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Japan's local governments and governance under population decline

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to provide a brief overview of Japan's local government system, including an examination of the significant challenges they face. The local government system operates on a two-tiered structure, with prefectures serving as regional governments and municipalities serving as local governments. This chapter focuses primarily on the municipal level of government. First, a brief historical background of Japan's modern local government system is provided. Second, the author reviews the fundamental institutional characteristics of Japanese local governments, including size, responsibilities, and public finance. Third, the focus shifts to leadership selection in Japanese local governments and their different challenges. Fourth, characteristics of local civil servants are explained, focusing on their personnel system. The fifth section delves into the latest nationwide municipal merger reform and discusses results of empirical studies on its effects. The sixth section refers to demographic challenges many local governments have been facing. Finally, the last part of the chapter concludes with suggestions for future research avenues.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Although Japan's contemporary local government system was established through enacting the new constitution and a series of institutional reforms after World War II (1945), the origin of the modern local government system dates back to the Meiji Restoration period (1868–1912). The Meiji government ended the Edo (Tokugawa) period (1603–1868), which was often characterized as the centralized feudal system (Steiner 1965), and built a modern nationwide local administration system. Japan's local government system under the Meiji government had a highly hierarchical and centralized nature compared to the current local system. The newly

established system in the Meiji era was influenced by Prussia's municipal system and the traditional community in Japan (Kim 1988; Muto 2010; Nagata 1998; Shindo 1982). The Meiji government created a unitary three-tier system of local governments: 1) prefectures, 2) cities and counties, and 3) towns and villages, subject to county jurisdiction and cities and counties under prefecture jurisdiction (Muto 2010).

The Meiji Constitution lacked any basis for local government autonomy (Kuni 2017; Shindo 1982). Prefectural governments were considered part of the national government, although they were classified as local authorities. Prefectures were set up as agencies of central government (Muto 2010). Prefectural governors are recommended by the minister of interior and appointed by the emperor. Prefectural governments had control over the municipalities (Steiner 1965; Shindo 1982), while municipal governments had some limited autonomy. Counties were often national agents with chief executives appointed by the interior minister. Assembly members were elected by residents with limited voting rights, and a city mayor was appointed by the interior minister, chosen from candidates nominated by the city assembly. The head of a town or village was appointed by the city assembly (Muto 2010).¹ One remarkable event in local government is the Great Meiji Consolidation of municipalities. To establish cities, towns, and villages as modern local government units, the Meiji government carried out nationwide municipal mergers, which reduced the number of municipalities from 71,314 in 1888 to 15,859 in 1889 (Yokomichi 2007).

Japan's defeat in World War II led to a number of democratization and decentralization reforms of the local government system led by the Allied Forces. The Constitution of Japan, which was enacted in 1947, guarantees autonomy of local governments, with the Local Autonomy Law (Article 92), defining local government operations (Horiuchi et al. 2015). Other significant institutional reforms include introducing direct popular election of prefectural governors and mayors. However, several features of the centralized pre-war local government system remained in the post-war system. Those include "a system of delegated functions mandating local executives to carry out a wide range of programs and public services" (*kikan inin jimu*) (Hijino 2020, p. 140), "enhanced guidance and intervention in local matters by the central government" (Kuni 2017, p. 1), limited revenue sources of local governments, and "the dispatch of national bureaucrats to local governments for supervision" (Hijino 2020, p. 140; Steiner 1965). However, such practically limited autonomy of local governments has been expanded and intergovernmental relations have dramatically changed since a series of decentralization reforms after the 1990s, including abolishing agency-delegated functions, fiscal decentralization, and significantly reducing ministerial guidelines and regulations over local service provisions, and devolving authority of different policy areas to lower levels of governments (Hijino 2020).²

INSTITUTIONAL FEATURES

Japan has a two-tier system beyond the central government, with prefectures serving as regional governments and municipalities serving as local governments, categorized as cities, towns and villages. As of January 2023, Japan has 47 prefectures and 1,718 municipalities, with 815 cities (including 23 special wards in Tokyo), 743

towns, and 183 villages (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications n.d.e). All municipalities have similar powers and responsibilities, although some may have additional responsibilities based on population size. For example, cities can have more authority over welfare administration than towns and villages (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications n.d.d). In order for a municipality to become a city, its population must be 50,000 or larger. The requirement was relaxed to 30,000 or larger population for municipalities during the Great Heisei Municipal Consolidation period, which incentivized towns and villages to merge and acquire city status. The requirements for a municipality to become a town vary according to ordinances of the prefectural government with jurisdiction over that municipality. No specific requirement exists to become a village (CLAIR 2020; Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications n.d.d). The main responsibilities and services of municipalities include providing elementary and middle schools, social relief, nursing homes for elderly, nursing insurance, national health insurance, as well as urban design, roads, bridges, water and sewerage, waste disposal, firefighting, medical emergencies, and resident registration (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications n.d.b).

To ensure the same standard of local government services in all municipalities, the central government makes financial adjustments among local governments through dividing a portion of the national tax based on their financial capabilities (CLAIR 2020). This has contributed to Japan being one of few countries that have achieved high interregional equality since the 1970s due to extensive interregional redistribution and equalization mechanism through local allocation tax and national subsidies to local governments (DeWit 2002; DeWit and Steinmo 2002; OECD 2005; 2016a, b).³

Main revenue sources for local governments are local tax, local allocation tax, national government disbursements, and local government bonds. Local Tax Law sets 15 types of local tax, including municipal inhabitants tax, property tax, city planning tax, municipal tobacco tax, and more. Besides these types of local taxes, local governments may set new tax items by ordinance. The local allocation tax is collected by the central government as a national tax. Then, it is distributed to local governments that do not have sufficient financial resources to reduce regional imbalances in tax revenue (CLAIR 2020). In fact, the majority of the municipalities rely on local allocation taxes from the national government. Those municipalities that do not receive local allocation taxes and can cover municipal expenses with their own tax sources are called “*fukouhu dantai*” (non-receiving entities). Very few of these financially affluent municipalities exist. Only 4.4% of municipalities (75 out of 1,718) did not receive local allocation taxes in 2020, 3.1% (53 municipalities) in 2021, and 4.2% (72 municipalities) in 2022 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2022a). National government reimbursements are distributed to local governments for specific uses. The largest spending areas of local governments are public welfare (22.9% of the total expenditures of all municipalities, 125.5 trillion JPY), followed by general affairs (17.9%), education (14.4%), and public works (10.1%) in FY 2020 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2022b).

Many local governments are not able to acquire the amount of tax revenue for their expenses. In fact, percentage of local tax is only 28.7% for midsize cities (with populations of 100,000 or more), 21% for small cities (with less than 100,000 population), 20% for towns and villages (with 10,000 population or more), and 11% for

towns and villages (with less than 10,000 population) (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2022b). Therefore, many local governments rely on transfers from the national government, including local allocation taxes and national government reimbursements.

LEADERSHIP SELECTION

Japanese local governments are composed of legislative and executive branches. They have adopted the presidential system, where voters directly elect the mayor and members of the local assembly for four-year terms. Unlike the diverse local government structures in the United States, Japanese local governments are uniform across municipalities, providing a more homogeneous administrative structure. This homogeneity, along with similarities in culture, ethnicity, and economic levels across regions and local areas, allows researchers to control various factors that may impact the variables of interest in large-scale studies.

There is no constitutional provision limiting the number of terms a prefectural governor or a municipal mayor can serve. In 2015, 218 mayors were elected. Among them, 67 mayors were elected three times so far, 20 mayors were elected four times, nine mayors were elected five times, and two mayors were elected more than six times (The Japan Research Institute for Local Government 2016). Bills introducing term limits for prefectural governors and head of municipalities have been submitted to the national diet. However, all of these bills have been repealed. Instead, some prefectures and municipalities have enacted ordinances prohibiting repeated re-election of prefectural governor or ordinances requesting voluntary restraint from repeated re-election of governors or mayors (Research Institute for Local Government 2022). Mayoral candidates must be at least 25 years old. Residency in the municipality they are running for is not required. Each municipality constitutes one single electoral district (Soga 2019). Local assembly candidates also must be at least 25 years old. However, unlike mayoral candidates, they must reside in the municipality they are running for (Soga 2019). The maximum number of assembly seats was previously determined by law based on population size. However, in 2011 this was changed, allowing municipalities to determine the number of seats through ordinance (MIC 2015). The single non-transferable voting system is used to elect local assembly members. The number of seats in each district ranges from two to 50 at the municipal level. Most municipalities have one at-large district, while larger cities are divided into multiple electoral districts (Hijino 2020; Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2017).

The relationship between the legislative and executive bodies in Japanese municipalities is classified as a ‘strong-mayor’ system in the United States, whereby mayors hold exclusive power over all executive agencies (CLAIR 2020; Kawasaki 2000). Mayors are responsible for enacting regulations, preparing budgets, proposing bills, and appointing or dismissing staff (CLAIR 2020), with a limited number of political appointees they can make. Mayors appoint a vice-mayor with the local assembly’s consent. The number of vice-mayors can be determined by local governments through an ordinance (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications

n.d.c; Osugi 2009). Vice-mayors play a crucial role in supporting the mayor's initiatives and planning.

Local civil servants below the rank of vice-mayors are professional civil servants, and mayors hold authority over their personnel matters, including promotions and transfers. However, the extent of the mayors' personnel authority varies significantly among municipalities, depending on their size (Inatsugu 1996). However, to the best of the author's knowledge, no systematic empirical evidence shows variations in mayors' actual authority over personnel matters of local civil servants among municipalities. Given the limited number of political appointees at their disposal, mayors often heavily rely on career civil servants and may choose a career civil servant as a vice-mayor, particularly at the beginning of their term, due to a short- age of information on human resources.

Japanese local councils, while having the power to vote on budget and ordinances and conduct a vote of no confidence to remove mayors (CLAIR 2020), have not frequently exercised these powers. The process of passing a vote of no confidence in a local assembly is challenging, as it requires a high number of council members to be present and a high level of agreement. To pass the vote, at least two-thirds of the council must be present and three-fourths of those present must approve. Additionally, if a vote of no confidence is passed, the mayor has the power to dissolve the assembly, making it difficult for such a vote to be initiated (Soga 2019).

Despite having the power to create or amend bylaws and revise mayoral proposals, local councils have been historically passive in their legislative role. Only a small percentage of councils submitted bylaw proposals and revisions to mayoral proposals, with most serving as rubber stamps for the mayor as the primary lawmaker (Hirose and Local Council Reform Forum 2014). According to the National Survey on the Operation of Municipal Councils (Hirose and Local Council Reform Forum 2015; Nagano 2019), the percentage of local councils that submitted a bylaw proposal was only 7.5% in 2009, 8.2% in 2010, 8.1% in 2011, 8.4% in 2012, 11.12% in 2013, and 10.8 % in 2014, among municipalities that responded to the survey (1,407 to 1,603 municipalities). Furthermore, only 10.4% of local councils rejected legislation proposed by a mayor in 2014. The percentage of local councils that submitted revisions to mayoral proposals was only 17.3% in 2014. Thus, most Japanese local councils largely depend on the strong role of the mayor as a lawmaker and are considered rubber stamps for the administrative body (Hirose and Local Council Reform Forum 2014). However, decentralization reforms begun in 1999 increasing public attention to their passive role have led to a shift toward a more active legislative role in local policy making.

Regarding the supply side of entry to municipal level politics, I point out the following challenges with respect to quality of local democracy. These issues are largely related to the population decline and gender equality. First, the shortage of candidates for mayoral and local assembly elections has become a major challenge for municipalities, especially those in rural and small-town areas (Hijino 2020; Suzuki and Han 2019; Tsuji 2019). As a consequence, the number of walk-over mayoral elections (i.e., uncontested elections) has been increasing in mayoral and local council elections. The percentages of uncontested seats of local councilors in towns and villages was 13.2 % in 2007, 20.2% in 2011, 21.8% in 2015, and 23.3% in 2019.

For city level councils, they were 1.9% in 2007, 1.6% in 2011, 3.6% in 2015, and 2.7% in 2019 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications n.d.a). Percentages of uncontested mayoral elections at the town and village level were 49.8% in 2003 to 2006, 40.5% in 2007 to 2010, 47.2% in 2011 to 2014, and 48.2% in 2015 to 2018. Those in the city-level municipalities were 29.4% in 2003 to 2006, 20.6% in 2007 to 2010, 25.4% in 2011 to 2014, and 25.5% in 2015 to 2018 (Iwagami 2019). Such large and increasing numbers of uncontested elections created critical challenges for local democracy.

The lack of female representation in local politics is a major challenge for democratic governance (Suzuki and Avellaneda 2018; Tsuji 2019). In Japan, despite the country's status as a developed nation, a significant gender gap exists in terms of maternal employment rates, full-time earnings, and women in leadership positions. This large and persistent gender disparity has garnered attention from scholars (Estévez-Abe 2013; Steel and Martin 2022).

Gender disparity in politics is also notable. In terms of female political representation, Japan ranks lower compared to most developed and developing countries (Eto 2010; Steel and Martin 2022). As of December 2022, Japan ranks 165th out of 187 countries in terms of the percentage of female politicians in the lower or single house of parliament (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2023). The low representation of women in politics extends to the local levels as well, with only 33 female mayors in 2019 and 24 in 2016, out of 1,718 municipalities (Ichikawa Fusae Kinenkai 2015, 2020). The percentage of women on local councils is also very low, with 11.7% of female councilors across town and village-level municipalities in 2021 (Cabinet Office of Japan 2022b). There is variation in the representation of women across different regions, with the share of female councilors ranging from 4.9% in Aomori Prefecture to 30.6% in Osaka Prefecture. For city-level municipalities, the percentage of female councilors across municipalities is 17.5%, ranging from 8.2% in Nagasaki Prefecture to 30.8% in Tokyo Prefecture (Cabinet Office of Japan 2022b). Although women's representation in local administration is still relatively low, it is significantly higher than the level of female representation in national administration. In 2015, the percentage of female local officials holding managerial positions (*kacho soutou shoku*, position corresponding to section manager) across municipalities was 14.5%, which increased to 17.8% in 2020 and 18.4% in 2021. In contrast, at the national level, the percentage of women holding similar managerial positions (*kashitsu cho soutou shoku*) was only 5.9% in 2020 and 6.4% in 2021 (Cabinet Office of Japan 2022a).

LOCAL CIVIL SERVANTS

This section discusses administrative characteristics of local civil servants focusing on the employment system. Although Japan's national-level bureaucracy has attracted scholarly attention led by some influential works on Japan's bureaucracy, such as Johnson (1982), local-level bureaucrats have been understudied in an international context except for several studies in Japanese. Mayors are considered powerful and influential actors with authority over personnel matters, yet the number of external experts they can hire is limited. Under the Local Autonomy Law, they can only appoint a vice-mayor with a limited term. Furthermore, such appointments need

the consent of the local assembly. While some mayors rely on informal external policy advisors, not all do. Therefore, from a human resource standpoint, mayors rely on the professional local civil servants already working in their local government (Soga 2019). What are the characteristics of Japan's bureaucracy from a broader comparative perspective? It is widely recognized that the administrative characteristics of bureaucracy differ largely among countries.⁴ Although scholars have studied bureaucracy for a long time, systematic cross-national comparisons of bureaucratic structures and characteristics are still new (Dahlström et al. 2012). Public management scholars are often said to have been neglecting state structures and institutional differences across countries (Beagles et al. 2019; Milward et al. 2016; Roberts 2018). However, the recent development of cross-national data set allows researchers to compare and examine characteristics of national bureaucracy and the public sector in analyses (Dahlström et al. 2012; Evans and Rauch 1999).

One significant way to make cross-national comparisons of public bureaucracy is focusing on personnel systems (Cooper 2022; Dahlström and Lapuente 2017; Evans and Rauch 1999). In particular, previous studies often examine the degree to which recruitment and promotion systems of public officials are meritocratic or politicized. Recruiting and promoting public officials in a politicized bureaucracy primarily focuses on their political masters. But professional administration concentrates on merit and internal recruitment of senior officials, not on finding political appointees or recruiting through a political network.

Another significant dimension for classifying bureaucratic structures is to look at the “closed” or “open” nature of the civil service system (Bekke and Meer 2000; Læg Reid and Wise 2015; Dahlström et al. 2012). Open systems concentrate on choosing the best candidate for each position and being flexible when recruiting and promoting public officials. However, closed systems focus on formal entries into public service, seniority systems, and lifetime employment (i.e. career-based systems) (Dahlström et al. 2012; Læg Reid and Wise 2015). Promotions usually follow rules of seniority and are not based on merit or performance (Bekke and Meer 2000; Gualmini 2008). Moving between jobs is limited between the public and private sectors in closed systems (Suzuki and Hur 2020, 2022).

Japan's bureaucracy is characterized as having highly professional civil servants working in a very closed personnel system. The recent civil service reform is said to have increased political influence over bureaucracy in the central government (Mishima 2017, 2022). However, when compared to other countries, Japan's national bureaucracy continues to maintain its top position in terms of bureaucratic professionalism. Furthermore, the Japanese personnel system resembles an ideal type of closed bureaucracy, ranked top in the bureaucratic closedness index.⁵

Although some differences exist between the central government and local governments, such characteristics of a high degree of meritocracy and closed personnel system of national bureaucracy can be applied to municipal-level civil servants. Civil servants in local governments are primarily recruited into the lowest level positions within a municipality through merit-based exams. Instead of filling specific vacancies, local governments hire a set number of new employees (most are new graduates) in April of each fiscal year with job security (Otani 2018). Mid-career recruitment is very

limited.⁶ Therefore, promotions to executive positions are mostly based on internal promotions rather than external hiring.

Local civil servants are trained as generalists, rather than specialists to gain a broad range of knowledge and experience necessary for local administration. During their first 10 years, municipal-level civil servants typically rotate through various sections, such as welfare, economic development, general affairs, and medical, as part of their training (Inatsugu 1996; Otani 2018). Promotions are said to have been primarily based on seniority up to certain positions and selection speed of promotion to senior position tends to be slow (Inatsugu 1996; Otani 2018). The central government of Japan is said to have an “up-or-out” promotion practice, where losers of promotion competition among employees hired in the same year are often forced to leave their organization and assigned positions in affiliated organizations. However, local governments are said to have not adopted such competitive promotion management practices. Employees who fail to be promoted for higher positions stay in the same organization until retirement. However, in reality, some variations exist regarding promotion patterns, speed, and selection criteria across municipalities (Inatsugu 1996; Hayashi 2021). Furthermore, a nationwide survey for personnel policies of municipalities showed that 48.5% of the 165 surveyed municipalities are reconsidering a seniority-based promotion principle (Idei and Ono 2013). However, the majority of surveyed municipalities answered that they do not have plans to change policies regarding lifetime employment and internal promotion.

It has been argued that personnel matters of civil servants tend to be under political influence in local governments (Inatsugu 1996; Otani 2018). However, the actual strength and scope of mayors’ influence should depend on the municipality (Inatsugu 1996). In fact, much is still empirically unknown about politics-administration dynamics and the degree of political influences in recruitment and promotion of municipal-level civil servants. Few studies have been conducted on this relationship at the local level, even in Japanese (Soga 2019).

MUNICIPAL MERGER

Like several countries, such as Denmark, Finland, Sweden, New Zealand, and Australia, Japan has undergone large-scale municipal merger reforms (Suzuki 2016). Three nationwide waves of mergers have reduced the size of local governments in Japan. The first wave, the Great Meiji Consolidation (1888–1889), saw a decline in the number of municipalities from 71,314 to 15,859. The second wave, the Great Showa Consolidation (1953–1961), further reduced the number of municipalities to 3,472 from 9,868. The third wave, the Great Heisei Municipal Consolidation (1999–2010), resulted in a decrease in the number of local municipalities to 1,727 from 3,229.

Although the ultimate goal of the central government for the Great Heisei Municipal Consolidation remains debatable, one immediate goal of promoting mergers was restructuring small, financially weak municipalities, which largely relied on intergovernmental transfers (Shimizu 2012; Yamada 2018; Yokomichi 2007). Merger decisions were not mandatory, but voluntary.

However, the central government incentivized mergers by offering substantial financial benefits. Specifically, the Ministry of Internal Affairs extended generous

bonds to municipalities that merged during that period. Simultaneously, the government reduced local tax grants that were earlier provided to municipalities and prefectures that were experiencing financial difficulties. Municipalities were strongly financially incentivized to merge as a result of the combination of generous bonds and reductions in local tax grants (Suzuki and Sakuwa 2016). Local administrative chiefs often utilized referendums or questionnaire surveys to gauge public opinion on consolidation decisions. These referendums are conducted over an extended period before making the final decision to consolidate, as they are considered an effective way to determine the residents' desire for consolidation. In addition, each municipality also voluntarily conducts local referendums alongside their consolidation decisions (Miyazaki 2014). In municipal mergers after 1999, municipalities could choose their merger pattern from two types: the creation of a new municipality or municipality absorption. The first resulted in merging municipalities creating a single new government (Miyazaki 2014), with legal personalities of previous municipalities being lost and a new legal personality created. The second resulted in one core municipality absorbing its merger partners, with the legal personalities of the merged partners being lost and the legal personality of the core municipality remaining (Ehime Prefecture n.d.). From April 1999 to April 2014, there were 649 municipal mergers. Of these, 461 led to creating new municipalities and 188 involved absorbing other municipalities (MIC 2014; Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2014; Suzuki and Sakuwa 2016).

Several empirical studies examine why some municipalities decided to merge. For example, Yamada (2016) shows fiscal incentives by the central government encouraged small fiscally weak municipalities to merge. Using local referenda data, Miyazaki (2014) reveals large municipalities preferred to consolidate as they would play a central role in merged municipality. Small municipalities also preferred to consolidate as mergers would help overcome anticipated financial challenges caused by demographic decline and aging. Furthermore, municipal merger causes a fiscal common pool problem where some municipalities behave as free-riders (Hirota and Yunoue 2014, 2017). Hirota and Yunoue (2017) identified a fiscal common problem associated with municipal merger, where merged municipalities rapidly increased expenditures and bonds just before mergers.

Has municipal merger led to better municipal performance? Results of empirical studies suggest various effects of merger on municipal performance. For example, Miyazaki (2018) showed mergers increased municipal expenditures immediately after merger, as opposed to the initial expectation. However, such spending increases are found to be temporary. Increased expenditures gradually decline, which shows positive effects of merger on fiscal performance. Saito et al. (2023) showed mergers increased the supply of an essential public service, library services.

Some studies showed the merger effects in the political arena. Horiuchi et al. (2015) showed that municipal mergers influenced national-level election outcomes, reducing voter turnout in national elections, compared to non-merged municipalities. Yamada (2021) argued that mergers weakened the ties between voters and municipal politicians due to reducing local council members. Another issue that has been empirically tested is the unequal distribution of merger benefits among merged

municipalities. Some municipalities may gain more but other municipalities lose from mergers. For example, Suzuki and Sakuwa (2016) showed municipal mergers negatively influence population growth for municipalities if they are not the largest municipality among their merging partner, suggesting that smaller municipalities incur considerable costs from mergers. Pickering et al. (2020) found that less populated merged areas are likely to see reductions in public spending after mergers.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES

Another challenge that local governments face in Japan, especially those in small-town and rural areas, is population decline and ageing. Japan has undergone the most extreme demographic pressure in the world. Among all countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Japan is demographically the oldest country (OECD 2019). In 2020, the country's estimated ratio of people 65 and over, compared to working age people ages 20 to 64 years, was 52.0. After that followed Finland's 40.1 and Italy's 39.5. (This is the number of people aged 65 and over per 100 people of working age from 20 to 64; OECD, 2019, p. 174.) The ratio in Japan is expected to increase to 80.7 by 2050, also projected as the highest worldwide, followed by South Korea's 78.8 and Greece's 75.0 (OECD 2019).

Japan recorded 2.6 million more deaths than births from 2010 to 2019 (United Nations 2019, p. 12). As a result, Japan ranks 24th worldwide in lower population with -0.12 population growth. This means the number of deaths exceeds the number of births (Dillinger 2018). The Masuda report estimates by 2040 that 896 municipalities, out of a total of 1,741, will be extinct due to demographic and socioeconomic challenges, creating alarm in rural and small municipalities (Japan Policy Council 2014; Suzuki et al. 2020).

Japan's local governments have been facing several challenges relating to demographic decline and aging. One challenge is curtailing and withdrawing public and private services, especially in rural and small-town areas. Due to factors such as declining population, population aging, accumulated government debt, and expenditure cuts, local residents have experienced various declines in public services, including closure and merger of local public schools, municipal health clinics, and hospitals (Kamibayashi 2009; Yamauchi 2009). Nationwide, reform by means of municipal mergers has greatly promoted such reductions in municipal services. Private services, including local shops and transportation services, also have disappeared from many local communities (Ministry of Economy Trade and Industry 2010; Ministry of Land Infrastructure Transport and Tourism 2007; Suzuki 2017). In some municipalities, residents volunteer to make up for shortages of government services, but not all of them (Suzuki 2017). Dealing with declining government and private services and shrinking population is a major challenge for local governments and citizens in many local areas.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided a brief historical overview and institutional features of local governments in Japan and has discussed several topics, including leadership selection, local civil servants, municipal merger, and demographic decline. Despite Japan's long history of democracy, developed economy, and unique political and

administrative contexts, Japanese local governments still have been understudied in a way that tests and develops existing general public administration and management theories with a comparative perspective. Japan's case suggests several significant potential research questions. One such question includes examining the effects of political leadership on municipal performance. Although mayors' authority and power are said to be strong in previous studies, bureaucracies in Japanese local governments seem to be highly meritocratic, relatively autonomous, and insulated from political influence from a comparative perspective. Furthermore, compared to bureaucracies in less developed countries, Japanese local governments have higher administrative capacities and enjoy administrative stability. In that context, to what extent does the leadership of mayors influence municipal performance? Is the quality of public services influenced by individual characteristics of top leaders, as demonstrated by empirical and theoretical studies from other countries (Andrews and Boyne 2010; Avellaneda 2009; Meier and O'Toole Jr 2002)?

Another significant question is what the effects of gender and representative bureaucracy are. Japan scores very low in gender equality among developed nations and all countries world-wide. In the context of low gender equality, it is important to study if increasing descriptive representation of female leaders in politics and administration influences municipal performance and quality of public service. Furthermore, in a highly homogeneous context in terms of race and ethnicity as in Japanese municipalities, which dimensions of representative bureaucracy, such as economic and educational background, are more important? Alternatively, do theories of representative bureaucracy not apply in Japanese local governments?

Finally, the impact of municipal mergers, especially in peripheral areas should be examined more empirically. Most existing empirical studies on merger effects around the world examine the impact of merger on overall performance of post-merger municipalities (Tavares 2018). However, as the case of Japan shows (Pickering et al. 2020; Suzuki and Sakuwa 2016; Yamada and Arai 2020), the impact of merger may not be equal across merged municipality units. Some pre-merger units gain more from municipal merger, but other units may lose. In the case of Japan, municipal merger seems to bring negative consequences in terms of population growth for small areas within merging partners (Suzuki and Sakuwa 2016) and public spending (Pickering et al. 2020). Such empirical tests should be examined in other dimensions of municipal performance, as well as beyond the context of the Japanese local government.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Muto (2010), Shindo (1982), and Steiner (1965) for further descriptions of the pre-war Japanese local government system.
2. See Hijino (2020), Kuni (2017), and Muto (2010) for decentralization reforms in the post-war period.
3. See Suzuki (2019) for more details about the Japanese government effort to promote interregional equity.
4. See, for example, Dahlström and Lapuente (2017), Painter and Peters (2010), and Suzuki and Demircioglu (2019).
5. In the second wave of the Quality of Government Expert Survey conducted in 2014–2015 (Dahlström et al. 2015b), Japan's national bureaucracy ranked 5th out of the 116 sample countries in

terms of degree of administrative professionalism, as opposed to politicization. In the third wave of the QoG Expert Survey in 2019 (Nistotskaya et al. 2021), Japan was ranked 14th out of 80 countries. Furthermore, Japan records the highest level of bureaucratic closedness among 113 sample countries in terms of bureaucratic closedness (Dahlström et al. 2015a, Suzuki and Sakuwa Forthcoming) and also the highest among 106 sample countries (Nistotskaya et al. 2021).

6. However, mid-career recruitment seems to be increasing in recent years (Ono 2019).

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