

The Indispensable Element of Democracy

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The long-lasting rule of the Liberal Democratic Party collapsed after the last election. The Japanese people chose to vote for politicians not associated with the LDP and welcomed the birth of a new government for, the first time in 38 years. The Japanese people realized their power, the power of the electorate, the power of people that can change government. We, the Japanese people, decided to use our constitutional right to vote and thus attempted to change the face of the Japanese government forever.

Democracy is a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation involving periodically held free elections. An indispensable element of democracy is the right to vote. Since the dawn of modernization, people have been struggling for this right. It was the fight against monarchies, against totalitarianism, a fight waged by the peoples of the world to ensure that we today are guaranteed the right to vote. Although hundreds of thousands have died for this struggle, the situation today in Japan will not directly grant everyone the right to vote.

A few days before the last election, one member of the Self-Defense Force taking part in the peace-keeping mission in Cambodia appeared on TV and said with a sigh, "I'm very interested in this election. But I have no right to vote because now I live here. Unfortunately, this is the situation." Until I heard him, I thought that the right to vote was automatically guaranteed to every Japanese from the age of 20. To my surprise, however, this right is not granted for all. Who sent the Self-Defense Force overseas? Who makes up the Diet? The answer is clear, the members of Parliament who are elected by us. Even though they have to go to a foreign land to ensure a democratic free election is carried out, these members who risk their own lives ironically will not have the right to vote.

Unfortunately, under the Public Offices Election Law, more than 440 thousand Japanese are deprived of their right to vote just because they live abroad. Even after they come back to Japan, they still have to wait three months to be registered as voters. This problem also affects citizens living in Japan. If you move within three months

before any election, you must abandon your right to vote for that coming election. Actually, this happened to three members of my Speech Section out of seven for the last election. They were extremely disappointed because it would have been their first time to vote for the national Diet. Now I feel we, Japanese take democracy for granted. With the fact that the people of Japan have not really fought for democracy, we have never dreamed of losing our rights. But actually this is happening and each of you here can become a victim easily. I think many of you are planning to study abroad or you might change your place of residence before an election. In those cases, you have to abandon your right to vote because of this undemocratic system. Let us take this matter under serious consideration and change it.

These days, political reform, especially the reform of the election system for the House of Representatives, is now being debated. Electoral reform is very important because it can directly affect a Representative's activities. But if they are real politicians representing the Japanese, they need to revise the Public Offices Election Law as soon as possible to grant everyone the right to vote according to the constitutional principle of national sovereignty. It is about time our government officials do it because this system has remained unchanged for more than 40 years.

In order to grant everyone aged 20 or older the right to vote, first, Japanese living abroad must be given opportunity to vote. Japanese Ambassadors in each country can function as Election Control Commissioners. In this information-oriented society, it is easy to acquire information about the election and each candidate's campaign pledge. Presently Japan is the only G7 country which does not have this system. Actually, one French friend of mine studying at my university voted for the last French election. As for the problem of the Japanese citizens relocating, the government can reduce the period of three months to a few days by using their computer system more efficiently. With the globalization of economy and study, the number of the Japanese living abroad will surely be increasing. We must do it at any cost because the right to vote must never be restricted in a true democratic society.

Sovereignty rests with the people. We declared this policy at the beginning of our constitution. We are granted this sovereignty by our continual efforts. But in today's system, I cannot say that sovereignty, the right to vote, is in our hands completely. Let us declare today that

we will walk in the footsteps of those who have died for democracy to ensure that Japan is a country governed by its people.