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**President-Elect Obama: History, Challenges & Possibilities  
The African World  
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I found myself facing a peculiar choice. Because I was taking Election Day off to do election work, I could have submitted an absentee ballot. In fact, that would probably have been the most logical thing to do. It would have saved me a lot of time. I kept procrastinating in filing for such a ballot until it was too late.

On Election Day I realized why I did not file the absentee ballot. Like millions of other voters, and particularly African Americans, I had to physically touch the voting machine. In my case, it was a touch-screen computer, but it would not have mattered whether it was that or an old-style lever that I had to push. November 4, 2008 was a moment when I had to make physical contact with the voting machine and actually see my vote counted. I had to know that it was actually happening. And I needed to stand on line - in our case for 2 1/2 hours - with hundreds of other African Americans and wait patiently for a moment to influence history.

Irrespective of any reservations one might have regarding the proposed policies of President-elect Obama (yeah, I get a kick out of writing and saying "President-elect") there is no question but that the election victory had a profound emotional impact on Black America specifically, but this country generally. I can honestly say that I never expected to see a liberal Black person elected President of the USA, and I was not sure that a conservative Black person would be elected either. As the election returns were coming in, my stomach was tied up in knots unlike anything I have experienced since my daughter was born. I did not make predictions and I do not trust polls. More importantly, I did not trust the white electorate.

## What to make of the election?

In reviewing the stats from the election, the results are quite interesting. Obama won the popular vote by 52% compared with McCain's 46%. This is extremely significant and has not been replicated by a Democrat since Lyndon Johnson won the Presidency in 1964. Nevertheless, what it also shows is that the USA is quite divided. That 46% of the vote McCain won represented more than 55 million people. What is noteworthy is that while Obama won only 43% of the white vote, whites under the age of 30 backed him by a 66-32% margin. Latinos voted with Obama at a rate of 67% (an important increase over those who went with Kerry in 2004). Women voted with Obama at a rate of 55%, though he lost white women by 5% points (although this was better than Senator Kerry in 2004). It is also noteworthy that although Obama only received 45% of the veteran's vote, compared with McCain's 54%, this remains significant in light of the red-baiting and terrorist-baiting that was being targeted at him. Additionally, union voters went with Obama at 60% compared with McCain receiving 38%, a lower percentage than should have sided with Obama in light of the current economic crisis but that probably reflects racial divisions within the house of labor.

The election reflected several important concerns and tendencies:

- **The economy:** there is no question but that the economic crisis had a significant impact on the electorate. 63% of voters indicated that the economy was a priority issue. McCain was never successful in crafting a message on the economy that resonated with the public.
- **A concern about the perception of the USA overseas:** There was a sense among Obama supporters that there needed to be a change in the relationship of the USA to the rest of the world. This was, however, very unfocused.
- **A decline in the importance that voters attached to both the Iraq war and terrorism:** With regard to Iraq this probably reflects a growing sense that the Iraq war is coming to an end and that the Occupation is not a critical issue.
- **The next Supreme Court appointments:** For 47% of the electorate this was a critical issue. This was a hot-button issue with liberals and progressives who have been watching the Supreme Court make increasingly indefensible decisions that reflect its right-wing course.
- **Race matters...sort of:** Particularly among younger voters, race was a less significant factor in influencing voter behavior than among older voters. It is also apparently the case that the economic meltdown led many white voters to put racial concerns on the back burner. That said, the "racial neutrality" of the Obama campaign took matters of racist oppression largely off the table for any significant discussion, a fact that may return to haunt the incoming administration.

Without question, the Obama victory needs to be understood as a tribute to exceptionally good organization; the initial positioning of Obama as, at least in the primaries, an anti-war candidate; the onset of the economic crisis; the candidate's continuous message of optimism; and Obama's ability to remain cool under fire.

## Act II: Beginning right now

The implications of the Obama victory will need to be unpacked over the coming weeks and months. That said, there are a few points worth noting because they will have strategic implications:

**Obama's mandate is vague, yet identifiable:** the mandate he has received is to (1) address the economic crisis immediately in a manner that favors regular working people. This is evident from the polls and from plenty of anecdotal information. In addition, the mandate involves (2) changing the relationship of the USA to the rest of the world. This particular point is very unfocused but it is evident that the US voters are increasingly concerned about the perception of the USA overseas and what that means for matters of national security.

Most people were unfamiliar with the actual programmatic steps Obama is advocating on the economy, yet they were unwilling to be swayed by the red-baiting rhetoric of McCain/Palin. This may offer an opportunity for progressives to advance one or another variant of a redistributionist approach toward the crisis.

With regard to foreign policy, this is extremely complicated and quite troubling. While Obama has emphasized the need for negotiations as a first step in international relations, when confronted by forces to his Right, he has tended to back down and often suggest highly questionable military and crypto-military options in handling crises, e.g., unilateral attacks on Al Qaeda bases in Pakistan. Some people around Obama seem to be advocating a get-tough approach toward Iran, which itself could lead to hostilities. While the people of the USA, by and large, are not looking for more war, the ability of the political Right to manufacture the ever-present threat from right-wing Islamists (including but not limited to targeting Iran) has successfully promoted a climate of fear. This will, more than likely, be a weak point for the President-elect and a place where pressure must be placed by anti-war forces.

**The world is expecting a great deal from an Obama administration:** All corners of the Earth erupted in glee upon news of the Obama victory. Obama will more than likely reach out to traditional US allies in order to repair the damage done by the eight years of the Bush administration. There will more than likely be outreach to Africa, though the character of that outreach is as yet to be determined. Obama, while Senator, expressed a great deal of interest and concern with Africa, and developed legislation focusing on the on-going crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He will probably try to alter the relationship of the US to Africa, though it is not entirely clear thorough how such an alteration will be. One should expect outreach to the African Union to offer support in cases of humanitarian disasters and crises, but unless Obama is prepared to break with the whole "war against terrorism framework" there may be continued militarization of the continent (through vehicles such as AFRICOM and the Trans-Sahel Military Initiative).

**Progressives will need to perfect an approach of "critical support" towards the Obama administration:** The corporate backers of President-elect Obama have no interest in a transformative agenda. They are interested in stabilizing capitalism generally, but especially stabilizing the financial sector. They are open to selective nationalizations as long as such nationalizations do not bring with them significant popular accountability. In light of this, progressive forces will need to be organized in such a way as to mount a challenge from the left side of the aisle. President Obama will

need to be pushed on many areas, including foreign policy; healthcare; housing; jobs; and in general, the need for a pro-people approach to addressing the economic crisis. Taking this approach of *critical support* means, tactically, pointing out what has NOT been accomplished in the Obama agenda on the one hand, and, on the other, challenging the new Administration when it advances policies that are regressive, e.g., threatening Iran or Cuba and compromising with the insurance companies on healthcare.

Critical support also means raising issues that the Obama administration may tend to shy away from or avoid altogether, such as race/racism. Race is fused into the US system. Racist oppression and the differential in treatment between people of color and whites remains a major part of the US reality. For that reason, progressives must push the Obama administration to address the continuing impact of racist oppression. This may lead to clashes that at one and the same time appear to be tactical, i.e., matters of timing, but are actually quite fundamental, i.e., about whether there needs to be a systemic challenge to racist oppression.

None of this happens in the absence of organization. Those who rallied to the Obama campaign came from various political tendencies and experiences, and many of them will seek to return to their "everyday life." At the same time, there are those who mobilized that are looking to be part of implementing the "dream" and they will be unable to do this as individuals operating alone. If one really wants to advance an approach of critical support for the incoming Administration, it will mean creating the grassroots organizational structures around the country that are capable of educating and mobilizing the millions of people who are seeking a new direction. This approach, what I have described elsewhere as a *neo-Rainbow* approach, can be used to exert pressure to ensure that the incoming Obama administration lives up to its full potential.

So many of us cried with joy and amazement on the evening of November 4th with this historic breakthrough. Our excitement cannot rest with the electoral success but must be fused with a genuine effort to create a new politics.

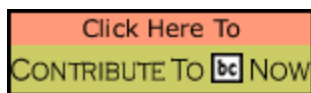
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