

Japanese PM sacks three top nuclear officials

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In a bid to revive his political fortunes, Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan last Thursday dismissed three top officials in charge of the country's nuclear policy. The move came amid widespread concern and anger over the ongoing nuclear disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi plant since the March 11 earthquake and tsunami.

The officials were Nobuaki Terasaka, head of the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA), the country's main nuclear regulatory body; Kazuo Matsunaga, vice minister of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI); and Tetsuhiro Hosono, director-general of the Natural Resources and Energy Agency (NREA).

Critics have long pointed to the incestuous relationship between METI, one of Japan's most powerful ministries, and energy corporations such as Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), which owns and operates the Fukushima plant. METI not only promotes nuclear energy via NREA, but is also responsible for nuclear regulation through NISA. On retirement, a number of top METI officials have taken up positions with companies such as TEPCO.

TEPCO, the largest energy corporation in Asia, is notorious for serious breaches of safety, systematic cover-ups and the persecution of whistleblowers. Its failure to heed warnings about the potentially disastrous consequences of a tsunami contributed to the catastrophe at the Fukushima plant. A giant wave swamped backup generators, producing a complete power failure and partial meltdown in three nuclear reactors.

Former METI official Hiroyuki Kishi, now a professor at Keio University, told *Bloomberg* that the decision to dismiss the three officials was purely "cosmetic," pointing out that they were due to leave the ministry as part of a regular reshuffle. "To account for the huge mess at Fukushima, they should fire all the director generals in the ministry, or dismantle it entirely," he said.

Five months after the nuclear disaster first emerged, TEPCO, supervised by NISA, remains in charge of operations to bring the Fukushima plant under control. The crisis is far from over, with the ongoing efforts to restore cooling systems to three

crippled nuclear reactors impeded by debris, damaged instrumentation and high radiation levels. Over the past week, TEPCO workers have detected radiation levels in unit 1 of 10 sieverts an hour—40 times the maximum dose of 250 millisieverts allowed for Japanese nuclear employees in a year.

The sackings came after revelations last week that NISA had recently encouraged power companies to send representatives to a symposium on nuclear power to try to counter public hostility and suspicion. METI minister Banri Kaieda has also announced that he intends to resign after replacing the three officials, and to shake up the nuclear regulatory structure by making NISA independent of METI.

Nuclear operators are confronting determined opposition, particularly from local authorities, to the restarting of reactors. Currently only 16 of the country's 54 nuclear reactors are on-line, with the remainder either shut down following the March 11 earthquake or closed for scheduled maintenance.

In a bid to reassure a sceptical public, Prime Minister Kan recently announced "stress tests" for reactors before bringing them back on-line. There is no guarantee, however, that public opposition to nuclear power will be overcome. By next May, all 16 of the nuclear plants presently operating are due to shut down for maintenance.

Kan has sought to capitalise on public opposition to the nuclear power industry by declaring that Japan should wind back its dependence on nuclear energy and boost the use of renewable energy sources. Before the Fukushima disaster, the government had planned to expand the share of nuclear power in the country's energy supply from 30 percent to 50 percent. With the shutdown of plants, the proportion has now fallen to 18 percent.

A widening debate has opened up on "datsu-genpatsu" or "shedding nuclear power," with a major editorial in the *Asahi Shimbun* calling for a turn toward liquefied natural gas and the longer-term development of solar and geothermal energy sources. However, business groups have warned that investment uncertainty and higher electricity costs will lower economic growth, lead companies to shift production offshore

and contribute to higher unemployment.

The government announced a bailout plan for TEPCO last Wednesday that will establish a state-backed body to provide compensation for people impacted by the nuclear disaster. The government will initially contribute 2 trillion yen (\$US24 billion) to the fund but the final figure is expected to be far higher. More than 80,000 people have been forced to leave their homes and businesses inside the 20-kilometre evacuation zone around the Fukushima plant. The impact of nuclear contamination on agriculture and the fishing industry is much wider.

The corporate elites are nervous that Kan is seeking to find a way out of the political crisis confronting his government by playing the anti-nuclear card. Kan narrowly survived a no-confidence motion by the opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in early June by promising to resign as prime minister once steps had been taken to overcome the nuclear crisis. The pledge was enough to prevent opposition factions within his own Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) from voting with the LDP.

Parliament implemented one of Kan's three nominated steps last Monday with the passage of a second supplemental budget for the fiscal year 2011 for reconstruction in areas devastated by the earthquake and tsunami. But the two remaining steps—the passage of a bill to promote renewable energy and another to permit the issuing of bonds to cover the deficit for the current fiscal year—are yet to be taken. The opposition LDP, which controls the parliamentary upper house, is insisting that the government drop promised social programs as a condition for allowing bonds to be issued.

Kan has refused to name a date on which he will step down, and might yet seek to cling to office. His standing in opinion polls was already low before the earthquake and sank further amid public anger over his government's incompetence in dealing with the nuclear disaster. A Kyodo poll on July 25 found that support for Kan had slumped to 17.1 percent, down from 23.2 percent in June.

However, the same poll found that more than 70 percent of respondents supported Kan's policy of winding back Japan's dependence on nuclear power. That result has prompted speculation that the prime minister might outmanoeuvre his opponents inside and outside the Democrats by calling a snap election and running on an anti-nuclear policy—perhaps even with a dramatic announcement today, the anniversary of the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima. To date, Kan has ruled out an early election.

Expressing the frustration in financial circles in Japan and

internationally, the British-based *Economist* magazine published an article last week entitled “Japan's hopeless politics: nuclear options” with an underline “The uncanny stickability of Japan's prime minister.” After noting Kan's rockbottom poll ratings, it observed: “One of his advisers, however, points out that most other politicians score even lower in the polls. Mr Kan's unpopularity is a symptom of a deeper problem: a loss of faith in politics generally.”

The political crisis facing the Kan government and Japanese establishment as a whole is being compounded by the deepening worldwide economic turmoil. This week the government intervened heavily in international money markets in an effort to prevent the yen from climbing further against the US dollar and hitting Japanese exports. At the same time, Japanese shares slumped amid the sharp global decline in stock markets. While various analysts are predicting an economic recovery in Japan later in the year, figures to be released on August 15 are expected to show an annualised contraction of around 2.6 percent for the second quarter.

Japan's economic stagnation is fuelling deep divisions in the Kan government and the political elite more broadly. Kan's chief opponent inside the Democrats, Ichiro Ozawa, has supported an expansion of public spending and favours closer ties with China as a means of boosting the economy. Kan has fostered closer relations with the US and implemented a number of economic restructuring measures. Sections of Japanese business, however, are demanding far more extensive austerity measures, as championed by the LDP.

The worsening economic crisis, coming on top of the disastrous earthquake, will produce more active opposition not only to the government, but the political establishment as a whole. As the *Economist* cautiously noted, what characterises the political climate in Japan is a generalised suspicion, hostility and distrust of all the major political parties.



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