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Global Reactions to Obama Victory from Moscow to Beijing to Muslim World

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Here are some comments I gathered on what Obama's victory means for America's image in the world. They include Kishore Mahbubani from Singapore; Tariq Ramadan, the controversial Muslim scholar in Europe; Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the author of "Infidel," Wang Jisi, dean of international relations at Beijing University; Gary Kasparov, the chess champion and democracy activist in Moscow and Carlos Fuentes in Mexico City.

OBAMA SHOULD LOOK EAST

Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, has just published "The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East."

By Kishore Mahbubani

SINGAPORE -- Barack Obama's presidency will stir the world. It will restore a lot of the faith that the world's population once had in America. Many will say, "Only in America" could the son of an African father be elected president. America would once again become a beacon of hope. At least half of the anti-Americanism around the world would disappear with Obama's election. But such great hopes also create great dangers. Both Americans and the rest of the world would expect many of America's problems with the world to disappear overnight.

Many Americans naively believe that America will naturally reconnect with the world once George W. Bush leaves office. Certainly a change in personalities will help. However, what is really required is a change in policies. This will be a lot more difficult.

America's intelligentsia has truly let down the American people by failing to educate them on how much the world has changed. "Steady as she goes" is no longer an option for America. Like any other nation, America, powerful though it may be, will have to adjust and adapt to new global realities.

There are at least three major adjustments America will have to make.

First, it has to deal with new economic competition. America was right to promote free trade. The world hopes that it will continue to do so. But

free trade and free-market economies also lead to "creative destruction." Henry Ford destroyed the horse-and-buggy industry. Today Ford, General Motors and others have to deal with more effective competition from overseas. Why have they not prepared themselves? Who has been sleeping on the job?

Second, America has to deal with new global challenges, from global warming to global epidemics. All solutions to these problems require global cooperation. America will have to rediscover the value of multilateral cooperation. U.N. bashing will have to stop. Americans will have to learn to compromise to achieve consensus. Can America compromise?

Third, in the coming Asian century, America will have to give priority to the Pacific over the Atlantic. The G-8, NATO and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development are organizations of the past. The future lies in Asia. Would Obama travel more across the Pacific or the Atlantic?

None of these adjustments will be easy. The fundamental problem here is that the American people have not been prepared. If elected, Obama won't be able to achieve miracles. Nor should he try. But he could be different from Bush in one key aspect. He could show America and the world that America once again has a thoughtful and reflective president who is prepared to speak honestly to the American people, not nurture their illusions.

And he could also show once again a decent respect for the opinions of all mankind. With this small but significant start, he could put America back on the right track again.

AFTER BRIEF HONEYMOON, MUSLIM WORLD WOULD FEEL BETRAYED BY OBAMA

By Ayaan Hirsi Ali

Ayaan Hirsi Ali is author of "Infidel."

NEW YORK – As the new U.S. president, Barack Obama will at first have a honeymoon period with the Muslim world, a continuation, really, of the honeymoon he has already enjoyed as a black man rising to the heights of power in the most powerful nation on earth, America. But Obama has said he is determined to find and kill Osama bin Laden. He has said that the frontier in the war on terror is now in Afghanistan, a hotspot for jihadis since the 1970s, where he wants to send more troops. In other words, he would continue the Bush policy, only with more competence.

In short order, this increased U.S. presence and the collateral damage it would cause in Afghanistan and the region would end Obama's honeymoon. It would remind the Islamists and their sympathizers across the Muslim world that Barack Obama would not act out of solidarity with people based on the color of his skin or because of his origins in Kenya, but as the commander-in-chief protecting American national interests above all.

As a result, much of his popularity would vanish. Perhaps it would even fall to the level of George Bush. I'm sure many would come to think that Obama had betrayed them.

Barack Obama has also criticized Bush for "not talking to the enemy," particularly in Iran. So, the world would expect Obama to obey all the diplomatic traffic rules and follow all the procedures to try to persuade President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Iranian authorities to abandon their project to build a nuclear bomb.

But when Iran refuses to give up its bomb despite the eloquent entreaties of the new American president, Obama would be forced to act. So, after talking with Iran, he would likely end up at the same spot where Bush is. That wouldn't make him very popular in Iran or with others who oppose America's use of its military might.

At the same time, the original impetus of Obama's campaign was his pledge to withdraw from Iraq in 16 months. There is little doubt that if Obama were to actually implement this pledge, jihadis in Iraq and around the world, who see history in the millennial terms of the long fight against the Crusaders, would feel they are the victors.

As the Obama campaign developed over the months, he has emphasized he would withdraw "responsibly." "Responsibly" is, of course, open to interpretation. I don't think it is responsible to pull out of Iraq in 16 months – unless you want the jihadis dancing in jubilation.

The message such a precipitous withdrawal would send to the jihadis is the same message Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero sent when he rapidly withdrew forces from the coalition in Iraq after the election in March 2004: If you hang on long enough, you can scare the West away.

More important than all of this is the consensus that developed in the campaign that the U.S. must end its energy dependence on the Middle East within 10 years. This raises some profound questions about the future of the liberal world order.

When America effects such a strategic withdrawal from the Middle East, it will leave the whole region open to the energy-hungry Chinese and to Russia. They care little about democracy, human rights, borders or boundaries the way America has. They will be more than willing to come to terms with even the most repressive Islamist regimes as long as the oil flows their way or through their pipelines.

America may well be able, in this way, to end its conflicts in the Middle East. But the people of the region, particularly women, will pay the price.

A HOPE NAMED OBAMA

Tariq Ramadan, the grandson of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna, has been named by Foreign Policy magazine as one of the world's top 100 intellectuals. His most recent book is "In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons From the Life of Muhammad." Ramadan teaches at Oxford University.

By Tariq Ramadan

OXFORD, England – The eight years of George W. Bush's presidency have accustomed us to so many errors, lies, willful distortions and political manipulation that a page is about to be turned in the history of the United States.

Since September 2001, the Bush regime has been obsessed by the "global war on terror" and the conflict with the "Axis of Evil." But over time, Americans have awakened to the emptiness of these bellicose and arrogant slogans.

Barack Obama's election would be an event to be welcomed for several reasons; yet we must not be lulled into complacency by naive estimates of what lies ahead.

Barack Obama's roots, his past and his multiple cultural identities stand in stark contrast to the profiles of George W. Bush or John McCain. His understanding of, and relations with, the countries of the world – particularly of the global South – and with American society itself point to a different outcome. Taken together, his life and experience make hope for a new understanding of domestic and international issues possible.

On the most fundamental level, Colin Powell has laid out the terms of reference: Barack Obama is not a Muslim; he is black and Christian. But, in the final analysis, what if he were a Muslim? What is wrong with being "African-American" or "Muslim" in today's America?

While it now appears that the U.S. can live with the election of a black American, indications are that a new, virulent anti-Muslim racism has arisen in the wake of the events of September 2001.

Given such fears, and the hardening of religious and ethnic divisions, Barack Obama's past and origins should make it possible for him to emerge as "everybody's president." In rejecting manufactured divisions, cultural biases and the "religionization" of social issues, Barack Obama could well become the symbol of a new United States simply by wielding his stature as president to promote domestic policies that favor justice and equality, empowering citizens of all origins.

The first black president's greatest achievement would be to cause people to forget his color. But success is far from assured.

On the international level, Barack Obama should be able to lay to rest the deafness of the outgoing administration, which spared no effort to persuade Americans that they were the victims of "aggressors" who "hated" their civilization and their values.

Above and beyond the condemnation of terrorist acts, which is virtually unanimous and should be unconditional, the criticisms and grievances of the entire world must now be heard. The policies of the Bush administration have produced a worldwide rejection of the United States. The new president must begin with symbolic actions to demonstrate that the life of an Afghan, an Iraqi or a Muslim is worth no less than that of an American. The time has come to put an end to the language of bullying and intimidation and to close the dungeons of shame at Guantanamo and other similar prisons around the world.

As president, Barack Obama could no longer justify, in the name of American national security, the deaths of the innocent, legalized torture, extraordinary rendition and other discriminatory measures up to and including the granting of American visas. If Obama's diversity of origins gives cause for hope, it would only be insofar as these origins would permit him to open doors instead of close them.

The campaign has made it clear that we must entertain no illusions. Change may be significant in certain areas; in others, it is bound to be limited. The Palestine-Israel conflict is central to world peace. Yet Barack Obama has taken such an outspoken pro-Israel stance (before an American pro-Israel lobby) that significant change on this issue would be extremely unlikely. Nor should much be expected in dealing with the international economic crisis.

Both issues (unconditional support for Israel and economic neoliberalism) seem to constitute untouchable dogmas. No American political figure dares call them into question. But the future of the entire world hinges on the global-local conflict in the Middle East and on the international economic order.

We must not succumb to irrational hope. There can be little doubt that some positive change could be expected under a Barack Obama presidency. Any such change should be welcomed; at the same time, our critical vigilance must not be relaxed, especially with regard to the sacrosanct dogmas of a political and economic establishment that cannot bring itself to acknowledge the dignity of the Palestinian people, or the devastation wrought by an economic order that has plunged so many across the planet into poverty and insecurity.

IF AMERICA ACCEPTS OBAMA, THEN IT CAN ACCEPT RISE OF CHINA

Wang Jisi is the dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University.

By Wang Jisi

BEIJING – Chinese reactions to Barack Obama's election are mixed and confusing. The last few public opinion polls have showed a vast majority of Chinese respondents supporting Obama and anticipating his victory.

However, among Chinese intellectuals and elites, who are supposedly more knowledgeable about international affairs, including some senior specialists on America, stereotypes persisted.

Some of them have believed that "America could not accept a black president." Many in Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong have predicted that something dramatic, similar to John F. Kennedy's assassination or Chen Shui-bian's mysterious "bullet event," would happen to disrupt the process. To them, America, after all, is a nation full of conspiracies, from the alleged "discovery" of Saddam Hussein's nuclear devices to the machinations that precipitated the current financial storm.

These suspicions reflect a common image of the United States in China: a white-dominated, highly competitive society that believes only in power politics and the "rule of the jungle." Just as America would not elect a candidate from an ethnic minority, this thinking goes, neither would it ever accept the rise of a non-Western nation – China. Instead, America would do its utmost to contain and weaken China unless it changes into a country like Japan.

Now that the election campaign is behind us, it's time for both Chinese and Americans to view each other anew. Chinese should see the United States as a nation not necessarily discriminating against people or nations that are racially, culturally or politically different.

Americans should see China as a rapidly changing society whose emergence may help solve the world's common problems, among them financial turbulence, the energy shortage and climate change.

As most Chinese hail Barack Obama's likely triumph, it'll be up to the new president to grasp the opportunity and demonstrate America's willingness and ability to adapt to the changing realities.

OBAMA VICTORY WILL -- FINALLY -- CHANGE RUSSIAN VIEW OF AMERICA

Garry Kasparov is a leader of The Other Russia coalition (theotherussia.org). He is a former world chess champion and resides in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

By Garry Kasparov

MOSCOW -- There is no doubt the election of Barack Obama as the new president of the United States will have an impact on how many in the rest of the world think about the world's sole superpower. Obama represents a new generation of leadership, and he both sounds and looks very different from his predecessors.

Here in Russia, as in most places I have visited recently, Obama's appearance -- he will be the first black leader of any world power -- is getting the most attention. His victory would mark the end of the view of America still promoted by many in Russia, a line used by the Soviets to counter accusations of repression. "Ah, but in the U.S. they lynch Negroes!" It is practically conventional wisdom, and not just here, that in America the rich WASPs and Jews exploit the poor blacks and Latinos. If Obama wins, it will be as if suddenly everyone can see the world is undeniably round.

Unfortunately, most will rather talk about what this might mean for race in America instead of confronting the racism and xenophobia in our own nations. But the only thing that will matter, and surprisingly soon, is whether or not Obama acts differently. The window of opportunity for Obama to take advantage of the world's curiosity and goodwill will be small. The crises we face are too big; the new American president will not enjoy much of a grace period.

Obama would be halfway there simply by virtue of not being George W. Bush, who, rightly in some cases and wrongly in others, has come to symbolize every problem anyone has ever had with America, Americans and American power abroad. Bush is practically a bouquet of the classic American stereotypes, the ones so easy to hate. Rich, inarticulate, uninterested in the world, stridently religious and hasty to act. (And the images of New Orleans after Katrina seemingly exemplified the stereotype of Americans as racists and were viewed largely without surprise abroad. Of course they wouldn't rescue poor black people!) Obama would explode these stereotypes. But the world's multitude of grievances with Bush would quickly be laid on Obama's doorstep if he were fail to back up his inspiring rhetoric with decisive action.

He could get off to a good start by making it clear he does not consider the people of Russia to be the enemy of the United States. As in most authoritarian states, the Putin regime does not represent a majority of its citizens. Kremlin propaganda works hard to present America as Russia's adversary. Obama could strike a blow against that image by speaking out against the dictatorial leaders in Russia and around the world. Then those words must be quickly followed up with deeds.

THE FIRST MESTIZO PRESIDENT NORTH OF THE BORDER

by Carlos Fuentes

Fuentes is the author, most recently, of "Happy Families"

MEXICO CITY -- The historical election of the first "mestizo" to the White House would go a long way toward redeeming the promise of the United States in the eyes of the world, particularly after the truly ruinous Bush tenure. For the first time, a mixed-race leader will have come to power north of the border.

Yet, I do not underestimate the capacity of the U.S. -- especially under a Democratic administration led by Obama -- to recover. But the investment should be directed away from anything that smells of market speculation and toward the modernization of infrastructure. A visitor to the U.S. is astonished at the deterioration of dams, railroads, public spaces and schools -- not to mention the absence of decent health care and pensions -- above all in comparison with Europe.

It has been said repeatedly that all the citizens of the world should have the right to vote in the election for the president of the United States because his or her decisions will affect our lives. Of course, it is up to the electorate the United States to decide who is best prepared to attend to the urgent issues I've outlined.

But there should be no doubt that the election of Obama certainly thrills those of us who must nonetheless live with the choices of the democratic process in the United States.

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