



The recent US Presidential elections and Lessons for Africans - by Peter Aiyuk

Millions of people around the world stayed "glued" to their television sets on the night of November 4th and the early hours of November 5th 2008, eagerly awaiting returns for the election of the forty-fourth President of the United States of America. The magnitude of the contest was very apparent: it was going to be the very first time that an African-American would be elected president of the United States of America. Voters in the United States and people all across the globe had their reasons for preferring one candidate over the other.

It became obvious to me during the primaries of the Democratic Party that the candidacy of Senator Obama had a remarkable appeal that transcended race. Some people thought he had no chance given that he is black man with little or no name recognition competing against white candidates. After participating in the caucus in my precinct, in which my wife and I were the only African-American supporters in his camp, amongst almost ninety nine percent Caucasian supporters, I immediately ruled out the possibility that race would be a major factor in voters decision as to who will be the next President of the United States of America.



In my opinion Senator Obama brought to the political arena common sense and practical stance on issues, and a level of honesty that even political novices could comprehend and appreciate. Over the years, politicians have taken on issues that portrayed their lack of touch with the common folks. Senator Obama demonstrated that he had a profound understanding of what ordinary people go through, thanks to his upbringing and the work he did as a community organizer in Chicago. This knowledge combined with modern technology enabled him to outmaneuver his opponents, who were still applying outdated political strategies, unaware of the

socio-cultural and philosophical shifts in the country. The Obama political philosophy which I would call "Techno-Common sense" squashed the politics of polarization of the past.

For many minorities living in the United States, and for many Africans in the continent of Africa or elsewhere, the election of Senator Obama as the first African-American President of the United States of America is like a "vindication". His election gives hope to millions of people around the world who for one reason or another thought that certain heights were unattainable, or that certain dreams were unrealizable, or thought that "glass-ceilings" were unbreakable. It inspires them to work harder and to apply themselves more to changing the things they can change rather than accept the status quo.

The voters of the United States have proven that societies are dynamic and that change as a natural phenomenon is inevitable. The outcome of the election is testament to the United States striving for a "more perfect union" as every society should aspire for.

I would like to highlight some lessons which run the risk of going unnoticed as we all get caught up in the celebration of the victory of Senator Obama. These lessons I think should be as important to Africans as the outcome of the election.

We are all aware that this was a highly contested and hard-fought election between Senator Obama and Senator McCain. Unflattering words were spoken during the campaign and it was evident that some feelings were hurt. On one occasion the candidates would not even shake hands after a nationally televised debate. However, just a few minutes following the announcement of Senator Obama as the projected winner and the one who would be the forty-fourth President of the United States, a memorable and profound moment of the election night came when Senator McCain made his concession speech. He said he had called President-elect Obama and congratulated him on his victory. He even admonished some supporters for booing when he said he congratulated the President-elect. He said the election was over and that it was time for the country to come together and support the President-elect. It was during that moment that I reaffirmed the greatness of the American democratic process and the need for many African nations to practice "real" and honest democracy. Senator McCain exhibited maturity and demonstrated that in a democracy, the interests of the country were more important than personal aggrandizement.

In the same breath, another memorable moment came that night when President-elect Obama gave his victory speech. One key point during the speech was when he said he will be President of all the people and assured those who did not vote for him that his administration will be that of inclusion. His cabinet appointments so far have reflected that promise. This is again an example for African leaders to emulate.

The invitation of President-elect Obama to the white house by the current President, George Bush, is a lesson African leaders should copy. Although this is an American tradition, it however speaks volumes in the manner of smooth transition of government in the United States of America. We all know that during the campaign the President-elect linked his opponent, Senator McCain, to what he called the failed policies of the current administration. President Bush was used as the "poster child" for Senator McCain's future agenda for the country if he was elected the next president. Despite that repeated portrayal, President Bush and his wife showed hospitality and friendliness to the Obama family with a perceived sincere willingness to help the new President succeed.

President-elect Barack Obama on his part invited Senator McCain to a private meeting after the election. This indicates a desire and promise to reach out to former opponents and to work for the good of the country.

These are some of the tenets of a democracy that I believe should be consistently practiced. These lessons should be emulated by African Countries so that those societies can flourish and be places worth living in, where peoples of other lands can come to enjoy its beauty, its exquisite sceneries, its rich culture, and its compelling history, while assuring them of its social stability. Personal aggrandizement and power hoarding should give way to general interest, the pursuit of the common good, and government should again be for the people. Africans, it is time to rise up.

Written by Peter Aiyuk
President, African Union of Northern Nevada