

Obama victory could be mixed blessing for Filipinos

By Gus Mercado
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DALLAS, HOUSTON, Nov. 14 (PinoyGlobal) - In his mantra of “*Change has come to America, This is our time, Yes we can!*”, Barack Obama made history last Nov. 4 as the first American of color to break the race barrier and win the highest post in the land. But will the presumed blessings from the historic elections be felt by Filipinos and Filipino-Americans? As the folksy defeated vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin was prone to say: “You betcha!”

Senator Obama has won the plurality of the elusive Filipino vote, which went for Bill Clinton in both of his presidential contests, stayed with Al Gore in 2000, then switched to George W. Bush in 2004.

A survey of 840 active Filipino community leaders in America showed a strong shift of undecided registered voters towards Obama in the last several days before the elections that gave him a decisive 58-42 share of the Filipino vote.

But the Filipinos were not always in Obama’s camp. In fact, the majority were ambivalent towards Obama for a long time, not so much out of racial prejudice and gullibility to vicious anti-Obama propaganda as the Manila pundits thought, but for two practical reasons: (a) a widespread discomfort about Obama’s readiness to serve as President; and (b) many Filipinos had become enamored of Senator Hillary Clinton partly due to her personal closeness to Filipino leaders and her straightforward commitment to support issues that are near and dear to Filipinos. Mrs. Clinton was the only one among the four senators vying for the presidency who suspended her campaign to return to Washington to vote for the all-important Senate Bill 1315 that approved equity pension benefits for our hapless WWII veterans.

No presidential candidate since Bill Clinton has received such a broad-based support that spanned across voting sectors: Obama won 96 percent of the



Gus Mercado

African-American vote as expected, 66 percent of the Latino group, 63 percent of the Asian vote, 54% of Catholics and 68% of new voters.

Following the national trend, the Filipino voters were influenced by the economic factors such as family income, jobs, housing and health care – the issues that are referred to as “pocketbook issues”, closely followed by issues that are important to Filipinos, such as immigration and the veterans’ issues, national security and the Iraqi War.

Overall, the Filipinos who voted in the historic elections agreed with the mainstream Americans who saw in Obama their best hope to change their lives for the better. They believed that Obama had the best chance and the best abilities to rebuild an American economy that has grown dangerously unstable. They also believed that Obama was the best choice to rebuild the American

position and image in the world, to restore our ties with traditional allies and to end the disastrous Iraqi war. They felt confident that with his extraordinary ability to reach out to people from all walks of life, regardless of social stature and color of skin, the newly-elected President could emerge as a strong, vibrant, fresh and charismatic leader who will inspire the people with his eloquence and unusual intelligence, and change the course of the nation.

The Filipinos were inspired by the moving words of the president-elect in his acceptance speech at Grant Field, Chicago on election night: "Tonight we proved once more that the true strength of our nation comes not from the might of our arms or the scale of our wealth, but from the enduring power of our ideals: democracy, liberty, opportunity, and unyielding hope."

What an Obama Presidency would mean for Filipinos

As one of the growing minority groups in America, the Filipinos can relate vicariously to the struggles and eventual triumph of a minority candidate in conquering the racial divide and winning the presidency of the most powerful nation on earth. If an African-American can dream of becoming president and make it happen, anything is possible. For the first time, young Filipinos in America were inspired and energized to partake in the political process. This bodes well for the future leadership of the Fil-Am community.

But if Filipinos are expecting a dramatic bonanza from an Obama presidency, they might be in for a big disappointment.

To be sure, urgent reforms by a populist president in the areas of universal health care, education, individual freedoms, lower taxes for the poor, and ending the war in Iraq will certainly benefit a large segment of the working class, including many Filipinos. And, significantly, Obama has already given verbal and written assurances to our Filipino leaders in Washington that he would support our WWII veterans' claims for equity benefits, as well as an all-encompassing and comprehensive immigration reform. These words of support from the new leader of the free world are very comforting to our remaining WWII veterans who are now dying at a rate of 7 a day. If he delivers on this promise, his support could be the crucial turning point in this depressing 65-years-old issue.

But we don't foresee a major shift in U.S. foreign policy towards the Philippines with an Obama

presidency. If anything, there are potentially devastating downsides. If he makes good on his campaign pledge to penalize U.S. companies that outsource to foreign countries, it could prove disastrous to the fledgling call centers and the rest of the outsource contracting companies in the Philippines that are already hit hard by the current global economic crisis. This will hurt a struggling Philippine economy as many call centers and BPO offices in the Philippines may have to lay off the Filipinos that staff them. After the elections, some American companies in the Philippines reportedly have tentatively scrapped plans for expansion. This will not augur well for the economic future of the country.

Similarly, if the Obama era increases taxes on corporations and force them to pay for employees' health care, as stated in their election platform, it would hurt small business owners which many Filipinos in America are, cause them to reduce staff, who are also mostly Filipinos.

Hopefully, these campaign promises of the Obama campaign are just that – political posturing to win the middle class votes. If he was serious about these promises, Filipinos would jump off the Obama bandwagon as quickly as they got on it.

Be that as it may, regardless of whether we voted for Senator Obama or not, or whether we agree with his economic policies or not, we should now come together under his umbrella of hope and his vision for a better and safer America. A politically and economically empowered Fil-Am community has unique strengths to offer to President-Elect Obama – in response to his call for support from all sectors of society, that we may all be an integral part of his dream of uniting and rebuilding our great nation. #

(Send reactions to this article to gmercado@grandecom.net)

(About the author: **Gus Mercado** has been an active leader of the NAFFAA and the FPACC national federations for more than 15 years, and community leader in Texas for the last 25 years. A three-time recipient of the "U.S. Jaycee of the Year" and numerous other distinguished community service awards, he is currently Executive Director of the Philippine-American Chamber of Commerce in Texas and Chairman/CEO of **Datalogix**, a thriving high-tech engineering company that has provided high-paying jobs and economic empowerment to hundreds of Filipino engineers in North America.)