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In Japan, Words Matter in Leadership

<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/06/11/in-japan-words-matter-in-leadership/>

IKENNA STEVE NWEKE, JUN 11 2025

Trust-based leadership has a long history. It was a fundamental component of legitimate authority in ancient Greece and Rome. Public trust was a practical requirement for efficient governance in both societies, not just a moral ideal. Leaders such as Pericles, Solon, and Cincinnatus exemplified this concept by winning and retaining the trust of the people. Pericles believed that respect and trust between leaders and citizens were essential to Athens' democracy. On the other hand, Julius Caesar's fate highlights the danger of betraying that trust and shows how its deterioration could result in political collapse. These instances demonstrate how trust was essential to leadership's survival and success in the ancient world. In democracies, leadership is a trust agreement between the governed and the governing class, as well as a function of power and authority. The legitimacy of leadership is questioned when this trust is violated, either verbally or physically. This piece suggests that Japan captures the true essence of this intersection of legitimate authority and public trust by exploring how cultural norms, symbolic sensitivity, and leadership standards interact and how such interaction influences political behavior in the country.

The significance of accountability and responsibility in governance in Japan is noteworthy, as it is common to have leaders resign over remarks deemed inappropriate by the public. For example, Yoshiro Mori, who chaired the Tokyo Olympics organizing committee, resigned in February 2021, five months before the event, after being accused of making sexist remarks against some female members of the committee. Mori apologized and resigned from his position, stating, "What is important [...] It must not be the case that my presence becomes an obstacle to that." Similarly, Heita Kawakatsu, former governor of Shizuoka Prefecture, resigned for what many described as "occupational discrimination". Kawakatsu, while inaugurating newly employed staff of the prefecture, was quoted as saying, "Unlike those who sell vegetables, raise cattle and make things, you are highly intellectual people." In Japan, a country that thrives on respect for others and moderation, his statement drew criticism; he apologized and resigned.

While Mori and Kawakatsu resigned for making discriminatory statements, a recent incident is about "a joke over rice", a staple food with both economic and symbolic importance in Japanese society, by Taku Eto, Japan's Minister of Agriculture. The minister had on Sunday, May 18, 2025, stated that he had never needed to buy rice because his supporters regularly gave it to him for free and that he had accumulated so much that he could even sell some. The minister resigned two days later, publicly apologizing for his inappropriate remarks.

On his part, Japanese Prime Minister, Ishiba Shigeru described the minister's remarks as highly inappropriate and issued a public apology. He accepted responsibility for appointing Eto and admitted that Eto's behavior represented a violation of the public's trust in his administration. The Prime Minister's response is in tandem with democratic governance expectations that political leaders are responsible for their behavior and that of their appointees. The response also underscores his commitment to openness and public accountability by portraying the incident as an ethical aberration.

While some observers may view the incident as an insignificant mistake with inflated consequences, it merits serious consideration within academic discussions on political culture, ethics, and governance. The incident highlights the relationship between leadership and ethical responsibility. It also shows how public discourse reflects and shapes the legitimacy of political authority. For scholars of governance, it illustrates how cultural and ethical considerations are not marginal but integral to political analysis. It exemplifies the complex interplay between political culture, normative

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ethical expectations, and governance practices, offering a distinctive counterpoint to prevailing global trajectories.

Understanding the sociocultural significance of rice in Japan is essential to appreciating the incident's ramifications. Rice represents tradition, hard work, and national identity in addition to being a staple food. In the past, rice farming has impacted land ownership structures, molded Japan's agrarian economy, and functioned as a gauge of food security and self-sufficiency. Thus, a casual or contemptuous remark regarding rice, particularly from the person in charge of agricultural policy, touches a deep emotional and material chord. The backlash suggests a perceived insensitivity, particularly at a time when Japanese farmers are dealing with increasing economic pressures from globalization, climate change, and demographic shifts. The minister's joke's exact content has not been made public. Even seemingly harmless statements can be taken as disparaging of the real hardships faced by rural communities in such an environment.

The ethics of leadership require that leaders not only refrain from misconduct in the discharge of their duties but also comprehend how language, tone, and symbolic gestures affect public trust. Hannah Arendt (1958) asserts that legitimacy, which depends on the consent and respect of the governed, is what sustains power. A leader's public remarks play a critical role in maintaining or eroding that legitimacy. Remarks can damage an institution's reputation by giving the impression that the government is bothered by the problems of the people, especially when made by those in positions of authority. According to Jürgen Habermas (1991), the significance of communicative rationality and the public sphere, where mutual respect and understanding are essential to democratic discourse. According to this viewpoint, the minister's resignation serves as a confirmation of the ethical obligations associated with accountability, a common feature of Japan's political culture.

The political culture of Japan has been shaped by postwar democratic norms and Confucian ethics. It places a premium value on public honor, humility, and officials' obligations to uphold the dignity of their positions. In comparison to many Western democracies, as well as in Africa, resignations in Japan are more frequent in response to scandal, poor management, or even public offense. According to Ginsburg and Cheibub (2017), accountability is stronger when adapted as a cultural value. Minister Eto's resignation indicates a social and personal dedication to upholding the moral standards of public office.

It is important to compare the incident with political reactions in other settings to further highlight its significance. Political leaders frequently survive public scandals without stepping down in many democracies by depending on institutional inertia, media tactics, or partisan allegiance. This propensity adds to what Warren (1999) referred to as the "trust deficit" in contemporary democracies, where people grow more doubtful of the ability of elites to exercise self-control. For example, in Italy, former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi courted controversy after the 2009 L'Aquila earthquake by stating that the victims' experience was akin to going on a camping event. Despite the noise generated by his statement, he refused to step down. Similarly, Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria, in his statement on April 21, 2018, described the Nigerian youth as "lazy and uneducated", refused to apologize following backlash from the public, the media, and the opposition parties. The Japanese example, on the other hand, demonstrates how cultural norms can reinforce moral behavior. It also suggests that strict guidelines for public discourse could serve as a check on the normalization of disrespect, as well as preventing moral complacency, but could also function as a counterbalance to the acceptance of rudeness and insensitivity in politics.

It might seem like a minor political incident when Japan's Agriculture Minister resigned due to a poorly thought-out joke. But a deeper look teaches valuable lessons about the cultural underpinnings of accountability, the duties of public communication, and the ethics of leadership. The incident serves as a reminder to both academics and professionals that a democracy's strength is demonstrated by the moral conduct of its leaders as well as by its institutions and laws. This case challenges us to reevaluate how language affects public life and how accountability, when taken seriously, can fortify the democratic fabric of the state as scholarly communities continue to examine issues of governance, political legitimacy, and moral leadership.

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