



The cancellation of the IIT project in Melaulim is a clear indication that the government can heed the wishes of the people. The cancellation further suggests that all development that the government sees fit to impose on Goans and the Goan land is reversible. The decision to cancel the IIT project came after much chest-thumping bravado by ministers in the ruling government, especially after the Zilla Parishad elections that the BJP swept, that they had the mandate and support of the electorate.

The Chief Minister, Pramod Sawant, assumed that this sweep of the Zilla Parishad elections is people's approval of his leadership and giving him the go ahead for the recent projects in the Mollem forest reserve. Similarly, the Health Minister, Viswajit Rane, who also tasted success in the Zilla Parishad elections as all the candidates he supported emerged victorious, acted as if the people of his constituency had given him the green light to proceed with the IIT in Melaulim.

For the legitimacy of Sawant's leadership, the stakes at the Zilla Parishad elections may have been indeed high. Sawant became Chief Minister in 2019 after the demise of Manohar Parrikar, but has never been recognized popularly as the leader of the people of Goa. In 2017, the BJP had managed to cobble together an alliance, after the Congress failed to form a government despite winning a majority of 17 seats. The 2017 election thus disregarded the will of the people, in fact it reminded many of the horse trading era of the 1990s. Parrikar and the BJP justified their actions saying that they had a greater share of the polled votes. As a result of the 2017 horse trading fiasco, and the fact that he faced opposition within BJP supporters, Sawant desperately needed an electoral win, where both the vote share and seats would be in his and his party's favor.

One cannot really fault Sawant and Rane for claiming that the Zilla Parishad results meant that Goans were effectively giving consent for the development projects. Perhaps the Chief Minister and the Health Minister jumped the gun because of the victory despite the widespread protests against mega projects, be it the IIT or the infrastructure projects in the Mollem forest. In the months leading up to the Zilla Parishad elections, these protests drummed up support for the anti-people and anti-environmental policies of the government, both through sustained actions on the ground and through social media. The public opposition to development was so strong that the Zilla Parishad sweep had to be a sign that the people were wrong, or so everyone thought.

And so, following the results of the Zilla Parishad elections, many, for this or that reason, were deeply dejected that all the protest had amounted to nothing. No matter what one believed, it seemed that everyone accepted the narrative that the victorious side promoted; 1

many tried to make sense of why Goans had effectively voted for the same people who promoted the destruction of their land.



Election Wins are not Votes for Development

But the people of Melaulim seem to have proven everyone wrong! From what one gathers from the core leadership of the Melaulim protests, the primary goal of the protest was ownership of land. The people of Melaulim did not change their demand of land ownership even after most of the BJP-supported candidates won in the Zilla Parishad elections. They stuck to their guns, and in fact are pushing for their demands ever more vociferously these days, despite the IIT project cancellation.

While the issue of why Goans vote for pro- destructive development politicians might have to wait for some other day, the Melaulim case forces us to think about the role of elections in Goan society today. What are elections for? Just an occasion for the transfer of power and the gift and favors that are exchanged before voting? What is the value of one vote?

The value of a person's vote comes into serious question when the government blatantly disregards people's wishes. In this case by promoting destructive and harmful development. If the health of the citizens is jeopardized due to the coal dust, if the land on which citizens and their ancestors have lived and worked on is not legally theirs (as is the case in Melaulim), or forests and other fragile ecological niches are destroyed, or the fact that the government decides that another railway line should be cut through villages and the houses in them, then the government does not serve the interests of the people that voted it to power.

While politicians supplicate before the voter before elections, what happens after is that the will of the people is, more often than not, ignored. In fact, as far as the history of Goa is concerned, post 1961, what happens after elections matters much more than the pre-election promises of the politicians. A recent case in point is the private resolution to scrap the three linear projects in Mollem where 11 members voted for the resolution, and nine abstained. The resolution was defeated by 20 votes.

An electoral victory is no license for 'development'. From the Melaulim example, it is quite clear that winning an election, or having a greater vote share, or majority seats, does not give authoritative powers to the elected representatives. But it is also clear that while one can approach politicians for personal favors, one cannot count on them when it comes to issues that determine the collective future of the state. The people then have to protest and put their lives on the line. This unaccountability of elected representatives post elections is fast rendering the electoral process empty.

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