



ISS Seminar Report: The US Presidential Elections and the Implications for Africa Pretoria, 14 November 2008

Speakers and topics:

Eric M. Bost – U.S Ambassador to Pretoria.

Chair: Dr Jakkie Cilliers, ISS Executive Director

Rapporteur: Leruo Moremong, Intern, African Security Analysis Programme.

ON Tuesday, 4 November 2008, roughly 53 percent of over 130 million U.S voters elected Barack Obama as the next president of their country. His campaign and ultimate election was remarkable in many respects. In addition to raising unprecedented sums of money (nearly \$600 million), Obama's campaign was, like none before it, able to successfully mobilize youth voters and harness the power of technology, especially the internet to its advantage. In being elected America's 44th President, Obama's election also repudiates the so-called Bradley Effect. Perhaps the most defining and 'symbolic' feature of these presidential elections however, has been the selection of an African-American to the highest office in the land. This has raised expectations both domestically and throughout the world of a paradigm shift in American domestic and foreign policy, away from the 'politics of fear' arguably used by the Bush administration towards more constructive engagement. This has been especially true for the African continent.

On Friday, 14 November 2008 the Institute for Security Studies hosted a seminar, the main focus of which was to examine the U.S presidential elections and the possible consequences they may hold for Africa. The chairperson for the seminar, Dr. Jakkie Cilliers, began by noting manner in which the 2008 U.S presidential elections have enthused the world and Africa in particular. Seldom, he argued, has anybody been able to stimulate such emotions throughout the world. In this regard, Barack Obama, though generating significantly contrasting emotions, has been comparable to George W. Bush.

With the latter having contributed significantly to negative perceptions of the U.S throughout the world (evidenced by one of the lowest approval ratings for an outgoing President), President-elect Obama has the monumental task of restoring global perceptions of the U.S perceptions, along with navigating through daunting domestic and international challenges. Turning his attention to the subject of the day, Dr. Cilliers called upon Ambassador Bost to lead the discussion.

Ambassador Bost began his presentation by giving an overview of the 'historic' U.S election, highlighting other dynamics, including early voters (who comprised a third of the total voters), high youth turnout and total campaign spending (which, if congressional races are included came up to around \$5.2 billion). While acknowledging the historic nature of this election and the euphoria generated by it around the world, the Ambassador sought to stress that President-elect Obama would, on January 20, be elected President of the United States of America, and not of any other state. The significance of this point, according to the Ambassador was to temper (mainly international) expectations of an Obama administration. While there is no doubt that Obama will adopt a holistic perspective to most issues, being a first term president it is more than likely that domestic challenges will take priority over international issues. Another point illustrated by Ambassador Bost to suggest that Obama's administration will be inward looking is the gravity of the domestic challenges currently facing the U.S which, he suggested, would have to be dealt with prior to meeting any international expectations. The ambassador cited the loss of 1 million jobs in the U.S this year, the highest rate of unemployment in 14 years and a significant rate of foreclosures as some evidence of the enormity of the domestic challenges confronting the next administration. He was, however, quick to suggest his were only hypotheses of the actions of the incoming administration, rather than facts.

One of the reasons offered by the Ambassador as to why U.S Africa/ South Africa policy is unlikely to improve was that the outgoing Bush administration has made some significant contributions to Africa's development in its 8-year reign. Referring first to the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, PEPFAR, the Ambassador stated that in the last five years, \$1.5 billion had been provided to South Africa to help address the HIV/Aids crisis. This year alone, he added, \$600 million dollars had been channeled towards this effort. This, he suggested, was "more money than the Clinton administration had provided [for the fight against HIV/ Aids] in eight years." The second point made by the Ambassador to highlight the benevolence of the U.S to Africa was the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), under which \$9 billion worth of goods, 98% of which, he stated, is duty free. Ambassador Bost also referred to the African Education Initiative. Starting in 2002 the Bush Administration, according to the Ambassador, has authorized and appropriated \$600 million for the education of primarily girls. Under the Millennium Challenge Account, \$1.5 billion had been provided to several Southern African countries to assist in conflict resolution and a move towards democracy.

According to Ambassador Bost, a comparison of Republican and Democratic administrations in the last 50 years shows that with regard to trade, the former are more disposed to free trade than their Democrats counterparts. Under the current administration

the continent, he said, had received six times more aid (about \$6 billion) than since the Truman administration. The importance of this point was to introduce caution in the expectations South Africans and Africans in general, might hold for an Obama administration.