

Change Has Come ... Has It? President Barack Obama's First Year

Norbert Wagner / Benjamin Haase

„Change has come to America“, said Barack Obama on the eve of the presidential elections on November 4, 2008. His election as 44th President of the United States was celebrated euphorically around the world. Few presidents before him had carried such high expectations for their presidency. Being bestowed with the Nobel Peace Prize is symbolic of these hopes. However, the circumstances of his entrance into the White House could hardly have been more complex: Obama was confronted with a heavily damaged image of the States, the consequence of two wars and a massive economic and financial crisis. Meanwhile, Obama's political course is coming under fire from parts of the American public. Specifically, he faces massive opposition over his health care reform (one of his political flagship themes). Disillusionment is widespread. Recent polls reveal how sharply public approval has dropped since Obama took office in January 2009. It thus seems reasonable to take stock on the first anniversary of Obama's presidency – one year of President Barack Obama.

The „...American election campaign is supposed to test which candidate has the personality, the determination and the capability for decision making required by a president. A skilfully directed campaign is an unmistakable sign: It is the business card of the future statesman and gives a clear reading of the government's capabilities.“¹ No candidate before Barack Obama has ever been borne into office with such outstanding admiration – and expectations too. With his campaign, his messages, his instruments and his strategy, he brushed aside the old power structures. „Yes we can!“ Everyone was inspired by his campaign – the media, the professionals, and, last but not least, the voters. He exuded charisma, could mobilize the masses and symbolized the „Anti-Bush“ era – Barack Hussein Obama had it all. He embodied the desire for a fundamental change in politics and the final downfall of the Bush presidency.

With a good strong wind at his back he has embarked on many reforms; how successful they will be, however, remains uncertain. His stimulus plan pumped an enormous amount of money into the economy. He initiated a Climate Protection Bill. And he revived the issue of health care reform, which the Clinton government had failed to push through – and in so doing he triggered a culture clash. Obama also intended to bring America back on the right moral track and promised to shut down the Guantanamo camp within a

¹ Cf. Peter Radunksi. „Obama und die Zukunft des deutschen Wahlkampfes“ In: Kerstin Plehwe (Eds.), „Die 10 Erfolgsstrategien des Barack Obama“, Hamburg: Hanseatic Lighthouse, 2008, 165–176.

year. Obama took on a lot – unfortunately, too much for public patience. A year after the election, none of these challenges has been solved. Approval ratings have dropped from 65 percent to 50 percent.² Euphoria has cooled and the carefully cultivated image of a savior is slowly turning into a problem. Obama, the President of the United States, is after all only a politician – dependent on majorities and compromises.

Barack Obama's decision on a new strategy for the Hindu Kush was eagerly awaited. His desire to bring the troops home from Afghanistan was stated clearly during his trip to Asia, but the President is still trying to find the right „exit strategy“. While Secretary of State Clinton argued for more soldiers, Vice President Joe Biden requested that more effort be put into the hunt for terrorists. And Defence Secretary Gates, who had already served under George W. Bush was caught between the two camps. There was consensus in particular that responsibility should be handed over to Afghan security officials as soon as possible. However, after the Afghan presidential elections were overshadowed by accusations of corruption and vote-rigging, the government of Hamid Karsai came under intense pressure.

President Obama faces most opposition on his primary proposition for domestic policy: the health care reform. Republicans and conservative Democrats (so-called Blue-Dog-Democrats) fear that the planned introduction of public health care will bring about a socialization of the entire health care sector. Furthermore, they are alarmed by the potential high costs of the reform. The President himself gave a fiery speech in Congress campaigning for the reform and harshly criticizing the fact that between 30 and 46 million Americans are not insured, which is unacceptable. But parts of the public appear sceptical as well. Last summer, thousands demonstrated in Washington against the planned health care reform.

In the media, Obama was portrayed as a pop star and celebrated as such. In the end, expectations were so high that he almost had to fail, and this is increasingly becoming a problem for Obama. A year after his triumphant victory, even the US media is becoming increasingly critical in their calls for his election promises to be carried out.

Without question, the new President has been able to significantly improve the US image around the world. In Prague, Obama spoke of his vision of a world free of atomic weapons. In Cairo, he extended his hand towards Islam. Towards Russia he proclaimed the end of tensions and announced the abandonment of plans for global missile shields. By now, both nations are negoti-

² Cf. Sabine Muscat, „Barack Obama. Ein Mann – ein Jahr“. In: Stern Online, 11-11-2009, <http://www.stern.de/politik/ausland/6-einjahr- praesidentenwahl-barack-obama-ein-mann-ein-jahr-1519 366.html> [Nov. 30 2009].

ating the dismantling of their nuclear stockpiles. In environmental policies Obama requested a moderate change of pace, but Congress has yet to pass the proposed bill. And unfortunately, Obama has been forced to acknowledge that the Guantanamo prison in Cuba will have to be shut down later than expected.

The massive emergency assistance for the economy is slowly paying out: economic activity has increased, but unemployment is not yet under control. Barack Obama came to grips with the problems and acted quickly, but has lost some of his shine. The tough political slog has caught up with the election message of change. On October 27, 2009, at a political appearance one year after his dazzling victory, Obama was forced to admit that „change doesn't come overnight“.

Public approval for Obama has receded since he took office in January 2009. The American public seems unhappy with his political course. It seems advisable for the democratic leadership to increase their pace. Election campaign experts indicated recently that Democrats may lose a dramatic number of followers in congressional elections in November 2010 – partly because the Left may be disappointed by their beacon of hope. Changes do need time, but Americans' patience is not boundless, as the Economist points out:

„His domestic reforms are taking time [...] the best test of Mr Obama's presidency is not whether he changes things quickly but whether he changes them for the better [...] In the next few months, America and the world will start to see whether he can or he can't.“³

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³ Cf. *ibid.*