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Japan anti-nuclear movement gains traction as crisis drags on

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By [Chisa Fujioka](#)

TOKYO (Reuters) - Japan's anti-nuclear movement, small and ignored by the general public, is gaining traction as a crisis at a tsunami-stricken nuclear power plant drags on for weeks with no clear end in sight.

The growing debate will make it difficult for the government to meet its target securing 50 percent of national electricity from nuclear power by 2030, up from 30 percent now.

The public has watched nervously as engineers battle radiation leaks, hydrogen explosions and overheating fuel rods at the Fukushima Daiichi plant on the northeast coast after it was hit by a 9.0 magnitude earthquake and tsunami on March 11.

With updates on the world's worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl in 1986 now daily fare on TV, more Japanese are questioning the safety of the quake-prone country's 54 nuclear reactors and the government's plans to build more.

"As a person who has had a pro-nuclear stance, I'm totally at a loss at the moment whether we should promote Japan's nuclear policy," Masayoshi Yoshino, an MP from Fukushima prefecture where the Daiichi plant is located, told a news conference this week.

"I know in my mind that I should decide based on the results of a thorough investigation into what has happened. But my instinct tells me 'no more nuclear plants'," said Yoshino, of the main opposition Liberal Democratic Party.

In Yamaguchi prefecture, western Japan, anti-nuclear groups claimed a small victory last month after work to build a new nuclear power plant in the city of Kaminoseki was suspended, prompted by concern from local authorities.

"The mood has changed," said Tomiko Takeshige, an activist there fighting against plans for Chugoku Electric Power Co to start the plant's operations in 2018.

"Mayors and local assembly members who have repeated the government line that these plants are safe have become silent. Ordinary people too, now come to us to say that we were right, that nuclear power plants are dangerous."

In resource-poor Japan, the government has long emphasized the importance of nuclear power and prided itself on its nuclear expertise. In an energy plan unveiled last year, it aimed to build at least 14 new reactors by 2030.

Voters have also generally supported the role of nuclear energy in a country where nuclear reactors provide some 30 percent of electricity and have been counted on to help meet an international pledge to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

But that was before the Fukushima crisis, which has forced tens of thousands of residents to evacuate from the plant's vicinity and sparked fears of radioactive contamination in water, fish and vegetables.

BODY SAYS "NO"

The latest disaster at first triggered little mainstream debate over nuclear policy, but Prime Minister Naoto Kan said last week that the plan for Japan to build more nuclear reactors may need to be reviewed.

In Tokyo, nuclear power policy has featured prominently in debates ahead of a gubernatorial election on Sunday.

"We must review and eventually reduce dependence on nuclear power," candidate Hideo Higashikokubaru said this week.

He singled out the Hamaoka nuclear power plant 200 km (124 miles) southwest of Tokyo, located near the Tokai region where geologists have predicted a large quake. "All possibilities including a possible closure should be reviewed," he said.

But for all the concerns over nuclear safety, Japan still looks a long way from a mass anti-nuclear movement.

Many rural towns are dependent on subsidies and donations doled out by the government and companies to host nuclear plants.

Kunihiro Uno, a candidate trying to oust a pro-nuclear incumbent in an election for governor of Fukui prefecture, said some voters had approached him in tears to shut down reactors but others worried about the fallout on the local finances.

With 14 reactors, Fukui, in the country's west, has the most number of reactors than any other prefecture in Japan. For years, the prefecture has fed off what Uno calls "nuclear drugs" -- subsidies that fund new schools, sports facilities and roads.

"People say nuclear power plants are scary and want to stop building new ones but there's not much support yet to stop depending on the plants for business, public funding and energy needs," he said in a telephone interview ahead of the election on Sunday.

"Deep down, people know it's better not to have nuclear plants but they think about jobs and other factors, and it's considered a necessary evil."

(Additional reporting by [Kiyoshi Takenaka](#), [Linda Sieg](#), editing by Jonathan Thatcher)

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