

UNDERSTANDING JAPANESE DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE

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Despite being Asia's most prosperous democracy and one of the world's largest aid providers, Japan has a strikingly low profile in the field of international democracy assistance. Japan directs most of its democracy-related assistance to technocratic top-down governance programming, placing a low emphasis on civil society assistance. The reasons behind this choice stem from Japan's history and its views of development.

Experience With Democracy Aid

- Japan began engaging in democracy assistance during the early 1990s in response to democratic openings in Asia and domestic criticisms of its foreign aid system.
- The Japanese government's democracy aid increased from \$4 million in 1990 to \$200–\$300 million annually in the late 2000s.
- Japan allocates a small portion of its overall aid budget to democracy aid. From 1990 to 2008, Japan spent on average 0.7 percent of its total foreign aid budget on democracy assistance, significantly less than comparable foreign aid actors.
- Japan directs more than 98 percent of its democracy assistance to state institutions.

Why Japan Focuses on State Institutions

Human security. The devastation of the 1997 Asian financial crisis brought about a new regional focus on human security. This strengthened the Japanese emphasis on economic development and poverty reduction rather than democracy or human rights, and it spurred Japanese investments in social infrastructure and humanitarian aid.

State sovereignty. Japan traditionally allocated foreign assistance based on requests from recipient-country governments. Although this policy was officially abandoned in the 1990s, Japan still provides democracy aid based on governmental requests. As a result, Japan's contacts with nongovernmental organizations in recipient countries are limited, and most aid flows to nonpolitical governance reforms.

Development over politics. Japan promotes democracy support as a form of development aid rather than as an instrument for political empowerment. Unlike other donor countries, Japan does not explicitly foster democracy abroad but instead provides aid to governments attempting to democratize or consolidate democracy as a development goal.

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