

PANDERING TO PRESSURE GROUPS

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

Debris after a landslide which was caused by torrential monsoon rains at Puthumala near Meppadi, in Kerala's Wayanad district in 2019. | Photo Credit: REUTERS

In what seems to be a replay of the widespread protests in 2013 against the demarcation of Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESA) for the conservation of the Western Ghats, the high ranges in Kerala, dominated by settler farmers, are again becoming restive. While it was the bitter opposition to the Gadgil and Kasturirangan Committee Reports that led to the protests earlier, this time it is an order issued by the Supreme Court mandating the [maintenance of a 1 km Eco Sensitive Zone \(ESZ\) around forests](#) that has triggered the unrest.

Last week, [Kerala Forest Minister A.K. Saseendran stated](#) that the order would pose a setback to the State's efforts to exclude human settlements adjoining forest fringes from regulations on development. Following this, the High Range Protection Council, largely representing settler farmers and headed by the church, has threatened to launch another round of protests demanding legislation to bypass the order.

The apex court's directive will force the State government to revise the ESZ of at least 10 of the protected areas which were earlier marked as zero following massive public resistance.

In 2014, the [Kerala Assembly had unanimously adopted a resolution](#) urging the Centre to exclude human settlements and agricultural land from the 123 villages identified as ESA by the Kasturirangan committee. The then Chief Minister Oommen Chandy told the House that Kerala's stand was dictated by the larger interests of farmers. The government later said that only protected areas would be demarcated as ESA, inviting criticism from environmentalists who warned that it would prove disastrous for the fragile ecosystem of the Western Ghats. They feared that the political consensus on excluding populated areas from the ESA would defeat the very purpose of the notification.

Eight years later, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan's reaction to the Supreme Court order is similar to that of Mr. Chandy. He said the LDF government was not in favour of human habitations being turned into ESZs. Noting that Kerala had a peculiar situation in which regions in forest fringes were thickly populated, he said the government's priority would be to protect people's interests.

It is relevant that the order has not prescribed any new restrictions in the ESZs barring the ban on construction of permanent structures. The prohibited activities include commercial mining, setting up of sawmills and major hydel projects, commercial use of firewood, production of hazardous substances, and tourism activities such as flying aircraft and hot air balloons over the national park area and the discharge of effluents and solid waste to natural water bodies or terrestrial areas.

The draft notification issued by the Union Ministry of Environment in April to declare ESZs around the Neyyar and Peppara wildlife sanctuaries in Thiruvananthapuram had also run into a wall of protest, with local bodies expressing the fear that the regulations would hinder development activities and eventually lead to phased migration from the region.

Significantly, the final notification on demarcating ESAs in the Western Ghats spanning six States (Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Goa and Gujarat) has been pending for

almost nine years, with the stakeholder States demanding exclusion of more areas, notwithstanding the devastation caused by recurrent natural calamities.

The Kerala government is trying to keep the lid on the unrest by excluding inhabited areas from the purview of the regulations prescribed by the Ministry and the court. But in surrendering to the compulsions of politics and the clout of pressure groups and religious leaders, it is losing sight of the larger issues of conservation and sustainable development. A State with 25 protected areas can ill afford to turn its back on conserving these precious natural assets for posterity.

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