Nuclear power kills. If ever one had any doubts about the truthfulness of this statement, the past few months in South African politics have surely dispelled them. During this time, the government’s nuclear plans effectively killed the political career of former Finance Minister Nhlanhla Nene whilst indications are that the career of current Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan will soon suffer the same fate. It has slain any semblance of unity in the upper echelons of the ruling African National Congress. It is rumoured that the public spats in which members of various ruling party factions are engaged and that have come to hog national headlines each week are a result of ongoing palace intrigue that is caused by their jostling for position which will enable them to secure the maximum benefits from the potential bonanza that awaits when tenders for the construction of nuclear plants are awarded.

The open hostility exhibited by erstwhile comrades has exposed as a sham the image of a strong and united party and revealed a picture of an organisation riven by factionalism and bitter internal disputes. It is widely predicted that, if this deal is pushed through (as current indications are that it will), the country’s credit rating will be downgraded to junk status. A downgrade will likely plunge the economy into a coma and cause it to be put on life support.

At this point, many readers will object that this is a deliberate mischaracterisation of nuclear energy. After all, echoing the sentiment expressed in the (US) National Rifle Association’s slogan, we will be reminded that nuclear power does not kill people or is responsible for any of the outcomes described above. Rather, these arise from the actions of politicians and other stakeholders who have a vested interest in the nuclear deal and are prepared to go to extreme lengths to ensure that they and their associates profit from it. Although the key role that individuals’ motives and actions plays is acknowledged, blaming certain individuals’ motives alone is somewhat misleading since, by its very nature, the successful rollout of a nuclear programme depends on certain things happening. These, in turn, increase the likelihood of the scenarios described above being realised.

By way of support for this assertion, consider that the building of a single nuclear power station represents a long-term, multi-billion Rand investment on a scale which dwarfs that of similar public investments. In addition, there are substantially greater upfront costs involved (in both proportional and absolute terms) and an extended construction period when compared to these other investments. Furthermore, nuclear assets are indivisible and of a discrete nature. A reactor either gets built or not and, if built, cannot be operative at half or three quarters of the way built nor can it be put to alternate civilian uses. In combination, these characteristics virtually guarantee that a nuclear building programme maintains momentum and continues to attract investment long after policymakers and politicians have had second thoughts about the viability of the programme.

In such a situation, it can become relatively easy for governments to be drawn into continuing to
invest in their nuclear programmes even if they see little or no justification for doing so. One has only to observe the decades long (and seemingly never-ending) construction periods of many nuclear plants internationally for evidence thereof. Needless to say, this set of circumstances provides the ideal conditions in which graft and patronage networks are able to thrive and is likely to increase both the opportunity and propensity for certain individuals to engage in corrupt practices.

Secondly, given the destructive purposes to which nuclear technology can be put, a raft of laws and regulations have to be passed in order to prevent this technology falling into the wrong hands. Since each reactor is potentially a national calamity, policymakers justify these regulations as being necessary to protect the welfare and safety of citizens. These laws also serve to provide convenient cover behind which the less than savoury aspects of these deals can be hidden. To shore up this cover, the global nuclear industry seems to have a built-in failsafe against closer public scrutiny and unwanted attention in that, once established, stakeholders in the industry can always appeal to the nebulous concept of the ‘national interest’ in an attempt to conceal their actions from the public. By elevating every investigation of their operations to a potential national security concern, they are able to shield their operations from investigation and thus to avoid criticism. Arguably, this has the effect of lowering the degree to which this industry feels accountable to the public since being open to investigation and subject to criticism (and thence learning) forms the basis of public accountability.

Despite these arguments, many readers will still remain sceptical that nuclear power itself can somehow be held responsible for the events unfolding in South Africa at present and unconvinced of the plausibility, let alone truth, of the initial contention that nuclear power kills. Indeed, some will even hold that the tone of this article is unnecessarily alarmist as the ‘deaths’ referred to above are not actual deaths but figurative ones. Nuclear power does not actually kill people. Moreover, as knowledgeable readers will point out, if the actual and estimated number of deaths from operations and emissions were taken into account, one might well find that nuclear power has killed the least number of people than all other forms of electricity power generation. To this nuclear supporters would add that safety features on the latest reactors are being upgraded as we speak.

Extolling the safety mechanisms that are to be put in place and the enhanced technical specifications to which they will be produced, however, is apt to lull citizens into a false sense of security as the charges of which the nuclear industry stands accused risk dealing a death blow to our democratic aspirations by undermining state commitments to greater openness and accountability and downplaying public desires for greater freedom. Yet these are ultimately the greatest protections which a country, especially a young, emerging democracy with a bitter history of division and exclusion, can offer to protect the lives and livelihoods of all its citizens, especially the most vulnerable and marginalised members of society, and are far superior to any of the technical fixes which supporters of this or that technology are inclined to put forward. Ignoring these deeper sociopolitical issues and failing to factor them into decision-making is perhaps the greatest crime committed when embarking upon any nuclear programme.

For these reasons, one remains steadfast in the belief that nuclear power kills and is, in the final analysis, likely to emerge as a prolific serial killer in any nascent democracy using any measure, literal or figurative.

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The nuclear killer lurking in our midst
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Article-Summary:
South Africa’s nuclear programme will be a disaster. Besides the fallouts being witnessed in the jostling for gains by greedy politicians, the project is likely to gobble up huge amounts of public funds that will be difficult to account for as the government will cite national security concerns of nuclear power, thereby curtailing citizens’ right to accountability.


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