

Nicobar Elections Controversy: Tribal Self-Governance and Electoral Reforms

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Nicobar Elections Controversy Latest News

- The Andaman and Nicobar Islands (A&NI) administration has notified draft rules proposing formal **constituency-based elections for Nicobarese tribal councils** — a move that has sparked urgent concern among tribal leaders.
- The Tribal Welfare Department has set June 15, 2026 as the deadline for suggestions and objections.
- The proposal has reignited a deeper debate about indigenous self-governance, cultural autonomy, and the administration's motives — particularly in the context of the ₹91,000 crore Great Nicobar development project.

Background: Who Are the Nicobarese

- The Nicobarese are a **Scheduled Tribe** with a total population of about 30,000 spread across the Nicobar group of islands.

- They are represented by **seven Tribal Councils** — covering Car Nicobar, Nancowry, Kamorta, Teressa, Little Nicobar, Great Nicobar, and others.
- Below the Tribal Councils sits the **village leadership structure of three Captains per village** — a First Captain assisted by a Second and Third Captain.
- The concept of “captaincy” is centuries old — originating in the 16th century when Nicobarese who negotiated with passing colonial ships began calling themselves captains.
- The British later formalised this structure for their own administrative convenience in the late 19th century.
- The tribal council structure itself is more recent, emerging in the 1990s primarily to facilitate community participation in Central government poverty alleviation schemes.

How Do Nicobarese Choose Their Leaders

- The current system is **consensus-based and community-driven**, not bureaucratically fixed.
- Elections for village Captains happen whenever the community feels the need, not on a fixed schedule. The process is strikingly organic:
 - Village residents gather at a community meeting, nominate names through popular consensus, prepare their own ballot papers, appoint their own polling officer from within the community, and elect the Captain by majority vote.
 - The Tribal Council Chairperson is similarly chosen by popular consensus — and in some councils, no formal election has been held for decades, with the position continuing on the **basis of community acceptance**.
- Crucially, even elected Captains are not autonomous decision-makers. As per the experts, decisions are taken through popular community consultation — Captains are neither lawmakers nor unilateral leaders.
- The community values candidates for their education, Hindi fluency (for dealing with government officials), exposure to the outside world, and practical “smartness” in navigating bureaucracy.
- Experts note that the existing system has real problems — in several Island Tribal Councils, it is **unclear when the Chairperson was last elected** and what authority they actually hold.

What Do the Draft Rules Propose

- The **Andaman and Nicobar Islands Tribal Councils (Preparation of Electoral Rolls and Conduct of Elections) Rules, 2026** — notified in May 2026 — prescribe a formal, structured electoral system for **five-yearly elections** to Village Councils and Island Tribal Councils.
- Key features include:
 - Villagers would elect **five to nine Captains** per village and directly vote for the **Chief Captain** of each Island Tribal Council.
 - The First Captains of all villages on a given island would then vote for the Vice-Chief Captain.
 - The Island Tribal Council would comprise the Chief Captain, Vice-Chief Captain, and all First Captains of that island.
 - The rules also introduce delimitation of constituencies, preparation of voter rolls, and reservation of seats for women.

- These rules are framed under the **Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Tribal Councils) Regulation, 2009** — a Presidential regulation intended to bring autonomous self-governance to the Nicobarese.
- However, that same 2009 Regulation gave the district administration (through the Deputy Commissioner and Assistant Commissioner) an **absolute veto** over any council decision deemed a threat to public order or likely to cause “annoyance”.

Why Are Tribal Leaders Concerned

- **Bureaucratisation of a Living Tradition** – Tribal leaders fear that imposing a fixed electoral calendar and formal administrative procedures will disrupt their organic, consensus-based governance.
- **The Great Nicobar Development Project: The Political Subtext** – The timing of these rules has not gone unnoticed. The Tribal Council of Great Nicobar has been actively opposing the Centre’s ₹91,000 crore mega-project involving a container port, international airport, and township on Great Nicobar Island.
 - Analysts noted that there is a real possibility the rules have been brought forward precisely because of this opposition.
- **Consultation Deficit** – Opponents cited the absence of prior consultation with the community and the non-recognition of **the Tuhet system** — the traditional joint family structure that forms the social backbone of Nicobarese community life.

Constitutional and Legal Dimensions

- The Nicobarese are a **Scheduled Tribe** and thus entitled to constitutional protections under the **Fifth Schedule of the Constitution** (though Andaman and Nicobar Islands, being a Union Territory, is technically outside the Fifth Schedule framework — a significant legal nuance).
- The 2009 Presidential Regulation that underlies these rules retains significant administrative override powers, which means the proposed “self-governance” is structurally limited from the outset.

Conclusion

- True self-governance for tribal communities cannot be delivered through a standardised electoral template designed for mainland India.
- When a community has governed itself — effectively and organically — for generations, formalisation without consultation is not reform; it is substitution.

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