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BY GERARD BOYCE

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A Nuclear Assault on South Africa's Freedoms



Attempts are underway to suppress and even demonize anti-nuclear protesters in South Africa. (Photo of 2016 Johannesburg protest by Linda Pentz Gunter)

A considerable number of pro-nuclear articles penned by supposedly impartial nuclear experts or professed nuclear industry lobbyists have appeared in the South African media of late. The flurry of pro-nuclear activity has been so noticeable that the cynic would be forgiven for thinking that this outpouring of pro-nuclear sentiment was not random but part of a concerted campaign to push a pro-nuclear agenda that coincided with some specific event or cause.

One possibility could be that it was aimed at delegates attending this summer's BRICS summit, an alliance of countries whose members (both current and invited) are all pro-nuclear, that was held in Johannesburg during August.

Alternatively, observers of South Africa's nuclear industry might attribute this activity to Mineral Resources and Energy Minister Gwede Mantashe's still delayed address to Cabinet on what he has dubbed an 'updated Integrated Resource Plan' that will reportedly include an allocation for nuclear power even though the Presidential Climate Commission concluded in its recently released final report into South Africa's energy transition that there was no place for nuclear power in the country's least costly energy plans.

Seen against this backdrop, it is relatively easy to ignore most of these articles or dismiss them as propaganda produced by the nuclear lobby as part of its ongoing and seemingly futile bid to have government expand nuclear power output.

It is difficult, however, to dismiss a specific recent article that appeared in a nationally syndicated business news supplement that is distributed along with daily newspapers belonging to the Independent Online (IOL) media group; a large South African newspaper group that is owned by embattled holding company Sekunjalo Investment Holdings.

Written by Mr. Hügo Krüger, a civilian nuclear engineer whose biosketch indicates that he is 'writing a book on the Green Movement and its negative effect on global politics', he describes it as advice he would give government when selecting a nuclear power plant. As part of this checklist, the author advises government to question, "Is there a legal and national security strategy in place to battle the NGO industrial complex so they cannot intentionally delay the project?"

The antagonistic note struck in this guideline offers deep insight into what the nuclear industry really feels about democratic processes and illustrates the contempt in which it seems to hold civil society groups that call upon government to engage citizens in good faith by providing platforms for meaningful public debate and to see to it that adequate civilian oversight mechanisms and legal safeguards that guarantee restitution to affected communities are in place before it [government] contemplates making a decision of this magnitude.

Their remarks are likely to resonate with Cabinet members who recently approved for tabling before Parliament the General Intelligence Laws Amendment Bill; an authoritarian piece of legislation which, if passed, commentators believe will widely expand the powers of the intelligence services and curtail the freedom of civil society organizations, all in the name of the 'national interest' of course.

There exists no doubt too that these views will appeal to senior policymakers in the South African energy sector like Minister Mantashe, who has accused environmental civil society groups of being anti-development and has labelled them litigious 'foreign agents'. Thus, this guideline is likely to stoke the paranoia and natural resource chauvinism which appears to color the national conversation about nuclear power in South Africa and across much of the African continent.



Minister Gwede Mantashe meets with US Treasury Secretary, Janet Yellen, in 2022 at the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy. (Photo: US Embassy of South Africa).

Where the importance of public support is acknowledged, one notes how selective the author has been when citing results from the study which they referenced to back up their assertion that the South African public supports the building of new nuclear power stations by neglecting to mention that this study finds that survey respondents were eight times more likely to be in favor of solar and wind energy than they were to be in favor of nuclear power.

Granted, valid objections could be raised about survey methodology employed and the content of the questions that were put to respondents. This latter objection in particular is likely to prove especially pertinent when attempting to interpret the results of any survey of public opinion of nuclear power in South Africa given the well-established finding of historically low levels of public knowledge of nuclear power and the lack of public education on the topic.

Yet these are the self-appointed experts whose views will continue to receive significant media coverage in South Africa as part of the nuclear industry's relentless drive to get government to expand nuclear energy capacity. This is despite the fact that many politicians' ardor for this electricity generating option is starting to cool, especially in the developed world, because of cost considerations, the falling cost of alternate sources of

energy and the realization that nuclear power will deliver too late to address today's urgent climate needs.

Presumably, pro-nuclear voices will become more shrill as the window of opportunity for undertaking such an ambitious venture narrows due to government's room for fiscal maneuver being squeezed by the toll which rolling electricity blackouts (called 'load-shedding' in South Africa), lackluster economic growth and ballooning public debt, among others, are likely to exert on government finances.

If so, South Africans can expect nuclear lobbyists to redouble their efforts to influence key policymakers and that the preference they previously revealed for conducting deals behind closed doors away from public scrutiny will intensify.

For this reason, it is asserted that the nuclear industry represents an imminent threat to the system of democracy in South Africa and contends that, until the nuclear question is settled decisively, it will continue to chip away at the country's fragile democratic foundations by casting aspersions on those who seek to hold public representatives to account and advocate for greater public input in decision-making by portraying them as being unpatriotic or anti-development.

To combat the threat posed by the nuclear lobby and reinforce our system of democracy, this author moves that the South African government should put its nuclear plans to a public referendum, but only after suitable public education campaigns are run to address the public's limited knowledge of nuclear power.

A nuclear referendum is the ideal way to force nuclear supporters and pro-nuclear politicians to make their case to voters and the tax-paying public rather than direct their efforts to attacking those who seek to ensure that government acts with transparency and makes decisions that are genuinely in the best interest of all South Africans not just a small clique of insiders.

Unlike the lists of guidelines drawn up by sundry nuclear lobbyists, this is one nuclear policymaking guideline every South African will agree government ought to abide by.

This first appeared on [Beyond Nuclear International](#).

Gerard Boyce is an Economist and Senior Lecturer in the School of Built Environment and Development Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Howard College). He writes in his personal capacity.

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