

OBAMA AND THE CRIES FOR CHANGE

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“Obama for a change!” That’s a slogan I’ve heard often during my few days here in the United States of America. Being in the country now gives me a sense of the cry for change that Senator Barack Obama’s candidacy for USA President has raised. Whether or not he will be elected in November, and whether or not he can fulfill the hopes for change, are questions yet to be answered.

But it’s clear that the many months of competition between Barack and Senator Hilary Clinton have already demonstrated that some very unexpected change could really be possible in the USA. When I left that country twenty years ago to come to Zambia, I certainly would never have imagined that a woman and an African-American would be the leading candidates for the White House!

Sexism and racism are still very strong – in private circumstances as well as public situations – but they are at least being challenged more than might have been anticipated.

So what are the big issues that are crying out for change in the USA at this time? What are more and more people hoping for? Let me mention three issues that I noticed are very prominent indeed. And I noticed these issues advertised on signs and posters that appear in many places around the country.

SUPPORT THE TROOPS – BRING THEM HOME!

“Support the troops – bring them home!” It’s clear that the Iraq War is a big, big issue in USA politics at the moment. Recently I was visiting a city near a very large army training base. Yes, there were a few signs that said, “Support the troops” – meaning, back the war and keep giving more money to beat the Iraqi resistance and establish “democracy” there. But there were more signs – at least that I saw – that indicated that the best support for the USA troops out there in a dangerous country was to bring them back home, get out of the military mess, stop a crazy political cause.

It’s clear that a major issue getting more and more US citizens upset and willing to call for change is the Iraq War. It is seen as a war that never should have been begun because it was begun on a lie, the deceptive propaganda of the Bush administration. And it is a war that is draining precious resources from the country, besides inflicting immense suffering on the people of Iraq and destabilising the entire Middle East region.

Thousands of military personnel have been killed and injured. Enough money is spent every day on this war to meet the medical needs of Zambia and so many other African countries. And the scarce resources of diplomatic respect and negotiation skills have been wasted away by partisan interests, personal pride and economic greed.

So when Obama calls for a change in the Iraq War policy, his words ring favourably. What that change may entail – immediate withdrawal of troops or phased withdrawal or ?? – are yet to be seen. But the memory among many citizens of the disgraceful defeat in the Vietnam War of almost fifty years ago just strengthens the cry for change.

HOME FOR SALE, EASY TERMS!

Another call for change is promoted by the feeling that the USA economy is falling apart. Not disintegrating in the rapid and tragic sense of the Zimbabwean economy, but in a way that shows up, for instance, in the sale of thousands of homes across the country. I noticed in the cities I recently visited the posting of signs in front of many, many homes, advertising “Homes for Sale, Easy Terms.”

Several years ago, many homes were being purchased by ordinary citizens who took advantage of cheap loans, easy mortgages, and invested what little income they had in hopes of the future security of personally owned homes. Other homes were purchased by housing speculators who hoped to make big profits in the near future. But with a slowdown in the economy, and an excess of housing units on the market, homeowners are now finding themselves trapped by heavy debt. Foreclosures on mortgages are becoming the order of the day.

The signs in front of so many houses for sale are sad indicators of a faltering economy. Ripple effects are felt as workers lose previously well-paying construction jobs and industrial production of appliances and furniture declines.

The Bush administration has managed the national economy very poorly and that economy is now being doubly hit by the expenses of the War and the rapidly rising prices of oil. It's no wonder that cries for change are being loudly heard!

BE HAPPY, BE GREEN!

Everyone knows that the USA is a major producer of greenhouse gases and the consequent global warming effects of climate change around the world. And more and more people in the States are calling for a change in environmental policies that are so foolish, so wasteful, so dangerous.

I spotted a sign on the back of a big bus in one city that read, “Be Happy, Be Green!” The bus was using a mix of electricity and petrol to power its very efficient engines. Many thousands of automobiles, called “hybrids,” are also running on that electricity-petro mix for electric motor and internal combustion engines. Initially expensive to buy, but in the long run much cheaper to run and much kinder to the environment.

“Recycling” is a big thing in the USA, with plastic goods – such as the bottles and bags that disgracefully litter Zambian streets and fields – glass containers and paper products (newspapers, cardboard boxes, etc.) are carefully sorted out and disposed of with respect for the environment.

The rising global price of oil is reinforcing calls for more sane energy policies in the States. Again, change is the order of the day.

POLITICS OF CHANGE FOR ZAMBIA

As interesting as the Obama campaign might be for us in Zambia to follow, I think there should be a lesson for our local politicians to learn. And that lesson is to pay attention to the cries for change coming from so many citizens these days.

Change in policy priorities that don't place adequate focus on education and health services for our most important natural resource, the Zambian woman, man and child. Change in

budget allocations that don't give sufficient priority to agriculture. Change in transparency of government operations that still facilitate so much corruption. Change in a national political culture that now talks more about "reconciliation" between individuals than about programmes to benefit the majority of the citizens.

Obama might go to the White House because he will try to listen to and answer the cries for change. What Zambian might go to State House for the same wise and ethical reason?

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