

American first before anything else

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Comment

[New Sunday Times - 11/16/2008](#)

THE world appears very excited that Barack Obama is the president-elect of the United States of America. Added to this is, of course, the exuberance that marks the end of what arguably is the worst presidential period under the Bush administration.

Many are hopeful that Obama will be the torch to brighten the darkness that has encapsulated the White House for the last eight years.

That Obama is the first "black" president to occupy the White House is to most no longer a contradiction, especially to the younger voters who are mainly responsible for the choice.

To them, Obama is an American, though often mentioned as African-American (not, American-African, unlike in Malaysia where the ethnicity supersedes the nationality as "Malaysian", giving emphasis to ethnicity more than the nationality).

He is, therefore, considered a true "blue" (Democrat) American. He has embraced the American way of life, speaks like an American and has his heart for America.

As an adult, Obama, had his encounters with drugs and alcohol, just like his peers then; though he confessed to regretting them.

There is no doubt Obama has experiences as a second-class US citizen, as narrated in his books and writings. He, too, was a victim of discrimination many times over. But Obama remains steadfast as an American.

Despite his Kenyan roots, where his father and grandfather originate, Obama makes no pretence that he wants to be an American, not Kenyan.

For example, at no time has he been parochial in promoting Swahili, Kenya's national language, in the US, campaigned for a separate Swahili vernacular school for the sake of his own cultural diversity or preservation of his mother tongue.

In fact, he visited Kenya only in his late 20s, despite having many relatives there.

Obama was educated in the Indonesian language and is believed to be still conversant in that language and knows a bit of Gaelic, too.

But for Obama, American English is the language on which he has built the American dream. That's how American he is.

He is on record advocating Americans to find unity in diversity, saying: "There is not a liberal America and a conservative America; there's the United States of America."

Presumably, for similar reasons, Obama has preferred to drop the name "Hussein" associated with his father (Barack Hussein Obama Sr) and grandfather (Hussein Onyango Obama).

Maybe "Hussein" is anti-American to start with (remember Saddam).

What is sure is that he wants to appear all-American; wishing no distraction by sporting the wrong name (recall the controversy created when he was photographed in a Kenyan outfit).

While some creatively conjecture that "Barack" could be a truncated version of "Mubarak", an auspicious Muslim name, meaning "blessed", Obama wants none of this in his journey to be an American, what's more an American president.

He wants to stay clear of Islam (although in reality he cannot totally disassociate from it). After all, many of his Kenyan relatives are Muslims. And his half-sister is "Maya Soetoro".

So he often identifies with the majority; reiterating that he is a Christian (hopefully, not the born-again type like the incumbent president, with purported skills to "talk" to God).

In short, to hail Obama as the first black American president is really missing the point, as much as to hail Joe Biden as the first Catholic vice-president.

Or, for that matter, so-and-so as the first Irish US president, just like JFK was the first Catholic of Irish descent to be president.

What needs to be underscored is: they are first of all "American". Period. The rest are mere incidentals which add colours to the character of being an American first.

Obama is even more colourful and diverse in his "capacity to transform communities, hearts and minds. He "saw the many different cultures within our nation in a nuanced manner", Maya has testified.

This is how unique the 44th US President would be come Jan 20, 41 years after the assassination of American black civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr, on April 4,1968, in Memphis, Tennessee.

He will be the one to fulfil King's famous evocation of "I have a dream", but not as a black minority leader, rather that of Americans and recognised by all.

Unfortunately, not exactly all. Within hours after his election victory, the term "Obama assassination" appeared in the top 100 Google search terms.

This is what the British 2007 Nobel Literature laureate Doris Lessing had feared much earlier.

For Obama's sake, may he be spared.

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