

# The Popular Momentum that Propelled Obama into US Presidency

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The emphatic victory of Barack Obama in the US Presidential elections has generated a great deal of interest and enthusiasm, a veritable 'Obamania', across the world. There are indeed several special aspects to this remarkable victory. That he is the first black person to be elected to the highest political office in the US; that his campaign emphasised 'hope' and 'change' at a time when the US is passing through an extremely gloomy period in its history, and, above all, that his arrival marks the much-awaited end of the hated Bush Presidency, and a decisive popular rejection of its hallmarks, have all added up to make this probably the most memorable election in recent American history. For political observers watching this election from afar, the most encouraging aspect perhaps has been the passionate popular participation that made this election an energised extension of not only the fight against racism but also the wider anti-globalisation, anti-war campaign.

Liberal sociologists in India have already begun reducing Obama's victory to a sanitised sign of the 'greatness' of American democracy and the 'maturity' of the African-American community. But, racism in the US is not just a shocking memory of a cruel past; it is still very much a continuing social reality. For large sections of the American working class and the poor, race and class combine, reproducing conditions of systematic discrimination and deprivation. And the African-American community's sustained struggles against racism have shaped the polarisations of US politics over decades and centuries, from the Civil War through the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the radical Black Power movement in the 1970s and up until the present. If Obama's eloquent oratory tapped into the depth of an entire community's yearning for justice, the silent tears of Jesse Jackson, noted US civil rights campaigner and himself a Presidential hopeful of yesteryears, beamed live into television sets across the world, reflected the sense of vindication that Obama's victory has generated in millions of American hearts.

But what kind of change will Obama's Presidency bring to the US and its policies? The American ruling elite sees Obama as a political bailout package for the crisis-ridden establishment. Parallels are being drawn between Obama's promised platform of change and Roosevelt's New Deal that had rescued the American economy from the ravages of the Great Depression. Through his famous New Deal Roosevelt had translated the Keynesian doctrine of large-scale state intervention (socialisation of investment) into a policy paradigm and the whole thing got a boost from World War II and its outcome that favoured the US and its allies. However desperately the US may need another Rooseveltian rescue act, it is not easy for Obama to replicate that experience in the present juncture in which the US is faced with not only an unprecedented financial crisis but acute political and military challenges.

The early transitional signs emanating from Team Obama indicate more continuity than change in matters of both economic and foreign policies. The political team is dominated heavily by recycled Clinton era strategists while the 17 members of his Transitional Economic Advisory Board are drawn mostly from among top corporate bosses and financial barons. The choice of someone like Rahm Emanuel - a leading member of the rightwing Democratic Leadership Council and a known neo-liberal fundamentalist and pro-Israeli hawk - as the chief of staff can hardly be interpreted as a sign of any salutary change. Obama's foreign policy pronouncements have been replete with warnings

against Iran and Pakistan and his occasional suggestions of withdrawal of US troops from Iraq have been tempered by his emphases on sending fresh military reinforcements to Afghanistan. In the domestic domain, Obama and his managers have already begun to emphasise the need to lower expectations and temper hopes of bringing about the change promised all through his election campaign, notably signalling a slower pace for the reform of the healthcare system, which had been emblematic of the campaign's rejection of the callousness of neo-liberalism.

While in no way dismissing or underestimating the great importance of Obama's victory and the possibility contained in the present juncture, progressive forces in the US must keep up the popular momentum that has led to such an emphatic victory for Barack Obama with his promised platform of change. Obama must now be held accountable and the people must find ways to prevail over the well-entrenched forces and designs of corporate and imperialist betrayal. The same also holds for anti-imperialist forces in other parts of the world. Instead of losing our way in the spectacle of Obamania, we must all doggedly pursue our anti-imperialist and socialist agenda, grabbing with both hands the opportunities opened up by the present crisis and the end of the Bush era.

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