

Japanese nuclear reactor re-activated despite mass protest

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A Japanese nuclear power reactor restarted on Sunday—the first to reopen since the March 2011 Fukushima earthquake disaster—despite deepening popular opposition, reflected in a huge demonstration last Friday.

Organisers estimated that between 150,000 and 180,000 people joined the rally outside Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda's official residence in central Tokyo, making it one of the largest protests in Japan in recent years. The turnout by far exceeded the estimated 45,000 people who attended a rally the week before.

The *Asahi Shimbun* reported that chants of “Saikado hantai! (We oppose the restart of the reactors) filled the streets. A wide cross-section of people, including mothers with children, pensioners and businessmen, carried placards and banners denouncing the government's decision last month to order the reactivation of two reactors at Oi, on Japan's western shore.

A 36-year-old woman who brought her two young children to the rally told the newspaper it was the first such rally she had attended. “The government never cares about our lives,” she said. “I have been a silent observer so far, but I cannot stand aside any longer.” Her comments reflect a broad distrust of the political establishment, which has brushed aside widely-held safety and health concerns.

Police sought to downplay the size of the rally, claiming that 17,000 people were involved. But the crowd blocked off a six-lane road and adjoining streets. Police parked five armoured riot control buses outside Noda's compound to prevent protesters entering it, and

several helicopters circled overhead.

On the same day, smaller rallies were held in other cities, including Osaka, Nagoya, Nagasaki and Kumamoto. On Sunday, another 10,000-strong demonstration took place in Tokyo, and about 700 protesters blockaded the entrance to the Oi facility.

These demonstrations, organised primarily via social media, undoubtedly give voice to a wider public sentiment. A June 5 Pew opinion poll found 70 percent of respondents favouring a reduction in the country's dependence on nuclear energy.

Nevertheless, the protests failed to stop the restarting of the No. 3 reactor at Oi. Kansai Electric Power Co (KEPCO), the utility that operates the plant, said on its web site that a nuclear reaction occurred on Sunday, a key step toward electricity generation.

Seishu Makino, Japan's senior vice industry minister, defied the protest blockade at Oi to attend the reopening, standing alongside KEPCO vice president Hideki Toyomatsu in order to underscore the government's determination to proceed.

KEPCO's second approved reactor at Oi—No. 4—is due to go online as early as July 17. Other reactors are already being lined up to follow, including those operated by Tokyo Electric Power Co (TEPCO), the company responsible for the Fukushima catastrophe.

All of Japan's 50 reactors had been shut down since May, certainly for maintenance or upgrading; but significantly due to the public unease produced by last year's partial meltdown of three Fukushima reactors,

which forced about 87,000 residents to evacuate their homes.

Even as KEPCO's No. 3 Oi reactor was being reactivated, TEPCO reported another problem at the crippled Fukushima plant. The company said the cooling system for the spent nuclear fuel pool at its reactor No. 4 broke down on Saturday, and a temporary system was set up on Sunday. TEPCO said the cooling system had to be restored, or temperatures would have risen beyond safe levels.

Last week, TEPCO's shareholders formally accepted a one trillion yen (\$US12 billion) bailout by the government, based on a business plan that assumes the company can restart reactors at its Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant in Niigata Prefecture by next April. This assumption, combined with TEPCO's ongoing record of denying culpability for last year's disaster and its delays in negotiating compensation for the victims, shows that nothing much will change, as far as TEPCO is concerned. TEPCO has a long proven record of covering up or downplaying nuclear accidents.

Most media outlets have incorrectly described the TEPCO bailout as a nationalisation. The government now has a majority stake in the company, but the conglomerate will continue to run as a profit-making corporation, working in close partnership with other businesses and financiers.

Noda's Democratic Party of Japan government claims that all restarted reactors will undergo "stress tests" to ensure their safety, yet essential emergency infrastructure is not in place, and a proposed new Nuclear Regulatory Authority has yet to commence. Among the basic facilities still lacking are raised seawalls to shield reactors from tsunamis, on-site command centres and radiation monitoring equipment and medical supplies in enlarged evacuation zones.

Moreover, Japan is one of the most earthquake-prone regions on the planet. Two seismologists, Mitsuhsa Watanabe of Toyo University, and Katsuhiko Ishibashi, professor emeritus at Kobe University, last week warned that KEPCO's Oi plant sits atop four major tectonic faults, and one minor one. KEPCO's

emergency procedures foresee only two faults moving at once. The plant is located on Wakasa Bay, home to 13 reactors and not far from two major cities, Kyoto and Osaka.

Noda's government has sought to justify the rush to reopen reactors by arguing that its concern is for ordinary people, insisting that acute power shortages will occur this summer. Prior to the Fukushima disaster, Japan drew nearly 30 percent of its energy from nuclear power. The government has also attempted to sway opinion by warning that household electricity bills would double by 2030 if the country went nuclear-free. Yet, its trillion-yen TEPCO bailout has demonstrated where its true priorities lie—with the corporate elite.

Across Japan, the Fukushima catastrophe has reinforced deeply-felt fears about the destructive and deadly dangers of nuclear technology, held since the US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The political and corporate elite, with the government essentially backed by the opposition Liberal Democratic Party, are riding roughshod over these concerns. Similarly, while it is rescuing TEPCO, the government is doubling the highly unpopular consumption tax to 10 percent. Last Friday's mass protest in Tokyo points to intensifying public disaffection with the pro-corporate political establishment as a whole.



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