Part Five
The Excesses of Ambition: the Pacific War and its Lead-up

5.1 THE FRAGILE DEMOCRACY OF TAISHŌ (1912–26)

When Emperor Meiji’s son Yoshihito (1879–1926) acceded to the throne in 1912, things were looking good for Japan. The auspicious name ‘Taishō’, meaning ‘Great Righteousness’, was chosen to mark the new era. It suggested self-assurance as a world power, and promised wisdom and justice.

For Yoshihito personally, however, things did not look so promising. There were increasing doubts about his fitness of mind and body. This was generally attributed to meningitis just after birth, but he was now in his thirties and the effects of such an illness would have long since stabilised. Almost certainly, it was some other—and presumably more embarrassing—disorder that was now troubling him. Doctors passed him fit to assume the throne, but his condition soon deteriorated markedly. Within three years he was unable to walk or talk properly. The awkward situation continued for a few years, till his son Hirohito (1901–89) took over as regent in November 1921.

Yoshihito’s uncertain reign started with a political crisis. Late in 1912 the Saionji cabinet refused to agree to extra divisions for the army, which was keen on expansion. The army minister resigned and the army refused to replace him, bringing the cabinet down. Approached by Yamagata and the other oligarchs, Katsura Tarō agreed to form his third cabinet. However, he was an unpopular choice with the public and with the political parties, who saw him as a symbol of continued oligarchic authoritarianism. The main parties now included not only the (Rikken) Seiyūkai but the newly formed (Rikken) Kokumin-tō (‘Constitutional Nationalist Party’). These two parties initiated the Movement to Protect Constitutional Government (Kensei Yōgo Undō), which attracted many thousands of supporters from amongst the public.
These same two parties also brought a motion of no confidence against Katsura, who responded by persuading the new emperor to order the withdrawal of the motion. The emperor’s order was ignored—testimony to the exceptionally low esteem in which he was already held. Presently, in February 1913, thousands of angry demonstrators surrounded the Diet building, obliging Katsura to resign after less than two months in office. This was the first time in Japanese history that the voice of the people had helped bring down a government.

The man who followed Katsura as prime minister, Admiral Yamamoto Gonbei (1852–1933), was a political neutral and was well-disposed towards party politics. Parties gradually strengthened their representation in cabinet, but it could not be said that party politics became established. The aged Okuma Shigenobu, who succeeded Yamamoto in 1914, may have been a party man in the past but by this stage he was much under the influence of the oligarchs. He in turn was followed in 1916 by Terauchi Masatake (1852–1919), who was firmly opposed to party politics and was an unpopular prime minister.

The first real party-dominated cabinet was that of the Seiyūkai’s Hara Takashi (1856–1921, also Kei), who succeeded Terauchi in 1918. However, he was not necessarily the ideal representative of democracy. Though widely known as the common man’s politician he was in fact of high-ranking samurai descent and very well-connected. He had only become prime minister after close vetting and approval by the oligarchs, was an early exponent of pork-barrel politics, and was not above resorting to undemocratic methods such as the use of professional ‘muscle-men’ to physically intimidate his opponents. After his assassination in 1921 he was followed by a number of non-party cabinets.

This was the pattern of politics in the Taishō period. As with the Meiji period, there were advances for democracy and liberalism, but these were invariably counterbalanced and checked by authoritarianism and repression.

On the one hand Minobe Tatsukichi (1873–1948), an influential professor of law at Tōkyō University, was able to advocate democratic constitutionalism. He could also promote his view of the emperor as an organ of the state, as opposed to the absolute nature of the emperor’s authority promoted by the government in the Meiji period. On the other hand, another professor of law at Tōkyō University, Uesugi Shinkichi (1878–1929), contended that the emperor was absolute.

At least this was debate. However, in 1925 a repressive Peace Preservation Law was passed, in effect making it a crime to advocate basic changes to the national political structure. But yet again, this was the