

German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ)

DIJ Social Science Study Group

June 24, 2015, 18:30

Juliane Schulz, Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg



A New Dawn for Direct Democracy in Japan? Action and Mobilization Strategies of a Grassroots Movement

The increasing number of local referenda in Japan indicates that the larger discourse on political change and political reforms that is also aiming at more democratization may be gaining traction. While this process began already in the 1990s, the nuclear accident in Fukushima in March 2011 appears to have triggered a new wave of social movement activism campaigning for more local autonomy, better means of political participation for citizens and the introduction of more elements associated with direct democracy. Among the many new groups that have emerged in recent years is *Minna de kimeyō ,genpatsu‘ kokumin tōhyō* (Let’s Decide Together – Citizen-initiated National Referendum on Nuclear Power, hereafter: MdK), which uses the highly emotional topic of nuclear energy to attract attention, but in fact pursues the more general political goal of establishing direct democracy in Japan. Through its anti-nuclear campaign it hopes to educate the public about direct democracy and to mobilize citizens to participate in political decision-making. Its initial goal is to hold a national referendum on the abolition of nuclear power by winning the support of the public. If successful this would lead to the first national referendum in Japanese politics.

This project takes MdK as a case study and aims at contributing to a deeper understanding of the activities and strategies of advocates of more direct democracy and the constraints they experience in Japan. Drawing on participatory observations and qualitative interviews with activists, I argue that one of the characteristics of MdK is the social capital its members build up through experiencing a collective learning process about democracy. This contributes to the creation of a social infrastructure that aims at encouraging the public to take an active part in changing the political decision-making process. Furthermore, the individual networks, the knowledge members have acquired through many years of activism and the experience they have gained in framing political goals, lead to stronger advocacy roles and shape the interaction process with the national authorities in particular for promoting direct democracy.

Juliane Schulz is a Ph.D. candidate at Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg and currently a scholarship fellow at the German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ). She holds a Master of Arts’ degree in Japanese Studies and Sociology from Eberhard Karls University Tübingen.

The DIJ Social Science Study Group is organized by S. Heinrich, P. Holdgrün and C. Hommerich. All are welcome to attend, but registration (holdgruen@dijtokyo.org) is appreciated.

German Institute for Japanese Studies Tokyo (DIJ)
Jōchi Kioizaka Bldg. 2F, 7-1 Kioichō, Chiyoda-ku, Tōkyō 102-0094, Phone: 03-3222-5077
For a map please refer to www.dijtokyo.org