

How Much Will the U.S. Change under Obama?

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Articles & Testimony

U. S. President Barack Obama's pre-election promise for change has galvanized public opinion around the world, including in Turkey. To what extent will he transform the United States domestically and revolutionize American foreign policy? And, what does Obama's promise of change hold for Turkey?

A study of Obama's Cabinet members and close White House advisers casts light on how much America will change and where such change is likely to be most dramatic. Obama, in fact, has crafted two Cabinets: a "national security Cabinet" representing continuity and a "domestic issues Cabinet" composed of new faces and ideas in politics.

The domestic issues Cabinet, with freshfaced 40somethings, is likely to introduce major change in American politics. This cabinet includes Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis, administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency Lisa Jackson, Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sibelius, and Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Shaun Donovan. Members of the domestic issues Cabinet hail from outside the Washington beltway. Bringing expertise from outside of Washington's circles, Obama has signaled that this portfolio of secretaries, namely housing, health, environment, education and labor, will witness dramatic change in the Obama administration.

Already Obama has supported these staffing decisions with policy changes. A first sign is his proposal for universal socialized health coverage for all Americans, a revolutionary proposal in the free enterprise and every-man-for-himself world of American politics. Other items at the top of this Cabinet's agenda include Green America, bridging the gap between high-quality and low-quality education in American schools, and fighting poverty. Obama faces counterveiling forces deeply rooted in America's founding ethos of frontier mentality and individualism. Still, if he succeeds, America would be transformed significantly.

While the domestic issues Cabinet will be ushering in dramatic change, on the foreign policy side the trend seems to be evolution, not revolution. The national security Cabinet includes, among others, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and Jim Jones, chief adviser on the National Security Council. This is an establishment crowd is in their 60s and boasts extensive experience in foreign affairs and Washington politics.

The policy tools and methods of the Obama national security Cabinet will differ from that of the Bush administration. However, long-standing U.S. goals, such as preventing Iran's nuclearization, watching Russia, disarming North Korea, establishing Arab-Israeli peace, achieving stability in Iraq, and gaining the upper hand against al-Qaeda as well as the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan will remain Washington's cardinal foreign policy objectives. In other words, expect many new openings and gestures, but no revolutions in American foreign policy in the Obama age.

The openings will be rooted in multilateralism and dialogue. The United States has already started to extend olive branches to many countries, including Cuba, and will engage others, such as Iran. If not the goals, the tenor of American foreign policy will change in the Obama age.

Even bigger change will come in gestures: A challenge for the United States is winning hearts and minds, not just in Turkey, but also in leftist Europe and neoleftist Latin America, as well as in Muslim Middle East and Africa. In this regard, Obama's personal history is promising.

The new United States president has multiple identities that he carries with ease; he is black and white in the American context. This helps him bridge the racial divide in the United States but also around the world, including in Latin America -- no wonder Obama was received with open arms at the Summit of the Americas that was held in multi-racial Trinidad and Tobago on April 19.

Obama bridges global gaps as well. His parents are Swedish and Kenyan, making him a Southerner and a Northerner in the global context. What is more, Obama can bridge the Atlantic, charming Europeans and Americans alike with his left-leaning, yet pragmatic politics.

Last but not least, Obama has many faiths in his family, including Christianity, Judaism and Islam, as he highlighted it in his inauguration speech on Jan. 20, providing proof that religions co-exist.

At home in Washington, Nairobi, Port of Spain, Stockholm and Istanbul alike, Obama is America's messenger to the world. This is good news for Turkey; like Obama, Turkey is a country with multiple identities. Since Sept. 11, Turkey has a hard time simultaneously being a European, Western and Muslim nation. It was almost as if Washington picked one of these identities to the detriment of the others.

Turkey can now flourish as a European country in the West that happens to be Muslim. Obama has already emphasized this vision in his speech to the Turkish parliament on April 6. This is indeed the biggest change the Obama administration has ushered for Turkey.

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