

### What is the *Insei*?

Chiten no Kimi (治天の君) is a term used to refer to the emperor or the retired emperor (Joko, 上皇) who held actual political power as the head of the imperial family during the late Heian era and the Kamakura era of the Middle Ages in Japan. Chiten-no-kimi reigned as the de facto sovereign. However, there are two types of "chiten-no-kimi": one that includes the reigning emperor, and the other that does not include the reigning emperor but is limited to the retired emperor who administers the imperial household. If the Joko is the ruling sovereign, he is called *Chiten*, and his rule is called *Insei*. If the emperor is the ruling sovereign, his rule is called *Shinsei*.

The term "Chiten" appeared with the start of the Insei government in the late Heian period. Until then, the government had been administered by the Fujiwara clan (Fujiwara Hokke), who held political power as regent (Sessho or Kanpaku, abbreviated as Sekkan). Sessho is the deputy of the emperor, while Kanpaku is the assistant to the emperor. The political rule led by the Fujiwara Hokke is called the Sekkan politics. Under the Ritsuryo political system, acting for and assisting him was the source of the Fujiwara clan. However, under the Insei regime that began with Emperor Shirakawa, the Sekkan politics lost its basis for existence, as the emperor came to hold actual political power based on direct paternal authority, even after the emperor abdicated to his son. The loss of power by the regents can be seen as a transition from the rule by the matrilineal lineage to the rule by the patrilineal lineage of the emperor.

From the mid- to late-Heian period, it gradually became common in aristocratic society for a single family to hold a particular government position. The head of the family (governor) had the authority and obligation to distribute the earnings to the family members. It is thought that this social trend also affected the imperial family, and that those who became the head of the imperial family came to execute the original authority as the ruler.

The head of the imperial family was in effect the sovereign of the imperial dynasty and came to be known as Chiten. Although there could be multiple retired emperors, only one could be the reigning sovereign, and there were even fights between retired emperors over the position of Chiten (as the Hōgen Rebellion). The emperor was like the Crown Prince when the Chiten became the real monarch. In fact, once the Insei regime was in full swing, the Crown Prince was no longer appointed.

There are two major qualifications for the position of Chiten. First, the person must have experienced the imperial throne. Second, the person must be a direct descendant of the current emperor. As a result, it was a matter of life and death to obtain the title of Chiten, as failure to become Chiten meant that one's descendants could not succeed to the Imperial Throne. However, after the Kamakura period (1185-1333), there were cases in which the

qualifications mentioned as above were not always met, such as when Go-Takakura-in, who did not assume the imperial throne, became a Chiten, or when Kogen, who was not a direct ancestor of Emperor Komyo, became a Chiten.

In the Insei regime, the emperor is the nominal head of the imperial family, while the Chiten is the substantive head. The political structure in which the substantive head of a family replaces the nominal head and assumes real power has long been observed in subsequent Japanese politics. For example, in the Kamakura shogunate, after the blood of three generations of the Minamoto clan had been cut off, the Hojo clan, the most powerful family clan supporting the Minamoto clan, succeeded to the regent's position (Shikken) from generation to generation. Moreover, the chief of the Hojo clan, *Tokuso*, was more powerful than the regent himself. The relationship between Tokuso and the Shikken was almost the same as that between the Chiten and the emperor.

The term "Insei" is sometimes used to describe contemporary Japanese politics. For example, in the LDP government of the Showa era, Kakuei Tanaka remained in the position of appointing the next prime minister as the kingmaker for a while after he resigned as prime minister. Even in the Reiwa era, Shinzo Abe, who retired after holding the longest term of power for eight years in constitutional history, was regarded as the real supreme ruler until his assassination in 2022, and the current Kishida administration is said to have been created with Abe's support.

### **Questions**

1. What is the Chiten?
2. Before the Insei started, what type of politics had been prevailing?
3. What type of social change caused the transition from the Sekkan politics to the Insei?
4. What are the two major qualifications to become a Chiten?
5. Why does the rule by the Kamakura shogunate look like the Insei?
6. Why was the former PM Abe called being executing the Insei?
7. Are there political regimes looking like the Insei in your home country? Describe the cases in the history and contemporary politics.