

Wag the dog

This is a response to Brian O' Riordan's article in SAMUDRA Report No. 27 and an attempt to set the record right on what happened at Loctudy, France

The analysis of the events leading to the breakup of the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF) and the formation of the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP), authored by Brian O' Riordan, the Secretary of ICSF's Brussels office, and published in SAMUDRA Report No. 27, was disheartening and provoking.

In this response, what has been attempted is not a counter-analysis of the events in Loctudy in October 2000, nor is it a point-to-point rejoinder to O' Riordan's article. Rather, it attempts to take up, in the light of bare facts, some of the assumptions or implied suggestions of O' Riordan behind the breakup (or breakdown) of WFF.

O' Riordan refers to a struggle between the Indians and the Canadians to wrest control of the WFF. Yes, there was a struggle. Every struggle involves a minimum of two parties. But it is naive to think that both the parties struggle towards the same end. More often, when one side struggles for power and supremacy, the other party struggles for equality or even survival. We have seen this clearly in the struggles of nations for independence.

When the US or India struggled against the British, one side struggled to continue the imposition of domination over the other, while the other had no alternative but to join the struggle just to protect its due rights and to be accepted and respected as an equal. To the British, unity meant the continuation of the British empire; but, for the Americans and the Indians, unity meant collaborating to create a world order based on equality and respect for one another. Yes, both the Indians and the Americans who struggled against the British can be seen as breakers of unity or

the cause of a shipwreck, but that depends from which side one views the struggle.

O' Riordan has simply stated that each side struggled for power, but he has not bothered to substantiate his statement. Even if one takes—or pretends to take—an impartial view of the situation, when the struggle is between a culpable party and an honest party, such a view favours the culpable. Surely, O' Riordan knows who is who, but, for some strange reason, he prefers to place both parties on the same level. A few facts amply demonstrate that while the lobby led by the Canadian delegation struggled for power, the lobby led by the Indian delegation was forced to join the struggle, not to wield power but for freedom, equality and survival:

- The Canadian Council of Professional Fish Harvesters (CCPFH) initiated a proposal to the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), which was never discussed in the Co-ordination Committee (CC), and the General Co-ordinator of the WFF (an Indian) had no information whatsoever that such a step had been taken by CCPFH on behalf of WFF. If that was not an effort to wrest control of WFF, what was it? When the Indian delegation questioned this action of the Canadians, O' Riordan discerned it as a struggle for power between the Canadians and the Indians!
- The CC had set a last date for admission of new members to the WFF and had decided upon procedures for such admission. This was to ensure that members who join the WFF towards the end of the three-year interim period

would not exercise undue influence on the proceedings of the Constitutional Assembly. But the Assistant Co-ordinator (a Canadian), who had not recruited a single member for almost three years, suddenly brought in 12 new members from Latin America, just before the Constituent Assembly began. This was done after the deadline for new members had lapsed, and did not follow the procedures agreed upon by the CC. Though this unlawful decision was clearly a means of gathering votes at the Constituent Assembly, the General Co-ordinator went out of his way to accommodate it, and had the new entrants declared as full-fledged members of WFF, with voting rights and so on, hoping that good sense would prevail. But that did not happen, as events proved later. If that was not a struggle, by hook or crook, for power by the Canadian delegation, what was it?

- The Canadian and the American leaders (of the WFF) were very keen on establishing a law by which they would have permanent membership at the CC. This insidious intention and outrageous ambition of the North American delegation was exposed by the lobby led by the Indians. But

O’Riordan sees this as a “bizarre debate” over the number of continents. If that was not a struggle for power by the North Americans and a struggle for freedom and equality by the Indians, what was it? A bizarre debate? No, it was a struggle to free the North American leaders from their bizarre ambition for power.

A reference to the “bizarre debate over the number of continents” figures several times in O’Riordan’s reflections. Therefore, it is necessary to look at it a little more closely and understand both the foolishness and the seriousness of the issue. The question is what was bizarre—the debate or the understanding of the debate by O’Riordan?

The North American leaders wanted the world to believe that the debate was a bizarre one. What surprises us is that O’Riordan himself believes it! (Or does he?)

Escapism at work

Here we have a clear case of escaping the real issue, or rather insincerity in facing the real issue, and making it appear instead like a ridiculous non-issue. Well done, North American delegation! Since you could not fight the issue, you have successfully diverted the attention of even intelligent persons to non-issues.

The real issue was one of proportionate representation at the CC and at other levels of the WFF. That every country, generally, has one membership at the WFF was already an accepted principle. The Continental Councils were also under discussion, and each continent was supposed to send two members to the CC. Everybody knows that there are only two countries in North America, while other continents have 30, 40 or more. If North America were accepted as a separate continent, for the purposes of the WFF, it would mean that the US and Canada would each have permanent membership at the CC.

If one considers as bizarre a CC without both the Americans and the Canadians, then, yes, you are right, O'Riordan. If that were the case, the debate was indeed bizarre. Let there be six continents or ten—or any number, for that matter. That was not the issue. The real issue was of proportionate representation of member countries and the population of fisher peoples (the actual stakeholders for whom the WFF exists) at all levels in the WFF.

O'Riordan distinguishes between two different types of leadership. One is the charismatic leadership of mass movements, requiring unquestioning loyalty; and the other is the leadership for professional rights, requiring negotiations. He further implies that the style of leadership of the National Fishworkers Forum (NFF) requires unquestioning loyalty, which is (or seen to be) dictatorial and undemocratic.

Without going into the relevance or irrelevance of making such a distinction, and the misleading aspects of attributing a dictatorial and undemocratic style of functioning to the NFF leadership, it will be better to review facts and decide who was dictatorial and undemocratic. O'Riordan has made a learned statement, without giving even one example of undemocratic action by the NFF leadership, which demanded unquestioning loyalty.

Consider, instead, these facts:

- It took almost three years for the CCPFH to present an audited statement of accounts of the money it had collected for the

Delhi meeting. Some serious questions posed to the CCPFH regarding money, raised at the CC meetings and at the Constituent Assembly, still remain unanswered. Yet, the CCPFH expects its transparency in financial matters to be unquestioningly accepted.

- The CCPFH brought in 12 member-nations into the WFF after the deadline decided by the Co-ordination Committee, and without following the norms agreed for acceptance of new members. Members were brought in through the back door by the CCPFH, but, in the case of the NFF, they were allowed to come in through the front door through a democratic process initiated by the NFF leadership. If the General Co-ordinator and the NFF had demanded unquestioning loyalty to accepted norms, the CCPFH would not have had the democratic strength to stand where it does now.
- An opinion was expressed at a CC meeting that the WFF should not collaborate with Greenpeace. That was just an opinion, and no final decision had ever been made. And yet, the democratic CCPFH demanded absolute loyalty from Thomas Kocherry, the General Co-ordinator from India, and denounced him for joining a group to protest against globalization and the World Trade Organization (WTO), just because Greenpeace was also a member of that group.
- The American member of the WFF CC, as head of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations (which is a member of WFF), can have open collaboration with a group in which Greenpeace is also an active member. But, in any of his various capacities, Thomas Kocherry should not only shun Greenpeace at all times and in all places, but should also not collaborate with groups with which Greenpeace associates. Did the North

American and European WFF CC members think that they were charismatic leaders of mass movements that they could demand unquestioning loyalty and submission from Thomas Kocherry to their own whims and fancies? If such a stance is not dictatorial and a denial of an Individual's freedom, pray, tell us, what is it?

- The CCPFH, which is said to achieve its goals through negotiations and a democratic process, took the lead in writing to Greenpeace, denouncing Thomas Kocherry's collaboration with them. This was done in the name of the CC, though it was never discussed at the CC meeting. The CCPFH leaders did not find it necessary to clarify the matter with Thomas Kocherry or negotiate with him. They simply expected, or demanded, unquestioning loyalty from the head of their organization to their own whims and fancies, even as their sense of democracy and negotiation did not prevent them from denouncing their own democratically elected leader to a third party.
- The democratic negotiating group could not even accept for discussion a proposed resolution from the Spanish delegates. The French leader walked out of the CC meeting at the very suggestion of accepting the proposal for discussion at the general assembly, and the CCPFH strongly supported the French action of vetoing the resolution.
- In all discussions and decision-making at the CC meetings, Thomas Kocherry has always stood for consensus; he has not claimed the democratic right of deciding by a majority of votes. Had that right been claimed, there would have been at least one woman co-opted into the CC.
- During the three years that he held the office of General Co-ordinator of the WFF, there was one really

undemocratic action on the part of Thomas Kocherry. That was the initiative he took in getting Francois Poulin appointed as Assistant Co-ordinator, in 1997. The General Assembly, which had just concluded, had not created such a post.

Surely, O'Riordan should be in the know of all these facts because of his close collaboration with the WFF Secretariat and the then General Co-ordinator. It is really strange that he could even suggest that Thomas Kocherry's style of functioning was dictatorial and undemocratic. To be sure, a theoretical analysis of the two types of leadership (of professional representation and mass movements) has its merits. But O'Riordan's attempt at identifying them does not even take a casual glance at facts. But when one takes—or decides to take or is made to take—a deviant stance, then facts do not matter.

Was there a debate over Greenpeace at the Constituent Assembly, either at the CC meetings during the Assembly or at any of the general sessions? Greenpeace was jointly invited by the NFF and the CCPFH to the Delhi meeting in 1997. There was just one person (Arthur Bogason of Iceland) who voiced opposition to collaboration with Greenpeace, but neither did any discussion take place nor was any decision made. The matter did, however, come up again at later CC meetings, and a decision was made not to invite Greenpeace to the Constituent Assembly, a decision that was followed. During the Constituent Assembly, just one person raised the question as to why Greenpeace was not present. Again, there was no discussion or decision. How, then, does O'Riordan perceive an explosion on the issue of relationship with Greenpeace?

Ill perception

This, again, is a case of misperception or ill perception. The debate at the Constituent Assembly, both at the CC meetings and at the General Assembly, was not about Greenpeace, but about letting down the General Co-ordinator of the WFF to a third party, which happened to be Greenpeace. A letter was written in the name of the CC, when such a letter or matter was never discussed at the CC. That

letter, denouncing the Co-ordinator of the WFF, was sent to Greenpeace, without even a copy forwarded to the General Co-ordinator.

The letter was obviously formulated during the days of the CC meeting at San Francisco. This can be deduced from the fact that a member of the CC, who arrived at San Francisco just after the CC meeting ended, was presented with that letter for a signature, and was deceived into believing that it was a decision of the CC to send such a letter to Greenpeace. The member concerned confirmed this at Loctudy.

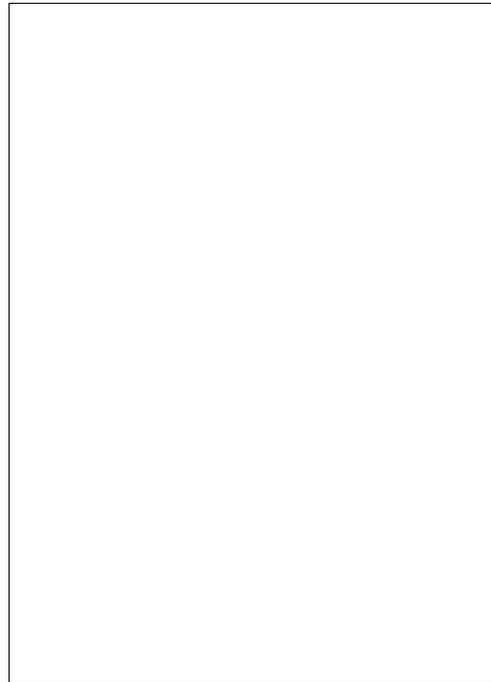
The whole issue of the letter to Greenpeace is very uncivilized, vicious and malicious. The issue at Loctudy was the undemocratic, indecent and stealthy action against the General Co-ordinator of the WFF, authored by his own top-level colleagues, the North American and European members of the WFF CC. That letter could as well have been written to any other group. That was not the point at all. How could O’Riordan possibly pick up relationship with Greenpeace as an issue during the Constituent Assembly at Loctudy? It is even more outrageous that he missed perceiving the insidious aspect of this so-called Greenpeace issue.

In any international organization, persons from different countries hold various offices and responsibilities. When

criticisms are made against them, they are directed individually to those persons—who may happen to be from any nation. It is childish and immature to assume that such allegations are made against the countries they come from. How absurd it is to believe that their countries were being attacked! If someone, assuming that the attack was on his or her country, felt shocked or dismayed or wounded, one can be broadminded and generous in appreciating that sense of patriotism, misplaced though it is. But such patriotism is not going to do any good to the process of building up international solidarity. Such persons should be helped to grow out of their misplaced, token sense of loyalty to their countries. O’Riordan seems to have unconditional sympathy for such behaviour. What is even more absurd is that he seems to believe that allegations were made against Canada as a nation.

Whose voice?

O’Riordan’s conclusion seems to be that the existence or the non-existence of a World Forum—one or more—makes no difference to the lives and struggles of the fisher peoples all over the world. He states that, with or without these world bodies, the fishing communities the world over will find ways to express solidarity and unite to make their voices heard. One wonders which international collective he would propose as the voice of the fishing



communities. On the other hand, the editorial comment of SAMUDRA Report No. 27, an organ of ICSE, whose Brussel's office secretary O'Riordan is, expresses a different opinion.

Drawing a comparison from a graphic example or incident can make the reading interesting and help in understanding certain aspects of the matter in question. But when a complete parallel is forcefully applied, the example takes over the driver's seat, as it were, while the real matter under discussion gets pushed to the rear seat. It is like the tail wagging the dog! An example can only be a tool; an overapplication of it clouds the issue. ❧

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