Emori Ueki

Emori Ueki was an outspoken advocate of popular rights for all Japanese. He was introduced into politics by the intellectuals who formed the Liberal Party and was active in party causes. As editor of the party’s newspaper, his was an influential voice in prompting Japan’s government to adopt a constitution and institute a popularly elected legislature, the Diet, to which he was himself elected. Before his untimely death, Ueki promoted radical causes, including equal rights for women.

Ueki was born in 1857, the son of a samurai in Tosa province. His father was the private secretary to the feudal daimyo, and Ueki was educated in Chinese classics at the Chidokan, the official school of the domain. In 1873, he briefly lived in Tokyo, studying at the Kainan, a private school, before withdrawing and returning to Tosa. There, he attended lectures by Taisuke Itagaki, a political leader in the group of samurai who had overthrown the government of the Tokugawa shogun in 1868 in order to reestablish the political authority of the emperor in the movement that became known as the Meiji Restoration.

Deciding to enter politics himself, Ueki became a close associate of Itagaki and assumed a position of leadership in the Freedom and People’s Rights Movement. The movement had its roots in the 1873 debate within the government over whether to declare war on Korea. The war party, including Itagaki, lost, and many resigned their government positions. The debate expanded, however, into whether the power of the Meiji government was being monopolized by members of the Satsuma and Choshu clans (which had been instrumental in the overthrow of the shogun). Itagaki and Ueki, both members of the Tosa clan, called for greater popular participation in government, including eventually a popularly elected legislature.

Ueki helped Itagaki organize the Risshisha (Self-Help Society) in April 1874 to assist those samurai who had been retainers of the shogun and therefore unemployed since the Meiji Restoration had ended their salaries. The two men also wanted the Risshisha to spread Western political ideas, especially the doctrine of natural rights, and to serve as the foundation of a larger political body that would not be limited to the Tosa region.

Returning to Tokyo in 1875, Ueki’s political development was influenced by the Meirokusha, the Meiji Six Society (founded in the sixth year of the restoration). That group was formed of intellectuals who favored adopting Western learning and technology to modernize Japan in order make it competitive with European nations. Ueki did not read any foreign languages and was forced to rely upon translations of Western literature, focusing principally on the history, politics, and economic ideas of England, France, and the United States. He also attended lectures by those Japanese who had traveled to Europe and America. Ueki began to publish articles calling for greater rights for all Japanese and was briefly imprisoned for one particularly controversial piece. In 1879, he wrote a popular pamphlet, Minken jiyu ron (On People’s Rights and Liberty), expounding on the theory of naturally endowed rights to political independence and the necessity of constitutional government.

In 1877, Ueki returned to Tosa and worked with Itagaki to revive the Aikokusha (Society of Patriots) and the Kokkai Kisei Domei (League for Establishing a National Assembly). Following the second national meeting of the League for Establishing a National Assembly, Ueki proposed that the organization be transformed into a political party. His proposal gained support, especially from groups like the sake brewers, who felt they were being overtaxed by the government. Ueki was able to tie his proposal to the concept that government was interfering with the natural right to property and free enterprise. The government eventually responded, promising in 1881 that a legislature would be elected nine years later. On October 29, 1881, Ueki’s plan was adopted, and the Jiyuto, or Liberal Party, was founded, the first modern political party in Japan.

Soon, however, Ueki began to have disagreements with Itagaki over his elitist opinions. Ueki favored a radical, egalitarian organization of all Japanese. Those divisions, plus police repression and a fear that radical members of the
party would become more violent, led Itagaki to disband the Liberal Party in 1884. During its short history, Ueki was editor of the party newspaper, *Jiyu shimbun*. In that position, he traveled through Japan, spreading his ideas on speaking tours and publishing them in editorials.

During the 1880s, the rural economy of Japan was in decline, and many peasants rose up in rebellion against government policies. Ueki's writings on natural rights inspired many rebels, although he himself never became involved in any uprisings. Force was often necessary to repress the peasants, with many killed and others arrested and imprisoned. Ueki moved back to Kochi (formerly Tosa) and spent his time writing about Japan's family system and women's rights. He developed a sweeping antitraditional social program, calling for equal rights for women and the elimination of public brothels. Ueki, however, saw no contradiction in his notorious patronage of brothels while espousing those ideals.

Ueki also called for an end to the newly established conscript army system. He feared that a conscript army could be used as a tool of repression by the government and wrote, "An army does not depend on guns and ships but primarily on the feeling of patriotism which is imbued with the true love of liberty." Ueki drafted a proposed constitution during this time as well. In it, he called for popular sovereignty, a unicameral legislature, and the right to vote for all who paid taxes. None of those ideas were adopted by the government in its final constitution of 1889.

In the first national election in 1890, Ueki was elected to the Diet, the lower house of the legislature. He spoke out for changes regarding his favorite causes but also displayed a willingness to compromise with conservatives. When he died unexpectedly of a chronic stomach illness in 1892 at the age of 35, many believed that he must have been poisoned. Despite the feeling that he left business unfinished, Ueki helped to shape the liberal causes in Meiji Japan and influenced those who came after him.