

National Diet

The Constitution of Japan was promulgated on November 3, 1946, and came into force on May 3, 1947. The first session of the Diet based on this new Constitution was convened in the same year on May 20.

Status

The Constitution provides that “The Diet shall be the highest organ of state power, and shall be the sole law-making organ of the State” (Article 41). As it most directly reflects the will of the people, the Diet is the most important organ in the nation. The Diet is also the only organ which can enact laws.

Organization

The National Diet is composed of two Houses: the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors. The bicameral system means that, although each House independently deliberates and decides on their positions on individual bills, the will of the Diet is established when both Houses agree.

Today, the House of Representatives has 465 Members of whom 176 are elected under the proportional representation system and 289 are elected from single-seat constituencies. The term of office of Members of the House of Representatives is 4 years. In contrast, the House of Councillors has 248 Members, of whom 100 are elected by the proportional representation system. The other 148 Members are elected from 45 Prefectural constituencies. There are two Prefectural constituencies comprising two prefectures: Tottori/Shimane and Tokushima/Kochi. The term of office of Members of the House of Councillors is 6 years, half of the Members being elected every 3 years.

Functions

The National Diet is authorized not only to enact laws but also to decide the national budget, approve the conclusion of treaties with other nations, designate the Prime Minister, and initiate amendments to the Constitution.

Each House may also conduct investigations in relation to government; consider petitions submitted by the public; elect its own Presiding Officer and Deputy Presiding Officer, and Chairmen of Standing Committees, as well as establish, if necessary, Special Committees at the beginning of each session; set up its own rules pertaining to meetings, proceedings, and internal discipline; and punish Members for disorderly conduct.

To perform these functions, Members may submit bills and resolutions; pose questions to the Cabinet about general affairs of national administration; and ask questions, debate, and participate in voting regarding bills.

Convocation and Term of Session

The Cabinet decides the convocation of the Diet, which is then convoked by promulgation of the Imperial Rescript. There are three types of sessions: ordinary, extraordinary, and special.

An ordinary session must be convoked once a year in January for a term of 150 days in order to deliberate the national budget and related bills for the next fiscal year.

When an ordinary session is not meeting, an extraordinary session may be convoked whenever considered necessary by the Cabinet, for example, to consider urgent matters or a supplementary budget or bills for countermeasures against a disaster. When a quarter or more of the total Members of either House request that an extraordinary session be convoked, the Cabinet must

convene a meeting. An extraordinary session must be convoked after a general election has been held following the expiration of the term of office for the Members of the House of Representatives, or after a regular election for the Members of the House of Councillors has been held.

A special session must be convoked after a general election following the dissolution of the House of Representatives. Upon convocation of the Diet, the Cabinet resigns en masse, and the two Houses must designate a Prime Minister.

The term of extraordinary and special sessions is determined by a vote of both Houses. The term of session may be extended once for ordinary sessions and twice for special sessions and extraordinary sessions.

Opening Ceremony

At the beginning of each session, an Opening Ceremony attended by the Members of both Houses is held in the Chamber of the House of Councillors in the presence of His Majesty the Emperor. The Speaker of the House of Representatives gives a ceremonial address on behalf of the Members of both Houses and then the Emperor delivers a speech.

Government Policy Addresses

After the Opening Ceremony, Ministers of State deliver speeches at the plenary sitting of each House. In an ordinary session, the Prime Minister delivers an address on general policy. This address is followed by speeches by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Finance, and the Minister of State for Economic and Fiscal Policy. In extraordinary and special sessions, the Prime Minister and, when necessary, other Ministers of State give addresses. Several Members then ask questions on behalf of their own parties and groups, and the Prime Minister or other Ministers of State respond.

Plenary Sitings

Plenary sittings are meetings of all the members of the House. The will of the House is determined at these sessions. The deliberations of each House are, as a rule, open to the public, and business cannot be transacted in either House unless one-third or more of the total House membership is present. All matters are decided by a majority of those present, except as elsewhere provided. There are four ways of voting at plenary sittings at the House of Councillors: oral (Members are asked whether they have any objections), standing (Members are requested to rise if they are in favor of a question), open-ballot (Members in favor of the bill cast white ballot slips with their names on them and Members in opposition cast blue slips), and push-button (Members cast their vote by pushing the “approval” or “objection” button at their seats). Generally, plenary sittings begin at 10:00 a.m. on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at the House of Councillors and at 1:00 p.m. on Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday at the House of Representatives.