

Will PH finally adopt nuclear energy?

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"Why is our DOE apparently intent on pushing the nuclear option when there are safer and less costly options?"

Before the March lockdown started, we noted that the Department of Energy had already submitted to Malacañang a draft executive order for the government to conduct a feasibility on the adoption of nuclear energy. It was only late last month, however, that the EO was signed by President Rodrigo Duterte.

The Department of Energy, perhaps out of a surfeit of zeal and impatience, announced days ago that it was exploring the possibility of putting up modular nuclear plants on at least three islands, including Palawan.

But the DOE should really hold its horses as the EO only provides for a feasibility study at this point, not what type of nuclear plant is preferable, whether it is only modular or full-blown with all the bells and whistles.

We can probably understand the seeming impatience of the Department in suggesting the immediate adoption of nuclear power as part of the country's energy mix, particularly since it had already floated the idea as early as four years ago.

In fact, the DOE has been actively moving towards the use of nuclear energy, citing the rapid growth in electricity demand and the urgent need to ensure 24/7 power supply. After Duterte ordered in 2016 a study on the possibility of reopening the Bataan nuclear power plant, the DOE invited experts from the Rosatom State Atomic Energy Corporation to conduct a discreet visit in 2017 to inspect the nuclear facility. The Russian experts reported that the Bataan plant can become operational but would require repairs costing between US\$3 billion to US\$4 billion.

In December 2019, the DOE hosted the eight-day visit of an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) team of experts to review the country's infrastructure development for nuclear power. The result of the Integrated Nuclear Infrastructure Review (INIR) conducted by the IAEA has not been made public as yet.

What we know is that the experts acknowledged that the Philippines is following a systematic approach in finalizing its nuclear power strategy and complete the associated infrastructure development.

On the part of the government, Energy Secretary Alfonso Cusi has indicated that the results from the INIR mission would help the Philippines focus its efforts on the identified gaps, accelerate the legislative process and prepare the national decision.

“It is high time we put the framework in place to bring nuclear power into the energy mix. We should learn the lessons from the past and catch up with the missed opportunities,” Cusi is quoted as saying on the IAEA website.

But despite the DOE's fervent wish for the country to adopt nuclear energy as soon as possible, it could run into a brick wall as various sectors are just as fervent in their opposition to the project.

Bishop Ruperto Santos of the Diocese of Balanga in the province that hosts the now-mothballed Bataan Nuclear Power Plant, (BNPP), has been quoted in a recent report as saying that the feasibility study should be "transparent, non-partisan and not exclusive.”

The prelate also expressed the hope that the study would shed light on the safety of nuclear energy in the Philippines, as this would "could settle with finality whether our country is ready and able (to produce) safe nuclear energy.”

Greenpeace Southeast Asia is also opposed to DOE moves to tap nuclear energy, which it said "blatantly disregards any attempt at consultation even while proposing to expose the Filipino people to the inherent and serious dangers of nuclear power."

The environmental group warned that nuclear power is the most dangerous source of electricity, and throughout their life cycle, nuclear plants contribute significantly to climate change.

Besides, the group said nuclear is the most expensive option for power generation as capital costs are astronomical and construction delays can last as many as 17 years. As things now stand, the Philippines is the only country in ASEAN with a completed but non-operational nuclear power plant.

Does that mean that other member-nations in the regional bloc are well aware of the pitfalls rather than the claimed benefits of nuclear energy that none of them are willing to put up even just one in their respective backyards?

So why is our DOE apparently intent on pushing the nuclear option when there are safer and less costly options, such as solar, wind farms, hydroelectric and geothermal, among others, to choose from?

That's the question we are also asking, but we're sure our readers can make their own informed judgment.

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