

Japan's accountability crisis

By CHRISTOPHER HOBSON
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A defining feature of democracy is that it has been the best form of government for ensuring accountable rule. One important element that distinguishes it from authoritarian regimes is that there are certain institutions, checks, procedures and laws that allow the general public to hold their leaders to account. The system is far from perfect, but in theory (and generally in practice) no one is above the law. And the ballot box has proven to be a relatively successful mechanism for making sure politicians do not overstay their welcome.

One of the great virtues of democracy is that it avoids the kind of scenarios which appear when authoritarian regimes fall, as was witnessed when former Libyan strongman Moammar Gadhafi was finally held to account at the point of a bayonet.

A very troubling and negative trend, however, is the increasing breakdown of accountability mechanisms in our democracies today. This is an important issue everywhere, but it is a particularly relevant and pressing concern here in Japan. Democracy in this country has always had its faults, but the way much of the ruling class has responded to 3/11 and the Fukushima disaster has highlighted how broken this system has become.

Despite Fukushima being one of the most serious nuclear accidents in human history, and the independent investigation commission to the Diet clearly determining that it was "a man-made disaster," few have been held accountable for what happened.

Naoto Kan is no longer prime minister, but the way he was forced from office by his own party was hardly a sterling example of democracy at work. Regardless of Kan's responsibility in contributing to the way the Fukushima crisis developed, singling him out did little to address the real source of the disaster, which stemmed from complacency and collusion between the government, the bureaucracy and the nuclear industry. This was a major conclusion reached by the independent commission: "the root causes were the organizational and regulatory systems that supported faulty rationales for decisions and actions, rather than issues relating to the competency of any specific individual." Accountability is not just about individuals: it is about their collective behavior, and is necessary at this institutional level for democracy to function properly.

It has now become apparent that the shock of 3/11 and Fukushima has not been enough to engineer the real changes Japanese democracy needs. If anything, it seems like there is a gradual attempt to return to "business as usual." The ease with which petty-minded party politics reappeared in the months after the disaster is illustrative of how poorly Japanese politicians

appreciate their roles as representatives of the greater good. Likewise, the mindset of Tokyo Electric Power Co. and the other power utilities indicates that their own narrow interests continue to override other concerns, such as the welfare of the residents of Fukushima. Tepco has failed to take sufficient responsibility for what happened, and the government has not done enough to hold it to account.

Given that the serious institutional problems that led to Fukushima have yet to be earnestly addressed, how confident can we be about the decision to move ahead with restarting nuclear plants elsewhere in Japan? The haste with which the government and Kansai Electric Power Co. have pushed to restart the Oi nuclear power plant suggests a deeply troubling situation, namely, that those in power are actively trying to ignore the lessons of Fukushima. Yet Fukushima cannot be another inconvenient truth. Japan must face up to what happened, properly care for those affected, and make sure that such a catastrophe is not repeated.

The Fukushima disaster forces us to think about what democracy without accountability might mean. What is left in democracy if this crucial element disappears? Accountability works to promote good government and the proper use of power, and it is an important aspect that separates democracy from more authoritarian forms of rule. It acts as a powerful standard against which to criticise and challenge politicians and other actors in a democratic system. Such practices are not about punishment or blame, but about ensuring a culture of rule that prioritizes the interests of the general public, and not private or particular concerns.

What Fukushima made painfully clear is that such a culture is largely absent from Japanese democracy today. Until greater accountability and transparency become a more prominent part of the way this country is run, restarting nuclear reactors seems foolhardy in the extreme. This is not to argue against nuclear power, but against nuclear power that lacks proper oversight and regulation, as has been the case in Japan to date. The mobilization of Japanese civil society following the Fukushima accident is an important step in trying to make the political and economic elite more accountable and aware of their responsibilities. Rather than trying to ignore or bypass these movements in the rush back to nuclear power, the discussion and debate that emerges should be encouraged, as it may also be a way of helping to re-energize this country's democracy.

As Japan recovers from the tragic triple disasters 2011, it is essential to re-assert accountability as a vital and necessary part of its democracy. The people of Fukushima and Japan deserve nothing less.

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