

Confusion over Nuclear Plant Indicates Kan's Motive to Stay Longer

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Who are now agonizing over fundamental national policies in Japan? They may be local government chiefs rather than Prime Minister Naoto Kan who should be so. The recent confusion over whether to restart two reactors of the Genkai nuclear power plant in southwestern Japan has indicated Prime Minister Kan's hope to pursue his personal interests without national interests in mind.

Mayor left to decide to restart reactors

Genkai Town Mayor Hideo Kishimoto in Saga Prefecture notified Kyushu Electric Power Co. of his consent to restarting the plant's second and third reactors now under regular checkups. Before his decision to give the consent, he and the town assembly jointly examined the safety of the plant.

As there were no traces of earthquakes or tsunamis found in the town over the past 2,000 years, the mayor concluded that natural conditions indicate the town as a secure location for a nuclear plant. He also considered electricity supply insecurity that emerged from the Great East Japan Earthquake in March this year. "It would be insecure for the whole Japan if we halt nuclear plants in western Japan," Mayor Kishimoto told me. "I concluded that we should support the Japanese economy with electricity supply."

I interviewed Saga Prefecture Governor Yasushi Furukawa as well. While taking into account the Genkai mayor's decision, the governor has urged the central government to decide whether to restart the Genkai reactors from his belief that nuclear power plants are a pillar of the central government's energy policy and that they should be subjected to decisions by the government. Since the nuclear energy policy is put under the leadership of the central government, it is unreasonable to hold a company or a local government responsible for deciding whether nuclear reactors are safe or should be restarted.

The prime minister, who made a political request to halt the Hamaoka nuclear plant in central Japan, should be held responsible for giving a political decision on whether to restart the Genkai reactors. Any central government decisions, however, should be fairly reasonable and backed by a long-term outlook. On June 29, Economy, Trade and Industry Minister Banri Kaieda explained this point to Governor Furukawa and the governor was satisfied with the explanation. The governor's remaining condition for approving the restart was the confirmation of Prime Minister Kan's view.

Kan's arbitrary proposal triggered confusion

How to deal with the Genkai nuclear plant will exert a great impact on Japan's future course. Even if Japan is to increase natural energy sources' share of electricity generation, it will have to depend on nuclear plants to some extent for one to two generations. Fears of electricity shortages have already been affecting Japan's industrial infrastructure. In the scorching summer season, any further electricity shortages could lead to deaths of the elderly, the sick and infants. The central government is responsible for obtaining the Saga governor's approval on the restart of the Genkai plant reactors promptly to pave the way for restarting other reactors whose regular checkups have been completed.

Kaieda made efforts to fulfill the responsibility, guaranteeing the safety of the Genkai nuclear plant and requesting the governor to approve the restart of the reactors. On July 6, however, Prime Minister Kan suddenly proposed further safety tests for all reactors. The Kan cabinet has been divided.

While a local government decided to approve the restart of the nuclear reactors in consideration of electricity supply for the whole of Japan, Prime Minister Kan suddenly made a proposal to shift an energy policy away from nuclear plants, without explaining its entire energy policy, an industrial decline or people's future livelihood. The arbitrary proposal for new safety tests shows nothing more than his ulterior motive to remain in office longer.

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