

Latest government nuclear push sparks faith community outcry

South Africans are up in arms following the government's announcement in January 2024 that it has green-lit plans to kick off a massive new nuclear build program. Environmental groups warn the initiative could lead to the construction of power plants generating 21GW of nuclear energy by 2050.



DMRE is revisiting possible nuclear power generation. Source: Shaun P Twomey/Pexels

The Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (SAFCEI) and Earthlife Africa Johannesburg are leading the charge against the government's plan. They point to a highly controversial draft proposal by the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy (DMRE) that outlines the addition of 4,000MW of nuclear capacity by 2040 and a further 14,500MW by 2050.



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"We're seriously considering taking this new nuclear plan to court," states Francesca de Gasparis, executive director at SAFCEI. "The entire public consultation process was a sham. The energy regulator, Nersa, basically denied us, and the public, a chance to review and comment on submissions from the energy minister. These submissions were crucial to determining whether certain conditions on the plan were even met."

Makoma Lekalakala, Earthlife Africa director, is equally incensed: "The scale of this is mind-boggling. It's even bigger than the Zuma-era nuclear plans and they're trying to keep it all under wraps. This stinks of what went down back in 2017. We took the government to court and forced them to scrap their nuclear plans that could have cost us a trillion rand!"

Inexplicable developments

Critics argue the government's 2019 energy plan (IRP) contained no provision for new nuclear capacity by 2030 and only indicated preparations for a future build of 2,500MW. Yet, inexplicably, by mid-2020, the process was already steaming ahead.

SAFCEI and Earthlife Africa voiced concerns to Nersa from the start, flagging the misinterpretation of the energy plan and the lack of transparency around funding and cost assessments. In August 2021, their warnings went unheeded – the DMRE ploughed ahead with the plan.

"They're ignoring the people again," Lekalakala asserts, "With the insane costs of new nuclear, the impacts on electricity prices, the unresolved waste issue...the public has a right to know what's going on. We reckon cheaper, cleaner energy options are a much better way to go."

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