Obama: The New Contours of Power*

Jerry Harris and Carl Davidson

a) Professor of History, DeVry University, Chicago, Illinois
   E-mail: gharris234@comcast.net
b) Networking for Democracy, Chicago, Illinois
   E-mail: carld717@aol.com

Abstract
Barack Obama’s election as US president marks a historic cultural shift in US political life, and is a major victory for progressive forces. But what is the nature of the broad-based alliance that placed him in the White House, how was it forged and from what did it derive its strength? The global economic crisis has shockingly exposed the bankruptcy of hitherto dominant and unfettered neoliberalism and opened the way for setting a genuinely progressive social and economic agenda. This article analyzes the challenges that face the new administration and the balance of progressive forces that could make a profound and lasting difference to US society.

Keywords
Apollo Alliance, BRICs, Civil Rights movement, global economic crisis, Iraq war, John McCain, neoliberalism, ‘soft’ power

American progressives have won a major victory in helping to defeat John McCain and placing Barack Obama in the White House. The far Right has been broadly rebuffed, the neoconservative war hawks displaced, and the die-hard advocates of neoliberal economics are in thorough disarray. Of great importance, one long-standing crown jewel of white supremacy, the whites-only sign on the Oval Office, has been tossed into the dustbin of history.

Behind the political victory is the historic cultural shift rooted in the Civil Rights struggle. Not only was a Black man elected president, but one whose name shouts its Third World otherness. Those of us whose initial political experience was the Civil Rights movement, with its reactive wave of racist violence and hatred, have been deeply moved by the Obama victory. Moreover, Obama’s personal history is grounded in the multicultural and global reality of today’s world. Born in Hawaii, the most Third World of all US states, and

* This article appeared in Race & Class, Volume 50, #4, April-June 2009.
spending his early years in Indonesia adds to Obama’s universal appeal as an important symbol of multicultural globalization. In this, he reflects the sensibilities of today’s youth and the first glimpse of US society in a new century.

The depth of the historical victory was revealed in the jubilation of millions who spontaneously gathered in family homes, neighborhoods and downtowns across the country, as the media networks called Obama the winner. When President-Elect Barack Hussein Obama took the platform in Chicago to deliver his powerful but sobering victory speech, millions of Americans of every race and age literally danced in the streets and wept with joy, celebrating the achievement of a dramatic milestone in a 400-year struggle, and anticipating a new period of hope and possibility.

While celebrating Obama’s election is important, a more critical task is understanding the shift in power and the political character of the emerging hegemonic bloc. What are the social forces put into motion by the ever-worsening economic crisis, the failures of neoliberal globalization and the gathering demographic changes in US society? What sectors of the capitalist class will the new administration represent and what tensions are already evident inside this alliance, particularly between the hierarchy of elites and the social base? We’ll attempt to answer these and other questions as we explore Obama and the new contours of power.

The Defeated Bloc

First, we need to review the defeated ruling bloc that John McCain attempted to ride to power. Ironically, his stiff war-bruised body seemed the perfect symbolic representation of the battered Iraq occupation and broken economic model he sought to lead. In this bloc, the most influential sectors were the military/industrial complex and low-road global speculators firmly entrenched in Wall Street. Of all US industries, the military/industrial complex is the least globalized, receiving the majority of its profits from government contracts.1 Its war culture is steeped in patriotic chauvinism, and neoconservatives as the industry’s ideological frontmen rallied around McCain.

As for global speculators, Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson is a fine representative. As ex-chairman of Goldman Sachs, he pushed financial deregulation and cross-border integration that spread the economic crisis to banks and institutions worldwide. Paulson’s initial $700 billion bail-out package was proposed with no legal or constitutional oversight, reflecting his own

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