

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نېاشد تن من مېباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مېباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

BY FAWZIA AFZAL-KHAN

22.01.2021

Will Kamala Do the Right Thing?



Photograph Source: Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies – Public Domain

My daughter, a Pakistani American mother of two young children, married to an African American man of Jamaican parentage, is understandably excited about our new Veep-to-be, Kamala Harris. She keeps sending me articles by “desi” women like herself in relationships with Black men, who are excited about this new chapter dawning in American history.

What is particularly poignant for young mothers of biracial kids like hers, is the hope that Kamala’s ascension to the second most powerful position in the country’s leadership, will simultaneously mitigate the anti-Black racism within the South Asian community. Thus, when Sharda Sekaran, a “Blindian” (Black and Indian) young woman interviewed for a

recent essay in *The Lily* that my daughter sent me this morning, interprets Kamala Harris' election as "a validation of the identity I've had to fight for"—how can one not feel elated at the prospect of people like my own darling granddaughter growing up feeling similarly empowered in their identities as Black South Asians for the first time in US history? How can I deny that as a Pakistani immigrant myself, I've not seen the anti-black prejudice that one associates largely, if not exclusively with white supremacy, also prevalent in my own "desi"-American community? But the question that doesn't get raised in these expressions of delight at having one's "identity" now represented at the highest levels of officialdom, is whether having a "Blindian" woman as Vice President is enough of a victory against the forces of regression. The title of the recent article in *The Lily*, "[Kamala Harris has elevated the Blindian community: 'It's a validation of the identity I've had to fight for'](#)"—begs the question, is the "validation" that may come from seeing a Black and Desi woman "elevated" to high office really worth all the excitement and anticipation? In other words, is identity politics at the level of representation enough, by itself?

I'm old enough to remember first hand a similar excitement many of us who were new immigrants from countries of the global South like Pakistan, felt when the Reverend Jesse Jackson created his National Rainbow Coalition as a platform for his 1984 presidential run. Just having an African American running for the Presidency generated such a sense of pride and excitement in communities of color, with which I felt a sense of affinity. But this affinity went far beyond race and ethnic identity, and therefore represented something different from that which Kamala Harris evokes. After all, I was neither Black nor male. Having grown up as a child of the Bandung era, motivated by ideologies of transnational solidarity that socialist or left-leaning progressive leaders such as Sukarno, Nehru, Nasser stood for in the so-called Third World, Jackson to me, and to others of my ilk, represented a bridge to those international forebears, including to the two African Americans who attended the Bandung Conference of 1955 as observers, Richard Wright and Adam Clayton Powell. Jackson's appointment in 1966 by the Rev Martin Luther King Jr, to serve as the first director of Operation Breadbasket in Chicago, itself an offshoot of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition which was the product of a social justice movement that grew out of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, linked Jackson to King's own radical agenda and internationalist understanding of the intersectional roots of racial, economic and social injustice. This oppression that his movement sought to dismantle at home, in the USA, was an oppression that King, as well as other civil rights leaders, came to understand as linked to similar injustices faced by brown and black peoples everywhere. Building allyship and solidarity, people like King and later Jackson, drew inspiration from those fighting similar injustices against the scourge of racialized colonialism in their own countries, and it was this transnational solidarity of purpose that drew youngsters like me to their brand of struggle. To progressive minded folks of my generation, that idea of a political coalition, which invited

people of all identities, races, genders, classes and religions to band together to push for a justice-oriented social and economic agenda, one that could counter the racist effects of the conservative era of Reaganomics, was the need of the moment. The concept that appealed to us was “affiliative politics” rather than simply “identity politics.” It was clear to us that just because someone was Black or Brown, didn’t mean s/he subscribed to the Bandung era vision of a world united around progressive values.

This then, is my real concern regarding the “identitarian validation” that the figure of Kamala Harris represents for so many black and brown, and particularly Black-Brown, or “Blindian” folks in the USA today. What exactly is being validated, and what function does such validation serve? What is the political vision that Kamala Harris stands for, and which we are obviously endorsing, if we use her as a representational/identity crutch? Those who have followed her career as a public prosecutor, point out her disappointing record on achieving criminal justice reform which would actually have meant something concrete to her constituents of color. For instance, Don Conway writing for the World Socialist website in an article entitled, “Who is Democratic Senator Kamala Harris?” reminds us that

Lara Bazelon, former director of the Loyola Law School Project for the Innocent in Los Angeles, wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed, “Time after time, when progressives urged her to embrace criminal justice reforms as a district attorney and then the state’s attorney general, Ms. Harris opposed them or stayed silent.” Donald Specter, executive director of the Prison Law Office, stated in a *Daily Beast* interview, “As far as I know, she did very little if anything to improve the criminal justice system when she was attorney general.”

Not only has her record on social justice issues internal to the USA been dismal, but it is important to understand that these are intimately linked to how she has positioned her political affiliations abroad, in stark contradiction to the morally-driven positions her Black predecessors of the Civil Rights era upheld. Thus for example, she has said nothing that would rile up the Indian American community of rich donors who contributed significantly to her campaign, and most of whom are supporters of the right wing Modi government in India. For instance, when asked a question in September 2019 by a Kashmiri American woman as to what her position was on the human rights abuses being perpetrated against Kashmiris as a result of Modi’s policies, Harris gave the most tepid of responses, saying vaguely that she would ensure Kashmiris knew that “we are watching.” Not once did she mention Modi by name, or even India as a state committing violence against Kashmiris by being an occupying force. King, were he alive today, would, I’m quite certain, have strongly condemned Modi for his anti Muslim and anti-Dalit policies. Perhaps Harris’ reluctance to say anything definitive on Modi’s regressive, authoritarianism is tied to her open support of the Zionist agenda, as she is on record for having stated time and again, her great admiration for Israel, which she visited with her millionaire husband Doug Emhoff and reported only that she was “impressed” by the amazing architecture of the Supreme Court building in Tel Aviv. This is a

building that surely symbolizes anything but justice for its Palestinian citizens or for those Palestinians whose territories are under occupation by Israel and where despite countless UN resolutions to the contrary, Israel continues to build more and more illegal settlements. Yet she believes the country is “a beautiful home to democracy and justice” (*Arab America*, Jan 30, 2019). When asked by the *NYT* (June 19th, 2019) whether Israel meets human rights standards, she responded, “Overall, yes.” This, despite the fact that Amnesty International’s Annual Report from 2019 states categorically, “Israel continued to impose institutionalized discrimination against Palestinians living under its rule in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT).”

If someone insists on whitewashing injustice abroad (Israel, India)—one must and will, end up whitewashing it at home. Pushing a representational agenda built around identity politics alone, becomes a reactionary move, not a progressive one. So while I “get” the emotional uplift provided by this election especially to young women who come from similar mixed race backgrounds as Kamala Harris, I believe we need to stop playing identity politics. Instead of “identifying” with people just because they “look” like us—we need to ask, “what is their politics”? Interestingly, her father, Donald Harris, whom she rarely mentions, was a man who gained popularity with students at Stanford as a “Marxist scholar,” and was accordingly criticized by establishment voices there (who weren’t keen on giving him tenure) as “a pied piper leading students astray from neo-classical economics,” according to a 1976 story in *The Stanford Daily*. He was seen as a threat by some of his colleagues, because his brand of politics, in which solidarity around issues of class and racial justice clearly take precedence over heritage and identity, was anathema to the ruling class ideology in capitalist USA. It is therefore hardly surprising that he was not amused by Kamala’s comment responding to a question she was asked when she was still a Presidential candidate in 2019, about whether or not she’d ever smoked pot. Her joking response, in an interview with *The Breakfast Club*, possibly intended as an attempt to win over voters, was, “Half my family’s from Jamaica. Are you kidding me?” The “joke” apparently, did not go over well with many folks, including her father, who in a statement to Jamaica Global Online, [wrote](#):

My dear departed grandmothers (whose extraordinary legacy I described in a recent essay on this website), as well as my deceased parents, must be turning in their grave right now to see their family’s name, reputation and proud Jamaican identity being connected, in any way, jokingly or not with the fraudulent stereotype of a pot-smoking joy seeker and *in the pursuit of identity politics*. Speaking for myself and my immediate Jamaican family, we wish to categorically dissociate ourselves from this travesty. (qtd in [Harpers Bazaar.com](#) *my italics*)

Kamala Harris has talked effusively about her bond with her mother, and spoken proudly of her Indian “heritage” (that identitarian label again!)—and while part of it is understandably, because of the fact that after the parents’ divorce, she and her sister were brought up largely by her mother, it is also worth considering that the mother, a well-known medical researcher

who was actively involved in the Civil Rights movement alongside her boyfriend, later husband Donald, was nonetheless, no Marxist. As Chelsey Sanchez, writing in *Harper's Bazaar* reports,

Baron Meghnad Desai, an economist born in India, recalled meeting the couple before a dinner party to the *Times*. She was “fiery and radical but not Marxist in any sense,” [while Donald](#) “did take a serious interest in radical political economy....”

Indeed, as the titles of many articles and books Donald J. Harris published over a prolific and distinguished scholarly career indicate, his view of economics is intimately tied to the politics of decolonization and a critique of capitalism as a system that exploits Black people in the United States. I'm quite certain that titles such as the following would not sit well with the centrist image Ms Harris has assiduously cultivated in her pursuit of a political career, and most certainly her prosecutorial history would not wash over well with a father who has written these articles:

+ “Marxian Exploitation and Domestic Colonialism: a Reply,” Review of Black Political Economy, 4(4), December 1974, 89–90.

+ “Capitalist Exploitation and Black Labor: Some Conceptual Issues,” Review of Black Political Economy, 8(2), Winter 1978, 113-151.

+ “Economic Growth, Structural Change, and the Relative Income Status of Blacks in the U. S. Economy, 1947-78,” Review of Black Political Economy, 12(3), March 1983, 75–92.

Further, Herb Boyd writing for *The Amsterdam News* last year informs us that Donald Harris also published a tribute to Malcolm X shortly after the latter's death, which appeared in the *Kingston Sunday Gleaner*, a Jamaican newspaper. The article is a “mini-biography” of Malcolm, which describes details of his life that at the time were largely unknown since the posthumous publication of Malcom's autobiography was still in the offing. Harris—Kamala's father—is effusive in his praise for Malcolm's radical vision and commitment to structural change in America:

Malcolm...was no ordinary Muslim-convert. He brought with him into the movement not only an awareness of personal hardship and injustice but also a passion to convert others; a determination to change the environment of his people; a sharp analytical mind and the consummate skill of a public speaker and debater.

Boyd then goes on to inform us that in his daughter's memoir, [*The Truths We Hold: An American Journey*](#),

...there is no mention of Malcolm and her longest reflection on her father *is merely to note his ancestry*, the weekend visits when she was very young, and his academic career ([Amsterdam News](#) my emphasis) .

Once again, we are brought back to this notion of “ancestry,” “heritage,” “identity.” But this is what we must confront, and help our children to do the same: a sense of identity that is only skin-deep, is not an identity to hold on to, to tout as a badge of honor or pride.

And so, my Blackistani granddaughter, like other “Blindians” – needs better role models than what’s on offer through Harris today. I look forward to teaching her about the importance of affiliative, rather than merely skin-deep, identity politics. And maybe, we can hope, that over the course of her Vice Presidency, Harris will learn to do better than her record to date; maybe she will figure out how to Do the Right Thing, after all. The first step in that direction would be to acknowledge the radical political vision of her father.

JANUARY 21, 2021

Fawzia Afzal-Khan is University Distinguished Scholar at Montclair State University in NJ. Her latest book is [*Siren Song: Understanding Pakistan Through its Women Singers*](#). She can be reached at: fak0912@yahoo.com