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An inconceivable reality

DRAMATIC GLOBAL EVENTS SPARKED a foreboding sense of insecurity worldwide in recent months. There were the uprisings in the Maghreb and Middle Eastern countries where societies have revolted against despots and dictators in a way never deemed possible. The revolutionaries, who are predominantly Muslim, are not fighting for Islamic theocracies, but are calling for freedom and democracy. Many observers in the West did not consider them ready for this or even capable of it. The second event with global ramifications was the catastrophe in Japan, where the chain reaction of an earthquake and tsunami triggered the worst-case scenario at the Fukushima nuclear power plant.

The disaster in Japan is of even greater concern to people than the political upheaval mentioned above. The German Federal Chancellor, Angela Merkel, said that the “impossible became possible” in Fukushima. This is perhaps how we would like to see it. However, what happened in Fukushima was not that the impossible became possible but rather that a possibility that we did not want to envisage became a reality. This event has changed our perception of the risks involved, as the catastrophe has shown that the calculations concerning the so-called residual risk and the assumptions regarding its controllability were too optimistic. Schopenhauer called such behaviour “nefarious optimism”.

Fukushima serves as a warning against excessive faith in the progress, feasibility and controllability of technology and nature. The events in Japan will change energy policy worldwide as Fukushima is not Chernobyl. Unlike 25 years ago, dangerous experiments were not being carried out in a scrap reactor in an unpredictable dictatorship. The Fukushima disaster occurred in a technologically advanced country, in a democracy where, until 11 March 2011, the government had constantly affirmed that its nuclear power stations were safe. Major doubts have since arisen about the assurances of other governments on nuclear safety. Even those who previously supported nuclear technology unconditionally are now intently discussing and considering its abandonment and a change in energy policy.

The catastrophe in Japan as well as new scenarios and responsibilities will also have an impact on Swiss politics. The number of people who oppose the construction of new nuclear power stations or believe they are untenable for the future has risen sharply. The change in opinion by many Swiss politicians within days or weeks is clearly explained by the forthcoming elections. While tens of thousands of people in Japan must begin a new life having been permanently driven from their homes by the disaster and forced to live in unbearable uncertainty regarding the long-term consequences of contamination, there is intense speculation in Switzerland about which party will turn “Japan” to its advantage.

Read Heinz Eckert’s article on page 16 onwards to discover how recent developments will influence campaigning for the parliamentary elections on 23 October.

BARBARA ENGEL

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■ **EDITORS:** Barbara Engel (BE), Editor-in-Chief; Rolf Ribi (RR); René Lenzin (RL); Alain Wey (AW); Jean-François Lichtenstern (JFL), responsible for “Notes from Parliament”, Relations with the Swiss Abroad, FDFA, CH-3003 Berne. Translation: CLS Communication AG ■ **LAYOUT:** Herzog Design, Zurich ■ **POSTAL ADDRESS:** Publisher, editorial office, advertising: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad, Alpenstrasse 26, CH-3006 Berne, Tel.: +41313566110, Fax: +41313566101, Postal account (Swiss National Giro): 30-6768-9. Internet: www.revue.ch ■ **E-MAIL:** revue@aso.ch ■ **PRINT:** Swissprinters St.Gallen AG, CH-9001 St.Gallen. ■ **CHANGE OF ADDRESS:** Please advise your local embassy or consulate. Do not write to Berne. ■ All Swiss abroad who are registered with a Swiss representation receive the magazine free of charge. Anyone else can subscribe to the magazine for an annual fee (Switzerland: CHF 30 / abroad: CHF 50). Subscribers are sent the magazine direct from Berne.

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Echo

Cover photo: Max Frisch, the most famous Swiss writer of the last century, would have celebrated his 100th birthday in May. (Photo: Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin).