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**THE POLITICAL PROJECT OF THE RULING RIKKENDŌSHI-KAI PARTY
FROM ITS ORIGIN TO SELF-DISSOLUTION:
IDEOLOGICAL ESSENCE AND REASONS FOR FRAGILITY**

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The Rikkendōshi-kai party, founded in 1913, became the ruling party after winning the 1915 parliamentary election and Prime Minister Ōkuma Shigenobu joined it. In historiography, the process of Rikkendōshi-kai emergence, as well as this party's cabinet, is limited to an exclusively positive statement of the fact of existence of such party and government, which in the midst of World War I was replaced by a “technical” non-party cabinet. The problem of deep reasons for emergence of such an unexpected power is not only unstudied but not even posed in available publications. During World War I the party government of the Association of Allies of the Constitution effectively pursued domestic political liberalization policy (property electoral qualification was reduced) and active external imperial expansion (particularly in China). Despite the undeniable achievements, Ōkuma's single-party Cabinet did not rely on stable majority in the parliament. Thus, in October 1916 the Cabinet was dismissed and the Rikkendōshi-kai party ceased to exist. Problem and chronological analysis method of factual material allows to claim that the main reason for the self-dissolution of “The Association of Allies of the Constitution” was lack of experience in then Japanese political tradition of forming multiparty coalition governments. Japanese party politicians learned their lessons from Rikkendoshi-kai's bitter experience. The key one was the fact that in conditions of absence of an unambiguously dominant party in the parliament a reliable party support for the government should become inter-party coalitions, formed on the basis of inter-party ideological and personnel compromises. However, that idea was implemented only in 1924, when, for the first time in its history, a true coalition “Cabinet of Three Parties to Defend the Constitution” (*Goken sampa naikaku*) led Japan.

Keywords: Japan, Ōkuma Shigenobu, parliament, Rikkendōshi-kai party (Association of Allies of the Constitution), World War I

“The Constitutional Association of Political Friendship” (the Rikkenseiyū-kai) is rightly considered to have been the leading pro-government party of Imperial Japan in the first third of the XX century. At least it is justified by the fact that more than half of the government cabinets of Japan, which were formed within that chronological framework, had precisely the Rikkenseiyū-kai as their party support. Its ministers ruled “The Land of the Rising Sun” in 1901, 1908, 1911–1912, 1918–1922, 1924–1925, 1927–1929 and 1931–1932.

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However, each rule has got its exceptions. The political project “The Association of Allies of the Constitution” (the Rikkendōshi-kai) existed in 1913–1916 and became such exception. The project was destined to become a party basis for one of Japanese governments and it was not ordinary. The Cabinet formed by the Rikkendōshi-kai ruled Japan in the midst of World War I – more precisely in 1915–1916. Although due to those government’s efforts, Tokyo’s participation in the war turned out to be very effective in terms of Japanese imperial expansion, the Cabinet, which was formed by the Association of Allies of the Constitution, was forced to resign and the Rikkendōshi-kai party was disbanded. It should be admitted that it does not happen too often with successful governments and parties in political history and it needs explanation.

In historiography, the process of Rikkendōshi-kai emergence, as well as this party’s cabinet, is limited to an exclusively positive statement of the fact of existence of such party and government, which in the midst of World War I was replaced by a “technical” non-party cabinet. The problem of deep reasons for emergence of such an unexpected power is not only unstudied but not even posed in available publications, as it is evidenced by the works of Daba Yūji [馱場 2007], Ibuki Ken [伊吹 2005], Iwata Kikuo [岩田 2004], Kitake Yoshinari [季武 1998], Kondō Misao [近藤 1986], Mikuri Takashi [御 2004], Murakawa Ichirō [村川 1998], Oka Yoshitake [岡 1969], Shimizu Yuichiro [Shimizu 2020], Yui Masaomi [由井 1977].

The study aims to understand the reasons for such an unusual political fragility of Rikkendōshi-kai party project, which seemed quite successful, with the use of the problem and chronological historical research method toolkit. In order to achieve the aim, the following tasks should be completed:

- Identify circumstances of Rikkendōshi-kai party’s emergence
- Identify the party’s ideological orientation
- Analyze cause for sudden dissolution of the Rikkendōshi-kai party given established principles of forming the party Cabinets in the Japanese Empire in 1920s.

We shall start with the emergence of the Rikkendōshi-kai party. The Meiji¹ reformers were unwilling to trust government cabinets to party politicians. Therefore, at the end of the reign of Emperor Mutsuhito the country was ruled by a non-party cabinet, which was formed by the Court and consisted of exclusively professional officials and the military, headed by the Prime Minister Katsura Tarō (1848–1913). After the leading conservative, and therefore seemingly pro-government party, “The Constitutional Association of Political Friendship” got a landslide victory at the latest parliamentary election of the Meiji era in 1912 with 52 % of votes. The Rikkenseiyū-kai got 209 out of 381 seats in the lower house of parliament. However, the non-partisan Katsura Tarō’s Cabinet got serious problems in the field of public administration, which was referred to in historiography as “The Taishō era political crisis”² [Shimizu 2020, 178]. The Rikkenseiyū-kai MPs periodically tried to put pressure on the government on budget and personnel policy, strategically hoping to form their own party cabinet. Under such condition, on February 7, 1913 [Shimizu 2020, 180], Prime Minister Katsura initiated the creation of his own pro-government party focused exclusively on him. Its personnel base should have been made up of government officials [纈纈 1987, 93], united by the ideological banner of extreme pro-government conservatism, national unity and imperial great-power expansion of Japan [藤村 1993, 97], nicknamed as Dai-Nihon shugi – that was “The Doctrine of Great Japan” [古川 2004, 28]. The latter was planned to be implemented taking into account “the strengthening of the Japanese-British alliance and the spirit of harmony between Japan and Russia, as well as between Japan and France” [藤村 1993, 101] on the eve of clearly approaching World War.

The project was called the “Katsura shin-tō”, which may be translated as “The Katsura’s New Party”, and its implementation began. Civil servants became actively involved in the new party, demonstrating their loyalty to the current head of the Cabinet by their membership in the party. Almost the majority of oppositional Constitutional National

Party (Rikkenkokumin-tō) functionaries surprisingly joined as well [山本 1982, 104]. As a result, 83 delegates took part in the first constituent congress of this party [川崎, 原田, 奈良本, 小西 2001, 914]. It looked rather impressive for then political tradition of Japan. Among those who joined the new pro-government party were even some members of then-not-elected upper house of the Japanese parliament (a kind of Japanese “House of Lords”) [内藤 2008, 116], which allowed Katsura to hope for possible establishment of his party’s control over both chambers of the Japanese parliament in the future [内藤 2008, 114]. The powerful Mitsubishi concern became the new party generous financial patron [遠山 1964, 294].

Attempts of such an aggressive pro-government party building caused the discontent of the Emperor’s Court and influential military, as the Prime Minister tried to limit their power [季武 1998, 35] by the forces of party consolidated civil apparatus [駄場 2007, 30]. The government even discussed the possibility of appointing civilian officials to the positions of Ministers of the Army and Navy [小林 1996, 295]. Nevertheless, it did not prevent Katsura from actively involving Japanese generals and admirals in preparing a new round of inter-imperialist struggle for Chinese market, developing in the bowels of the government office a list of ultimatum demands Japan made to China after Katsura’s death in the form of notorious “The Twenty-One Demands” [川田, 伊藤 2002, 17]. There was quite a decent explanation for such an aggressive policy. Japan was seeking not to seize the enormous Chinese market, ousting other imperialist competitors from there, but to help neighboring China to accomplish an effective modernization [亀井 1970, 69]. Yet the Imperial Court, as the bearer of the highest state power in Japan, preferred to deal with non-party cabinets, which were absolutely under its control and with no ministers representing any political party. The military were free to openly oppose to the Prime Minister’s unconventional initiative. Among the oppositionists was the former military governor of Japan in Korea, Chief of the General Staff of the Japanese Army, Marshal Hasegawa Yoshimichi (1850–1924) [小林 2006, 296]. As a result, on 20 February 1913, Katsura was forced to resign from the office, fell seriously ill and in October 1913 died of stomach cancer. Personnel admiral Yamamoto Gonnohyōe (1852–1933) headed the government. He openly disowned the party initiatives of his predecessor and fundamentally positioned his government as a non-party one.

For obvious reasons, government officials began to massively leave the party of the former prime minister. By reason of people outflow from the party, eleven regional branches of the Katsura shin-tō ceased to exist at once [由井 1977, 107]. The party, which the late Katsura founded, seemed to be forgotten. But not all the co-founders of that political project were ready to agree on this. First of all, those included the former ministers of Katsura government, who were dismissed with him in February 1913 and did not enter the cabinet of Yamamoto Gonnohyōe. Among them were the former Minister of Communications Gotō Shimpei (1857–1929), ex-Minister of Agriculture and Commerce Nakashōji Ren (1866–1924), former head of the Ministry of the Interior Affairs Ōura Kanetake (1850–1918) [伊吹 2005, 95], as well as a career diplomat, former Japanese ambassador to Great Britain and at the time of the resignation of the Katsura government – Foreign Minister Katō Takaaki (1860–1926) [近藤 1986, 171–173]. Through their efforts, this political project was not only preserved, but also ideologically formalized, after which on 23 December 1913 it received a corresponding and well-grounded official name the Rikkendōshi-kai (立憲同志会) – “The Association of Allies of the Constitution” [伊吹 2005, 83].

The political program was urgently developed for this party project. It proclaimed that the state structure of Japan, legalized by the Constitution of 1889, was absolutely correct. The rights and freedoms prescribed in that constitution were quite enough for successful development of the country and its people, while any constitutional legal innovations in those conditions were extremely undesirable. Hence the name of the party was the Rikkendōshi-kai and Katō Takaaki became its elected chairman [御 2004, 14].

Katō managed not only to save the party but to give this political project an additional impetus. The secret of the Rikkendōshi-kai party's success was rather simple: in the conditions of the impending and then outbreaking World War, the Association of Allies of the Constitution immediately and fully supported the entry of Japan into the war on the side of the Entente, approved Japan seizing all German colonies located in the region, and opposed participation of Japanese armed forces in any hostilities in Europe. Moreover, as an experienced diplomat, Katō Takaaki recommended to use employment of Europeans in the war to expand and strengthen Japanese positions in neighbor countries (primarily in China) [Hamilton, Herwig 2003, 315]. The Japanese government then was headed by another formally non-partisan Prime Minister Ōkuma Shigenobu (1838–1922). It was implemented in practice and turned out to be extremely good for the country, which qualitatively increased the Rikkendōshi-kai party rating among the voters. A lot of authoritative public figures joined the Association of Allies of the Constitution: prominent members of the civil rights and freedoms movement Kōno Hironaka (1849–1923) and Ōishi Masami (1855–1935), famous journalists, chief editors of popular newspapers Shimada Saburō (1852–1923) and Minoura Katsumodo (1854–1929). They were followed by Japanese businessmen, whose support provided the Rikkendōshi-kai with financial stability and a certain independence from the current government.

Among the large entrepreneurs, who joined the Association of Allies of the Constitution, was the vice president of “Nissai” – the first and still the largest insurance company in Japan – Kataoku Naoharu (1859–1924) [村川 1978, 128], as well as the former Minister of Finance in the government of the late Katsura – Wakatsuki Reijirō (1866–1949), closely associated with banks [村川 1998, 90].

All those facts influenced the results of parliamentary election in March 1915. The Association of Allies of the Constitution, led by Katō Takaaki, came out as a sensational winner, having received 153 parliamentary seats out of 381. The results looked even more unexpected, given the fact that the main conservative force of the country – the Rikkenseiyū-kai party – managed to get only 108 of its representatives in the parliament at the election [玉井 1999, 45]. At the same time, the pro-government quasi-party pocket of the incumbent Prime Minister Ōkuma, formed of government officials in accordance with the late Katsura's template (it went to the polls under an unpretentious brand the Ōkuma hokukoen-kai, which is translated as “The Association of Ōkuma's Supporters”) [大隈重信とその時代 1989, 117], completely failed the election: the result was 4 % of support and a miserable faction of a dozen MPs [日本史年表 2001, 266]. It happened despite the fact that many ministers of then government cabinet personally took part in the election campaign for the Association of Ōkuma Supporters [季武 1998, 88], while Ōkuma hokukoen-kai party used the latest technical innovations, struggling for votes. For example, gramophone recordings of Ōkuma's election speeches were distributed throughout the country [岡 1969, 40].

In search of reliable support in parliament, the incumbent Prime Minister Ōkuma Shigenobu, who entered parliament as the leader of his own party project the Ōkuma hokukoen-kai, announced immediately after the election that he was leaving the party named after him and was also joining the Association of Allies of the Constitution, eventually becoming the head of both the government and of the Rikkendōshi-kai party. He explained this not entirely plausible act of his quite simply: the time had come for authorities to “abandon non-party uncertainty and move on to politics, based on political parties” [大西, 齋藤, 川口 2006, 44]. As the Rikkendōshi-kai party got the largest support from voters at the last elections, then government was to work, relying on that party. Thus, at one moment the Association of Allies of the Constitution from a formally opposition party turned into a ruling one.

The bureaucratic apparatus reacted to the change in the country's political landscape quite expectedly. By May 1915, together with the head of government, most civil servants from previous “Ōkuma's Supporters” party amicably had moved to the Rikkendōshi-kai

[奈良岡 2006, 165], which allowed to increase the parliamentary faction of the Association of Allies of the Constitution up to 165 MPs. However, even in this configuration the Rikkendōshi-kai did not receive a majority in the parliament, which consisted of 381 MPs. However, the party became a key support in the parliament for the government. The Cabinet activity faced strong opposition from those party politicians who were not included in the pro-governmental pool. Adoption of the next budget under conditions of the World War was in jeopardy. As a result, seemingly monolithic, the Association of Allies of the Constitution suddenly ceased to be unified. It became clear that some former activists of the Ōkuma hokukoen-kai did not support the excessive political flexibility shown by the prime minister. It resulted in public withdrawal from the Rikkendōshi-kai of a group of MPs and officials, who announced on 27 December 1915 the formation of an independent party project called “The Friends of Justice Club” (Kōyū-kurabu) [日本近現代史辞典 1978, 206].

The situation in pro-government party camp could be corrected only by unequivocal success in both domestic and foreign policy, on which the Ōkuma’s Cabinet focused, positioning itself as a party government for the Association of Allies of the Constitution. The government acted energetically and effectively. Within the period of its work, upon Ōkuma’s initiative, a new electoral law was adopted, according to which the property electoral qualification for voters was reduced by one and a half times (up to ¥ 10 annual tax payments) [阪上 1990, 28]. It led to a significant increase in number of voters. In the field of foreign policy, the Ōkuma party government, overcoming the resistance of Western “geopolitical partners”, in May 1915 managed to impose on China [Elleman 2002, 18] the majority (more precisely 13) [Liu 2011, 236] of “The Twenty-One Demands”, which were presented back in January. According to them, Japan exponentially ousted other imperial “predators” from China.

The “Japanese-Chinese compromise” [Zarrow 2005, 80] stipulated that “meeting Japanese wishes”. Beijing recognized Tokyo’s domination in Shandong (from where the Japanese expelled the Germans at the beginning of the war), agreed to extend for 99 years the term of the Japanese “lease” of Port Arthur and Dalian, captured after the Russian-Japanese War of 1904–1905, as well as the use of South Manchu and the Andong-Shenyang railways. In addition, China had to transfer several promising mining pits to the Japanese concession, while the only one iron and steel factory in China – the Han-Ye-Ping mining and metallurgical complex – was transformed into a Japanese-Chinese joint venture. In addition, China assumed the obligation not to lease ports to other countries without Japan’s consent [Chi 1970, 28–33].

Japan’s imperial success within Ōkuma’s premiership looked so impressive that in August 1915 he retained the post of the head of the Cabinet and became the Minister of Foreign Affairs. That position in the government was at that time a direct creation of the Emperor. In June 1916 he was awarded with an honorary title “kōshaku” [日本重要人物辞典 1988, 133], which is usually translated as “marquis” in European historiography, though it does not quite adequately reflect its true meaning. In the hierarchy of then court titles of Japan, the person who was awarded with such title was equated in status with a non-reigning son of the emperor. Therefore, in European tradition, kōshaku may refer to “grand prince”.

The government and its prime minister were forced to resign on October 9, 1916 [中村 2008, 17], while the party, on which that Cabinet relied, the very next day (October 10) self-dissolved. Apparently, there may be only one way to understand and explain this. No internal political indulgences and foreign policy success could cancel the main drawback of the Cabinet: the Ōkuma government’s support in parliament was limited to one single party – “The Association of Allies of the Constitution”, which despite the fact that he possessed the largest faction in the lower house, did not reach the coveted majority. It undermined stability of the government, which in the context of the ongoing world war

threatened the country with very real troubles. The state needed urgent consolidation, while the Rikkendōshi-kai party and its government became its own victims.

In October 1916, the government came to a simple and generally reasonable conclusion: if a single party government does not have a majority in parliament, a coalition agreement is necessary. Only then Japanese political tradition did not know any examples of proper multiparty coalition cabinets. It was believed that the government should have worked as a single team, and therefore its political course and personnel were to be determined by a common program strategy. It could not be the result of inter-party compromises because each party had its own program with which it would go to election. Different party programs may not coincide in some way. Therefore, any compromise is a rejection of at least part of the goals the party stated in its election program, which may be a deception of voters. Hence there is a simple conclusion: the result of any inter-party compromise should not have been a coalition, but only the merger of existing parties into a new party project with new clearly stated goals. That is why the only logical consequence of the party-government crisis could be reforming the existing pro-government party into a new political project. It happened after tense political consultations on 10 October 1916, when after the resignation of the government the consolidation of the pro-governmental Association of Allies of the Constitution (the Rikkendōshi-kai), the moderately oppositional Association of Centrists (the Chūsei-kai) and the Friendship Club (the Kōyū-kurabu) and their transition to a new party project called “The Constitutional Association” (Kensei-kai) [岩田 2004, 8] was announced. This “association” gained a majority in the parliament (197 seats out of 381) [伊吹 2005, 97], which inevitably strengthened the position of the government it supported. However, the condition for such a party merger on the part of the former “centrists” and “friends of justice” was the resignation of Ōkuma Shigenobu’s Cabinet, in response to which an appointment of Katō Takaaki, the previous head of the Rikkendōshi-kai, was agreed. He became a head of the newly formed Kensei-kai party [日本史年表 2001, 266]. That decision was explained by the fact that Ōkuma himself and his entourage in the government did not want to provide ministerial portfolios to former political outcasts from Chūsei-kai and Kōyū-kurabu. In addition, the Friendship Club was created in December 1915 by those politicians who reasonably considered Ōkuma not a very reliable ally for his previous betrayal of the Ōkuma Hokukoen-kai, the party created mainly for Ōkuma.

Thus, one of the most successful and effective governments in the entire Japanese history became a victim of inter-party intrigue and in October 1916 was forced to resign fully. Emperor Yoshihito immediately accepted resignation, replacing Ōkuma’s Cabinet with another “technical” and non-partisan government of professional bureaucrats and the military, headed by the former Governor-General of annexed Korea, Marshal Terauchi Masatake (1852–1919). The issue of forming a new party government was promised to be resolved after the next parliamentary election, scheduled for April 1917. After a forced resignation from the post of prime minister and the self-dissolution of his party, Ōkuma Shigenobu acquired a persistent image of a failed politician and was forced to abandon big politics, although he remained a member of the upper house of parliament until the end of his life as a bearer of *kōshaku* title.

Thus, working on the issue of understanding the reason for the collapse of the Rikkendōshi-kai party, it should be mentioned that the fate of the Rikkendōshi-kai party and Ōkuma government is an example of how unpredictable and versatile politics can be. When obvious success, even under conditions of a rather successful war, does not guarantee stability to the government and the status of a pro-governmental party may not mean that it would last long enough. However, the main reason, which led the pro-governmental Rikkendōshi-kai party to its collapse, was not unpredictability of politics itself but the lack of experience in forming inter-party coalition agreements in the political tradition of Japan then. Japanese party politicians should be commended in that case, as after several years they learnt their lessons from Rikkendoshi-kai’s bitter experience. The

key one was the fact that in conditions of absence of an unambiguously dominant party in the parliament, not political projects, which artificially merged into a new single party, should become reliable party support for the government, but inter-party coalitions, formed on the basis of inter-party ideological and personnel compromises. However, that idea was implemented only in 1924, when, for the first time in its history, a true coalition “Cabinet of Three Parties to Defend the Constitution” *Goken sampa naikaku* (護憲三派内閣) led Japan.

¹ *Meiji* (Japanese: “The Enlightened Rule”) – the era name (Japanese: *nengo*), officially proclaimed in 1868 by the board of Japanese Emperor Mutsuhito (1852–1912), whose reign lasted from 1867 to 1912.

² *Taishō* (Japanese: “The Great Rectitude” or “The Great Righteousness”) – the era name of Japanese Emperor Yoshihito (1879–1926), whose reign lasted from 1912 to 1926.

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Політичний проєкт керівної партії Ріккендоші-кай від виникнення до самоліквідації: ідейна сутність і причини нетривалості

Після перемоги на парламентських виборах 1915 р. заснована в 1913 р. партія Ріккендоші-кай (“Спілка прихильників конституції”) стала керівною внаслідок вступу в неї тогочасного прем’єр-міністра Окуми Шігенобу. В умовах Першої світової війни партійний уряд “Спілки прихильників конституції” результативно реалізовував політику внутрішньополітичної лібералізації (був зменшений майновий виборчий ценз) та активної зовнішньої імперської експансії (особливо в Китаї). Попри незаперечні здобутки, однопартійний кабінет Окуми не опирався на стабільну більшість у парламенті, тому в жовтні 1916 р. був відправлений у відставку, після чого партія Ріккендоші-кай припинила існування. Метод проблемно-хронологічного аналізу фактологічного матеріалу дає підстави стверджувати, що головною причиною самоліквідації “Спілки прихильників конституції” стала відсутність у тогочасній політичній традиції Японії досвіду формування багатопартійних коаліційних урядів.

Ключові слова: Окума Шігенобу, парламент, партія Ріккендоші-кай (“Спілка прихильників конституції”), Перша світова війна, Японія

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