

OpenDemocracy

2012, an era of uncertainty

TAKASHI INOBUCHI 24 December 2011

Subjects: International politics, Democracy and government, Civil society, China, Japan, asia & pacific, democracy & power, visions & reflections, globalisation

The tsunami and nuclear accident made 2011 an especially hard year for Japan. But the questions raised by the experience are similar to those being asked across the world, says Takashi Inoguchi.

In 1666 a great fire and other dreadful events, from plague to war, assailed London. The poet John Dryden was inspired to compose the lengthy poem *Annus Mirabilis* (a year of wonders), which depicts these disasters and heralds the city's ability to rise above them. It seems appropriate to recall this at the end of 2011, an *annus horribilis* which in Japan was full of frightening and shocking events; and to ask whether, here and elsewhere, the passing year might also turn out to be the beginning of a new and more hopeful course.

The third month of 2011 saw a terrifying earthquake hit the northeastern region of Japan, followed immediately by a huge tsunami that bulldozed much of the northeastern coastline and an unthinkable nuclear accident at the Fukushima First nuclear-power station. The earthquake of 11 March 2011, at magnitude nine according to modern seismic calculations, was the largest in Japan for over a thousand years.

The toll of each ingredient of the tragedy was very different. The robust and careful way in which dwellings, other buildings, roads and railways had been constructed and protected meant that no one died in the earthquake; but the tsunami's relentless assault killed some 20,000 (of whom some 10,000 are still missing), and the Fukushima nuclear accident, while yet to be a direct cause of death, forced the evacuation of some 500,000 residents living in what became a prohibited area.

The devastation of the region affected is estimated as equivalent to 5% of Japan's entire GNP. The economic consequences have been severe, as the disaster both precipitated new problems and aggravated existing ones (the gradual withdrawal of businesses from the area as many manufacturers relocated their factories to elsewhere in Asia; shortages of power, skilled labour, and key components; and the Japanese yen's high exchange-rate). Amidst the turmoil, it remains to be seen whether Japan can retain its reputation for indefatigable innovation in such

areas as lightweight resilient aircraft and electric vehicles, which depend on the supply of key materials (carbon fibre) and components (the silicon ion battery).

The popular sense of 2011 being an *annus horribilis* is reinforced by political events. Japan's own "regime change", as the long dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party ended and the Democratic Party of Japan became the lead party of government, happened in 2009; but 2011 confirmed that this has intensified rather than terminated questions over the country's political model. The *Higashi Nihon Daishinsai* (Eastern Japan Great Earthquake Disaster) may lead to another big turnover in 2012.

But Japan has no monopoly of uncertainty, political or economic. Two of Japan's neighbours, and major powers - the United States and China - face presidential elections in 2012. Since the mid-1960s in the US and 1980 in China, election-years in the two countries have been marked by a rise in the annual economic growth-rate of 3.4% and 1.1% respectively. Will Barack Obama, or Hu Jintao, be able to oversee a boost of this scale in 2012? Japan's immediate neighbours, South Korea and Taiwan, also face presidential elections in coming months, with no assurance as to the outcome. All the candidates are looking closely at the macroeconomic figures and forecasts, and eyeing the competition between the US and China.

There is similar uncertainty elsewhere in the region. Many in southeast Asia are concerned by the tensions around the South China Sea, both between the US and China and involving various states claiming sovereignty over its archipelagos. It is unclear yet whether the fledgling democratising moves of Burma (Myanmar) will resemble the last phase of South Africa's apartheid regime. In south Asia, continued violence in Pakistan fuels fears that the country explodes or implodes; in India, political challenges to the ruling Congress Party and the resilient Maoist insurgency cast a shadow over its immediate future.

In the middle east, the withdrawal of most American forces from Iraq increases apprehension about an Iranian resurgence there and in the Gulf states; the conflict in Syria, the unresolved path of the Arab awakening, and Israel's failure to reach agreement with the Palestinians, make for a cloudy picture. Europe's financial-political crisis deepened in 2011, a situation that also reverberates in Asia thanks to strong trading links.

Indeed, the deep connections between and within all these regions create the ground for progress and danger alike. Is the year 2012 to be an *annus horribilis* or an *annus mirabilis*?