

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد
بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
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 STEWART LAWRENCE

18.08.2024

Can Harris Make This Not Just Her Moment – But Ours?



Photograph Source: The White House – Public Domain

Giddy triumphalism has become the reigning mood in American politics. First it was the Republicans, exulting in their standard-bearer’s expanding lead over a decrepit Joe Biden, some confidently predicting a November GOP landslide. Now it’s the Democrats’ turn. Having vanquished Biden in a transparent political coup led by Barack Obama and Nancy Pelosi – and confirmed by Cy Hersh in his customary trenchant reporting – the party that only a month ago despaired of preventing Trump’s return to power is jubilant that Kamala Harris — once dismissed as an albatross around Biden’s reelection chances – appears ready to deal her own swift deathblow to the Orange Man.

But let’s be real. The latest polls do indicate a striking turnaround in the balance between the two candidates, and with Trump’s camp still struggling to regroup, there’s been a decided momentum shift in the Democrats’ favor, no question. All that heady talk of Trump “expanding the map” beyond the traditional swing states? It’s vanished. Harris, in a just released Cook Report, enjoys a slender lead nationally and in most – but not all – of

those same swing states where Trump was leading by an ever-widening margin just three weeks ago.

And she's beginning to command sizable crowds at her non-stop campaign rallies, with Minnesota governor Tim Walz – recently rechristened the “perfect Midwestern Dad” — standing loyally – and comfortably – at her side.

Is it Obama 2.0? Democrats clearly hope so. TIME magazine just issued a fawning cover story of Harris with an iconic portrait of the candidate emblazoned on its cover. “It’s her moment,” the caption reads below an outsized image of her countenance – for once displaying a measure of weathered gravitas rather than the gleefully smiling dilettante she too often projects in her public appearances. This is image-making – or perhaps re-making– at its best. Democrats have less than 90 days to convince election-weary voters that their revamped darling is more than just a one-time sidekick of a political cipher who never inspired his own party half as much as Harris does now. But can they really pull it off?

If 2024 suggests anything it's that the country is still suffering from post-COVID PTSD – with alarming rates of depression and anxiety among adults, and record-level suicide attempts among minors, especially Black pre-teens, conditions that receive far too little ink, much less serious policy attention, least of all from Harris, it seems. This isn't just about the death of the American Dream; it's about the slow motion cultural implosion of America. For the first time in memory America's youth and young adults no longer believe that they're likely to be better off than their parents. They're mired in student debt and many can't find decent jobs or afford to purchase a new home. Too many are languishing in quiet misery and they're turned off by politicians – especially the gaggle of octogenarian adults, mostly White, that dominate Congress and insist on speaking for them without her hearing their concerns.

Some pundits have suggested the electorate may be suffering from a mood disorder – vacillating between the dark depths of fear, anxiety and rage that still fuel Trump's surprisingly resilient electoral prospects while rushing to embrace the sudden sugar high – what former Obama strategist David Axelrod has called “irrational exuberance” – that has accompanied the Democrat's all-out media blitz and largely uncritical promotion of Harris and her boisterously joyous campaign.

Of course the race is a toss-up. The “double haters” disgusted with their 2024 election choices – a whopping 25% of the electorate just a month ago – are beginning to side with one candidate or the other – in about equal proportions. And the popularity of third-party

candidates, most notably Robert F. Kennedy Jr., is fading rapidly. Kennedy is down from a polling average of 10% to 5% and in some surveys just 2% – while Cornel West and Jill Stein scarcely register at all. GOP pollster Frank Luntz says the number of genuine undecideds in the race has fallen to 4%, a modern record. Indeed, a growing number of head-to-head polls now show Harris and Trump each near 50% with just 1-2% dividing them. That’s a far cry from polls just a month ago with Trump and Biden in the mid-to-high 40s with as many as 15% still undecided. If current trends hold, the country is moving toward one of the closest elections ever, with even the popular vote – to say nothing of the Electoral College – likely decided by the slenderest of margins.

So what’s likely ahead? One of the ugliest – and possibly shallowest – slugfests in modern presidential history. Trump’s MAGA base – like the candidate himself – seems intent on engaging in a campaign of character assassination combining blatant racial and sexual put downs of Harris with attacks on her intelligence and mental competence. The same likely goes for Democratic strategists, though there isn’t much one can add to the litany of (well-deserved) assaults on Trump’s character that haven’t been hurled already. Thus, the most novel element of this campaign may well be the targeting of the two VP running mates, neither of which has an established reputation. VPs are supposed to aid their party’s campaign by standing by to parry the opposing party’s attacks on the main candidate– not to become the primary object of those attacks themselves. But 2024 may well set an entirely new – and disturbing – precedent here. Many voters still doubt whether Harris is ready to serve as president – she still needs to prove herself – while Trump, despite earning his highest approval rating since 2015, is engendering fresh doubts about his own readiness to serve thanks to his increasingly befuddled and erratic public performance thus far. But Tim Walz and JD Vance offer opposition research attack dogs on both sides fresh targets for mudslinging. Between unfounded Democratic accusations over Vance’s supposedly amorous encounters with couches, and GOP depictions of Walz as “Tampon Tim,” the smutty sexualization of the candidates – already apparent in attacks on Trump and Harris – is destined to reach an unsavory new low.

Still, the current prominence of the two VPs will likely subside once Harris and Trump square off at their first debate about three weeks from now. Trump is likely to be as boisterous, bombastic and prone to falsehood as ever – but won’t be intimidated. The real test is whether Harris, who hasn’t debated anyone in four years, can hold her own and parry Trump’s attacks with comebacks of her own. Harris is coasting along on a trouble free hayride right now, ignoring uneasy questions about her multiple overnight flip-

flops. Does she have a genuine grasp of the concerns that affect most voters – the economy and inflation, immigration and the deepening and inconclusive wars in Europe and the Middle East? On abortion and most public health issues, voters clearly favor her rhetoric – and trust her stewardship – but Trump still has the advantage – though dwindling – on the top line issues and more importantly, is still viewed as the stronger and more effective leader overall – a key barrier to Harris’ further advance among the remaining swing voters.

Efforts to rebrand Harris as a female Obama will continue, of course, but so will the efforts of the GOP to define her politically as well as personally in the most unflattering light possible. While Democrats seem to think Trump & Co. are simply reeling from Harris’ rise, the truth is, the GOP, which has fewer financial resources, is keeping most of its powder dry until after the Democratic convention. Expect a huge GOP negative media onslaught after Labor Day, probably the worst such advertising attack ever recorded. It won’t be pretty, former Clinton strategist James Carville warns. “She better have a good cut man in her corner to stanch the bleeding,” he adds.

Harris has been lucky – or blessed. Thus far she’s managed to escape the kind of scrutiny that the media – even a fawning one – normally demands of political candidates. Unlike Biden, Harris is great before a teleprompter with adoring fans cheering her on, but it’s not clear she can withstand the to-and-fro of a withering sit-down interview much better than a doltish Sarah Palin did in 2008. Harris’ performances in the past have suggested at times a cringe-worthy vulnerability – for example, in her interview with Leser Holt where she dismissed the need to visit the US-Mexico border as part of her immigration “portfolio.” There’s a good reason her handlers are keeping her shielded from such encounters – they place her at real risk of exposure – but she can’t stay bundled up for much longer. Even icons have to engage the masses at some point.

Harris – for all her faults and foibles – may well have a shot at winning the presidential race and bringing some real joy and relief to her party and to the country as a whole. Vanquishing Trump – a second time, but this time for good – would be a world historical achievement. It could shift the entire country into an entirely new *zeitgeist*, much as Obama’s 2008 victory did. But that won’t happen if Harris continues to serve – as she has for so long – as a telegenic but distant campaign prop, basking in the shadow of her party’s venerated forebears. Harris’ recently expanded team – which now includes Jim Messina, Stephanie Cutler and a phalanx of veterans that crafted Obama’s 2008 campaign – seem anxious to reincarnate her in the image of their former hero. But the

country doesn't need another Obama – it needs a Kamala Harris it's never seen before. To win, Harris needs to reach down within herself to find a voice and a character strength she's perhaps only dreamed of possessing in the past – and no one, least of all Harris herself, may know if such a person, riding deep public disenchantment with status quo, can powerfully spring forth, seemingly out of nowhere, to establish her own signature “brand.”

Is Harris prepared to stand up to Israel in Gaza, where Biden has failed so miserably? Can she avoid pandering to both sides on the border and help forge the comprehensive immigration reform legislation that has eluded Congress for well over a decade? Can she advocate for an economy that genuinely serves the unmet needs of working people – the 60% of the country now living paycheck to paycheck – regardless of the compromises that corporate elites in both parties continually demand?

Some Democrats – led by 82-year old Vermont senator Bernie Sanders – are hoping that Harris can embrace this particular destiny, one that Obama – faced with ongoing Pentagon and corporate demands for policy conformity – largely failed to fulfill. Sanders has laid out a set of progressive economic reforms that he believes most Democrats and even a majority of Republican voters will endorse, including an expansion of Medicare coverage, the adoption of a single-payer health care system, a boost in the minimum wage (to \$17 an hour), a one-time wealth tax, and a more progressive tax system overall. A poll Sanders sponsored earlier this month found widespread voter support for such measures and he's lobbying Harris to embrace it when she finally announces her campaign's economic platform in the coming days. But as Sanders himself well knows – and he has the scars to prove it – it will take a diehard populist warrior capable of rallying the country beyond this year's balloting to begin pushing Congress toward the adoption of such a broad-based agenda – and rebuffing the inevitably fierce pressures to compromise.

Times – it's often said – “call forth” for the man. It remains to be seen whether times also call forth the woman. Harris – egged on by a progressive base – has an opportunity to make this not just “her” moment but the beginning of a powerful moment for all working Americans. But it will take courage and faith and a newfound sense of herself as a change-agent – one that has eluded her thus far – to fulfill this greater destiny. America already possesses a bevy of Beyonce-style celebrities gleefully strutting their stuff before adoring fans on stages that resemble fashion runways. What the nation needs now is a veritable Joan of Arc, sword in hand, ready to sacrifice herself for the greater good, come what may.

Stewart Lawrence is a long-time Washington, DC-based policy consultant. He can be reached at stewartlawrence811147@gmail.com.

AUGUST 16, 2024