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JAPANESE BUREAUCRACY: DESCENT FROM HEAVEN

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In May 2014 Prime Minister Shinzo Abe decided to launch the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs, a new bureau, run by Katsunobu Kato, Abe's closest aid. This maneuver is no doubt aimed at tightening control of bureaucrats, that have been indulging overwhelming power for ages. This shows clearly the importance of bureaucracy in political life of Japan.

Bureaucracy, or in other words, a group of non-elective government members that takes an active or sometimes decisive part in policy making process, is now widespread all over the world.

Japanese bureaucracy is deeply rooted into Japanese political system, policy- and decision- making processes. Its origin goes back to the Tokugawa period of Japanese history (1603-1868). Back then, the provincial lords appointed select warriors to become their retainers, who were then gradually transformed in bureaucrats during the seventeenth century. They were disarmed, detached from land ownership and forced to relocate to castle towns to deal with peacetime duties, such as crime prevention, taxation, flood control, development of infrastructure, management of political relationship with the Tokugawa bakufu. It is

interesting to note that the basis of Japanese bureaucracy was meritocratic and their social status was the highest among all the four existing classes of the Japanese society, making them feel their exceptional role as members of the official elite of the society. Japanese bureaucracy was ultimately consolidated during Meiji Restoration and after the World War II it played a great role in mobilizing the resources for enhancing both the economic growth and political participation.

The historic links between the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and bureaucracy are well-known. The LDP, characterized by a strong presence of former bureaucrats among its members, has been in power since 1955 till 1993, except for a short 11-months period between 1993 and 1994 and for a 3-years period from 2009 till 2012, now it is back on track. The LDP exercises strict control over promotions within the bureaucracy, making it almost impossible for unacceptable to the party bureaucrats to arrive at higher levels of their carrier. This makes the interdependence between the bureaucracy and government even stronger. Besides, bureaucracy plays an important role in policymaking process, preparing draft proposals of



the bills for the Party, that after revision, are sent to the Diet for approval.

Bureaucracy in Japan rely heavily on specialized advisory councils and committees for informational support and public opinion monitoring. But these committees do not have independent research staff, and the research is conducted by the personnel of the controlling government agency which cannot but call into question independent nature of the research as well as its transparency. This creates a strong vertical structure of the decision-making process which connects advisory councils, bureaucracy and the government, with the bureaucrats playing a fundamental role in it.

Bureaucracy in Japan is closely linked to business as well. The Japanese term amakudari “descent from heaven” stands for the retired civil servants that at the end of their governmental carrier become “counselors” to big companies. Their employment by the companies goes without saying, since hiring a person with such a prestigious background is considered a privilege. But it is at the same time a financial burden for the company, since it is expected to pay not only a salary, corresponding to the high level of their “amakudari” employee, but also a huge retirement allowance once the ex-bureaucrat decides to leave its executive position in the company. In return, companies expect some privileges and support at the highest ministerial level, thanks to the connections of their “counselor”. Bureaucracy, penetrating both in government and business, becomes a mediator between them, creating non-transparent ties and augmenting its role and weight in the society. Many Japanese experts assume that the system should be changed but agree that this process could take

many years, since it is deeply rooted in the society structure and the bureaucrats are not likely to accept reforms that would limit their power.

It would be wrong to say that post-retirement employment of civil servants is a uniquely Japanese phenomena. Similar practices exist in other countries, like the United States, Russia. Former Chancellor of Germany Gerhard Schröder accepted from Russian giant Gazprom the position of Chairman of Board of Nord Stream project, providing an example of “amakudari” on the international level, aiming at strengthening the ties between the countries and giving an international prestige to the project.

Many European economies own directly large chunks of the economy, while Japanese government owns nothing but Postal Savings Bank. What is unique to Japan and what makes Japanese amakudari different from the others is that Japanese business does actually follow the “administrative guidance” in its decision-making process.

Whether we like it or not, it has been the bureaucracy that is unquestionably accepted in Japan as society’s ruling elite since Tokugawa shogunate until nowadays and Japanese leadership, whatever it is, has no intention to act against it anytime soon. In this prospective, the creation of the Cabinet Bureau of Personnel Affairs, that will help the Prime Minister to decide the appointment of 600 elite bureaucrats at various ministries and agencies seems to aim at appointing “right” people rather than at shrinking the bureaucratic apparatus. That means bureaucracy will continue to remain a crucial issue in Japan and represent the influential elite for the years to come.

