

King of the world: Obama and the promise of world peace

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My grandmother could not sleep. She was too excited about the “crowning of that wonderful black King in America”. She thinks he may bring peace to the world. My grandmother is not alone in confusing the inauguration of Barack Obama with a coronation. The transfer of power in the United States looked very regal to me too.

What is unusual about my grandmother’s excitement is that she is a pious old Muslim woman who lives in a small town in the north of Iran. My grandmother does not watch TV and I would be surprised if she could point to the United States on a map. She has never before expressed any interest in politics, let alone world politics. I had no idea she knew about President Obama. She is apparently not alone. Her whole town is excited. They are praying for him.

The world’s fascination and admiration for newly inaugurated President Barack Obama is astounding. I do not believe any other American President has ever enjoyed so much support around the world, along with so many high expectations. Perhaps my grandmother is not wrong in thinking of Barack Obama as the king of the world. The President of the world’s only superpower seems to wield extraordinary power, but can he ever fulfil the world’s hope of peace and justice?

Perhaps the world will just be relieved if America stops the unilateral interventionism of the Bush administration, which resulted in two wars and an indefinite “war on terror”. There is hope that President Obama will bring the troops home from Iraq and rely more heavily on diplomacy. Obama has already signed an executive order closing down the detention centre for “enemy combatants” on Guantanamo Bay, has outlawed the use of torture by US personnel and has ordered the Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.) to shut down its secret “black site” overseas prisons.

However, the euphoria about the election of President Obama seems to go far beyond these acts and promises. I believe my grandmother and many like her around the world envision a dramatically new world order. They may end up being disappointed. The men and women President Obama has appointed to his cabinet do not suggest that he envisions a radical change in America’s foreign policy. For example, President Obama is keeping Robert Gates, who served as C.I.A. director under the first President Bush, in the position of Defence Secretary. The Obama administration will hopefully rely more heavily on diplomacy but it is unlikely that its aims and goals will be very different to previous administrations. The Obama administration, like all US administrations, will aim to serve US national interests. Serving US national interests does not always result in the most just outcomes. To believe President Obama would place justice above the interests of the country he leads would be naïve. Obama is after all the President of the United States and not the world’s leader.

Obama is clearly focused on achieving significant changes in US domestic policies. The United States is broken. People are out of jobs, the health care system is a joke and the education system is failing millions of Americans. President Obama recognises these problems and wants to fix them. He is putting his energy in the



Barack Obama talks at a campaign rally.

Photo: Bbsrock

domestic arena because that is what he knows best and where he believes he is most needed. President Obama has his eyes on history. He knows he cannot do everything. He will leave much of the foreign policy work to experts from previous administrations, who will make only cosmetic changes, so that he can concentrate on changing his own country.

One can easily understand the joy over Obama’s inauguration in the United States. The son of an African migrant who spent many years in Indonesia is not the typical person you would expect to reach such high office. He represents hope, change and unity in a country reeling from divisive politics and broken promises. He is a fresh, young, charismatic leader who symbolises the end of a destructive era – and a progressive politician coming after years of neo-conservative rule. As the country’s first African-American President, Obama brings hope to millions of Americans who have felt excluded and disenfranchised in their own country. A black man leading the United States means something very special in a country that has been too long divided on racial lines.

How he will realistically affect my grandmother’s life is less clear. Perhaps the fact that he does not intend to make his mark through foreign policy is a very positive step. At least, if he is not proactive about international relations, he may do less damage than his predecessor. For many of us who are committed to human rights, we hope the inauguration of President Obama represents a return to respect for international law and human rights principles. Barack Obama’s inauguration is indeed historic but perhaps less significant for the rest of the world than the excitement he has engendered would suggest.