



70th anniversary of universal suffrage in Japan:  
Ensuring youth participation in politics and the sustainability of society

Introductory remarks by Mr. Hirofumi TAKINAMI,  
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Hi, young parliamentarians and participants from all over the world.

I am Hirofumi Takinami, the Deputy Leader of the Japanese delegation, a member of the upper house of Japan.

Last year I attended the Conference of Young Parliamentarians in Geneva, where I announced that Japan would co-host the first independent Global Conference of Young Parliamentarians with the IPU in Tokyo. So, it is my great honor and pleasure to welcome all of you to Japan today.

Coincidentally, this year marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of universal suffrage in Japan, and I am sincerely grateful for this opportunity to give a keynote address in a year that is extremely meaningful for Japan.

The right to vote for a representative of one's choice is the basis of parliamentary democracy, that ensures each individual's right to participate in the political process. But looking back at history, we see that universal suffrage is not something that can be taken for granted.

In Japan, the road to universal suffrage began in 1890 with the first general election for the House of Representatives members, when the days of samurai carrying swords were still fresh in people's memories. This was the first time that ordinary citizens were allowed to participate in national politics. Even so, the right to vote was restricted to men 25 years or older, who were able to make a significant tax payment. Thus, the number of eligible voters was severely limited, and amounted to just over

1 % of the entire population.

Later, as Japan underwent a period of rapid industrialization, advocacy for universal suffrage spread nationwide as a social movement. Notably, as the momentum of Taisho democracy spread throughout Japan after World War I during the Taisho era, the nation's youth showed particularly great enthusiasm for increased freedom and democracy. As a result, the requirement for the tax payment was abolished, and universal male suffrage was achieved in 1925 for the first time in Japan. This time, the number of eligible voters amounted to 20% of the total population.

Thus, universal male suffrage had been achieved a long time before the World War II. On the other hand, it took until the end of WWII before women's right to vote was achieved.

In 1945, in addition to recognizing the right of women to vote, the voting age was lowered to 20, resulting in nearly half the total population being eligible to vote. Universal suffrage for both women and men was guaranteed by the Constitution of Japan, which came into force in 1947.

Universal suffrage has been the norm in Japan for the past 70 years. The Japanese people of today are taking this universal suffrage for granted as a fundamental right. However the hardships overcome by earlier generations of Japan to secure this right are something of which we may rightly be proud and which we should duly commemorate.

Japan experienced rapid economic development at a pace rarely seen in history, called "Miracle". But, we Japan now experiences a declining birthrate and an aging population yet again at an unprecedented speed. Although Japan has matured as a democracy, it also shows signs of socioeconomic stagnation. We are now faced with the limitation and drawback of our existing systems, which were predicated on a growing

population and economy and which often focused on measures for elderly, who turned out to vote with high rate. Without significant reform, it is unlikely that we will be able to meet the challenges we face. There is no doubt in my mind that the ones best suited to take on such challenges are young people with new, innovative and non-traditional ideas and values.

At present, however, Japan's young people struggle under the weight of harsh social and economic realities that include fiscal deficit as well as the generation gap in the burden of and the benefits offered by social security policy. In fact, I am concerned that today's young people are gradually losing hope in politics. Like many countries, Japan sees that voter turnout for young people is significantly lower than that of older generations. In fact, this voting gap is particularly pronounced in Japan, which is a matter of serious concern.

At present there is a bill before the Japanese Parliament to lower the voting age to 18. Anticipating this lowering of the voting age, there are considerable efforts to promote education in school that fosters children awareness of every citizen's civic duties. As parliamentarians, we must provide strong support for such measures.

The Japanese government is currently introducing programs for women's empowerment and implementing policies to promote gender equality to achieve a society in which all women can shine. Promoting increased participation by women in the political process is essential, not only because it fulfills a democratic requirement to reflect diverse opinion in public policy, but because it helps bring us closer to the goal of achieving equal opportunity for all people in society in general. In particular, I am keenly aware of the need to accelerate efforts to address issues such as wage inequality, poverty, and violence against women, which requires increased participation in politics by young women. I will also do my best as the Deputy Leader of the Japanese delegation in support of the lady Leader of our

delegation, Ms. Makishima, this morning's chairperson.

In conclusion, increased participation in the political process by young people will have a significant impact on today's political mechanisms and policy content. The greater the energy brought to our socioeconomic systems by young people, the brighter the prospects to ensure sustainability for our future, as young people have a long life ahead of them and must inevitably consider the world from a long-term perspective.

To close my presentation, let me say that all society needs the power of youth to reach the next era, and I vow to give my best effort in parliamentary activities for promoting the participation of young people in the political process. Thank you for your attention.