

Japan, Two Years After Fukushima

Friday 8 March 2013, by [ROUSSET Pierre](#) (Date first published: 11 February 2013).

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The triple disaster of 11 March 2011 constituted a major turning point in contemporary Japanese history — its political impact is not however unequivocal. It has provoked a radical break in the way in which many Japanese people perceive the authorities and institutions of their country. It has informed a profoundly progressive citizens' revolt. But it has happened at a time when the geopolitical situation in East Asia is increasingly unstable: the popular sentiment of insecurity is accompanied by a great uncertainty as to the regional evolution of the relationship of forces between the powers; which has led to a dangerous renewal of reactionary nationalist and militarist movements.

The earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011 have had important social and economic implications above all in the north east which was directly hit. A population which was massively damaged has found itself in a situation of impotence and dependency. The traditional family, social and institutional networks have been devastated. The psychological shock has been profound, fed by the physical disappearance of community spaces (villages, neighbourhoods and so on), the lack of reliable information, solitude, the feeling of no longer having a future. Faced with the incredible administrative impotence shown by the state in these times of emergency, regional activist organisations (trade unions, associations and so on) have done remarkable work to bring aid and offer frameworks of collective activity to refugees. They have benefited in this respect from national and international aid networks, but their resources have remained inadequate in relation to the breadth of the disaster. As for the Japanese workers' movement, it is too weakened (and bureaucratised) to bring to the attention of the country as a whole the social issues revealed or provoked by the disaster.

Thus — and given also the extreme gravity of the accident in the Fukushima power station — it is the nuclear question which has dominated the political scène in the post March 11 period. The pro-nuclear consensus which had prevailed in Japan has been broken. The avowals of those involved in this economic sector and the publication of documents have shown how this consensus had been built on lies, corruption, and private-public connivance; on the negation of the risks linked to radioactivity and the possibility of major accidents. This policy of lies was perpetuated during and after the disaster — to the point that mothers in the contaminated zones no longer knew what precautions should be taken to protect their children (more sensitive than adults to radiation of relatively weak dosage). The anti-nuclear movement — yesterday predominantly local (a citizens' collective against each power station) — has taken on a national dimension, sometimes mobilising tens of thousands of persons, something never before seen in the archipelago. For various reasons, the power stations were deactivated, one after the other, to the extent that by May 2012 not a single one was still in service. In July, Naoto Kan, Prime Minister at the time of the disaster, declared himself in favour of a non-nuclear Japan.

In 2012, a number of polls showed a very large majority in favour of abandoning nuclear power.

However, in early February 2013, polls showed 56% in favour of the policy of reopening of the power stations advocated by the new government of Shinzo Abe. How can this turnaround be explained?

Regional instability and nuclear lobby counter-offensive

After the Fukushima disaster, the nuclear lobby hunkered down. The development of the situation in eastern Asia gave it the opportunity to retake the offensive. Although often misfiring, the North Korean missiles increased the fear of a military threat. Above all, a conflict of sovereignty with China has emerged. Tokyo administers the Senkaku (in Japanese) or Diaku (in Chinese) islands. Beijing has always contested their annexation by Japan, but for decades the two governments had avoided making this question a "hot point" in their relations.

The territorial hot points were located more to the West, China forcibly demanding with military deployments the Paracel and Spratley islands against Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines, but remaining very discreet on the tracing of its maritime frontiers in relation to Japan.

In September 2012, Tokyo opened the Pandora's box wide. The government effectively "nationalised" the Senkaku islands which were under private ownership. Beijing reacted by sending ships and planes to the sensitive area, and then stating that it wanted to map the micro-archipelago. The tension has just mounted further with the Japanese government accusing a Chinese warship of having "targeted" one of its destroyers with an attack radar. All this does not presage war, but an "active" territorial conflict which is likely to endure.

If what was yesterday diplomatically contained has now become explosive, it is obviously because each state covets the underwater wealth of the South China Sea. It is also because each has an interest in encouraging great power nationalism. For internal reasons (diverting attention from the social crisis), but also because the relationship of forces is in full evolution here. China is affirming itself as a military power and does not wish to be contained by the first "island front line" running from Senkaku/Diaku to the Spratley and Paracels. The USA is strengthening the presence of the Seventh Fleet. However, Tokyo is no longer assured that the protection of Washington will remain unflinching.

For the first time, authorised voices are heard in Japan to say more or less explicitly, that the archipelago should equip itself with nuclear weapons. A fundamental taboo is being lifted in a country which in 1945, lived through the crimes against humanity of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The suppression of article 9 of Japan's pacifist Constitution is increasingly evoked (it affirms the renunciation of war). Concrete measures are taken or announced to increase the military strength of the "Self-Defence Forces": an increase in the military budget, redeployment of F-15s, launching of a high precision optical satellite and so on.

Energy security is going through troubled times, argues the nuclear lobby, which advocates nuclear power so as not to depend on supplies by sea. The lobby wants the bomb also, the "civil" nuclear power supplying the necessary fissile materials necessary to the military. This alarmist campaign has made an impact on the Japanese people.

Confronted with this new situation, the Japanese citizen left has launched an appeal that each country in the region affirms resistance to the rise of xenophobic militarist nationalisms. It denounces the invocation of a mythical history to grab islands which have never been inhabited. It aspires to a shared management of the seas in the interest of the peoples and respect for ecological requirements.

Two opposed political blocs are taking shape, and this is something new. On the one hand the nuclear lobby, the militarist currents and most of the nationalist right. On the other, the civilian anti-nuclear movement, the last survivors of Hiroshima/Nagasaki and those who represent them (the mayors), the pacifists who defend the Constitution, those opposed to US bases in Okinawa, personalities like the Nobel prize winner for literature Kenzaburo Oe and so on. However, the anti-nuclear movement in Japan faces a difficult political situation for which it was not prepared.

In the absence of a left political alternative, the rejection of nuclear power after Fukushima was first incarnated on the political level by the parties of the centre-right, although they became rapidly discredited because of their incompetence. New populist radical right formations have emerged in the region of Osaka, then Tokyo. For now, the dominant post-war party, the Liberal Democratic Party, has regained power under Shinzo Abe. It has benefited from the abstention of disillusioned sectors of the population and an unmerited reputation for good management. The bad news – like the signature of the Trans-Pacific Free Trade Treaty whose social effects will be devastating – was put off until after the electoral period.

Internalisation of the anti-nuclear movement

There is no return to normality in the Fukushima power station. The nuclear crisis is going to last. The civic movement continues its everyday struggles in the archipelago: pickets in front of the head office of Tepco (the operator of Fukushima), filing of complaints by victims, resistance against the reopening of each power station. Last November Japan hosted a second international conference for a nuclear free world. Closer links have been made between the struggles waged in various countries for a nuclear free world, as well as struggles in various countries of the region, like South Korea or India. For the first time, the Asia-Europe Popular Forum has published a declaration in favour of ending nuclear power. March 2013 will be marked by numerous mobilisations for the second anniversary of the disaster.

The shockwaves from Fukushima continue to spread.

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P.S.

* Translation International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>