



US Foreign Policy under President Barack Obama and the Promotion of Multilateralism and the Rule of Law

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Abstract

Five years ago, in November 2008, Barack Hussein Obama was elected the 44th US president. Senator Obama's campaign message had been 'change', 'change we need', and 'change we should believe in'. In this post-Cold War era, the US is the only remaining superpower and the American president the world's most influential leader. Accordingly, despite the fact that non-Americans do not participate in an American presidential election, they are nevertheless interested in its outcome given the leading role that the US plays in shaping international relations, for better or worse. This article does not explore US politics. Nor does it revisit the political economy of imperialism let alone the dependency discourse. It rather reflects on American foreign policy against the background of the promises that Senator Obama made in his book, *The Audacity of Hope* and later during the campaign. It is based on the hopes that his election raised in the 'world beyond the American borders' and aims to pave the way for a critical but fair assessment of US foreign policy under President Obama.

Résumé

Il y a plus de quatre ans, en novembre 2008, Barack Hussein Obama a été élu comme 44^e président des États-Unis d'Amérique. Le slogan de la campagne du sénateur Obama était le « changement », « nous avons besoin de changement », « nous devons croire au changement ». En cette ère post-guerre froide, les États-Unis d'Amérique restent la seule superpuissance et le président américain le dirigeant le plus influent au monde. Ainsi, bien qu'ils ne participent pas à l'élection présidentielle américaine les non-Américains sont néanmoins intéressés par le résultat de cette élection compte tenu du rôle de premier plan que les États-Unis d'Amérique jouent dans les relations internationales, pour le meilleur ou pour le pire. Cet article n'examine pas la politique américaine. Il ne revisite pas non plus l'économie politique de l'impérialisme, encore moins le discours de dépendance. C'est plutôt une réflexion sur la politique étrangère américaine par rapport aux promesses que le sénateur Obama a faites dans son ouvrage *The Audacity of Hope* et plus tard au cours de sa campagne. Il se fonde sur les

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espoirs suscités par son élection dans le « monde au-delà des frontières américaines » et vise à ouvrir la voie à une évaluation critique mais juste de la politique étrangère américaine sous le président Obama.

Introduction

'Change' was Barack Obama's campaign slogan during the US 2008 presidential election. The American people finally endorsed his message of change when they elected him their 44th President.

Senator Barack Obama took the 'Gospel of change' to the rest of the world, especially to Asia and Europe which he visited briefly before the 2008 election but the message was heard in the remaining parts of the world, including Africa where Barack Obama's father was born.

The people and leaders of the rest of the world expected that unlike under his predecessors, the US under President Obama's administration would avoid unilateralism and abide by international law in conducting its international relations. This would require working through international organisations instead of undermining them when they did not seem to serve US interests. The Obama Administration was also expected to privilege dialogue and peace over war and militarism, invest more in the development of the poorest nations, and contribute to giving a human face to the monster of globalisation that mainly worked for the developed countries and their companies while increasing the number of its victims among the underdeveloped nations and their peoples. Expectations in Africa were even higher than in any other part of the world given its close ties to the US African American president whom some Africans considered a 'son of Africa'. African people expected 'change' in the US African policy and hoped even against all hope that Africa would be given a pride of place in US foreign policy under President Obama.

In this post-Cold War era, the US is the only remaining superpower and the American president the world's most influential leader. Accordingly, despite the fact that non-Americans do not participate in an American presidential election, they are nevertheless interested in its outcome given the leading role that the US plays in shaping international relations, for better or worse.

This article does not deal with the US domestic policy under President Barack Obama. It rather reflects on the American foreign policy against the background of the promises that Senator Obama made in his famous book, *The Audacity of Hope* (Obama 2008) and later during the campaign. It is based on the hopes that his election raised in the 'world beyond the American borders' (Obama 2008: 320-382) which is revisited. It stresses some principles that were expected to drive 'change' and be promoted in US foreign

policy under Obama's presidency, namely multipartyism, international rule of law, dialogue, peace and development. Senator Obama had also been critical of globalisation and advocated 'change' in US-African policy. The article aims to pave the way for a fair assessment of US foreign policy under President Obama.

Barack Obama's 'World beyond the American Borders'

Politically, economically and ideologically, the tendency of different American administrations over the past decades, especially after the Second World War, has been to push the American borders as far as possible with a view to extending the American Empire.

To assess US foreign policy under President Obama, it is critically important to understand the 'world beyond the American borders', where it begins and ends and how to mark out this world which consists of states, non-state entities, organisations and even individuals (Mangu 2011: 153-157).

Although it was not named, Israel, America's closest ally, which is to be protected by all means and at any times, and whose policy should never be condemned officially, is seen as 'part of America' in the minds of millions of American citizens. Accordingly, Israel can be excluded from the 'world beyond the American borders'.

Indonesia was the first country that Barack Obama named as part of the 'world beyond the American borders' (Obama 2008: 320-330, 375-376, 380-382). Barack Obama used this country as a 'metaphor' for the world beyond the American borders, 'a world in which globalisation and sectarianism, poverty and plenty, modernity and antiquity constantly collide' (Obama 2008: 330). The Indonesian people therefore expected the US to get involved in more development activities than in the military ones in their country, in both public and private relief aid, as the Americans did after the Tsunami that affected the region (Obama 2008: 376). Indonesia is one of the biggest Muslim countries.

In his inaugural address, President Barack Obama referred to America as 'a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews, and Hindus – and non-believers' (Obama 2009). Born of a Muslim father and having spent part of his life outside the US in Indonesia, Obama is certainly the US president who was supposed to be the closest to the Muslim world. He could better understand the Muslims and show greater respect for them. Change in this area also required a divorce from George W. Bush's policies after 9/11 that contributed to alienating millions in the Arab and Muslim world rather than approaching them by labelling them 'terrorists'.

President Barack Obama promised the Muslim world that America would 'seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect' (Obama 2009).

After Indonesia, Iraq is the country that attracted more attention from Senator Obama. Until recently, there were more US troops in Iraq than in any other country in post-Cold War history. Iraq had been invaded under Bush's administration. Most Americans were opposed to the continuation of war in Iraq. Senator Obama opposed war in Iraq as 'a dumb war, a rash war, a war based not on reason but on passion, not on principle but on politics' (Obama 2008: 348). His earlier opposition to this unpopular war was one of the first arguments that Senator Obama provided as evidence of his leadership in foreign policy against McCain who had reportedly voted for Bush more than 80 percent of the time and supported his foreign policy in the Senate. Senator Obama first visited Iraq in January 2006, almost five years after 9/11. What the Iraqi people expected from the Obama's administration was the fulfilment of his electoral promise to withdraw American troops within 10 to 16 months and to contribute to reconstruction and national reconciliation in this country. Having been part of the problem for their unilateral invasion of Iraq in violation of international law for bypassing the UN, the US had to be part of the solution to Iraqi problems.

After the elimination of Saddam Hussein, Americans were expected to keep on providing development assistance to Iraq and reconcile with the majority of the Iraqi people who opposed war against Iraq despite being also opposed to Saddam Hussein, himself a former US ally in his war against Iran. Iraq and Afghanistan were also the only foreign countries that President Obama called by names in his inaugural address delivered on 20 January 2009 and in his first State of the Union Address a month later. They were also singled out among the beneficiaries of Obama's Stimulus Plan.

The 'world beyond the American borders' included Indonesia, Iraq, and Afghanistan (and its Taliban) (Obama 2008: 347, 362, 364, 368, 378). It included the Balkans (Obama 2008: 366, 378), North Korea (Obama 2008: 357, 373), Brazil (Obama 2008: 375-376), Burma, Bosnia, and Sudan (Darfur) (Obama 2008: 357, 378, 380), China (Obama 2008: 360, 362, 363, 377, 380), Russia, India (Obama 2008: 362, 368, 371, 377), Ukraine (Obama 2008: 368-371), Venezuela (Obama 2008: 372), Kenya (Obama 2008: 373, 378), South Korea, Cuba (Obama 2008: 373-374), Poland (Obama 2008: 374), Kenya (Nairobi) (Obama 2008: 65-66, 242, 373, 375, 378, 380), Iran (Teheran) (Obama 2008: 375, 380), Nigeria (Obama 2008: 377), Somalia, Sierra Leone and the Congo (Obama 2008: 377), Uganda (Obama

2008: 377), Rwanda (Obama 2008: 377), Mozambique (Obama 2008: 377), US Allies (Obama 2008: 378-379), South Africa (Obama 2008: 341, 374), and Zimbabwe (Obama 2008: 378).

Groups and people like the Taliban, Osama Bin Laden, his Al Qaeda and allies were also considered part of the 'world beyond the American borders' (Obama 2008: 363-381). Apart from these entities and groups that were expected to be taken care of, the US under President Obama had also to improve its relations with other African, Asian, East European, and American countries, including Cuba, North Korea, and Iran that the Bush administration considered part of the 'Axis of Evil'. And yet, the US proved to be 'part of the Evil' through its constant violations of international law and use of force. On the other hand, US foreign policy could not neglect traditional allies in Europe, America, Asia, Africa and those in the islands of the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific oceans who also expected to benefit from change in US foreign policy under Barack Obama who promised that his administration would be more respectful of international law and favour a multilateral approach in dealing with the major problems affecting our contemporary world.

Multilateralism and Respect for International Law in US Foreign Policy

The maintenance of international peace and security as the major objective of the United Nations (Article 1 (1) of the UN Charter) requires the people of the world to work together. No single country, no matter how powerful it may be, can achieve this purpose alone. As President Obama stressed in his first state of the union address, 'America cannot meet the threats of this century alone, but the world cannot meet them without America' (Obama 2009). On the other hand, good leadership in international affairs is a leadership that is collective and respectful of international law rules and principles.

In recent years, the US was tempted to act unilaterally and used its position as the world's sole superpower to bypass international organisations when they did not endorse its foreign policy, obey its instructions or ratify Washington's decisions. In the process, the US probably succeeded in inflicting more damage to international law than any other world nation.

The Americans have been several times out of their borders in arms to destroy their real or supposed enemies or to silence them. One may remember the hard choice that the rest of the world was required to make with regard to the American-led 'war on terror'. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York, former President George W. Bush called for a 'coalition of the willing' and asked nations to choose whether they were with or against the US. Yet, the US cannot take advantage of its relative prosperity and might to enslave the rest of the world or subject it to new forms of

imperialism. On the other hand, the US cannot stand alone and isolate itself from the rest of the world. The opposite of isolationism is not unilateralism, but multilateralism. The outcome of unilateral diplomacy has been failure or mixed success. The fact of being the only remaining world superpower is no excuse to bypass the rest of the world and shun international organisations to act unilaterally. Nor is it a guarantee that actions so unilaterally conducted will be successful.

The ‘Change’ that Barack Obama promised in US foreign policy required the US to abandon its unilateralist tendency and engage in multilateral diplomacy to address the world’s problems in a more successful and comprehensive manner (Mangu 2011: 157-166). Barack Obama committed himself to promoting multilateralism by working together with the leaders of other nations to change the world for the better and the rest of the world expected that he would live up to this commitment. Change was therefore expected in US foreign policy under Barack Obama. As he rightly confessed:

Without a well-articulated strategy that the public support and the world understand, America will lack the legitimacy – and ultimately the power – it needs to make the world safer than it is today. We need a revised foreign policy framework that matches boldness and Truman’s post-World War II policies – one that addresses both the challenges and the opportunities of a new millennium, one that guides our use of force and expresses our deepest ideals and commitments (Obama 2008: 357-358).

Despite its might and resources, the US alone cannot pretend to solve or succeed in solving the world problems such as terrorism, insecurity, global warming, poverty and pandemics such as AIDs and malaria without becoming itself the world’s major problem (Obama 2008: 365). Obama argued that it was in the US strategic interest to act multilaterally rather than unilaterally, especially when the Americans use force around the world (Obama 2008: 365). In Obama’s words, ‘Acting multilaterally means obtaining most of the world’s support for our actions, and making sure our actions serve to further recognize international norms’ (Obama 2008: 365). This implies that the US should act within international organisations and abide by international norms.

According to Obama, the US should comply with international law because ‘nobody benefits more than we do from the observance of international “rules of the road”’ (Obama 2008: 365-366). He added:

We can’t win converts to those rules if we act as if they apply to everyone but us. When the world’s sole superpower willingly restrains its power and abides by internationally agreed-upon standards of conduct, it sends a message that these are rules worth following, and robs terrorists and dictators of the argument that these rules are simply tools of American imperialism (Obama 2008: 365-366).

Compliance with international law also granted some legitimacy to any action undertaken by the US. According to Obama, in military parlance, legitimacy is a 'force multiplier' (Obama 2008: 366).

In spite of the fact that the US contributed immensely to the creation of the UN and other international agencies, which set up international law rules to be observed or complied with by all the members of the international community, the irony is that the US has also become one of the leading nations as far as the violation of international law norms is concerned. Directly, it has repeatedly violated international law by action or by omission.

The establishment of the Guantanamo prison and CIA jails where prisoners were denied human rights, the use of force against Iraq and other military actions unilaterally conducted in other parts of the world are some instances of direct violation of international law by the US. Senator and Democratic candidate Barack Obama bemoaned the effects of Reagan's policies toward the Third World, especially his administration's support to the apartheid regime of South Africa alongside the funding of El Salvador's death squads and the invasion of Grenada (Obama 2008: 341). The US was associated directly or indirectly with Haiti's 33 coups d'état (Gutto 2009: 13), the more recent being the 2004 coup that overthrew President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

The US also indirectly violated international law norms through its agents or allies by encouraging or abstaining from condemning some of their actions. However, the US cannot blame 'rogue states' for behaving badly and for their non-compliance with international law norms when it behaves itself as a rogue nation within the UN Security Council, sitting there to silence other nations and veto their actions when they are opposed to American interests, or when the US is unwilling to accept that its own actions be vetoed by the same Security Council.

Senator Obama argued that 'our challenge is to make US policies move the international system in the direction of greater equity, justice and prosperity' (Obama 2008: 374). One of the key actors of the international system is the Security Council, which appears to be undemocratic as five nations; namely the 'Big Five' (the US, United Kingdom, China, France, and Russia) hold the veto right they use as they please to mainly champion their own interests and make law for almost two hundred states that participate in the UN. South America, African continent, and the whole of Asia, except for China, have no veto right in the Security Council that claims to decide for and on behalf of the entire world.

To meet the challenge of moving the international system towards greater equity and justice, the people of 'the world beyond the American borders' expected the US under the Obama administration to agree to the enlargement of the permanent membership of Security Council to states representing

other parts of the world. 'Change' under Obama also required the US to engage in the reform of the Security Council to make it more representative of the people of the world, including those of Africa.

This entailed a reform of the Security Council that Obama also criticised for being 'frozen in a Cold-war era time wrap' in its structure and rules (Obama 2008: 365). Senator Obama recognized that it was in the American interest for the US to act multilaterally through international organisations and in compliance with international law. He advised that 'we should be spending more time and money trying to strengthen the capacity of international institutions' [such as the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Atomic Energy Agency (AEA), and the World Health Organisation (WHO)], 'so that they can do some of this work for us' (Obama 2008: 378, 379). Obama went on:

The more effective UN peacekeeping forces are in handling civil wars and sectarian conflicts, the less global policing we have to do in areas that we'd like to see stabilized. The more credible the information that the International Atomic Energy Agency provides, the more likely we are to mobilize allies against the efforts of rogue states to obtain nuclear weapons. The greater the capacity of the World Health Organisation, the less likely we are to have to deal with a flu pandemic in our own country. No country has a bigger stake than we do in strengthening international institutions – which is why we pushed for their creation in the first place, and why we need to take the lead in improving them (Obama 2008: 379).

This was a recognition that the US tended to use these international organisations as instruments of its foreign policy. Yet, international organisations were not created to do the work for the US or serve American imperialism. One expected, however, that the US under the Obama administration would spend more time and money to strengthen international organisations instead of undermining them.

According to Senator Obama, besides the UN agencies that functioned well like UNICEF, there were other agencies that seemed to do nothing more than hold conferences, produce reports, and provide sinecures for third-rate international civil servants.

But he added that those failures were not an argument for reducing 'our involvement in international organisations, nor are they an excuse for US unilateralism' (Obama 2008: 378-379). The reality is that UN agencies such as UNESCO and even organs such as the Security Council and the General Assembly are often accused of inefficiency and therefore deprived of funding when they tend to rebel against the US and act against the American interests. Unfortunately, international relations provide the ground for competition of states' interests where the most powerful ones would generally prevail over

other states. Former French President General de Gaulle is reported to have rightly pointed out that ‘states have no friends but interests’. One should also understand that the primary objective and business of US foreign policy is to serve American interests even if this would require the US to act unilaterally and violate international law.

Senator Barack Obama suggested at least two areas of American unilateralism. The first area was where the US could act to perfect its own democracy and lead by example in improving its human rights record tarnished by violations of human rights such as detention without trial and torture in the Guantanamo prison, and degrading and inhuman treatment in the prisons of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Marines and the CIA, in or outside the US.

Senator Obama referred to the existence of the Guantanamo prison where the US administration had instituted a law which was totally different from the one it applied to its own citizens as the worst conscience case. He even quoted from a Pentagon report indicating that ‘some U.S. personnel at Guantanamo had in fact engaged in multiple instances of inappropriate activity – including instances in which U.S. female personnel pretended to smear menstrual blood on detainees during questioning, and at least once instance of a guard splashing a Koran and a prisoner with urine’ (Obama 2008: 152).

Obama rightly found this totally unacceptable on legal and moral grounds and deplored that ‘the very ideals that we have promised to export overseas were being betrayed at home’ (Obama 2008: 339).

Abroad, foreigners detained in the CIA prisons suffered the same fate even when these prisons were established in European countries which had abolished torture and were bound to respect the rights of all the people living on their territories.

In his State of the Union Address, President Obama reassured the world when he held: ‘I can stand here tonight and say without exception or equivocation that the United States of America does not torture. We can make that commitment here tonight’ (Obama 2009). The ‘world beyond the American borders’ expected that his administration would honour such an unprecedented commitment by not torturing or condoning torture by its friends and allies abroad. The US was expected to improve its human rights record by signing and ratifying international instruments such as the Rome Treaty establishing the International Criminal Court (ICC) aimed at prosecuting and punishing all those responsible for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity, including American citizens. It was also expected that the US under the Obama administration would sign and ratify treaties such as the Tokyo Conventions on the protection of the environment instead of polluting it. Moreover, international peace and security required the US to

stop spending billions in the development of weapons systems of dubious value while labelling nations such as Iran, Iraq, and North Korea 'rogue states' and preventing them from developing their own weapons of mass destruction.

According to Senator Obama, the unwillingness to make hard choices and live up to its ideals undermined US credibility in the eyes of the world and weakened its ability to press for democracy, human rights, protection of the right to environment, reduction of weapons and the rule of law in despotic regimes (Obama 2008: 380).

The second area of unilateralism suggested by Obama was the area of self-defence (Obama 2008: 365). The US, as any other state under international law, has the right to take unilateral military action to eliminate any imminent threat to its security. Unfortunately, Senator Obama understood 'threat' to mean 'a nation, group, or individual that is actively preparing to strike US targets (or allies with which the US has mutual defence agreements), and has or will have the means to do so in the immediate future' (Obama 2008: 364-365). This broad definition of 'imminent threat' led to a far stretched American definition of self-defence, which conflicts with international law that also does not support the doctrine of preventive self-defence (Dugard 2000: 418-421). 'Change' that Barack Obama advocated also required the American administration under his leadership to promote dialogue, peace and development in its foreign policy.

Promotion of Dialogue, Peace and Development as a Consequence of Change in US Foreign Policy Under the Obama Administration

From its inception, the US has been a warring nation. It waged war to gain its independence. During the first 50 years of its independence, it was confronted with the American Civil War and the Secession War. It participated in the First and Second World Wars, and was instrumental in bringing both to an end. The US has also demonstrated that it was the only country capable of waging war on several continents at once.

The US led the Cold War against the former Soviet Union. Since the 1950s, it has been almost on all international battle fields and even on domestic ones, directly or through proxies.

Over the past decades, the US took the lead in the war against Iraq when this country invaded Kuwait. The US backed Iraq in its war against Iran. Before turning its back on Iraq in the aftermath of its war on terror, the US also supported the Taliban in their war against the Soviet Union. It led the war against Iraq when the Saddam Hussein's regime was deliberately accused of backing Al Qaeda and producing weapons of mass destruction. On the other hand, the US has been threatening war against North Korea and Iran. Washington's heavy hand is always felt in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The use or threat of force has been a key component of the American foreign policy. Whether the US has won all its wars is a matter of dispute. Vietnam and Somalia bear testimony to the contrary.

On the other hand, the US is generally blamed for focussing on business and American interests while paying little attention to the improvement of the life conditions of other peoples and to the development of their countries. Obama's discourse of change therefore called for change of focus from war to peace, dialogue and development-oriented American foreign policy (Mangu 2011: 166-172). The rest of the world expected the American diplomacy under the Obama administration to focus on dialogue, cooperation and development rather than the use or threat of force that should be an ultimate resort.

Instead of resorting to use force or threat to force, the Obama administration was also expected to engage in a meaningful and sincere dialogue with countries such as North Korea and Iran to combat the proliferation of weapons and fight terrorism, which threaten international peace and security.

The US was expected to rather promote dialogue and peace with other and even within nations such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Northern Ireland and former Yugoslavia. In the Middle East, the US was expected to promote dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians on the one hand and between Israel and the Muslim world on the other hand. From the US-led Security Council and from the US itself, the Palestinians expected not quiet diplomacy, abstention or silence when Israeli forces were killing, but rather some tough decisions to compel the Israeli government to dialogue and make peace with the Palestinians. Obama recognised that the US had an obligation to engage in efforts to bring about peace in the Middle East, not only for the benefit of the people of the region, but for the safety and security of American children as well (Obama 2008: 381). There was mistrust between the US and the Muslim world. This mistrust reached its peak in the US during the 2008 presidential election when opponents accused Obama of being a Muslim, as if an American Muslim or an American of Arab descent did not qualify to be elected US president.

Beyond the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the rest of the world also expected that Obama would help bring peace between the US and the Muslim world on the one hand and between Christians and Muslims on the other hand.

Moreover, under the Obama administration, the US was expected to wage war against underdevelopment and poverty instead of sticking to a militarist concept of peace understood as the silence of weapons. Billions of dollars spent for military activities in Iraq, Afghanistan or elsewhere could be used to fight poverty and underdevelopment in these countries.

In his inaugural address, President Obama made the following commitment:

To the people of poor nations, we pledge to work alongside you to make your farms flourish and let clean waters flow; to nourish starved bodies and feed hungry minds. And to those nations like ours that enjoy relative plenty, we say we can no longer afford indifference to suffering outside our borders; nor can we consume the world's resources without regard to effect. For the world has changed, and we must change with it (Obama 2009).

It was therefore expected that the US under the Obama administration would invest more in the development of the poorest nations. This also required the US to contribute to 'humanising' or giving a human face to globalisation that mainly benefited the developed nations and their companies.

US Foreign Policy Under President Obama and the 'Humanisation' of Globalisation

Globalisation relates to the opening-up of the market. So far, it has been benefiting the rich countries, including the US, at the expense of the poor nations that have been even growing poorer. The 'Washington Consensus' also led to an unjust international economic order and contributed to safeguarding or promoting the economic and financial interests of the rich countries instead of promoting prosperity for all.

According to Obama, 'If overall the international system has produced great prosperity in the world's most developed countries, it has also left many people behind – a fact that Western policy makers have often ignored and occasionally made worse' (Obama 2008: 373).

Obama blamed globalisation and its main agents, which are financial institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation (WTO), multinational companies and developed countries, for their role in increasing poverty in the underdeveloped world (Obama 2008: 375-376). Among these agents of globalisation, he first blamed the US and other developed countries.

Obama deplored that:

the United States and other developed countries constantly demand that developing countries eliminate trade barriers that protect them from competition, even as we steadfastly protect our own constituencies from exports that could help lift poor (Obama 2008: 375).

Change in the US-African policy under President Obama

Obama never denied his African origin or identity. He visited Africa several times prior to his election and, whether she liked it or not, he took his

fiancée Michele to Kenya before they were married. Accordingly, unlike most of his predecessors, some of whom knew Africa through story books and Hollywood movies only, Obama was not foreign to the African continent nor was Africa foreign to him. Kenya is naturally the first African country named in *The Audacity of Hope*. He visited this country three times since he became US Senator in 2004 and evoked this country as the country of his father and where he had family, cousins and a grandmother. The main problems of Kenya related to massive violations of human rights and constitutionalism, the corruption of public officials, ethnicity, and denial of freedom of expression and opposition to government. Obama argued that Americans had to win the hearts and minds of people in Nairobi and in Nyangoma Kogelo, a small village in Western Kenya where his father was born and where there was a real sense of kinship with him (Obama 2008: 65-66, 242, 373-375).

Less than a year after hundreds were killed in ethnic violence following the great fiasco that was the 2007 Kenyan election, millions of Kenyans hoped that Obama could help reconcile them and inspire many people in the political leadership and the citizenry who longed for the kind of change he represented and had called for. As Juliana Mwihaki rightly stressed, there were, indeed, many lessons for Kenya to draw from Obama's election as US president (Mwihaki 2009: 58). The American people, who were mostly white, elected a black person born of a father from the Luo ethnic group in Kenya while political intolerance in this country was such as a Luo could not be elected president. Had he returned to Kenya and taken up a Kenyan citizenship to run for president of this East African country, Obama could have been disqualified as a foreigner or failed to be elected a Kenyan president.

Apart from Kenya, Senator Obama knew the history and problems faced by many other African countries. He referred to Somalia, Sierra Leone and the Congo as 'lawless countries' (Obama 2008: 377). This is an assessment based on the classification of African countries in the American conventional social science discourse between 'failed', 'collapsed', 'weak', 'underdeveloped', or 'quasi' states struggling between 'disintegration' and 'reconfiguration' (Wunsch & Olowu 1990; Zartman 1995, 1999; Migdal 1988; Médard 1977: 35-84; Jackson 1990; Villalon & Huxtable 1997).

In Somalia, the US-led UN mission once failed to restore peace and law. Somalia 'collapsed' and 'disintegrated' partly due to the withdrawal of the international community. As a result, terrorist activities have intensified in Somalia over the past three decades. Somali pirates have also been particularly active along the Somali coasts and in the Indian Ocean.

State reconstruction as a prerequisite for peace, security and development in Somalia and the rest of Eastern Africa is not only in the interest of the Somali people but also in the interest of the world since a 'collapsed' Somalia has also been threatening international peace and security. African people expected that decades after its withdrawal, the US under the Obama administration could make a comeback to Somalia and join hands with the African Union and the States of the Eastern Africa sub-region that have been struggling to help reconstruct Somalia and bring law and order to this country.

Sierra Leone now seems on a good track, but armed conflicts are still rife in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), especially in the Eastern part of the country where some militia and foreign armed groups have been operating for many years. The DRC was destroyed during three decades of the authoritarian rule of President Mobutu Sese Seko who was backed by American administrations. President Laurent-Désiré Kabila who overthrew Mobutu was also backed by the US directly or indirectly through its new allies in the region; namely Rwanda and Uganda. These countries invaded the DRC. When Barack Obama was advocating change in America and came to power, Rwanda and Uganda were still operating in the DRC. Rwandan and Ugandan officials, the Congolese rebels or militias that they supported and a number of Western multinationals were involved in the illegal exploitation of the DRC's natural resources while the Congolese people, including children and women, were victims of gross human violations. Expectations were therefore high that the Obama administration could help reconstruct the DRC; consolidate peace, security, and democracy; promote respect for human rights and the rule of law; end foreign aggression and the illegal exploitation of the Congolese natural resources; and encourage cooperation, development and democracy in the Great Lakes Region.

President Barack Obama also told authoritarian leaders around the globe and those clinging to power through corruption, violence, human rights violations, vote-rigging and manipulation that they were on the wrong side of history, but the US would extend a hand if they were willing to unclench their fist (Obama 2008: 377).

Zimbabwe and Libya were singled out as African countries where massive human rights violations were committed (Obama 2008: 378) but they were not the only countries where people suffered from the authoritarianism of their leaders. President Mugabe sometimes organised elections even though he could not think of anybody else to lead Zimbabwe. In Libya, Muammar Gaddafi acceded to power by a coup d'état in 1968. When President Omar Bongo of Gabon died in June 2009 after 42 years in power, Colonel Gaddafi became the 'Dean' of African presidents. Election was

unknown in the Libyan political dictionary. Gaddafi's decisions, which were wrongly attributed to the people, were not open to any form of criticism. Many people who knew he had delusions of grandeur were not surprised when he proclaimed himself the 'King of African traditional Kings' (Mangu 2011: 180-181). Under the above circumstances, Obama's message of change and his subsequent election could not go unnoticed among the Zimbabwean and Libyan citizens. They could also dream of change and expected that the Obama administration could contribute to change in the governance of their countries.

In North Africa, although Morocco and Western Sahara were not mentioned in *The Audacity of Hope* expressly, one expected that the Obama administration could promote dialogue and peace between these countries, their leaders and peoples in the same way as they encouraged dialogue between the Khartoum government and that of South Sudan.

The Saharawi people hoped that the US could convince the King of Morocco to accept a referendum that could help them enjoy their right to self-determination like the South Sudanese.

In Morocco where the powers were concentrated in the hands of the King, there was hope among the militants of democracy that they could receive some support from Washington after Obama's election. The US administration was also expected to keep an eye open on Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria, which operated under de facto military regimes and where progress towards democracy had been slow despite their good ranking in terms of economic, social and corporate governance.

West Africa is a region where some progress had been made on the road to constitutionalism and democracy in countries such as Benin, Ghana, Mali, and Senegal. However, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Guinea, Liberia, Mauritania, Niger, Sierra Leone, and Togo still had a long way to go. The US administration was expected to contribute to consolidating constitutionalism and democracy in the countries where they were already established or to promoting them in those countries where they were on the wane.

On the other hand, Obama had associated Nigeria with India and China as countries that developed two legal systems – one for foreigners and elites, and another for ordinary people (Obama 2008: 377). American and British companies and people were among those foreigners who pushed for and ultimately obtained a special legal system. Accordingly, like the Indian and Chinese, the Nigerian people could dream of change and expect that the Obama's administration would help bring this dual and discriminatory system to an end in their country.

South Africa performed the miracle of bringing the apartheid system to an end and reconciling its people into a 'Rainbow Nation' of which Nelson Mandela was the founding father. Unfortunately, the end of apartheid did not mean the end of poverty that still affects the overwhelming majority of the South African population who are black. Economic apartheid persisted in South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. The Black majority expected the US under the Obama's Democratic administration to help them in the same way as the Republicans supported the apartheid government. However, like in some Western African countries, progress had been made in terms of democracy, respect for the rule of law, human rights, good governance, and development in Southern African countries such as Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho, Mozambique, Mauritius, and Zambia. Accordingly, there was no darkness everywhere in Africa, as Conrad once suggested (Conrad 1999).

Barack Obama rightly deplored that some positive trends in Africa were often hidden in the news of despair. Yet, despite the staunch resistance of some authoritarian leaders and the rise of some coup-minded military officers, democracy is spreading in Africa. The economies of authoritarianism and dictatorship, which paradoxically used to be funded by some Western democracies under Washington's leadership, have entered into recession. The days of authoritarian leaders and other military junta are numbered. According to Barack Obama, 'We need to build on these glimmers of hope and help those committed leaders and citizens throughout Africa build the better future they, like we, so desperately desire' (Obama 2008: 377). It would be immoral and inhuman for Americans to watch others die with equanimity (Obama 2008: 378). Imperialism unfortunately does not know any morals. It does not care about the people. Its morals leads it to selfishness and non-stop economic exploitation to benefit the rich people. The 'monster' has no concerns for the plight of its victims and this is part of its nature.

If moral claims were insufficient for Americans to act as the African continent implodes, Senator Obama argued that 'there are certainly instrumental reasons why the United States and its allies should care about failed states that don't control their territories, can't combat epidemics, and are numbed by civil war and atrocity' (Obama 2008: 378).

Africans expected that the Obama administration could engage in aid relief to combat AIDS and other pandemics, help those who were affected by droughts and famines, and end wars and armed conflicts by using their political and armed muscles since most conflicts developed thanks to Washington's silence or support. The US administration could also help those who fought against authoritarianism and corruption since most corrupt leaders during the Cold War were hailed as Washington's friends or

allies. Over decades, Obama admitted, 'we (the American administration and business) would tolerate and even aid thieves like Mobutu, thugs like Noriega, so long as they opposed communism' (Obama 2008: 338). In fact, contrary to Obama's assertion, they were not thieves or thugs. They were darlings of the US and the romance only came to an end when the US was no longer interested in them and when they ceased to serve its interests. This resulted in the US becoming vulnerable and losing any authority to give other nations a lecture about democracy, respect for the rule of law and human rights. The US also supported the apartheid regime in South Africa. The African National Congress (ANC) was considered a terrorist organisation and Nelson Mandela branded a terrorist leader. In former Zaire, 'Mobutu or Chaos' was the formula that long shaped US foreign policy (Schatzberg 1991; Weisman 1974). Western countries, especially the 'Western Troika' made up of the US, France and Belgium, continued to support President Mobutu as the best representative of Western interests to the detriment of the masses and democratic forces.

From 1990 to 1993, the US facilitated Mobutu's attempts to hijack political change by maintaining that Mobutu as the president of the Republic was a legitimate part of the transition process leading to free and fair elections, rather than an impediment to it.

The US also backed the rebels fighting to oust President Mobutu and Presidents Laurent-Desire and Joseph Kabila without providing any substantial support to non-violent and democratic opposition.

According to Nzongola-Ntalaja:

The message that the world community of nations sent to the people of the Congo and Africa as a whole in these two instances is loud and clear. Changes through democratic means and the rule of law are not as deserving of unequivocal support as changes through the barrel of a gun. The first changes are slow, somewhat confusing, and rely on universal principles of governance that some believe are not applicable to Africa. The second, on the other hand, are decisive and led by self-reliant African leaders who are likely to establish stable political orders and market economies compatible with the interests of the developed North (Nzongola-Ntalaja 1998: 5).

Africans expected change not only in the message from Washington under the Obama administration, but also in its deeds. Economic and strategic interests could no longer prevail over ideals to command support for African authoritarian and corrupt leaders. Africans did not ask President Obama to impose democracy and good governance with the barrel of a gun or to liberate them from tyranny, which he could not, but to just do what he said the Americans could:

We can inspire and invite other people to assert their freedoms; we can use international forums and agreements to set standards for others to follow; we can provide funding to fledging democracies to help institutionalize fair election systems, train independent journalists, and seed the habits of civic participation; we can speak out on behalf of local leaders whose rights are violated; and we can apply economic and diplomatic pressure to those who repeatedly violate the rights of their own people (Obama 2008: 374).

Barack Obama was also right not to trust those who ‘believe they can single-handedly liberate other people from tyranny’ (Obama 2008: 374). Unfortunately, they were and still are many to hold such belief in the Western hemisphere, especially in the US.

As he pointed out:

there are few examples in history in which the freedom men and women crave is delivered through outside intervention. In almost every successful social movement of the last century, from Gandhi’s campaign against British rule to the Solidarity movement in Poland to the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, democracy was the result of a local awakening (Obama 2008: 374).

Africans hoped that an American administration led by a man who directly traced his roots to an African country (Kenya) would do more to help the continent. However, Obama was not a senator for Okelo, a Kenyan or an African lawmaker. He was rather an American citizen and a senator for Illinois. He could not love Africa and Africans more than America and the Americans who elected him (Mwihaki 2009: 60; Mangu 2011: 187-188). He could be black, but his mind and soul were American. The last sentence of his *The Audacity of Hope* even sums it up when he confessed that ‘My heart is filled with love for this country’ (Obama 2008: 427). This means that there was no or little space left in his heart for other countries, including the African.

As I pointed out elsewhere (Mangu 2011: 188), the primary responsibility for rebuilding or developing Africa and improving the life conditions of its peoples lies with Africans themselves. In this world where people are interdependent and should cooperate, Africans also need the assistance of other nations, especially the US and other world developed nations. The continent that suffered from the slave trade to benefit the Americas and that used to be marginalised had to be given a pride of place in the hearts of the Americans and in US foreign policy (Mangu 2011: 191).

Conclusion

Obama's election was a historic moment in the American and world history. It symbolised the victory of hope over despair, optimism over pessimism, tolerance over intolerance, equality over discrimination, human rights over human wrongs, reconciliation over hatred and racial segregation, justice over injustice, morality over immorality, the new over the past, the truth over the lies, audacity over adversity and civilisation over modern forms of barbarity. It was the triumph of constitutionalism, democracy and human rights. Obama's election was based on 'change' he advocated. Accordingly, 'change' was expected in US domestic and foreign policy, including the African policy. Unlike the previous American administration, the Obama administration was expected to promote multilateralism and the rule of law in international affairs. As for the majority of African people, they expected that Africa would be given a pride of place in the American foreign policy and that the Obama administration would promote peace, security, development, good governance, and democracy on the continent despite the main responsibility for an African renaissance resting with Africans themselves.

This article was not about why Obama was elected and whether he delivered on his promise of 'change'. Even when he focussed on the US foreign and African policy, the author did not intend to examine the driving force, which is imperialism, and its political economy let alone the dependency discourse. Nor did he purport to investigate the magnitude and feasibility of 'change' under President Obama.

The article rather reflected on the American foreign policy against the background of the promises that Senator Obama made in *The Audacity of Hope* and later during the campaign. It took stock of Obama's promise of 'change' and the 'audacious' hopes that his election raised across the world in general and in Africa in particular. Its main aim was to provide a solid background for a credible assessment of the US foreign and African policy under a president who advocated 'change' not only in Washington and the US, but also in the 'world beyond the American borders'.

A fair and complete assessment of 'change' that Obama promised in US foreign and African policy will only be made later when his second and final term ends in 2016. It will then be possible to judge whether Obama delivered on his promise of 'change', whether he could bring about significant 'change' in US foreign and African policy, and whether it was 'business as usual' and that the immense and audacious hopes that he raised across the world and in Africa were unfounded.

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