

MY SAY: Obama the game-changer

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US President Barack Hussein Obama is now the Nobel Peace Prize Winner for 2009. It's almost like a dream. Many have hailed the decision, and the audacity of hope put on him. But not everyone agrees. A stunned fellow laureate and former Polish president Lech Walesa quipped: "So soon? Too early." The *Financial Times* called it the "Urgency of Now".

Still, others have nightmares, especially from the "enemy" camp. Obama's predecessor George W Bush, after all, had tried very hard to bring peace, but only managed to get a shoe thrown at him! Obama, on the other hand, hardly tried and voila! got the real thing, barely 240 days into his presidency. Others have suggested that the award is meant to shame the former president.

It must seem unfair, unless the Norwegian Nobel nomination committee has been struck by Obamania, or just gone nuts. But no, it looks like the committee was sober enough to know the difference. For example, it recognised that Bush eventually changed the world into a divisive one while Obama intends to do just the opposite. The Nobel committee has many good things to say about the current US president for his creation of "a new climate in international politics" when the world had been pushed into a "dangerous phase".

Still, what exactly has Obama achieved? Previous laureates include one who helped millions of poor people and another who planted millions of trees in Africa. What about Obama? Giving millions a chance to merely experience a "change in global mood"?

Whatever it is, the truth is more brutal: the rules of the game have changed somewhat. Period. This time, it is not about what has been achieved, but about the future instead. More specifically, the citation reportedly lauds Obama's vision of a nuclear-free world and about the "power to contribute to peace". A former Nobel Prize winner, Mohamed El Baradei, sums it up nicely: "In less than a year after taking office, he has transformed the way we look at ourselves and the world we live in..." This is true!

Still, the difficulty, as some have termed it, is the "lack of tangibles" of what can normally be measured — a peace treaty perhaps, as in the case of Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin, or a clear reduction and curtailment of the global stock of nuclear weapons, or reforming the United Nations, something like what Woodrow Wilson did in founding the League of Nations. It must be something that can be counted, measured, felt or touched. Otherwise, what is it that we are recognising or rewarding?

In all honesty, this is nothing new, though rare. Psychologists and motivators have always advocated rewarding "potentials" (read: future) if the goals to be achieved by the person are quite formidable. Thus, a person who wants to quit smoking is encouraged to make known his intention publicly, and then be rewarded for making that bold statement. The impact of this exercise is to add pressure and prepare him mentally to live up to his "intention to quit smoking" since the whole world has come to know about it.

Another way of looking at it is that there will be enough people to remind the person concerned when he is about to falter, or otherwise lend a helping hand to help him achieve his lofty goal. Invariably, there is a greater chance of succeeding compared with just keeping things to himself and then finding out that it is impossible to quit after all.

Now, Obama is in a similar situation. After receiving the Peace Prize, he must by all means deliver. Not only the world has endorsed his intention for bringing peace back, he has also accepted the endorsement in full fanfare.

Certainly, this is more complicated and difficult than quitting smoking (to which Obama has admitted that he sometimes lapses).

Notwithstanding, the principle works in the same way, namely building up the pressure and at the same time, garnering support from others who share the same intention. It is no longer just a goal for the US by its president; it has suddenly been transformed into a global intention as a Nobel Peace Laureate belongs to the world, as it were.

Obama needs to focus on the latter just as much as the former. With the high expectations of the global population, that can be even more compelling when it comes to the crunch. He must learn this from Bush, who was too myopic in interpreting the global picture.

The downside, of course, is that the "enemies" are even more determined to create barriers for Obama. But this hopefully, will be counterbalanced by the other side raising the possibility of success even higher.

In other words, this is yet another "Obama phenomenon" that will have others following as well. Perhaps this is apt given the appalling situation on every front of the world today. Meanwhile, the world is more divided and fragile than we care to admit, and it is time to change the rules of the game for peace to be real.

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