

A post-mortem on the environmental protest



Concrete access paths to farms built illegally before May 2004 could be sanctioned by the proposed ODZ policy changes.

Protests are normally the culmination of months and years of simmering disenchantment that finally boils over and surfaces. The environmental protest held last week merits some analysis.

Firstly, the turnout. Most estimates were that around 500 people attended the protest. Once the figure was published, the usual naysayers (armchair critics, cynics and the hunting lobby) were out in force to downplay the significance of the protest due to what they perceive as a poor turnout.

Besides the usual critics, one must add the political apologists, whose 'judgment' on the success or otherwise of protests obviously depends on which party is in government. This time it was the turn of Labour Party supporters to pooh-pooh the protest.

Detractors of the protest wheeled out the tired arguments that the hunting lobby manages to corral much more support in their protests and that much higher numbers were expected from a coalition of 20-odd NGOs. There is an apt saying in Maltese whose gist is that reason does not need physical force – in other words, it's the validity of the principle and ideals that matter, not the physical and tangible show of force.

The fact that environmental issues are a source of concern for an increasing number of Maltese is undeniable, and is backed by recent polls, hinting that a substantial number of 'environmentalists' prefer the pen to the sword, with the 500-strong crowd in Valletta actually representative of swelling ranks back home.

Secondly, the political exponents present. While it is heartening to observe that Alternattiva Demokratika were not the only political party present for the protest (the Nationalist Party joined in too), one cannot but speculate if the same PN exponents would be present for an environmental protest in 2019 if there is a change in government at the next general election. The PN was absent for all previous protests.

PL exponents, including European Parliament election candidates, were conspicuous by their absence. One would have expected a few to attend to go against the grain so as to send an unequivocal message to their party that hobnobbing with developers is not on.

In 2009, just weeks after the EP elections in which I had stood as a candidate for the PN, I had attended the spontaneous protest organised by NGOs at Bahrija in reaction to the rebuilding by then PN General Council president Victor Scerri of a dwelling just metres away from a watercourse in the area.

Some smart alec even held aloft a placard with the words "Where is Alan Deidun?", since most had anticipated that I would not be present for the protest. The smart alec was naturally gobsmacked when I introduced myself to him at the protest, with the then Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi being later hectorred by the PL media about my presence at the protest.

Principles should always come before party allegiance and I am sure some PL MPs and EP candidates felt the urge to attend last week's protest but were hampered by political considerations.

The charade going on at Monte Kristo

The country has sneered at the events unfolding at Polidano Brothers in Ħal Farruġ with a mixture of contempt and scorn, with a sense of déjà vu hanging heavily in the air.

I was the first to commend the Malta Environment and Planning Authority for the enforcement action it embarked upon at the site since I strongly believe all enforcement action should be supported, whatever its timing. My initial euphoria, however, gave way to a seeping sense of resignation that the whole brouhaha would not amount to much more than a charade, mainly because employers like Charles Polidano, who have hundreds on their payroll, can twist any administration's arm simply with statistics.

The latest twist has been the submission to Mepa by Polidano of a restoration plan for the huge stretch of land they own which extends over 64,000 square metres. I wonder if Polidano would have spontaneously found it in his heart to submit the plan had Mepa not intervened the way it did?

The latest twist in this melodrama that many are anticipating is a fine that will invariably be imposed on Polidano for his infringements, with many drawing a parallel with the Riviera Hotel case in Marfa where the illegal encroachment on public land of his hotel was sanctioned against a fine of 100,000 Maltese liri (€233,000).

For Mepa to be credible, it must demolish the extensive illegal structures and clear the scrap and debris that have been allowed to accumulate on the site at Ħal Farruġ. In addition, the

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investigation into who at Mepa called Polidano prior to the enforcement action to forewarn him of the imminent action being taken must bear fruit and not simply be used as a smokescreen.

More arguments against proposed ODZ policies

The three articles I featured in this column in previous weeks critically evaluating the environmental impact of the proposed Outside Development Zone policies, only managed to scratch the surface of the potential impact of these extensive policies.

For instance, the policies might lead to greater land fragmentation by stating that demarcation should not result in land holdings that are smaller than one tumolo. This threshold is too low, as one of the major challenges for the financial sustainability of farming in Malta is the ever-decreasing size of holdings.

The policies also stipulate that boundary walls along existing country lanes or roads may be built using Globigerina Limestone (franka) and mortar, a feature that would completely jar with the surrounding rural ambience. Existing rubble walls could also be repaired without the need for development permission – again, this might allow for abuse.

The policies say Mepa would consider sanctioning concrete access paths to arable land holdings built prior to May 2004 – once again, this would result in an 'en masse' sanctioning of past illegalities.

As for intrusive agrotourism developments, these policies would allow new buildings – boutique wineries, for instance – in ODZ areas, without the need for them to be backed up by feasibility studies showing that there is a demand for them, so as to avoid giving the green light to white elephants.

Still no public access to Mġarr ix-Xini shoreline

Over three weeks have passed since Mepa refused the preposterous planning application by the owner of Ta' Ċenċ Hotel to padlock a gate that gives public access to the Kantra area at Mġarr ix-Xini, which is privately-owned but which is the only point of access to the nearby sea (the cobbled beach at Mġarr ix-Xini is half a kilometre away) and to the Ta' Ċenċ inlet.

Well, you guessed it, the gate and padlock are still there (at least till earlier last week, when I last checked) and access is still denied.

Mepa is called upon to enforce its decisions even in areas that are far from public scrutiny such as Ta' Ċenċ.

Recycling used tyres

One of the most interesting scientific research projects supported financially by the EU Commission is one concerning the recycling of used tyres.

The volume of used tyres the EU generates is staggering – an estimated 3.5 million tons per year. The EU-funded project TYGRE (www.tygre.eu) has devised innovative ways of recycling and recovering some useful materials in used tyres, such as steel and a variety of organic materials that can be burned instead of coal or biomass as a fuel source.

Through gasification, used tyres can also produce two versatile by-products: syngas, which can be burned as a fuel, and silicon carbide, which can be used in the ceramics industry and for electronic applications.

Space to rescue biodiversity

A frequently-overlooked challenge faced by Natura 2000 managers is punctually meeting the onerous monitoring and reporting obligations, which must be backed by constant acquisition of data and mapping for the Natura 2000 site in question.

Space can, literally, come to the rescue to biodiversity – the project MS.MONINA (<http://ms.monina.eu/>) has developed earth observation-based services that can collect relevant services and products on Natura 2000 sites, including maps and indicators of landscape configuration, vegetation, habitats and conservation efforts.

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