

EDITORIAL: Japan needs broad public debate on its energy future

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The government has laid out three different visions for the future of the nation's power supply. It plans to craft its new long-term energy policy by the end of August after a national debate on these alternatives.

What kind of energy future should Japanese society build following the harrowing experience of the Fukushima nuclear disaster? This is a very important question with huge implications for policy efforts to protect people's livelihoods, support the nation's economy and ensure that today's Japanese will fulfill their responsibilities to future generations.

We need to have serious, in-depth conversations on the issue. We should not leave the matter to others.

The three options proposed by the government posit three different shares for nuclear energy in the nation's total power supply in 2030.

We have been calling for the phasing out of nuclear power generation as soon as possible, and various polls have shown that a majority of Japanese are in favor of reducing dependence on atomic energy.

However, there is wide disagreement among people on issues like how fast and how far nuclear power generation should be reduced, and what should be the main alternative to atomic energy as a power source.

The government is preparing to hold a series of public hearings on its energy policy. It will conduct a public consultation to give people an opportunity to express their views.

One notable element in the government's efforts to get people involved in the policymaking process will be a "deliberative opinion poll."

A group of people randomly selected from around the nation will be asked to answer a preliminary questionnaire. The respondents will then be invited to study basic information about the issues at hand and hold discussions before answering another questionnaire.

The results of the final poll, revealing changes in the respondents' views after learning about and deliberating on the issues, will be treated as informed public opinion and used in policymaking.

The approach will allow citizens with different opinions on specific issues to have face-to-face discussions so that they can understand each others' thinking and seek common ground. It could help prevent debate on nuclear power generation becoming polarized between the pro- and anti-nuclear camps.

The problem is that there won't be enough time for the process to work well because of an inflexible timetable. Even preparing materials for a discussion meeting requires a lot of time and care, and the neutrality of the organizers must be guaranteed. Chairing such debates will require great skill and experience.

Some experts have pointed out various problems with the government's current plan in writing, and officials should try to fix the problems and improve the plan by addressing those opinions and proposals.

Public debate on energy policy must continue even after the government's decision at the end of August, and the framework encouraging deep and mature deliberation by citizens on the nation's energy future should be kept in place.

The fostering of forums for discussion could lead to new ideas about the use of electricity and unique energy strategies in specific regions. The government could benefit greatly from accumulating expertise in fostering public debate on policy issues and using it for policymaking in other areas as well.

Distrust and discord can grow easily among people with different opinions. The real test of democracy lies in the efforts of people to overcome those disagreements and work out realistic answers.

Amid a widespread feeling of hopelessness at the current political gridlock, the new approach should be a first step toward a breakthrough.

--The Asahi Shimbun, June 30

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