

## Obama holds up a mirror to the French

Print

By Dominique Moïsi

Published: June 9 2008 17:34 | Last updated: June 9 2008 17:34

If the US elections were held in France, Barack Obama would win by a landslide. The “Obamania” wave that has **seized France, like most of the world**, comes as no surprise but has specific characteristics.

In France, the only other country in the world that sees itself imbued with a universal message, the US has, at least since the second world war, acted as a mirror reflecting the country's deepest fears and hopes. The huge audience that gathered last week at the invitation of a “pro-Obama French committee” in the main amphitheatre of the Institute of Political Studies in Paris expressed, of course, a rejection of the Bush years. But it translated above all a longing for the return of an America capable of constituting once again a source of hope and no longer a cause of fear for the world – an America that would be admired for its recovered essence and not loathed for its abysmal performances.

This America is of course incarnated by Mr Obama. In symbolic terms, the fact that, in the US, black could have become the “colour of hope” is a source of both French admiration for America and self-examination for France, a country that has yet to come to terms with its colonial heritage. It is therefore logical that two questions dominated the pro-Obama debate in Paris, a debate from which foreign policy considerations were largely absent – as if, in the minds of the French gathered there, America the model was already prevailing over America the actor.

The two questions were: could an Obama-like phenomenon be possible in France; and could Mr Obama really be elected in the US – that is, in spite of the colour of his skin? The answer to the first question was an emphatic No and to the second a very prudent Yes.

The No answer given by the audience expressed a regret and a concern. No one in France from such a complex and mixed ethnic background as Mr Obama could have reached such a high level in political life.

The comparison with the French black community was of course difficult to make. The majority of black elites who were prominent in the politics of the fourth republic (1946-58) had left France with their children to take control of the new states born out of the decolonisation process. Even a comparison with the north African immigrant community, a more fitting one for France, would not yield better results. Today, the most prominent person of such origins is Rachida Dati, the bright but abrasive minister of justice who is fighting for political survival in a very hostile social and professional environment.

Of course last year's presidential contest in France between Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal is also seen by many in retrospect as a dress rehearsal for the forthcoming US elections, with the Republicans' John McCain in the role of an older equivalent of Mr Sarkozy keen to emphasise the “rupture” with his predecessor, and Mr Obama in the role of a much more intellectually sophisticated and charismatic Ms Royal, stressing the compassionate, social, participatory card.

Of course, some would see instead a comparison between Mr Sarkozy and Mr Obama, the latter being a much more positive version of the former, both calling for the rediscovery of old and traditional values, but clearly not the same, as Mr Obama is “surfing on hope” the way Mr Sarkozy was “surfing on work”.

Yet there was agreement in the Paris meeting that it would take one if not two generations to see in France the appearance on the political scene of a “French Obama”. The educational and political systems as they exist today were simply not ready to give birth to such a political creature.

Admiring the US for an openness that had led Mr Obama to the position he occupies today – the first black nominee with a chance to win in American and western history at large – the French audience was at the same time visibly more obsessed, maybe more than the US electorate, by the race factor. Mr Obama may not be “black” in the strict sense of the term, but

in terms of perception that is what he is, and the question remains: can a black candidate become president of the US?

The debaters kept returning to the question in an obsessive manner, as if the French, with a deep sense of schadenfreude, were ready in advance to denounce an America that had transcended itself in seeming racial openness, only to fail at the very last minute to keep its promises – as if it were “too early for America too” to have a “coloured” president.

The barely stifled references to his potential assassination constituted another illustration of that phenomenon, as if in the French mind hope in America since President John F. Kennedy’s years could be associated only with death and doomed to end in a brutal and tragic manner.

Whatever the result of this November’s US presidential election – and it is impossible to predict today – one thing is certain: America, thanks to Mr Obama, has returned to be the emotional centre of gravity of the world, and this time not only in tragic terms as it was after September 11 2001, or in negative terms as during most of the George W. Bush years.

What the US has lost in terms of real clout – economically, diplomatically and militarily – it can regain with its votes if, and only if, of course, the candidate of hope can deliver on his promises.

*The writer is a senior adviser at France’s Institute for International Relations*

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2008

"FT" and "Financial Times" are trademarks of the Financial Times. [Privacy policy](#) | [Terms](#)  
© Copyright The Financial Times Ltd 2008.