Eunice Ha
Senior Program Manager, Asia, National Democratic Institute

Japan’s Role in Democracy Advancement

As part of the Sasakawa USA Emerging Experts Delegation (SEED) program, I was fortunate to participate in a week-long study trip to Japan from December 1 to 7, 2019. The delegation included six other D.C.-based experts from Freedom House, IRI, NED, and NDI. The purpose of the trip was to explore how Japan’s foreign policy and overseas development assistance relate to democratization and democratic governance in Asia and beyond. The trip included a series of meetings in Tokyo with officials and practitioners in Japanese government, businesses, civil society, and academic institutions, as well as opportunities to travel outside of Tokyo to deepen our familiarity with Japanese society and culture. Below are some of the key takeaways from the trip.

Today is a difficult time for many countries in the region going through political transitions, as challenges such as national security risks, economic instabilities, and natural disasters can push them towards regression of democratic culture. Japan, however, shows its resilience, preventing democracy from backsliding as one of the long-standing democracies of Asia and the fourth largest aid provider globally. Japan is one of the world’s democracies to not have deteriorated while democratic norms and values declined for the 14th consecutive year across the Asia-Pacific region¹. I believe democratic values and norms are crucial elements to keep the nation, region, and the world safer and more prosperous in turbulent geopolitics. Democracy brings different nations and people together based on the same respect for universal rights and norms. My trip to Japan helped me learn that Japan could play a bigger role in that effort of promoting democratic norms and values.

A series of open and constructive dialogues with a variety of professionals in Japan confirmed for me that Japan is equipped to play an active role in promoting peace, the rule of law, democracy and good governance in the Asia-Pacific region. Throughout its history, Japan has experienced numerous shocks, financial crises, national security risks, pandemics, and natural disasters, yet remained committed to democracy instead of being swayed by illiberal and authoritarian forces. For example, Japan has rebuilt the nation even after the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami along with multiple other natural disasters. Not only learning how to cope with such tragic crises, the country also shares its knowledge and technology in the field of disaster risk reduction at the global level². These conversations particularly on Japan’s experience in overcoming the past natural disasters and preparing better safeguarding mechanisms for future potential disasters increased my curiosity about how the country has survived its democratic institutions and processes and consolidated its democracy. I was also curious to learn details of how those crises have led the communities to be more solidified and tightened instead of causing more division and exclusions.

Despite valuable lessons of democratic advancement Japan can offer to others, I learned there was mixed feedback from those whom we met in Tokyo about Japan’s role in promoting democracy in the region. Some were concerned about the perception of Japan after its wartime legacy and past aggressions during WWII, explaining Japan’s commitment to universal values may draw scrutiny and be a hard sell to the region. Moreover, some mentioned that Japan had never fought for democracy thus they were not sure whether Japan could talk about democratization to other nations on the topic of democracy promotion. In addition, some also explained that democracy support could be viewed as interfering with local politics of a foreign country and imposing Western values, thus it is in Japan’s best interest to keep a low profile on democracy aid by not targeting democracy issues directly and operating under the radar to avoid negative attention in other countries. The amount of its Official Democratic Development Assistance (ODA) spending in the democracy field remains small (about 2% of its total amount on average) compared to other major donors such as the U.S. (12.4%). Most of Japan’s support goes to the state-institutions focusing on bureaucratic capacity building through supporting public sector policy and administration management and judicial support, and almost no support goes to civil society development. Japan’s democracy assistance has been coordinated at the government level and hesitant to involve political issues by directly including support for individuals or marginalized groups of a recipient country who seek democratization in their authoritarian countries. There may be different ways and approaches to democracy support where further discussions with, and comparative studies of other countries’ democracy support could be helpful.

Moreover, given that Japan’s conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has been the dominant political party for over 50 years, some said that, in addition to voters’ low participation rates in elections, there is not a robust two-party system with meaningful and strong political opposition. Some also noted Japan's nature as homogeneous and having an island-mindset, a docile society where citizens are quite subservient to their government. Additionally, the number of civil society organizations in Japan is much smaller than in the U.S. and they focus mostly on education, health, and other technical areas rather than advocating and promoting civil and political rights.

The points outlined above are valid and crucial to review and reflect on, yet they should not be hindering factors for Japan to move forward taking an active, innovative, and collaborative approach to promote democratic norms and values in the region. To me, listening to some of the candid and open conversations about some of the hesitancy from the group made me think those reflections could be humbling factors when expanding the role of Japan in democracy support in the region. The approach or model of its international democracy support is to share knowledge and information in mutual ways instead of imposing its own to another or only one-way/top-down way of providing support. Recognizing the Japanese democratic model is not perfect but still has a lot to offer as lesson learned and good practices, other countries would be more receptive to Japan’s assistance. Moreover, of the various groups of countries in the region I’ve come across in the field of democracy support that have demanded a more concerted and cooperative effort from the stable, Japan has clearly demonstrated its capacity as one of the few to not regress but be resilient to various crises and rehabilitate and rebuild itself. Sharing that experience and expertise with others in the region is more pressing than ever to advance democratic principles and practices in the region.