

## <Commentaries> The Paradox of Civil Society: Japan after the 3.11 Disaster

journal or publication title	Inter Faculty
volume	7
page range	195-202
year	2016-09-10
URL	<a href="http://doi.org/10.15068/00147470">http://doi.org/10.15068/00147470</a>

# **The Paradox of Civil Society: Japan after the 3.11 Disaster**

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## **Abstract**

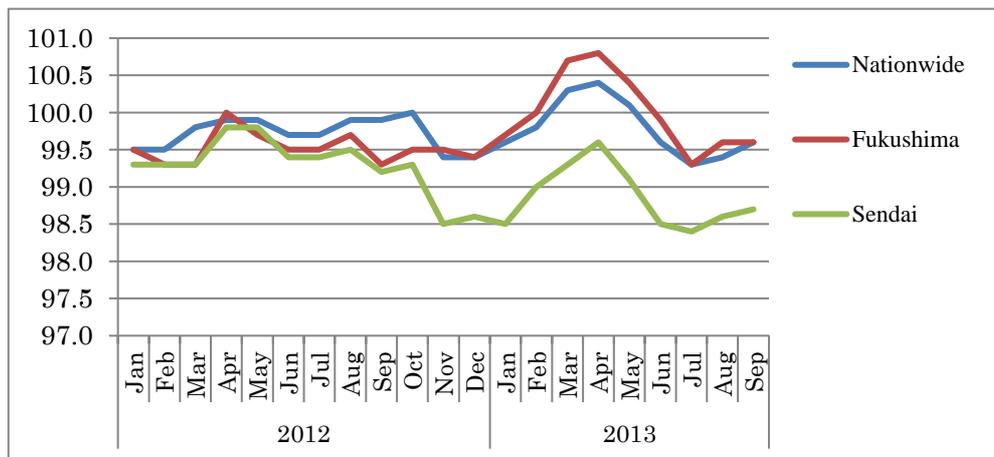
*Some considerations on the paradox presented by Japanese civil society in the context of the 3.11 triple disaster that hit Japan in 2011.*

**Keywords:** civil society, myth of nuclear plant safety, thick social capital, non-decision making strategy

## **1. Janus of the 3.11 disaster**

The tragic disaster of 3.11 was Janus-faced. On the one hand, there was the natural aspect of the huge earthquakes and tsunami endured by the Japanese people; the world showed admiration for their bravery. On the other hand, there was the artificial aspect in terms of series of accidents involving nuclear power plants built by men and their secrecy that has frustrated the citizens of the world.

The earthquake and tsunami took many lives, but it was Japan's civil society that helped limit the damage and provide support for the survivors. For instance, due to the indispensable role civil society organizations played in Japan at the time, there were no occurrences of opportunistic price rise in Japanese consumer goods. In fact on the contrary, the price of goods in the stricken areas such as Fukushima and Sendai went down, as can be seen in figure 1. below.



(Yoji Inaba 2015: 17)

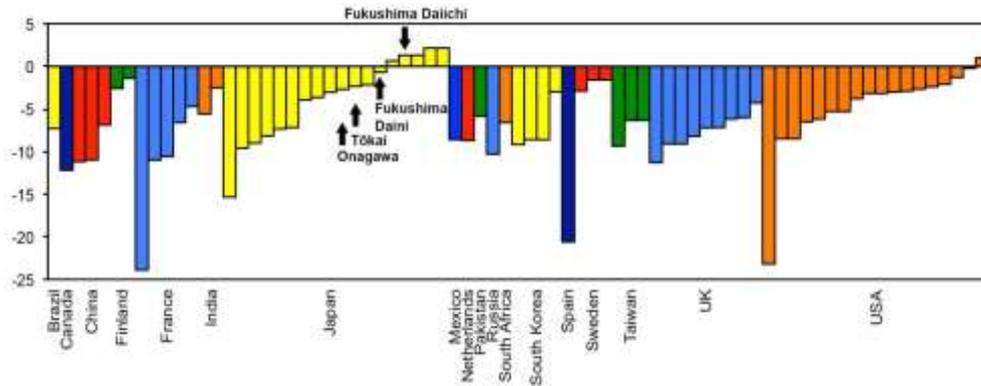
**Fig. 1: Consumer Price Before and After 3.11**

What happened on 3.11 and its aftermath showed that disasters can be devastating but that they can also bring out the best in people and civil society. The international community expressed its admiration for Japanese people and society for the way in which they cooperated and confronted their hardships and difficulties.

However, nuclear power plants have had a continuous history of problems which are still ongoing in Japan. It is still difficult to evaluate the damage from the nuclear accidents and the problems are likely to continue for many years. In spite of its high technology and the diligent and sincere labor attitude of its people, Japan did not know how to cope with the series of accidents at the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) Fukushima Daiichi Plant, the severity of which was rated ‘level 7’, the highest on the International Nuclear and Radiological Event Scale. Behavior by political leaders in the cabinet as well as the TEPCO CEOs revealed their lack of preparedness in terms of crisis management.

One shocking example concerning the problem of the nuclear power plants is shown in figure 2. below. The figure compares eighty-nine nuclear power plants located along coastlines of twenty countries for height of sea wall and average height of the biggest waves recorded within a 150 kilometer radius.

This figure shows the average big-wave heights minus sea wall heights. For the safety of nuclear power plants, we prefer negative numbers, but we find that five of the six nuclear plants with insufficient sea wall heights are Japanese, including the Fukushima Daiichi. This clearly indicates that Japanese nuclear plants are extremely vulnerable.



(Lipsy et.al. 2013: 6086)

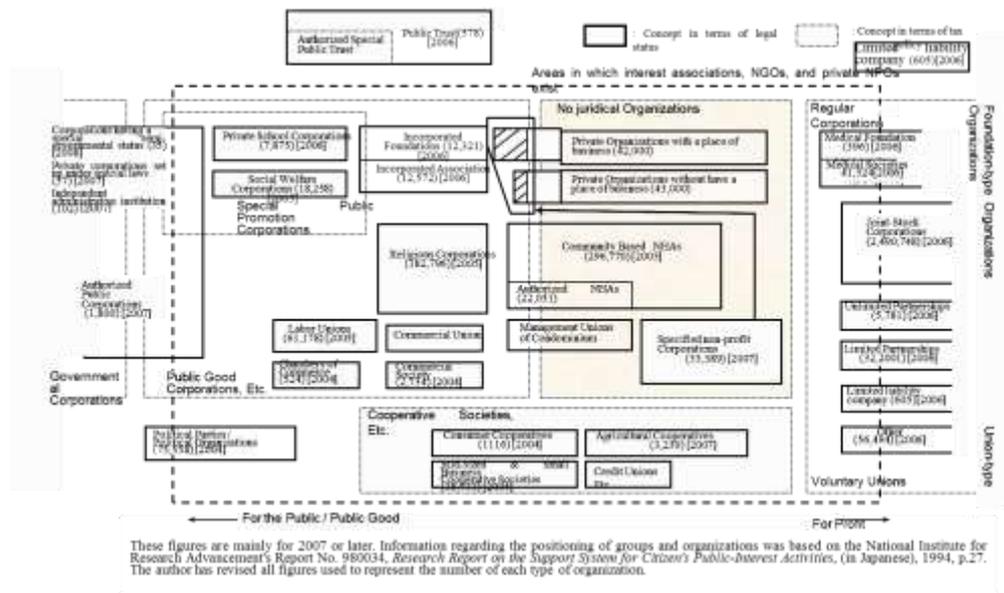
**Fig. 2: Comparison of Nuclear Power Plants in 20 Countries  
Sea Wall Height vs. Average Wave Height**

Now my question is: what could account for such contrasting faces of the 3.11 disaster?

## 2. Two faces of Civil Society in Japan

I would like to answer the question from the perspective of civil society. My answer to which actually reveals the face and reverse-side of Japanese civil society and liberal democracy.

Figure 3. below maps out Japanese civil society around 2007. Except for government-related organizations, private companies, and organizations located in the left and right-hand areas of the map, our JIGS survey (Tsujinaka and Kubo 2013) can analyze almost all civil society organizations, especially those located in the center of the map.



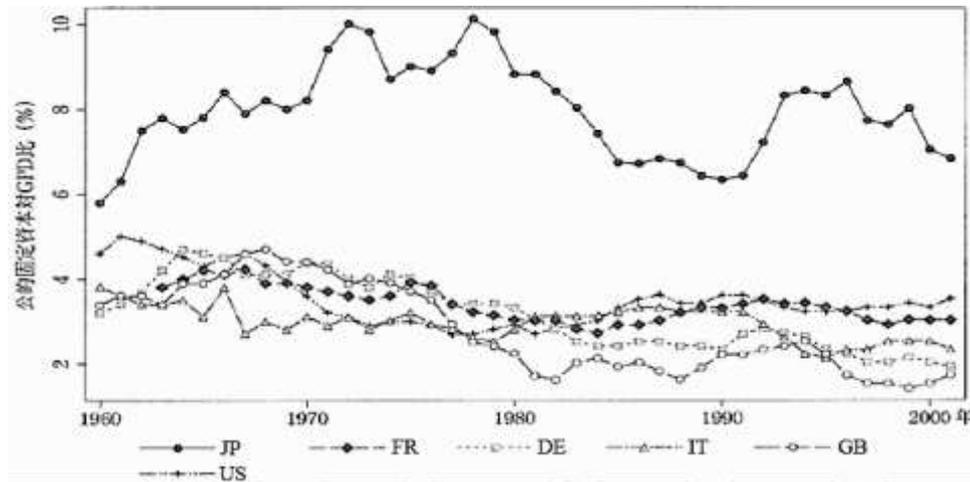
**Fig. 3: Civil Society Map of Japan**

Japanese civil society has very thick and stubborn grass-roots associations. The typical example is the 300,000 Neighborhood Associations (NHA, *Jichikai* or *Chonakai*) which constitute the key source of social capital, functioning as hubs of various community organizations. They also provide infrastructure for the well-being of the people, (located in the right-central grey area of the map).

Socially and economically speaking, there also exist a variety of socio-economic organizations that can be characterized as half-private and half-public based on more than 100 specific laws in Japan. In addition, there are many other straightforward private associations (in the forms of incorporated associations, foundations, chambers of commerce, etc.). The long dominance of the LDP since 1955 is mainly attributed to the role that these social groups have played as contributors or supporters of their campaign.

On the other hand, left-leaning radical and/or social movements had good relations with progressive parties (Socialist until 1996, Communist, Democratic Party since 1996, etc.) which had relatively weak ties with the local grass-roots organizations and socio-economic associations mentioned above. In general, the type of organizations designed for social movements lacked the centralization (as the national centers) and professionalization that are required at the center of power in Japan.

Prior to the disaster, many of these same local grass-roots associations and socio-economic organizations kept relatively quiet and, since they received subsidies from local governments and TEPCO, never mobilized anti-nuclear plant movements.

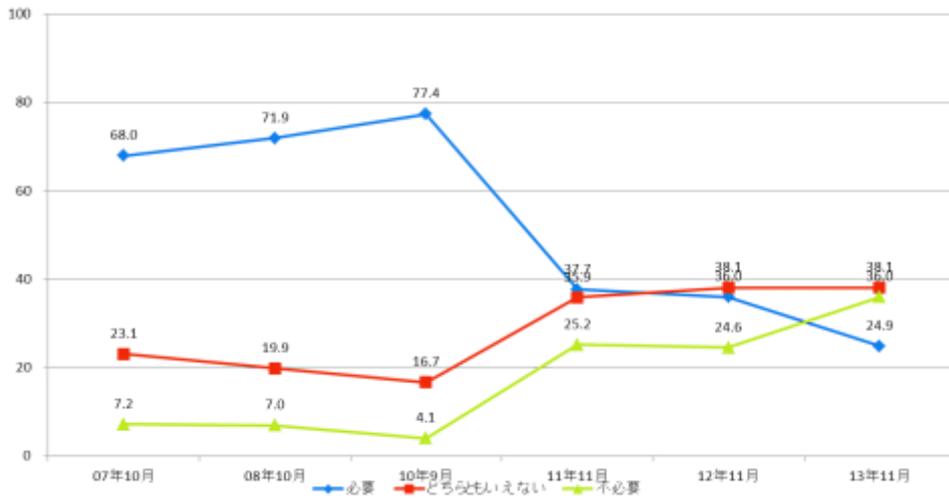


(Kamps 2006)

**Fig. 4: Public Works Investment per GDP 1960-2001**

Despite strong investment in public works (internationally speaking the amount is higher in terms of ratio to GDP in comparison to US, France, Italy, Germany and UK, see Fig.4. above), the Japanese government failed to ensure the security of the nuclear power plants of the major electric power companies. They chose to construct legitimacy as they invested in the ‘software’ of public relations (an estimated 20 billion EURO in total) rather than investing in reform of the ‘hardware’ of nuclear power plants to build a safer system (Kamikawa 2016).

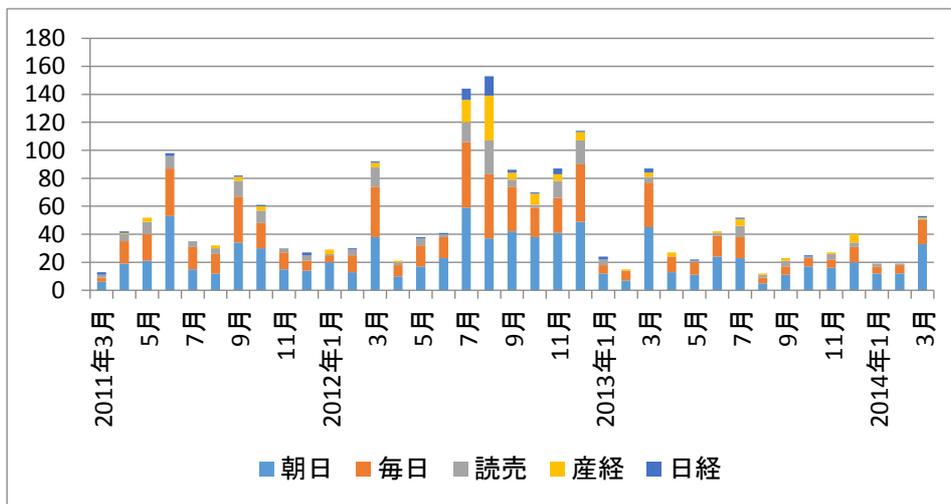
The Japanese ‘conservative’ political system (when the 3.11 disaster occurred the government was controlled by a non-LDP coalition led by the Democratic Party of Japan\*) responded poorly to the Fukushima disaster. Even after the disaster, both the LDP and the DPJ hesitated to face the nuclear energy problem and make it an issue of their platform for the general election, vaguely repeating their slogans for revitalizing and rebuilding Japan from the disaster instead. Consequently, the LDP have won three times in the nationwide elections since 2012, basically because they have a relatively sturdy infrastructure in civil society in their constituents while the opposition camps have remained divided.



Key: Blue=Yes; Green=No; Red=Neutral

**Fig. 5: Public Opinion toward Nuclear Energy in Japan Before and After 3.11: 2007-2013**

Although the majority of public opinion was anti-nuclear energy, the public could not organize and unify their voice in civil society, thus their opinion failed to be reflected in the political arena.



**Fig. 6: News Articles (5 major papers) Anti-Nuclear Power Movement 2011-2014**

The Fukushima nuclear disaster revealed that the Japanese political system was unable to respond to the nuclear crisis squarely. Although Japanese civil society showed social resilience, solidarity, and coherence in response to the earthquake and tsunami devastation, Japan as a whole failed to keep nuclear plants in check prior to the accidents and did not declare its support of the majority of anti-nuclear Japanese citizens whose organizations were weak and lacked political foundation.

### **3. Conclusion**

In conclusion, civil society in Japan has been well-developed and organized, which is why the conservative establishment comprising politicians, bureaucrats, and TEPCO has tried very hard to form and maintain their coalition with civil society organizations. In fact, conservatives have succeeded in keeping this coalition alive even after the disaster. They have adopted the strategy of ‘non-decision making’ as they have intentionally avoided making judgments on the nuclear disaster (Tsujinaka 2016). To say the least, they have succeeded in preventing nuclear energy from becoming an issue in political elections so far.

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\* A DPJ coalition had formed the government from 2009, which was the first time since its establishment in 1996. Between 1955 and 2016 the LDP lost power only twice, in 1993-94 and again in 2009-12.

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