

Outsider funding of anti-GMO efforts in Hawaii not really about 'home rule'

By Joan Conrow | February 1, 2015

As international anti-GMO activist Vandana Shiva led a rally at the Jan. 21 opening of the state Legislature, I reflected on how much had changed since I first encountered her on Kauai, two years ago.

Shiva had come to Kauai for one purpose: to exhort us to throw out the biotech seed companies that farmed the abandoned sugar fields. She was accompanied by Andrew Kimbrell of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Food Safety (CFS), and the two of them riveted a crowd that was large for our rural island.

I left energized, reassured in the correctness of my own long-standing aversion to pesticides, biotech agriculture and the multinational chemical companies that manufactured both. GMO-Free Kauai, a tiny fringe movement, was suddenly hip, infused with money and a mission. Change was in the air, and I assumed it would be good, since it was orchestrated by the "good guys" — progressives, activists, environmentalists.

But as the anti-GMO (genetically modified organism) campaign unfolded, first on Kauai, then Hawaii island and Maui, I was increasingly alarmed, and ultimately alienated. Any questioning of the issue or movement was immediately, and often viciously, shut down. Political demagogues were elevated to star status. Activists had no compunction about engaging in fear-mongering, propaganda and intentional misinformation campaigns — strategies they'd condemned when practiced by the chemical companies.

It became almost unbearable to watch my community polarize and divide as seed company employees, many of them former plantation workers, were accused of poisoning the land and their neighbors. Lies and fears were accepted as truth, and those who spoke against the activists were harassed.

No middle ground was ever staked, no compromise ever floated. It was only black or white, with us or against us, when it seemed to me that the issue was very gray, and most folks didn't want to take sides.

Disenchanted by the lock-step mentality of the movement, I began looking more closely at the organizations that supported it. How could they afford to bring in Shiva — who charges \$40,000 and first-class airfare from India — buy ads, pay unregistered lobbyists? I discovered the Hawaii movement is funded almost entirely by mainland groups — primarily the Center for Food Safety — using money donated by heirs of oil, pharmaceutical and manufacturing fortunes. It is not a local, grassroots, anti-corporate movement.

These mainland groups operate — and secure their own ongoing funding — by waging political and legal battles in small communities where they hope to secure victories that can be leveraged elsewhere. Shiva, who is closely aligned with CFS, serves as a charismatic cheerleader.

Hawaii has been played as a pawn in this strategy, which has international aspirations.

A similar steamroller campaign was also used in Thailand, with similarly divisive effects on the community.

Meanwhile, CFS, Pesticide Action Network, Food Democracy Now and other groups are using Hawaii's anti-GMO battle in fundraising appeals to benefit their own organizations, not local residents.

What has Hawaii gotten from this two-year war against GMOs?

Three poorly written bills, all of them being challenged in court; a lot of bad feelings; seriously divided communities; a resurgence of anti-haole sentiment, especially on the neighbor islands; lobbying activities that elude transparency and accountability; and county legal bills that have not been fully paid.

Yet we're no closer to assuaging any of the fears expressed by residents, or resolving community concerns.

So when I see Shiva, back for a third time now, issuing her latest battle cry of "Home Rule," I can only shake my head in dismay. What we need now is not more outside agitation, but "Home Heal."



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