

"Obama's Victory - Fear and Hope"

The whole of the United States and indeed the whole world was watching, and almost all of it was cheering, the election of Barack Obama as the next president of the United States. Although, during the electoral campaign, everyone tried to play down the centrality of the racial issue, on Nov. 4 it seemed that no one could talk of anything else. There are three central questions about what most commentators are calling this "historic event": How important is it? What explains the victory? What is likely to happen now?

On the evening of November 4, an immense crowd assembled in Grant Park, Chicago, to hear Obama's acceptance speech. All those who were watching U.S. television saw the camera zoom in on Jesse Jackson, who was in tears. Those tears reflect the virtually unanimous view of all African-Americans, who regard Obama's election as the moment of their definitive integration into the U.S. electoral process. They do not believe that racism has disappeared. But a symbolic barrier has been crossed, first of all for them, and then for all the rest of us.

Their sentiment is quite parallel to the feelings of Africans in South Africa on April 27, 1994 when they voted to elect Nelson Mandela president of their country. It has not mattered that Mandela, as president, did not fulfill the whole promise of his party. It will not matter if Obama does not fulfill the whole promise of his campaign. In the United States, as in South Africa, a new day has dawned. Even if it is an imperfect day, it is a better day than before. The African-Americans, but also the Hispanics and the young people in general, voted for Obama out of hope - a diffuse hope, but a real one.

How did Obama win? He won the way anyone wins in a large, complex political situation. He put together a large coalition of many different political forces. In this case, the gamut ran from fairly far left to right of center. He would not have won without that enormous range of support. And, of course, now that he has won, all the different groups want him to govern as each prefers, which is of course not possible.

Who are these different elements, and why did they support him? On the left, even the far left, they voted for Obama because of deep anger about the damage the Bush regime inflicted on the United States and the world, and the genuine fear that McCain would have been no better, perhaps worse. On the center-right, independents and many Republicans voted for him most of all because they had become aghast at the ever-increasing dominance of the Christian right in Republican party politics, a sentiment that was underlined by the choice of Sarah Palin as the vice-presidential candidate. These people voted for Obama because they were afraid of McCain/Palin and because Obama convinced them that he was a solid and sensible pragmatist.

And in-between these two groups were the so-called Reagan Democrats, largely industrial workers, often Catholics, often racist, who had tended to desert their Democratic party roots in recent elections because they viewed the party as having moved too far left and disapproved of its positions on social questions. These voters moved back to the Democratic party not because their outlook had changed, but because of fear. They were deeply afraid of the economic depression into which the United States has moved, and thought that their only hope was in a new New Deal. They voted for the Democrats despite the fact that Obama was an African-American. Fear conquered racism.

And what will Obama do now? What can Obama do now? It is still too early to be sure. It seems clear that he will move quickly to take advantage of a crisis situation, as his new Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, put it. I suspect we shall see a dramatic set of initiatives in the traditional first 100 days. And some of what Obama does may be surprising.

Still, there are two situations, the two biggest, that are largely beyond his control - the transformed geopolitics of the world-system, and the catastrophic world economic situation. Yes, the world received Obama's victory with joy, but also with prudence. It is notable that two major centers of power issued statements on the geopolitical scene that were quite forthright. Both the European Union in a unanimous statement and President Lula of Brazil said they looked forward to renewing collaboration with the United States, but this time as equals, not as junior partners.

Obama will pull out of Iraq more or less as promised, if for no other reason than the fact that the Iraqi government will insist upon it. He will try to find a graceful exit from Afghanistan, which will not be too easy. But whether he will do something significant in relation to the Israel/Palestine deadlock and whether he can look forward to a more stable Pakistan is very unsure. And he will have less to say about it than he may think. Can Obama accept the fact that the United States is no longer the world's leader, merely a partner with other power centers? And, even if he can, can he somehow get the American people to accept this new reality?

As for the depression, it will no doubt have to play out its course. Obama, like all the other major leaders in the world, is a captain on a very stormy sea, and can do relatively little more than try to keep his ship from sinking altogether.

Where Obama has some leeway is in the internal U.S. situation. There are three things where he is expected to act and can act, if he is ready to be bold. One is job creation. This can only be done effectively in the short run through government action. And it would be best done by investing in reconstructing the degraded infrastructure of the United States, and in measures to reverse environmental decline.

The second is the establishment, at last, of a decent health care structure in the United States, in which everyone, without exception, will be covered, and in which there will be considerable emphasis on preventive medicine.

And the third area is in undoing all the damage that has been done to basic civil liberties in the United States by the Bush administration, but also by prior administrations. This requires an overhauling both of the Department of Justice and the legal and paralegal apparatus that has been constructed in the last eight, but also the last thirty, years.

If Obama acts decisively in these three arenas, then we might say that this was a truly historic election, one in which the change that occurred was more than symbolic. But if he fails here, the letdown will be momentous.

Many are trying to divert his attention into the arenas in which he cannot do much, and in which his best position would be that of a lower profile, the acceptance of new world reality. There is much about Obama's future actions to fear, and much that offers hope.

by Immanuel Wallerstein