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Summer Nuclear Plant Restarts and Japanese Public Opinion
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Amid the Noda government's push to restart Japan's idled reactors, a new Pew Research Center poll of Japanese public opinion shows that support for nuclear energy continues to decline.

70% of Japanese polled say that reliance on nuclear power should be "reduced" compared to 44% last year. Just 4% say that reliance on nuclear power should be "increased" compared to 8% last year. 25% say that current rates of nuclear reliance should be "maintained", down 21% from last year's 46% level.

There are also indications that the current DPJ government may be headed for disaster at the polls. A burst of communal feelings and optimism, encapsulated in the "kizuna" (bonds) buzz-word chosen as the Chinese character most representative of 2011, appears to be waning. In answer to the question "Has the March 2011 earthquake/tsunami made Japan stronger or weaker?" 39% said "stronger", down 19% from last year. 47% said "weaker", up 15% from last year. These numbers may be tied to the high rate of dissatisfaction at the government's response to 3.11 – 60% disapprove of the government's approach while only 37% are positive.

This does not necessarily mean a boon for Noda's political opponents, however. 30% rate Noda as personally having a "good influence" while the national government as a whole scores only a dismal 12%. The opposition Liberal Democrats are rated at 17%, the same as the ruling Democratic Party.

With Japan's two major political parties floundering, it may seem as though the time is ripe for smaller parties to increase their influence. Jijii polling data from May, however, indicates that no party has increased its influence at the expense of the mainstream blocs with a full 70% of potential voters reporting that they support no party. Jiji claims that the percentage of voters who support no party is the highest that it has ever been.

The planned restart of the Ōi plant in Fukui prefecture has become a hot button political issue. On the specific question of the Ōi restarts, a May 19 - 20 poll by the *Asahi Shimbun* indicates that only 29% agree that the plant should be restarted while 54% are opposed. The poll also shows that the negative response to the government's 3.11 response extends to that of the "nuclear village" as a whole. When asked if they trust nuclear safety promises, a full 78% of those polled responded in the negative. Negative responses were 80% in March, but this only indicates that the Noda government's concentrated restart PR efforts swayed a mere 2% of those polled.

The *Sankei Shimbun* and its associated Fuji News Network TV infrastructure, which have consistently supported maintaining and even expanding nuclear power in Japan, report that a majority of 51.5% believe that plants should be restarted after confirmation of safety. Given the lack of trust in the Japanese government's definition of safety indicated in the *Asahi* and other polls, however, we must ask – what would be considered "confirmation of safety"? It is clear that the Japanese public is no longer willing to accept the lack of transparency that shrouded the nuclear industry from scrutiny in the decades leading up to the 3.11 meltdowns. Given indications that secretive practices continue to be the norm, trust appears hard to achieve.

A final poll, this time from *Tokyo Shimbun* on May 28, shows that Japanese voters are demanding an opportunity to bring some measure of clarity to the currently muddled political situation. 57.1% believe that Noda should dissolve the government and call an election. To this point, no political party has released detailed plans concerning Japan's energy future. The DPJ and LDP straddle entrenched and widespread anti-nuclear positions on one side and demands for cheap energy to fuel growth on the other. Something has to give and neither party has been willing to define a clear roadmap. This contradiction is shared by smaller parties such as Your Party. In plans for Japan's economic future on the party's website, Your Party stakes out no clear position on nuclear power other than claims that it is "important". The Japan Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party have planted a flag of de-nuclearization in public debate, but neither has a detailed plan for supporting renewables. An election could force Japan's political parties to outline detailed, forward thinking policies. It seems as though this is exactly what a dissatisfied electorate is now calling for.

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