

It is only March, but when Premier Jiang Yi-huah (江宜樺) said a referendum on the fate of the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant in Gongliao District (公寮), New Taipei City (新北市), could be postponed until the end of the year, he indicated that the war between pro-nuclear and anti-nuclear activists, as well as between political parties, could last for an entire year.

While that means the public would probably have to endure more mudslinging between the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), a delay could be a good thing, as the public would have more time to digest information and assess the pros and cons of the issue.

Both camps are now engaged in a battle over the threshold of the Referendum Act (公投法) and the issue of absentee voting, which are salient issues.

However, the following observations are worth consideration by all parties.

First, there are many people who support the anti-nuclear movement and who are opposed to the construction of the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant. Equally, there are those who believe that the nation cannot afford to abandon nuclear energy but think that safety concerns over the construction of the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant are overwhelming and who oppose it becoming operational.

So, while these two issues are one and the same for some people, they should be discussed separately, as the use of nuclear energy is a national policy issue that involves many other factors.

Second, while the safety of nuclear power is a major concern, many people want to know whether electricity production would be affected and electricity prices rise if the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant does not become operational. Many do not trust Taiwan Power Co's answers and have found that neither side of the nuclear power debate has been able to provide convincing data.

Observations on the nuclear debate

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Answering these questions is more important for the anti-nuclear camp, as there are many people who place price and production issues above safety concerns.

Third, for the first time in the history of the anti-nuclear movement, significant numbers of Taiwanese celebrities have stepped forward and endorsed the anti-nuclear cause. Their support has arguably raised awareness more than political parties and civic groups. Will that momentum help the anti-nuclear movement build a head of steam and translate into votes at the ballot box?

Fourth, the government has never explained how it would deal with nuclear waste even if safety at the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant is assured.

According to activists, once the nation's three currently operational nuclear power plants go offline, there could be as many as 960,000 barrels of nuclear waste which would require a disposal site at least 10 times larger than the Lanyu nuclear waste storage facility, which no longer accepts nuclear waste since reaching its capacity of 100,000 barrels.

Even if the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant operates without mishap, there will still be pollution issues.

Fifth, the government has said the issue should be decided by a national referendum rather than a local one. However, some have argued that those in northern Taiwan deserve a greater say on an issue which could directly impact their lives.

It could be difficult for the government to rationalize why people living within a 50km radius of the plant are given the same importance as those who live 200km away.

Last, the KMT supported the construction of the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant and said it also supports the goal of a nuclear-free homeland by gradually phasing out nuclear production of electricity.

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The KMT should make its position crystal clear, as this claim will be examined time and again before President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) leaves office in 2016.

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