

## Obama - Why He Must

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Writing in The Guardian of November 4, the very day of America's presidential election, Professor Bolaji Akinyemi, arguably Nigeria's foremost foreign affairs expert and one-time foreign affairs minister, said a victory for Barak Hussein Obama, the first Afro-American presidential candidate of the Democratic Party, would be the "ultimate catharsis" for both black and white Americans over the historical crime of slavery and slave trade.

This catharsis, rather than what Obama can do in office, said Akinyemi, should be the basis for measuring the significance of an Obama victory.

"Those who seek to diminish the importance of the Obama election victory by arguing that it will not translate into material well-being for Afro-Americans and the Africans," said Akinyemi, "miss the entire point totally."

The point, said Akinyemi, is that an Obama victory would purge descendants of black slaves and their white masters alike of the stigma of slavery. "A victory for Obama," he said, "will be the ultimate catharsis in purging the African race (Arabs are not really regarded as Africans) of the stigma of slavery... The election of Obama rather than what he does in office is the ultimate victory... It is also a catharsis for the white race, purging it of its guilt over the slave trade. An Obama victory will be the ultimate reparation (compensation)."

Put another way, for Akinyemi, it is enough that Obama should become the first Afro-American president of America in its over 200 years as a nation. Presumably anything else is a bonus.

Without doubt Obama's victory in penultimate Tuesday's election is an earthshaking event, even more earthshaking than 9/11 widely regarded as the most momentous event of the beginning of the 21st century. Actually 9/11 did not so much change the world as provide America with a pretext to raise the pitch of its global war-mongering by, among other things, invading Iraq as a leading producer of cheap oil which America had become addicted to.

Obama's victory, on the other hand, means it is no longer impossible for blacks, for long consigned to the lowest rungs of American society and of the world at large, to aspire to anything anywhere in the world. Of course before Obama, Ghanaian Kofi Annan had been the Secretary General of United Nations, but then a UN general secretary is little more than a civil servant who executes policies rather than a political leader who makes them.

In any case not since the Americans landed on the moon in 1969, has an event captured the imagination of the world like Obama's bid for America's, and by extension the world's, top job.

Even then to argue that Obama's victory on November 4 is in itself the ultimate victory is to overstate the importance of symbolism. To say Obama's victory is the ultimate victory is akin to the argument often peddled by tribal champions everywhere, Nigeria included, that what is good for them is also good for their tribes. Hardly can anything be more reactionary.

The leading proponent of this doctrine of what-is-good-for-me-is-also-good-for-my-tribe here in Nigeria is without doubt our inimitable former rebel leader, Dim Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu. Since his return from self-exile in Cote d'Ivoire in 1982 following his unconditional pardon by President Shehu Shagari, he has argued that the only way to bury the ghost of Biafra is to allow an

Igbo - presumably himself as Biafra's leader - to become the president of Nigeria regardless of what the person can, or cannot, do for the country. That this argument lacks merit should be self-evident.

Obama, of course, is not Ojukwu or any other self-selected tribal champion. He did not seek the ultimate job in the world on the basis of his colour. He sought it as an American who believed he was capable of saving America from the incompetence, the arrogance and the greed that President George Bush and his neo-conservative cult inflicted on his country and on the rest of the world the past eight years. As Akinyemi himself put it so beautifully in his article in question, Obama's popularity was "a repudiation of the America that Bush, whether his father or himself, sought to promote."

It is for this reason that I believe it is patronising to the black race to consider Obama's victory on November 4 as enough in itself. It is not. The victory is, of course, important, but unless he uses it to try and save America and the world from the misadventures of the neo-conservatives, his victory will mean little or nothing to humanity.

As Obama himself said in his short but characteristically eloquent acceptance speech on election night in Chicago, "What began twenty one months ago in the depths of winter must not end on this autumn night. This victory is not the change we seek - it is only the chance for us to make the change."

Writing on these pages on August 27, I expressed scepticism about Obama's chances of ridding the world of the legacy of Bush and Company. This is a legacy of, among other things, an economic recession and the rolling back of civil rights at home and of intensified war mongering abroad. An Obama presidency, I said, "will make little or no difference to the way its ruling classes have tried to recreate the world in their own image."

At the time I wrote this piece, I did not really think Obama will realize his presidential ambition even though he had defied all odds to snatch the presidential ticket of the Democratic Party from his much more fancied rival, Hillary, President Bill Clinton's wife. Now that he has defied even greater odds to become the first black president in America's history, I still believe he will make little difference in the way the country's ruling classes want its economy and society run. I also do not see how he can seriously change America's hegemonic tendency abroad.

However, if he maintains the courage of the conviction with which he defied all odds to become president, he should be able to reverse the philosophy of robbing the poor to give to the rich with which the neo-conservatives have managed America's economy and society and which they have tried to foist on the rest of the world.

It is this philosophy of RobinHood-in-Reverse through super-regressive taxation at home and through the International Monetary Fund's Structural Adjustment Programme in its many disguises abroad which is the root cause of the economic crisis now facing the world. If Obama can repudiate this philosophy as a principle for managing America's socio-economy, we will begin to see the end of the inequitable world Bush and his ilk have promoted all these years.

Such repudiation would be a tough call but Obama is in a strong position to bring it off. First, his liberal party now has a majority in both houses of Congress. Second, he would be faced with a Republican opposition fighting a civil war over why it lost both the legislative and executive arms of government. Third, the press and the public are likely to remain in love with him for quite a while.

Repudiating the economic philosophy of Bush and Company will, of course, not lead to the dismantling of their legacies overnight. But if Obama can achieve even that, he would have done

enough to justify the imagination with which his presidential bid gripped Americans and the rest of the world.

In his acceptance speech, Obama repeated the slogan of his campaign, "Yes we can," no less than half a dozen times. If his victory is to mean anything to America and to the rest of the world, he must, of course, try and deliver on some, if not all, of the promises he made.

I hope and pray to God that I am proved wrong, but chances are that he won't be able to deliver much. The more important thing, however, is that he must be seen to have tried. It is simply not enough that he is the first Blackman to rule the most powerful nation on earth