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The march of the environmentalist

The most important message of the referendum is that history can be made through resilience and broad alliance-building



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26 November 2013, 12:00am

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This Saturday's demonstration by 10 Environmental NGOs (ENGOS) is the first of its kind since the protests against the previous government's so-called 'rationalization' of development zones before the 2008 general election.

The latter protests had eventually given way to sectarian splinters within Malta's environmental movement, especially between moderate and radical wings. One hopes that this Saturday's alliance would be more long-lived and organic, possibly resulting in substantive successes such as that of the victorious Front Against the (Rabat) Golf Course in 2004, which comprised a wide range of radicals, moderates and others. This alliance did not depend on EU institutions for its victory, but was resilient in broad alliance-building and in its discourse for sustainability. Indeed, land development is an area which has more to do with national and local politics, than with EU directives.

It is not surprising that environmentalists are once again resorting to protest. The new Labour government seems to be banking on mega-projects as part of its economic policy. In the past months we have read about bridges, land reclamation and weakened environmental legislation, and we have also witnessed approval of development at Mistra and Portomaso among others.

The ideology towards overdevelopment and the political influence of big developers clearly show us that the environment is a political issue. Decision-making of technocrats is always subject to a condensation of different interests, views, pressures and grievances, which in the current scenario are structured towards overdevelopment. The other side of this story comprises activism which articulates discourse against the way of things.

Sensitization of the general public is one achievement in this regard. A good example of this is the call for a referendum against Spring hunting, which is heading towards the collection of 35,000-36,000 signatures required for an abrogative referendum, which, depending on a number of factors, can coincide with the European elections.

On hunting, the EU does have clear directives, but the decision of the European Court of Justice on the Maltese case ultimately resulted in plural interpretations, effectively returning the issue back to Maltese politics.

Indeed, the most important message of the referendum is that history can be made through resilience and broad alliance-building. I salute the ENGOS and voices within the media - such as Malta Today - which are active in this regard, but one also must acknowledge that Alternattiva Demokratika was and is an important player in the push for the referendum. I am also inclined to think that the Nationalist Party is consciously not being antagonistic towards the campaign, and I won't be surprised if some big party voices would also emerge as openly supporting the latter, if a referendum is announced.

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The overdevelopment and hunting issues indicate that populist politics without adversaries, as articulated by Labour in the run-up to the 2013 general elections, cannot conceal political and social antagonisms. Along similar lines, the environmental movement has much to gain through broader alliances which, however, are not diluted into pragmatic nothingness or into futile attempts to exorcise politics from the environment.

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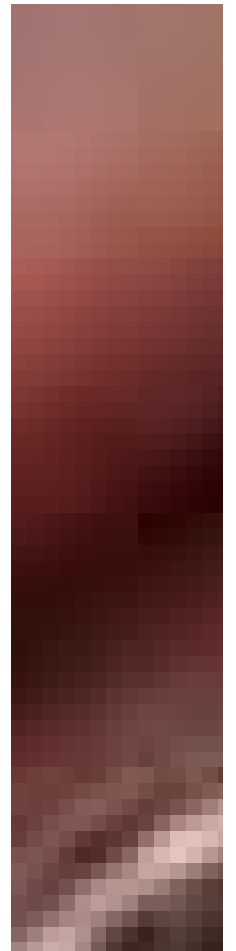
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