

Japan's Circle of Power: Legitimacy and Integration of a National Elite

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Summary

The concept of elites must be related to two important dimensions: democratic legitimacy and elite interpenetration as well as the distribution of power within these two dimensions. This paper develops a model for analyzing elites and shows how it can be used to understand the nature of Japan's leadership. Using a wide range of Who is Who publications, the incumbents of top positions within politics, bureaucracy, economy, pressure groups, and the mass media are investigated in accordance with the model presented in the theoretical part. The findings suggest that Japan's elite is not monopolistic. It neither consists of a single closed master caste, nor is it clearly dominated by one partial elite. It is not a pluralistic elite with fragmented centers of power and diverging interests drawn from a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds. Instead, Japan is ruled by a circle of power, which is held together by exclusive patterns of recruitment, mutual interests, interdependence, elite consciousness, and personal ties.

1 A Model for Analyzing Elites

The literature provides two basic frameworks for interpreting societal elites: the elitist approach, and the pluralist model of competing elites. According to the elitist approach, the elite of a society is characterized by an overlap between the different elite sectors, a high concentration of power, and a strong cohesion within the various elite groups. The pluralists conversely argue that an elite is comprised of various sets of groups with diverging interests, recruited through a variety of social backgrounds, and characterized by a limited concentration of power. However, as it was pointed out by many authors, the models lack arguments, there is a relative dearth of testable hypotheses, and, not least, they lack the solid ground of empirical variables. It is for this reason that an agreement between scholars about "who rules" has not yet been reached. Further, it has been argued that in the studies of elites, the higher the level of theoretical abstraction adopted, the greater the number of similarities, or at least of their functional equivalencies.¹ When the research is truly empirically grounded, the chances are greater to discover differences in national elite configurations caused by the diversity of the nations, social systems, structures, and levels of development.

¹ For this discussion, see Moyser/Wagstaffe 1987: 1-3; Dogan 2003: 6, 14; Schmidt 2004: 29-31.