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Japan bids to turn tragedy into a triumph

By David Pilling

Not everything in Tokyo is back to normal. Office workers complain that the corridors of their buildings are so dark, the result of electricity-saving measures, that they fail to recognise colleagues in the gloom. One man was spotted on the subway, also less bright than usual, wearing a miner's hat with torch attached, the better to read his newspaper. There are fewer foreigners on the streets, since many who fled in the immediate aftermath of the March 11 earthquake have not returned. And shops have taken to selling unusual items: one was offering "ice-touch underpants" for the hot, non-air-conditioned summer that descended with a vengeance on the capital this week.

But three months after the triple calamity of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown, Tokyo is gradually regaining some sense of equilibrium. Shops are well stocked. Water is back on the shelves after briefly running out in panic buying. Remarkably too, given the disruption to the supply chain and the severity of power shortages, economists are predicting that industrial production will regain pre-crisis levels in the next few months. For Japan as a whole – if not for the Tohoku region, where 22,000 are dead or missing – the immediate sense of crisis is over.

Many Japanese think that is not altogether a good thing. Japan has a long history of overcoming crises. But to overcome a crisis, one has to have a sense of one.

Takatoshi Ito, professor at University of Tokyo, says the government does not. If it did, he says, it would already have declared Tokyo Electric Power, the operator of the tsunami-engulfed Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, insolvent. He also bemoans parliamentary infighting. Naoto Kan, the fifth prime minister in five years, only survived a vote of no-confidence by promising to quit, a case of dodging a bullet by tying a noose around his neck. Asked what the government was doing in response to the crisis, Prof Ito replies scornfully: "Is there a government?"

Yet Japan is highly adaptable. The cliché of a change-resistant culture could hardly be further from the truth. John Dower, author of *Embracing Defeat*, the magisterial study of Japan's postwar recovery, says the country is characterised by dynamism and rapid shifts in direction. One only has to look at its transformation from a feudal society to a powerful industrial state, or from an aggressive military power to a country with a 60-year record of pacifism.

Nor has change always come from the top – which given the current crop of

politicians is just as well. When Commodore Matthew Perry's Black Ships menaced off the shore in 1853, the shogun at the time took to his bed. Yet dramatic change came anyway, led by a younger clique of samurai with a vision of a modern, industrial Japan.

This year's catastrophe will not produce anything so dramatic. But the shock to the national psyche will probably produce some genuinely new ideas.

There is, for example, an emerging consensus that coastal Tohoku cannot simply be rebuilt as it was. The region was already poorer than much of Japan, its population ageing faster and many of its younger people gone to the cities. One idea for revival is to declare the whole region a special economic zone with its own tax and labour codes designed to attract new industries.

Many commentators are also suggesting that Tohoku experiment with new agricultural regulations, overturning laws that make it difficult to combine smallholdings into larger tracts of land that could be farmed more efficiently. Others have proposed that new "compact cities" be built to make it easier to deliver services, such as care for the elderly.

Masayoshi Son, chief executive of internet company Softbank, also has big ideas. He has declared his company will move decisively into renewable energy. He has also spoken convincingly of the need to make Japan's electricity grid smarter. At the moment Japan's fragmented grid is decidedly dumb.

The earthquake may also galvanise Japan's civil society. Up to half a million volunteers and dozens of non-governmental organisations have helped in relief and rebuilding efforts. Keiko Kiyama, secretary-general of JEN, an NGO, complains that authorities are often inflexible in dealing with non-governmental entities. But NGOs, many with experience abroad, are making more forceful demands to be included.

Volunteerism is not the only stirring of citizen activism. The anti-nuclear movement has started to mobilise large demonstrations. And some people whose livelihoods have been ruined by the nuclear meltdown are expected to press compensation claims through the courts.

These are just some of the new ideas and trends bubbling to the surface. Not all of them will be good. Some will be impractical. Some will founder on the rocks of conservatism or vested interest. Even in their entirety, they may be insufficient to overcome Japan's very real challenges of an ageing population and water-treading economy.

Yet when historians look back on this period, they are likely to discern at least some important differences between pre- and post-tsunami Japan. Prof Dower says such

moments in history “crack open a space”. It is up to Japan – its citizens as well as its government – to take advantage of the opportunity tragedy has presented.

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