

THE ZONQOR CONFLICT IN MALTA

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Resumen

El artículo trata del conflicto sobre la Universidad Americana de Malta. Este se caracterizó por la creación de un nuevo movimiento ecologista, con las mayores protestas ecologistas que han tenido lugar en el país, y por la revisión por parte del Gobierno de sus planes originarios de desarrollo. En consecuencia, el conflicto acarrió todo un conjunto de impactos.

Palabras clave: Malta, urbanización, conflicto ecologista, Frente Harsien ODZ

Resum

L'article tracta del conflicte sobre la Universitat Americana de Malta. Aquest es va caracteritzar per la creació d'un nou moviment ecologista, amb les majors protestes ecologistes mai vistes al país, i per la revisió per part del Govern dels seus plans originaris de desenvolupament. En conseqüència, el conflicte va comportar tot un conjunt d'impactes.

Paraules clau: Malta, urbanització, conflicte ecologista, Front Harsien ODZ

Abstract

This article deals with the conflict on the 'American University of Malta'. This was characterised by the creation of a new environmental movement, Malta's biggest ever environmental protest, and by revisions by the Government in its original development plans. Consequently, the conflict had a variety of impacts.

Keywords: Malta, land development, environmental conflict, Front Harsien ODZ

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Introduction

This article deals with the conflict related to the proposed development of the 'American University of Malta' and Zonqor point, Marsascala, Malta. The proposal led to Malta's biggest ever environmental protest and to revisions by the Government in original plans.

Malta is the southernmost, smallest and most densely populated EU member state. Indeed, the Maltese islands have a land area of just 316 km² and a population of over 400,000, with 1,200 persons per square kilometre (Eurostat, 2010 pp. 163-4).

Malta has particular vulnerabilities and constraints (Briguglio L., 1995), among which, one can find its small territory size (Government of Malta, 2002). In this regard, agriculture and building development have altered Malta's landscape, with urbanization accelerating since the 1960s (Zammit, 2009).

It is therefore not surprising that environmental conflicts concerning the development of land have been common in Malta (Briguglio M., 2015b; Boissevain and Gatt, 2011). This is particularly so when one considers the pro-development State discourse of economic growth and neo-liberal ideology in Malta (Briguglio M., 2012).

The Zonqor Conflict

On 1 May 2015, Prime Minister of Malta Joseph Muscat announced that his Government is supporting the proposal of a private 'American University of Malta'. The project would be carried out by Sadeen Group from Jordan on 90,000 m² of protected land in Zonqor, Marsascala, which forms part of Malta's Outside Development Zone (ODZ) (Timesofmalta.com, 2015a).

The Government of Malta and the Sadeen Group signed an agreement on 5 May. The University was said to attract 4,000 students mainly from the Middle East, North Africa and Europe, would result in investment of over €115 million, to create around 400 jobs (Timesofmalta.com, 2015b).

The proposal immediately raised controversy in Maltese civil society in general and within the environmental movement in particular. The latter had just been highly active in a national legally-binding referendum a few weeks before, on the prohibition of hunting of birds in Spring. Even though the pro-hunting lobby won the referendum, the difference in votes was of merely 2,220 votes despite the fact that no parliamentary political party supported the anti-hunting lobby. Despite the defeat, the environment movement showed that it was capable of mobilizing people as an electorally-significant political constituency. (Briguglio, 2015a)

Malta's environmental movement had witnessed its fair share of victories and defeats on various environmental issues, but also managed to have various sensitizing, procedural and structural impacts (Giugni; 1995; van der Heijden, 1999; Carter, 2001; Rootes, 2007) during the years, at times in relation to Malta's 2004 EU accession (Briguglio, 2015b).

Within such a context, when Prime Minister Muscat announced the large scale development proposal on ecologically sensitive land, it was not surprising that environmentalists started to mobilize against such plans.

Indeed, a few days after Government's proposals, a public meeting to organize an action plan was held on 13 May by radical environmental activists against the Zonqor proposal and around 80 persons from different environmental, activist and political backgrounds attended (Facebook.com, n.d).

At the same time, some other activists were separately planning activism on this issue and teamed up with the former organizers.

Subsequently, further meetings were held and a new citizens' movement Front —Harsien ODZ— was publicly launched through a press conference in front of Malta's parliament on 23 May. The Front announced that its aims was to safeguard ODZ sites such as the one located at Żonqor Point and that its goals were purely environmental in nature (Independent.com.mt, 2015a). The Front added that as a citizens' movement it welcomed support from all sectors of society (Frontharsienodz.wordpress.com, n.d.).

Front activists included local councilors from the Labour, Nationalist and Green Parties; left, green and environmental activists, and some newcomers.

In the meantime, despite Government's public statements and press events to justify the project, civil society opposition towards the development on ODZ land in Zonqor was widespread. The following organizations, representing different and at times conflicting interests in civil society, criticized the proposal to develop at Zonqor.

Front Harsien ODZ, Marlene Farrugia (Labour MP), Godfrey Farrugia (Labour Parliamentary Whip), Nationalist Party, Alternattiva Demokratika —The Green Party, Archbishop Charles Scicluna, Kunsill Studenti Universitarji, Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry, Din l-Art Helwa, Flimkien Ghal Ambjent Ahjar, Malta Organic Agriculture Movement, Friends of the Earth Malta, TerraFirma Collective, Moviment Graffiti, Zminijietna Voice of the Left, Ramblers Association, Marsascula Deputy Mayor Desiree Attard (Labour), Malta Developers Association, St Hubert Hunters Association, Zonqor Point Farmers, ADZ— Malta Green Youth, Malta Employers Association, Noise Abatement Society, Federation for Hunting and Conservation (FKNK), Birdlife Malta, Times of Malta, The Malta Independent, Malta Today, Youth for the Environment, Nature Trust, Church Environment Commission, Jesuits (Malta), Forum Professjonisti Partit Nazzjonalista, Partit Komunista Malti, Integra Foundation, The Critical Institute, Why Not?, Kopin, Greenhouse, Gender Liberation, Moviment Kattoliku Studenti Universitarji, Theatre Anon, Koperattiva Kummerc Gust, Friends of Marsascula, Organisation Friendship in Diversity, Students' Philosophical Society, Aditus, Youth for the Environment, PHROM, Drachma, Earth Systems Association, NIFS (National Independent Forum for Sustainability), numerous Academics from University of Malta, MCAST, Junior College, Higher Secondary, and a group of Maltese artists against ODZ development (mikes-beat.blogspot.com, 2015a).

Some alternative sites to Zonqor were also mentioned in the civil society debate on the issue. Besides, there were also many speculations and criticism on the real intention behind the development. Supporters of the development,

however, emphasized that it could regenerate the ‘neglected’ southern part of Malta (inewsmalta.com, 2015)

In the meantime, Front Harsien ODZ announced that a national protest “#savezonqor” would be held in the capital city Valletta on 20th June (maltatoday.com.mt, 2015a).

The build-up to the protest included press conferences, social media, an advert on state television, internal and external meetings.

The Front announced that it was being endorsed by: Moviment Graffiti, Alternattiva Demokratika, Friends of the Earth, Flimkien Għal Ambjent Aħjar, Integra Foundation, Partit Komunista Malti, The Critical Institute, ADŽ-Alternattiva Demokratika Żgħażaġħ, Why Not?, Greenhouse–Malta, Gender Liberation, JesuitsCommunity, KopinKopin, Ramblers, BirdlifeMalta, MOAM, Moviment Kattoliku Studenti Universitarji (MKSU), Kunsill Studenti Universitarji (KSU), Theatre Anon, Koperattiva Kummerċ Ġust (KKG), Friends of Marsascala, Organisation Friendship in Diversity (OFD), Students’ Philosophical Society (SPS), Aditus, Youth for the Environment, Platform of Human Rights Organisations in Malta (PHROM), SDM, Drachma, Earth Systems Association, Żminijietna and Nature Trust Malta (mikes-beat.blogspot.com, 2015b).

The protest transpired to be the biggest ever of its kind in Malta, with around 3,000-4,000 participants. <https://euobserver.com/beyond-brussels/129250> As was the case with Front’s press conferences and statements, it gained comprehensive coverage in the Maltese media, in what transpired to be a clear sensitizing impact (Giugni; 1995; van der Heijden 1999; Carter 2001; Rootes 2007.) of Front Harsien ODZ (independent.com.mt, 2015c)

Comparatively, a protest at Zonqor organised by the opposition Nationalist Party a few weeks before had around 400 participants (independent.com.mt, 2015b).

On 20 August, in what transpired to be the main substantive impact (Giugni; 1995; van der Heijden 1999; Carter 2001; Rootes 2007) of Front Harsien ODZ,

Prime Minister Joseph Muscat announced the developed footprint of ODZ land at Zonqor would be reduced by 80 per cent to 18,000 m², and that the other part of the private University would be developed on a brownfield site in Cospicua's ex-Dock Number 1, occupying warehouses and adjacent buildings which were built during Hospitaller and British rule in Malta (Timesofmalta.com, 2015c).

It was also announced that the government would rent out both campuses to Sadeen Group for around €200,000 a year, is a very low price considering the historical value of the Dock No. 1 site and the sea views at Zonqor (Independent.com.mt, 2015d)

Front Harsien ODZ said that even though it noted its impact on the reduction of the ODZ footprint, it still disagreed with Government's plans, insisting that alternative non-ODZ sites should not be discarded by the Government (Timesofmalta.com, 2015c)

In the meantime, Front Harsien ODZ also had procedural impacts (Giugni; 1995; van der Heijden 1999; Carter 2001; Rootes 2007), most notably through participation in Malta's parliamentary environment committee, which was chaired by Labour Member of Parliament Marlene Farrugia, who had also expressed her opposition to the Zonqor development and held other press conferences on the Zonqor issue. Eventually, Farrugia resigned from this role and from the Labour Party, thus becoming an independent member of parliament (Timesofmalta.com, 2015d).

During the parliamentary committee meetings and through other public statements, Front activists raised various technical and procedural queries during these meetings, which also looked into possible alternative sites for development (Independent.com.mt 2015e).

Eventually, on 15 December, the Labour parliamentary majority approved the transfer of public land in Zonqor and Bormla to Sadeen. The marathon parliamentary session was 15 hours long, especially due to various queries made by Nationalist members of parliament and Marlene Farrugia (Timesofmalta.com, 2015e).

Here, it transpired that Sadeen applied for a Higher Education Institution, and not for a University, and that this has not yet obtained accreditation. The official name of the project became 'American Institute of Malta'. In reaction, Front Harsien ODZ called this parliamentary sitting "surreal" and said that it showed terrible governance (Timesofmalta.com, 2015f).

The development requires approval by Malta's Planning Authority, following a planning process which will include an Environment Impact Assessment. Front Harsien ODZ is planning to oppose the planning process during the public consultation process and through mobilization.

Conclusion

The Zonqor conflict confirms that environmental conflict based on development of land is ever-present in Maltese politics, with a visible increase in public consciousness and social movement mobilization. Even if Malta's Planning Authority approves the amended development, the environmentalist movement is likely to play a stronger role as political constituency in Malta.

| Date | Event |
|-------------|---|
| 1 May | Government announces American University of Malta |
| 5 May | Government of Malta and Sadeen Group sign heads of agreement, including development on ODZ land in Zonqor |
| 13 May | Activists hold public meeting to develop an action plan |
| 23 May | Front Harsien ODZ officially launched |
| 20 June | Front Harsien ODZ organizes national protest in Valletta against the Zonqor development |
| 20 August | Prime Minister Joseph Muscat announces changes in plans, including reduced ODZ footprint. |
| 15 December | Government Parliamentary majority approves development following marathon parliamentary session |

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