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Towards a Social Justice Electoral Strategy: Really, Bob?

**Nafsi ya Jamii
By Wilson Riles
BC Columnist**

About six months ago, my friend, Bob Wingⁱ wrote a missive to a selected list (as far as I know) arguing that progressives (the left) should whole heartedly participate in the electoral process from within the Democrat Party. He pointedly invited comment; at the time I reviewed it but waited to see what others had to say. I like Bob Wing. I not only consider him to be a friend but also appreciate his political history, deep thought and progressive intentions. We have a number of friends in common and both worked on the 1988 Jesse Jackson presidential Rainbow Coalition campaign. However, I have serious concerns with what he is recommending and I have no hesitation about stating them even in the face of a potential Mitt Romney presidency.

Bob articulated very well the progressive insurgent Democrat 'call to arms.' He is addressing The Split in the Left ranks in regards to participation with the Democrat Party and a "social justice electoral strategy." Wing's thoughts and positions will attract many progressives, young and old, into the 2012 elections. His intent, though, seems to be to invite us into a more protracted struggle within the Democrat Party "for the soul of the Party." My friend represents the current crest of a moving wave of progressive activism that has waxed and waned for many, many years.

The lack of a coherent and straight forward response to Bob's words after six months dooms the possibility of bridging The Split and dampens even more the huge potential for moving to a place of

greater progressive success electorally **and** otherwise in the U.S. at every level. A carefully crafted response is called for. I will attempt a bit of that here without repeating Wing's words for the sake of space. Bob's missive can be found at organizingupgrade.com. These words are my effort to engage with my friend and the progressive community to bring us to a place of deeper understanding, mutual appreciation, and maybe collective action. You will get a good sense of what he said from the topics I address.

First of all, Bob attributes too much coherence and agency to the "rightwing." He does not give enough weight to the splits, disorganization, and serendipity that are part of the political history on The Right and The Left. He, like too many of us, is envious of some **supposed** rise of power on The Right and – like folks caught in a Stockholm Syndrome – wants to copy their strategies and behaviors. This misguided thinking is a result of a false unconscious meme at the root of Western Culture: mainly that '*individuals make history rather than history making individuals.*' Some of us attribute consciousness and agency to cabals on The Right that direct the sheep-like thinking and responses of large numbers of people. This false belief fits well with the capitalist conceptions that overemphasize individualism and authoritarianism. It ignores the systemic influences of culture, individual circumstances, natural altruism, and contemporary conceptual framing. In other words, that kind of thinking ignores the power of community.

A reframing and deeper analysis of the question of why Republicans took the House of Representatives in 2010 would illuminate that it was not because they were better organized, more loyal to that **all-over-the-map** shifting landscape of policies called Republicanism, nor because of anti-gay rights initiatives on state ballots, nor because of better grassroots organizing. Bob, like many others, romanticizes specific past activists of the Black community and other marginalized communities. The way that Western culture does History is through an emphasis on individuals; ***A Peoples' History of the United States*** was a unique, important, and effective counterview of History. It detailed the deep currents and flow of US political thought and activity. There are historical and structural phenomena in US politics that are cyclical and predictable regardless of the specific individuals or specific groups involved.

What is progressive? Progressive-ism needs to be more clearly defined. It is not about changing – or occupying – the 'seats' of power with different individuals. Personal power needs to be separately

considered from a progressive systemic change. I was happy to see that Bob recognized Jesse "Jackson's own political shortcomings;" that is the beginning of deeper thinking. After all, how much difference would it have made if Jesse Jackson had been the Democrat's nominee or if he had been elected President in 1988? Barack Obama's election forces us to downgrade our hopes and expectations for this individual achievement. The systemic change of maintaining a Rainbow Coalition **distinct** from the Democrat Party would have meant much more! The big tragedy of that election was not Jackson's loss but was Jackson's decision to dismantle the Rainbow probably after a deal to gain seats on the Democrat National Committee. Those individual seats have resulted in almost no progressive gains within that Party. That is why Bob must make his appeal today.

Another thing...Bob looks at power largely from a Washington D.C. perspective. This is wrong. Local, state, and national are all a systemic piece but the place where fundamental, **sustainable** change has always come from is the local. Wing talks about national to local and local to national. I put a greater emphasis on local because the state and national arenas are more corrupted and more rigged to maintain the status quo. Progressives' priority must always be the increased empowerment of the base.

He also is calling for more unity on an operational level than I think is possible or needed. There needs to be more mutual understanding, solidarity, values clarification, and inclusive visioning rather than the expectation that we are going to move as a coordinated army. Ugh! I contend that we misperceive The Right if that is what we think is the source of 'success' on that 'side.' Bob does not look deeply enough at why things happened in the past as they did. He gives too much weight to joint corporate coordinated action and does not recognize the cultural, systemic, framing and "world view" underpinnings of why people and institutions take the actions they do. Deepening this understanding **does** change how people and institutions act without DEAFEATING them or DOMINATING them. In fact, long term, sustainable change happens in between election battles not at election battles. The defeated simply wait for the next election time to defeat back if there is no work done reframing and finding common ground between elections. So the struggle is about the "hearts and minds of the public" and about the consensus-derived systemic changes that institutionalize authentic longings of hearts and minds of community.

I think that Bob is right about working together to change political structures. We must change the way elections are funded, winner-

take-all systems, and the Electoral College. That work does not require us to join the Democrat Party. Neither does he analyze the past failures of progressive Democrats to change the Democrat Party. Progressive Democrats, Greens, and other progressives might join together in and support of such changes. But, my friend is soft on the Democrat Party member's and labor member's entanglements and efforts to maintain the current system. Much of the top leadership of the Democrat Party would consider such changes a threat.

Progressives backing the same candidates together will probably not happen again – any time soon. We should not invest too much strategizing, hope, or expectations in individuals in seats-of-power. And Bob seems to ignore the futility of focusing on changing the Democrat Party Platforms; it is largely ignored. He puts non-electoral organizing – like too many of us do – on a back burner. Progressive activism is not just about winning elections is it? What do you think?

Note: Bob Wing has been involved in social justice organizing since 1968 with a strong emphasis on antiracist and antiwar work. He was previously founding editor of [ColorLines](#). He is the Program Director of [Pushback Network](#).

For Mr. Riles, the following is an explanation of the meaning of the Swahili term "Nafsi ya Jamii":

Nafsi ya Jamii is the Swahili phrase that translates in English to "The Soul Community". Real community is the next phase in the process of seeking individual justice through social change. To be guided by the words of Howard Thurman: "Don't ask what the world needs; ask what makes you come alive, and go do that. What the world needs is people who have come alive." Maintain a Seven Generations perspective in all that is done; honoring the generations who've come before and mindful that our actions will have an impact for the generations who come after. Additionally, recognize that all of us are cultural beings; we include deep cultural understanding and experience in all that is done.

BlackCommentator.com Columnist, *Wilson Riles*, is a former Oakland, CA City Council Member. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Riles.



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