

Sunday, Dec. 30, 2012



Angry neighbors: Chinese demonstrators set fire to a Japanese national flag during a protest over the issue surrounding the Diaoyu Islands, known as the Senkaku Islands in Japan, in Wuhan, central China's Hubei province on Sept. 16, 2012. AFP-JIJI

BIG IN JAPAN

# As the new year approaches, Japan still reels from 2011

By **MICHAEL HOFFMAN**

What a sad, sad country this is. What sad shape it's in, as this Year of the Dragon draws to a close. Economically, politically socially, individually, it is merely scraping by, surviving rather than living.

Last Jan. 1 a Japan Times editorial commented, "It is impossible for people in Japan to put 2011 behind them." That remains true 12 months later.

This year was spared upheaval on the scale of the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdowns that will forever define 2011. Symbolic of 2012 is the collapse on Dec. 2 of ceiling panels in the Sasago Tunnel in Yamanashi Prefecture, which killed nine and reflected gradual crumbling rather than explosive cataclysm. A subsequent frenzy of belated infrastructure inspections turned up a plethora of defects pointing to similar accidents waiting to happen. West Nippon Expressway Co. and Metropolitan Expressway Co. both began removing concrete panels from tunnels they operate. If not for Sasago, of course, they would not have.

Each in its own way, last year's Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant meltdowns and this year's tunnel collapse indicate the shoddy foundations on which the postwar "Japanese miracle," long since extinct, was built. In July, the nation got a sharp dressing-down. It came from University of Tokyo professor emeritus Kiyoshi Kurokawa, chairman of the Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission.

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## What should the Snake bring?

The [incoming Abe administration](#) faces a host of issues. What do you think Japan should focus on most intently in 2013?

- More family-friendly work initiatives to keep women in the workforce.**
- Serious progress with post-tsunami reconstruction in Tohoku.**
- Monetary policy that keeps the yen at a healthy exchange level.**
- The aggressive pursuit of alternative energy sources.**
- Diplomatic strategies that ease tensions with Asian neighbors.**
- The settlement of the Futenma issue.**

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"What must be admitted, very painfully, is that this was a disaster 'Made in Japan,' " Kurokawa declared. "Its fundamental causes are to be found in the ingrained conventions of Japanese culture: our reflexive obedience, our reluctance to question authority, our devotion to 'sticking to the program,' our groupism, our insularity."

The catastrophe, he said, was "the result of collusion between the government, the regulators and Tepco (Tokyo Electric Power Co., Fukushima No. 1's operator)."

If Fukushima brought anything good in its wake, it was the potential for national self-examination and reawakening. Kurokawa's philippic was one sign of it. Another was the massive demonstrations that occurred throughout the year, primarily against nuclear power but also expressive of a more general frustration. A mass rally at Tokyo's Yoyogi Park in July drew 170,000 participants; weekly protests outside the prime minister's residence have been tens of thousands strong. It has been decades since the Japanese people demonstrated on this scale. By the end of August, Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda could ignore the protesters no longer. His meeting with their representatives, however, was no meeting of minds. The protesters' parting shot was, "We the people do not believe you."

By then Noda was on his way out. Earlier that month, in response to relentless pressure from the opposition-leading Liberal Democratic Party, he had promised to dissolve the Diet's Lower House "soon." He held out until Nov. 14, then called an election for Dec. 16. The results are fresh in our memories. Contradictions are not in themselves astonishing, but the LDP's triumphant return to power under Shinzo Abe poses more than a few riddles. A nation

seeking release from its own past suddenly invited it back. The LDP, in power almost uninterruptedly from 1955 until 2009, presided over the postwar "miracle" but was a spent force, intellectually if not politically, by the sputtering 1990s, unable to adapt to a rapidly changing world. Abe himself served a brief term as prime minister in 2006-7. He wrote recently in the monthly magazine *Bungei Shunju*, "I am a person who has experienced failure as a politician, and it is because I am such a person that I am ready to give everything for Japan."

That's what voters wanted, apparently, and it's what they got, although how they square their peaceable habits with his bellicosity, or their vociferous nuclear phobia with the LDP's rejection of ousted Prime Minister Noda's pledge to phase out nuclear power by 2040, are not the least of the election's puzzles.

Everyone knew as 2012 dawned that it would be an election year, though Noda could technically have waited until next summer. Public disgust seethed and simmered. In February an *Asahi Shimbun* poll showed support for the governing Democratic Party of Japan to be all of 19 percent; the LDP trailed at 12 percent. Was there nowhere else to turn?

Hope coalesced around a rising charismatic young politician named Toru Hashimoto. He'd been Osaka Prefecture's governor and was now Osaka City's mayor, but he seemed made for bigger things. Bold, brash, mincing no words, he spoke of the need to "reset" Japan. He packaged his many novel ideas under the rubric *ishin* (restoration), a reference to the nation-transforming Meiji Restoration of 1868.

His Osaka *Ishin no Kai* (literally Osaka Restoration Society) grew into the *Nippon Ishin no To* (Japan Restoration Party). Would it have done better had it not merged, papering over ideological gaps, with a hastily-formed mini-party led by ultranationalist former Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara? It didn't do badly in any case, coming in a respectable third, only two seats behind the routed DPJ, but as a much-vaunted "third force" bent on upending the political status quo, it was humbled by the Abe juggernaut.

Can Japan be "reset"? Hashimoto's plans for doing so include abolishing the Diet's Upper House, giving local governments more power and having the prime minister elected directly instead of, as now, appointed by the leading party. The unsteady response to and slow recovery from last year's catastrophe bode ill, barring some sort of reset, for future catastrophes deemed likely. In August the government's Central Disaster Prevention Council said a massive earthquake in

the Nankai Trough, extending south of Honshu, could kill 323,000 people in 30 prefectures. The Tokyo metropolitan government around the same time projected 9,700 deaths should a magnitude 7.3 earthquake strike directly beneath the capital.

Nature's belligerence is grim enough. Add to it a growing truculence among increasingly powerful neighbors, and a national sense of being beset becomes comprehensible, though not constructive. In mid-August seven activists from

Hong Kong landed on one of the Senkaku Islands claimed held by Japan, but also claimed by China (the Chinese call them Diaoyu). Five were arrested and deported. Days later, a dozen Japanese nationalists of the rightwing group Gambare Nippon swam ashore from a 20-boat flotilla and raised the Hinomaru flag. That was the prologue. The main drama unfolded through early fall — the central government under Noda outbidding the Tokyo government under Ishihara and purchasing three of the islands from their private owner; Chinese demonstrators rising en masse in fury, trashing Japanese businesses in China while the Chinese government, usually quick enough to stamp out popular outbursts, suddenly, if temporarily, turned permissive. Among the rallying cries of the rampaging demonstrators was, "Down with little Japan!"

Little Japan indeed. A happy country's happiest people are its youth, but Japanese young people — dwindling numerically, struggling to gain a foothold in a shrinking economy, uncertain of the future to the point that many among them have given up hope of marrying and having children — have little to celebrate.

Who are Japan's happiest citizens? Men in their 80s, said a survey released in August by the Dai-ichi Life Research Institute. Its unhappiest are men in their 40s — the prime of life. To paraphrase the year's top buzzword, the motto of comedian Sugi-chan: Wild, eh?

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