



Revisiting the Obama Legacy

By Rasna Warah



Unlike his last visit to Kenya in July 2015, when large sections of Nairobi were effectively under lockdown and when the country virtually came to a standstill when the “son of Kogelo” returned to his “homeland”, Barack Obama’s “homecoming” this week did not generate as much excitement or gushing tributes. This was expected, as the former United States president was not in Kenya on an official visit but was here to open a centre for youth in his father’s village, a brainchild of his half-sister Auma Obama. Besides the “welcome home” slogans that usually accompany such visits, Obama’s presence in the country hardly generated the kind of euphoria that was evident the last time he came to Kenya - this time the euphoria was more apparent in South Africa, where Obama delivered an inspiring lecture on the anniversary of Nelson Mandela’s 100th birthday after his Kenya visit.

Not to mention that his visit coincided with a highly controversial and embarrassing summit in Helsinki that saw President Donald Trump essentially throw his own intelligence services under the bus in the presence of the Russian President Vladimir Putin, who himself spent some time as a KGB intelligence officer. The contrast between the megalomaniacal, misogynistic and fundamentally dishonest Trump and his predecessor - the charismatic, intelligent and eloquent Obama who has rock star appeal - was painfully evident. When Obama works a room, you can be sure he will gain more converts. His messiah-like messages have silenced even his most vocal critics. On the other hand, Trump’s utterances generally elicit shock, followed by a deep sense of trepidation. After that bizarre summit in Helsinki, Americans and the world are grappling with the idea that the US

president might have been “captured” by the Russian state.

And unlike Bill Clinton and Trump, there is also no whiff of a sexual scandal surrounding Obama. Obama never really knew his Kenyan father, who abandoned him when he was just a toddler, but this childhood trauma does not seem to have had a damaging effect on his own relationship with his wife Michelle and his two daughters. Everyone knows, and can see, that he is a man who is deeply committed to his family and is not threatened by strong women.

Obama brought a rarefied dignity to the Oval Office. He will be remembered for his reflective leadership style and the seriousness with which he took his responsibilities as leader of the most powerful nation on earth. He has definitely earned a name in the history books for not just being the first black (or rather, mixed race) president of the United States, but also for mending decades-old fences with countries such as Cuba and Iran. He will be remembered, among many of his other accomplishments, for advocating for the rights of all people, be they racial minorities, gays, people with disabilities or women.

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However, there are many things that Obama failed to accomplish, and many things that he actually made worse. Despite his African heritage, he failed to bridge the racial divide in America; some believe that race relations may have worsened under his tenure, perhaps the result of a backlash against his presidency and against black people’s aspirations for equality. This backlash is probably what got his successor Trump elected. Racism has now become an epidemic in America, and has demolished the myth that the US is a land where everyone - regardless of race - enjoys equal freedoms and rights. While it was not Obama’s job to fix centuries-old prejudices in America, he failed to address the issue of racism in America forcefully.

But it is Obama’s foreign policy that has left many of his supporters puzzled. Obama strengthened Clinton’s “no American boots on the ground” policy in foreign conflicts by intensifying drone attacks in places such as Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, which are believed to have led to many civilian deaths and which are said to have led to more radicalisation. Most people are not aware of the fact that Obama used more drones against terror suspects than his predecessor George Bush, who was more prone to engage American troops in direct combat in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

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When Barack Obama became president, the American public believed that the US government would focus on the economy and scale down its wars and counterterrorism operations. However, while Obama did bring back troops from Iraq, as he promised, the war on terror became more clandestine. He increased the use of drones that targeted suspected terrorists (which also led to several deaths

of innocent civilians, including children) and continued with mass electronic surveillance. Yet despite the billions spent on intelligence and security, groups such as the Islamic State still managed to take root under his watch. And Guantanamo Bay, the US detention facility in Cuba established for terrorist suspects, still remains open, though the number of detainees have fallen significantly from about 700 under George Bush to just 40 today.

A few years ago, *The Washington Post* reported that the Obama administration had built a “constellation of secret drone bases” in the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, including one site in Ethiopia, ostensibly to help the US better able to monitor and control terrorists, and also allow the superpower to gain access to the region’s natural resources. Drone activity in Somalia apparently intensified in the country between June and September 2011, weeks before Kenya’s invasion of Somalia in October 2011. Obama’s supporters may argue that targeted drones are less damaging than direct conflict, but those who have suffered from these attacks do not quite feel the same way.

The Obama administration’s support of opposition groups in Syria has also been criticised for turning what might have been a short civil war into a long-drawn conflict that gave birth to terrorist organisations (which masqueraded as moderate Islamist rebel forces) such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. No one knows yet how or where the chips in Syria will fall, but history may judge Obama harshly for his intervention there.

But perhaps Obama’s most harmful intervention in a foreign country was his decision to support a “regime change” in Libya. While most agree that Muammar Gaddafi was a dictator, under his strong-man leadership style Libya remained a stable and prosperous country. When US, British and French warplanes bombed Libya in the name of defending human rights and when Gaddafi was killed, the country descended into chaos and anarchy as factions fought each other for supremacy, just like what happened in Iraq when George Bush decided to lead a regime change there.

The countries that participated in the Libyan bombings are not likely to admit this but there would be no flood of refugees entering Europe via Libya if Gaddafi was still in charge. His regime kept Europe safe from human traffickers who are now exploiting vulnerable Syrians and poor Africans and making a fortune in the process. I am sure this uncomfortable truth doesn’t sit well in Obama’s conscience and will haunt him for a long time to come.

Meanwhile, the jury is still out on Obama’s decision to find and kill Osama bin Laden. Could it be that this killing was extra-judicial? Bin Laden’s sons have accused Obama of violating basic legal principles by killing an unarmed man, shooting his family and disposing the body in the sea. Bin Laden’s son Omar, who has publicly denounced violence of all kinds, has raised the question of why his father was not arrested and tried in a court of law, but his voice was muted by the self-congratulatory stance of the Obama administration and its cheerleaders who viewed the killing as justified in line with the US government’s war against terror.

Critics of Obama also point out that press freedom worsened under his leadership and whistleblowers were unfairly vilified – despite Obama’s stated commitment to protect freedom of expression. Salon.com commentator Glenn Greenwald has said that the Obama administration launched a broad (and possibly unprecedented) war on whistleblowers and investigative journalists, including harassing WikiLeaks supporters by detaining them at airports and seizing their laptops without warrants.

Former *New York Times* reporter David Shipler has chronicled the many ways the Obama administration created an atmosphere of fear among journalists and ordinary citizens, including by renewing the notorious Patriot Act that enhanced the US government’s surveillance powers and

gave security agents authority to comb databases and emails of suspected criminals and terrorists. Shipler claims that press freedom weakened under Obama and that the US president allowed draconian search-and-seizure methods used by the very dictators he often denounced.

“The most odious aspect of this Climate of Fear is that it fundamentally changes how the citizenry thinks of itself and its relationship to the Government. A state can offer all the theoretical guarantees of freedom in the world, but those become meaningless if citizens are afraid to exercise them. In that climate, the Government need not even act to abridge rights; a fearful populace will voluntarily refrain on its own from exercising those rights,” said Greenwald, who gained notoriety after his disclosures of classified documents by the American whistleblower Edward Snowden that were published in *The Guardian* newspaper in 2013.

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Meanwhile, Snowden is still holed up in Russia because he fears he will be arrested if he returns to the United States. Snowden revealed to the world how the terrorist bogeyman has been used to conduct mass surveillance and to spy on civilians through mobile phones and the Internet. These activities are clearly unconstitutional and violate the US Bill of Rights, but they are tolerated because the American public has been made to feel sufficiently afraid to not ask too many questions.

In *The Rise of the American Corporate Security State*, Beatrice Edwards, the Executive Director of the Washington-based Government Accountability Project, shows how the withdrawal of Americans’ rights, including their right to privacy, has been accomplished because Americans have been repeatedly told that they are facing imminent danger. Americans have thus willingly surrendered their civil rights because they are frightened. This clampdown on civil rights intensified during George W. Bush’s administration but became more secretive under Obama’s.

The nexus between government and big corporations has also been strengthened. The war on terror has been extremely lucrative for private corporations providing security and intelligence services. Edwards believes that clandestine electronic warfare is not going to go away any time soon, as the business of intelligence has proved to be extremely profitable for certain corporations. US corporations and the US intelligence agencies are bedfellows in the deal. What’s worse, because this war is silent and invisible, Americans don’t know where or when it is being waged. This is a truly chilling scenario.

Since 9/11, the United States has spent more than \$500 billion on intelligence, of which 70 per cent is spent on contracts with private corporations. And because security contracts are deemed to be “secret” in the interest of national security, no one knows what the money is spent on. Edwards shows how increasing budgets for security and intelligence agencies have coincided with greater protection for rogue bankers and financial institutions, as happened during the 2008 financial crisis when Obama bailed out the very institutions that created the crisis in the first place. While Al Qaeda leaders became the targets of intense manhunts, illegal detention and execution, the millionaires who made thousands of people homeless and crashed the economy got away scot-free. Meanwhile, whistleblowers such as Snowden were deemed traitors for exposing unconstitutional and illegal

surveillance of civilians around the world.

Edwards admits that Obama is not entirely to blame for this state of affairs because every US president is hostage to the big corporations and to what she calls “the Deep State”, a rogue branch of the US government that does not respond to the president, Congress or the courts. (Trump has given the Deep State a new meaning by referring to all those opposed to his policies as belonging to it.)

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Apologists for Obama claim that he is a pragmatist and could only do so much in a country where partisan politics and Congress determine government policy. Others say that Obama is just an American liberal, not the revolutionary that so many imagined him to be, and so cannot be judged for the radical reforms he failed to bring about but who can be credited for maintaining the model of freedom and democracy that is cherished by the majority of Americans.

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This dictatorship has now manifested itself in the Donald Trump presidency - which may lead future historians to ponder whether Obama’s presidency set the stage for this alarming state of affairs. Obama is no doubt a wiser and much more intelligent president than Trump, but he did not manage to reverse or extinguish the dystopian ideology that led to the rise of Trumpism and its tendencies towards fascism that the world is now witnessing.

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