

From New Delhi by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

Clash of views at Commonwealth meet

The proponents of George Bush's new world order pushed their agenda, but faced tough opposition.

The conference of the heads of state of the 49 Commonwealth nations—former colonies of the British Empire—in Harare, Zimbabwe, turned out to be a lively three-ring circus. Two rings were occupied by such political lightweights and “loyal” proponents of President Bush’s new world order as British Prime Minister John Major and Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. The third ring belonged to none other than Queen Elizabeth II, shuffling along shaking hands and radiating a beatific smile toward the rulers of the former colonies.

Notwithstanding the clowning and clubbiness exuded in this Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), which takes place every two years, it was evident that the well-scrubbed warriors battling for the new world order came prepared to wield their newly found weapons, such as democracy, environmental protection, and human rights, to lead the “white man’s burden” into a glorious future. It became apparent that the direct and indirect (Canada, Australia, New Zealand) subjects of the British monarch, who is also the titular head of the Commonwealth, were ready to use the weapons, come what may.

The first salvo came from the political weakling Brian Mulroney, who initiated the debate on the global political and economic situation at the executive session. Facing a wall of opposition from “black” and “brown” members, Mulroney kept insisting that adherence to democracy and human rights is the key to solving the problems of developing nations. John

Major, whose father was a trapeze artist, on the other hand, was better placed to make the circus more engaging. One day after a compromise draft—the first draft prepared by India caused heartburn to many—had been prepared, Britain sneaked in a parallel draft placing greater emphasis on human rights than on the development needs of poor nations.

The British draft, which was kept out of the public eye, according to media hounds, besides promoting human rights, environmental protection, and democracy, had tried to subsume all these under “good governance,” which was to be made a criterion for receiving aid.

The trapeze act of “Junior” Major and the mumblings of Mulroney, however, came under sharp attack from the rest of the 10-member high-level appraisal group (HLAG). Leading the charge, scholarly Indian Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao posed the delicate question whether democracy and human rights had much meaning for people lacking food, shelter, and employment. Rao said that he did not see that adherence to human rights and democracy could help in breaking the poverty barriers.

“In India, we have a vibrant democracy. But we have many problems relating to meeting the basic needs of food, shelter, and health care, among other things. We have to tackle the problem of population growth, we have to provide employment, we have to modernize ourselves and obtain the latest technology. But we should not forget the latest technology may not help us unless we are able to meet the

basic needs of the people. These are questions to be answered. Democracy cannot progress or be strengthened unless the pressing problems facing the people are solved,” Rao told the gathering.

But Rao’s words may fall on deaf ears, as is apparent from the compromise draft. The Indian draft, which had given development the pride of place, was shot down because it did not refer to democracy, democratic processes and institutions, human rights, a rule of law, and equality of women—the litany of the new world order.

Three documents, the report of the HLAG, the draft Harare declaration, and the memorandum of Secretary General Emeka Anyaoku, were discussed. India cautioned against some of the formulations contained in these documents. These related to the proposal for setting up a mechanism for sorting out conflicts involving the Commonwealth countries, and for institutionalizing arrangements for observing elections. As India saw it, these formulations can be used at a later date as justification for interference in the internal affairs of sovereign member-countries.

If the circus left a bad taste in the mouth for many, the meeting had its own rewards. At Harare, the Indian and Pakistani prime ministers met for the first time and held face-to-face talks for about an hour to ease tensions between the two countries. There are indications that despite uphill political opposition, the meeting may in fact yield some fruitful results. Similarly, the Indian and Malaysian prime ministers met to discuss increased economic and other cooperation between the two countries. It was also useful to find out that a number of Commonwealth leaders had strongly backed Indian Prime Minister Rao’s opposition to the formulations prescribed by the new world order.