Can Japan's Anti-Nuclear Protesters Keep the Reactors Shut Down?
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By Lucy Birmingham / Tokyo

Japanese Nobel literature prize winner Kenzaburo Oe, 2nd left, holds a banner alongside three others in an anti-nuclear demonstration, in Tokyo on September 19, 2011.

For months after a devastating earthquake and tsunami crippled Japan's Fukushima power plant, sparking fears of a possible nuclear meltdown, the country's anti-nuclear groups struggled to be heard. A few small rallies were held, but they failed to generate much media coverage. As debates raged from Germany to China about the safety of nuclear reactors, commentary in Japan, of all places, was strangely absent. Protests are just that unusual in this conservative country.

But this is starting to change. As Fukushima continues to spew more radioactivity into the air and trust in the government and Tokyo Electric Power Co. plunges, the mood in Japan is slowly shifting away from nuclear power. On Sept. 19, the mounting anger and fear culminated in a rally of some 60,000 anti-nuclear protesters in Tokyo — the largest such gathering since the March 11 quake and tsunami. The protesters included the elderly, families with children and a large contingent from the towns near the reactor. A surprising number were local government officials and members of RENGO, the 6.8-million-strong federation of labor unions. "Normally RENGO never goes against nuclear power because many members are nuclear industry employees," says Satoshi Kamata, a journalist and atomic energy opponent who organized the rally. "I'm guessing about 10,000 to 15,000 RENGO members were at the rally."(See photos of the tsunami hitting the Fukushima plant.)

Kamata also made sure there was a celebrity factor, inviting Nobel Prize-winning author Kenzaburo Oe, composer Ryuichi Sakamoto and other high-profile figures to participate to try to attract more media attention. The outpouring of support shows just how angry and frustrated people are, he says. "They don't want to feel powerless anymore. They want to make a change," he says. "This rally was a totally new phenomenon. It's not just an anti-nuclear energy movement, but the beginning of a large-scale protest by ordinary people, a historic people's movement."

Fueling the fear was former Prime Minster Naoto Kan's Sept. 6 revelation of a worst-case scenario government report he received just after the Fukushima crisis began stating that a massive evacuation of Tokyo's 30 million residents could have been necessary. The plant sits just 130 miles northeast of Tokyo. "It was a crucial moment when I wasn't sure whether Japan could continue to function as a state," he said in an interview with the Tokyo Shimbun, a daily newspaper. "When I think of safety not being outweighed by risk, the answer is not to rely on nuclear."

At the beginning of the year, Japan had 54 nuclear reactors providing about 29% of the country's energy needs. An additional 14 plants were in the pipeline, with the hopes that nuclear power would meet over half of the country's energy demands by 2030. After the Fukushima crisis, however, Kan began pushing hydroelectric, wind and solar power, endorsing a plan to increase alternative energy production from the current 9% to 20% by 2020. His last mandate before resigning in August was to push through Parliament a new law promoting renewable energy. (Read about how to stop a nuclear reactor meltdown.)

But just as the anti-nuclear movement is gaining traction and support for renewable energy is on the rise, the new prime minister is signaling his intention to get Japan's

reactors up and running again. At a high-level meeting on nuclear safety and security during last week's U.N. General Assembly, Yoshihiko Noda spoke of the country's continuing need for nuclear energy. "We will raise the safety of nuclear plants to the highest level," he said. Then, in an interview with The Wall Street Journal on Sept. 21, he talked about restarting the country's idle reactors in the spring. "If we have a power shortage, it will drag down Japan's overall economy," he said. Nuclear energy critics argue, however, that Japan would be just fine next year because the country managed with fewer than a third of its reactors operating this summer. When asked about this by The Wall Street Journal, Noda replied: "That's absolutely impossible."

A showdown between politicians and concerned citizens may be in the making. On Monday, the city of Makinohara in Shizuoka Prefecture drew widespread attention after it passed a resolution to permanently shut down the nearby Hamaoka nuclear power plant. A similar resolution had already been adopted by the three other municipalities in the prefecture and six major companies, including Suzuki, have said they may leave the area because of concerns over the plant. Hamaoka's three reactors went offline as part of a government safety mandate following the Fukushima accident. But despite the fact seismologists have described the ageing plant as among the most dangerous in the world because of its position on top of two major fault lines, operator Chubu Electric Power Co. has announced plans to restart it. It's now building a 60-foot-tall levee to protect the plant from a possible tsunami.

Some activists are now pushing for a national referendum on nuclear power. In a Sept. 21 poll conducted by the Mainichi Shimbun, a major newspaper, nearly two-thirds of respondents indicated they wanted a vote on whether the country should continue to rely so heavily on nuclear power. In his speech at the anti-nuclear rally earlier this month, Kenzaburo Oe pointed to a referendum Italy held in June in which the country voted down the prospect of building new reactors. The Japanese people, too, should be given the right to vote, he said. "What is now clear is this: in Italy, human life will not be threatened by nuclear energy anymore. We Japanese, however, must continue to live under the fear of nuclear disaster."

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