Hopes and Traps on the Path to a Nuclear-Free Japan: The Fukushima Disaster and Civil Society

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The Fukushima nuclear disaster, which caused complex societal damage, also led to a shift in Japanese public opinion supporting the move away from nuclear power. The nuclear phaseout movement has transcended the traditional framework of Japanese social movements and has the potential to become a new force for reform. However, the Japanese nuclear phaseout is also complicated by the Liberal Democratic Party’s style of rule, the link with nuclear weapons, and the relationship between Tokyo and the areas hosting the nuclear power plants. This article considers the future outlook for an energy shift and political reform in Japan with a focus on the roles of civil society and local leadership. Keywords: nuclear power, civil society, nuclear weapons, Fukushima disaster.

Will the Fukushima nuclear power plant (NPP) disaster lead Japan to a nuclear phaseout? What path of “recovery” will the people of Japan head toward after experiencing unprecedented damage caused by the devastating earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear triple disaster? Will the surge of the anti–nuclear power movement, which surprised the world, be erased through the return to power of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)? In this article I aim to respond to these questions from the experiences and perspective of a civil-society practitioner involved in the nuclear phaseout movement.

First, I outline the complex social damage caused by the Fukushima nuclear disaster and reflect upon major developments within Japanese society since March 11, 2011 (3/11), until today. I then focus on the newly emerged agents for social movements against nuclear power. Following this, I touch upon the link between nuclear power and nuclear weapons, and issues such as conflict within the movement regarding the situation of
Fukushima people affected by the disaster. Finally, I consider the potential for an energy shift and political change in Japan and necessary conditions for these to take place.

**Human Effects of the Fukushima Disaster**

The effects of the Fukushima NPP disaster on Japanese society and its people are not easy to portray fully. Nothing has yet been published that can be said to comprehensively detail the damage caused.

The Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami of 3/11 was a triple disaster, comprising the earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent meltdown of three reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi NPP. The meltdown was caused by loss of power following the tsunami; there is also a strong thesis that the damage to the reactors was in fact caused by the earthquake itself, prior to the tsunami hitting.

The amount of radioactive materials dispersed into the atmosphere following the hydrogen explosions is thought to be at least ten times that of Chernobyl and more than one hundred times that of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Cesium and other radioactive isotopes stuck to nearby soil and buildings, causing widespread contamination. The explosion also caused the problem of uncontrollable highly contaminated water within the nuclear power plant facilities.

In December 2011 the Japanese government announced that the nuclear reactors had been brought to a state of “cold shutdown” and that the situation was under control. However, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo withdrew this statement of resolution of the accident in March 2013. In reality, the situation within the nuclear plant remains extremely unstable, including the still laid-bare spent fuel pool.

Regarding damage caused by radiation, there are no reports of deaths due directly to the effects of radiation. Of the 170,000 children within Fukushima Prefecture who have been tested, twelve have been found to have cancer of the thyroid (*Japan Times* 2013a), though the causal relationship with radiation is not clear.