

Response to the Nuclear Power Plant Accident and COVID-19

-An interview with Professor Emeritus Kiyoshi Kurokawa, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, in commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake-

March 2, 2021

The Fukushima nuclear power plant accident ten years ago and the current COVID-19 pandemic alike revealed a big challenge Japan faces, the government's crisis management and emergency response capabilities. What lessons can we learn and how can we apply our experience for the future? I threw these questions at Dr. Kiyoshi Kurokawa, Professor Emeritus at GRIPS, the former chairman of the National Diet of Japan's Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission (NAIIC) and the current Chair of a COVID-19-related advisory board to the Japanese Cabinet.

--Professor Kurokawa, you now serve as the Chair of the AI Simulation Advisory Board to the Japanese Government. The Board was initially tasked to validate the Government's response measures during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, including PCR testing measures and temporary closures of schools. Has it been validated?

"The Board was set up last summer consisting of four members including Professor Shinya Yamanaka of Kyoto University, and myself. One day I received a FAX requesting me to take over as the Chair of the board. I visited Minister of Economic Reconstruction, Yasutoshi Nishimura, for the details. He indicated that while he already had five working groups focused on the pandemic control reporting to him, he was expecting the four of us to provide advice from a higher perspective."

"Up until then, the working groups had conducted a variety of simulations using artificial intelligence and supercomputer FUGAKU to see how the virus might spread, but they hadn't reviewed the measures taken by the Government enacted in response to the first wave. With such working groups serving under the aegis and beholden to the Administration, it is difficult for them to provide an objective assessment of Government policy and performance; yet however, objective evaluation of past measures is an important first step needed to help launch future measures."

--How different is your current role from the one you had as Chair of the Independent Commission on the Fukushima Nuclear Accident?

“NAIIC was the first of its kind in the Japanese Constitutional history, whereby the National Diet as the legislative branch of Japan established an investigatory commission composed of civilians who were backed with the right and power to investigate state affairs. Typically, investigation boards of this sort are set up within the Government and since the Government tends to hold almost all the pertinent facts that provide the underlying fundamentals for discourse and debate, such an investigations cannot really proceed without them. While the Diet is equipped with the National Diet Library as well as Diet members have policy secretaries, neither can compete with the Government in terms of investigative capabilities and resources.”

“The NAIIC, however, was independent from the government and bureaucracy, and was given the legal authority and staff to conduct its investigation thanks to a special law passed unanimously by the Diet. We made a concerted effort to ensure the Commission’s independence by taking all possible security measures for the information we collected and abiding by strict rules such as a requirement for recording any contact or interaction with stakeholders such as employees of the electric companies and bureaucrats. All the ten commission members, those involved, a seismologist, a lawyer, science journalist, the chair of the township-level society of commerce and industry in the affected municipality and myself, had to go through a “checkup” for possible conflict of interests before being officially assigned to the Commission.”

--You compiled a final report six months after the initiation of the Commission.

“We interviewed at total of 1,167 people, including then Prime Minister Naoto Kan and Mr. Masao Yoshida, the then director of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant (NPP), as well as a survey targeting more than 10,000 residents in the disaster-stricken areas, leading to the release of our final report in July 2012. We concluded that the accident was a man-made disaster, not a natural disaster attributable to the earthquake and the subsequent tsunamis. While the Government’s own investigation committee and TEPCO’s own investigation committee also issued their own reports and findings, only our commission clearly addressed the Government and TEPCO’s responsibility in the matter; made possible thanks to the fact that we were an independent Commission.”

“Our report highlighted the relationship between the regulators and the business operators, citing the concept of ‘Regulatory Capture’. A term borrowed from economics, which refers to the situation the state the power structure between the regulator, in this case of the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency under the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), and the regulatees, in this case power companies, became reversed with the regulator ending up ‘captured’ as a prisoner beholden to the regulatees. The regulatees, or business operators, have far more technical knowledge than the regulator and took initiative in the process of rulemaking. As a result, their interests overweigh the safety of the nation in the regulations. This phenomenon is not just limited to the power sector. This became not just a problem for the electric power industry, but also for Japanese society at large.”

--Could you please elaborate on that?

Japanese society has a clear-cut “vertical” structure in which one stays in a single division/department of the company since his/her entry and builds up career there. In other words, horizontal mobility, that is, changing companies or organizations is not easy. The dominance of this single-track career path culture tends to make those who rise to the top of the dominance hierarchy adopt missions that follow precedent and prioritize protecting the interests of the organization. Having the same kind of people with the same kind of opinions, the organization as a group can easily go in a wrong direction. You know that if you said something different, you would be left forgotten. This “groupthink” mentality, or a strong pressure for harmonization, which is unique to Japan, underlies the regulatory capture phenomenon. In the situation where people make decisions in such a homogeneous background, they may make an irrevocable mistake at one point.”

--In the wake of the accident, has Japan changed in terms of t the single-track career path culture or continuing to favor homogeneity within its organizational culture?

“Essentially, nothing has changed. In most Japanese companies, those who successfully decode the organization values often rise to the top, and even if business performance deteriorates, the few mechanisms to remove bad management are at best, weak. In addition, the private sector appears to continue favoring government offices to first consult whenever there is a problem or issue. This ‘Okami Consciousness’ (the overweight power and influence of the government officials over the citizenry) also seems unique to Japan.”

“Many companies staff elites in the planning department of the head office, which serves as

the interface with the relevant government office. Companies cannot survive unless they are capable of “sensing the administration’s intention and reading the situation. The key for companies to grow and survive has been how they manage regulations in favor of their own interests. Japan's post-war economic growth was largely achieved by this system, and perhaps as a result, it has remained largely unchanged.”

“Having said that, we are seeing more and more youths fly out of large companies to start their own business these days. It’s still too early to say that such startups are the engine for Japan’s economic growth today. Yet, I’m pleased to see more and more individuals stay independent of organizations without being deeply immersed there.

--NAIIC’s report provided seven recommendations for making full use of the commission’s evaluation results. Has any of them been further pursued and discussed?

“Our recommendations included the need for oversight of regulators, improvement of response to residents in the affected areas, further inquiry into the causes of the accident, and how a new regulatory organization and laws and regulations should be. We also touched upon the necessity for setting up an independent investigation commission which looks into and examines nuclear energy-related issues, including decommissioning and spent fuels.

“We submitted the report to the Diet. It’s now the Diet’s responsibility to deliberate on our recommendations to the fullest and develop action plans. In actuality, however, although the Special Committee on Nuclear Issues was established in the House of Representatives in response to the report, I do not believe that any substantive discussion has taken place.

I believe that this is because too many Diet members have a limited understanding of the investigative capabilities of the Diet, and the public as a whole mistakenly assume their only means of engaging with the legislature is through voting in national elections.

--What can we do about it?

For one thing, we need to reinforce and strengthen the capability of the Diet to conduct investigations. In case of the U.S., for instance, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) is an independent organ closer to the Congress. It is much like the Board of Audit of Japan in terms of its mission to analyze the administration’s policies and execution of them, but more recently the GAO has shifted its focus to the outcomes and effects brought about by the policy measures. In 2004, they changed the word represented by the A from Accounting to

Accountability, referring to the government's responsibility for executing its policies. The U.S. government has implemented 80% of the GAO's recommendations within a few years from the issuance. It is most advisable for Japan to have this kind of capability in the Diet.

There is a belief that it is the role of the judiciary to hold people accountable for accidents. Three people, including Mr. Tsunehisa Katsumata, then chair of TEPCO, were indicted, and ruled not guilty by the Tokyo District Court in 2019. Judicial decisions are important, but they are not enough. We need a forum for discussion based on objective findings from investigations. The Diet has the responsibility to verify whether the government is fulfilling its promises in matters that greatly affect the lives of the people. The government's policy measures against the COVID-19 pandemic since last year also make a good topic for the ruling and opposition parties a joint examination.

--What's your assessment of the Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Various issues have surfaced in the past twelve months. We knew that the virus would spread further during the wintertime, but the government did not take action to secure more beds or to improve the testing posture. It was also pointed out that we need a Japanese version of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention of the U.S. as a central body for managing public health. There's more. But none of these arguments have been properly examined, and instead, the same arguments come up again and again every time the number of COVID-19 cases surges. These issues actually coincide with those discussed at the time of the nuclear disaster, more specifically, how the government responded about the healthcare of affected people, how the new nuclear regulating organization should be, and so on. The Washington Post once observed that the response to the pandemic by the Japanese government resembles what is written in the report of the NAIIC very much. The government's response to the pandemic, therefore, constitutes another topic to be examined and discussed by setting up an independent investigation entity in the Diet.

It is a challenging job, and the key determinant will be whether the Ruling Party agrees to the idea of verification. At the time of the nuclear accident, the then ruling party, Democratic Party (DPJ), voted in favor of the establishment of the National Diet Accident Independent Investigation Commission (NDAIC) because they hoped that the commission would examine the mistakes of the LDP-era nuclear policy. I saw it as a miraculous moment in which the then ruling Democratic Party and the then opposition Liberal Democratic Party agreed to the same project for different agendas. Fundamentally speaking, however, nuclear accidents and

countermeasures against contagious diseases are extremely important issues that have far-reaching impact on the nation and thus require deliberations across different political parties. To keep the government in proper check, we need a real investigation capability that is independent from the government itself.

(Interviewed by Hisatoshi Kabata, the Asahi Shimbun)

*This article is translated from the Asahi Shimbun article in Japanese and is not an official English translation of the Asahi Shimbun.