



Recent Protests Raise Concerns About Political Representation

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The last year has been a tumultuous one for Hawaii: the protests from Mauna Kea to Kahuku have drawn out sharp and fuzzy divisions that have long been simmering under the surface.

Many view these events as a setback that plays into a narrative of Hawaii being anti-business and antagonistic towards outsiders. Others think it is a long overdue awakening and a reckoning to be rejoiced over.

It has been endlessly mowed over as a clash between culture and science; as a blind for Kanaka Maoli vs. a settler class; or the rule of law versus lawless sovereignty activists. But it might just be a result of a rotting democracy.

Most of the arguments put forth against the protesters have centered on the necessity of enforcing the rule of law. While the rule of law is a principal of liberal democracy, it's not exactly a convincing argument. In the first place, the argument is too near the excuse made by repressive governments cracking down on dissent.

The presupposition behind the rule of law in a liberal democracy versus a dictatorship is that our laws are both just and represent the people. The allegation of the kiai is that the actions at Mauna Kea, Kahuku, and Waimanalo fail exactly that test.

Thus, arguments that we should enforce the rule of law only serve to further prove in their eyes that the government has no interest in their position; that Hawaii is not a genuine democratic republic with both majority consensus and minority protections.

And they have a point. For the record I support the TMT and the Kahuku windmills, viewing both as serving a good that is worth the cost and finding the scientific claims advanced by the protestors as spurious at best. But what I cannot do in

good conscience is dismiss the kiai as merely cultural curmudgeons of a peculiar sort.

The protests raise substantive issues regarding actual, effective political representation in Hawaii. The opponents of the TMT are a minority, but not an inconsequential one. Yet where are the vociferous opponents of that project in the legislature or city councils?

Our Legislature Has Calcified

On the flip side, where are the strong proponents of the TMT in our government? The results of the protests should unite opponents and supporters alike on one front: our current government is not representative of the interests of the people of Hawaii.

The inaction of our government cannot be boiled down to a single fault. It seems undeniable though that one of the problems is that while our population has expanded, and the interests of our community grown more diverse, our Legislature has calcified.

The 1950 Hawaii Constitution established our Legislature at 25 Senators and 51 Representatives. At the time, the population was 498,000 persons. The average member of the House represented some 10,000 persons. This is itself a formidable task. Yet now each representative is expected to represent the interests of 27,000 people.

That is an impossible task. No group of people that large can be accurately represented by a single person.

In order to sound agreeable enough to everyone, representatives can only advocate mealy mouthed solutions to vaguely stated issues, not firm positions on real problems.

The interests of passionate minorities in the electorate not only can be ignored by elected officials, they must be ignored if they intend to get reelected. Representatives cannot be a passionate advocate for anything, because they cannot form a big enough electorate to keep themselves in office. This disillusion citizens that never see their interests represented. It results in a homogeneous legislature that skews towards those wealthy and well-connected enough to afford the costs of a campaign.

The size of the electorate means that we always vote the same people back in, because practically no capable, common working person can absorb the costs of running for office.

Consider how the TMT issue would be different if there had been a legislative minority advocating against it. It is no secret that opposition to the TMT is as strong as it is because it has become a symbol for a whole host of Kanaka Maoli issues. If those issues had advocates in the legislature, a compromise could have been reached.

For instance, those sitting on the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands waiting list might have felt less aggrieved if their issues had been addressed beforehand. But our Legislature is set up so that these concerns didn't have to be addressed, so they simply festered.

The point of having minority groups in significant seats of power is not to be nice. It's to prevent exactly the sort of breakdown the TMT embodies.

Instead of compromise we have a government arrogant in its claims to represent us and so unfamiliar with having to advocate for anyone that it is afraid to act. Instead of representation we have a legislature only comfortable within the confines of the Overton Window enforced by interests descended from the Big Five.

We are letting our lives be governed by a government that doesn't represent the diverse opinions that make up Hawaii. The Legislature has simply grown too distant to be effective; representation too diluted to be meaningful. Being a legislator should not be a vaunted seat of high power; it should be almost mundane.

If we want to avoid the next TMT, we need to expand representation so that minority voices are represented. The next opportunity we have to hold a constitutional convention that would allow us to address this is eight years away.

But if you want local culture and interests to be represented in Hawaii, it's never too early to start advocating for the change we need to see.