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EDITORIAL: Why wait for the election? Abe should address nuclear power issues

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About 70 percent of voters want to see an end to nuclear power generation in Japan, according to an Asahi Shimbun opinion poll conducted on Feb. 16 and 17.

Respondents were asked to pick their preferred scenario from among five choices on the future of nuclear energy in this country. Nuclear power generation should be: “stopped immediately,” “stopped before 2030,” “stopped in the 2030s,” “stopped after the 2030s,” and “continued without being stopped.”

The poll results indicate about 60 percent of Japanese want the use of nuclear energy to terminate by the end of the 2030s. Only 18 percent supported the choice that nuclear power generation should continue.

The poll shows that Japanese sentiment toward nuclear power has remained mostly unchanged despite the transition of power from the government led by the Democratic Party of Japan to one headed by the Liberal Democratic Party.

However, politicians are currently showing little interest in holding in-depth discussions for building a society that is not dependent on nuclear energy.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has also advocated a reduction in Japan’s dependence on nuclear power. However, his administration appears to be tilting toward changing the direction from reduction to promotion of nuclear power. For example, it has vowed to review the policy of the DPJ-led government toward phasing out nuclear power. But the Abe administration has yet to make clear what elements of the policy it will change and how it will implement such changes.

The administration is adopting a wait-and-see attitude as the Nuclear Regulation Authority is working on new safety standards and determining if active faults are running under nuclear reactors. The government has apparently decided to avoid making any risky political move until the Upper House election in summer.

The Diet has exhibited no great zeal, either, in holding serious debate over the future of nuclear power in Japan.

Any major change in the nuclear power policy would have a huge economic and social impact.

That’s why any significant change in the policy requires careful preparations and enormous efforts to secure a broad public consensus. It is vital to minimize the negative effects of the policy shift and ensure it will lead to renewed economic growth and beneficial structural changes.

The NRA’s more rigorous safety inspections and assessments are certain to increase the number of reactors that are likely to be decommissioned or left idled for prolonged periods.

This prospect raises some important questions. What types of procedures are needed to decommission reactors? How should the government mitigate the effects on local economies and on the system for a stable supply of electricity? How should spent nuclear fuel and radioactive waste be stored?

All these questions must be tackled immediately. The government should sort out all issues that need to be addressed, and the Diet should start discussing them immediately.

Late last month, based on a proposal by the Diet’s Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission, the Diet set up a special committee to study issues related to nuclear power generation. The investigation panel called for close public monitoring of nuclear regulators through the special committee so that they will not serve the so-called nuclear village, a close-knit community of politicians, businesses, academics

and bureaucrats with vested interests in nuclear power.

While respecting the purpose of creating the special committee, the Diet should consider using it as a forum for broad policy debate on reducing the nation's dependence on nuclear energy.

Another idea worth serious consideration would be starting a fresh initiative to promote discussions among citizens, such as last summer's "national debate" programs.

If political leaders avoid grappling with tough policy challenges and postpone necessary actions, they will only exacerbate future confusion.

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