

City council reforms in Japan: From local government to local governance

Introduction

Until the 1990s, there was little interest among researchers in local government or city council issues despite the extensive interest in national level government issues. Some changes occurred in this tendency when the concept of the New Public Management (NPM) was implemented and became broadly prevalent in western countries including Japan. Since the NPM has focused on the efficiency of administrative management not only of national level government but also of local governments, the need for change in local governments has gradually increased. The wave of local government reforms has also started pinpointing on both systems and institutions of city councils, which consist of politically elected members and are supposed to be provided enough leadership and legitimacy from their electorates. The truth is, however, that city councils are neither believed to function adequately nor expected to do so by their constituencies, at least in Japan. Essentially speaking, city councils are responsible for fostering the evolution of communities, and providing the leadership of the social, cultural, political and economic dimensions of community. In addition, they are also responsible for provision of relevant information to their constituencies. All councils must ensure improved accountability to their constituents and greater openness in their operational affairs (Dollery & Marshall, 1997).

Needless to say, as pointed out by James Bryce and Alexis de Tocqueville, the importance of local government and city council reform has gradually heightened the significant role of local autonomy for democracy. This increased importance naturally leads to demands for reform of local governments and city councils. In fact, reforms have been implemented in not a few countries with a major focus on western countries. For example, “[d]uring the past thirty years, the local government systems and structures in both western and eastern European countries have seen significant changes and ruptures in crucial institutional dimensions” (Wollmann, 1999, p. 15). In some cases, local governments’ conduct of the reforms has earned the respect of federal or national authorities because of their progressive and active modifications of systems, structures and institutions (Dollery & Marshall, 1997). As a practical matter, the focus on local governments or local autonomy in Japan has also been enhanced in regards to the issue of the decentralization of authority

especially since the 1990s. At the same time, the need for both local government reforms and city council reforms has been growing. Each of Japan's municipalities has a city council in accordance with the regulations of the Local Government Act. As will be outlined in more detail below, any attempt to explore the city council reforms in Japan in terms of governance and by a comparative analysis must be of significance.

Especially since the 1990s, many remarkable studies of local government reforms including research about city council reform have been conducted. Some of them have impressively discussed the theme of local government reform in terms of city council's legitimacy or governance and from the viewpoint of comparative local public policy studies. Dollery and Marshall have defined the role of elected councilors with some clarity. He stated that the elected councilors were expected to consult extensively with their constituents, demonstrate new levels of ethical behaviour in their conduct, and exhibit vision in their leadership of the community. Moreover, he stated that they had also been made responsible for the performance of their councils, especially in relation to the determination and achievement of policy outcomes (1997). From the approach of institutionalism, Guy Peters has comprehensively discussed institutional theories in political science, especially from the point of view of new institutionalism (1995 or 1999) and his research has had an impact on other researchers. Using Peters' analysis, Hellmut Wollmann has successfully investigated institutional development in terms of institutional choice or institution building in local governments, and has actively drawn on the distinction between government and governance (2007). Likewise, although they do not adopt the concept of governance, Joanna Howard and David Sweeting (2007) discuss the complementarity between strong political leadership and citizen participation, examining the case of a council in England, and explore the interplay between the two using the concept of legitimacy or legitimation, particularly, the multi-faceted approach to legitimacy offered by Haus and Heinelt (2005).

After the middle of the 1980s, some comparative local public-policy studies, i.e., comparative analyses of the issues of local governments, were carried out. Arthur Gunlicks "globally" reviewed and analyzed local government issues and contributed to the enhancement of comparative public-policy studies (1981). Quite a few scholars including Gunlicks, however, have compared local governments only within western-culture or Christian nations. Few scholars have paid attention to examples of Japanese or Asian local governments for comparison to counterparts in western nations. Only a few Japanese researchers

such as Kengo Akizuki (2001) and Minoru Takeshita (1999) have discussed Japanese *local* government reforms, not national-level reforms, using a comparative approach. Simply speaking, the comparative study of local public policy on city council reforms has been allowed to languish with insufficient investigation.

The purpose of this paper is to further explore comparative local public-policy studies focused on city council reforms in Japanese and western nations. In addition, because little research has been conducted about city council reforms in terms of governance or legitimacy, this paper attempts a study of comparative local public policy in terms of governance. It may be somewhat ambitious, but it will provide some useful approaches for the implementation of city council reforms in Japan.

First, in order to identify institutional changes in city councils, the following analytical dimensions are applied: geopolitical, historical and cultural features of the city; relationships between mayors and councils; leadership in local government; the legitimacy of democratically-elected city councils; modified structures and institutions in local government. The abovementioned list of analytical dimensions may not be sufficient for the expected comprehensive argument about city council reforms and local governance. This paper can, however, contribute by providing a new analytical viewpoint on local government reforms in Japanese municipalities with the application of governance theory. This is discussed in Chapter II. Second, so as to encourage a global research viewpoint, a comparative public policy studies is attempted in Chapter III. Finally, some concluding remarks are offered in Chapter IV.

References

- Akizuki, K., (2001). *Gyousei/Chihoujichi*. Tokyo: Tokyo-Daigaku-Shyuppankai
- Dollery, B., & Marshall, N. (Eds.). (1997). *Australian Local Government: Reform and Renewal*. South Melbourne: MacMillan education Australia
- Gunlicks, A., (1981). *Local Government Reform and Reorganization: An International Perspective*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press
- Haus, M. & Heinelt, H. (2005) How to Achieve Governability at the Local Level? Theoretical and Conceptual Considerations on a Complementarity

- of Urban Leadership and Community Involvement, in: *Democratic Choices for Cities*, pp.12-39. London: Routledge
- Howard, J., & Sweeting, D., (2007). Addressing the Legitimacy of the Council-Manager Executive in Local Government. *Local Government Studies*, 33(5), 633-656. London: Routledge
- Peters, G., (1995). Political Institutions: Old and New, in: *A New Handbook of Political Science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Peters, G., (1999). *Institutional Theory in Political Science: The 'New Institutionalism.'* London: Continuum
- Takeshita, M., (1999). *Sekai-no-Chihoujitiseido*. Tokyo: Imagine-Shuppan
- Wollmann, H., (Ed.). (2007). *Local Government Reforms in Countries in Transition*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers