2. The Political Influence of the Japanese Higher Civil Service*

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It is generally recognized that the Japanese higher civil service exercises considerable political influence. Many Japanese politics specialists believe that Japan is rather unique in the world in terms of the degree to which career civil servants influence politicians.

We all know that in most societies, senior bureaucrats maintain a close relationship with politicians. Senior bureaucrats assist politicians in formulating policies, translating policies into legislative bills, and drafting an annual budget. Once programs are authorized, bureaucrats are again in charge of administering the programs, although they are usually supervised by politicians.

So it is not unusual for the upper bureaucracy in any nation to have some influence over politicians. Bureaucrats and politicians need to work together and need to get along with each other. It is clear that proximity, contact, and cooperation between any two groups are bound to create a situation of considerable mutual understanding and influence.

However, what is extraordinary about the Japanese higher civil service is the degree to which it has successfully initiated important social and economic policies and the degree to which it has successfully sold these policies to politicians. Today, we often hear about Japan’s remarkable economic success. It is believed that the governmental policies played a major role in achieving this success, and that these policies have largely been put together by Japan’s career higher civil servants.

For example, the productivity of Japan’s steel industry is said to be about three times as great at that of the British steel industry, and the productivity of Japan’s shipyard is three to four times as great as that of any shipyard in any European nation. During the 1970-1973 period, Japan needed to consume 1.4% more energy to expand its GNP by 1%, but in the 1975-1977 period, Japan succeeded in reducing it to only 0.6%.

These changes have been brought about by a number of factors, not the least of which is the role played by the Ministry of International Trade and Industry and other 

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government agencies. These government bodies have been using such a wide variety of measures as subsidy, interest rate, financing, legislation, taxation, administrative guidance, and long-term economic planning in order to reduce energy consumption, combat pollution, increase productivity, and expand foreign trade.

It should be noted that these measures are developed not just by bureaucrats alone. They are developed through a complicated series of negotiations involving such diverse parties as industry, government bodies including regulatory agencies, financial institutions, labor organizations, scholars, experts, politicians, and others. But the group which usually plays a central role in consolidating opinions and generating a consensus is the higher civil service. Japanese politicians tend to play a role of implementing the consensus created by the career senior bureaucrats and not the role of leading and guiding various groups.

What we call the Japanese higher civil servants consist of those who passed the prewar higher civil service examination or its postwar equivalent. The examination included three main branches: the administrative, diplomatic, and judicial sections. Each year several hundred college graduates pass this examination. They usually serve for 25 to 30 years before leaving the service, and the total size of those in active service has probably never exceeded 10,000. In terms of the basic organizational structure of the Japanese ministry, key civil service positions are section-chief, division-chief, bureau-chief, councillor, director of an agency, and administrative vice-minister. Except for a few technical and scientific positions, all the above positions are filled by those who have passed the special examination and have joined the elite corps of career civil servants.

Why is the Japanese higher civil service so powerful? Seven major reasons may be identified. Let us examine each of these reasons.

First, the Japanese senior bureaucrats are widely regarded as a truly elitist group in Japanese society, and the fact that they are an unquestionable elite inevitably makes them influential in Japan.

Since there is no group in the United States comparable to the Japanese higher civil service, it is difficult to explain why they are an elite or influential. Even the British and French higher civil services, which are thought to be considerably more powerful than the American "higher" civil service, hardly exercise the kind of influence exercised by the Japanese higher civil service.

The closest approximations to the present Japanese higher civil service might be the colonial Indian Civil Service (ICS) or the traditional Imperial Chinese civil service. These elite services virtually monopolized all the critical administrative, judicial, and political positions in colonial India and Imperial China, including the positions of local district officers, district judges, tax collectors, treasurers, heads of police forces, governors of provinces, policy-makers of the central government, cabinet ministers, and sometimes even the prime minister or its equivalent.

Being an elitist group means that the Japanese higher civil service can attract the brightest youth in Japan. Many of the highest standing students from the most prestigious universities in Japan have chosen a bureaucratic career. They did so not just because the higher civil service itself is quite prestigious but because a civil service career often leads to an important post-retirement business or political career. Even today some of the top officers of major Japanese business corporations are former government bureaucrats. Some of the leading national political leaders in Japan are retired higher civil servants. As a matter of fact, approximately 50% of Japan’s postwar prime ministers are former bureaucrats.