

Reality behind the Obama victory
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Barack Hussein Obama's victory in the US presidential election has unleashed long-anticipated celebrations, in America and around the world, of the end of the neo-con era.

It is all the more special, in the eyes of many, by the fact that it is marked also by the election of America's first black president.

It is depressing to see how many Muslims, in America and elsewhere, have uncritically joined the celebrations with little sense of just how hollow these may be.

Eight years ago, a lot of American Muslims actively campaigned for George W Bush (right), and celebrated his victory over Al Gore, on the basis that Bush could not possibly be worse than Bill Clinton (left), then regarded as the most anti-Muslim and pro-Israel president ever.

Most have long since repented their misjudgement and prefer not to be reminded of it, understandably enough. It may not be long before Obama's Muslim supporters find themselves feeling similarly silly.

For all Obama's promises of change, we actually know very little of what to expect from him. In truth, Obama ran on little more than vague promises; after eight years of Bush and Dick Cheney, there was little doubt that this would be enough.

In the last few days of the campaign, commentators were looking at Obama's lead in the polls and saying that it would take something truly remarkable for him to lose the race.

In truth, that has been the situation since at least the mid-term elections at the end of 2006. The results of those elections confirmed the US rejection of the neo-cons, and the drama of the fight for the Democratic nomination was intensified by the knowledge that the winner was virtually a shoo-in for the White House.

John McCain's selection as Republican candidate, with his maverick reputation, was acknowledgment from their side that no mainstream Republican could hope to be elected.

If the Bush legacy alone had not been enough to guarantee a Democratic victory, a number of other factors played into Obama's hands. The selection of McCain meant that even the Republicans' core support could not be taken for granted; traditional conservatives and the religious right were both highly suspicious of him.

This contributed to McCain selecting a running mate who pleased those constituencies but effectively cancelled out his possible appeal to non-Republicans, as well as proving an electoral liability in every other sense.

And to top it all, the economic crisis in the last couple of months of the campaign (even without McCain's gaffe about the fundamental stability of the US economy while Lehman Brothers were folding) made the election primarily about the issue on which the Republicans were weakest and Obama least weak.

Not 'truly' black

Much has been made of the fact Obama will be the US's first black president. In truth, given the above advantages, it would have taken a lot more than the colour of Obama's skin to prevent him strolling through the door held open for him by the Republicans; especially as he is not particularly black in any case.

By that, I do not mean that his mother was white, but that he is not a typical African-American, of slave stock, who has risen out of the ghettos and come through the typical African-American experience, to rise to the top of the politics.

Men like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton based their political standing on their black community roots and were always resented for it in mainstream politics. Obama, like the Republicans Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell, and the golfer Tiger Woods for that matter, owes little or nothing to America's black history, experience and culture; and so, for white America, can be treated as virtually one of them.

For the American political establishment, he is the modern equivalent of what used in colonial times to be called an "educated native"; or what in apartheid South Africa used to be called an "honorary white".

This is how he has risen to the top of a system that, like any political system, acts as a series of filters to block out anything different, dangerous or challenging. His record in politics is of a man of image not substance - a performer rather than a man of action.

As such, he is perfect to be the public face of the political establishment that really runs the US, and that transcends the political spectrum of right to centre-right represented by the Republican and Democratic parties.

barack obama president of the united states of america When Obama takes office, and actually has to act rather than simply perform, the only real changes we are likely to see will be those forced on the establishment by the disasters of the last few years.

And the fact that Obama is so obviously the anti-Bush, in the eyes of both Americans and the world, means that even those changes will not need to be as great as would otherwise have been necessary to be credible. The image of change that Obama represents is likely to prove the perfect cover for actually getting away with changing very little indeed.

It is unlikely that only Muslim expectations will be disappointed in the years to come. Clinton used once to be called the first black president; and in many ways he was probably more rooted in black America than Obama is.

In years to come, Obama will probably be seen - by a lot of Americans, not just black ones - as just another mainstream, establishment American politician, albeit a slightly, superficially, insignificantly off-white one.