



**POLITICAL CONFLICTS AT THE END OF THE HEIAN PERIOD: CIVIL
WARS AND THE RIVALRY BETWEEN THE GENJI AND HEIKE CLANS IN
JAPANESE HISTORY**

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Abstract. *The late Heian period marked a critical turning point in Japanese history, as internal political struggles and the rise of the warrior class led to the collapse of aristocratic rule. This paper explores the factors that caused the Genji (Minamoto) and Heike (Taira) rivalry, leading to major conflicts like the Hōgen and Heiji Rebellions, and culminating in the Genpei War. These events marked the beginning of samurai-led governance and the eventual founding of the Kamakura*

Shogunate.

Keywords: *Heian Period, political conflict, Genji, Heike, samurai, Hōgen Rebellion, Heiji Rebellion, Genpei War, Minamoto no Yoritomo, Taira no Kiyomori, Kamakura Shogunate*

Main Body

2.1 Political Decline and the Emergence of Military Power

During the late Heian period, political control began to slip from the hands of the imperial court and powerful noble families such as the Fujiwara clan. The system of *insei* (cloistered government) allowed retired emperors to exert influence, but it often led to factional disputes and weakened centralized authority. Simultaneously, the expansion of *shōen* (private estates) undermined the tax base and empowered local landowners. In these regions, the growing military class—samurai—began to exert control, both economically and militarily.

The Minamoto (Genji) and Taira (Heike) clans emerged as the two most powerful warrior families. Both clans were often employed by imperial factions as military enforcers, which gradually drew them into court politics. Their rivalry became more pronounced as they competed for influence and rewards, reflecting the growing instability of Heian governance.

2.2 Hōgen and Heiji Rebellions: Prelude to War

The Hōgen Rebellion(1156) erupted after the death of Emperor Toba and revolved around a succession dispute between Emperor Sutoku and Emperor Go-Shirakawa. Both the Taira and Minamoto clans were drawn into the conflict—Taira no Kiyomori and Minamoto no Yoshitomo supported opposing sides. The victory of Go-Shirakawa's faction and Kiyomori's rise marked the beginning of Taira dominance.

Only three years later, the Heiji Rebellion (1159) broke out, further highlighting the internal divisions within the military elite. This time, Minamoto no Yoshitomo attempted to





challenge Kiyomori's growing influence but was ultimately defeated. Kiyomori consolidated power and even elevated his daughter to imperial consort, symbolizing his control over the court. However, his rule bred resentment among other nobles and the Minamoto survivors, particularly Minamoto no Yoritomo, who would later rise to challenge the Heike.

2.3 The Genpei War and the Rise of the Kamakura Shogunate

The Genpei War(1180–1185) was the climax of the Genji-Heike rivalry. It began when Prince Mochihito, backed by Yoritomo, called on the Minamoto clan to rise against the Taira. What began as a political rebellion transformed into a full-scale civil war, involving battles across Japan. Major events like the Battle of Ichi-no-Tani, Yashima, and finally the Battle of Dan-noura in 1185 marked decisive victories for the Minamoto. The defeat and destruction of the Taira, including the death of the child emperor Antoku, ended Heike rule.

After the war, Minamoto no Yoritomo established the Kamakura Shogunate in 1192, signaling the beginning of samurai-led military government in Japan. This marked a major shift from court-centered aristocratic governance to a feudal system dominated by warrior elites.

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