

Calls for Japanese PM to resign over nuclear crisis

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Pressure has been mounting on Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan over the past week to step aside over his handling of the crisis produced by the March 11 earthquake and tsunami. Criticisms have come from the opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and, even more significantly, from within his own Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ).

The move against Kan is being fuelled by public discontent and anger over the government's inadequate response to the disaster. The death toll is now over 14,000 and continues to rise as more bodies are found. Another 13,660 are still missing. Many towns and villages on the north-eastern coast have been obliterated, with an estimated 47,776 buildings collapsed and another 11,030 partially collapsed. Around 150,000 people are living in emergency shelters, but many more have been forced to find accommodation elsewhere.

It is, however, Kan's response to the ongoing crisis at the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear plant that has prompted the greatest public criticism. The longstanding collusion between the plant operator, energy giant Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), nuclear regulators and government, combined with the continuing lack of information, has fuelled suspicions about the actions of the company and the Kan administration. Even by TEPCO's optimistic estimates, it will be at least six months before four damaged reactors at the Fukushima plant can be properly stabilised.

A series of opinion polls conducted last weekend confirmed strong public hostility to the government's handling of the nuclear crisis. A telephone survey by the *Asahi Shimbun* found that 67 percent of respondents disapproved of the government response, while only 16 percent expressed approval. In a poll by the *Mainichi Shimbun*, 58 percent of respondents said they did not trust government information on the nuclear accident and 78 percent that Kan had not shown leadership in dealing with

the disaster.

Another poll carried out by the *Nikkei* business daily found that nearly 70 percent of people surveyed wanted Kan to be replaced as prime minister. Even before the earthquake struck, support for the DPJ-led coalition had sunk to an all-time low. In the *Asahi* survey, approval for the government rose marginally to 21 percent, up 1 percent from the newspaper's previous poll in February.

Hostility to Kan and his government was expressed in the first round of local elections on April 10, in which DPJ-backed candidates failed to win key governorships and the party did not gain a majority in any of the 41 contested prefectural assemblies. Significantly, however, the LDP failed to make significant gains and its overall tally of prefectural seats dropped by more than 100, reflecting widespread alienation from the political establishment as a whole.

Last week in the wake of the local elections, the LDP began to call for Kan to step down. Previously, the opposition party had been cautious, not wanting to be seen as exploiting the national tragedy for political ends. As Waseda University academic Etsushi Tanifuji noted in comments to the *Wall Street Journal*: "The Japanese voters would have never forgiven [lawmakers] if they carried over their squabbling into crisis management."

Seeking to capitalise on this sentiment, Kan called for national unity and earlier this month appealed to the LDP to form a grand coalition to deal with the crisis. Despite pressure within the opposition's ranks to agree, LDP president Sadakuza Tanigaki declined, preferring to keep his distance from the tainted administration.

Tanigaki has now gone on the offensive. Last Thursday, he told the media: "The time has come for [Kan] to decide whether he stays or not." Criticising Kan's response to the

nuclear crisis, he said: “It would be extremely sorrowful [if Kan stayed].” Ignoring the LDP’s own poor performance, Tanigaki declared that the vote had been “an expression of the people’s distrust in [Kan’s] handling of the disaster.”

Kan is also under fire within his own party, with the DPJ’s upper house speaker, Takeo Nishioka, last week calling for him to quit for failing to properly handle the aftermath of the triple disaster—earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis. According to the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, LDP legislator Bunmei Ibuki reported to fellow parliamentarians that some Democrats had asked the LDP “to help topple the Kan administration.”

The remark is especially significant as it followed a document by DPJ strongman Ichiro Ozawa, leaked to the press last week, that was highly critical of Kan’s handling of the disaster. Ozawa wrote that the government’s response had been slow and compounded the crisis. “No signs of Prime Minister Kan’s leadership are seen in the measures that the irresponsible administration is taking, and the damage from the disaster may spread further,” he stated.

Turning to the local election result, Ozawa declared: “The huge defeat in the first half of local elections means the public is warning Kan’s cabinet.” According to the *Japan Times*, “Ozawa reportedly pointed out to his close aides that a binding no-confidence motion against Kan in the lower house would be needed to force Kan to step down. Such a move would require 70 to 80 DPJ parliamentarians crossing the floor to vote with the opposition.

Just last September Kan fended off a challenge by Ozawa for the top job that revealed deep divisions within the DPJ over foreign policy and economic strategy. The DPJ won the 2009 election in a landslide, ending half a century of virtually unbroken LDP rule by promising to improve living standards and to adopt an international stance more independent of the US.

Support for the DPJ-led government quickly began to slide, however, as former Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama failed to keep his promises. He was forced to step down last June after caving in to pressure from Washington to allow a controversial US Marine base to remain on the island of Okinawa despite mass protests demanding its removal. After becoming prime minister, Kan reaffirmed that the base would stay on Okinawa and has strengthened ties with Washington.

The conflict over the US base highlights the dilemma

confronting the Japanese political establishment. Since the end of World War II, Japan has depended strategically on its military alliance with the US. The economic rise of China, which overtook Japan last year to become the world’s second largest economy, has fundamentally altered relations in East Asia. While wary about the emergence of an Asian rival, Japan is now economically dependent on China as its number one trading partner.

Ozawa’s challenge to Kan last year reflected basic differences in orientation. During the contest, Ozawa declared that he would renegotiate a deal with Washington to shift the US base off Okinawa. While pledging continued support for the US-Japan alliance, he called for a more independent foreign policy and improved relations with China. At the same time, he opposed Kan’s plan for a higher consumption tax and ditching the party’s election promises to boost social spending.

While Ozawa was defeated, the vote among DPJ legislators—as opposed to other party delegates—was extremely close at 206 for Kan against 200 for Ozawa. Moreover, the underlying issues remained unresolved and have only been sharpened in the aftermath of the March 11 earthquake. Japan’s economy is expected to shrink sharply in the second quarter, which only compounds its economic reliance on China.

Washington’s preference for Kan was evident last Sunday when he met with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on the first leg of her Asian tour. While not openly campaigning for Kan, Clinton was effusive in her praise of the Japanese response to the crisis, saying: “We are very confident that Japan will recover and that it will be a very strong economic and global player for years and decades to come.” She pledged Washington’s “steadfast support” to Japan to overcome the impact of the earthquake and reiterated that the US-Japan military alliance remained the “cornerstone” of security in East Asia.

Facing a potential leadership challenge, Kan expressed his “sincere appreciation” for US assistance in dealing with the disaster.



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