Sometime in the 2020s, when an international consortium completes the Thirty Meter Telescope, the most powerful telescope on the planet, astronomers will gaze from the 14,000-foot summit of Mauna Kea volcano, on the Big Island of Hawaii, out to the edge of the observable universe.

Or maybe they won’t. With a militant advocacy not often seen in the Aloha State, a small group of Native Hawaiians and their sympathizers have managed to stall the $1.4 billion project, which was to begin construction in April. They stood in front of trucks on the road to the summit and declared the telescope an abomination — to the Hawaiian people and their ancient religion, to the environment and to the mountain, revered in Hawaiian tradition as the piko, the navel, the island’s sacred center.

Several were arrested last month. On Thursday the trustees of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, a state agency charged with improving the well-being of Native Hawaiians, voted to rescind their 2009 vote of support for the telescope. Now they are officially noncommittal.

The political eruption has left the telescope operators — the California Institute of Technology; the University of California; and research institutions in Canada, China, India and Japan —
stranded. When they agreed this month to halt construction, Gov. David Ige thanked them for being “respectful and sensitive” to native beliefs and culture.

Protesters blocked vehicles from getting to the Thirty Meter Telescope site at Mauna Kea, Hawaii, last October.
HOLLYN JOHNSON / HAWAII TRIBUNE-HERALD, VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

It is not clear when the project will resume.

The protesters don’t speak for all Hawaii residents, or even all Native Hawaiians, many of whom embrace the telescope. But it is easy to understand why they may feel fed up. Mauna Kea is a site of wonderment even before night falls and the stars come out by the billions. It is a habitat for threatened insects and birds, and rich in precious archaeological sites. It also has been stressed for decades.

The University of Hawaii, which has managed the mountaintop since 1968 under a lease from the state, has at times been a sloppy steward. An embarrassing state audit in 1998 cited its failures to protect the summit’s fragile ecology and cultural resources as it
oversaw the development of a sprawling complex of more than a dozen observatories there. Over the decades it has collected little to no rent from its many scientific tenants. (The Thirty Meter Telescope is to be the rare exception, paying up to $1 million a year.)

It’s hard to know if the anti-telescope furor has crested yet. The telescope builders have a strong claim to legitimacy, and they are being blamed for things they had nothing to do with — like the 1893 overthrow of the Hawaiian kingdom, the loss of native lands, the state’s many social ills and degraded environment. This is an unfair burden for a group that has spent years cultivating local support, navigating the approval process and successfully — so far — fending off lawsuits. It insists its paperwork is in order. It also points to plans to donate about $2 million a year to local causes like business incubation; job training; and scholarships in science, technology, engineering and math.

Mr. Ige, who has been far too withdrawn in this confrontation, needs to step up. If he thinks the telescope is an important asset that promises great benefits to Hawaii’s residents and economy, not to mention to science and humanity at large, he should say so. If he thinks more needs to be done to protect the environment and native interests, he should say what that is and make it happen. His mild news releases urging more dialogue are not enough.

Coexistence may never satisfy the core group of protesters who have been demanding the total erasure of technology from Mauna Kea’s peak. What is tragic is the missed opportunity for shared understanding, given that many of these protesters are themselves descendants of some of history’s greatest astronomers, Polynesian wayfinders who set out across the Pacific a millennium ago, guided by the stars and currents, to find Mauna Kea in the first place.