

The International Politics of the Kumamoto Earthquake

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Starting on April 14th 2016, a series of powerful earthquakes later known as the Kumamoto Earthquake struck the Kyushu region of Japan resulting in loss of life, severed lifelines and mass evacuations. In response, the Abe Administration in Tokyo sent over 25,000 JSDF troops to affected areas and created a special 20 trillion yen (179 billion US\$) budget to fund housing, business and infrastructure. However, the rhetoric surrounding the actions of the Abe Administration were interpreted by the media as taking advantage of a natural disaster to achieve political goals. In particular, comments made by chief cabinet secretary Yoshihide Suga which alluded to the need to amend Japan's constitution and the dispatch of U.S. Military aircraft to the disaster zone were perceived by writers, journalists and academics as Shock Doctrine—using disaster to push political agenda that had nothing to do with disaster recovery or response.

In spite of this, the Abe Administration saw both short and long-term improvement in its public approval ratings in the wake of what many average people—both Japanese and foreign—viewed an effective handling of a major natural disaster. This paper will discuss causes for the divorce between public and media perception of the Japanese government's handling of the 2016 Kumamoto Earthquake, examining how public opinion is formed in Japan via both modern and traditional forms of media.

Prime Minister Abe and the Media

In order to discuss the relationship between the Japanese media and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during the Kumamoto Earthquake, it is first necessary to give provide a background on the politics of the Abe administration and how the Japanese media have reacted to them.

Shinzo Abe is the current Prime Minister of Japan, and he is also the president of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party, the leading conservative political party in Japan which has held power almost continuously since its formation in 1955, with few exceptional periods in the 1990s and again in the late 2000s. Although the LDP has never historically adopted any specific political philosophy, and the individual members of the LDP hold differing viewpoints, the general leanings of LDP members have

always been to the right of their opposition while not being as far right as Japan's extreme-right nationalist groups. Instead, the LDP has traditionally associated itself with a broad set of goals: export-based economic growth tempered by protectionism, close ties with the United States, streamlining of government, and the privatization of government institutions.¹⁾ Other achievements which the LDP can claim are Japan's economic shift from manufacturing to scientific research, and the promotion of Japan as an internationalized, high-technology society in the 1990s and 2000s.²⁾ Because the LDP has always lacked a strong, centralized political ideology, the party has consistently failed to foster political participation and strong voter turnout over the 60 years it has remained in power. Likewise, its party leaders and the Prime Ministers have rarely been charismatic, and are instead pragmatic figureheads. However, it could be argued that the LDP's lack of strong ideology allowed the LDP to avoid divisiveness and internal strife, which allowed the party to remain in power and become a stable platform around which a coalition of agriculture, big business, big industry and other interest groups were able to gather and work together with party members to implement new policy measures. (Dolan & Warden) Although this close relationship between government and interest groups, along with the LDP's patron-client based local support group structure, has led to issues of widespread issues of corruption,³⁾ the LDP was able to effectively implement policy and promote economic growth as well as a Japanese middle-class during Japan's "miracle economy" period.

The 2010s have brought new challenges to the Liberal Democratic Party, and long-term economic stagnation has called for new financial policy. The LDP have attempted to stimulate the economy by promoting a policy of a weak yen, in order to assist exporters. However, this has had an effect of cooling consumer demand as Japanese households have lost purchasing power.⁴⁾ Likewise, in 2013 Abe went ahead with the first sales tax increase since 1997, with plans to further raise it in coming years in order to finance social spending as part of the LDP's "Abenomics" economic strategy.⁵⁾ However, this increase in sales tax also had a negative effect on consumer behavior and, already struggling with increased costs of living due to a weak currency and high energy costs, Japan fell into recession in 2014 which further hindered Prime Minister Abe's attempts to pull Japan out of decades-long economic stagnation.⁶⁾ The left-leaning Japanese and international media—already critical of the LDP and the Abe administration due to longstanding animosities over media censorship, historical revisionism, hawkishness and an LDP push for constitutional revision—took this opportunity to harshly criticize what they saw as the imminent floundering of Abenomics.^{7, 8)} Likewise, as consumers started to feel the true effects of the economic recession and the Japanese middle class suffered from wage contraction, a lower quality of life and the evaporation of hopes for lifelong employment which their parents and grandparents enjoyed during Japan's economic boom, spending tumbled and support for the LDP plummeted.^{9, 10, 11)}

Faced with the threat of opposition parties taking control from the LDP, the Abe administration

called for a snap election while his opponents were still unprepared and had not formulated any viable alternatives to the LDP's Abenomics plan. The gambit paid off. The LDP was able to consolidate their power base and Abe was re-elected as the prime minister. Although the Abe administration characterized the results of this election as a referendum on Abenomics and a vote of confidence from the Japanese people, the snap election witnessed a record low voter turnout with half of the electorate abstaining from the vote.¹²⁾ It is likely that the result of the snap election was not so much a vote of confidence for the Abe administration as it was a sign that the opposition parties had no viable alternative economic strategy to challenge the LDP with. Faced with a stalled economic recovery and pressured by increasingly bellicose Russian, Chinese and North Korean posturing, the Abe administration resolved to move forward with plans for the "most drastic reforms [in Japan law] since World War 2" in areas of agriculture, healthcare, labor, economy and—most contentiously—national security.¹³⁾

In his April 2015 address to the United States congress, Prime Minister Abe announced his intent to "enact all necessary bills by this coming summer" to expand Japan's Self-Defense Forces' capability to act in a role of "collective self-defense" in which the JSDF would be able to engage in pre-emptive warfare should an ally of Japan be threatened, aligning with the decision made by the LDP in the summer of 2014 to call for reinterpretation of the Japanese constitution.¹⁴⁾ In accordance with this decision, the Abe administration introduced 11 bills into the Diet in May of 2015, collectively referred to as "Peace and Security Preservation Legislation", the content of these bills all concerned an expansion of Japan's military capacity to join in armed foreign conflicts.

Although the LDP promoted these bills as a limited expansion of "exclusively defensive" military capability, and attempted to assure the Japanese public and opposition parties that the LDP was committed to peace, the Abe administration encountered stiff opposition to its bills.¹⁵⁾ After much opposition filibustering and public outcry the bills were passed by the national diet on September 19th, 2015.¹⁶⁾ Constitutional scholars, academics, atomic bomb survivors, anti-war organizations opposition parties, political pundits would roundly criticize the LDP of using its majority to railroad this controversial legislature through the national diet.^{17, 18)} Approval ratings for Abe also fell into negative numbers for the first time since 2012, with one poll conducted in August suggesting that fully half of the Japanese public disapproved of the Abe administration.¹⁹⁾ Media outlets both inside and Japan noted that the decision was "unpopular".²⁰⁾ After the passing of the defense bills, the LDP expected to spend the rest of 2015 refocusing its efforts on economic reform. However, the next stage in the LDP's Abenomics program was met with criticism by commentators who argued that Abenomics had failed to pull Japan out of its recession prefacing their forecasts by needling Prime Minister Abe's "unpopular security legislation."^{21, 22, 23)}

In the final months of 2015, the LDP's topic-shift from national security to safer discussions of

economic growth policy, a softening of stance on consumption tax increase and some modest economic recovery saw the Abe administration regain ground in public polls. However, a pall of “unpopularity” continued to hang over the administration into 2016 as foreign and domestic media continued to criticize the Abe cabinet for its role in expanding the role of Japan’s military.²⁴⁾ This was the public relations situation which Prime Minister Abe found himself in when, in early 2016, the Kumamoto Earthquake struck.

The Earthquake

The 2016 Kumamoto Earthquake, so named by the Japan Meteorological Agency, was actually a series of strong quakes which struck the Kyushu area of Japan in mid-April of 2016, beginning with a foreshock on April 14th and lasting for several days. The strongest quake occurred 28 hours after the first foreshock at 1:25AM on April 16th directly beneath Kumamoto City.²⁵⁾ At first, the Japanese Meteorological Agency announced that the earthquake was a magnitude 6, but later analysis of data from remote seismometers indicated that the earthquake was magnitude 7, or the largest possible classification of earthquake.²⁶⁾ Additionally, readings taken by the JMA of both the foreshock and mainshock discovered long-period ground motion rates of over 100 meters a second, making these earthquakes especially damaging to the interiors of high-rise buildings.²⁷⁾ The mainshock which occurred on April 16th was particularly damaging to the region which was still attempting to recover from what was believed to be the main earthquake which had occurred on the 14th. In total, both quakes resulted in 72 deaths and 2,104 injured.^{28, 29)} Further exacerbating the situation, the severe ground motion of the earthquake caused extensive damage to lifeline facilities. Across Kumamoto Prefecture, approximately 470,000 households experienced a loss of electric power, 430,000 households lost access to water, and 110,000 experienced gas outages.^{30, 31, 32)} In the most severely hit areas, approximately 8,000 households were completely destroyed—a large number considering Japanese homes are built to resist moderate earthquakes.³³⁾ This situation demanded large-scale evacuations, with the total number of evacuees reaching a peak of 183,000 on April 16th.³⁴⁾ mid-August 2016, the number of people still evacuated or under evacuation advisory number 2,100 while deaths resulting from illness or stress caused by evacuation number 17 (Japan Fire and Disaster Management Agency).

As mentioned above, the Kumamoto Earthquake was characterized by an extreme long-period ground movement. This led to widespread mud and rockslides, damaged roads, warped railway tracks and collapsed bridges across the affected region. This limited mobility and complicating rescue, evacuation and resupply efforts.³⁵⁾ Widespread damage to the Main Kyushu Expressway, including road surface collapse, buckling, the collapse of entry and exit ramps, and the collapse of the

Kiyamagawa Bridge caused portions of the highway to be closed off. Passability of the expressway was not restored until April 29th and passage restrictions were not completely lifted until mid-June.^{36, 37)} Rail services to Kumamoto Prefecture were severely disrupted when the earthquake caused a shinkansen to derail and badly warped the rails of both regular train lines as well as those of high speed bullet trains providing service to the prefecture. Although Japan Railways initially estimated that service would be resumed in time for the Golden Week holiday in May, the mainshock which occurred on the 16th worsened the damage, causing the rail company to delay the re-opening of its services.³⁸⁾

Although an official government statement detailing the total cost of damages inflicted has yet to be released, the city and prefecture of government has estimated that the cost of damages to roads, bridges, dams and other basic infrastructure to be over 170 billion yen (1.6 billion USD) with over 3,500 individual locations in need of repairs.³⁹⁾ Likewise, the General Insurance Agency of Japan have reported that total insurance losses due to claims paid on damage to residential properties have surpassed 3.2 billion USD, while final insurance losses are estimated to surpass 4 billion.^{40, 41)} Furthermore, the Kumamoto Prefectural Disaster Management Headquarters estimated losses to marine and agricultural industries at 100 billion yen (940 million USD).⁴²⁾ Later on, the Prefectural Disaster Management HQ would revise this estimate to include other industries such as manufacturing, commerce, service and tourism based industries, with the total amounting to over 1 trillion yen (9.6 billion USD).⁴³⁾ However, these amounts are likely to increase, as these estimates can not account for the long-term local economic impact caused by the disruption of businesses and trade.

The damage caused to Kumamoto Prefecture by the earthquake was not limited to financial losses and disruption of life. The earthquake was of a sufficient scale to affect many culturally significant locations or structures, some of which were damaged or completely destroyed. The tower gate of the Aso Shrine, a nationally registered Tangible Cultural Property, completely collapsed along with other ancillary buildings in the shrine, including a prayer hall.^{44, 45)} Kumamoto Castle also suffered severe damage to its roof and walls in the April 14th foreshock, while the large watchtowers along the Northern and Eastern walls collapsed in the mainshock two days later.⁴⁶⁾ Unlike the castle itself, which was not an original structure, the watchtowers were original structures dating back from 1600 when the castle was originally laid down, and were registered as tangible cultural treasures by the government.⁴⁷⁾ Yet another historic structure which was completely destroyed was the Janes' Residence, the first western-style home to be built in Kumamoto Prefecture. The building was registered as a cultural treasure, and was surrounded by other famous buildings, such as one of the homes that was inhabited by Natsume Souseki.⁴⁸⁾ On April 14th, several of the home's load-bearing walls gave out and, on the 16th, the building completely collapsed during the mainshock. Although restoration work has begun on Kumamoto Castle as of June of 2016, the Janes' Residence may never be restored

due to the financial distress which the disaster has placed on the prefectural and city governments of Kumamoto.^{49, 50)}

It was not just severity, but also length and range which made the Kumamoto Earthquake the most devastating natural disaster that Japan has experienced since the Tohoku earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown on March 11th, 2011. The Kumamoto Earthquake's April 14th foreshock by itself was devastating enough, but when the government of Japan realized on April 16th that it was only the precursor to a much larger event, recovery efforts were stalled and repairs which had already begun were forced to start anew.⁵¹⁾ Adding to the confusion and fear were hundreds of very strong aftershocks which occurred with great frequency over a wide area. This series of events would put unprecedented strains, as well as public and media scrutiny, on the Japanese government's ability to respond to this major disaster.

Government Response; Media Reaction

At the time of the April 14th foreshock, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was having dinner with colleagues in Tokyo's Shibuya Ward.⁵²⁾ Upon receiving notice of the earthquake, PM Abe made a statement to the press in which he called for "The swift assessment of the scale of devastation, for cooperation among government bodies, and for the prompt and accurate provision of information regarding evacuations and damage to the Japanese public." After giving this initial statement, Prime Minister Abe, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga and LDP Minister of State for Disaster Management Taro Kono reported to the Crisis Management Center in the basement of the Prime Minister's office to manage and oversee government officials concerned with the recovery effort of what was believed to be the primary disaster event of the Kumamoto Earthquake.⁵³⁾ Under the direction of Abe and his cabinet members, in less than two hours and twenty minutes after the foreshock, a Crisis Management Center was established at the office in accordance with Japan's Disaster Response Law.⁵⁴⁾ At 11:30PM, the Prime Minister headed the first Meeting of the Emergency Response Headquarters for the Earthquake. In this meeting, reports from constituent government ministries and agencies were reviewed as Prime Minister Abe and his Crisis Management Office sought to collect information and determine the length of damage caused, though the dark of night proved to be an hindrance.^{55, 56)} In the prime minister's opening address, Abe issued the following instructions: 1) Ensuring the safety of residents is first priority, 2) the central government must work closely with local governments to ensure a high level of alert and the safe evacuation of residents during any possible aftershocks, 3) The central government must work closely with organizations engaged in the provision of emergency supplies and medical care.⁵⁷⁾

Within the same night, Kabashima Ikuo, the governor of Kumamoto Prefecture, petitioned

Japanese Self-Defense Force command as well as the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Fire and Disaster Management Agency for the immediate commencement of rescue operations.⁵⁸⁾ The GJSDF and FDMA responded by sending 350 JSDF troops as well as 200 out-of-prefecture police officers and 200 firefighters.⁵⁹⁾ Additionally, the Ministry of Defense responded by immediately sending one helicopter and two fighter jets to the airspace of the affected region in order to gather reconnaissance on earthquake damage.⁶⁰⁾

At 10:00 PM, and again at midnight, Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga held an emergency press conference and took interviews to announce that there was no evidence of damage to any of the three nuclear reactor facilities located near the earthquake zone, and that there was no danger of a nuclear incident due to the fact that the severity of the earthquake at those locations was well within safety margins of the facilities' tolerances.⁶¹⁾

On April 15th, the day following the foreshock, an Emergency Disaster Management Office was also set up at the Kumamoto Prefecture government offices to further deal with the rescue and recovery operations on location while surrounding police departments in the neighboring prefectures of Oita and Kouchi sent specially equipped helicopters to assist with rescue operations.⁶²⁾ At this time, Prime Minister Abe appears to have been preparing for a personal visit to the affected area; deliberation over the acceptance of the Trans Pacific Partnership was originally planned for the 15th with Prime Minister Abe in attendance. However, at the outset of the meeting, the Prime Minister took the podium and declared that he would recuse himself in order to ensure "the safety of [Kumamoto's] citizens and the support of its disaster victims". This led to the head chairmen of the special committee to postpone deliberation of TPP legislation until April 18th or later.⁶³⁾ Instead, the Prime Minister returned to the Emergency Disaster Management Office where he attended a second and then a third emergency disaster management meeting. These meetings were interspersed by press conferences in which Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga, who fielded questions from the media. Among the topics covered at the three press conferences held on the 15th, significant announcements included that an additional 1,600 JSDF troops and 1,900 police were being dispatched to the disaster zone and that the prime minister would be visiting the affected areas in person the following day.^{64, 65)} It was during the April 15th press conferences that Secretary Suga aired his opinions on the need for a constitutional clause that would grant the state overreaching powers during natural disasters, igniting accusations that the Abe Cabinet was attempting to exploit the disaster in order to push through unpopular constitutional reform and normalize Japan's military, the accusations of which would ripple through both Japanese and English media.⁶⁶⁾ Some Japanese academics reacted so negatively to the suggestion of the need for more unilateral military involvement in disaster mitigation that they demanded that the JSDF be removed completely from disaster relief efforts and converted into a non-military disaster relief corps.⁶⁷⁾

Meanwhile, in the emergency disaster meetings, the Prime Minister put special emphasis on the fact that many evacuees were fearful of aftershocks and had spent the previous night outdoors. As a result, the prime minister highlighted the need to provide adequate indoor shelter conditions and ensure that all evacuees were able to shelter indoors in light of weather reports that forecast severe rain in the Kumamoto Region. The execution of this plan would prove to be a public blunder for the Abe Administration; through the Abe cabinet's chain of command, the prime minister's appeal to ensure adequate shelter for evacuees appears to have been mishandled and miscommunicated. By the time this statement had reached the desk of Kumamoto Governor Ikuo Kabashima, it had become a strongly-worded command to "remove" evacuees who were sheltering outdoors. Governor Kabashima replied angrily and publicly that the government "doesn't understand the situation on the ground" and that "the evacuees aren't outside because there aren't enough shelters. It's because they are so frightened of aftershocks that they can't stand to be inside."⁶⁸⁾ Hours later, the fears of these evacuees would prove to be justified.

The Kumamoto Earthquake's mainshock occurred in the very early hours of April 16th, quadrupling casualties, snarling repair and rescue operations, severing lifelines and collapsing structures which were damaged in the initial foreshock. In response to this, Prime Minister Abe called his cabinet members to the Crisis Management Center at 3AM and began gathering intelligence, with Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga holding another emergency press conference approximately 30 minutes later in which it was announced that many victims were suspected to be buried alive, and that rescue operations were ongoing throughout the night despite heavy rain. It was also announced that Abe's planned visit to the affected regions was to be canceled until further notice, which would later become a contentious issue for critics of the Abe administration's handling of the disaster.^{69, 70)} Within the same day, Chief Cabinet Secretary Suga informed the press that, as was the case with the April 14th foreshock, there was no threat presented to any of the nuclear power plants, but concerns would persist among anti-nuclear political factions and media pundits. Eventually, the head of the Nuclear Regulation Agency was compelled to apologize for a "lack of news in the wake of the deadly earthquakes in Kumamoto Prefecture" despite the fact that the information appears to have been publicly available.^{71, 72)}

It was not until the 16th that the Abe Cabinet increased the dispatch of emergency aid workers and JSDF troops to Kumamoto to 25,000.⁷³⁾ Up until this point, only approximately 2000 troops had been ordered to the disaster area to aid emergency rescue experts. This is in spite of the fact that the governor of Kumamoto Prefecture had submitted his request for aid from the JSDF on April 14th. This delay was criticized by an anonymous Kumamoto Prefectural Government office staff journalist, who lamented that the government hadn't sent more troops immediately to "prevent public disorder when the second earthquake happened while the prefectural government was still paralyzed by the first

quake.” This quote was picked up by left-leaning blogs and social media commentators, who used it to attack the Abe Administration, accusing the prime minister of being a “political strategist”.⁷⁴⁾

On April 17th, the Abe cabinet requested that the United States Marines provide aid to communities cut off by landslides via the use of Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft operating out of Ginowan, Okinawa.⁷⁵⁾ Although the employment of Osprey craft was ostensibly viewed by the U.S. military as a gesture of goodwill, both the military base and the Osprey aircraft themselves are controversial.

Opposition party members were quick to attack Abe for what they viewed as a political move, with the head of the Japanese Communist Party accusing the Abe cabinet of “exploiting the disaster as an opportunity to familiarize people with the Osprey to eliminate their fear of the aircraft.”⁷⁶⁾ Some media outlets echoed this sentiment, accusing Abe of using the Osprey as a political device and highlighting local negative sentiment towards the aircraft.⁷⁷⁾ On the other hand, it later came to light that the use of the Ospreys may have been a necessity; 80% of Japan’s own heavy-lift helicopters were undergoing maintenance at the time of the Kumamoto Earthquake and were not able to participate in aid transportation efforts.⁷⁸⁾ Still, given the contentious nature of the Osprey, it is unlikely that their use was utterly without political motivation.

As the recovery effort went on in the following days and weeks, the media found further fault with several aspects of the way in which the Abe administration was prosecuting recovery efforts in Kumamoto. Abe’s planned April 16th inspection of the disaster area was postponed by the mainshock which occurred on that date, and as a result Abe did not visit Kumamoto Prefecture to tour the damaged area until the 23rd.⁷⁹⁾ It wasn’t until the following day, April 24th, that the Abe Administration made the motion to compile an emergency supplementary budget of special 20 trillion yen (179 billion US\$) to fund housing, business and infrastructure repairs.⁸⁰⁾ At the same meeting, Abe made demands that procedures be expedited to designate the Kumamoto Earthquake as a ‘Disaster of Extreme Severity’ in order to allow for passage of the aforementioned emergency supplementary budget, with the designation passing on April 25th.

Abe’s delayed visitation to Kumamoto and the resulting delay in designating the disaster as a ‘Disaster of Extreme Severity’ and assembling an emergency supplementary budget were criticized by the Democratic Party diet members.⁸¹⁾ This sentiment mirrored by liberal media outlets such as the Mainichi Shimbun, which editorials both in Japanese and English that characterized the Abe administration as “desperate to swiftly respond”.^{82, 83)}

The Public View

While the government was dealing with the disaster in Kumamoto, media outlets were conducting polls to determine how the LDP’s handling of the Kumamoto Earthquake had affected public

opinion. The results of these polls showed that, on the whole, Japanese citizens were satisfied with the way in which the Abe administration was handling recovery efforts despite a steady stream of criticism from the media, academia and opposition parties.

One national poll conducted by Mainichi Shimbun in the immediate aftermath of the April 16th mainshock reported that 65% of the Japanese public viewed the Abe administration's response to the Kumamoto Earthquake as appropriate, despite only 33% of the polled participants indicating that they would vote for LDP candidates in the summer House of Councilors election and 21% indicating that they would vote for other opposition parties. Mainichi was careful to note that 50% of the participants had a negative opinion of the LDP's security legislation.⁸⁴⁾ It is interesting to note that 65% of participants of this poll indicated that they viewed the Abe Administration's actions as appropriate despite very low civic engagement. In other words, poll participants were generally positive about the Abe administration's response despite 44% of participants indicating that they were not affiliated with any political party.

Another joint public opinion poll conducted by the Fuji News Network on April 25th found that a nation-wide average of 57% of participants "acknowledged the value" of the Abe Administration's response to the Kumamoto Disaster, while only 32% responded negatively.

Interestingly, 60% of poll participants from the Kyushu region polled favorably towards the Abe Administration's handling of the quake, thereby beating out the national-wide average; the actual victims of the earthquake were, on the whole, some of the most satisfied with the government's response. This poll also found a significant disparity between participants of different political alignments, with 76% of LDP supporters rating the government response favorably while only 47% of Democratic Party supporters gave favorable responses. From this, one can conclude that politics were a strong factor in determining whether the government response to the earthquake was effective or not.⁸⁵⁾

Similar national polls conducted by other Japanese media outlets during this time period posted similar results, all of which indicated that the Abe administration gained public support through its management of the disaster, and with their only difference being how much support the LDP had gained. All polls appeared to have agreed that the Prime Minister Abe's national support rose above 50% for the first time since his 2012 term.^{86, 87)} These polls indicate that the Japanese public was not overly influenced by institutional, political or media-based criticism of the Abe administration during the recovery period, save for those citizens who were already politically opposed to Abe and affiliated with opposition parties.

Conclusion

Despite liberal media and opposition parties' frequent and sometimes-warranted criticism of how the Kumamoto Earthquake was handled by the Abe cabinet, general public opinion did not appear to be affected by this criticism. Contrariwise, based on the results of national polls conducted during the months following the earthquake, it appears that the general public consensus was that the Abe administration's management was competent, and received particular commendation among those who directly suffered under the earthquake in spite of the Abe administration's unpopular national security decisions. It appears that, among the general Japanese population, interpretation of how effective the LDP's Kumamoto Earthquake response was influenced by political alignment while foreign opinion of the Abe administration was more unilaterally controlled by English translations of left-leaning Japanese media outlet publications.

Japan has been long-characterized by a mistrust for institutions such as government, the media, and businesses. The findings of the 2016 Edelman Trust Barometer survey, published two months before the Kumamoto Earthquake, indicate that public trust in the media is in the 30% range, where it has languished ever since the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. The same survey also indicates that the most popular method for finding new information in Japan is the use of search engines like Google to find video and photographs, with traditional media outlets like television and print are falling behind.⁸⁸⁾ This is indicative that Japanese public is in a mindset of "seeing is believing", and the LDP managed to provide enough visual evidence to sway public opinion in spite of critical media.

The record on Prime Minister Abe's leadership during the Kumamoto Earthquake has yet to be written. As with all major natural disasters, the true results of the Abe Cabinet's efforts will not be certain until Kumamoto Prefecture achieves economic recovery, but it appears that Prime Minister Abe's immediate and short-term response was perceived as effective by the Japanese public despite other divisive decisions made by his administration and the political and media hostility which those divisive decisions engendered, even during the recovery effort. As for the international reaction to the LDP's handling of the situation, it appears to have been muted with only a few exceptions, namely Japanese media which also publish in English, taking any particular positive or negative view, with most foreign media concerning itself with neutral reporting of events or well-wishing.

One thing is for certain: the Japanese public looks for concrete, visible results to draw its conclusions about government government, and Japanese earthquake victims will always be less interested in political and media polemic than in how quickly emergency supplies will be delivered.

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