Process and Players  |  Japanese Government Structure Overview

The Constitution of Japan, created in 1946 and implemented in 1947, laid the foundation for Japan's parliamentary system of government, which is divided into three branches: the legislative branch, the executive branch, and the judicial branch. Power is separate and checks and balances exist between the three branches.

The Legislative Branch

The legislative branch is comprised of the country's sole law-making body, the National Diet. The Diet has two Houses, the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors, both comprised of members elected by the public. Members of each House are required to serve on at least one standing committee during ordinary sessions, which begin in January and last 150 days with one possible extension.

| House of Representatives  
or Lower House  
(Shugiin in Japanese) | House of Councillors  
or Upper House  
(Sangiin in Japanese) |
<table>
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<td>Members</td>
<td>475</td>
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<td>Term length</td>
<td>4 years or upon dissolution of the House</td>
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<td>Member eligibility</td>
<td>25 years and older</td>
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<td>Type of representation</td>
<td>Single-seat constituency: 295 Members Proportional representation, each representing 1 of 11 electoral blocks: 180 Members</td>
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<td>Extraordinary sessions</td>
<td>Held when requested by 25% or more of total Members, after general election upon term expiration, or when called by the Cabinet</td>
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<td>Dissolution possible</td>
<td>Yes through resolution of the House of Representatives</td>
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| Unique attributes      | - Special sessions are held after general elections that result from House dissolution  
- Has precedence when the two Houses disagree on a bill or other measure  
- Can pass a no-confidence resolution dissolving the Cabinet | - Sometimes referred to as the “House of Common Sense,” the Upper House provides checks on the Lower House  
- Plenary committee on research |
| Committees             | - 17 standing committees  
- 9 special committees (as of January 2015) | - 17 standing committees  
- 7 special committees (as of January 2015) |

Chart 1. Characteristics of the Houses of the National Diet
The Executive Branch
The executive branch is led by the Prime Minister, who is nominated through a Diet resolution followed by official appointment by the Emperor. The Prime Minister’s office is supported by the Cabinet, which is comprised of Cabinet Ministers and Cabinet State Ministers designated by the Prime Minister and must be Diet Members. These Ministers remain in office until they are dismissed by the Prime Minister or the Lower House passes a no-confidence resolution (or rejects of a confidence resolution) dissolving the entire Cabinet including the Prime Minister. A no-confidence resolution of the Cabinet does not result in dissolution when the Lower House is dissolved within ten days of the resolution. The Cabinet includes the Cabinet Office, Cabinet Agencies, and 11 Ministries, including the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare and the Ministry of Finance. These central government offices (chuo shocho) steer Japan through implementation of various policies and Cabinet-initiated legislation.

The Judicial Branch
The judicial branch is comprised of the Supreme Court and four types of lower courts. The Supreme Court ensures that legislation and actions taken by the Cabinet and the Diet are constitutional. The Supreme Court’s chief justice is appointed by Cabinet nomination and official appointment by the Emperor. The other 14 justices are appointed by the Cabinet. Justice appointments are reviewed periodically within the House of Representatives and can be terminated through a majority vote, although this has yet to happen. Mandatory retirement age of Supreme Court justices is 70. The current Chief Justice is Itsuro Terada, who was made Chief Justice in April 2014. Below the Supreme Court are high courts, district courts, family courts, and summary courts. Most trials involve one to three judges. In 2009, criminal trials began to include the general public through the use of lay judges.

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