of intense debates a land tax payable in cash was instituted in 1873. The tax was based on 4 per-cent of the land's capita value. Without going into the details of the manner in which this measure was carried out and the effect it had, here it needs to be noted that now the government had the basis for a stable source of revenue.

The fourth major problem was dealing with the commutation of samurai pensions. In the Tokugawa period the samurai had, as a privilege of their rank, been given stipends. This burden of stipends cost the Finance Ministry a third of the total yield from the land tax. The new government could not reduce these stipends as they had been substantially reduced over the years and it did not want to increase the burden of taxes on business as it sought to encourage growth. It was therefore,

willing to abolish this privilege as well. However, given the political impact of such a step it had to be carried out with moderation and care. A few tentative proposals were tried but finally in March 1876 the commutation of stipends was made compulsory for all samurai. The smallest stipend holders were given government bonds at fourteen times the annual value. These bonds bore a 7 per cent interest rate. Larger stipend holders were given bonds five times their annual value and the interest rates were 5 per cent.

The commutation of samurai stipends reduced government expenditure by 30 per cent. Its benefit was felt in the process of economic development but it created social and political problems. The loss of economic as well as social privileges by the samurai fuelled their anger and provided an impetus to the rebellions against the new government. The most serious of which was the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877 led by Saigo Takamori (1828-1877), Meiji leader from the influential han of Satsuma.

The important changes which these reforms reflect and which they brought about transformed the basis and nature of rule. The Daimyo and the upper samurai as well as some court nobles were deprived of power though they still retained their economic clout. At the lower levels many samurai merged with the peasantry, others became landlords or merchants and some joined the bureaucracy or the military forces. Power was now centralized and controlled by a political system which had the Emperor at the helm and under whom was the bureaucracy and armed forces. In this context changes were carried out to create a constitutional form of government which would be more acceptable to the Western powers as above all Japan desired to end the unequal treaties that had been imposed upon it. To this end Japan had to transform itself into a modern nation which at that time meant a westernized nation.

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Discuss in about ten lines how and why a National Army was created in Japan?

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- 2) Which of the following statements are right or wrong? Mark (✓) or (×).
  - i) The inspiration for establishing prefectural system in Japan came from China.
  - ii) The ban on the sale of land was abolished in 1872.
  - iii) Japan adopted the Prussian model for her army.
  - iv) The commutation of samurai stipends reduced government expenditure.

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## 4.3 TOWARDS CONSTITUTIONALISM

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The Meiji Constitution which came into effect on February 11, 1889 and lasted till May 3, 1947 was the basic document which gave form to the final political structure. But the political system cannot be understood only by studying this document. The constitution was formulated in a context of debate and discussion within the ruling oligarchy and demonstrations and petitions from emerging political associations. The constitution was effected only after a host of other crucial political changes were carried out. Examining the nature of the constitution; the process by which it was formulated and the views of the opposition group indicates the nature and character of authority in Meiji Japan. First we will look at the Meiji constitution, then at the opposition demands and finally consider the chief characteristics of the Meiji political structure.

### 4.3.1 The Meiji Constitution

Japan has a long history of constitutions and the earliest is the 17 Article constitution issued by Shotoku Taishi in 604 A.D. but the idea of a modern constitution owes more to western legal influence than to Chinese ideals. Before the Meiji period there had been deliberative assemblies of feudal lords and there was a tradition of public authority or *kogi* which many scholars see as the basis on which modern constitutionalism was successfully built. In other words there was a tradition of arriving at decisions through discussion. We have already seen that the authority of the Shogun during the Tokugawa period was not feudal but purely autocratic.

The Meiji leaders in the initial months issued a statement which was in effect an appeal for unity and which laid down the basis for future change. The Charter Oath issued by the Emperor on April 6, 1868 had five articles. The first among these promised: "An assembly widely convoked shall be decided by public discussion." This laid the basis for the creation of a constitutional system of government.

The crucial problems which arose while deciding about the nature of the constitution were to do with:

- the speed at which these measures would be carried out,
- the power and authority of the Emperor, and
- how these laws would be integrated within Japanese traditional practices so that society would not be disrupted.

The Meiji leaders were also aware of the dangers of socialism and did not want Japan to be faced with these problems.

Among the Meiji leaders Yamagata Aritomo argued that an excessively fast pace would alienate the people and lead to social instability. Ito Hirobumi (1841-1909), on the other hand argued that Japan was now part of an interdependent world and within Japan the privileges, stipends and power enjoyed by the samurai had been abolished. Hence, in this changed environment it was not possible to ignore democratic ideas and it was necessary to share power.

The most liberal view was put forward by Okuma Shigenobu (1838-1922) who advocated a British style parliamentary system. Okuma was from the province of Hizen and had served as councillor, and between 1873-1880 as a Finance Minister. His memorial of March 1881 was a radical proposal advocating the establishment of a Parliament by 1883 with election in 1882. The government would be formed by the majority party. He wrote, "Constitutional government is party government and the struggle between parties are the struggle of principles."

Almost diametrically opposed to this was the view of Iwakura Tomomi (1825-1883), an influential noble who belonged to the core group of Meiji leaders. He and Inoue Kowashi (1843-1895) argued that in Japan, unlike Britain there was no tradition of political parties and they would not be successful. Therefore, the Emperor should appoint and dismiss the Cabinet independent of a parliamentary majority. Such views were supported by influential newspapers. The Tokyo *nichi nichi shinbun*, a paper close to the government was a strong supporter of the divinity of the Emperor.

The loyalist tradition had argued that Japan was created by the gods and the Emperor was a direct descendant of the Sun Goddess, whose grandson was the first Emperor of Japan. The lineage of the Imperial House had continued in an unbroken line and this established the uniqueness of Japan's political structure. *Kokutai* literally means the national body and this became a key word in the debates which took place around the functions of the Emperor. During the Meiji period this word was interpreted in many ways even to argue against the mythical traditions but later it came to be exclusively associated with the idea of a divine Emperor.

An influential Meiji intellectual Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901) who was an ardent moderniser wrote an article on the Imperial house. In this he argued that the Imperial family should stay out of politics as it belonged to all the people. The Emperor would remain a symbol of unity and continuity while power would rotate between responsible parties.

These debates reflect the range of ideas within the ruling establishment and the different perceptions these leaders had even while broadly agreeing on the goals that national policy must aim for. The process of drafting was carried out in great secrecy by a team headed by Ito Hirobumi and they were advised by German legal scholars H. Roesler and A. Morse. However, before the draft was even prepared an Imperial ordinance created a peerage system in 1884 and in 1885 a Cabinet system with Ito Hirobumi as the first Prime Minister was established.

An Imperial decree on October 11, 1881 promised a constitution so that "our imperial heirs may be provided with a rule for their guidance." The constitution would come into effect in 1890 and its basic premise was that parliamentary democracy should be controlled otherwise it would disrupt the social and political order. To further ensure that the opposition did not create problems, laws were enacted to control public meetings and publications. Finally in 1887 the Peace Preservation Law gave the police the power to, remove anyone "who plots or incites disturbance, or who is judged to be scheming something detrimental to public tranquility."

The final draft was submitted in April, 1888 and on February 11, 1889, a day called Kigensetsu, when the supposed anniversary of the first Emperor Jimmu is celebrated, the constitution was gifted by the Emperor to his people.

### 4.3.2 The Debate

There are debates about whether the constitution was merely a facade or a genuine attempt to chart out social change. One view sees the Meiji oligarchy as an alliance of factions (hanbatsu) from the bans (Satsuma, Choshu, etc.) but this overlooks the centralizing forces at work in the Meiji Government. Other scholars have argued that Japan like Prussia, because of late development, chose the idea of a social monarchy and was able to carry-out its programme of modernization. The ambiguity of retaining a traditional Emperor with sacrosanct powers (Article-I: "The Empire of Japan shall be reigned over and governed by a line of Emperors unbroken for ages eternal. Article 4 The Emperor is head of the Empire, combining in himself the rights of sovereignty') was to remain a source of tension until the end of the Second World War when the occupying forces of the United States imposed a new constitution.

The proponents of the Meiji state as "absolutist" argue that the samurai were able to use the Imperial institution to free themselves from a feudal system and base their power on a coalition of class forces. This was possible because no single class was dominant; feudal power was in decline, the peasantry was rebelling and the bourgeoisie was rising. E.H. Norman argued that it was this absolutist state which could have carried out the immense task of modernization. Allied to this argument is the view of peasant rebellions as creating a climate of fear that a popular revolution would endanger the social system and therefore, absolutism was acceptable to a wider range of groups.

#### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Discuss the various views within the oligarchy as to the nature of the constitution.

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- 2) Which of the following statements are right or wrong? Mark (✓) or (×).
  - i) The loyalist tradition regarded the Emperor as a direct descendant of the Sun Goddess.
  - ii) Fukuzawa Yukichi did not want the Imperial family to stay out of politics.
  - iii) The first article of the Charter Oath laid the basis for the creation of a constitutional government.
  - iv) The drafting of the constitution was done openly.

## 4.4 PROTEST AND REVOLTS AGAINST THE MEIJI STATE

We have looked at the way in which the Meiji oligarchy carried out a series of reforms to create a new political structure. This entailed wide ranging debates within the ruling oligarchy but it also created dissension, protest and turmoil outside the ruling establishment. In this Section we shall consider the areas in which protest was voiced, the nature of these protests and the ideology that these opposition groups articulated.

There were protests against the land tax but here it can be noted that in general the measures were a political success and they removed the element of arbitrariness which was present in the Tokugawa system. The changes worked to the advantage of the larger landholders. By abolishing many customary rights landlord-tenant disputes increased mainly over the question of rents. However, the class which was most adversely affected, subsistence farmers for instance, were also the most powerless to protest.

### 4.4.1 Against Dismantling of Privileges

The more violent reactions were provoked by the dismantling of the structure of privileges of the traditional elite. The Shizoku rebellions between 1874 and 1877 were serious challenges to the new regime. These revolts were led by young samurai who had been active in the anti-Tokugawa movement and occupied important positions in the new Meiji government. Eto Shimpei (1834-1874), who led the Saga rebellion of 1874 was a member of the Council of State; Maebara Issei (1834-1876), who participated in the Shinpuren uprising in Kumamoto was in the government, and Saigo Takamori, who led the last and most serious uprising, the Satsuma Rebellion of 1877 was one of the core group of the Meiji leaders and had occupied important posts.

The elites found their traditional privileges taken away and were looking for an opportunity to assert themselves. They came together over the question of whether Japan should invade Korea or not. Korea had refused to open diplomatic and trade relations with Japan and Saigo hoped to use this to build a Samurai army. Saigo had earlier proposed a development model in which he argued for adopting Shinto as a state religion; specific measures to revitalize the rural economy and the manufacturing sector would support the stipends of the Shizoku.

The Meiji leaders did not object in principle to invading Korea but were opposed to the timing as they felt that Japan was still not sufficiently strong and such adventurous action would invite Chinese or Russian intervention as well. The Iwakura Mission, which had toured Europe and the United States 1871-1873 was well aware of Western military and economic strength; These leaders argued that Japan could not afford to divert precious resources urgently needed for modernization though the hard liners failed this had repercussions.

Satsuma played a crucial role because the samurai population there was very large, as the rural warriors or goshi were also considered samurai. In the rest of Japan samurai had lived in castle towns through out the Tokugawa period and had no direct connection with the land. The changes directly affected the privileges

and livelihood of the goshi and they provided willing recruits to the anti-government normal revolts.

The failure of these revolts attests to the success of the government in establishing its power and creating a wide support structure. It was also due to the failure of the rebel leaders to effectively mobilize and use their supporters and sympathizers. The Satsuma rebellion was however, better organized and larger in scale with 22,000 supporters. The government sent an army of 33,000 and later reinforcement of 30,000. The success of the government forces was due as much to the narrow political base of the rebels, their tactical errors as to the superiority of an army based on universal conscription.

#### 4.4.2 Freedom and Peoples' Rights Movement

The Meiji government also faced opposition from within the oligarchy over its policies. Itagaki Taisuke (1837-1919) and Goto Shojiro (1838-1897), who belonged to the Tosa (a leading hanin the Meiji Restoration) faction were one group who argued for a democratic government. They led the Peoples' Rights Movement which began as an upper class anti-government movement. The early advocates of peoples' rights were samurai and wealthy farmers (gono) who had been active in the Meiji Restoration but gradually the supporters expanded to include school teachers, priests, petty merchants and small landholders. The changing character of the movement reflects this change in its composition.

The Peoples' Rights Movement also put forward a vision of Japanese politics which was different from that supported by the Meiji leaders. Therefore, even though there are many features which are in common and though some of the movement leaders compromised with the government this differing basis marks a clear divide. The movement also created political consciousness and contributed to the growth of political associations and political parties. Finally, the growth of the movement within a decade of the Meiji Restoration points to the existence of local traditions of protest and solidarity. The rapid spread of Western liberal ideas was possible not only because of reasonably high levels of education but because there was a background within which these new ideas could be assimilated.

In the formative period (from 1874-1878) several political organizations were formed, such as the Public Party of Patriots (Aikokuto) in 1874 and the Society to Establish One's Ambitions (Risshisha). The membership of these groups was largely in Tosa, now called Kochi Prefecture and its leaders, like Itagaki Taisuke or Ueki Emori (1857-1892) called for a popular assembly and a representative government. These institutions, they felt, would remedy the problems created by the concentration of power, conscription, heavy taxes and the mismanagement of foreign affairs.

The manifesto of the Risshisha proclaimed:

"We, the thirty million people in Japan are all equally endowed with certain definite rights, among which are those of enjoying and defending life and liberty, acquiring and possessing property, and obtaining a livelihood and pursuing happiness. These rights are by nature bestowed upon all men, and therefore, cannot be taken away by the power of any man."

However, all scholars are not unanimous in accepting these statements at their face value. Robert Scalapino sees this rhetoric as a tool with which certain members of the ex-samurai class sought to gain political power for they could no longer rely either on military power or on intellectual and social prestige. Itagaki Taisuke was far from liberal in his views of the people and sought to build his base on the samurai, richer farmers and merchants. He argued that political power should rest with the moneyed class.

From 1878 to 1881 the movement spread, in spite of government repression. as it was fuelled by the growing discontent of the common people (heimin) who were affected by the land tax revision. This discontent led to the formation of numerous societies particularly at the village level. Irokawa Daikichi, who has done pioneering work on these groups calculates that over 150 were formed. In October 1881 when the Freedom Party or Jiyuto was formed. It had 149 affiliates and by November of that year it could mobilize more than 135,000 people in a petition “campaign to demand representative government”.

The oligarchs had announced in 1881 that they would form a national assembly within nine years. Okuma, who had advocated an early date for convening the national assembly resigned and formed his own party, the Constitutional Reform Party (Rikken Kaishinto). This party drew its support from the urban middle class while the Jyuto was largely supported by wealthy farmers even though its leadership was mostly of former samurai.

The movement had been growing particularly in the rural areas and conventions were held demanding a constitutional government. To take an example, in March 1880 the 4th general convention of the “Association for the Establishment of a National Assembly” was held with 114 delegates representing 96,900 members spread over 28 prefectures.

This intense political activity was also reflected in the large number of private constitutional drafts which were written. Between 1879-1881 there were more than forty drafts by private individuals. This political activism reflected the desire to escape feudal restraints and create a wider awareness. Societies formed at the village level, such as the Learning and Debating Society at the small market town of Itsukaichi (the name means fifth day market town), near Tokyo, read western liberal works, debated ways to improve society and this “ignorant rabble” discussed drafting a national constitution, a legal system and a code of civil rights. One of the members Chiba Takusaburo (1852-1883) produced a full constitutional draft which is highly evaluated as an enlightened document.

The government’s repressive machinery was being enforced. The promulgation of laws restricting the press and limiting public meetings in 1875 and 1877 silenced many supporters. Under the 1875 and 1876. laws some sixty persons were arrested but by 1880 the number had gone up to more than three hundred. The Ordinance on Public Meetings (1880) allowed the police powers to regulate the activities of political groups. Moreover, soldiers, teachers and students could not attend political meetings. In 1881, 131 political meetings were disbanded followed by 282 in 1882. The press was treated equally harshly. The editor of a Tokyo paper, Azuma, was sent to jail for two years and fined 200 yen for saying that the Emperor was, like other government officials, a public servant.

After 1881 the Peoples' Rights Movement began to splinter and according to some scholars the violent incidents which took place between 1882-1885 form a separate phase which they call "incidents of extremism" (gekka jiken). These incidents in Fukushima, Gumma, Kanagawa, Ibaraki and Saitama were largely organized by leaders from the Jiyuto "to overthrow the oppressive government, which is the public enemy of freedom." In 1884 in the Kabasan incident they attempted to assassinate the government ministers to "protect the citizens' happiness and natural liberties." The Kabasan incident was not an uprising of people caused by economic difficulties but an attempt to change the government by insurrection. However, in the Chichibu uprising of 1884 the economic distress of the people was the prime factor.

The suppression of the Chichibu uprising marked the end of the movement. In fact, the movement had, in spite of the long period of agitations, achieved very little. The Meiji oligarchy promulgated a constitution in 1889 which limited political rights and it was only in 1918 that the prime minister came from the parliament. The movement was limited by internal factionalism, a weak leadership and above all by its acceptance of the central role of the Imperial institution. This laid them open to attack by the oligarchy who controlled the Emperor.

However, the movement, in part, was responsible for pushing the Meiji leaders to convene an assembly and promulgate a constitution. It helped to establish the basis for a system of political parties. These traditions of political dissent were carried on later by the socialist and Christian movements though the people's rights leaders were not successful in countering the Meiji political culture of authoritarian rule.

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## 4.5 THE NATURE OF THE MEIJI POLITICAL SYSTEM

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In the above Sections we have seen how the Meiji political system evolved and what were its basic features. The opposition and its demand of a different and more democratic structure has also been examined. In this Section we look at the guiding principles behind the political changes which built a modern nation state. The predominant thrust of the Meiji oligarchy in the political sphere is best summed up in the slogan "rich country, strong army" (fukoku kyohei). This slogan illustrates the Meiji oligarchy's idea- that for Japan to survive and preserve its national integrity in the face of Western imperialist threat it had to create a wealthy and prosperous nation and build a strong defence force to protect it. The Meiji leaders efforts were directed by these goals and to achieve them they carried out a process of centralization of power and suppression of dissent on the grounds that it dissipated national energies, created social disorder and increased the danger of foreign domination.

### 4.5.1 The Emperor

The key figure in the political system was the Emperor, who, even though he did not exercise personal power, became the source of power. It is for this reason that many Japanese historians speak of an Emperor system or describe the Meiji period as "emperor system absolutism (tennosei zettaishugi): It is important to

remember that in Japanese the word used for the emperor-tenno has a much more religious significance than the word Emperor in English. The Emperor had lived in relative obscurity throughout the Tokugawa period. He was dependent on the Bakufu for finances. Yet, he was regarded as the source of virtue and the central figure in Japanese culture. The Meiji leaders set about building up the image of the divine Emperor and to present him as the “axis of the nation” (Ito Hirobumi).

The Emperor made (from 1878-1885) six great circuits of the nation. These Imperial progressions, in the words of Inoue Kaoru, were carefully designed not only to inform the people of the emperor’s offers the opportunity of displaying direct imperial rule in the flesh thus dispelling misgivings about monarchical government.

The Meiji leaders were very consciously using the Emperor for political ends though at the same time his direct involvement was severally curtailed and he lived in the expressive phrase of the times “above the clouds”. The Emperor was projected as an aloof and distant ruler who was above politics. He became in the words of Mori Arinori the “peerless capital, the greatest possible treasure in the enterprise of fostering loyalty and patriotism.”

Goto Yasushi divides the development of the Emperor System into three periods:

- the first from 1868 to 1884, saw the formation of the basic features of the system,
- in the second, from 1885-1895, the system was implemented, and
- in the third, from 1895-1905; there was a restructuring.

The two pillars on which the system rested were the bureaucracy and the military.

#### **4.5.2 Bureaucracy**

The bureaucratic structure was formed over a period of time but by 1872 a hierarchical system with 15 categories of bureaucrats had been created. These were divisible into three broad categories of which the first two groups were direct imperial appointees and were, treated differently even under law. Moreover, the policy of recruitment allowed access to people from various social classes and only a small percentage of the nobles and samurai became bureaucrats. The powers and privileges of these officials were not because of their birth but because they were employees of the Emperor. Similarly, the military was directly answerable to the Emperor and they were to later use this power to topple cabinets and enforce their view.

The Meiji Government even while creating political institutions denied political activity as a legitimate right. It saw politics as something which divided people and represented selfish group interests and it projected the Emperor as representing the will and interests of the nation in a non-partisan manner. This was enforced by excluding groups from taking part in political activity. As mentioned earlier minors, women, teachers and soldiers were forbidden to attend political meetings. In the Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors it was written “neither be led astray by current opinions nor meddle in politics but with single heart fulfill your essential

duties of loyalty.” Women were not permitted to go out of the house on political business till 1922.

The Meiji Emperor ruled till his death in 1912 and his reign marked the transition of Japan from a closed and isolated country to a major world power. Japanese institutions were radically transformed and though hesitatingly, a constitutional structure was created. The parliament or Diet as it is called in Japan was able to assert a small degree of authority and influence on the ruling oligarchy. From these tentative and hesitant steps a party system evolved and political debates increased. But right from the beginning the Meiji leaders were able to seize the initiative and take decisions on the course of national policy. This was because they controlled and kept out of the constitutional process both the bureaucracy and the military. Key institutions and ministries functioned directly under the Emperor. It is for this reason that even though in the subsequent periods there were changes, there were no violent social upheavals because different government institutions were jockeying for power. Thus in the 1930s it was the army which became the dominant force within the government.

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Discuss the Peoples’ Rights Movement in Japan.

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- 2) Discuss the position of the Emperor in the political system.

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- 3) Fill in the blanks :

- i) Risshisha was a ..... organisation which  
..... rights for the .....
- ii) Iwakura mission was ..... the invasion of .....
- iii) Goshi were ..... warriors who were also  
considered .....
- iv) The society at Itsukaichi discussed the drafting of a ....., a  
..... system and a code of .....  
rights.
- v) The Imperial policy of bureaucratic recruitment ..... access  
to people from ..... social classes.

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## 4.6 LET US SUM UP

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The political changes in the Meiji period were carried out by a small group of leaders who had helped bring about the Meiji Restoration. They were motivated in part by the desire to transform Japan into a modern nation so that they could revise the unequal treaties. They were also interested in building a powerful and prosperous country. They used the existing institutions, such as the Imperial institution or religious ideas to effect slow and gradual change. The Meiji leaders were concerned about the possibility of social disruption and the influx of divisive ideas from the Western nations. That is why they borrowed selectively from countries like Prussia to fashion a political structure suited to their idea of Japan.

The opposition movements also wanted to build a Japan but their vision differed from that of the Meiji oligarchy. The anti-Meiji revolts by the traditional elite, the shizoku were backward looking and arose out of the loss of privileges and destruction of customary rights. These elites were thrown to market forces which they could neither understand nor control.

Among the opposition to the Meiji State the Peoples' Rights Movement represented a liberal and democratic opposition in its initial phase but its scope and intensity increased and gradually as other social groups who were disadvantaged were included. There were even violent incidents which threatened the authority of the state. The failure of the movement lay in a number of factors, such as factionalism and a weak leadership, but essentially the Meiji government was already too firmly entrenched both ideologically as well as institutionally to be dislodged.

The basic structure of politics that was created had certain ambiguities which were to pose problems in the following years. Japan became a centralized and aggressive nation using the myth of imperial divinity to not only unite its people but to expand its borders. Internal suppression and external aggression emerged from the same political outlook. The idea of a democratic government based on the will of the people espoused by the Peoples' Rights Movement was defeated but remained to inspire democrats of other generations.

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## 4.7 KEY WORDS

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**Goshi :** Warriors who lived in villages in Satsuma. Though the samurai had to live in the castle towns these warriors were treated at par with samurai.

**Kogi:** Public discussion. The word was also used to refer to the Shogun during the Tokugawa period. During that time the word Shogun was rarely used.

**Shizoku:** After the restoration status distinctions were abolished and the former samurai were known as shizoku.

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## 4.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Base your answer on Sub-sec. 4.2.2.

- 2) (i) x (ii) ✓ (iii) x (iv) ✓

**Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) Your answer should include the various views mentioned in Sub-secs. 4.3.1 and 4.3.2.
- 2) (i) ✓ (ii) × (iii) ✓ (iv) ×

**Check Your Progress 3**

- 1) Your answer should include the various political organisations; their leaders, demands and methods. See Sub-sec. 4.4.2.
- 2) Mention the status of the Emperor along with the reasons as to why and how this status was attributed to him. Base your answer on Sub-sec. 4.5.1.
- 3) i) political, advocated, people  
ii) against, Korea  
iii) rural, samurai  
iv) constitution, legal, civil  
v) allowed, various.

