

Japan - Taking into the streets: Nuclear fear reawaken mass anger

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Compared with the West, and recently the Middle East, which has been swept by civil uprisings, Japan is not commonly known for having large-scale demonstrations or violent antigovernment protests.

But since March 11, when the Great East Japan Earthquake devastated the Tohoku region and triggered the Fukushima nuclear crisis, the public has found a new cause for standing up and demonstrating on a scale unseen since the student protests of the 1960s.

Sept. 19 saw an unprecedented tens of thousands of people gather in Tokyo to protest nuclear power, surprising even the participants.

Below are questions and answers regarding civil unrest in Japan:

How do rallies usually play out?

Small rallies and marches are held virtually daily in front of the prime minister's office, the Diet building and the Kasumigaseki center of the bureaucracy, staged by labor unions and other groups to protest specific government policies.

But since three reactors melted down at the Fukushima No. 1 power plant, Tokyo Electric Power Co. and the government have been targets of growing protests.

Farmers early on in the nuclear fallout crisis protested in front of Tepco's head office, demanding that the utility compensate them for their financial losses.

The largest such demonstration took place Sept. 19, when somewhere between 30,000 and 60,000 protesters, depending on whether one buys the police figures or the rally's organizer, staged an antinuclear march in Tokyo that featured several notable celebrities, including Nobel novelist Kenzaburo Oe and actor and antinuke activist Taro Yamamoto.

Similar demonstrations were held simultaneously in other parts of the nation, including in Fukushima, Nagoya, Fukuoka and Nagasaki.

Yasunari Fujimoto, executive director of the antinuclear organization Japan Congress Against A- and H-Bombs, known as Gensuikin, one of the organizers of the Sept. 19 protests, said more demonstrations are in the works.

"We plan on organizing another gathering in Fukushima Prefecture next March 11, on the one-year anniversary of the disaster," he said, and that gathering will be followed by one in Tokyo on March 24.

Gensuikin and other antinuclear groups are also aiming to gather 10 million signatures to demand that the government no longer rely on nuclear power as a source of energy.

The “Goodbye to Nuclear Power Plants Rally” calls for the cancellation of construction plans for new power plants and the decommissioning of existing atomic plants, particularly Monju and other nuclear reprocessing plants that use plutonium.

“Our final goal is to make the government present a clear road map for getting rid of nuclear power plants,” Fujimoto said.

When in the past did people stage protests?

“Hyakusho ikki” (peasant and farmer uprisings) date back as far as the 12th century Kamakura Period up until the Edo Period (1603-1867).

The uprisings were often driven by anger against heavy taxes and famine that especially victimized peasants, who would gather in sometimes violent demonstrations against the ruling class.

Notable examples are the Ikko Ikki (Ikkoshu Uprisings) of the 15th and 16th century by peasants, farmers and monks - mainly followers of the Jodo Shinshu sect of Buddhism, which taught that all believers face equal salvation by the Amida Buddha - who stood up against samurai rule.

1637 saw the famous Shimabara Rebellion, an uprising of tens of thousands of Christian peasants and farmers against heavy taxation and religious persecution in Shimabara, in what is now Nagasaki Prefecture.

Stephen Vlastos, in his book “Peasant Protests and Uprisings in Tokugawa Japan,” observes that peasant protests markedly increased toward the latter part of the Edo Period.

“The number of protests rose from an average of 4.9 per year in the 17th century to 11.8 in the 18th century, and to 14.8 between 1800 and 1868,” he writes, explaining that the “frequency and intensity” of such protests peaked at the time of the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

However, Vlastos points out that despite the increasing frequency of protests toward the end of the Edo Period, they were mainly directed against wealthy commoners and not the ruling class.

“For the most part, peasants were observers and not actors in the ensuing revolution,” he writes.

What has motivated modern demonstrations?

Following the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and Japan’s rapid industrialization, the Taisho Era (1912-1926) saw the establishment of a two-party political system which had been developing since the turn of the century and a more democratic system of government.

Students and academics, backed by labor unions and influenced by a variety of Western schools of thoughts imported at the time, staged public demonstrations calling for universal male suffrage.

And following World War II and in the 1960s, various leftist student movements erupted, many led by members of the All-Japan Federation of Student Self Government Associations (or Zengakuren) and other organizations.

In 1960, violent demonstrations were organized by students opposing the revised Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, which critics feared would force Japan to fight in future wars involving the United States.

In the late 1960s, students demonstrated against the Vietnam War and the U.S. military presence in

Okinawa, and staged numerous protests calling for university reforms.

In one famous incident, 400 students were arrested by police in 1969 for occupying the University of Tokyo's Yasuda Hall.

How did those protests turn out?

The student protests in the 1960s eventually lost momentum with the end of the Vietnam War and as some of the more radical student groups turned to terrorist acts, most notably the Red Army Faction, known for hijacking a Japan Airlines plane to North Korea in 1970, as well as numerous other terrorist attacks, some deadly.

While student movements continued in the 1970s through events such as opposition to construction of Narita International Airport, they have not been as intense or widespread in recent years.

Could the antinuclear protests lead to real change in the nation's nuclear policy?

That is yet to be seen.

Taro Kono, a Lower House lawmaker of the Liberal Democratic Party, told reporters on April 26 that instead of holding mass demonstrations, a more effective approach would be for the people to directly visit the offices of lawmakers to express their views on nuclear policy.

Kono said both the ruling Democratic Party of Japan and the LDP are beneficiaries of major electric utilities and naturally lean toward protecting their vested interests.

"Rather than 1 million people engaging in demonstrations, I believe it is far more effective if 1 million people went to the offices of politicians and directly told lawmakers or their secretaries their views on the issue, and tell them that unless they consider shifting sources of energy, they would not be receiving your support," he said.

ALEX MARTIN, *Japan Times Staff writer*

P.S.

* Japan Times Staff, October 12, 2011

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