

THE RETURN OF MINORITY MAN

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On July 25, 2015 Barack Obama landed at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport as the first ever sitting US president to visit Kenya. This wasn't his first visit. He had come three times before: the first as an impecunious youth, to see with his own eyes where his father had come from, the second as a young man starting out in life, eager to expose his fiancée to his African roots and the third as a young politician, when he was dismissed by the government spokesman, Dr. Alfred Mutua, as 'a junior senator from Illinois who is yet to mature,' for daring to lecture Kenyans on the evils of corruption.

On his fourth visit, although he stepped off Air Force One wearing a well-tailored, metallic grey suit in lieu of a body hugging costume and brightly coloured cape, he still appeared like a comic book hero, made flesh. Even Dr. Mutua, now a county governor, was part of the welcoming committee, beaming from ear to ear in repentance and keen to shake the great man's hand. At a later stage on his two day tour, he declared to the jubilant masses that he was the first Kenyan-American president. In a storyline that would have been rejected by any self-respecting film producer, Barack Hussein Obama Jr. had, indeed, defied all the odds to become 'the most powerful man on earth.'

Several months later, after attending the launch of a book entitled *A Path Not Taken - The Story of Joseph Murumbi* I was led to think about ways in which Barack Obama had managed to affirm and influence more than one minority grouping. Joseph Murumbi was a man born of a Goan father and a Maasai mother who became Kenya's second vice-president and was, therefore, another minority representative. However, for a more focused appraisal of his life and achievement, let me lead you to my review of *A Path Not Taken* elsewhere in this edition.

On a purely observational level, when Barack Obama hugged and kissed Auma, his sister from a different mother, and made it a priority to dine with members of his extended family, he endorsed inclusivity within all families. And when he signed the visitors' book upon landing, he gave more proof, if it were needed, that it was

all right to be left handed. However, there are more 'minority' insights for Kenyans, East Africans and Africans in general, if we look at Barack Obama as the first 'black' president of the USA. His achievement begs such questions as 'Can there be a woman, or Muslim, or Hindu, or El Molo or Pokot or Pokomo president of Kenya in the next 50 years?' The answer is, perhaps not. That is unless we arrive at a level of political maturity in which we vote for ideas and not tribes and resolve to elect leaders who are the embodiment of the said ideas, regardless of their sex, colour, creed or ethnicity. Barack Obama benefited from having supporters from all walks of life help him to raise the money to run his campaign. So, 'Can we have leaders who are not the richest people in the country and who do not have to pay many of us to elect them?' Perhaps not, when the expectation is that if politicians don't give us '*kitu kidogo*' (something small), we won't allow them '*kitu kikubwa*' (something big).

Barack Obama, has drawn the displeasure of some African Americans by not identifying with them adequately. So, 'Can we have leaders who favour the national good over the parochial good?' Perhaps not, when our politics are dictated not by the tyranny of expectation but by '*the tyranny of numbers,*' which relegates small communities to indefinite, developmental immobility. Once Barack Obama had won the democratic nomination, his leading competitor within the Democratic Party, Hilary Clinton, agreed to take on the role of Secretary of State within his first cabinet. So, 'Can we have leaders whose motivation is not to have power for its own sake but for the greater good?' Perhaps not, if those alliances, which we do have, show no effort to declare a flag bearer for forthcoming elections. After having been president for 8 years, Barack Obama will willingly step down in 2016. So, 'Can we have presidents who don't feel that, once on top, they must stay in power for life, because they are indispensable to the nation's wellbeing?' Perhaps not, if the defence of entrenched interests is considered to preclude new approaches to governance, indefinitely.

So, all told, Barack Obama's fourth, triumphant return to his fatherland enjoined us, its citizens, to embrace accommodation and tolerance and also gave us cause to consider just how far we have travelled along the road to true democracy and the distance which remains to be covered.

Word Count: 800 words