

Book Review: After the Great East Japan Earthquake: Political and Policy Change in Post-Fukushima Japan

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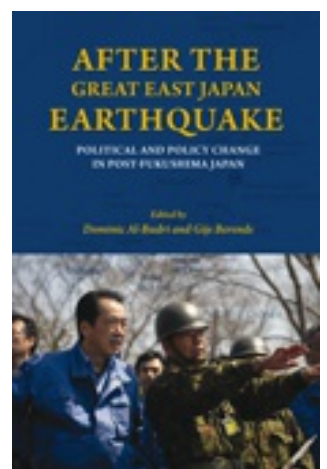
*This book sets out to explore shifts in Japanese politics and policy-making following the Fukushima disaster, with perspectives offered by diplomats and policy experts at European embassies to Japan. The book addresses those policy areas most likely to be affected by the tragedy – politics, economics, energy, climate, agriculture and food safety – and describes how the sectors have been affected and what the implications are for the future. Useful reading for political scientists and policy makers, finds **Hansley A. Juliano**.*



After the Great East Japan Earthquake: Political and Policy Change in Post-Fukushima Japan. Dominic Al-Badri and Gijs Berends (eds.). Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press. June 2013.

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The earthquake and tsunamis that hit Tohoku on 11th March 2011, and the explosion at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant which followed shortly after, gave rise to a variety of policy developments in Japan, as politicians and business leaders attempted to grapple with the impact of the triple disaster. This edited volume attempts to look at the implications of the disaster through the eyes of the affected sectors and stakeholders with the benefit of hindsight, deliberation and reasoning, taking in economic and fiscal policy, energy, environment, agriculture and food safety.



Chapters 1 and 2 discuss culture and society in Japan as the 21st century began and the unfolding of the triple disaster. These chapters are quite evocative of what has already been written about Japanese society prior and immediately after the disaster. Though this is well-trodden ground, such a portrait is necessary in understanding how responses to the disaster were not only shaped by the nature of the disaster itself, but more importantly by the realities of “a country that showed remarkable resilience in many areas, but one in which its administrators, businesspeople, politicians and citizens were simultaneously facing an array of challenges” (p. 9).



As would be expected following such a society-threatening catastrophe, it appeared that there were multiple calls for individual, inter-sectoral and bipartisan cooperation following the earthquake and its effects. Chapter 3 considers unity in fragmentation in the population, with Dominic Al-Badri commenting on the public pressure felt by the Japanese government to respond adequately to the concerns of the most-afflicted areas of the Tohoku region. This could be reflected in the hitherto-unprecedented public receptivity to the raising of consumption tax to 10% (Chapter 3), mounting pressure with regards to an overhaul of Japan’s nuclear policy (Chapter 4), and attempts to pursue more “green policies” such as calls for legislation for climate sustainability (Chapter 6), as well as initiatives towards reforming the agriculture and food production sectors (Chapters 7 and 8).

Of course, the social and political situation surrounding such policy developments was not at all rosy. In the beginning of the crisis, there were attempts at rapprochement between the then-ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) and the opposition Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and the general public seems satisfied with DPJ Prime Minister Naoto Kan's initial handling of the disaster. However, subsequent policy developments, Kan's avoidance of publicity, as well as in-fighting between DPJ politicians (fostered no less by one of its old stalwarts Ichiro Ozawa) eventually diminished any appreciation the general public might have had for Kan's efforts and that of his successor Yoshihiko Noda (p. 38-43).

The victory of the LDP in the parliamentary elections on 16th December 2012 -while quite massive with its 294 seats – was clouded by the fact that the election had the lowest voter turnout in Japanese history. The LDP victory was as flimsy a reaction as the DPJ victory in 2009 was, [as noted in analysis by political scientists writing for The Monkey Cage](#). Dominic Al-Badri thus predicts that “it is conceivable that the Japanese political system will continue to move away from the two-party system” (p. 65). This, in turn, led to the complication of the attempted reforms. While regulation of nuclear power has become non-negotiable in tandem with calls for relying on renewable energy, the fact remains that the energy mix of nuclear power will take a long while to be fully institutionalized (p. 104). More significantly, the DPJ's attempts to reduce Japan's greenhouse gas emissions via reliance on nuclear power was reversed towards utilization of fossil fuels to continue to support the country's energy demand, subsequently hampering Japan's capability to implement transnational agreements on climate policy, most ironically the Kyoto Protocol (p. 126). Similarly, the question of liberalization in order to participate in Japan's prior pushing of Trans-Pacific Partnerships (TPP) with countries in the region has been assaulted in the name of protecting Japanese farming and food production (p. 147).

While the analyses and recommendations in the volume appear to be sound, their appraisals of existing policies also reflect the contradictions of managing economic policies in keeping a highly-industrialized capitalist society. The conservative tendencies of interest groups appear to be quite conducive in keeping the debates at deadlock, as seen in the attempts of Keidanren (Japan Business Federation) and the JA (Japan Agricultural Cooperative) to keep the policy status quo tilted in their interest networks' favour (see Chapters 6 and 7, respectively), which would indeed warrant state intervention. Yet the tendency to decentralization is also apparent in the authors' appraisals, as the portrayal of businesses' attempts to venture into agricultural production shows (p.145).

Nonetheless, such contradictions – rather than detracting from the attempt to rationalize the development of such issues – should perhaps be seen as a reflection of how the intersections of Japanese public policy have indeed evolved in different directions. It is thus a challenge for Japanese policy-makers and the general public to decide whether they would want to change it along more centralized, uniform lines, or try to find a way to preserve the autonomy of the involved sectors from the opportunistic intrusion both by state elements and the lobby groups. More than a nuanced account of the Fukushima triple disaster, the book will also serve as an exemplary model for students of public policy on how local and national developments cannot be divorced from the demands of transnational relationships.

Hansley A. Juliano graduated this 2013 with a Master of Arts in Political Science, major in Global Politics, from the Ateneo de Manila University. An independent researcher and former student journalist, he is a part-time lecturer in the Department of Political Science in the same university. His research interests include socio-political movements, political and economic development, as well as the changing contours of studies in literary criticism, history and philosophy. [Read more reviews by Hansley.](#)