

Obama : what he means to us
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Barack Obama is now the president-elect of the United States after running a long and gruel race, firstly by defeating Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primaries and then defeating John McCain in the presidential elections.

That this presidential race was historically monumental cannot be questioned. The United States would have either voted for its first black president or its first woman vice-president. This presidential race has received unprecedented public attention not just among the American public but also from the rest of the world.

That most Malaysians were supporting Obama is not surprising. But given Obama's diverse and colourful background, it is also not surprising that different Malaysians were supporting Obama for different reasons.

It is also very probable that many Malaysians select aspects of Obama's story which they can relate with and 'tune out' those aspects which they might not necessarily agree with. This prompts the question, on my part at least, of what lessons from Obama's candidacy and campaign Malaysians have selectively learnt from and what this may mean for politics in our country moving forward.

It is likely that most Malaysians supported Obama at least partly because they were sick and tired of the 'bullying' and seemingly arrogant way in which George W Bush conducted his foreign policy. But it is also likely that many Malay Malaysians were especially angered by Bush's wars on terror in Afghanistan and Iraq which were linked, psychologically at least, to a larger war against Islam.

Barack, with his middle name of Hussein, his Muslim Kenyan father, his Indonesian step-father and part of his childhood spent in Jakarta, would surely offer a foreign policy that would be friendlier to Muslims countries around the world, certainly compared to Bush, and probably compared to John McCain.

For non-Malay Malaysians, their support for Obama was largely influenced by the thought that a minority can rise to the position of the highest office in the land in the most powerful country in the world, perhaps hoping for a parallel in our own country. For some, more well-informed Chinese Malaysians, they might have been encouraged by the fact that Obama's sister-in-law is married to a Chinese Canadian, whose parents were originally from Malaysia.

We see what we want to see

But both sides miss important aspects of Obama's candidacy and campaign which may clash with their particular worldviews.

It is probable that many Malays who celebrate Obama's victory over his white opponent and who are hopeful for a more accommodating foreign policy towards Muslims countries would not even entertain the possibility of a non-Malay becoming the prime minister of Malaysia (or perhaps the chancellor of a public university or the head of a state-owned or

government-linked company).

It is also probable that many Malays conveniently ignore the fact that Obama has made a firm commitment to the defense of Israel and its policies including supporting the indivisibility of Jerusalem, a position which even the Israelis themselves are willing to put on the negotiating table. (Also conveniently forgotten is the fact that under certain theological interpretations, Obama is effectively an apostate).

At the same time, non-Malays who are hoping that Malaysia can move towards a similar path of having a minority prime minister conveniently ignore the fact that Obama has much more in common with the 'majority' in the United States than the minorities in Malaysia.

It is very doubtful that Obama would have gotten as far as he has gotten if he were a Muslim instead of a Christian or if he came across as speaking from the perspective of his race instead of his more inclusive language or if he did not have the experience of growing up in with his white grandparents and his white mother.

The Malaysian equivalent of Obama would be a Chinese Muslim who is fluent in BM, grew up with adopted Malay parents in Kelantan, got his undergraduate degree from a Malaysian public university and then went on to get his Masters from Oxford or Cambridge.

Those who have tracked Obama's campaign from the beginning could not help but notice that Obama stayed purposefully away from issues of race. Again, the equivalent of this in Malaysia is for a non-Malay leader of a major party in Malaysia not to bring up the issue of the NEP if his or her party has aspirations to be the leading party of the governing coalition.

By projecting their own aspirations onto Obama, Malaysians of different races may be in danger of conflating their expectations of the impact of an Obama presidency and what it means for Malaysia.

Lessons for Malaysia

This is not to say that the Obama campaign does not hold valuable lessons for Malaysians and for Malaysian politics. There are ideals espoused in this campaign which Malaysia can realistically aspire to.

Firstly, while Obama's racial identity was of historical importance, it was not featured in the rhetoric and arguments put forth by both sides. Political norms in the United States have matured to a level where explicit race-baiting is no longer an acceptable means of campaigning.

Trent Lott, a former Mississippi senator, had to resign from his position as the Senate majority leader after making remarks which seemed to praise the racially exclusivist position of Strom Thurmond, a former senator noted for his segregationist and racist views.

It is likely that McCain would not have survived his political campaign if he had made explicitly racist sentiments against Obama or ethnic minorities in the US. It is noteworthy that McCain purposefully stayed away from bringing up the issue of Jeremiah Wright, Obama's former pastor who gained controversy by making many 'anti-American' statements from the pulpit.

But this kind of racial rhetoric can be found in healthy doses in Malaysian politics. It is still

politically acceptable for certain groups in Malaysia to question the citizenship of minorities or to publicly use phrases and words which are deemed offensive on the part of minorities in the country.

It would do the country much good if political parties could move away from the racist rhetoric and to debate the policy differences based on more substantive grounds. Of course, one can argue that one man's supposedly racist rhetoric can often be interpreted as legitimate on the grounds of free speech or political rhetoric. But there needs to be differentiation in the content of these speeches.

For example, it should be politically unacceptable to say that 'All Malays or Chinese or Indians are XXX' (insert preferred derogatory term) in a public setting but one should be able to legitimately question whether the NEP is enshrined within the constitution or to what extent does Islam being the religion of the country imply that Malaysia is an Islamic state or if Chinese or Tamil schools are detrimental for national unity.

The second aspect of the Obama campaign which may realistically come to fruition in Malaysia is how he managed to build a broad-based coalition of seemingly different groups based on an ideal of how a nation (or part of a nation) can come together to effect genuine change in that country. Obama mobilised and inspired young voters like few US politicians could ever hope to achieve. He drew in ethnic minorities and more educated white, middle-class voters into his 'big tent'.

One may argue that Malaysian politics already had this kind of broad-based coalition in the form of BN. And indeed, for many years, the BN has managed to deliver stability and economic growth for all Malaysians. But for many of these years, the BN has managed the country partly by playing on the fears of Malaysians, that there would be ethnic strife and economic instability if the BN was not in charge. Obama, on the other hand, built his broad-based coalition on the ideals of hope and change for a better future.

A local equivalent to Obama?

While the equivalent of an Obama has yet to make an appearance on the public stage in Malaysia, there are a few politicians out there who are genuinely trying to appeal to possible higher aspirations in the country where our racial identities can be somewhat transcended and a better and more hopeful country can be built on principles of equality, justice and mutual respect.

For all his shortcomings, Anwar Ibrahim is probably the politician who has pushed the barriers furthest in terms of giving Malaysians a glimpse of future possibilities rather than being mired in the current model of racial 'tolerance' and grudging respect which currently exists in the polity.

Anwar, since 1999, has been refashioning a new coalition of sorts under PKR as well as under the larger umbrella of Pakatan Rakyat, by appealing to all Malaysians who are sick of the manner in which power has been abused, corruption tolerated and human rights trampled under the governing party.

His coalition of non-Malays, urban Malays, many of them middle-class and yearning for a post racial vision for the country, was partly responsible for PKR's astounding electoral performance in the March elections.

Another Malay politician who has been making similar strides in the direction of redefining political rhetoric is Zaid Ibrahim who, despite being an Umno leader in a state which is more than 90 percent Malay, has been much more vocal in his writings and his public remarks, compared to his other Umno colleagues from more ethnically heterogeneous states, in expressing the need for a new kind of politics in Malaysia.

That he would step down from his position as a minister in the cabinet partly because of his principled stance against the Internal Security Act, prompted by the decision to arrest a senior Chinese DAP leader, Teresa Kok, under the ISA, is certainly laudable and perhaps gives us a glimpse of what Malaysia can look like in the future.

Ironically, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi could have been the PM that had the genuine support and affection of Malaysians across the board if he had only implemented some of the many promises he made just before his historic electoral victory in 2004.

Malaysia is not the United States, in so many ways. But this doesn't mean that Malaysians cannot or should not aspire to have the same kinds of ideals expressed in the Obama campaign that was partly rooted in the aspirations of the foundation fathers of America. The vision of America as a place where every child, regardless of race or religion, can aspire to the highest office in the land is surely one which we can all support.

Perhaps after many years of the 'same old politics', it is time for Malaysia to work towards a 'change we can believe in'. If this were to happen, it would affect Malaysians of all races and religions in many more ways than Obama's candidacy and campaign.

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