

14021 **Anti-nuclear protest in Japan Fizzling out**

The Economist (Abridged), March 8th 2014

IT IS PERHAPS no accident that Tokyo's post-war architects included no large public spaces where people could gather and make their voices heard. The famously buttoned-down, well-behaved city has no equivalent of Kiev's Maidan, the heart of the opposition movement which last month toppled Ukraine's president, no Tahrir Square, no Tiananmen.

People head for the capital's leafy parks instead, as anti-nuclear marchers did in July 2012 to declare "No to nuclear restarts". Then, just 16 months after the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear accident at the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant in March 2011, some 170,000 protesters went to Yoyogi Park in the city's west to march, in the country's biggest demonstration in decades.

Anti-nuclear protest has in any case shrivelled since 2011 and 2012. As the government prepares to turn back on a substantial number of reactors this year and next, leaders of the anti-nukes movement are pessimistic about the chances of forceful opposition. One reason is that many Japanese understand well that their country, with limited natural resources, lacks choices. They know the immediate economic consequences of abandoning a functioning nuclear-power infrastructure to rely on costly and possibly unreliable imported energy. And with the Nuclear Regulatory Authority Japan now has something approaching a robust safety regime.

And yet opinion polls still show, again and again, that a majority of people want gradually to exit nuclear power. The government, under the pro-nuclear Liberal Democratic Party, is doing the opposite. Luckily for those planning restarts, the anti-nuclear majority is unlikely to take to the streets in numbers as great as in 2012. Demonstrations have a bad image with the public, says Taro Yamamoto, an actor-turned-politician elected to the upper house of parliament last year as an independent. In November 2013 he caused an uproar when, at a garden party, he handed a letter to the emperor about the consequences of the nuclear crisis in Fukushima, violating protocol. The media often pays scant attention to large demonstrations, he says, or reports them as if they are already over. Another factor is that those who oppose nuclear power plants are mostly women, who in Japan tend not to assert themselves. It is in the countryside, where nuclear plants are sited, that visible and sizeable opposition would count the most. But especially in rural areas, says Hiroko Uehara, a former Tokyo mayor who is leading a 95-strong network of local mayors against restarting nuclear power plants, there is little tradition of or fondness for public action.

(410 words)