

Japan: Amateur protesters in the forefront of anti-nuclear demonstrations

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The Internet and simple word-of-mouth are proving to be unbeatable combinations in getting ordinary folk to come together for a common cause.

Protests against nuclear power plants held across Japan in recent months have had a distinct grass-roots civic movement flavor.

In a nutshell, amateur demonstrators are making their voices heard, and they are not relying on organized labor unions and other professional agitators to get the job done.

This was evident during a march held Oct. 9 in Tokyo's Shibuya district. The demonstration was a particularly noisy affair as participants banged drums, even frying pans, and blew trumpets to attract attention.

An employee at a local restaurant, curious to find out what all the commotion was about, said, "I thought it was some kind of festival, but then I realized it was only a demonstration."

One individual who has participated in a number of anti-nuclear protests since April does so because they are so enjoyable and quite unlike professional organized protests of the past where people were forced to take part.

Another person who marched with his pregnant wife said, "When I think about my wife and my child, I want the government to abolish dangerous nuclear plants immediately."

The protest was organized by Minoru Ide, 31, who works in interior decorating and also plays in a punk band as a hobby.

Ide is very nervous about nuclear power and has carried a dosimeter to check radiation levels since disaster struck at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant northeast of Tokyo.

He considers himself an "amateur citizen" as opposed to the professionals in labor unions and other organizations that have played the central role in social movements until now.

While he applied to the police to hold the march, Ide had no organization. Interest spread via the Internet and word-of-mouth.

In his application to the police, Ide said he expected 100 people to turn up. In fact, 600 people showed up.

One of the web sites that had posted a notice about the protest had a link to video images of recent demonstrations in New York against corporate greed and Wall Street.

Hajime Matsumoto, who manages a shop that recycles goods in Tokyo's Koenji district, is regarded by many as helping to kick off this new-found civic interest.

He was behind a highly publicized protest held in April.

Matsumoto, 36, graduated from university at a time when there were few job openings for new recruits. Matsumoto's lack of ties to any traditional organization, like a company or a labor union, was instrumental in his being able to bring ordinary citizens together.

He has visited South Korea and France in an effort to develop cooperative ties. When images of his anti-nuclear protest were broadcast over the Internet, he was contacted by someone in Taiwan who wanted to organize a similar event.

The anti-Wall Street protests in the United States were also brought together by young people and the unemployed who learned of the events online.

At a gathering organized Sept. 19 and supported by Nobel Literature Prize winner Kenzaburo Oe, organizers said 60,000 people showed up.

The Japan Congress Against A- and H-Bombs (Gensuikin) was a key part of the organizing committee.

Gensuikin official Toshihiro Inoue estimates that only about half of that gathering was brought together by the organizations involved.

"While there is a sense of possibility in the actions of young people, it is also important to establish ties with people who we are certain will take part," Inoue said. "What will be important is bringing those two sides together."

Demonstrations in Japan took on a negative image from the 1980s after a number of violent incidents involving radical groups.

After 2000, demonstrations took on a new form, especially through protests against the U.S.-led war in Iraq.

The events were described as "peace walks" or "parades" and attracted several tens of thousands of people.

One of the organizers at the time, Ichiro Kobayashi, 41, said, "There is a strong negative image about demonstrations in Japan and there is also strong pressure to conform. We tried to not create an organization in order to produce a form that would make it easier for ordinary people to take part."

He says the latest anti-nuclear protests seems to have been influenced by those earlier changes.

Kojin Karatani, 70, a noted literary critic, took part in demonstrations after the March 11 Great East Japan Earthquake. It was the first time for him to do so in about half a century.

Karatani said he sensed that those who once took part in demonstrations as students joined the latest protests as though attending a reunion, while the younger participants were genuinely angry: not just toward nuclear energy, but over more pressing concerns.

Hiroshi Kainuma, a graduate student at the University of Tokyo who wrote "Fukushima ron" (On Fukushima), which looks into what nuclear energy meant for Fukushima Prefecture, offers words of caution about the extent to which the protests can spread.

"The movement will eventually run into a dead end if it gathers people through a confrontational structure of justice against evil and only attacks obvious targets such as the central government and Tokyo Electric Power Co."As an issue, nuclear energy is similar to what I call a lifestyle disease of Japan, in which continued economic growth was rampant by placing undue burdens on local communities. There will be a need to involve even the enemy to set a course that can change the social structure."

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P.S.

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<http://www.asahi.com/english/TKY201110100211.html>