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Essay

Strategies of Political Institutions and Civil Society Actors in the Post-3/11 Era: The Case of Japan^{*}

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ABSTRACT

Japan is at a crossroads of public administration and disaster management, especially in the aftermath of the catastrophic events of March 11, 2011: a major earthquake near Tōhoku, and the subsequent tsunami and nuclear reactor meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear facility. There have been advocates for more top-down governance to handle such crises (and the ongoing residuals of such crises), while others have touted more decentralization—that is, more governance at the local level. Nevertheless, Japan still faced myriad public policy challenges three years after the catastrophic events. This article investigates the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Japan’s local governance in the aftermath of March 11, 2011, addressing broadly the theme of disaster management and, more specifically, the impact (or lack thereof) of NGOs (nonprofits) on the local governance processes in Japan in the midst of the debates regarding top-down and bottom-up approaches to disaster management.

KEY WORDS NGOs; Nongovernmental Organizations; Nonprofits; Civil Society; Disaster Management

CONFORMITY AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article is grounded in societal conformity as a perspective to view the roles and constraints of political institutions (in particular the Japanese legislature, the Diet) and civil society actors, also known as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or nonprofit organizations (NPOs). Familial relationships are very important in Japan, meaning “outsiders” such as NGOs are not necessarily received with open arms—at least not initially. The catastrophic events of March 11, 2011—the Tōhoku earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear plant meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi facility—were a seismic test for governmental and nongovernmental entities. The unspeakable

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aftermath and cleanup were, I would argue, somewhat minimized by the inability of well-intentioned NGOs playing a more active role. The constraints could be characterized as culturally bound. For example, in African American and Latino cultures, family ties and strong reliance on one's immediate and extended family for support are much more important than is outside help (Chia et al. 1994). Additionally, people in a disaster are more likely to view their needs as physical (rather than psychological or emotional), especially in non-Western cultures such as that of Japan (Satel 2005). Thus, the use of a Western framework as a standard for evaluating a non-Western society could be seen as problematic.

Culturally, Japan generally tends to conform partly because of its ideological/cultural/top-down governance roots grounded in a sense of conformity. I would argue that this is conformity not in the sense of irrational conformity (herd behavior) but in the sense of rational conformity (compliance/obedience): "Rational conformity is behavior guided by thinking, judgment, or reasoning. It occurs as a result of the influences exerted by the object's behavior or attitude and includes abidance, compliance, and obedience" (Song et al. 2012:1366). Such rational conformity is embedded in Japan's historical and political allegiance to the emperor and to political institutions. To be fair, leerness of outside intervention is not unique to Japan and can also be viewed historically in many conservative communities in the United States, including in the areas of education, civil rights, and health care.

Moreover, rational conformity has implications for civil society vis-à-vis the state in natural or manmade emergency-management issues. Additionally, Japan's relatively nascent (compared to its Western counterparts) NGO culture is one of the consequences of conformity to the state; however, Ayumi Suzuki suggests that "it is not so much that Japan lacks a culture of giving as much as it lacks a culture of asking" (Kingston 2010). That is, NGOs need to be more aggressive in seeking grants and subsidies to raise money for their activities.

Generally, various factors in Japan contribute to conformity, not the least being the history of an emperor or a top-down political system. Furthermore, Japan's Disaster Countermeasures Basic Act of 1961 and the updated (1997) version are clearly top-down approaches to disaster-management emergencies, with the state and prefectures (regional governing bodies) taking the lead role rather than working in tandem with civil society actors. Designated public corporations, such as utilities, the Bank of Japan, and the Japanese Red Cross, however, cooperate with the state to minimize the damage of natural disasters, although, unlike civil society actors such as NGOs which tend to be more adaptable to particular societal needs, public corporations are more beholden to the state and thus may have particular legislative constraints. Nevertheless, Japan is considered to be at the forefront globally in the area of natural-disaster management.

The impetus for Japan's considerable expertise in natural-disaster management came in the aftermath of the Kobe earthquake in 1995. The technical (e.g., engineering, excavation) expertise has been more present, but thernontechical expertise (e.g., community-led initiatives), or what Nakagawa and Fujibayashi call "soft issues" (2010:338) have not. Thus, community-led groups such as nonprofits and NGOs began to appear in the emergency-management sector. In particular, SEEDS Asia was established

in 2006 as a nonprofit resource for nontechnical issues, which include operational issues, the media's role, skills and capacities to execute strategies, and public policies to curtail the effects of natural disasters. Conformity for Japanese citizens may play a role in the principle of *cheng-ming* (a principle of Confucianism), which means knowing one's place in society and accepting the authority of the state (and not civil of society actors) in administering goods and services in the face of disaster. Additionally, a country's social capital (e.g., skill sets and organizational strength) can enhance or inhibit disaster-management efforts.

Moreover, a recent study by Veszteg, Funaki, and Tanaka (2015), similar to Putnam's (1993) work, has revealed that social capital in the form of norms, networks, and mutual trust actually increases after natural disasters such as Japan's Tōhoku earthquake and the subsequent tsunami. The data revealed in the researchers' "disaster survey" that respondents were more likely to "pay back a favor to someone who did a favor for him or her in a crisis situation than in a normal situation" (2015:131). Thus, perhaps trusting the government to come to one's aid is context-driven in the case of Japan and many Western societies, including conservative communities in the United States, in terms of natural-disaster relief. Such conservative communities in the United States may not want government or NGO "intrusion" in an area such as civil rights but may welcome such "intrusion" when natural disasters such as tornadoes and floods occur.

Nevertheless, the lingering effects of conformity and the 1925 Peace Preservation Act in Japan may play a role in the lack of institutional cooperation between the state and civil society actors. More specifically, the act prohibited Japanese citizens from conducting political discussions and forming societies (e.g., civil society groups). One can even consider stifling effects on civil society actors as far back as the Meiji era (1868–1912), in which "laws were promulgated to prevent the workers from forming organizations" such as labor unions, which "have long been suppressed by the state" (He 2010: 278). Thus, "civil society has been constrained by the deeply embedded, state-centric institutions" (He 2010: 274). A seam may nevertheless be opening, in terms of holding government more accountable in a public setting, not just in casual private conversations. For example, Dr. Kiyoshi Kurokawa, chairman of the National Diet of Japan Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission (NAIIC) from December 2011 to July 2012, when asked by a reporter on October 17, 2012, "Has Japanese society taken to heart the lessons of the disaster, beyond the humanitarian aspects that it has so clearly embraced?" replied:

"I'm not so sure". ... There's one grassroots development that may signal change. Starting last summer, groups of people have held quiet demonstrations across from the prime minister's office every Friday at 6 p.m. Often whole families are present with children; the atmosphere is almost like a picnic. Could it be a sign of change? One journalist thinks yes, because it shows "they are willing to protest to the authority." (Hyde 2012)

SHIMIN SHAKAI (CIVIL SOCIETY) IN JAPAN

Japan is a relative latecomer to NGO activism, in part because of cultural norms and political (statist or top-down politics model) and socio-economic reasons. Japan did not become an active NGO participant until the early 1990s. As a result of Japan's cultural, political, and socioeconomic mix, activists such as civil society actors were seen as unimportant and not in alignment with state economic industrialization goals. The state was forced to take a second look at these new players (NGO activists) in the aftermath of the Tōhoku earthquake and subsequent tsunami and nuclear reactor fallout, however. In addition, Japanese cultural norms of conformism began to be liberalized: norms and identity issues were being challenged by the international politics of Huntington's third wave of democratization of the 1980s and 1990s. "International 'social' mechanisms through which norm diffusion and policy change" (Reimann 2010:160) began to take shape. Moreover, Reimann makes a strong argument that the growth of Japan's NGO sector can be attributed to not only international factors but also domestic factors. The interface of the two realms has stimulated the growth of civil society activism in Japan. The devastating Tōhoku earthquake occurred a year after Reimann's book was published and forever changed, I believe, the face of civil society activism in Japan.

With the passage of the Law to Promote Specified Nonprofit Activities (NPO Law) on March 19, 1998, Japan's civil society actors were given more space. The law gave NGOs more legal standing, placing them on the same footing as political institutions and for-profit corporations. The stimulus for the new law was the January 1995 Hanshin–Awaji earthquake. The Coalition for Legislation to Support Citizens' Organizations played a significant role in helping to establish the NPO law.

The new law helped decentralize (bottom-up approach to public policy issues) the role of NGOs so they could work with prefectural governments (as opposed to having mandates or top-down approaches from Tokyo). The NGOs could tailor their expertise to given prefectures or regions in Japan. For example, NGOs could publicly investigate (and seek public feedback) for disaster management, in contrast to traditionally closed (private) investigations of politicians. Moreover, the NPO law was meant to help minimize ethnic or clan-prone politics, which have been prevalent historically in Japan. That is, the law could help citizens move beyond the notion of considering only one's own "backyard" and to see Japan as a singular unit, not in a nationalistic way but as a "community of citizens" who happened to be Japanese citizens, regardless of clan.

The Japan NGO Center for International Cooperation (JANIC) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan networking NGO founded in 1987 by a group of NGO leaders who saw the need to better coordinate activities in Japanese society when the country was faced with natural disasters. JANIC works to facilitate communication with groups overseas to ameliorate and manage the aftermath of natural disasters. Additionally, the Task Force for Disaster Response, established by the Diet a day after the catastrophic events of March 11, 2011, helped to ensure that NGOs can effectively apply their technical and nontechnical knowledge and experience from overseas aid activities to domestic relief activities. As of March 30, 2014, the task force had officially ended its three-year

mission, though some of the projects undertaken by the task force have been included in or become part of existing projects of JANIC and other NGOs.

Civil society in Japan has grown exponentially since the 1990s in spite of a culture of conformism. Civil society actors have grown in part because of a more positive perception based on public opinion about NGOs, and there has been more support from the Diet in terms of treating NGOs as juridical persons. Additionally, NGOs have begun to extend their networks internationally in the areas of economic development, environmental awareness, human rights, and conflict resolution. Nevertheless, NGOs in Japan continue to struggle with credibility, at least in terms of the federal government. For example, Japan's Finance Ministry gives approval to organizations that want to be classified as NGOs and has been reluctant to make NGO involvement in natural or man-made disasters the norm. Thus, "NPOs (Nonprofit Organizations, aka NGOs) are kept financially weak, limiting their capacity and effectiveness, suggesting that the government remains leery of organized citizen groups" (Kingston 2010:1).

Moreover, according to Kingston (2010), Akihiro Ogawa posited that:

[t]he Japanese NPO world is becoming bifurcated. On the one hand, you see NPOs that become service providers as subcontractors to the local government. Since they have money from the government, they are still surviving. But participants are totally lost and frustrated in terms of their visions and organizational missions. Apparently they are miserable. The government's commitment is not enough. I believe it is time that the government reconsiders its NPO policy. Otherwise, these kinds of NPOs will disappear since the volunteers will leave. ...

On the other hand, I also see something like the opposite extreme; some NPOs are trying to establish themselves as social enterprises (*shakaiteki kigyo*). People who are empowered enough see NPOs as a chance to achieve social entrepreneurship in local communities. I feel the dynamism recently. They do not get any money from the government; basically they are collecting money by themselves, mostly membership fees, money from foundations by writing funding proposals, and selling originally invented goods.

Obviously, Ogawa's sentiments were expressed pre-3/11. Thus, perhaps there is more of an impetus for more NGO-to-NGO partnerships in terms of collaborative fund-raising while NGOs' credibility is raised in the average Japanese citizen's mind.

Perhaps beyond cultural notions of conformism and *okami*, "those above" (i.e., the government) may or may not know what is best in post-disaster-management scenarios in Japan. For example, survey data illustrate a lack of awareness of or an unwillingness to get involved with NGOs:

More than 70 percent of people in Japan are unwilling to take part in the activities of nonprofit organizations, a Cabinet Office survey revealed. The proportion of such people stood at 71.6 percent up 22.7 percentage points from the survey in 2005. By contrast, people who are willing to participate in NPO activities accounted for 17.5 percent, down 26.4 points, the government agency said. The interview-based survey, the second of its kind, was conducted between June 20 and 30 (2013) on 3,000 adults across the country. Valid answers were received from 59.5 percent. With respondents allowed to give multiple answers, the largest group of 43.6 percent said they have no time to participate in NPO activities, followed by 29.9 percent who said they have no opportunities and 24.1 percent who are not interested in NPO activities. Asked whether they are ready to make donations to NPOs, 23.2 percent said they want to do so, against 62.4 percent who gave the opposite answer. Of those who do not want to donate to NPOs, 37.0 percent said it is difficult to see the effects and 35.8 percent said they [cannot] afford to make donations. Also in the survey, 19.7 percent said they are familiar with NPOs. By contrast, 69.3 percent said they only know the term and 10.0 percent said they don't know about NPOs." (Japan Times 2013)

Perhaps we need to reconsider how we think about NPOs and other civil society actors in Japan. For example, one Western observer indicated, "The difference is that, in Japanese community organizations, volunteers generally help people they know, not strangers," wrote Tish Robinson (2011), an American professor teaching at Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo, discussing ten NPOs helping in recovery efforts in the immediately impacted areas of the Tōhoku earthquake. Some of the NPOs were involved in rebuilding homes, providing fishing nets (fishing is one of the main occupations along the coast), and psychosocial counseling services. One notable example of conformism and thinking about the community as a whole, rather than as an individual or single family unit, is illustrated in one particular NPO's experience (which is not an exception to other NPOs working in the impacted areas). Robinson noted that the NPO Second Harvest Food Bank Japan

is the largest food bank in Japan, gathering surplus food from companies and providing it to people in need. Second Harvest has been operating in Japan for eleven years, and helping out with the disaster in Tohoku since March 13 (2011), from Iwaki-shi in the south all the way up to Yamada-machi in the north, reaching out to different

locations in the region. Recently, Second Harvest has forwarded 300 boxes (each one weighing 20 to 25 kilograms) to Minami-Sanriku and 100 boxes to Shinchi-Machi and Minami-soma. Charles McJilton, head of Second Harvest Japan, noted, “Whenever we go to an area, we look for two different things. Is there a need? Is there someone we can work with in that area? Without both of those key pieces in place we find that we have no traction.”

Second Harvest has adapted their response to this disaster from their normal approach to food distribution. In response to the Tohoku disaster, they have adjusted to the Japanese concept of “fukohei ni naranai you ni,” meaning everything equal to everybody. McJilton noted, “If Japanese organizations receive 300 boxes, they all have to be the same. That means that 70 to 80% of the food delivered has to be purchased. On a normal basis, all the food that Second Harvest receives is free. There is no reason for us to buy it, it is there. But because of the requirement on the ground in Tohoku, Second Harvest is spending anywhere between 4,500 to 7,500 yen per box per household up there, which can run anywhere from 1.5 to 2.25 million yen a week, just to get food up there to one location.”

The second adjustment Second Harvest has made in Tohoku is to “enryo,” people’s being reserved. McJilton notes, “If Second Harvest goes to a community in Tohoku and says, ‘I have 2,000 peaches,’ the local people will say, ‘Well, we’ll take five cases.’ I know that their situation in the next six to nine months is not going to change dramatically. So they could actually use all 2,000 peaches. They don’t want to waste. They don’t want to show they are using more than the next person and they don’t want to be concerned about neighboring communities. Are they taking more than other people? That has also been a major challenge for us as an organization. We have had 90 different shipments up there with our own trucks and other organizations providing food up there and we will continue to do that. Regarding ‘enryo,’ every time you talk to a community and say you are going to provide a service for them, they ask about the community next to them. Are we going to get to them too? Because I don’t want to be first. Don’t give me too much. Don’t take too much. It is very real.” (Robinson 2011:paras. 9–11)

DECENTRALIZATION IN THE UTILITY SECTOR: A POTENTIAL STEP TOWARD INCREASED CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM

In a move that will open up competition in the utility sector of Japan (and that might open up prospects for NGO actors to have a say in feasibility and environmental impact studies), the Japanese Cabinet recently announced reform in the utility sector. This effort will at least be an attempt at decentralization from the top:

“The cabinet has approved a bill to reform Japan’s power industry in what will be the biggest industry shake-up in 60 years.

The Economy, Trade and Industry Minister Yoichi Miyazawa told a news conference on [March 3, 2015] that the bill will remove a monopoly by regional utilities by separating power generation from transmission in 2020.

The main part of the reforms will be the opening up of the 7.5 trillion yen residential and small business market from March 2016, the centerpiece of the plan to boost competition, lower power prices and cut energy imports. Households will be able to choose among power companies.

After the Fukushima disaster crippled Japan’s nuclear energy sector four years ago, the government then pledged the biggest shake up in the history of the fragmented electricity industry to boost competition and contain a surge in power prices.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s plan is to set up a national grid company to allow new suppliers to sell electricity to the residential sector. The original government aim was to set up a company that could guarantee equal access to all participants. But plans to give the nationwide grid management body more control over the system of distribution and transmission lines were scaled back, amid lobbying from power utilities. ...(*Japan Today*, March 4, 2015)

Tokyo Gas Co Ltd., for example, Japan’s biggest city gas supplier, aims to grab a 10% share of the retail power market in the Tokyo metropolitan area by 2020, doubling its power generation capacity to 3,000 megawatts. The company already supplies power to larger customers after an earlier phase of liberalization.

The final stage of the reforms involves splitting up the generation and transmission units under holding companies but utilities won't be forced to shed operations under the current plans, creating further doubts about the scope of changes. (*Japan Today* 2015:paras. 1–5, 15–16)

There is a cautionary tale here, however: “Adding to the grid body’s difficulties, is the uncertainty over when and how many of Japan’s 48 nuclear power plants will be restarted after the post-Fukushima shutdown” (*Japan Today* 2015: para. 17).

Additionally, there may be other avenues to buttress civil society activism. For example, in an independent investigation committee report published in the aftermath of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant accident (July 6, 2012), the committee suggested in their list of recommendations to the National Diet:

Recommendation 7:

Develop a system of independent investigation commissions

A system for appointing independent investigation committees, including experts largely from the private sector, must be developed to deal with unresolved issues, including the decommissioning process of reactors, spent fuel issues, limiting accident effects and decontamination. (National Diet of Japan 2012:23)

Moreover, ongoing reconstruction efforts in the Tōhoku region include

A system of collaboration and cooperation with a broad range of actors such as private business operators, NPOs and individual volunteers needs to be established. The sharing of understanding on the necessary to develop integrated measures against damages as a social system should be promoted among those such as the national government, economic circles, local governments, and academic circles. With securing the understanding of residents, capability to quickly respond to massive and extensive disasters should be strengthened. Furthermore, with a view to strengthening resilience of the country, we aim at developing network systems complementing the hierarchical response, in the light of initiatives taken in foreign countries to respond to crises. (Reconstruction Program Committee 2013:30)

It is important to note that NPOs and NGOs are mentioned as a collaborative partner in disaster recovery efforts, though the hierarchical (top-down) response is ever present. The interaction of domestic and outside (i.e., international) voices is evident. For example, other efforts include public-private partnerships:

In order to revitalize each initiative of the activity in the disaster-afflicted areas and expand its range in future, it is necessary to share the expertise of excellent examples of initiatives in the disaster-afflicted areas. It is also necessary to improve the environment for themselves to be able to voluntarily and spontaneously undertake smooth and active collaboration among residents, organizations of regional bond such as neighborhood councils and neighborhood associations, shopping mall associations, societies of commerce and industry, NPOs, universities, private business operators, business groups and the administration, through exchange of information such as expertise, human resources and experiences, exchange of opinions and exchange of human resources. (Reconstruction Program Committee 2013:44)

Nonetheless, cultural norms are difficult to change; paradigm shifts are never easy.

CONCLUSION

The historical, top-down, vertical state-centric decision making may be somewhat waning (at least in the utility sector) in Japan, which may indirectly create opportunities for civil society actors. We must be careful as researchers to not impose a Western framework as a standard for evaluating non-Western societies, however. Countries have diverse histories, cultures, norms, and traditions. Even so, Japan's civil society sector still faces myriad challenges, including rational conformity (abidance, compliance, and obedience), directed by top-down government authority and familial ties. In addition, NGOs in Japan (like many NGOs around the world) face economic challenges (i.e., *adequate* funding and credibility from local residents).

The March 11, 2011, earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear reactor meltdown catastrophes are still presenting political, economic, and social issues, including the rehousing of residents in the shadow of the Fukushima nuclear plant. Additionally, social norms, conformism, and familial links must be considered when developing long-term relationships with impacted communities in disaster-management plans in Japan. Thus, civil society actors will have multiple opportunities to have their voices heard, but perhaps in the Japanese cultural context, the expressions may have to be in the form of public-private-civil society partnerships. As civil society actors in Japan continue to move forward, creating space, we should keep in mind the thoughts of Louisa Rubenfien, a scholar of Japan society. According to Tish Robinson, Rubenfien

shared an intriguing idea for providing psycho-social support to disaster victims in Tohoku. She suggested pairing Tokyo housewives with other Tohoku housewives through short visits several times a year. In keeping with the Japanese preference for human relationships, the relationships should be long-term, not just one-off meetings. This raises the question of how to make these relationships long-term and ongoing. Rubenfien suggested that an exchange of some kind is necessary to allow the relationships to blossom and endure over time. Her idea was to have Tohoku wives open their home to 2–3 Tokyo wives once a quarter, where they could exchange local recipes of knowledge of some sort. Surely, it is relationships that will help provide the psycho-social care so desperately needed in times of great loss.

NPOs provide the bridge for people to volunteer, playing a critical role in coordinating projects with local governments and overseeing safety. The NPOs that are the most successful in these types of situations are the ones where relationships are often long-term. As we move into rebuilding and rehabilitation, long-term relationships between organizations such as companies, chambers of commerce, and schools, as well as between individuals, may be the key. (Robinson 2011: paras. 38–39)

Civil society actors will have to be more intentional, in spite of cultural norms, in their efforts. Additionally, increased trust from citizens regarding NGOs (even though NGOs may still be viewed as “outsiders” or strangers) must be nurtured in a non-paternalistic manner by the state. Patterns of non-patronizing attitudes include positive public service announcements via television, radio, and print and social media, as well as ongoing partnerships.

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