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## **EVALUATING THE OBAMA PRESIDENCY: AFRICAN AND MUSLIM PERSPECTIVES**

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S:/AP2012/ Evaluating the Obama Presidency: African and Muslim Perspectives

What expectations should we have about the presidency of Barack Hussein Obama? What should be the basis of those expectations? The 44th President of the United States has a triple ancestral heritage. Obama is descended from Africans, from Muslims and from mainstream Americans. In the bid to be elected President of the US, Barack Obama emphasized his affinity with mainstream Americans, and underplayed both his African and his Muslim ancestry. In this concluding chapter we shall pay special attention to expectations of his Presidency among Muslims and among people of African descent, both within the United States and worldwide.

The basis of such expectations have to rely on three kinds of credentials Barack Obama may have. One set of credentials on which we would base our expectations are existential credentials concerning Obama's own identity and his personal character and attributes. Obama's intelligence, his social and political skills and his personal style of leadership are, of course, part and parcel of the man.

Also existential is his African and Muslim ancestry. He is the first United States' president whose father was born a Muslim and whose grandfather was, by all accounts, devout in the faith. He is the first President none of whose names were either European or Jewish. His first name was based on the Swahili name Baraka (blessing), his second name Hussein is clearly Arabo-Muslim, and his family name Obama is indisputably Luo from Kenya. It is to his credit that he

never tried to suppress his middle name Hussein which was politically the most risky in the United States.

He is also the first United States' President whose childhood education was partly in a Muslim country — indeed, within the most populous Muslim society in the world, Indonesia. Barack's childhood was also in Hawaii, arguably the most multicultural part of the United States.

Barack Obama probably learnt more about Islam from his Indonesian stepfather (the mother's second husband) than from his biological Kenyan father.

His school in Indonesia was secular and not a traditional madrasa. But his fellow students were overwhelmingly Muslim, as were indeed the majority of his instructors. He was exposed to Islam in the human composition of the school even if not necessarily in the syllabus and the curriculum.

### **A PRESIDENT IN ACTION**

Next to these existential criteria for basing our expectations of the Obama presidency are the *credentials of performance* itself. Within his first one hundred days Obama made no spectacular move to either Africa or Black America apart from First Lady Michelle's visits to black schools and to places which help to feed the poor and the homeless of Washington, DC. Obama had also expressed concern about the crisis of Darfur in the Sudan and tried to have an input in the quest for solving the problem.

But although his Afro-oriented gestures in his first one hundred days were modest, Obama's moves towards the Muslim world were more substantial. His first major television interview for foreign audiences was with Arabiya television network addressed to the Arab world. He also addressed the people of Iran on their national day, extending America's hand of goodwill if Iran would "unclench its own fist" towards America.

Obama was the first US President since 1979 to call Iran by its official post-revolution name of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Obama administration also expressed its readiness to engage in direct negotiations with Iran concerning Iran's nuclear program and aspirations. The United States had not abandoned its official suspicion that Iran's nuclear motives were ultimately military, but the Obama Administration was ready to join the Europeans in direct negotiations with Iran on those issues.

For the Arab-Israeli conflict President Barack Obama appointed as his Envoy the former majority leader in the US Senate, George Mitchell, an experienced mediator and negotiator who had successfully mediated the Good Friday agreement for Northern Ireland in 1998.

Unlike President Bill Clinton who disproportionately entrusted the Arab-Israeli dispute to American Jews to handle, Senator George Mitchell has Lebanese, as well as Irish ancestry from his childhood.

Obama also appointed Richard Holbrooke, another very experienced and distinguished mediator, as Obama's special envoy for both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Obama also invited the Presidents of both Afghanistan and Pakistan to join him at the White House early in May 2009 for more fundamental evaluation of their joint policies towards the Taliban insurgents in both countries and towards general struggle against Muslim extremists at large.

Although the government of Israel which came to power early in 2009 was at best lukewarm about a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian problem, the Obama Administration has emphasized to both the Israelis and the Arabs that a two-state solution is still the policy of the United States. Vice-President Joseph Biden has also emphasized that two-state approach to Jewish audiences within the United States.

But on one important issue the Obama administration has been more successfully defied by the pro-Israeli lobby. Barack Obama was about to nominate Charles Freeman to chair the National Intelligence Council, the institution in charge of supervising the effort to generate National Intelligence Estimates. Charles Freeman was on record as a critic of the United States' semi-subservient policy towards Israel. In a speech in 2005 Freeman had said the following:

... as long as the United States continues unconditionally to provide subsidies and political protection that make the

Israeli occupation and the high-handed and self-defeating policies it engenders possible, there is little, if any, reason to hope that anything resembling the former peace process can be resurrected.<sup>1</sup>

Opinions of this kind are seldom expressed either in public or even in university classrooms in the United States. But Admiral Dennis Blair, the new director of national intelligence who was appointed by the Obama Administration, concluded that Freeman's readiness to speak frankly would help re-energise the intelligence community after all the partisanship of the years of George W. Bush.

The last thing the Israeli Lobby wanted was any objectivity in evaluating Israel's so-called special relationship with the United States. Uncritical friends of Israel like the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Weekly Standard*, as well as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) started a smear campaign against Charles Freeman.

And in Congress all the Republican members of the Senate Intelligence Committee declared themselves against Freeman. Pro-Zionist Senate Democrats like Joseph Lieberman and Charles Schumer joined them.<sup>2</sup>

Charles Freeman was forced to withdraw, partly because the White House did very little to defend his nomination. David Broder, an influential journalist, drew a conclusion which was widely shared ... "The Obama administration has

just suffered an embarrassing defeat at the hands of the lobbyists the President vowed to keep in their place.”<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the fact that Charles Freeman had been considered at all (even if eventually withdrawn) indicated a tentative level of courage in the new administration concerning its relationship with Israel and Israel’s supporters.

Obama’s policy towards Africa has been less noteworthy than his moves towards the Muslim world. The President may feel inhibited precisely because his father was not only an African but also a citizen of an African country. Obama may be cautious not to betray either racial nepotism or a manifest bias towards Africa. When faced with a dilemma between helping Kenya and helping Bangladesh, Obama may feel compelled to help Bangladesh as a poorer and more deserving supplicant for American aid.

#### **BETWEEN GLOBAL AFRICA AND GLOBAL UMMAH**

The point has been raised whether Africa on its own would have been better off if Hillary Clinton had been elected President of the United States instead of Barack Obama. Although Bill Clinton as President had made a major blunder about the events which led to the Rwanda genocide of 1994, his administration had demonstrated considerable friendship towards Africa in the year 1998 was the most extensive visit by an incumbent US President to the African continent in history.

While under Barack Obama the American Navy was authorized to open fire on three Somali “pirates” who were holding an American captain hostage, Bill Clinton withheld the use of deadly military force on the Somali street in Mogadisho even after eight Americans were actually killed and at least one dead American body was dragged provocatively with Somali jeers in the streets of the Somali capital. Instead of ordering retaliation, President Clinton ordered the prompt withdrawal of all American troops from Somalia.

With regard to Hillary Clinton herself, she was such an admirer of African traditions of bringing up children that her first book carried the African title of *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us*.

Obama’s Africa policy may become more active in a positive sense in the months and years ahead. But on the evidence so far it does seem credible that the African continent itself would have been better off if Hillary Clinton had become President of the United States.

On the other hand, if we examine the Black world as a whole instead of just the African continent, Obama’s election to the Presidency of the United States has set a remarkable precedent in upward political mobility. The United States is only the first white majority country to have elected a man of colour to its highest office in the land. This American precedent may lead on to the election of a Black Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, a Black President of France, and even a Black Chancellor of Germany before the end of this twenty-first century. A



Somali Prime Minister of Italy in another fifty years is no longer inconceivable. After all, the United States has had a Luo President sooner than has Kenya, which has a population of several million Luo.

It is also not often realized that Barack Obama is not only the most powerful Black man in world politics today, but the most powerful man of colour in the history of civilization. As we have mentioned before, Barack Obama is more powerful than the Pharaoh who forced Moses out of Egypt, more powerful than the Ethiopian Emperor who defeated the Italians in 1896, more powerful than Shaka Zulu who

“stands out as the greatest of them all — both Romulus and Napoleon to the Zulu people — and his legend has captured the imagination of both European and African writers, inspiring novels, biographies, and historical studies in several tongues.”<sup>4</sup>

When we say Barack Obama is more powerful than Shaka Zulu, Ramesses II of Egypt, and Menelik II of Ethiopia, we do not mean Obama is greater than any of them. We do not know yet how great Barack Obama is likely to be.

What we do know is that he is Commander in Chief of US forces, which are greater than all the African armies in history added together. Currently it is

estimated that the United States has one thousand (yes, 1000) military bases overseas.

Officially the Pentagon counts 865 bases sites, but this notoriously unreliable number omits all our bases in Iraq (likely over 100) and Afghanistan (80 and counting), among many other well-known and secretive bases ... Others are scattered around the globe in places like Aruba and Australia, Bulgaria and Bahrain, Colombia and Greece, Djibouti, Egypt, Kuwait, Qatar, Romania, Singapore, and, of course, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba — just to name a few. [This is quite apart from long-standing bases in Germany and Korea].”<sup>5</sup>

In sheer power, there is therefore no doubt that Barack Obama is in a class by himself among Black leaders in the history of civilization. But what about Obama’s impact upon African Americans?

Black voters in the United States voted for Obama in percentages of over 90% — after some hesitation in the early stages of his primary campaign for the presidency. But in the course of his first 100 days there was some Black disenchantment because Obama was perceived as being in denial about the importance of such African American concerns as affirmative action and

reparations for past injustices. At African American public meetings to grade Obama's performance during those 100 days, some African Americans graded him as low as C-. Others gave him an Incomplete.<sup>6</sup>

But in fairness to President Obama some of his most important policies were bound to benefit millions of African Americans, although the policies were not specifically focused on African Americans. His aspiration to make health service as affordable and universal as possible was bound to benefit hundreds of thousands of uninsured African Americans. His plan to try and make college education more affordable was also bound to benefit generations of young Blacks if Obama succeeded. Indeed, many of these policies were likely to yield greater benefits to African Americans than even affirmative action — which in the past had often benefited more white women than Black men.

With regard to health policies affecting the African continent, Barack Obama has a tough act to follow when compared with George W. Bush. President Bush persuaded Congress to allocate billions of dollars to combat HIV-AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean countries. Bush's strategy against HIV-AIDS abroad was arguably his most enlightened policy, though his accompanying condition of sexual abstinence was naïve, and was honoured more in the breach than the observance.

## DOUBLE STANDARDS IN GLOBAL JUSTICE

One question which the Obama war on terror has posed is whether the drone has become a weapon of ethnic-specific targeted assassinations. Barack Obama has authorized more specific assassinations than any other Head of State since World War II — with the possible exception of Israel's readiness to murder some of the enemies of the Jewish state.

If the alleged terrorists against the United States had been Europeans, like Russian communists or Austrian Nazis, would any American President have chosen targeted assassinations as an answer to the problem? Would an American president have signed off the killing of V. I. Lenin, and sat up all night for the phone call to confirm “murderous mission accomplished?”

Muslim intellectuals are speculating whether Obama has found it easy to authorize the killing of Pakistanis and Yemenis because these people were neither of European stock nor of Judeo-Christian ancestry.

Obama has even authorized the killing of US citizens in Yemen without the remotest pretence at due process. Obama has been jury, judge and executioner, not only of Osama bin Laden but of many others.

Innocent Muslims who have been killed by US drones are estimated to run into hundreds, if not thousands. The Obama presidency has been the presidency of assassination *par excellence*.

When President Harry Truman authorized dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 it was asked whether it was easy politically to drop such horrendous weapons on Asiatic populations rather than on European cities. Was President Truman trying out a new deadly weapon on the so-called “Yellow people.”

Similarly, a question is now asked whether Obama is the new President Truman trying out drone-attacks on Muslim populations.

On the issue of who deserves due process instead of either execution or years of imprisonment without trial, it is worth comparing Muslim suspects with what the United States and its allies did about European Nazis who, directly or indirectly, had caused the death of 50 million people. The victorious allies had given the Nazi monsters due process at Nuremberg. They were collectively charged with accusations of crimes against peace, crimes against humanity and the newly-identified crime of genocide.

Herman Goering, whom Hitler had chosen as his successor in the 1930s, received a very elaborate trial at Nuremberg, although his crimes were much worse than those of Osama bin Laden seventy years later. Goering remained loyal to Hitler even after Hitler’s death.

Goering was found guilty of all charges and condemned to death. But on the eve of his execution he committed suicide with a phial of cyanide, secretly imported into his cell in October 1946.

The main issue here is whether the Nazis were given a proper trial while Muslims suspected of terrorism are executed without trial under the Obama presidency.

A closer approximation to Guantanamo Bay was Spandau Prison in Berlin. Rudolph Hess was like Osama bin Laden. Rudolph Hess had served as Hitler's deputy and head of the party chancellery. At his trial in Nuremberg Hess kept losing his memory or suffered what was called "periods of self-induced hysterical amnesia." He was eventually sentenced to life imprisonment to be spent at Spandau Prison in Berlin. He did have due process — which has been denied most of the Muslim prisoners at Guantanamo Bay. Rudolph Hess committed suicide in 1987 while still in prison.

Both the United States and Israel are suspected of killing some of Iran's nuclear scientists. Israel might previously have also targeted Iraqi and Syrian nuclear scientists. This is quite apart from targeted assassinations of radical Palestinians.

Again, contrast this with how Israel has treated European Nazis. The most spectacular was Israel's capture and trial of Adolf Eichmann, who had been Chief of the Jewish office of the Gestapo, entrusted with carrying out the genocidal "Final Solution."

Eichmann had organized mass deportation of Jews to extermination camps in Poland and elsewhere. By March 1944 in Budapest he had become a leading personality in the massacre of the Hungarian Jewry.

Though arrested at the end of World War II, Eichmann managed to escape from American custody and migrated to Argentina. He lived there under an assumed name.

Israeli intelligence finally caught up with him and captured him on May 11, 1960. The Israelis took every precaution to ensure that Eichmann was not assassinated. His trial began on April 11, 1961 — the charges included crimes against humanity and crimes against the Jewish people.

Although this man had supervised the killing of more Jews than all the Palestinians had done in total, the Israelis gave Eichmann due process. They wanted him to die, but after a judicial procedure. He was executed in Israel just before midnight on May 31, 1962.

Eichmann was eventually cremated and the ashes scattered outside Israeli's territorial waters. For a long time afterwards Adolf Eichmann has been the only judicial execution carried out in Israel.

But in this Cornell lecture, the bulk of the argument here is that European Nazis after World War II were treated with greater respect and accorded more formal justice than have Muslim terrorist suspects in the eyes of the Israelis and the Obama Presidency.

Albert Speer, Hitler's Minister of Armaments [and his favourite architect], received more dignity and fair play after the war than have Iranian nuclear scientists in peace time, who have been murdered at either Israeli or American instigation. Speer was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment. The Iranian scientists were just killed.

Can there be any other explanation than the thesis that even under an African-American presidency, Middle Eastern Muslim lives are held more cheaply than are European lives. Nazis who had killed millions had their say in court and could offer a legal defence.

It is possible that the recent outburst of Muslim rage in over twenty countries concerning the defamation of the Prophet Muhammad, had more to do with a general anger against the United States' foreign policy, rather than just indignation against a fifteen-minute film abusing the Prophet Muhammad.

Here we must distinguish between systemic political contagion and episodic political contagion. The Arab spring was a case of democratic contagion in rebellion against tyrannical systems. On the other hand, the Muslim rage against Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*, was a case of episodic political contagion. Also episodic is the September 2012 outrage against the film demeaning the Prophet Muhammad.



Whether we like it or not, Muslims across the world are more outraged by attacks against *Islam* (the religion itself) — rather than against *Muslims* [the followers of the faith].

When Muslims demonstrate against Danish cartoons, or Californian comic blasphemy, the scale of the outpouring seems disproportionate to non-Muslims. But three American wars on Muslim countries have provoked minimum protests from the global Ummah. Drone attacks by Obama are hardly noticed outside South Asia and Yemen.

It would make better sense if Muslims protested in their hundreds of thousands against deadly drones killing innocent Muslims than against cartoons titillating Islamophobes. The protesters should be more concerned with what is done to *Muslims*, rather than what is said about *Islam*.

It is one of the ironies of history that the etymology of the English word *assassination* can be traced back to the Arabic language. It originally referred to people who got intoxicated by smoking *hashish* [*hashishin* or assassins] and became murderous as a result. [*Hassa* also means in Arabic to slaughter people.

This is an alternative etymology].

The drone has become an intoxicant to the Central Investigation Agency — a *hashish* of modern technology. The resulting process has been a form of assassination. Every single casualty has been a Muslim, without exception. Many

have also been speakers of the Arabic language, which had coined the word *assassin* in the first place.

Obama's policy towards the Islamic Republic of Iran has been more contradictory. Obama would like to ensure that the Islamic Republic does not develop or acquire nuclear weapons. One of Obama's arguments is not convincing. He argues that the nuclearization of Iran would trigger an arms race in the Middle East, resulting in the proliferation of nuclear weapons in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, etc. This argument is unconvincing for the simple reason that the nuclearization of Israel in the 1960s did *not* trigger a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. Israel was more widely viewed as an adversary in the 1960s than Iran is in this twenty-first century. Nevertheless, there was no nuclear contagion in the 1960s following the Israeli atomic bomb.

But while Obama seems determined to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, Obama has resisted pressures by the Prime Minister of Israel trying to move Obama closer towards war with Iran. Obama seems reluctant to be drawn into his fourth war against a Muslim country (after Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya) within four years.

After Obama's Address to the Muslim world in June 2009, the Muslim ummah held its breath for a new era in relations between the United States and the Muslims of the world. Obama also addressed the peoples of Africa from Accra, Ghana. Those were heady days of Americo-Muslim and Americo-African

solidarity. All parties have sobered up since then. We are back to a world of tension and banality.

## **COUNTER-TERRORISM AND COUNTER-APARTHEID**

What is an “assassination”? One definition would be “The killing of someone politically important, for reasons which are either political or unknown.”

Let us compare assassinations under Barack Obama and assassinations under apartheid in South Africa.

South Africa pursued the nuclear option against its external enemies, rather than the option of drones. The nuclear option was designed for mass destruction, whereas the drones technology was for more selective killing, often targeted at a specific individual. South Africa did succeed in developing half a dozen nuclear weapons, but fortunately never used them.

During the years of apartheid the drone technology was not yet available. South Africa found other ways of dealing with individual adversaries.

Ironically, the apartheid system used due process for its adversaries more often than has the Obama administration for Muslim suspects. The laws of apartheid were immoral, but Nelson Mandela did have his day in court — unlike Osama bin Laden or the suspects in Guantanamo Bay. Most of Guantanamo Bay suspects have spent many years behind bars without access to lawyers, let alone access to due process in a court of law.

Although the apartheid system had no drones to use for targeted assassinations, it did have other means of eliminating adversaries. Police interrogations in South Africa were more dangerous than in the United States. If the United States had a violent experience on September 11, South African had an individualized experience on September 12. South Africa's bloody September 12, was the brutal death of Steve Biko with multiple brain and body injuries. Biko was murdered in 1977 either on government orders or by overzealous police torturers. Biko was the 46th detainee since 1963 to die under interrogation. The murder of Biko had wide-ranging domestic and international consequences.

Even after apartheid police behavior in South Africa is still more violent than in the United States. As recently as in 2012 the South African police opened fire and killed over thirty platinum miners. Such large scale domestic slaughter by the police within the United States has now become inconceivable. But larger scale killings by American drones overseas are perpetrated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) almost every other week. American drone casualties are less frankly acknowledged than are South Africa's police casualties.

To summarize the argument so far, police custody in apartheid South Africa was more risky than was the legal process and the judiciary. The reverse has been the case in Barack Obama's America. Police custody in the United States has been less physically risky for Muslim terror suspects than the legal void in Guantanamo Bay.

If an anti-apartheid suspect survived police custody in white-ruled South Africa, he or she was going to have due process, including access to his or her own lawyer. In contrast, Muslim terror suspects in Guantanamo Bay are in military custody without due process or access to lawyers for years and years. Apartheid police was more violent than the police in Obama's America, but South Africa's judicial system was fairer than Obama's treatment of Muslim suspects today.

With regard to nuclear weapons, apartheid South Africa developed the nuclear capability against potential anti-apartheid enemies abroad. The Obama administration has sought to stop its Muslim adversaries abroad from acquiring those weapons themselves. The immediate target of Obama's anti-proliferation policy is Iran. Obama's US predecessors did not attempt to stop the nuclear proliferation of either apartheid South Africa or Israel, both of which became nuclear powers.

In fairness to Barack Obama he did not limit himself to new methods of waging war — like the drones. He also supported and funded new forms of energy, such as wind. Surprisingly enough, the Obama Administration underutilized an older but equally clean form of energy — hydro-electric power. The immense water power of American rivers and lakes have been under-exploited because of the political vetoes and obstacles lodged by big oil companies.

Petro-sanctions against South Africa during the apartheid years was probably good news for hydro-electric power in the sub-region as a whole. Although hydro-electric dams can have severe environmental costs to displaced village populations, this water form of energy is still much cleaner than either coal, petroleum, or nuclear.

### **BETWEEN PETROLEUM AND HYDROELECTRICITY**

Oil and water have been adversarial liquids for centuries. It is a common adage that water and oil do not mix. In earlier centuries water played a more energy-intensive role than oil. When fossil oil was discovered in the seventeenth century, a new era was inaugurated in which water supplies were increasingly at risk from petroleum. By the late twentieth century rivers and lakes were increasingly polluted by neighbouring petroleum industry.

Barack Obama has had policies to govern fossil fuels but no comprehensive strategy specifically about the utilization of water. There had been Congressional legislation to protect clean water for human consumption, but no promotion of water as a source of energy.

As fossil fuel became economically more and more valuable there was less and less protection of water in places like the Niger Delta in Nigeria, or the Gulf of Mexico on the shores of the United States.

The Obama Administration has shown commitment to alternative and cleaner forms of energy. American investment has gone into solar, wind, and even

nuclear sources of power. Surprisingly the Obama Administration seems to have shown far less interest in imaginative ways of using water as a source of electricity. Water-policy in the United States is often in the hands of states rather than the Federal Government. California's water needs have often involved elaborate negotiations with other states like Colorado. But there is a role for the Federal Government in water-policy. The Federal Government could be more involved in the politics of water.

The Obama years in power coincided with expanding production of petroleum within the United States, and the discovery of petroleum in more African states. There has also been expanding fracking and production of natural gas in both the United States and Africa. The United States is expected to rival Saudi Arabia in oil production by 2020.

In contrast the Obama years have also coincided with fluctuations in supplies of water, partly because of trends in climate change. The range is from unexpected floods in one part of Africa (such as Southern Nigeria in 2012) to drought and drying rivers in Eastern Africa.

Since 2008 when Obama was elected United States president several African countries have become new oil producers or have expanded their production. These countries include Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania, Liberia, and the Republic of South Sudan.

Obama's expansion of oil and natural gas within the United States would not have helped these new sources of energy in Africa — except for the competition of the People's Republic of China. The Chinese are becoming major customers for Africa's resources, especially petroleum. China as the second largest economic power in the world, has developed a great appetite for fossil fuels from Africa and the Middle East. The Obama Administration could not ignore the rising economic power of China, especially its access to vital perishable resources across the world.

The political economy of Africa's petroleum is externally determined by the global market, including such major consumers as China, Europe and the United States. But the political economy of Africa's water supplies is primarily *domestic* rather than international.

The international phase of Africa's rivers and lakes was when Europeans were either exploring or conquering Africa. The struggle by John Hanning Speke to find the source of the Nile was historic. In 1858 Speke finally discovered the source near to today's town of Jinja in Uganda. The Nile as Africa's largest river emerged out of Africa's largest lake. The British explorer called this lake *Lake Victoria*.

Eventually Uganda and Kenya tapped Lake Victoria for hydroelectric power. By the twenty-first century about a dozen countries were recognized as



part of the Nile Basin — either as beneficiaries of the Nile or as contributors to the waters of the Nile.

Competition for the waters of the Nile have intensified in the Nile Basin as associated countries needed more irrigation and more electricity. Egypt's privileged position in the old Nile treaty, which went back to British imperial days, was unfair to Ethiopia. Unless a long term agreement is reached about sharing waters of the Nile, the situation could escalate into a war between Egypt and Ethiopia in the years ahead. Postcolonial Africa cannot afford such potential military rivalries over water.

The shores of Lake Victoria have not only produced electric power and irrigation. Those shores have also produced generations of Nilotic peoples. One son of Victoria Nyanza on the Kenyan side of the Lake was called Barack Hussein Obama, Sr. This son of the Lake went to America, got a degree and a wife. A child was born in 1961. He was named after his Nilotic Dad — Barack Hussein Obama (Junior). This child was destined to become the first Black President of the United States of America.

At the northern end of the Nile near the shores of the Mediterranean Africa produced Ramses II of ancient Egypt. At the southern end of the Nile near the shores of Lake Victoria Africa produced the father of the most powerful man of colour in world history — the younger Barack Hussein Obama.

Young Barack is already a great African American, but not yet a great President. Indeed, Barack Obama is a remarkable man for having broken the glass ceiling — and became the first Black Head of State of any White majority country.

The great Lake which produced this Nilotic progeny is still ridiculously named after a British Queen — Lake Victoria. The different countries bordering the lake may not easily agree on an alternative name drawn from their own heroes. But would they consider the name of this most illustrious grandson of Victoria Nyanza? Will Lake Victoria one day become *Lake Barack Obama*?

But Barack would have to earn such an honor in his years *after the presidency*. His name would be more relevant for the Lake than that of Queen Victoria — who never even saw Africa's largest lake.

#### **RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AND VOTING BEHAVIOR**

In our analysis we have now transitioned from Obama's credentials of *performance* to his credentials of *pledges*. The pursuit of affordable health and affordable education are pledges in the process of implementation. Also a pledge in the process of implementation is Obama's campaign promise of giving a tax cut of some kind to about 90 percent of the working population. Again beneficiaries of this pledge are bound to include millions of African Americans, as well as some of the six million Muslims who are United States' citizens.

In the elections of the year 2000 Muslim organizations in the United States preferred to reward George W. Bush for his Muslim-friendly *pledges* before Bush was elected than to reward Bill Clinton for his *Muslim-friendly performance* when in office as president.

In those elections of 2000 the question which had arisen was whether US Muslims should reward the outgoing Bill Clinton by voting for Al Gore — rather than invest in the unknown quantity of George W. Bush based on pledges? Bill Clinton had gone further than any other president in US history to give Islam some standing as an integral part of American society. But this was Clinton not as a Democrat but as a pro-Muslim policy initiator. He had started the process of going beyond the political convention of treating the United States as a Judeo-Christian community only. In personal behaviour such as adultery Clinton fell below Islamic standards of family values, but in official behaviour he was a particularly ecumenical President of the United States.

Under his watch, President Clinton recognized a major Islamic institution within the US — the fast of Ramadhan. He sent an open letter to believers wishing them a blessed fast. Under the Clinton watch, the White House for the first time ever celebrated Idd el Fitr to mark the end of Ramadhan at which the first lady recognized the increasing expansion of the Muslim community within the United States, entertained Muslim women at the White House, and wished Muslims well.

Under Clinton's watch, the United States decided to look the other way when the Islamic Republic of Iran was arming the Government of Bosnia in the face of an illegally-imposed arms embargo by the United Nations in spite of Serbian aggression. On the other hand, Clinton was slow to resort to force against Serbia, against Somalis, against the Hutus.

Under Clinton's watch the first Muslim chaplains of the US military were appointed — with the major participation of the American Muslim Council.<sup>1</sup> Under Clinton's watch Arab and Muslim Americans met with the President of the United States and discussed issues of Arab and Muslim concern. Under Clinton's watch Muslim representatives were received by Anthony Lake of the National Security Council and explored with him the implications of US policy towards Bosnia.

Indeed, under Clinton's watch enemies of Islam began to accuse the White House of extending hospitality to Hamas and socializing with mujahiddeen. Bill Clinton stuck his political neck out for Muslims of America. While in foreign policy Clinton was no less friendly to Israel than any other US president, in domestic policy he was more Muslim-friendly than any other president in the history of the United States. Clinton was much more active in trying to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict. Did Muslims repudiate Clinton by voting for the Republican George W. Bush in 2000?

To be or not to be politically active in a non-Muslim society. The burden of our analysis has been that US Muslims cannot afford to be politically neutral. They should be guided by existential credentials and performance — less by pledge. But they should reward the party which has helped them, and punish a party which betrays their interests. In the year 2000 Muslims did not reward the Democrats for a Muslim-friendly Clinton administration. The Muslims gambled on George W. Bush instead. They ignored Democratic performance and preferred Republican pledges. Muslim organizations endorsed George W. Bush and called upon their co-religionists to vote for the Republican candidate.

In the campaign of 2008 neither the Republicans nor the Democrats courted the Muslim vote overtly. On the contrary, the Obama campaign was sensitive to the erroneous charge that he was a closet Muslim. Muslims were particularly offended when Obama's organizers removed Muslim women wearing the *hijab*, from proximity to Barack Obama at a rally when a lot of cameras were targeting the candidate.

Muslims also complained that although Obama was prepared to be seen at Christian and Jewish places of worship, he very carefully avoided visiting a mosque during the campaign. After all, even President George W. Bush had visited a mosque.

Muslim defenders of Barack Obama felt that the choice before Muslim voters was between a Muslim-friendly candidate Barack Obama and a future

Muslim-friendly President Obama in the White House. The Muslim voters could not have both.

Obama had to avoid playing the Muslim card when he was campaigning. But with the first 100 days as President, Obama was saying that he had Muslim relatives. He had also raised the issue of US relations with the Muslim world to a high level of urgency.

He had pledged to end the war in Iraq. He had pledged to support the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state alongside Israel. He had pledged to combine military action in Afghanistan and Pakistan with considerable American resources for nation-building and economic development. Many of these pledges became explicit after Obama had been elected — rather than promises in his campaign. His performance on ending the Iraqi war has been partially successful; his performance on Afghanistan is disintegrating as a policy. He seems to have given up on Palestine two years ago.

### **CONCLUSION**

Barack Obama's existential assets of Africanity, Muslim ancestry and personal skills are potentially assets for his policies towards the Muslim world and for his impact upon the Black world. Barack Obama is likely to be more cautious in his policies towards the African continent to avoid the charge of ancestral bias and racial partisanship. But his election to the highest office of the most powerful

country in the world may have broken the glass ceiling in other white majority countries thousands of miles away from the shores of the United States.

When Princess Diana was dating Dodi Fayed, the son of an Egyptian millionaire, and a possible marriage between them was being rumoured, it seemed possible that a future King of England (Diana's son) could have a North African step-father. That scenario was ended by the car accident on a street in Paris which killed both Diana and her Egyptian boyfriend (1997). The election of Barack Obama to the US presidency in 2009 has opened up an even more compelling scenario — that a subsequent British monarch may be calling upon a Black person in the foreseeable future to form and head a government of the United Kingdom.

Diana had dangled the possibility of a British King having a North African step-father. Obama has opened up the near certainty of a Black Prime Minister of Great Britain before the end of the twenty-first century. Obama has set the precedent for the whole Western world. Amen.

## NOTES

1. Cited by John Mearsheimer, “The Lobby Falterers, *The London Review of Books*. (London, UK), March 26, 2009. John Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science, the University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Cited by John Mearsheimer, *ibid.*
4. See Eugene Victor Walter, *Terror and Resistance: A Study of Political Violence with Case Studies of Some Primitive African Communities* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1959 and 1972), pp. 109–110.
5. See David Vine, “The Costs of Empire: Can We Really Afford 1,000 Overseas Bases?”, *Foreign Policy in Focus* posted on the Web and printed on March 10, 2009.
6. The author of this paper was a panelist at one such meeting sponsored by the Institute of the Black World 21st Century and New York Avenue Presbyterian Church on April 24, 2009. Other panelists at the meeting included Congressman John Conyers.