Ex-prime minister joins Japanese anti-nuclear protest

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Former Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama joined an anti-nuclear demonstration outside his old office last Friday. His participation was an obvious bid to politically exploit the mounting protest movement against the reactivation of the country's nuclear reactors. But it was also a further sign of a deepening government crisis over the intense popular opposition to its pro-nuclear energy stance and other pro-business policies.

Ever-larger protests have been held each week since incumbent Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda last month gave the go-ahead to begin restarting idled reactors despite persistent public safety concerns following last year's Fukushima earthquake and nuclear crisis. The government's rush to reopen the nuclear units, even before new safety regulations have been drafted, re-activated the protests.

According to *Asahi Shimbun*, about 90,000 people protested outside the prime minister's office last Friday. The demonstration was the 16th in a row, every Friday night, and the number of participants has grown sharply from the 300 who attended the first protest in March.

In addition, on Monday last week, up to 170,000 protesters took to the streets in Tokyo, making it one of the largest rallies in Japan since the 1960s. Even the police estimate of the crowd, accepted by the state broadcaster NHK, was 75,000. Many participants had directed particular ire at Noda. "Noda! We're angry!" read one banner. "Noda, step down!" was a common chant.

Alongside political activists, the demonstrations have attracted many newcomers to public protest, ranging from young parents to the elderly. Maki Sekiguchi, a Tokyo office worker attending Monday's rally with her husband and small child, told the *Financial Times* she had never been part of a demonstration before recently joining the Friday night crowds around the prime minister's office. She was sceptical that the protests would persuade the government to halt reactor restarts, but "we feel we have to do something."

At Friday's protest, Hatoyama postured as an advocate for ordinary people. "It is truly regrettable that the voices of all of you gathered here today are so far removed from politics and the prime minister's office," he said, surrounded by reporters. "As a former prime minister ... I want to take your message inside the prime minister's office."

Hatoyama's gesture was cheered by some protesters but dismissed by others as grandstanding. "He can come here and say something impressive but it doesn't really matter," Osamu Arai, a 65-year-old construction worker, told Reuters. "This is a grass roots movement. Things change very slowly in Japan, but we must continue to protest."

Just a day later, the determination of the government and the nuclear industry to proceed, regardless of the protests, was underscored. Kansai Electric Power Company (KEPCO) said the 1,180-megawatt No. 4 reactor at its Oi nuclear plant resumed supplying electricity, making it Japan's second nuclear unit to do so since the Fukushima crisis eventually led to the shutdown of all reactors. KEPCO's Oi No. 3 unit had resumed power output on July 5, despite a mass protest (see: "Japanese nuclear reactor re-activated despite mass protest").

It is just over a year since the world's second worst nuclear disaster, after Chernobyl in 1986. The Fukushima plant, 240 kilometres north of Tokyo, was hit on March

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11 last year by an earthquake and tsunami that knocked out its power supply and swamped backup power and cooling systems, resulting in partial meltdowns of three of its six reactors. More than 80,000 people were forced to evacuate as still-unknown amounts of radiation escaped into the atmosphere.

Reports are continuing to emerge about efforts to cover up the extent of the radiation emitted during the emergency. *Asahi Shimbun* this week documented how workers at the Fukushima No. 1 unit were ordered to cover their pocket-sized dosimeters with lead plates to keep radiation measurements low enough to keep working under unsafe conditions.

Some refused the orders. Others raised questions about their safety and the legality of the practice. But the man in charge, a senior official of a subcontractor of Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), the plant's operator, warned them that they would lose their jobs—and any chance of employment at other nuclear plants—if they failed to comply.

The final report of a government-appointed panel into the catastrophe, released yesterday, stated that TEPCO was still failing to ensure the safety of its nuclear operations. "Even more than a year after the disaster, TEPCO isn't showing a sufficient amount of willingness to investigate the accident thoroughly in order to avoid a recurrence of such disasters," the panel concluded.

The report, however, largely traced the lines of an interim version released in June. It laid no charges and shed no new light on the many questions that remain unanswered about the disaster, saying it was no closer to finding out exactly how, when and where the biggest leakage of radioactive materials occurred.

Noting an attempt by the official regulator, the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency, to play down the possibility of reactor meltdowns, the report said government officials made "misleading" remarks early in the crisis that were "extremely inappropriate."

Yet, the report barely touched on the "regulatory capture"—the systematic collusion of the regulators with electricity companies—that an earlier report from a parliamentary investigation had identified as the basic cause of the disaster. This omission makes it unlikely that the government's new regulatory agency, still to be established, will be any different from the previous one.

The ex-prime minister's decision to identify with the anti-nuclear demonstrations highlights the fact that the popular opposition to the government's nuclear policy is fuelling divisions in the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), already split over its deeply unpopular plan to double the consumption tax to 10 percent and moves to join the US-led Pan-Pacific free trade pact.

Hatoyama took office in 2009 when the DPJ formed a government for the first time, ousting the discredited Liberal Democratic Party, which had spent five decades in power. But he was forced to resign after just nine months in office, primarily because he had abandoned, under intense pressure from Washington, a campaign promise to move a US military base off the southern island of Okinawa.

Earlier last week, three members of parliament's upper house left the DPJ, citing opposition to the reactor restarts, the consumption tax and the free trade pact. They were the latest Diet members to break away after former DPJ leader Ichiro Ozawa led 50 out of the DPJ, also opposing the consumption tax and promising to gradually lower Japan's reliance on nuclear power. Hatoyama has hinted that his faction might follow suit (see: "Japan's ruling Democratic Party splits").

Noda's government is scheduled to decide on a new energy policy next month to replace a 2010 blueprint that had sought to raise nuclear power's share to more than half of electricity generation by 2030, from about 30 percent before the Fukushima crisis. Analysts expect Noda to opt for a 15 percent share by 2030, an option that would require the restart of all 50 of Japan's reactors, before gradually closing older units.

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