THE DAILY STAR

Thursday, July 23, 2009

Rights at heart: The Obama phenomenon in world political discourse

By Jihad El-Zein

The speeches of the American President Barack Obama are turning into a world phenomenon as a new type of political language. In an address at the Democratic Convention which Senator John Kerry invited him to address in 2004, the politician Obama had already forced the whole Democratic Party to pay attention to him. His speeches continued to lead the news during his 2008 campaign, culminating in his historic speech on racism in America.

Not all of Obama's speeches are historic. His speech at the AIPAC convention in Washington fell well short of his usual standards, and came empty of any of the bright ideas we now expect from him. I believe this was because of the caution of his advisers in charting any novel territory, forcing him to self-censor before the Israeli lobby in Washington. A year and a half later, Obama's carefully crafted Cairo speech to address the Muslim world showed a lot of intellectual courage on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, also addressing a wide spectrum of topics which he had developed in his Ankara speech.

Irrespective of my professional attention to the study of speeches of powerful presidents around important events to draw political consequences from limited linguistic nuances, there has to my knowledge not been a series of lectures by an American (or other) president since John F. Kennedy which has been the focus of such sustained attention since his access to power. This is not only because of the speeches' content, but also because of the quality of the expression and its intellectual power. I did not follow as closely the speeches addressed to Obama's domestic audience since his taking residence in the White House, but I did peruse almost all of his speeches addressed outside or to the outside. Perhaps the domestic audience is more interested in his policies than in the rhetorical quality of his words. "We" in the rest of the world, from Europe to the Middle East, from Russia to Africa, anxiously await the new American direction of the White House leadership. The pressure of the economic crisis pressure on Americans, however, might not give them either the time or the "leisure" for observation, as they worriedly expect a change for the better against the dramatic worsening of the quality of their lives and the collapse of the United States' financial and industrial structures. This does not mean that the elites in government in the Middle East, or the people, do not want the Obama administration to hasten the decisive resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Here also, and in the Arab world in particular, "everyone" is trying yet again to warn the American "arbiter" not to underestimate the time factor in ruining serious chances for peace; if not, as has so often happened, in the dramatic collapse of the regional situation as a whole.

Here comes Barack Obama in a great lecture in Ghana, which is his first appearance on the black scene of the African continent, offering touching, deep and unexpected turns of phrase. In Obama's words in Accra, the sun was shining in full force on the pondered importance and suffering of Africa. He recounted to the Africans how in colonial Kenya the British insisted on calling his grandfather a "boy" even after he became an old man and a respected elder in his village. But while he denounced the artificial boundaries which the colonial era drew in Africa, he reminded his audience that the responsibility in the economic collapse, especially in recent years, fell on the national governments and not on the West. He gave the example of Zimbabwe, mentioning corruption, patronage and the dominance of self-interest as the key factors in the country's collapse. And he directly linked "failed states" in the Third World with such corruption in the early days of independence in Kenya and the forced emigration of his father. Obama made his the argument of political and economic historians in the past 20 years after historian Paul Kennedy's use in his "Preparing for the 21st Century," and reminded his audience that the individual income in some African countries at the beginning of the 1960s was higher than the individual income for a country like South Korea at the time. Where are South Korea and Kenya now? And while Obama described African personalities like Kwame Nkrumah and Jomo Kenyatta as "giants," "Africa's future is up to Africans," but "Africa doesn't need strongmen, it needs strong institutions."

Obama is an intellectual who knows the meaning of the words he uses. "We all have many identities," he said, reminiscing the visit to Ghana of the father of civil rights in Black America, Dr. Martin Luther King, upon Ghana's independence. He made us understand better the three reasons for his choice of Ghana as the first Sub-Saharan country he visited: its place as a major trade outpost for the export of black slaves to the Americas, its uniqueness as a relatively stable democracy in Africa, despite a reference he made to recent disputes over the elections, and the significance of the visit of Dr. King 52 years ago.

We might have to add to these reasons the discovery of oil reserves in the country. Every sentence that Obama uses carries multiple meanings: while insisting on the abandonment of exports reduced to a single product, he reminded his audience of the risk of a sole dominant economic product like oil turning into a new cacao: "From South Korea to Singapore, history shows that countries thrive when they invest in their people and infrastructure; when they promote multiple export industries, develop a skilled workforce, and create space for small and medium-sized businesses that create jobs."

In his use of vocabulary, Obama sometimes gives the impression of one essential meaning that he wants the listener to latch onto. "Progress may lack the drama of the 20th century's liberation struggles, but make no mistake: it will ultimately be more significant. For just as it is important to emerge from the control of another nation, it is even more important to build one's own."

As in his other foreign policy speeches, Obama does not avoid some self-criticism over the performance of the American government. On the American relation to Africa, he admits that the United States needs to be “more responsible in extending our hand … By cutting costs that go to Western consultants and administration, we will put more resources in the hands of those who need it.”

In his encouragement to create new markets, he stressed the need to modernize the countryside and not be content with developing the city. This is also in America’s self-interest, and “new markets will open for our own goods.”

I am not assessing here strategy and policies, I am speaking of a new format of political discourse in designing strategy and policies. Obama offers no doubt a new “spirit” representing a social and political phenomenon in American history, as the first black president, a spirit that brings a new parallel cultural depth, regardless of the longer-term consequences. No doubt something different is afoot.

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