

After the Quake: Implications for Japan's Political Future

An Interview with Dan Sneider

By Graham Webster
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The devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan will have political effects for years to come. Though the disaster response is still ongoing, observers have begun to assess potential political implications from the response. NBR talked to Daniel Sneider (Stanford University), a [National Asia Research Associate](#), on Wednesday, March 16, 2011, about the rapidly unfolding political events in Japan. He said partisan politics may be temporarily subsiding, and new leaders could emerge. This interview was published on the NBR website: <http://www.nbr.org>.

Before the earthquake off the northeast coast of Japan, Prime Minister Naoto Kan faced a lot of criticism. Does the recent tragedy change the situation for him and his cabinet?

My initial impression was that the Kan administration was getting a lot of credit for responding fairly decisively and quickly to the earthquake, in contrast to the government's response to the Kobe earthquake in 1995. Kan immediately accepted foreign assistance, mobilized the Self-Defense Forces, and appeared on television. Chief Cabinet Secretary Edano, who has been constantly on Japanese television trying to reassure the population, has played a particularly significant role.

Views on the government's response have somewhat changed as the nuclear crisis has deepened and people are increasingly uneasy. There is a lack of information flow as well as conflicting accounts of the crisis from the government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO). That has led the Kan administration to form a joint headquarters at the offices of TEPCO. In addition, Prime Minister Kan was reportedly heard yelling at the leadership of TEPCO about the lack of information. I think to some degree we're seeing growing criticism of both the government's and, probably more so, TEPCO's handling of the situation.

However, it's still early. Much will depend on how events play out in coming days.

Many expected Kan and the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) to be tested in upcoming elections in April. What do we know about the status of these elections?

I have not seen anything definitive on whether local elections will be held as planned, but I have to believe that they'll be delayed if conditions remain so unsettled around the country. I don't see any stomach or even rationale for calling early elections for the lower house of the Diet, which was the direction events were heading in before the earthquake struck. Politically, the crisis has meant that the crescendo of attacks on both the Kan administration and the DPJ have ceased—at least for now. There are more important things on the public's mind than political battles in the Diet.

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The opposition, in particular the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Komei Party, feel that they need to cooperate with the government at a moment like this, and they are.

What is less clear to me is the impact of the crisis on assessments of the prime minister's leadership. If in the end conventional wisdom and public perception are that Kan has not shown sufficient leadership, then we could see some speed-up of the transition within the DPJ to the younger generation of leadership.

You mentioned Chief Cabinet Secretary Edano's prominence since the earthquake. Could you elaborate further on his performance?

From what I've been hearing from friends in Japan, Edano's performance has elevated his status significantly, and he has now sort of made himself the heir apparent. This is not to say I think that was on his mind. Rather, he's performed as a Japanese political leader ought to perform. I don't think he is thinking about aggrandizing his own personal situation. But that is one of the outcomes of what has happened.

There is a Twitter hashtag for Edano saying "Edano-san, go to sleep," because people are worried about him and want him to rest. They see him on television, and he's very calm and professional. He really has embodied the composure and resolve in the face of tremendous crisis that you see more broadly from the Japanese people, and I think people have really embraced him for that reason.

Some commentators have asked where Ichiro Ozawa, another important member of the DPJ leadership, has been during the crisis. Do you have any insights into his role in the government response?

I don't know exactly where Ozawa literally is, and I've not seen this reported in the Japanese media. But I would guess he's up in Iwate Prefecture, one of the hardest hit areas. That's where he's from. It is the place he's represented his entire political life, and he's very devoted to Iwate.

Japan will need to engage in a massive rebuilding effort, which will require significant amounts of government spending on new infrastructure. Officials will also need to deal with a changing energy situation as they address challenges that I'm sure will be raised to the use of nuclear energy for electricity generation. Ozawa's views on the importance of continued government spending to stimulate the economy are thus likely to replace the emphasis on fiscal responsibility we saw in recent months from Kan and others in his cabinet.

Many countries have offered to support the search and rescue efforts since the earthquake, including China. What are the implications of cooperation on this humanitarian mission?

As far as I know the Chinese search and rescue team has already been deployed to Japan. The United States, Russia, South Korea, and others have offered a lot of help as well. Disputes in recent months over Japanese foreign policy have taken a backseat to the need to help Japan, and that's a good thing. Hopefully, such cooperation will set a different tone moving forward. I think this is a minor silver lining in what remains a massive, massive tragedy.

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