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Do the Right Thing: Put the South African Government's Nuclear Plans to a Popular Referendum



Ramokgopa addressing an Open Government Partnership event. Photograph Source: Open Government Partnership – [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)

Ever since South African Energy Minister Dr Kgosientsho Ramokgopa announced that Cabinet had approved the updated Integrated Resource Plan last December, local media has been awash with articles by nuclear supporters and sundry lobbyists exhorting politicians and government to ‘show true leadership’ and ‘do the right thing’ when it comes to nuclear power. Invariably, doing so means showing unwavering support for the government’s plans to expand nuclear energy generation capacity by choosing the particular nuclear technology or reactor design favored by the author of the article being read or following the guidelines they helpfully drew up to assist policymakers by advising how they ought to proceed going about doing so, even if this means going against the

recommendations of the presidentially-appointed panel of experts who sit on the Presidential Climate Commission or failing to address the numerous criticisms that have been leveled against government's nuclear plans, prominent South African nuclear scientists among them. Presumably, depending on the responses these articles elicit, individual politicians would then be lauded for the leadership and courage they have shown or berated for their lack thereof.

It is curious, not to mention ironic, to hear such sentiments expressed by pro-nuclear supporters, especially those who have long attempted to portray the decision to 'go nuclear' as a self-evident outcome of a purely technical decision-making process that is obviously best left to 'the experts' *i.e.* appointed and unelected technocrats who are supposedly immune to political interference. It is also somewhat misleading of them to characterize the decision to support the expansion of nuclear power capacity as one requiring 'courage' as such given the scant detail government has provided on its nuclear plans, the few general nuclear education and public awareness campaigns on nuclear power it has run within and outside of the communities in which it is proposed that reactors be located in future and the critical information related to its past nuclear dealings and the planned Koeberg life expansion project amongst others it has allegedly deliberately withheld from the public. All of these combined result in persistent and extremely low public levels of knowledge of nuclear power and related issues, so much so that the general public appears ambivalent about the issue of nuclear power. This assessment seems to be supported by the persistently low turnout that is observed at the perfunctory public hearings which the government seemingly hosts to satisfy administrative requirements surrounding public participation in order to mitigate any potential for conflict to arise in the future rather than to genuinely engage the public's views on nuclear power.

Subsequently, the organized anti-nuclear political movement nationally is under-resourced and the level of grassroots public support it enjoys is uncertain. Considering the limited organized opposition thereto and the general public's nuclear indifference, none but the most biased observer would be reluctant to concede that the decision to champion nuclear power is unlikely to demand much by way of boldness or courage from the individual politician. More so since nuclear power, by its nature, accords so conveniently with the motivations of the average individual politician to amass more power and influence for themselves and members of their class and has the power to undermine the public oversight mechanisms and regulatory frameworks set up to monitor them. Yet perhaps the

biggest reason why nuclear power is likely to appeal to representatives of SA's major political parties especially is because it could enable their parties to navigate the political forces that assail them.

Take for instance the ruling African National Congress (ANC). Rapidly losing electoral ground after having long squandered the liberation dividend it accrued due to the vanguard role it played in fighting apartheid because of endless corruption scandals involving senior leaders and politicians, the party is facing the prospect of securing less than 50 per cent of the vote in the upcoming national general elections for the first time since the advent of democracy in 1994. Cognisant of this prediction, party strategists might surmise that touting the rollout of a major public infrastructure building project such as that entailed in a nuclear build program would afford ruling party politicians leeway to make the grandiose campaign promises they believe will be necessary to persuade skeptical voters to give them yet another chance to stay in power for an additional five years. More cynically, party bigwigs might deduce that the prospect of being awarded a plum contract under this major public spending project might serve as the ideal sort of incentive that is required to induce members of the various warring factions within the ANC and the coterie of businessmen and 'tenderpreneurs' associated with each group to set aside their differences in order to campaign for the party before this crucial national election.

Likewise, for the opposition right-of-center Democratic Alliance (DA), which, despite the image that bluster about allegations of state incompetence and corruption linked to government nuclear deal-making might create, is actually not against nuclear power in principle. With the ongoing conflict in Gaza dividing popular opinion in the Western Cape, the only province where it holds power and has done so for the past 15 years, DA strategists are likely to be acutely aware that the party runs the risk of driving voters from the predominantly Muslim Cape Malay community in this province away because of its perceived pro-Israeli stance which echoes that of the leadership of Western countries like Germany or the US. Should it lose its support, it stands to lose the Western Cape. To mitigate this risk, DA strategists might calculate that the party has no choice but to cozy up to the smaller opposition parties (*e.g.* ActionSA, Freedom FrontPlus, Patriotic Front, Cape Independence Party *etc.*), many of which are its partners in the newly-formed Multi-Party Charter coalition, to retain power in this province. These parties, which, by and large, are to the right of the DA, tend to be pro-secession of the Western Cape and have become increasingly vocal in demanding a provincial referendum on the issue of Cape independence. Since the Western Cape does not have abundant supplies of energy and

historically relied heavily on Koeberg nuclear power station and energy imports from the rest of the country for its energy needs, an independent Western Cape would be vulnerable as it would be dependent on ESKOM, the public electricity utility of the country from which it seceded, for its energy needs if current plans for extending the operational life of Koeberg nuclear power station and installing additional generating capacity there were not approved. This inherent energy insecurity dilemma would represent an insurmountable electoral obstacle to any party officially entertaining the notion of Cape independence or which has made campaigning for a referendum thereon a cornerstone of its election manifesto. Mindful of this common weakness across all these parties' election platforms, the shrewd DA strategist would probably conclude that it would be prudent to silence any anti-nuclear voices within its own ranks, however muted, lest their voices alienate the smaller parties on which it might depend to form a coalition.

For the third biggest party, the Economic Freedom Fighters, the choice to support nuclear power is likely to be even simpler considering the Africanist agenda it purports to advance, the anti-imperialist rhetoric it employs and the concomitant natural resource chauvinism which its proclaimed nationalist revolutionary stance engenders. Aggressively pushing for a nuclear build program in order for the country to make use of the uranium with which it is endowed flows naturally from this position.

It is apparent from the scenarios described above that political imperatives dictate the adoption of a pro-nuclear position by politicians from all the major political parties in SA irrespective of the political ideologies they espouse or the content or merits of the specific nuclear plan under review. Under these circumstances, exhorting politicians to support nuclear power is akin to urging them to act to protect their party's narrow political interests. One submits to the reader that this does not seem to be particularly brave or courageous.

In contrast, it would require a tremendous amount of courage for a politician to acknowledge and act on the insight that the distortions introduced by prevailing political considerations render it impossible for them to hold robust internal political debates on the issue of nuclear power, more so considering the increased frequency with which ostensible party comrades have resorted to using deadly methods to eliminate potential rivals. It is, therefore, naïve to rely on the party political system to formulate positions on nuclear power that are truly in the nation's best interest.

In recognition thereof, the truly courageous and patriotic politicians, if they did exist, would instead endorse measures to ensure that the case for nuclear power is decided by

each politician's independent and objective assessment of the merits and drawbacks of the argument put before them rather than party consensus based on cynical political calculations. These include measures like an open debate and secret vote on nuclear power in Parliament, perhaps a foolhardy suggestion for all the prevailing political dynamics described earlier. Alternatively, they could opt to support the right of every citizen to act with the courage and integrity nuclear supporters claim they want politicians to by calling upon the government to submit its nuclear plans to a popular referendum. In a country where citizens have become fed up by years of maladministration and corruption and large sections of the electorate are beginning to lose faith in the democratic system itself, this display of political courage would serve as definitive proof of the leadership credentials of the politician who wanted to 'do the right thing' by their compatriots.

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