



Seminar Summary Report of “The US Presidential Election and its Implication for Africa”

**United Nations Conference Center
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The seminar aimed to analyze the implications of the 2008 US Presidential Election on Africa. In addressing the issue, two speakers who specialised on the subject were invited to make their presentations at the seminar.

The first speaker, Dr. Steven Erkovich, who came from the American University of Paris and specialised in US politics and foreign policy, gave a presentation on *The Foreign Policy of the Next President of the United States: Focus on Africa*. He started his presentation by giving a brief overview of how United States Foreign Policy towards Africa had changed as a result of the end of Cold War, from being purely strategic to being a mixture of interests and values. The end of the Cold War was marked by particular events such as the end of Soviet Union, which lost its superpower status and retreated from Africa, and also the 9/11 terrorist attack, which changed the entire geostrategic thinking and system. He noted that the current themes of US Foreign Policy towards Africa began during the Clinton administration. Furthermore, he argued that four basic clusters determine or can be seen as motivations behind the current US foreign policy towards Africa. These are;

- Primarily, the US interest of integrating Africa in the global economy and trade. This is mainly because of the Americans generally think that facilitating free trade, in terms of reducing as much as possible the

limitations to do plenty of business in Africa, could spread wealth, alleviate poverty and tackle root causes of costly wars.

- The second motive is the Americans' interest to search for peace and security in Africa, which is not only pursued for the benefit of the Africans, but also for safeguarding US interests and security as well. According to the speaker, this is especially important to the US in its war against terrorism.
- Thirdly, the US wants a strong democracy and good governance to take hold in Africa. This is as a result of the Americans' need for the world to share their deep core values. According to the speaker, in a world where values and beliefs are shared, people will speak the same language, and negotiations and diplomacy will be easier and more predictable; democracies can only do real business with democracies. This will be a benefit to the Americans, since they want to do business with African states, which are endowed with huge resources.
- Finally, the last motive of the US policy towards Africa is its commitment to fight diseases in Africa.

While analysing the two presidential candidates' programmes with regard to US foreign policy towards Africa, the speaker highlighted that some of the themes and propositions made by the candidates are similar. He mentioned that both candidates were interested in the problems and potentials of Africa. Dr. Erkovich further noted that the substance of US foreign policy towards Africa will not change; rather, the style might be different. In this context, if Obama is to be elected, Africans, who would be expecting more from the US, but will only get some *Tough Love* including straight forward criticism. He then talked about some of Obama's foreign policy propositions towards Africa. These include the establishment of a coherent strategy to handle the situation in Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, halting the *genocide* in Sudan, tackling effectively corruption in Kenya, establishing more maritime presence in the Niger Delta, and increasing pressure on President Robert

Mugabe. On the situation in Zimbabwe, McCain even went a step further, saying that he would mobilize the international community to put sanctions on Zimbabwe and oust President Mugabe from power.

The second speaker, Dr. Joseph Vincent Ebode, who is an expert in political studies at the University of Yaoundé II, gave a presentation entitled *The Candidature of Senator Barack Obama: An African Reading*. The presenter started by briefly addressing the candidature in the US presidential election. Noting that in any political system, political parties will rationally select their best possible candidates to stand for them during elections, the speaker elaborated the rationale for Obama's candidacy by identifying two causes that are internal and external in nature. As to the internal level, the candidature of Obama is a result of the ordinary evolution of the American political system. On the one hand, it illustrates the maturity of the American political system, and, on the other hand, it demonstrates a political repositioning undertaken by the two principal political parties with respect to the black community. The maturity of the American political system started with the appointments of prominent African American figures like Andrew Young, General Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, Susan Rice, Jendayi Frazer, General Kip Ward, and also with the first participation in a presidential nomination contest of the first African American Jessie Jackson. According to Dr. Ebode, the United States gave a trial to the African Americans, as mayors, judges of the Supreme Court, senators, ministers and generals. Thus, African Americans were handed the opportunity to prove they could participate and even lead in the American decision making system.

The presenter also explained the reason for Obama's candidature relating to international politics in two ways. According to him, the first reason behind the candidature of Obama lays with an American strategy for winning the resources and market of Africa, not only in a competition with China but also with Europe. The idea here is that Africa, because of its immense resources including the forests of the basin of Congo, the oil of the Gulf of Guinea,

became a 'strategic zone of interests' for the United States. Therefore, for the United States, the election of the senator Obama would crown a strategy of regaining Africa. The speaker pointed out the second reason for Obama's candidature is related to the prospects for an exit strategy from the war in Iraq. It is widely known that Obama went against the decision for the United States to go into Iraq. If Obama succeeds in extricating the United States from Iraq, it could free up billions of dollars which could be invested in Africa.

During the discussion time, it has been argued that whichever candidate came to power, Africans should not expect too much and too many new things from the new administration. The interests of the United States in Africa are pillared primarily on doing business. United States foreign policy will continue to comprise of its four current themes, which started from the time of Clinton's administration. It is noted that, though both candidates talked about their interest in addressing the multiple problems of Africans, they might not be able to respond quickly. This will be as a result of the existence of much more urgent issues such as the crises in Iraq and Afghanistan, and also the problem with Iran, which might monopolise the new administration's full attention.

From the Africans' standpoint, Obama's candidacy was not a random political event. It was mainly done to win the Africans' heart and minds in a make-or-die competition with China, India and Europe. It was also argued that since the United States is a business-minded civilization, the business of diplomacy is to do business with anyone. However, American business leaders prefer that business is predictable; for instance, they would prefer to conduct business with democracies that follow free market. Finally, it was mentioned that much cannot be done about the current approach of looking at the numerous issues of United States-Africa relations. However, it would be advantageous to intensely look at these issues from the perspective of "What the Africans can do to influence the administration in Washington to their advantage".