

Headline: The matter of coal

Byline: Philippine Daily Inquirer

Published Date: 12:22 AM November 05, 2016

Section: opinion

Word Count: 4207

Content:

According to a Fortune magazine report in December 2015, the use of coal is on the decline worldwide, as developed nations begin switching to cleaner sources of energy: “More than anything, the Paris Agreement was a signal that coal, the dirtiest of the fossil fuels used for power generation, is being phased out in developed countries like the US and much of Europe. Reliance is even being diminished in China, as the country seeks to clean up its air pollution.”

“However,” the report added, “India is the major global outlier when it comes to coal. India says it needs coal along with solar to meet its basic power generation growth needs. Additional coal plants built in India and China could lead to rising carbon emissions...”

The Philippines appears to be following the path of India in its continued reliance on coal. Before stepping down last June, President Benigno Aquino III left in the pipeline 25 new coal-fired power plants to be built in the country in the next decade. The matter briefly flared as a campaign issue; during the presidential debates, the candidates were asked about their stand not only on coal power but also on climate change and the Philippines’ commitment to the Paris Agreement, which enjoins the international community to take collective action to lower fossil-fuel emissions.

Then candidate Rodrigo Duterte’s response was to say, first of all, that the West was being hypocritical in asking poorer countries to now abandon coal and other polluting power-generation activities, when their gas emissions accounted for the worldwide bulk. The Philippines needs to meet its rising energy requirements, he said. In another interview, asked about the spate of new coal plants to be built, he declared that he saw nothing wrong with them, and in fact would welcome more: “You open the Philippines for all power players, I guarantee you the electricity will become cheaper.”

Some residents of Sual, Pangasinan, do not agree. Last Thursday, about 30 of them gathered to protest the construction of a coal-fired power plant—the second in their vicinity. The planned 900-megawatt, P48-billion power plant at Barangay Baquioen was given the green light after six public hearings, according to Mayor Roberto Arcinue. But Rosanna Marie Soriano, chair of the Save Sual Movement which spearheaded the protest action, said they were never consulted about the new plant.

And their voices were again disregarded because their gathering was stopped by the police, and their streamers and placards seized, even before it could start. They were told not to proceed to the Sual wharf, where they had planned to present a manifesto to President Duterte voicing their objections to the new power plant rising in their midst. Mr. Duterte was at the wharf for a ceremonial sendoff of 17 Vietnamese fishermen who were caught illegally fishing in the waters off Ilocos Sur last September.

Mr. Duterte never saw the protesters or their manifesto—the product of a signature campaign among Sual residents. Soriano said she was told by a police officer that they could not proceed with the protest rally; she and the others were dispersed and their paraphernalia confiscated. Mr. Duterte later appeared at a program where the mayor extolled the coal plant a-building and its promise of increased electricity in the area.

It is unfortunate that the voices of ordinary citizens who will bear the brunt of the well-documented ill effects of coal power generation are being stifled. The fears of Soriano et al. about coal's hazardous effects on their families and communities are not unfounded: The Philippines was recognized as a major intervenor at the Paris talks on climate change precisely because the country stands among those most vulnerable to the effects of a ravaged environment, as Supertyphoon "Yolanda" showed. (The Paris Agreement, which took effect yesterday, has yet to be ratified by the Philippines.)

If the Duterte administration is standing by more coal, it should at least listen to the ordinary folk, to help mitigate its disadvantages.

Subscribe to our daily newsletter

By providing an email address. I agree to the Terms of Use and acknowledge that I have read the Privacy Policy.