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Long-Awaited Self-Rule on the Horizon?

Nobuo Fukuda

What would truly fundamental change mean in Japanese politics today? In the wake of the deadly earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011, in which more than twenty thousand people were killed or went missing, what else could Japanese leaders and citizens have thought, said, and pursued than the discourse, policies, and deeds that Richard Samuels articulately recorded in his latest book *3.11: Disaster and Change in Japan*? While reading this well-researched and fair-minded account of Japan's epochal experience, those were the questions that came to my mind.

Samuels is right when he states that "3.11 changed few minds within Japan's chattering classes" (p. xi). Political entrepreneurs across the wide spectrum scrambled to define exactly what had happened, to name villains and heroes, to prescribe creative solutions, and to sell their long-cherished agendas for change (or no change) to the public. In the three policy areas closely studied in the book—national security, energy, and local governance—Samuels concludes that it was the political actors and pundits who advocated for "staying the course" who prevailed. Apparently, no fundamental change has materialized as an immediate result of 3.11.

Interestingly, the author sees the most lasting changes after 3.11 coming from Japan's local governments. He highlights a number of prefectures and municipalities that sent thousands of officials to badly affected localities in Tohoku and assisted their counterparts in the region for many months. Along with the novel horizontal collaboration crafted by a few prefectures and big cities, such as the Kansai Regional Union, their swift assistance initiatives enhanced the prominence of some ambitious local politicians, including Osaka mayor Toru Hashimoto and Nagoya mayor Takashi Kawamura (see pp. 154–57, 179).

From his comparative study of large-scale natural disasters in the past, Samuels finds that central governments around the globe have always tried to reassert their authority following a disaster, while local actors have resisted and demanded greater autonomy in the process of recovery. In Japan, it has been more than a decade since the Regional Autonomy Law was revised, wherein local governments were granted equal status with the central government for

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the first time in the nation's history. Nevertheless, the devolution of power and resources has progressed slowly, as Samuels suggests by directing our attention to the well-known catchphrase in Japan "30 percent autonomy." In that context, the empowerment of governors and heads of major municipalities after 3.11 should certainly be seen as a step toward change in Japan's political system.

Even in less prominent examples, we can find just as important signs of change. Katashina is a small village in Gunma Prefecture, located 110 miles north of Tokyo at the foot of Oze National Park. The village is a popular ski resort in the Kanto region and hosts nearly three hundred mostly small- and medium-sized hotels. On March 14, 2011, just three days after the earthquake and tsunami devastated its northern neighbors, Katashina invited residents of Minami Soma to take shelter in the village. Minami Soma, which is about 170 miles north of Katashina, was a coastal town in Fukushima that had been gravely affected by both the tsunami and the accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. Displaced people moved in from Minami Soma on March 18. Katashina, a village with a population of only five thousand, accommodated as many as one thousand "refugees" for months. It is noteworthy that the initiative originated with dozens of village youths who busily e-mailed each other on March 11 and discussed what they could do for their unfortunate neighbors. The village assembly and mayor supported their idea and quickly appropriated 100 million yen (roughly \$1 million), which was mainly used to help feed the guests.

Recently, I spoke with about a dozen organic farmers in a village in northern Fukushima. The village was more than 60 miles away from the damaged Fukushima Daiichi plants, and the farmers said that their farms were not as badly contaminated with radioactive materials as those closer to the reactors. Nevertheless, as the farmers kept producing crops, milk, and eggs, they found higher radioactivity levels in some of their products, such as shiitake mushrooms, and gave up selling them. Because the village is in a mountainous region with a lot of snow, the farmers benefit from ample melt water, which brings down enriched and nutritious soil from the surrounding forests. But now they are deeply concerned about the water's quality, given that some elements like cesium will stay radioactive for decades. As radioactive particles are carried in the streams and concentrated in the ground, their farmland could become increasingly contaminated for several decades.

For Fukushima residents, worse or even the worst may be yet to come. In the prefecture's municipalities, including the capital Fukushima and populous Iwaki, the incumbent mayors have lost their re-election bids one after another

since 3.11. According to news reports, many voters blame the municipal administration for the stalled decontamination.

Obviously, the most fundamental difference between 3.11 and previous natural disasters, which Samuels thoroughly addresses in chapter 3, is the impact of the nuclear accident. Grave concern about the fallout has been widely shared by the citizens living beyond Fukushima's borders as the radioactive contamination drags on. More than one thousand days after 3.11, surveys find that around 60% of the nation's population still opposes the restart of Japan's 50 nuclear reactors, all of which remain shut down as of late November 2013. Despite the insistence by utilities, business communities, and pro-nuclear prime minister Shinzo Abe that the reactors be restarted soon, they have been left idle because public opposition is too strong, according to Eiji Oguma, a sociology professor at Keio University.

For the past 60 years, many social scientists have lamented that the persistent political culture of *okami suuhai* or *okami danomi* (unconditional esteem for or reliance on the state apparatus) has prevented Japan from embracing a more robust form of democracy. Because the U.S. Occupation Forces ruled postwar Japan indirectly by using the surviving remnants of the imperial bureaucracy, the authoritarian state apparatuses escaped from total reform almost unscathed. Central government officials who had been appointed as prefectural governors and municipal government heads in prewar Japan rebranded themselves as democratic politicians after the war. As critics point out, Japanese voters have willingly elected those elites and subsequently been ruled as they used to be.

It is true that the once-vaunted state bureaucracy had long been discredited. At the same time, however, Japanese citizens still placed much faith in elites, as Samuels observes. After 3.11, this ambivalent relationship has been shifting, and we now see the disconnect between citizens and the state growing. As the nuclear crisis continues, people seem to be finally realizing that "okami danomi" cannot be a solution. But where, then, should they turn? People also understand that mere antagonism toward the state will get them nowhere.

I recall the young activists in Katashina seeing themselves as part of the village's political community and the village administration as a useful vehicle in implementing their ambitious plan. Of course, it is too early to conclude that the nation is finally exhibiting self-rule. Nevertheless, there have been many instances of citizens taking bottom-up approaches to relief and assistance, such as in Katashina, across the archipelago after 3.11. Structural and transformative change can only take place when the citizens come to feel that they are represented by the state and establish truly cooperative relationships with its apparatuses.