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Goldman prize awarded to South African women who stopped an international nuclear deal

Winners of the world's leading environmental award faced down Vladimir Putin and the country's recently deposed leader, Jacob Zuma, to overturn a multibillion-dollar nuclear deal

Jonathan Watts in Cape Town

Two grassroots women activists - one black, one white - stand together against two of the world's most powerful men - one black, one white - over a secret, undemocratic, multibillion dollar nuclear deal.

If this was the plot of a Netflix series, it might be dismissed as too neat, too perfectly symbolic and symmetrical.

But this is the true story of the two South African winners of this year's environment prize who tapped their roots in the anti-apartheid struggle to take on and beat an agreement by their nation's recently deposed leader Jacob Zuma and Russian president, Vladimir Putin.

Makoma Lekalakala and Liz McDaid were the sole signatories of a successful legal challenge against the plan for South Africa to buy up to 10 nuclear power stations from

Russia at an estimated cost of 1tn rand (\$76bn).

After a five-year legal battle, a high court outlawed the deal last April and accepted the plaintiffs' claims that it had been arranged without proper consultation with parliament.

Aside from the immense geopolitical ramifications, the ruling was a vindication for the civil society movement that aims to expand public participation, especially by women, in energy decision-making.

There were risks in confronting the president, the electricity utility and the interests of a foreign power. The two women were warned they could face violence and attacks on their reputation, but they signed the legal papers regardless.

"It is important that this campaign is led by women," Lekalakala said in an interview in Cape Town. "We are getting this [Goldman] prize because we really sacrificed ourselves by putting our names on the line. Others were shit-scared. But we've been through so much that we were willing to take the risk."

McDaid, who works for the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute, said the campaign was a recognition that grassroots action can work. "Governments everywhere like to give the impression that citizens have no power. That's not true. We have checks and balances and we need to use them."

Both cut their activist teeth in the anti-apartheid struggle of the 1980s. McDaid, then a teacher, was caught up in the Trojan Horse massacre in Athlone, Cape Town. She hid students sought by police in her house and used her car to block troops chasing students.

Lekalakala grew up in Soweto, the heartland of the black consciousness movement. She served as a shop steward in a department store when she was 19 years old. She also witnessed some of the worst of the violence, both from the white authorities and black-on-black factional conflict.

In the late eighties, an era when alleged apartheid collaborators were being punished with "necklaces" of burning tyres, she was woken by screams in the middle of the night and found bodies on the floor in the morning. "That was the hardest time of my life," she recalls.

This background has made the two women relatively fearless. They have both been threatened and suffered break-ins in which alarm systems were expertly dismantled and only their laptops (rather than valuables like jewellery or cameras) were stolen, suggesting the intruders were after information rather than money.

“It’s harassment,” said Lekalakala. “But I’m very forceful. I’m used to threats.”

The two began working together in 2009 when they joined Earthlife, a group designed to encourage women to become more involved in energy and climate policy-making.

For Lekalakala, it was an eye-opening experience. “When I started at Earthlife I was one of the only black women. I thought that was wrong. It is poor black women who are most affected but it is rich white men making all the decisions.”

They have proved influential, providing input into the National Energy Act and the climate energy policy.

They challenged the long-held view that energy is a technical, engineering matter for specialists rather than ordinary people. “We broke that barrier and we are continuously breaking barriers,” said Lekalakala, who has also campaigned against plans for a coal mine at Thabametsi.

They were tipped off about the nuclear deal by the Russian group EcoDefence. Although the South African government had not told the public about the plan, its business partner, state-owned Rosatom initially posted an announcement on its . This was quickly taken down but not before Earthlife made a copy that they used to rally opposition from environmentalists, , lawyers, and, the media.

Their court victory was a major setback for Putin’s plans to increase Russia’s income and influence, and may have contributed to the fall of Zuma after nine years in power. The president had reportedly fired two finance ministers in part because they were unwilling to approve the \$76bn cost of the project. It was also a focus of corruption claims by political enemies and rivals in the ANC, given reports that Zuma’s son was a director of the sole mine that supplied uranium.

The new government has signalled a shift in direction. President Cyril Ramaphosa said in Davos this year that the plan to add 9.6 gigawatts of nuclear energy was off the table. More recently, energy minister Jeff Radebe has signed deals that will promote wind and solar power.

“The political signs are good that nuclear is not going ahead any time soon,” said McDaid. “But I think this is just a step on the path to a nuclear-free South Africa. There is a long way to go. Success would be for our one existing plant to be decommissioned and for the government to make a nuclear-free declaration.”

Lekalakala agrees on the need to stay vigilant because coal - along with nuclear - remains a concern and the government will revisit its energy policy in five years.

“Civil society can claim some credit for ensuring the government didn’t run along a nuclear path that would have bankrupted the country,” she said. “We’ll use the Goldman award to further our struggle and build a new generation of activists.”



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