

IMPERIOUS MISSTEPS: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON LAKSHADWEEP RESTRICTIONS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Government policies & interventions for development in various Sectors and issues arising out of their design & implementation incl. Housing

Lakshadweep, an archipelago of 36 islands totalling 32 square kilometres in the Arabian Sea, has had an idyllic existence as a Union Territory. But no longer, it seems, as the [long arm of Delhi is rummaging around the islands](#) these days. Praful K. Patel, a BJP politician from Gujarat, who arrived as Administrator in December, appears determined to upend the landscape and recast the lives of the islanders, around 70,000 of them, all according to his authoritarian imagination. The [draft Lakshadweep Development Authority Regulation 2021](#) gives sweeping powers to the Administrator to take over land and forcibly relocate people, and proposes harsh punishment to those who resist. In other measures, proposed or implemented, the consumption or sale of beef, a part of the food habits of many, could be an offence punishable by seven years in prison; those who have more than two children cannot contest panchayat elections. Anyone could be held in prison without reason up to a year, under a new Goonda Act, in a place that has a very low crime rate. The traditional livelihood of fishing communities has been impeded by mindless regulations that deny them access to coastlines. Their sheds on the coastal areas have been demolished, saying they violated the Coast Guard Act. Dairy farms run by the administration have been shut.

Development, as it is coming, is not a promise, but a serious threat to the people of Lakshadweep and the fragile ecosystem. Mr. Patel is no stranger to controversies. In March, the [Mumbai Police named him as an accused in a case related to the death by suicide of seven-time Dadra and Nagar Haveli MP Mohan Delkar](#). Mr. Patel was named in the suicide note. He is the first politician to become the Administrator. In the last five months, he has demonstrated a unique disregard for the people's concerns and priorities. In the absence of any administrative rationale or public good in these blatantly arbitrary measures, there are fears of other motivations. Commercial interests could be at play, and the land that inhabitants are forced to part with could be transferred to buyers from outside. There could also be ill-advised political plans to change the demography of the islands. People have risen in protest, but far from listening to them, the Administrator seems insistent on his plans. Rajya Sabha Members from Kerala, K.C. Venugopal of the Congress and Elamaram Kareem of the CPI(M) have in separate letters urged the President to recall the Administrator. The rationale for carving out Union Territories as an administrative unit is to protect the unique cultural and historical situations of their inhabitants. The Centre is inverting its responsibility to protect into a licence to interfere. It must recall the Administrator and reassure the islanders.

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