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# A Governor's Power to Shape the Future of a Nuclear Japan

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SAGA, Japan — In a nation plagued by weak political leadership, it has fallen to the local governor of an obscure southern prefecture to make a crucial decision that could help determine the future of nuclear power in [Japan](#) after the [Fukushima Daiichi accident](#).

The governor, Yasushi Furukawa of Saga Prefecture, must decide in coming days whether to support a request by Prime Minister Naoto Kan to restart two reactors at a local nuclear plant that have been shut down since last winter for regular maintenance. There are growing warnings here that if he decides no, and other governors follow his lead, every nuclear reactor in Japan could end up idled in less than a year.

That is because Japan's reactors are legally required to shut down every 13 months for routine maintenance. Thirty-five of the nation's 54 reactors are now offline, some because of damage from the March 11 earthquake and tsunami, but most because of the maintenance requirement. Unless some of them are turned back on, the last reactor in Japan will be shut down by next April, depriving the nation of the source of almost a third of its electricity.

Turning the idled reactors back on requires the central government's approval, which has not been granted since the Fukushima accident. In the [public backlash against nuclear power](#) that has followed the disaster, the Kan government is asking local political leaders to sign off on the restarts as well.

Mr. Furukawa is the first governor who is being called upon to make a decision. This has turned him into a bellwether of sorts on Japan's nuclear future, as his decision will be closely watched by other local leaders who must weigh the same issues of public anxieties about safety versus the threat of electricity shortages.

"I feel a great responsibility has been suddenly placed upon me," Mr. Furukawa, 52, said in an interview. "Deciding not to restart the reactors could turn us into a non-nuclear country faster than Germany," referring to that country's decision to scrap nuclear power by 2022.

All eyes are on Mr. Furukawa because most governors appear to be on the fence about restarting reactors. The newspaper Mainichi Shimbun reported last month that governors of 10 prefectures that are home to nuclear plants had said in interviews that they did not support restarting their reactors, with most saying they needed more information about safety measures. (The governors of two other such prefectures were not interviewed.) On Monday, the governor of Fukushima went a step further, calling for an end to his prefecture's economic and energy dependence on nuclear plants.

Mr. Furukawa has publicly agonized over the decision, which he said he wanted to make by mid-July. On Wednesday, he said that he was satisfied by the central government's safety explanations, signaling that he might be leaning toward restarting the reactors in his prefecture.

The situation in Saga offers a telling glimpse at some of the forces shaping the debate over the nation's nuclear future. While Japan has seen few of the large street demonstrations that the Fukushima accident has inspired abroad, there has been a clear public backlash against nuclear power. Recent opinion polls show an overwhelming majority — 82 percent in a survey conducted last month for Tokyo Shimbun — support getting rid of the nation's reactors.

However, the same polls show that most respondents do not favor an immediate halt, but a gradual phasing out of nuclear power as alternatives are found. Conversations here on the streets of Saga as well as with decision-makers in Tokyo reveal a nation torn between the dangers exposed by the Fukushima accident and the need of a resource-poor nation to keep its only serious energy alternative to imported [coal](#) and oil.

“There is deep unease about the safety of nuclear power, but there is also deep unease about getting rid of it,” said Izuru Makihara, a political scientist at [Tohoku University](#) in Sendai.

The prospect of all the reactors going offline has alarmed the business community and the nation's powerful nuclear lobby, which have issued warnings of the dire economic consequences if nuclear power is lost. They warn of higher electricity prices or even blackouts that could damage Japan's earthquake-shocked economy.

In a sign of looming energy shortages here even without further reactor shutdowns, the government on Friday ordered factories and other large electricity users in Tokyo to cut usage this summer by 15 percent from last year.

“If all the nuclear reactors are stopped, the effect on the economy would be enormous,” Mr. Kan warned late last month.

Japan's still-tiny antinuclear movement has won credibility since the Fukushima accident, though it is still popularly regarded as part of the leftist fringe. Activists complain that a deep apathy as well as a fear of being ostracized prevents many Japanese from taking action.

"Many people support us from the shadows, but they are afraid of being disliked as radicals," said Hatsumi Ishimaru, 59, a homemaker who leads an antinuclear group in Saga.

Many people here say they are perplexed why this weighty decision has fallen on Saga, a rural prefecture of about 850,000 residents on the southernmost main island of Kyushu and a place whose main claims to fame are its glazed pottery and gourmet beef. Partly, it is a question of timing: two of the four reactors at its plant, the Genkai Nuclear Power Station, have been waiting to restart since finishing their routine maintenance two months ago. The other two reactors remain in operation.

Governor Furukawa complained that the decision had fallen to him because Prime Minister Kan had failed to chart a clear direction on Japan's post-Fukushima energy future. This is a criticism heard across Japan, and Mr. Kan has agreed to step down once crucial recovery bills are passed.

"Prime Minister Kan is running away from a decision that the national government should be making," Mr. Furukawa said. On Friday, the governor requested a meeting with Mr. Kan "to hear his energy vision."

The governor fumes that he is being pressed to come to a quick decision by the national government and by local business groups. Instead, he has repeatedly asked nuclear regulators and the plant's operator, Kyushu Electric Power, for more detailed explanations on how they would prevent a Fukushima-style meltdown from happening here.

"It is easy to see the business groups who favor restarting the reactors," Mr. Furukawa said, "but the public unease that opposes it is shapeless."

On Wednesday, Mr. Kan sent his minister of trade and industry, Banri Kaieda, to Saga to explain safety measures directly to Mr. Furukawa. Last weekend, nuclear regulators held a hearing here in Saga on the plant's safety that was broadcast live on cable television and online.

While there is no legal requirement to get local approval, officials at Kyushu Electric say the current backlash against nuclear power makes it politically difficult to turn the reactors on without hometown approval.

The manager of the Genkai plant, Masayasu Murashima, said he has visited the prefectural and nearby municipal assemblies to explain Kyushu Electric's main safety arguments. Unlike the Fukushima Daiichi plant, the Genkai station does not sit near a fault line and is in a part of Japan that has not seen a large tsunami in more than 1,000 years of recorded history.

Mayor Hideo Kishimoto of Genkai, where the plant is located, has already signaled his acceptance of a restart. He admitted that a big factor was Genkai's economic dependence on the plant, whose taxes and subsidies provide two-thirds of the annual budget of some \$100 million in the town of 6,400 people.

"I think the economic worries are bigger in people's minds here," Mr. Kishimoto said.

Town residents said they were afraid that an accident here could force the sort of evacuations that were ordered near the Fukushima Daiichi plant. However, they said they had no choice but to follow the mayor's lead.

"We know our lives are closely bound to the plant," said Hiroyoshi Hidaka, 56, who owns a health products store in Genkai. "This has turned us into a town of silence."