



# Japan Report

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Sustainable Governance in the  
Context of the COVID-19 Crisis

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## Executive Summary

The first major outbreak of coronavirus in Japan occurred following the arrival of the cruise ship “Diamond Princess” in Yokohama on 3 February 2020. A first wave of infections hit the country, stretching from about March to early May. A second wave followed in July to August, and a third one got underway in early November. The first and second waves were mild in comparison with those in many countries in Europe or the in the United States. The third one was more serious, though still less severe than in many other countries, reaching more than 5,000 registered infections per day in January 2021.

Japan’s health system has a good reputation. However, some critical deficiencies came became evident in 2020, including the small number of available testing kits, and a similar insufficiency of intensive-care units and specialized doctors and nurses.

During the first wave of the pandemic, the government drafted a number of institutional and policy initiatives. It adjusted the law on handling infectious diseases, created a high-level response center, and initiated a series of expert meetings to develop centralized policy advice. The declaration of a state of emergency and the passage of two supplementary budgets are also noteworthy.

However, a number of bottlenecks became soon apparent. The government was often hesitant to take bold and decisive action, not wanting to endanger the economy too much or threaten the Olympic Games that were originally scheduled for 2020. Considerable coordination problems also became apparent – within the government, between government and experts, and between the central and regional authorities. In terms of the effects of policy on the economy, it proved difficult to provide effective help to vulnerable groups such as the poor, non-regular workers, or small and micro business proprietors. The universal cash handout provided was not particularly well targeted, and the government had difficulty in settling on the appropriate scale for firm subsidies and cheap loans.

Still, Japan overcame the first and the second wave so successfully that well into the year 2020, the country was considered to have shown exemplary pandemic management. This initially favorable performance owed arguably less to prudent government action than to a concatenation of helpful social features such as high hygienic standards, frequent use of face masks and the public's abstention from handshakes in daily life. The fact that authorities could do no more than issue nonbinding requests during the first state of emergency also caused no major problems due to peer pressure and the prevalence of prosocial behavior.

However, lessons emerging from the first two waves were not sufficiently heeded and the government prioritized efforts to boost the economy, including a campaign to promote domestic travel. Government communication became increasingly inconsistent, and to some extent less effective. A third, more severe wave followed, and another supplementary budget as well as a second state of emergency became necessary. Process-oriented shortcomings of policymaking, especially coordination problems and a hesitancy to act decisively reappeared during the third wave.

The procedural crisis-response problems cannot be easily attributed to the state of democratic actors or their organization. The national parliament, the court system, the Board of Audit and the media have basically fulfilled their expected functions during the pandemic. Of course, opposition parties continue to be rather weak, reducing the government's need to account properly for its course of action, which, for better or worse, has been a risk-averse one seeking to balance economic, status and health-related objectives.

## Key Challenges

Compared to many other OECD countries, Japan handled the coronavirus pandemic between early 2020 and early 2021 well. While the third coronavirus wave in the winter of 2020/2021 was more severe than its predecessors, the numbers of infections and COVID-19-related deaths are still much lower than in most other industrialized countries with an aging population. This performance has been due to a number of helpful social factors such as the population's propensity to wear face masks, but also suggests that the government's crisis response was not badly wrong overall. Still, the

government faces challenges in terms of crisis management and in preparing for the recovery phase after the current pandemic.

The government's approach of relying mostly on society's voluntary precautions and compliance, while seeking to have a positive impact on the domestic economy, was subject to renewed criticism as a fourth pandemic wave approached in spring 2021. Additional concerns focused on a "sluggish" vaccine rollout that started only in late February, leaving the country well behind other Asian countries such as South Korea or Singapore, and efforts to keep the planned Summer Olympic Games on track. The late start and slow speed of the vaccination campaign resulted from bureaucratic inertia, a delayed approval process and the emphasis on building up vaccine stockpiles. The main challenge for the summer, however, will be the Olympic Games.

With respect to the health system, it is important to allocate available resources as efficiently as possible. Improving coordination between the various levels of government is essential for this. Once the acute crisis is over, there will be a need to improve preparedness mechanisms and practice relevant cooperation. As for fiscal and monetary support measures, there has been a tendency to focus on short-term relief during crises. To some extent this is reasonable. However, cash handouts and a "shotgun" approach to the provision of subsidies and loans do not meet sustainability criteria, or for that matter, propel desirable transformations. The Japanese government can do better in terms of aligning its crisis-related measures with strategic aims like equitable and resource-saving digitalization, decarbonization of the economy, or contributing to smart globalization.

The fiscal consequences associated with managing the coronavirus pandemic appear dire. Japan already had the highest debt-to-GDP ratio before the crisis. The official goal of achieving a primary budget balance by 2025 now seems unrealistic. The government and the Bank of Japan should identify and communicate more realistic medium to longer-term aims.

In terms of social policy, the crisis threatens to exacerbate inequalities in the distribution of wealth and income, and might hasten the rise of a precariat. This is particularly worrying as public welfare support is rather weak, and those who make use of this system continue to be stigmatized. The government needs to continue searching for more effective policy measures in this area. Government support for traditional small and medium-sized enterprises is understandable for employment-related and other reasons. Nevertheless, the economy has to progress in structural terms. Such change needs to be promoted more actively by the government than has been the case over the past few years.

The Japanese government's response to the coronavirus pandemic has not been as ill-conceived as in some other advanced countries. But it has been hampered by hesitant decision-making, deficiencies in terms of coordination, inconsistent communication and a general lack of leading from the center. The COVID-19 challenge will not go away in the short term. The year 2021, with the summer Olympic Games planned to take place in Japan, will call for especially difficult decisions, and it remains to be seen whether the government is up to the demanding job. It is hard to see how the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) government will convince the public that the games can be held in a safe and healthy environment, and there were already signs of internal dissent inside the LDP on the issue as of the time of writing.

# Resilience of Policies

## I. Economic Preparedness

### Economic Preparedness

Economic Policy  
Preparedness  
Score: 7

Japan is the world's third-largest economy, and has a strong and resilient economic system, which has earned a reputation for weathering severe economic crises remarkably quickly and successfully (Pascha 2010). Economic policy has been implemented in a way that allows its leading enterprises to react flexibly to upcoming challenges. The so-called Abenomics reform program, which has been pursued since 2013, includes a growth strategy that supports reforms for the private sector, with the goal of encouraging productivity growth and active investment. The loose monetary policy and fiscal support programs that were also part of Abenomics have led to a weaker yen, higher stock-market valuations and significant profit growth. The accumulated profits may help firms weather any upcoming severe downturn (Watanabe 2015).

On the negative side, the actual implementation of the recent reforms was considerably less effective than hoped (Komine 2018). Productivity growth is still a major issue. This is particularly true beyond the realm of the successful large and internationalized enterprises of the manufacturing sector. Average small and medium-sized enterprises, the more remote regions of Japan, and the non-manufacturing service sector display severe weaknesses, which government policies have not yet successfully addressed.

In terms of the longer-term sustainability of economic policies, Japan established an ambitious policy program in 2017, dubbed Society 5.0, which is meant to prepare the country for the major economic and social challenges of the coming decades. It entails a coordinated forward-looking strategy, with a vision that goes beyond the government sector to involve both the business sector and the broader society. One important aspect the goal of creating or maintaining technological leadership in future-oriented segments such as

digitalization; however, it also strives to fulfil the evolving needs of a population in an advanced, network-oriented society and economy (Holroyd 2020). The challenge in the years to come will be to operationalize these far-reaching goals in the form of effective policies.

With respect to ecological sustainability, Japan supports the 2015 Paris agreement on climate change, and has adopted a number of relevant measures. However, observers including the OECD (2019) have criticized Japan's climate policy as not sufficiently decisive enough to reach the Paris goals. The new Suga-led government, in office since September 2020, has promised that the economy would reach carbon neutrality by 2050. Still, doubts remain whether economic policy as currently envisioned can achieve this goal. For instance, the government currently expects that 20% to 22% of electricity will come from nuclear energy by 2030, up from the current 6%. Given widespread lack of trust in atomic power within the Japanese citizenry, particularly since the Fukushima Incident, this projection seems quite doubtful (Economist 2020).

Japan entered 2020, the first year of the coronavirus pandemic, during a business cycle downturn. The economy had contracted in the fourth quarter of 2019, for the first time in five quarters, following the controversial increase in the consumption tax from 8% to 10% on 1 October 2019. While the Bank of Japan said in January 2020 that it expected a growth rate of 0.9% for the entire year (Heckel and Waldenberger 2020), the business cycle did not provide much of a tailwind as the country entered the challenges of the burgeoning pandemic.

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Labor Market  
Policy  
Preparedness  
Score: 8

## Labor Market Preparedness

Japan is endowed with a strong and resilient labor market, featuring one of the world's lowest unemployment rates. When the coronavirus pandemic started in March 2020, this rate stood at 2.5% (although this figure would likely be a bit higher if measured in the same manner as in other advanced economies). The low rate is due to structural features of the labor market, especially stable long-term employment in regular jobs combined with the flexibility of non-regular and part-time jobs. In recessionary periods like the difficult 1990s and the 2008/09 global financial crisis, employment reacted procyclically, but much less so than in the United States, for instance (Saito 2020).

As in many other countries, the Japanese labor market has witnessed a significant deterioration in the quality of jobs. Retiring well-paid baby boomers have often been replaced by part-timers, contractors and other lower-wage workers. Non-regular employment has risen substantially to encompass about 40% of all positions. A major concern is that young people have difficulty in finding permanent employment positions, and are not covered by employment insurance. Moreover, because of the non-permanent nature of such jobs, they lack appropriate training to advance to higher-quality jobs. Most economists argue that the conditions for paying and dismissing regular employees have to be liberalized to diminish the gap between the two types of employment.

The Labor Standards Law was changed in 2018. Among its provisions, the allowed quantity of overtime work, a serious problem in Japan, was limited to 100 hours per month. At the same time, work-hour limitations and overtime payments for highly paid professionals have been removed. The law also addresses the wage gap between regular and non-regular work ("equal pay for equal work"). In 2020, the Supreme Court clarified what this effectively means: While contract workers must receive base pay rates equivalent to those of regular staff, there is no need to pay them similar bonuses (Harding 2020).

The government has sought to increase the role played by women in the economy while additionally boosting the national birth rate. These two goals have proven difficult to achieve in parallel.

Unemployment-insurance payments are available only for short periods. In combination with the associated social stigma, this has kept unemployment rates low. Part-timers are also eligible for unemployment insurance, but the contributions are not automatically deducted from the salary by employers; because part-timers thus have to pay the contributions themselves, many are likely without coverage. The Japan Organization for Employment of the



Elderly, Persons with Disabilities and Jobseekers (JEED) offers programs helping unemployed workers acquire practical skills specifically for manufacturing. There is a mandatory minimum-wage regulation in Japan, with rates depending on region and industry. The minimum wage is low enough that it has not seriously affected employment opportunities, although some evidence shows it may be beginning to affect employment rates among low-paid groups such as middle-aged low-skilled female workers.

Japan's investments in active labor-market policies are among the OECD's lowest, measured as a share of GDP (Bird 2020). As unemployment benefits are rather limited and the unemployment rate has been rather low, there has been little need, apart from special cases, to activate the work force through the use of government incentive schemes.

Citation:

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### Fiscal Preparedness

Fiscal Policy  
Preparedness  
Score: 2

Gross public indebtedness in Japan amounted to close to 240% of GDP in 2019, the highest such level among advanced economies, although this percentage has stabilized in recent years. In 2018, the government postponed its goal of achieving a balanced primary budget to 2025, but even then, it was already unclear how this was to be achieved.

Nominal interest rates have remained extremely low, with the Bank of Japan key short-term interest rate at -0.1% and long-term market rates around zero. Rates are so low partly due to the fact that more than 90% of the large public debt is held by Japanese, mainly institutional, investors. Still, the situation is very fragile: Should national savings fall short of domestic needs – a probable future development given the aging Japanese population – government deficits may be difficult to absorb domestically.

As the central bank already holds more than 40% of government debt, it seems that decision-makers have at least implicitly been swinging toward a policy of debt monetization, an uncharted and highly perilous strategy. The fiscal system has for quite some time been unprepared for a major disturbance like a

global recession or indeed an unexpected shock like the coronavirus pandemic (Oshio 2018, Kobayashi 2018).

Japan has a complex system of vertical fiscal transfers between the center and the regions, and the national government actively uses off-budget accounts for some of its policies, more so than in most other countries. Both make the transparent, efficient handling of fiscal policy more difficult.

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## Research and Innovation

Research and  
Innovation Policy  
Preparedness  
Score: 7

Science, technology and innovation receive considerable government attention and funding. Current policies are based on the Fifth Science and Technology Basic Plan (2016–2020). The government has determined to spend 1% of GDP on science and technology. A major focus is on creating a “super-smart” society, also dubbed Society 5.0 (Pascha and Fausten 2019). Concrete measures include a reform of the career system for young researchers, an increase in (international) mobility, support for the development of a cyber society, and – as before – the promotion of critical technologies, including defense-related projects considered indispensable to Japan's security. While the Society 5.0 strategy is strongly focused on “hard-core” technologies like ICT, it is evident from the name alone that it also emphasizes social innovation and the impact of technologies on human livelihood.

A recent high-priority project launched in 2019 (“Moonshot”) is meant to help solve some of the major applied-sciences-related problems such as carbon emissions. A total of JPY 100 billion (about €790 million, based on December 2020 exchange rates) have been earmarked for the initiative (Mallapaty 2019).

The government and outside observers realize that Japan's strong position among the world's top technology nations is declining. Various indicators confirm this. The Nature Index, for example, showed a 5.1% decline in 2019 with regard to high-quality scientific output. Japan ranks 5th in this index, below two countries with smaller economies – Germany at 3rd place, and the United Kingdom at 4th place (Nature 2020). The ratio of high-quality research output to R&D input is particularly weak in Japan.

In terms of developing and implementing the Basic Plan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) plays a major role. However, the scope of the policy program goes well beyond a single ministry, so the Council for Science, Technology and Innovation was founded in 2001 (renamed in 2014) to develop a comprehensive vision, orchestrate policy planning, and coordinate ministries and agencies.

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## II. Welfare State Preparedness

### Education System Preparedness

Education Policy  
Preparedness  
Score: 7

Japan’s education system has long been considered one of the country’s particular strengths. Literacy and basic mathematics skills were one of the foundations of Japan’s modernization. Today, it faces a number of challenges (OECD 2018). One of these is to deliver adequate quality. Under the LDP-led coalition, renewed emphasis has been placed on reaching the top international tier and on improving students’ English-language skills. While the number of students studying abroad has shown recent declines, this trend seems to have halted.

The government is actively promoting reforms. In the context of the Third Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education (2018–2022), which stresses the development of creativity, policymakers announced in May 2019 that the general curriculum taught at schools would be revamped.

The Japanese school system is known to be quite rigid in terms of reacting to new challenges, so its contribution to resilience is limited. However, the government has been making efforts to overcome the persistent shortcomings. The Third Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education (2018-2022) stresses developing creativity through curriculum reform, improved school organization and lifelong learning.

In the most recent Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) round of testing (2018), Japan achieved a respective 5th and 6th place in the areas of mathematics and science, but only 15th place in reading. One task that proved difficult for students was to utilize and evaluate text from the internet (Yajima 2019). A government panel in June 2019 proposed the inclusion of more digital, tech-based elements in the education system.

Another issue is rising income inequality at a time of economic stagnation. Measures providing free early-childhood education and free higher education, as well as additional policies related to the country's expensive private high schools, have yet to be implemented.

In terms of efficiency, the ubiquity of private cram schools indicates that the ordinary education system is failing to deliver the desired results. However, the public's general willingness to spend money for educational purposes reduces the pressure to economize and seek efficiencies.

There is growing concern that reform measures have not achieved their intended goals. Despite major university reforms and the government's well-publicized intention of establishing at least 10 domestic universities among the world's top 100, the rankings accorded to leading Japanese universities have been disappointing in recent years. In the Times Higher Education 2021 World University Rankings, only two public universities in Japan (Tokyo and Kyoto) made it into the global top 200 (THE 2020), down from five universities in 2019. However, the methodology behind the ranking seems to underrate the country's university system.

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### Social Welfare Preparedness

Social Welfare  
Policy  
Preparedness  
Score: 5

Post-war Japan was frequently praised as one of the most egalitarian market economies, with most households feeling comfortably middle-class. However, the country has developed considerable problems with respect to income inequality and poverty over the past two decades. Gender inequality also remains a serious issue. The country now ranks in the bottom half of the OECD with respect to its poverty rate, income distribution measured by the Gini coefficient, and levels of life satisfaction. Moreover, the World Economic

Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2020 ranks Japan at a dismal 121th place out of 153 countries in terms of the social inclusion of women (down from rank 110 in 2018). The scores for political empowerment and for economic participation and opportunity are particularly weak (World Economic Forum 2020).

The LDP-led government has placed a relatively strong focus on social inclusion issues since 2016, addressing wide-ranging target groups such as people with disabilities and the elderly (Cabinet 2016). While 2% of private sector jobs are to be provided to people with disabilities, the actual share sometimes seems to be overreported. The large population of socially withdrawn people (hikikomori), which may exceed one million according to 2019 estimates, constitutes a major problem (N.N. 2019). Many of these individuals are adolescents who are not well integrated in the education and employment systems, but the problem has also spread to middle-aged people.

The state has a social protection mechanism based on the Act of Public Assistance that offers a minimum level of support for the poor, particularly for disabled people, single parents and their children, and elderly citizens. However, the provisions are relatively meager, and making use of public assistance is also stigmatized in Japan. In 2018, UN human rights experts criticized the government for planning to cut the minimum provisions further, arguing that such cuts would lead to social exclusion and “enormous suffering in silence” (UN 2018).

Citation:

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## Healthcare System Preparedness

Health Policy  
Preparedness  
Score: 7

Japan has a well-regarded health system. Life expectancy is among the top three such figures in the world both for women (87 years at birth) and for men (81 years). Japan was ranked fourth in the Bloomberg Healthiest Country Index 2021. Infant-mortality rates are among the world's lowest (2.0 deaths per 1,000 live births). However, the country's public-health system is not without challenges (OECD 2019). A persistent shortage of doctors represents

one serious medical-system bottleneck. The number of doctors per capita is some 40% lower than in Germany or France. While Japan has the highest number of hospital beds per capita among OECD countries – 13 per 1,000 persons compared to the OECD average of 4.7 beds per 1,000 people (in 2019) (OECD 2021) – the number of intensive-care units (ICU) is comparatively low. In spring 2020, Japan had about 5,700 ICU beds, or some five per 100,000 people, while the U.S. had about 35 per 100,000, Germany roughly 30, and Italy and Spain around 12 and 10 respectively. Specialized staff are also scarce, as there were only 1,820 critical-care doctors in Japan as of April 2019. This issue concerns both provincial areas and densely populated ones such as the Kanagawa and Saitama prefectures near Tokyo (Maemura 2020).

Japan thus lacked critical capacities when dealing with the coronavirus pandemic (Park et al. 2020, Shimizu and Negita 2020: 9-10), given its scarcity of doctors and nurses, ICUs, and appropriate protective gear such as masks, and its relatively undeveloped testing infrastructure. Health system capacity limitations played a key role in guiding the country's early-response strategy of cluster tracing.

The OECD assessed Japan's preparedness for public-health emergencies in 2019. While it recognized that Japan had invested significant sums in disaster preparedness in the past, it also noted the presence of problematic issues such as insufficient oversight of the local level, a lack of cooperation between ministries, and a lack of exercises and drills. It recommended that more efforts be made to enable "a more agile response" (OECD 2019: Chapter 4).

The Global Health Security Index attempts a comprehensive assessment of global health security capabilities. Its 2019 index exercise ranked Japan at 21st place among 195 countries surveyed (NTI et al. 2019).

Citation:

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Family Policy  
Preparedness  
Score: 6

## Families

In Japanese society, there is still strong emphasis on a family model in which the husband serves as the main labor-market participant and the wife cares for the children. However, the traditional Japanese extended-household system, in which several generations, including grandparents, live together under one roof, has declined significantly over the past decades. The labor force participation rate among women aged 15 to 64 increased from 63% in 2010 to nearly 73% in 2020 (Statistics Bureau of Japan 2020), a level higher than in the United States. However, the majority of employed women work at part-time, non-regular jobs (Goto 2018). Although several policy measures aimed at addressing these issues have been implemented since the 1990s, many challenges remain.

The LDP-led government has sought to provide support for women in the labor force (so-called womenomics, Matsui 2019). For example, it has made efforts to expand the provision of childcare in order to improve conditions for working mothers. Efforts to abolish kindergarten waiting lists have made some progress, as the day care capacity has expanded from 2.2 million in 2012 to 2.8 million in 2018. The number of children on childcare waiting lists went down to a record low of around 12,500 in April 2020, but the government appeared unlikely to reach its target of zero by the end of the 2020 fiscal year (Jiji 2020). The ratio of fathers taking paternity leave has also increased somewhat, from around 2% in 2012 to 7.5% in fiscal year 2019, but still reflects a male-centered corporate culture. Many fathers take only a few days of leave despite generous legal paid-leave provisions. A revision of the law on parental leave was to be presented by the government to parliament in early 2021. It was expected to enable fathers to take more leave in the first eight weeks after child birth, also making shorter notice to employers possible (Kyodo News 2020).

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### III. Economic Crisis Response

#### Economic Response

Economic  
Recovery  
Package  
Score: 7

The main economic policy responses to the coronavirus pandemic in Japan were of a fiscal and monetary nature (Heckel and Waldenberger 2020, IMF 2021). The first measure, dubbed the Novel Coronavirus Disease Emergency Response Package, was introduced quite early, on 13 February 2020. Several more packages followed by late May. The Diet passed two supplementary budgets, on 30 April and again on 12 June, to finance the relevant measures. A third supplementary budget was adopted on 15 December 2020.

During the course of spring 2020, monetary policy was also eased in several steps, including monthly actions by the Bank of Japan between March and June.

Though they were introduced quite early, the initial measures proved insufficient, and the direction of individual instruments also proved suboptimal. However, the government reacted quite flexibly, adding more and more focused additional measures rather rapidly through the spring of 2020 and later toward the end of the year.

In terms of scope, the first two supplementary budgets reached a nominal magnitude of JPY 234 trillion (about €1.84 trillion at January 2021 exchange rates), or more than 40% of GDP. The third extra budget added another JPY 73.6 trillion (about €80 billion) or 13.1% of 2019 GDP. This amount of support is significantly higher than that provided during the global financial crisis of 2008/09. It is also large compared to the sums provided by most other advanced economies. However, it should be noted that the figures contain some window dressing: Research from Daiichi Life Group indicated that the true additional volume of the first two extra budgets amounted only to JPY 62 trillion or 26% of the announced volume (Heckel and Waldenberger 2020: 166).

Monetary policy created the impression of an all-out effort to fight the impact of the pandemic; for example, the “whatever it takes” terminology, made



famous by the ECB's Mario Draghi during the euro crisis, was adopted in the Bank of Japan's (BOJ) statement on 22 May. Any remaining restrictions on the purchase of Japanese government bonds (JGB) were lifted on 27 April, which is remarkable for a central bank that by that time already held about 50% of JGBs.

The fiscal measures were intended to distinguish between an emergency support phase and a V-shaped recovery phase (Cabinet Office 2020). For instance, the latter includes measures to make the overall economic structure more resilient, seeking to accelerate the digital transformation by supporting remote-working technologies, as one example.

The various schemes were by and large centered on three different aims: supporting the health sector with the goal of containing the effects of COVID-19; supporting enterprises seriously affected by the pandemic and the economic recession; and supporting individual households in order to reduce hardships. The economic measures for the support of firms entailed a large number of specific schemes. In May 2020, an international law firm counted at least 15 different financial-assistance schemes (Usami et al. 2020), which does not give the impression of a high degree of policy accuracy.

The government concluded that more emphasis should be put on targeting specific groups such as small and medium-sized enterprises. Incidentally, there was considerable criticism that the programs did not focus enough on the vulnerable (Saaler 2020). In mid-2020, a survey conducted in six advanced countries found that the Japanese population was the least satisfied with its country's aid to firms (Jiji 2020). At the same time, it should be noted that the number of bankruptcies was extremely low. The government thus had to strike a difficult balance between helping the needy and avoiding support for ossified structures. In terms of monetary policy, the BOJ estimated in June 2020 that some JPY 110 trillion "plus alpha" (about €80 billion) of its activities were directed at supporting corporate financing, while (only) JPY 40 trillion (about €10 billion) were used to provide yen and foreign currency funds to stabilize financial markets, along with JPY 12 trillion (about €3 billion) for the purchase of exchange-traded instruments (BOJ 2020).

Some measures were particularly controversial. The government offered a cash handout of JPY 100,000 (about €800) to every citizen, including children, which was taken by almost 99% of the population. As there were no restrictions on how this could be used, saving the amount being one option, its effectiveness in stimulating consumption was questionable, although for social policy reasons it may have offered relief to some people. A second handout was later considered but rejected.

A second, very controversial measure was the “Go To” travel campaign, a program subsidizing domestic travel. While the idea was to support suffering regional economies, this created the risk of spreading the coronavirus even further. Any ability to achieve the program’s economic objectives was compromised through the inclusion of trips to Tokyo in the scheme. After hesitating for quite some time, new Prime Minister Suga eventually decided in mid-December to suspend the program from 28 December 2020 to 11 January 2021 (Takahashi 2020).

Citation:

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### Sustainability of Economic Response

Recovery  
Package  
Sustainability  
Score: 5

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, the government led by Prime Minister Suga announced in October 2020 that Japan was committed to realizing a carbon-free economy by the year 2050. This goal was criticized as being both too ambitious and too vague. Suga responded by declaring in December that the government would review progress toward achievement of the country’s 2030 emissions-reduction targets in order to pave the way for the ambitious 2050 goal. Moreover, he announced that about \$11.8 billion would that year be dedicated to global decarbonization, though not all of this would come from public sources. Moreover, the country would make a \$3 billion contribution to the Green Climate Fund (Kyodo 2020).

Most of the government’s emergency measures lacked a sustainability component. However, in the third supplementary budget, passed in December 2020, there was a chapter on “Promoting structural change and positive

economic cycles for the post-coronavirus era.” Under the rubric of “Realizing digitalization and the green society,” JPY 2 trillion (about €10.5 billion) of this JPY 2.8 trillion spending item were earmarked for “Establishment of a fund to support innovative technology developments toward carbon neutrality” (Ministry of Finance 2020). While this action is noteworthy, it covers only a rather small portion of overall economic measures.

Citation:

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### Labor Market Response

Labor Market  
Policy Response  
Score: 8

Labor-market adjustment can rely on the in-built flexibility of the Japanese employment system. Accordingly, firms have reduced working hours, postponed new hiring, put workers on leave and reduced the number of non-regular employees during the COVID-19-related recession.

The government has also reacted: The conditions for the Employment Adjustment Subsidy, which supports firms with workers on leave and on training, have been relaxed, and subsidies have extended under the emergency measures passed in June 2020. Moreover, firms can receive support through an easing of loan conditions based on government and Bank of Japan emergency measures (Saito 2020). Other measures include subsidies for telework; income support for sick workers and their families, including in cases of quarantine; income support for people who have lost their jobs and for self-employed workers; as well as some support for economically insecure workers (OECD 2020).

At least partially due to these mechanisms and measures, the unemployment rate stayed low. In October 2020, it was 3.1%, only 0.7 percentage points up from the preceding year. At the same time, measures like reductions in the use of part-timers and contract workers hurts the weaker and more precarious members of society in particular, including foreign workers (Jiji 2020).

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Fiscal Policy  
Response  
Score: 5

## Fiscal Response

The government made a very significant fiscal effort to counter a looming coronavirus-driven recession. Two supplementary budgets were respectively authorized in April and May 2020, worth a total of JPY 234.2 trillion (about €1.85 trillion at January 2021 exchange rates) and amounting to approximately 40% of GDP (Saito 2020). This makes Japan's fiscal response the largest among advanced economies. It has been argued, however, that the amount of truly "fresh" funds contained in the supplementary budgets was considerably smaller (Heckel and Waldenberger 2020: 166). Still, given Japan's world-leading national debt of close to 240% of GDP, it is disconcerting that it is also leading the world in terms of increasing public debt further. On 15 December 2020, a third supplementary budget was passed with a price tag of JPY 73.6 trillion (about €80 billion), or 13.1% of 2019 GDP.

A main buyer of the additional government bonds will be the BOJ, which by June 2020 already held about half of the country's total public debt. In addition, the BOJ announced additional special measures in March and April, for instance giving loans to financial institutions to facilitate the provision of financing to firms, including a new measure designed to support mainly small and medium-sized enterprises. The BOJ also abandoned its upper limits for Japanese government bond purchases. In June, the Diet approved a relaxation of application conditions for regional banks affected by the crisis (IMF 2020).

The government did consider the implications for fiscal sustainability in its regular yearly update to its Basic Policy on Economic and Fiscal Management and Reform, and in the Economic and Fiscal Projections for Medium to Long Term Analysis, released in July 2020, which were compiled to prepare for the fiscal year 2021 budget process. It is "suspicious" though, as Tokyo University professor Iwamoto Yasushi puts it, "that the Basic Policy has lost all references to the targets of fiscal consolidation" (Iwamoto 2020). In all fairness, it is extremely difficult to foresee how the pandemic and its effects on the economy will play out further, including the question of whether the postponed Olympic Games can really be held in 2021. This will have notable fiscal consequences, whatever the outcome.

In November 2020, Finance Minister Aso reiterated the government's intention of balancing the budget by 2025 (Burland 2020). Achievement of this goal already appeared quite unlikely even before the COVID-19-induced recession and the extensive deficit financing of emergency fiscal programs. It is thus difficult to understand why the government would continue to perpetuate any expectation of reaching a balanced budget by 2025.

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## Research and Innovation Response

Research and  
Innovation Policy  
Response  
Score: 9

Japan has made significant efforts to use its financial, material and human resources to fight the coronavirus pandemic through expenditure in the field of research and development. R&D targeted at the development of therapeutic medicines and vaccines was included in the emergency measures of spring 2020, financed by the supplementary fiscal packages. Riken, for instance, the country's largest comprehensive research institution, has initiated substantial efforts in fields including the development of diagnostic methods, the development of therapies and other programs intended to help people. The institution uses its new Fukage supercomputer in Kobe to provide data and support research in these areas (Riken 2020). In the first supplementary budget of April 2020, Japan earmarked about JPY 50 billion (close to €400 million at February 2021 exchange rates) for research and development into medicines, the development of vaccines in Japan, and research and development into vaccines internationally. The second supplementary budget added four times that amount, JPY 205.5 billion, for the development of medicines and vaccines. It has been argued that Japan's pharma-related businesses and research units have limited ability to research, develop and produce vaccines in a timely manner (Suzuki 2021). However, important research questions extend beyond the narrow field of vaccine production, and it is thus difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the public support provided for coronavirus-related R&D efforts at this early stage.

## Citation:

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## IV. Welfare State Response

### Education System Response

Education  
Response  
Score: 8

On 28 February 2020, then-Prime Minister Abe and Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) asked schools to close down beginning on March 2, leaving the final decisions to local governments and other school operators. On March 24, MEXT published a new set of guidelines for the reopening of schools at the beginning of the new school year, after the spring break. The new guidelines were revised on April 1 to spell out the conditions for reopening and closing more clearly. Most of the schools that had closed temporarily reopened as of June, after the national state of emergency had been lifted (MEXT 2020a).

Statistical analyses were unable to confirm that the school closure was effective in mitigating infections (Iwata et al. 2020). Summer vacations were shortened to make up for missed classes. Additional measures intended to help schools cope with the situation included staggered attendance schedules, a redesign of timetables and the provision of supplementary instruction to students having academic problems (MEXT 2020b). Such measures were particularly important in view of the critical high school and university entrance exams scheduled to take place between January and March 2021. Additional funding; material support such as appropriate equipment, cellphones, and ICT equipment; and extra personnel such as support staff, social workers and counselors were also provided in order to ease the adjustment. In this context, qualification requirements for instructors were also eased. With respect to the universities, MEXT allocated funds to help improve the ICT environment, and changed rules regarding the acceptance of online courses.

The government has additionally provided emergency financial support for students facing economic difficulties due to heavy reductions in household incomes. This includes cash handouts, for which MEXT estimated that some 430,000 students would be eligible. There are also interest-free scholarships, and MEXT has requested universities to handle tuition payments flexibly, even postponing them if needed. In some cases, the ministry has provided financial support to public and private universities for tuition exemptions.

A total of JPY 276.3 billion (about €2.2 billion at December 2020 exchange rates) from the first supplementary budget, along with another JPY 161.7

billion (ca. €1.3 billion) from the second, were earmarked for education-related measures. Among these, JPY 700 million (ca. €5.5 million) from the first budget was dedicated to students whose household income had dramatically decreased, along with JPY 15.3 billion (ca. €120 million) from the second budget for financially distressed students (METI 2020b). The third supplementary budget of December 2020 included a JPY 500 billion university fund (Ministry of Finance 2020).

Despite the emergence of a strong third wave of COVID-19 infections beginning in late autumn 2020, the government did not want to close the schools again (Kyodo 2020). When the government declared another state of emergency for Tokyo and three neighboring prefectures on 7 January 2021 (later extended to a few more prefectures), schools were indeed exempted.

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## Social Welfare Response

Social Welfare  
Policy Response  
Score: 7

The government took various measures through its first and second supplementary budgets, both passed in spring 2020, to provide low-income households with extra support (Cabinet Office 2020).

With respect to direct support to households, a tax-exempt cash payment to all residents, including foreign residents, of JPY 100,000 (about €790 at December 2020 exchange rates) was put in place. Other measures include an additional child allowance of JPY 10,000 per child and month (about €79) and an emergency microcredit scheme for troubled households (maximum JPY 200,000, or about €1,580), enhanced rent support for low-income households, a reduction of or exemption from social security contributions, and a deferment of utility charges upon request.

Additional indirect support has been provided in the form of measures for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), including microenterprises, whose employees and even proprietors often belong to the group of low-

income households. A cash payment was offered to SMEs and sole proprietors whose revenue fell by more than 50% in any month of 2020 from the previous year. For instance, sole proprietors were eligible for payments of JPY 1 million (€7,900). Other measures include a deferment on interest payments for collateral loans, a deferment of taxes and social security contributions for businesses whose revenue had fallen by more than 20%, and an increase in the scope of the parental leave subsidy, which now also includes non-regular workers with less than 20 hours per week.

The government has made a valiant effort to target specific issues and households, though in some cases this support may not have been well targeted or may have been insufficient in size. For instance, at least by June, the economic effect of the cash payout was still small (Saito 2020); moreover, it had been complicated by the fact that for asserted reasons of efficiency, the government had tried to link the payout to use of the controversial “My Number” personal identification, to which many citizens are opposed (Kyodo 2020).

Support for single-parent households was rather minimal, amounting to JPY 50,000 (about €400) to every single-parent household, and JPY 30,000 (€240) for every additional child. By December 2020, the government was considering expanding this program (Jiji 2020).

Citation:

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## Healthcare System Response

During the coronavirus crisis, the Japanese government undertook a significant effort to address health system bottlenecks (Asia Pacific Observatory 2021). Testing capacity was increased from 10,600 samples per week in mid-March 2020 to more than 58,300 samples per week by mid-April, for instance by including private laboratories, universities and medical facilities (ibid.: 8). Public health centers, of which Japan has close to 500, were used to help fight

Health Policy  
Response  
Score: 7



the pandemic, and their staffing was expanded by a factor of 3.8 through measures such as asking retired health officers to help out (ibid.: 9-10). This proved a key success factor in implementing the cluster tracing strategy.

The OECD estimated that Japan's budget commitments to health system responses to the coronavirus pandemic had amounted to nearly 0.9% of GDP by late 2020 (Tsukimori 2020). Health-system-related measures included in the first and second supplementary budgets were aimed at expanding polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing capacity; maintaining hospital bed capacity; installing medical devices; providing human resource support and extra pay for health professionals; preventing nosocomial infection; procuring medical infrastructure; distributing masks, face shields and other personal protective equipment; producing ventilators; and supporting research and development for new drugs and vaccines (Asia Pacific Observatory 2021: 12).

The third supplementary budget of December 2020 contained additional health-related measures of some JPY 4.36 trillion (about €34.3 billion at January 2021 exchange rates) under the general heading of "containment measures." This included funds for securing the medical treatment system, supporting medical institutions, enhancing the testing system, developing the vaccine distribution system, implementing containment measures based on data and technology, and engaging in international cooperation (Ministry of Finance 2020).

For some problems, short-term solutions could not be easily provided. For instance, by December 2020, due to the lack of regular health system staff, the government was preparing to send military nurses to areas that had been hit particularly hard (Reuters 2020). The third wave of the pandemic in Japan, starting in November 2020, reached levels of infection for which the earlier capacity-boosting and management measures were clearly insufficient. For instance, in January 2021, when 40,000 new cases of COVID-19 infection were registered in Tokyo alone, 15,000 patients were reportedly turned away from hospitals or had to postpone planned stays (Kyodo 2021; Kölling 2021; Tsukimori 2021).

Japan was also slow in rolling out mass vaccination; it was the last among the major industrialized nations to begin, with its first injections planned to take place in late February 2021. Vaccine approvals took longer than in other major developed countries, also expected to occur in mid-February 2021. Logistical hurdles and interministerial coordination problems were blamed for the slow start to the vaccination drive (Kelly and Swift 2021; Kölling 2021)

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## Family Policy Response

Family Support  
Policies  
Score: 4

Like elsewhere, the coronavirus outbreak Japan has caused considerable psychological stress for all concerned, particularly for those working directly with patients, irrespective of gender (Tanoue 2020). However, one piece of research indicated that the suicide rate increased for women in Japan in the summer of 2020, but not for men (Nomura et al. 2021).

The government has made various efforts in its anti-coronavirus programs to alleviate the stress for families. Some of these have included income-related measures, as mentioned above (see P15). One peculiar income measure was the payment of JPL 100,000 to every registered resident in May 2020, which helps families in particular. This money could be used for any purpose, without restriction.

The government has sought to encourage telework by subsidizing telecommunications investments, including organizational transformation costs like workers retraining, at rates of up to 50% (and up to one million yen). It also introduced help for dealing with unforeseen care needs. For example, an employer subsidy was initially given to firms that allowed their workers to take paid leave due to the closure of schools or childcare facilities, and expanded further in May 2020. Self-employed workers have also been eligible for some support (OECD 2020).

With respect to the success of such policies, the government has found it challenging to keep up the momentum that followed the first wave of the

coronavirus pandemic and the first round of reactive measures in spring 2020. One issue has been the pervasive gender-based distribution labor within Japanese families (Rich 2020). While there has been some evidence that some husbands have been willing to share more of the household and childcare burdens during the pandemic, no major shift in this regard is visible. For instance, a survey by Meiji Yasuda Life Insurance conducted during 2020 showed that just 26% of men took more than one day of parental leave during 2020. This is a rise of only about 10% compared to the year before (Eda 2020).

As for the move toward telework, an initial enthusiasm in spring 2020 was followed by the concern that many firms' conservative attitudes would render any changes unsustainable. In a Sankei Shimbun poll (Busetto 2020), only 24% of companies surveyed had introduced some form of telework by March 2020; however, this figure jumped to 62% in April. Larger companies had more often been using some form of telework already (45% in March), and this group moved to even higher levels of adoption (79% in April), implying that workers in smaller companies profited less from the changes. An Asahi Shimbun survey of 100 major companies in November 2020 indicated that 62% wanted to maintain the extended telework pattern initiated in spring 2020. However, only six had extended it further after spring, and 21 companies actually wanted to reduce it again (Yamashita and Yamamoto 2020).

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## International Solidarity

International  
Cooperation  
Score: 7

Japan has contributed actively to international efforts to overcome the pandemic and its negative effects. In September 2020, new Prime Minister

Suga stressed in a speech before the UN General Assembly that his country was committed to playing a leading role in such international efforts (Suga 2020). However, as with other nations, the country's efforts to vaccinate its own population have taken precedence over solidarity with other nations. Japan has been one of the bigger national financial contributors to the COVAX Facility, the COVID-19 vaccination initiative for low-income countries. But even there, the JPL 17.2 billion (0 million) committed in September 2020 for vaccination pre-payments pales in comparison with national financial outlays on fighting the coronavirus.

Of course, COVAX is not the only measure in this category. By September 2020, Japan had contributed USD 1.5 billion in foreign aid to medical and health centers in the Global South (Suga 2020). An important actor in this context is the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA 2020). Japan has also earmarked for itself a Crisis Response Emergency Support Loan of up to JPY 400 billion (about €3.2 billion at December 2020 exchange rates), and wants to contribute actively to the reform of multilateral organizations including the World Health Organization (WHO). Through research facilities such as Riken, the country also contributes actively to research and development efforts relating to the fight against COVID-19, and also to threats posed by other infectious diseases (Riken 2020).

The third supplementary budget of December 2020 earmarked about JPY 144.4 billion (€1.14 billion at January 2021 exchange rates) for international cooperation measures, with about half of this sum channeled through international organizations active in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania (Ministry of Finance 2020).

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# Resilience of Democracy

## Media Freedom

Media Freedom  
Score: 6

Japanese media are largely free to report the news without significant official interference. While the courts have ruled on a few cases dealing with perceived censorship, there is no formal government mechanism that infringes on the independence of the media. The NHK, the primary public broadcasting service, has long enjoyed substantial freedom. However, the Abe-led government pursued a more heavy-handed approach in the post-2013 period, highlighted by a number of controversial appointments of conservatives to senior management and supervisory positions.

In practice, many media actors are hesitant to take a strong stance against the government or to expose political scandals. Membership in government associated journalist clubs has long offered exclusive contacts. Fearful of losing this advantage, representatives of the established media have frequently avoided taking an adversarial position (see Busetto 2019).

Generally speaking, the small group of media conglomerates and major organizations dominating the media does not adequately reflect the pluralism of opinions in Japan. Regional newspapers and TV stations are not serious competitors. However, competition has emerged from international media and interactive digital-media sources such as blogs, bulletin boards, e-magazines and social networks (Reuters 2020). A loss of public trust in the government and in major media organizations, particularly after the mishandling of communication around the Fukushima nuclear incident of 2011, may have intensified the move toward greater use of independent media channels, while also opening some new potential for independent investigative journalism. However, such channels tend to cater to their specific audiences. So while there is more pluralism, there is also the danger that events will be interpreted in a one-sided manner.

The substantial interest in the coronavirus pandemic by national and international media as well as social networks has ensured that reporting on

infection rates, problems and possible mistakes has been quite transparent. A first major incident occurred in early February 2020, with the controversial handling of the “Diamond Princess” cruise ship quarantined in Yokohama. The mishandling of the case was exposed by a video posted by a Kobe University infection control specialist (Normille 2020).

Another incident occurred when then-Prime Minister Abe announced in mid-April 2020 that the government would distribute two cloth face masks to each Japanese household. This move was strongly criticized and even ridiculed (“Abenomask”), while receiving broad media coverage (Mark 2020). Whether such criticism was fair or not, it is evidence that the media system had had the general ability and willingness during the epidemic to freely articulate views that may be embarrassing for the government.

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### Civil Rights and Political Liberties

Civil Rights and  
Political Liberties  
Score: 7

Civil and human rights are guaranteed under the Japanese constitution. However, courts are often considered overly solicitous toward the government.

During the coronavirus pandemic, the government has been rather restrained in curtailing civil liberties. Its move to close schools in late February was only a recommendation, rather than being legally binding, with final decisions ultimately left to local authorities and school operators. Prime Minister Abe was rather late to declare a state of emergency, making this effective beginning on 7 April 2020 for major prefectures, and only later for the whole country. And even then, the state of emergency only made “requests” or “demands” that were to be administered through regional authorities. Japan did not implement a hard lockdown in 2020. The state of emergency was lifted at the end of May, after infection rates had come significantly down. Although the infection numbers reached much higher levels in autumn 2020, the newly installed cabinet under Prime Minister Suga hesitated for quite a long time before declaring another state of emergency for Tokyo and three surrounding prefectures on 7 January 2021 (Rich and Inoue 2021).

To understand the government's relatively restrained approach, three aspects have to be considered. First, the Japanese population is much more willing to carry out legally nonbinding government "requests," than are populations in many other countries. In addition, it is quite common to wear masks particularly during the cold season, so the recommendation that citizens wear face masks was not considered an infringement on civil rights, as it was by certain parts of populations in many other countries (Economist 2020). However, while such social factors can to some extent explain the comparatively milder initial onset of the pandemic, there is no convincing evidence that this was a decisive reason for Japanese policymakers to pursue a restrained regulatory approach.

Rather, a second factor to be considered concerns the constitutional and legal options available to the government (Feldman 2020). There were some doubts in early spring as to whether compulsory orders issued under a state of emergency would in fact be constitutional (Repeta 2020). Yet while existing laws indeed did not allow for such binding rules, it is doubtful that the constitution would have disallowed tougher new legislation. Indeed, such powers had been used following the Fukushima nuclear incident.

The legal basis for dealing with epidemics (Kurishima 2020, Gillam 2020) is the 1998 Infectious Disease Control Law, in combination with the 2012 Act on Special Measures for Pandemic Influenza and New Infectious Diseases Preparedness and Response (API), as well as a 2020 revision of the 1951 Quarantine Act, which was introduced following the Diamond Princess incident. The central government's ability to declare an emergency under the API only gives it the power to establish nonmandatory rules; moreover, the actual implementation of the measures is by statute left to regional authorities. Regional authorities have no legal basis to declare their own states of emergency, although this happened in practice several times during 2020 without being challenged by the national government.

The Suga-led cabinet revised the 2020 coronavirus-related legislation by including the prospect of fines and even jail terms in cases of noncompliance (the latter of which were in the end dropped to obtain cross-party support, Kyodo 2021a). Given the seriousness of the third wave of the pandemic, reliance on voluntary compliance reached its limits in some respects, for instance with respect to businesses in hard-hit areas that refused to close temporarily or reduce operating hours. Parliament passed the revisions to the infectious-disease law and the coronavirus special measures law in early February 2021 (Kyodo 2021b).

Thirdly, political calculations made by the ruling LDP probably also help why the government did not embark on a tougher course of action. One of the Abe-led government's long-term goals was constitutional revision. One proposal in this regard was to add an article that would provide the government with strong emergency powers. Any such option was certain to be quite controversial, however. The Japanese population shows rather low levels of trust in the government; and indeed, a comparative survey carried out during the pandemic found that Japan's citizens are among those most strongly concerned about sacrificing individual rights and relaxing privacy protections (Alsan et al. 2020). Trying to force through tough emergency rules during the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic might have attracted considerable opposition, and could have undermined the LDP's aims to change the constitution in the desired direction.

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## Judicial Review

Judicial Review  
Score: 7

Courts are formally independent of governmental and administrative interference in their day-to-day business. However, courts have an incentive to avoid conflicts with the government, as these might endanger its independence in the long term. This implies that they tend to lean somewhat toward government positions so as to avoid unwanted political attention. Perhaps supporting this reasoning, the Supreme Court engages in judicial review only of specific cases, and does not perform a general review of laws or regulations.



With respect to the coronavirus pandemic, government measures seeking to halt the spread of the virus are issued on a nonmandatory basis, and do not rely on penalties or on the use of coercive power. Therefore, there was little reason to question the legislation and public action in courts. This was the case even during the first period of emergency rule in April/May 2020. The government respected the limits imposed by the constitution, and did not try to test those limits; moreover, its cautious attitude also followed from political considerations.

The court system did have to cope with the practical question of how to hold court proceedings under pandemic conditions (Osumi 2020, Chief Justice 2020). Unrelated to the coronavirus crisis, web-based meetings were approved as of February 2020 for the purpose of preparing for civil lawsuits. Courts struggled with the problem of ensuring safe conditions for court proceedings. However, the legal system did not come altogether to a halt; indeed, it was able to deliver important rulings on labor issues and the reapproval of nuclear power plants, among other issues.

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### Informal Democratic Rules

Informal  
Democratic Rules  
Score: 9

Given the demise of the Japan Socialist Party in the 1990s and the continued marginal parliamentary presence of the Japanese Communist Party, party polarization and anti-establishment populism have not been important issues in Japan for many years (Solis 2019). Both the center-right Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its more recent rivals, the Democratic Party of Japan and the Constitutional Democratic Party, have been “big-tent” parties,” with personal allegiances to individual leaders and intra-party factions playing a bigger role than policy-related differences in terms of structuring intra-party competition.

While the LDP has moved toward the right in recent years (as reflected in the composition of its leadership and the views held by its parliamentarians), the main parties still show substantial agreement on many policy issues. Apart from the highly controversial issue of constitutional revision, party polarization is generally not a major obstacle to policymaking in today's Japan.

With respect to the coronavirus crisis, the population has been primarily interested in pragmatic solutions to the imminent challenges of the pandemic. Such an attitude does not reward polarizing positions. Uncooperative views, for example, portraying face-mask recommendations as an obstruction of personal liberties, have not played a role in the public debate. This may be due to the fact that the maintenance of high hygienic standards to contain infections is considered to be common sense. Moreover, the government's COVID-19-related rules have largely been formulated as requests, which may have eased their acceptance by people opposed to them. (Penalties for noncompliance were introduced only in early 2020, during the second state of emergency. Tellingly, the government was willing to reduce planned penalties in order to gain broader partisan support for the revised legislation.)

Japan does have some anti-mask protesters, but their impact has been minimal. For instance, an anti-mask candidate in the July 2020 gubernational election in Tokyo received less than 1% of the vote. An August 2020 demonstration he organized in central Tokyo attracted only 100 participants (Ryall 2020).

Citation:

Mireya Solis, Japan's consolidated democracy in an era of populist turbulence, Policy Brief, Brookings Institution, 2019, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/FP\\_20190227\\_japan\\_democracy\\_solis.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/FP_20190227_japan_democracy_solis.pdf) (accessed in December 2020)

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# Resilience of Governance

## I. Executive Preparedness

### Crisis Management System

Crisis  
Management  
System  
Score: 7

Japan is traditionally prone to natural disasters. Particularly after the 1995 Hanshin earthquake in the Kobe area, and after the 2011 triple disaster in the northeastern Tohoku region, additional emphasis was put on disaster preparedness and relevant management mechanisms. The country has a Basic Disaster Management Plan at the national level, as well as local versions, and an operation plan for disasters (Director General for Disaster Management 2020). However, the focus is on natural calamities such as earthquakes, tsunamis or volcano eruptions, not on pandemics. The 1998 Law Concerning the Prevention of Infections and Medical Care for Patients of Infections does not contain any provisions for specialized plans, decision-making bodies or an (independent) advisory organ tasked with managing pandemics. Under the terms of the 2012 Special Measures Act on New Influenza, if an outbreak occurs, the prime minister (with approval from the cabinet) is to establish a Countermeasures Headquarters, which in turn is to set up an Expert Advisory Committee. However, there is no standing or independent organ for preparing and monitoring emerging developments in place (Library of Congress 2020).

As for the material preparedness, while the absolute number of hospital beds at the beginning of the pandemic was the G-7's highest, for example, the number of intensive-care units ranked below Italy and Spain (Maemura 2020). According to the WHO, Japan has one of the best healthcare systems in the world, but understaffing is an issue that has proven to be problematic during the current crisis. In addition, available testing capacity was very low compared with that in other major advanced industrialized nations. This led to

use of the so-called cluster approach to testing, which was successful during the first wave of the pandemic in spring 2020, when the number of cases was still low. As of the time of writing, however, there were doubts as to whether the cluster method would be as helpful during the third wave, when the number of cases was increasing more rapidly.

Japan has a minister of state for disaster management and a directorate general for disaster management in the Cabinet Office (Director General 2015). However, due to the different focus of disaster-related efforts mentioned above, these positions were of little help in the current pandemic. In March 2020, the economic revitalization minister was appointed as minister in charge of handling the coronavirus crisis, and in January 2021, the minister for administrative reform was additionally appointed minister for the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines (Sugiyama and Tsukimori 2021).

Coordination between the central government and the regional authorities has been criticized as being suboptimal; moreover, there has been a lack of consistent and transparent safety protocols for handling issues like travel (Murakami 2020).

The number of epidemic-related deaths in Japan remained low throughout 2020 by international standards. In terms of “output efficiency,” the country has therefore been regarded as a positive case (at least until the third infection wave hit Japan in the winter of 2020/21). However, the above-mentioned deficiencies explain why several comparative surveys revealed considerable dissatisfaction within the Japanese population with the Abe-led government’s handling of the crisis (e.g., Shim 2020). Abe’s successor, Prime Minister Suga, did not fare much better, as Japan appeared to be insufficiently prepared for the third, more serious, infection wave.

On the positive side, thanks to recent experiences with other pandemics in the East Asian region (SARS, MERS), the level of awareness of critical issues was high, and experts had considerable experience with similar incidents. Moreover, the established infectious-disease surveillance system proved useful in systematically obtaining and processing vital information. However, authorities still frequently rely on somewhat outdated information channels such as the telephone and telefax, and Japan’s coronavirus warning app, COCOA, has proven rather underwhelming.

Citation:

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## II. Executive Response

### Effective Policy Formulation

Effective Policy  
Formulation  
Score: 6

The Japanese government sought expert advice early in the course of the pandemic, establishing a so-called New Type Coronavirus Expert Meeting in mid-February 2020, led by the Director of the National Institute of Infectious Diseases and composed of medical experts and a legal specialist. The group numbered 10 members aside from the chairperson, and could ask other experts for assistance if necessary. One of the members, H. Oshitani of Tohoku University, was one of the figures who early identified the danger of aerosols and ill-ventilated rooms, leading to Japan's 3Cs strategy (the recommendation to avoid closed spaces, crowded places and close-contact settings) (Du 2020). The cluster approach was also associated with the committee. However, there has been some criticism that the committee "lacked representatives from essential disciplines such as economics, behavioral science and communication" (Shimizu et al. 2020).

The government strategy itself was quite strongly criticized for being too timid, inconsistent and poorly explained (Shimizu et al. 2020; Yoshikawa 2020). For instance, many people felt the emergency declaration in April 2020 came inappropriately late, and the cabinet's position was regarded as insufficiently clear. Different approaches by the national government and several more outspoken and activist prefectures, for instance Tokyo and Osaka, also contributed to an overall incoherence and the apparent lack of strong central leadership and communication. Prime Minister Abe seemed not to be fully in charge. Critics also pointed to a lack of leadership with respect to the design of economic emergency measures. Finally, government measures to boost the economy in the second half of 2020, such as the promotion of domestic travel and restaurant dining, were at odds with health-related policy

aims, and might well have contributed to the spread of the virus and the third wave of infections (Denyer 2021). Trying to strike a balance between different needs and demands might be a good (or at least possible) approach to politics in normal times, but clearly had its limits when fighting a pandemic.

The expert group itself was also subject to some criticism, with observers charging that it was too subservient to the government in some cases. For example, it was criticized for leaving out a reference to asymptomatic transmission of the virus in one of its reports, because the government was afraid of a panic among the public. In July, the original committee was unexpectedly dissolved (Swift and Sieg 2020). A new group was installed by the government, involving a broader range of experts including specialists on risk management, arguably to create more trust. Nevertheless, outside experts felt that the surprise move, which did not suggest a very orderly process, may actually have undermined trust in the mechanism further.

Finally, the government appeared insufficiently prepared for the third wave of infections that hit Japan in November 2020. Infectious-disease specialists criticized the government for not having done enough to prepare (in terms of infrastructure and more) for a renewed, not altogether unexpected wave, and also argued that implementing only a “lockdown light” in autumn 2020 had been a wasted opportunity to stamp out the virus (Denyer 2021).

Citation:

Lisa Du, This virus expert saved Japan from the worst of COVID-19. But has the magic worn off?, *The Japan Times*, 20 November 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/11/20/national/hitoshi-oshitani-japan-coronavirus/> (accessed in December 2020)

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## Policy Feedback and Adaptation

The government continually reviews its crisis-response approaches and adjusts its measures accordingly. For instance, the passage of supplementary budgets is a common mechanism for reacting to unexpected developments during the course of a regular budget year. During the fiscal year running from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021, the government introduced two supplementary

budgets in spring, and a third in December 2020. In comparison to the initial budget of about JPY 103 trillion (about €10 billion at December 2020 exchange rates), total spending for fiscal 2020 was thus boosted to JPY 175 trillion (close to €1.4 trillion). The additional measures contained in the December supplementary budget included a prolongation of earlier temporary activities, a readjustment of their size and new measures such as preparation for a vaccination program (Kyodo 2020). The response thus shows a considerable degree of flexibility.

At the same time, the government has frequently been quite slow to make adjustments, usually reacting to pressure from elsewhere. For example, then-Prime Minister Abe was late to introduce a state of emergency in spring 2020, and his successor, Suga, was equally hesitant to reinstate this status during the third wave of the infection despite alarmingly high infection rates and warnings from medical experts (Reuters, Kyodo and Jiji 2020). Eventually, the government declared a state of emergency for Tokyo and other prefectures effective as of 8 January 2021.

Japanese policymakers were also very hesitant in March 2020 to postpone the Olympic Games planned for July. They did so only after several key countries had voiced their concerns and the Canadian team had withdrawn entirely (Rich et al. 2020).

Citation:

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## Public Consultation

Public  
Consultation  
Score: 5

Policymakers in Japan are in contact with social actors, but some actors have better access than others. For example, there have traditionally been strong links between business representatives and the LDP, and on the other hand between unions and some other parties. This has also been called “patterned pluralism.” However, there is no evidence of any strong consultation mechanism having a powerful impact on the policymaking process during the coronavirus pandemic. While the chairman of Keidanren, Japan’s major business federation, was initially “at the heart of Japan’s response to COVID-19” (Harding and Lewis 2020), he later became quite critical of the

government approach to the pandemic, arguably with rather little impact on policymaking. He complained that former Prime Minister Abe did not pursue a strategic approach to dealing with the pandemic (Narumi 2020).

In examining the LDP-led government's handling of the pandemic, it appears that it was inside and outside pressure, not consultation, that shaped important aspects of relevant policies. For instance, the controversial cash handout to the population in spring was due to the pressure of the Komeito party, the junior coalition partner, while the postponement of the Olympic Games came about through pressure from abroad. Moreover, the government's focus on supporting the business sector in times of crisis matched the electoral interests of the LDP to a considerable degree (Takeda 2020).

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### Crisis Communication

Crisis  
Communication  
Score: 5

The government uses multiple channels to communicate with the public. Media use of the public is extensive, so there is no issue of a lack of access to important information in Japan. Detailed data on the spread of the virus and recommendations for behavior can be accessed from the website of the National Institute for Infectious Diseases. Detailed information on government policies related to the pandemic, as well as on support programs for the population, are easily accessible on the website of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. Detailed information on the spread of the virus and on recommendations for individual protective measures is also available in other languages than Japanese on the websites of prefectural governments, for instance in Tokyo. However, there is some question as to whether these communication channels are effective in reaching younger Japanese citizens (Takezawa and Katanuma 2021).

In the past, the central government's risk- and crisis-related communications have frequently been found to be deficient, for instance with respect to the lack of reliable information about radiation levels and the actual state of damage during the 2011 Fukushima nuclear reactor incident. While crisis communication during the coronavirus pandemic did not go as disastrously



badly as in 2011, a number of problems have occurred, with some examples given below.

During the first phase of the pandemic in Japan, when the infected Diamond Princess cruise ship docked in Yokohama, the government failed to provide reliable and reassuring messaging to those onboard and to the onshore population (Snow 2020).

After the government's mid-February establishment of a COVID-19 expert group to help with the crisis, both the expert group and the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) followed their own communication approaches and held their own press conferences, which were often not fully aligned with each other (Shimizu and Negita 2020). For example, one concrete issue was when to shift from an acute risk-focused communication targeting the 3Cs (avoiding closed spaces, crowded places and close-contact setting) to crisis-mode communication, in which more specific measures such as staying at home and washing hands were to be prioritized (Shimizu and Negita 2020: 11).

Researchers have blamed the government for ineffective communications both before and during the first state of emergency. Kazuki Shimizu et al. (2020) note that “[a]lthough citizens were asked to voluntarily avoid the 3Cs, behavior modification campaigns were not effective in the early phase of the pandemic. As the Japanese authorities failed to introduce clear incentives to encourage public adherence, most people did not change their behavior promptly. Closely linked to this, the government's communication strategy was inadequate, even during the state of emergency. Messages to avoid the 3Cs were clear, but the importance of physical distancing, washing hands frequently, staying home and protecting health systems were not communicated persuasively enough to change behaviors.” They also suggest that government communications at times lacked in accountability, transparency and clarity: “For example, the decision to postpone the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics was made abruptly without explaining how the decision had been reached. Moreover, the prime minister undermined adherence to measures introduced under Japan's state of emergency by describing it as ‘different from a lockdown as we are seeing take place overseas.’”

Other problematic issues in terms of government communications on COVID-19 included the government's establishment of a number of parallel task forces and meetings. A Novel Coronavirus Response Headquarters was put in place within the Prime Minister's Office, and a state minister was given responsibility for COVID-19-related measures. However, a clear line of

authority with regard to communication appeared to be lacking, sometimes leading to the mishandling of issues and delays (Murakami 2020).

Citation:

Shiho Takezawa and Marika Katanuma, Japan's old politicians struggle to convince young people to stay home, *The Japan Times*, 28 January 2021, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/01/28/national/japan-coronavirus-message/> (accessed in February 2021)

Nancy Snow, Japan's government has failed coronavirus communications test, *Nikkei Asia*, 21 February 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Japan-s-government-has-failed-coronavirus-communications-test> (accessed in December 2020)

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### Implementation of Response Measures

Implementation  
of Response  
Measures  
Score: 7

The implementation of unprecedented measures, as was necessary during the coronavirus pandemic, cannot be expected to be perfectly smooth and fully effective. This is as true of Japan as of anywhere else. Moreover, one must distinguish between the different phases of the coronavirus pandemic measures. Thus, while the early implementation of the strategy to detect clusters of infection and investigate linkages between clusters helped reduce the infection's spread, it could neither prevent the surge in cases that began around mid-March nor prevent subsequent waves. The implementation of a state of emergency in April (lifted in late May 2020) helped control the pandemic's trajectory (Shimizu et al. 2020a). So did the second state of emergency declared in early January 2021. However, infectious-disease experts criticized both of these states of emergency as having come too late.

A number of other problematic issues also emerged terms in terms of implementing the coronavirus response. Three examples will have to suffice here. First, in international comparison, there were relatively few infection test kits available during the early phase of the pandemic in spring 2020. The health ministry responsible (MHLW) was also slow to increase this capacity later (Murakami 2020). Second, the COCOA contact-tracing app for smartphones contained a bug, and few people installed it in any case, so its impact with regard to lowering infections remained doubtful (Reuters 2020). And third, by autumn 2020, observers and personnel involved noted that front-line healthcare workers had still not been given adequate protection (Shimizu et al. 2020b).

On the whole, however, the public sector was quite effective in making sure that the measures passed were in fact implemented, and one can speak of the “successful implementation of a ‘soft’ lockdown” (Suzuki 2020). Beginning early in the response, the government tried to involve the private sector in the implementation of crisis measures, thus profiting from the dense informal networks between the state and the business sector. However, other aspects of the government’s implementation were more problematic, and were not fully addressed during the course of the year. These problems clearly showed up again in January 2021, when the public-health system neared a point of breakdown. Critics like Kazuaki Shimizu had already warned in summer 2020 that there were not enough test kits available, and that “the capacity of both hospitals and isolation facilities may be insufficient to cope with the resurgence. There has been scant discussion of how to expand testing, and digitalization remains a work in progress” (Shimizu et al. 2020). To these critics’ minds, the state had wasted an opportunity after the passing of the first wave to prepare for a resurgence of the virus, and indeed had made things worse in health terms by encouraging activities such as domestic travel and restaurant dining with the aim of stimulating the economy.

In terms of impartiality, there were cases in which foreigners were unfairly criticized for bringing COVID-19 into Japan and spreading it. However, this was an issue only among parts of the citizenry, and public authorities stepped in to mitigate potential discrimination (Kyodo 2020). The national government acknowledges the issue of potential discrimination against certain social groups, and has taken action in various ways (Government of Japan 2020).

It should be noted that foreigners faced rather strict rules for entering Japan, discriminating between Japanese citizens and residents with a foreign nationality. During the first state of emergency in April/May 2020, a provision was passed that remained valid until autumn, barring reentry to foreign residents outside of Japan even with valid documents. This caused considerable hardship during that period (Siripala 2020).

Citation:

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[public/publication/200520\\_Debating%20Japan\\_Volume%203%20Issue%204.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200520_Debating%20Japan_Volume%203%20Issue%204.pdf) (accessed in December 2020)

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### National Coordination

National  
Coordination  
Score: 5

Coordination between national and regional authorities has not been particularly smooth. This is important, because according to the prevailing legal framework, many policy aspects have to be decided and implemented at the subnational level. This holds in particular, for example, for the states of emergency that were declared in April 2020 and again in January 2021. While the Special Measures Act gives national authorities the power to declare a state of emergency, the actual implementation of the related measures falls to the prefectures. The role of the national government is constitutionally limited given the country's historical experience with wartime mobilization directed from the center. However, this state of affairs has created certain tensions with regard to the efficiency of coordination between the central government and local jurisdictions (Gillam 2020).

The central government established a Novel Coronavirus Response Headquarters. This encompasses the relevant ministers and is chaired by the prime minister, but is run by a deputy chief cabinet secretary for crisis management. The national government also has an advisory committee, and regional authorities can set up their own advisory groups as well. There are few formal linkages between the national and subnational levels in these areas.

In practice, a lack of effective coordination emerged as the central government was frequently quite hesitant to take strong action, while proactive prefectures with urgent needs pushed ahead. After an early outbreak of the disease in Hokkaido, the prefectural government there took special actions, including the closure of schools, well before the declaration of a national state of emergency. There was considerable and publicly visible pressure from prefectures to declare a national emergency; however, when it ultimately gave in to this pressure, the national government declared a state of emergency for

only seven prefectures, including Tokyo, while leaving out several neighboring prefectures. Eventually, however, the whole country was included in the first state of emergency (Yoshikawa 2020, Gillam 2020). Throughout the year, coordination remained suboptimal, and prefectures often took their own course. During the second wave of the epidemic in the summer, for instance, the central Japanese prefecture of Aichi, which includes Nagoya, declared its own state of emergency (AP 2020).

The relationship between the national government and Tokyo Prefecture turned out to be particularly problematic, not only because the huge agglomeration of about 14 million people – not counting the neighboring prefectures of the Tokyo megalopolis – creates a particularly sensitive challenge, but because its governor, Yuriko Koike, is a staunch critic of the LDP and its government. By advocating and implementing a more dynamic anti-coronavirus strategy than that of the national government, and thus consciously differentiating herself from the Abe cabinet, she scored a landslide victory as incumbent in the gubernational election of July 2020 (Takenaka 2020).

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### International Coordination

International  
Coordination  
Score: 9

Japan has made considerable efforts to play an important role in international efforts to combat the coronavirus pandemic. In a speech before the UN General Assembly in September 2020, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga declared that his government intended to take a leading role in such efforts (Suga 2020). As the government has created the Novel Coronavirus Response Headquarters to coordinate ministries and their assigned agencies, the government is in a good position to commit credibly to such efforts.

The country is one of the world's major aid donors (SEEK 2020), and has made significant efforts in recent years to contribute to addressing global and regional challenges. It has done so as a member of UN organizations (including the WHO, to which it was the third most important national

contributor after the United States and China as of March 2020; McCarthy 2020); as a leading member of regional organizations such as Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Asian Development Bank; and in the context of national foreign policy initiatives connected to the vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific and beyond. This aid has included efforts to combat global warming and overcome bottlenecks with regard to international infrastructure investment.

Based on these external policy priorities, Japan has developed well-endowed and experienced agencies including the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, which are well-positioned to provide international support to low-income countries' efforts to deal with the effects of COVID-19.

Citation:

Yoshihide Suga, Address by SUGA Yoshihide, Prime Minister of Japan, At the Seventy-Fifth Session of the United Nations General Assembly, 25 September 2020, [https://estatemnts.unmeetings.org/estatemnts/10.0010/20200925/SxuqgUXRYBC2/k3KsuEc1y3Pa\\_en.pdf](https://estatemnts.unmeetings.org/estatemnts/10.0010/20200925/SxuqgUXRYBC2/k3KsuEc1y3Pa_en.pdf) (accessed December 2020)

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Niall McCarthy, Which Countries Are The Biggest Financial Contributors To The World Health Organization?, Forbes, 8 April 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2020/04/08/which-countries-are-the-biggest-financial-contributors-to-the-world-health-organization-infographic/> (accessed in February 2020)

## Learning and Adaptation

Learning and  
Adaptation  
Score: 7

The Japanese government and its bureaucracy use frequent formal and informal meetings to advance, review and reshape policies. In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, the two main bodies involved are the Novel Coronavirus Response Headquarters, a group of cabinet-level officials that had held more than 50 meetings by early February 2021, and the Novel Coronavirus Expert Meeting, which had met more than 20 times by late December 2020.

For example, after its 14th meeting on 19 November, the Expert Meeting urged the government to review its Go To campaign, which had been introduced to stimulate travel and thus demand in the various regions of Japan, as infections were spreading rapidly (Jiji Press 2020). After considerable hesitation, the government eventually followed the advice, suspending the program nationwide from 28 December 2020 until 11 January 2021 (later extended to early March).

In terms of evaluating the crisis-management system, the government's most important institutional step was to change the 2012 Act on Special Measures

for Pandemic Influenza and New Infectious Diseases Preparedness and Response (API) in early 2020 in order to cover novel aspects of the coronavirus pandemic. In addition to making numerous amendments to this and other relevant laws in the course of 2020, the national parliament passed government-sponsored bills in early February 2021 that introduced penalties for companies and individuals that failed to comply with coronavirus-related regulations. The government thus learned from earlier phases of the pandemic, but also reacted – after some hesitation – to mounting criticism and the growing dangers of the third wave of infections. Of course, introducing such penalties does not help in terms of improving crisis preparedness.

Indeed, the fact that Japan was hit hard by a third wave of infections that gathered momentum in late September 2020 and peaked in early January 2021 raises serious questions as to how much the government genuinely learned from the first two waves in spring and summer 2020. In any case, preparations for another wave were insufficient. Hospitals, especially in the Tokyo and Osaka areas, were overwhelmed by coronavirus patients, many of whom, due to mild symptoms, would not have been hospitalized in the first place in other major developed nations. Hospitals thus had to turn away patients with other substantial health problems, while test capacities (again) proved insufficient to deal effectively with the tide in late 2020 and early 2021.

Parts of the problem are structural and could not be overcome swiftly by learning – that is, Japan has plenty of hospital beds, but in comparative terms (i.e., per capita), has fewer intensive-care beds, fewer doctors and also fewer nurses than other major advanced economies (Tsukimori 2021). However, the specific course of the third wave was possible because the government failed to embrace and follow up on lessons learned during the first two waves (Shimizu et al. 2020). The existence of contradictory policies aimed on the one hand at boosting the economy (such as the Go To scheme), and on the other at keeping citizens safe, exacerbated the situation.

The government of Japan employs regular mechanisms to evaluate its policies, based on the 2001 Government Policy Evaluation Act (Matsuura et al. 2010). The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC, Administrative Evaluation Bureau) is in charge of the process. The specifications for such evaluations require that a number of quite demanding tasks be carried out. Critics have argued that many officials regard regulatory impact analysis (RIA) as bothersome. For an acute crisis like the coronavirus pandemic, the process is not useful and relevant.

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Kazuki Shimzu et al., Resurgence of covid-19 in Japan, *BMJ* 2020; 370, 18 August 2020, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m3221> (accessed in February 2021)

Miki Matsuura, Joanna Watkins, William Dorotinsky: Overview of Public Sector Performance Assessment Processes in Japan, GET Note: Japanese Public Sector Assessment Processes, August 2010, World Bank, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/10477> (accessed in December 2020)

### III. Resilience of Executive Accountability

#### Open Government

Open  
Government  
Score: 8

A substantial amount of information about government policies is available in Japan. During the current coronavirus pandemic, this has been true both of data such as infection rates, and with respect to government policies. For instance, the Prime Minister's Office; the Cabinet Office; the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare; and other relevant ministries and agencies such as the National Institute for Infectious Diseases have provided detailed information in a timely manner, in particular through their web pages and through press conferences. Substantial information is also available about the leading entities created to handle the pandemic, the Novel Corona Response Headquarters and the Novel Coronavirus Expert Meeting, as well as about their individual meetings.

Regional authorities also provide relevant information in a timely manner. The Tokyo metropolitan government, for instance, provides such information in Japanese, English, Chinese, Korean and easy Japanese (Tokyo Metropolitan Government 2020). Of course, smaller jurisdictions tend to provide somewhat less ample information than does Tokyo.

An information request by an upper house opposition legislator helped reveal that records of important COVID-19-related meetings between January and March 2020 had been kept in only a rather superficial manner, without providing details of the remarks made by the prime minister or other participants (Oba and Matsumoto 2020). Such practices diminish the transparency and accountability of government action.

Citation:

Tokyo Metropolitan Government, Shingata Corona Uirusu Kansenshou ni kansuru Jouhou (Information about the Novel Corona Virus Infection), Website, no date, <https://www.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/tosei/tosei/news/2019-ncov.html> (accessed in December 2020)

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Legislative  
Oversight  
Score: 8

## Legislative Oversight

The main health-related policies designed to fight the coronavirus pandemic were based on the act for infectious diseases and the 2020 special act on the novel coronavirus, as discussed in “Civil Rights and Political Liberties.” Fiscal stimulus measures have taken the form of supplementary budgets approved by the parliament, with some additional measures included in the regular 2021 budget. The Japanese Diet was thus duly involved, exerting its legislative authority. Supplementary budgets are a common feature of the budgetary process in Japan.

The regular 150-day Diet session most relevant with regard to pandemic responses started on 20 January 2020 and ended on 17 June 2020. The parliamentary opposition sought to extend the session, which is legally possible. However, the ruling coalition objected, arguably to avoid discussing a number of political sensitive topics unrelated to the coronavirus crisis. As a compromise, the ruling coalition and the opposition agreed to hold out-of-session committee meetings after the ordinary Diet period had come to a close. However, Prime Minister Abe did not participate in those meetings (Kyodo 2020, N.N. Mainichi 2020). Later, under new Prime Minister Suga, the ruling coalition agreed to hold an extra Diet session from October 26 until early/mid-December 2020. Thanks to this agreement, parliament was able to address important COVID-19-related issues, including a bill relating to vaccinations and a third supplementary budget for fiscal year 2020. The ordinary Diet session beginning in January 2021 was slated to address the budget for fiscal year 2021, which included additional COVID-19-related measures, as well as amendments to the infectious diseases bill.

Younger members from both the ruling and the opposition parties have proposed moving some Diet proceedings online, both as part of a broader Diet reform and to avoid the danger of infection. However, suggestions of this kind have thus far been rejected (Jiji 2020).

### Citation:

Kyodo (News Agency), Japan’s parliament ends coronavirus-dominated session without extension, The Japan Times, 17 June 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/06/17/national/politics-diplomacy/japans-parliament-ends-coronavirus-dominated-session-without-extension/> (accessed in January 2021)

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## Independent Supervisory Bodies

Auditing  
Score: 7

The Board of Audit of Japan is considered to be independent of the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. Its principal activity is to submit yearly reports to the cabinet that are forwarded to the Diet along with the cabinet's own financial statements. The board is free to direct its own activities, but parliament can request audits on special topics. Under the terms of its governing statute, the Board can also present opinions, reports and recommendations in between its annual audit reports.

While the Board of Audit has the formal power to supervise the government, it remains unclear whether it in fact has the capacity to provide robust economic research into the potentially far-reaching financial risks and fiscal performance of coronavirus-related policies

According to Article 20 of the constitution of Japan, "The Board of Audit shall conduct its audit with the objective of accuracy, regularity, economy, efficiency, effectiveness or other objectives necessary for auditing." This refers mainly to an accounting perspective, but according to the Accounting Standards of 2012, "The scope of the Board's audit is not limited to the processing of financial transactions, but includes business operations and project/program implementation relating to financial management, in order to determine, from a broader perspective, that financial management is being handled in a proper manner" (Board of Audit 2012). For example, the audit report for fiscal year 2018 included a special report, initiated by the board itself, on "Social security trends and their impact on the State's fiscal consolidation" (Board of Audit 2020: 62).

In principle, therefore, the Board of Audit has sufficient mandate and is able to develop an informed judgment on the attendant risks and subsequent performance of fiscal measures passed during the coronavirus pandemic. The Board monitors the government and regional authorities on an ongoing basis, and can address any financial aspects of pandemic policy in its yearly report, which may include special reports.

Citation:  
Board of Audit, Auditing Standards (Tentative Version), October 2012, [https://www.jbaudit.go.jp/english/effort/pdf/auditingstandards\\_h290810.pdf](https://www.jbaudit.go.jp/english/effort/pdf/auditingstandards_h290810.pdf) (accessed in January 2021)  
Board of Audit, Year 2020, [https://www.jbaudit.go.jp/english/pdf/Board\\_of\\_Audit\\_2020.pdf](https://www.jbaudit.go.jp/english/pdf/Board_of_Audit_2020.pdf) (accessed in January 2021)

Data Protection  
Score: 8

A Personal Information Protection Commission was established in January 2016, based on the Act on the Protection of Personal Information. This

commission is a cross-sectoral, independent government body that oversees the implementation of the act. The body's chairperson and commissioners are appointed by the prime minister, with the consent of both chambers of parliament. It is still early to judge whether the commission will be able to maintain independence from the government, and ultimately to determine whether it will be effective. In June 2020, the act was amended to take effect in the first half of 2022 or last quarter of 2021. In principle, the rules were tightened to increase protections for individual privacy. For instance, an opt-out scheme will increase restrictions on the provision of personal data to third parties (Tanaka et al. 2020). The commission issued rules for personal-data handling in the context of the pandemic on 2 April 2020, with a partial amendment on 15 May 2020 (Personal Information Protection Commission 2020). The rules seek to ensure that personal data collected in the course of pandemic measures are not used for other purposes or transferred to third parties without consent. A number of exceptions and clarifications are noted. For instance, the activity records of an infected company employee may be forwarded to the public-health authorities.

There have been a number of data-protection concerns during the course of the pandemic. For instance, in May 2020, Aichi Prefecture mistakenly published the names of several hundred patients on its official website. However, there is no evidence that data-protection principles are being systematically violated. In this respect, the 2016 act has been helpful. On the contrary, some observers have argued that the rules could emphasize privacy somewhat too much, thus being suboptimal in terms of fighting the pandemic (Miyashita 2020). Privacy protection is safeguarded in Japan's coronavirus tracing app, called COCOA (Contact-Confirming Application), but the government has tried to link its use to the unified My Number Card system, which was introduced in 2015 to help authorities provide and enforce uniform services. The My Number system has faced sustained opposition, with many citizens reluctant to adopt it due to privacy concerns. The government's decision to tie the contact-tracing app to this system slowed COCOA's COCOA.

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