

Strengthening “Human Capacity,” “Social Capacity,” and “Environmental Capacity”: Three Preconditions for Building a Sustainable Japan

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In January of this year, Prime Minister Takaichi abruptly dissolved the House of Representatives. As widely anticipated, the conservative Liberal Democratic Party secured a landslide victory, while the liberal Centrist Reform Alliance suffered a decisive defeat.

The dissolution lacked a clear and compelling policy rationale, and the election effectively devolved into a popularity contest centered on the Prime Minister herself, rather than a substantive policy debate.

Some may hope that this outcome will steer Japan toward economic prosperity. However, it appears more likely that it will further entrench a trajectory toward an “unsustainable Japan.”

For example, the Prime Minister’s policy of aggressive fiscal expansion may lead to an increase in government bond issuance, thereby imposing a greater burden on future generations. The continued depreciation of the yen is widening domestic economic inequality and diminishing Japan’s international standing. Already weak climate policies may stagnate or even regress. Furthermore, a potential shift toward more right-leaning politics may lead to attempts to amend Japan’s long-revered “Peace Constitution.”

This outcome may, in part, reflect a broader decline in the quality of democracy in Japan. In times of uncertainty and instability, people may be less inclined to engage in careful deliberation and more susceptible to simple and appealing rhetoric.

Democracy—where citizens learn from history, identify challenges, build consensus, and make responsible decisions—requires time and sustained effort. It is possible that many have opted for a more expedient path rather than engaging in such a demanding process. Alternatively, many citizens may feel disillusioned by unfocused policy debates, leading to a sense of political inefficacy and disengagement.

Against this backdrop, in late January, Environmental Civilization 21, in collaboration with various environmental organizations across Japan, convened two study sessions.

The first was a joint session with the Ministry of the Environment and the “Green Alliance,” a network of approximately 80 environmental organizations, on the subject of public participation in environmental policymaking.

The second was a seminar organized by our organization, featuring Professor Naoto Uehara of the Nagoya Institute of Technology, focusing on the current state and challenges of political education in Japan.

These discussions made clear that both public participation and political education are serious concerns in this country.

The session with the Ministry of the Environment was prompted by the observation that, although numerous public comment processes have been conducted in recent years on environmental and energy policies, these inputs have rarely been reflected in actual policy decisions.

In particular, policy-oriented NGOs, which have long emphasized the importance of public participation, view this situation as deeply problematic. While this concern is well-founded, it is equally important to establish and utilize mechanisms that enable citizen participation at much earlier stages of the policymaking process, rather than limiting engagement to the final public comment phase.

In 2011, Environmental Civilization 21 played a leading role in the introduction of the Act on the Promotion of Environmental Conservation Activities through Environmental Education.

Article 21, Paragraph 2 of this Act stipulates that the government should actively disclose relevant information, solicit diverse stakeholder perspectives—including those of citizens—and give due consideration to these views in policymaking processes. It further calls for the establishment of concrete mechanisms to facilitate effective public participation.

Subsequently, in January 2013, relevant policy guidelines were introduced. These guidelines proposed the establishment of “Local Environmental Partnership”

platforms in eight regions nationwide, designed to support prior consultation on policy proposals and to organize seminars providing guidance on policy advocacy.

However, ministry officials reported during the study session that these mechanisms have never been fully operationalized to generate actual policy proposals.

Responsibility for this situation does not rest solely with the government. As citizens, we must acknowledge that we have not made sufficient efforts to utilize these mechanisms effectively. For instance, our outreach activities should have gone beyond one-way information dissemination to foster genuine two-way communication and collaborative policy development.

At the same time, it is deeply regrettable that the Ministry has left these mechanisms largely unused for over a decade. The principle of “seeking diverse stakeholder views and reflecting them in policymaking” appears to have remained a mere formality. This raises concerns that public participation may be treated as little more than a procedural formality.

Such attitudes have contributed not only to undermining trust in climate and energy policies but also to increasing skepticism toward nuclear energy policy. As a result, meaningful policy input from the environmental and energy sectors has diminished, and these issues have rarely become central topics in national elections.

In this regard, the second seminar on political education offered an important perspective. From the 1920s through the postwar reform period and into the 1960s, *kominkan* (community learning centers) played a vital role as local hubs for cultivating active citizenship. Citizens were understood as individuals who consider not only their personal interests but also the well-being of society as a whole, thereby contributing to the development of democracy from the grassroots level.

However, Article 14, Paragraph 2 of the Basic Act on Education stipulates that schools must refrain from political education or activities that support or oppose specific political parties. This provision has effectively imposed strict political neutrality on educators, leading in practice to the avoidance of political education in schools. This is a serious concern, as it has contributed to the current widespread lack of political engagement.

It is often said that “the quality of politicians reflects the quality of the people.” In this context, the current situation—in which serious learning and open discussion about politics are avoided in both formal education and social education—is deeply concerning. Equally concerning is the limited use of opportunities for citizen participation in policymaking. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult to foster political awareness and critical thinking among citizens.

Consequently, opportunities to elect political leaders capable of articulating long-term national visions have become increasingly limited. Moreover, the rapid expansion of social media and AI in election campaigns—issues that resurfaced in the January election—is likely to further exacerbate these challenges.

In a country like Japan, with limited land and scarce natural resources, the foundation of national strength lies in its human capacity. Neglecting education that cultivates this capacity, restricting opportunities for political participation and thereby weakening social capacity, and failing to invest in the environment—thereby undermining environmental capacity—make it impossible to build a truly prosperous and sustainable Japan.

Although voter turnout in the January election was only 56%, the results must be respected. Environmental Civilization 21 will continue to advocate for strengthening human capacity, social capacity, and environmental capacity as essential pillars for achieving a prosperous and sustainable Japan.

(Translated by Hideyuki Mori, Advisor to Environmental Civilization 21)