

It is increasingly clear that the Sri Lankan Government regards policymaking as a top-down process, with little or no consultation with the people. There was the indecent haste with which the highly controversial 18th Amendment to the Constitution was adopted in Parliament.

Following on from that fundamental change in the basic law of the land and its governance comes the announcement – first in Vienna, and only thereafter in Sri Lanka – by Power and Energy Minister Champika Ranawaka that Sri Lanka has decided to consider the use of nuclear power as an energy option. This was followed by a rejection of NGO advice on familiar pseudo-patriotic grounds that some of them are funded from abroad and follow a foreign agenda.

Fortunately, there is still a tentative aspect to this decision, since the Atomic Energy Authority of Sri Lanka is said to be conducting a “pre-feasibility study of using nuclear energy as a viable option beyond 2020 for power generation”.

This is sensible. It creates some space for our experts in the relevant fields and civil society to discuss the pros and cons of having nuclear power in Sri Lanka. This policy debate should not be a dialogue of the deaf, nor should it be personality driven, since matters of vital national interest are involved.

In the first instance, Sri Lanka is well within its rights to embark on nuclear power for peaceful purposes as an energy option. Article IV of the Treaty for the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) states that the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes is “the inalienable right of all the parties” without discrimination, and that all should facilitate this transfer of technology.

Sri Lanka already benefits from non-power uses of nuclear energy for development purposes in areas like nuclear medicine, industrial applications, control of vector-borne infectious diseases and capacity building of our national nuclear research institutes. The scope for this has been greatly enhanced by the decision taken at



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THE RUSH FOR NUCLEAR POWER

Sri Lanka’s Gadarene rush for nuclear power should be tempered by practical considerations, cautions **Jayantha Dhanapala**.

the NPT Review Conference in May this year to create a fund of US\$ 100 million for extra-budgetary resources to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to finance such aid to developing countries.

Nuclear power generation, in contrast, is a complex and risk-prone process even if the Government is projecting this for 10 years hence. Currently, one study states that only 14 per cent of global electricity is supplied by nuclear power. The IAEA states that 441 power reactors in 29 countries are in operation but that in addition 60 new power reactors (the bulk of which are in Asia) are under construction, while over 60 countries have notified the IAEA of their interest in developing nuclear power.

This spurt of interest in nuclear energy as a source of power is undoubtedly related to the high cost of oil; acute concern over climate change through CO₂ emissions; the slow pace of technological development – and consequently, in cost reductions in non-conventional renewable sources of energy such as biomass, solar and wind; and the abundance and relative cheapness of uranium (and thorium in India and Sri Lanka).

These factors appear to have overcome the fears of disasters caused by human error like Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, possible terrorist attacks and the unsolved problem



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of how to deal with nuclear waste.

Sri Lanka is, therefore, not alone in being attracted by the superficial allure of nuclear power. In fact, we are behind the curve. The so-called ‘nuclear renaissance’ is sputtering out, as a new Canadian study concludes. A significant expansion of nuclear energy is unlikely because the constraints outweigh the drivers.

Consider the following...

Nuclear power is more expensive, especially in its capital outlay than is realised. Thanks to the global financial downturn, the high cost of a nuclear reactor at an estimated US\$ 10 billion and restricted access to funding are daunting.

If the reason is to combat climate change, nuclear power takes as much as a decade to come on stream, whereas quickly deployed alternatives are available. Also, if we are scarcely able to cope with solid-waste management, how can we deal with the nuclear-waste problem, which no country has solved – unless we want to export it to a country that is foolish enough to contaminate its own soil?

And although terrorism in our country has been defeated, can we insulate nuclear plants from strikes, acts of sabotage and sheer human error?

We must also keep in mind that while our reputation as a party to the NPT is good, our close association with Iran and Myanmar could lead to suspicions of harbouring nuclear-weapon ambitions. This can only add another irritant to our foreign relations.

For all of the above reasons, a healthy open debate must begin. And the Government must learn to listen – with its ear close to the ground. That is the democratic way – even under an all-powerful executive presidency without term limits.