

Hürriyet**DAILY NEWS & ECONOMIC
REVIEW**

Obama on Race: Process over Product

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What was revealed about President Barack Obama's outlook on racial issues as he dealt with the controversy over the arrest of Harvard University Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr.?

Interestingly, the principle view shown by the president was also highlighted by his attorney general in a controversial speech he gave last February commemorating African American History Month.

After making unintentional remarks about the arrest of Professor Gates in his home by Sergeant James Crowley of the Cambridge police, President Obama extended an invitation to the gentlemen for a beer at the White House -- a positive gathering which occurred on July 30. The idea it seems behind the invitation is that direct communication between parties involved in a conflict (in this case, Dr. Gates and Sgt. Crowley) and a skilled third-party facilitator (here the president of the United States), can advance mutual understanding among the participants.

Attorney General Eric Holder also underscored the dialogue theme in his noted speech about race. He said that "we, average Americans, simply do not talk enough with each other about race," and that "we must feel comfortable enough with one another, and tolerant enough of each other, to have frank conversations about the racial matters that continue to divide us." Participatory communication to which Mr. Holder seems to refer is an internationally applied methodology that builds more productive racial-ethnic relations through inclusive direct dialogue. The process begins with groups building trust (by sharing and acknowledging life experiences), leading to expressions of regret. Racial dialogue and reconciliation at the local level can gradually become vehicles for participants to collaboratively plan and implement their priority socio-economic and environmental initiatives.

Mr. Holder's comment in that speech that received great (negative) attention --that we are "essentially a nation of cowards"-- was directed at the reality that we as a nation commonly avoid inter-personal and -group dialogue on issues of race (and, for that matter, religion). People may not have the opportunity to participate in discussions about race, but also they may not want to in order to not feel the discomfort that can go along with conversing about how race can determine opportunities in life, for example. While recognizing

it is difficult, Holder suggests that people ought to persist and talk through hard issues.

From these two incidences involving the president and the attorney general, what can we learn about how the Obama administration might approach crux issues such as an apology from the federal government for slavery, affirmative action and reparations, and institutional racism (in the criminal justice system, the economy, health, and education) creating disproportionate levels of poverty and incarceration among African Americans particularly?

Foremost, Obama's policies may significantly grow from inter-racial "listening" (an act often repeated by Obama) --or racial dialogue across U.S. communities. In fact, policies and programs that create constructive local dialogue about racial and ethnic experiences and partnership could be viewed by the administration as an end in itself.

This approach to managing racial issues embodies the president's bottom-up philosophy, and could unfold in society in the following way. Understanding and relationships among racial and ethnic groups are built during inclusive local dialogue. Then, coalitions form and local racial movements composed of diverse groups spread horizontally --from one group to another and from one community to another through peers, its demonstration effect, and the ongoing training and work of facilitators. The local movements then partner and have a vertical effect --on state and national laws and policies.

For this to happen, dialogue at the community level needs to be catalyzed, facilitated, and sustained. What kinds of programs then spur on these local bottom-up processes? To start, the U.S. Department of Education could dedicate funding to compiling existing and creating new participatory dialogue activities that provide some structure to group dialogue to maximize information sharing, and build trust and partnership. A warehouse of racial dialogue tools ought to be made available on-line.

People, particularly those in a position to apply them, need to be trained in facilitating community-dialogue. Training can be given to leaders in government from the many departments who liaison with local communities; members of communities of faith with support from the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships; AmeriCorps and other grassroots volunteers; university students through community-building programs; and community workers from Organizing for America, the successor organization to Obama for America. Civil society organizations working on issues of racial reconciliation would be indispensable partners for their community outreach and capacity to train.

The emerging position of Obama on race does not seem as much focused on end solutions to our most challenging problems, but rather more on the process of how sustainable solutions may be found. Under Obama, then, race-related programs and policies would not be directed toward pre-determined ends, but rather reflect the consensus position derived from countless community conversations. The end for Obama, who utilizes magnificently his skills and identity, then, is to build the means by which people can come together and talk.

8/6/2009

Untitled Document

(Dr. Yossef Ben-Meir is joining the faculty at Al Akhawayn University in Morocco next month. He is president of the High Atlas Foundation, a non-governmental organization founded by former Peace Corps volunteers and dedicated to community development in Morocco. The views in this article reflect the author's.)

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