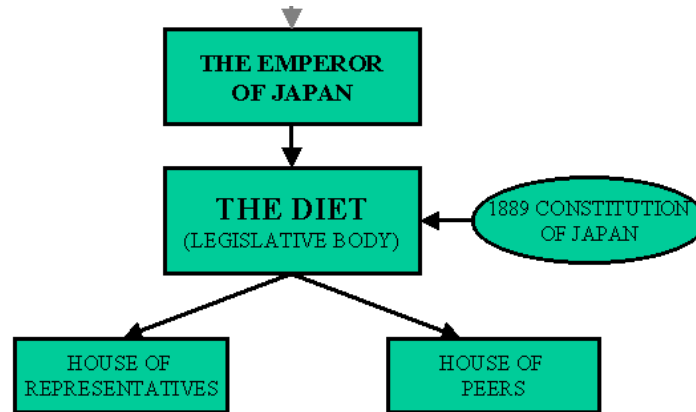


POLITICAL EFFECTS OF THE MEIJI RESTORATION



In spite of the institutional changes brought about by the 1889 Constitution, sovereignty still resided in the emperor on the basis of his divine ancestry. The new constitution specified a form of government that was still authoritarian in character with the Diet receiving only minimal concessions. Political parties were allowed to exist as part of the political process, but the compromises made between the Diet and the emperor over the next twenty years increased the Diet's power. The 1889 Constitution (Meiji Constitution) remained the fundamental law of Japan until 1947.

...It was Emperor Meiji, young and full of new ideas, who set Japan on the path to modernization, with the western nations as his model. A restructuring of Japan in nearly every respect--political, social, and economic--soon followed. Emperor Meiji and his followers sent envoys to these nations to examine their political systems, and the ideas that they brought back to Japan shaped the new government. On the one hand, in order to modernize the government the new rulers would need to dismantle the old feudal system, which meant taking away the considerable privileges enjoyed by the aristocratic classes--although these aristocrats typically filled the new government posts, so they still wielded political power.

After a period of unrest in which many Japanese began to question the new system that was developing, Japan's leaders were forced to reconsider their path to modernization. Farmers, for example, resented the new emphasis on industrial development; agriculture had been, after all, understood in the feudal period to be the backbone of the Japanese economy. In addition, as Japanese developed contacts with the outside world, they absorbed many influences, including notions of democratic political processes. These Japanese demanded that the new government not simply replace one autocratic system led by the shogun, with another, led by the emperor. As a result, the government promised a constitution that would spell out the rights of citizens. In 1890 the Meiji Constitution was adopted, proclaimed as a "gift of the emperor" to the Japanese people. The Constitution established a Diet, a legislative body with two houses: members of the upper house were appointed while those of the lower house were elected. The emperor abolished the old class system. Land was taken from the large landholders, the daimyo, and redistributed. The samurai were no longer able to carry the sword, their former badge of status.