

## Responding to a Swipe: A Community Organizer's Defense

by Yossef Ben-Meir

In his keynote speech at the Republican National Convention on Wednesday, September 3, Rudolph Giuliani disregarded and seemed to mock Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama's background as a community organizer. The former New York mayor and failed presidential candidate went on to state that Obama had "worked as a community organizer. He immersed himself in Chicago machine politics." By this reference, Giuliani linked community organizing to corruption.

But what is the function of a "community organizer," and how did these remarks undermine central tenets of the American experience?

Community organizers help local groups develop action plans and implement local development. They don't decide for others what their most pressing needs are but rather facilitate dialogue as people together assess the challenges and opportunities for creating socioeconomic projects. Community organizers are negotiators, conflict managers, and help build mutually beneficial and peaceful relationships.

The reality is that neighborhoods and villages of people generally don't spontaneously come together to improve their socioeconomic conditions. Catalysts are needed to jumpstart the process and organize meetings. And communities don't automatically work through conflicts that arise when they together plan local development and consider the broad range of interests and ideas reflected among them. Third-party facilitators help to ensure an inclusive, partnership-building, and productive experience. Community organizers perform these and other key functions until development initiatives are self-sustaining and people are meeting their needs through their own capabilities.

Community organizing has a long history in the United States. Its first initiatives in urban areas in the late 1800s were inspired by Alexis de Tocqueville and John Dewey--philosophers who connected community development to the nation's intrinsic identity of resourcefulness and tenacity. Contemporary community development grew significantly in the United States in the 1960s, and its political roots are in decentralization and federalism--concepts embodied in the Constitution and that the Republican Party historically has championed.

So what kind of social policies come out of the community organizing perspective? For his part, Obama's community organizing experience most likely informed his recent proposals to reform the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives to broaden access to support while reducing unhealthy government-religion entanglements. Community organizing redresses the dislocation of families in the United States and around the globe caused by free trade or other social and natural phenomenon. Facilitators of and participants in well-organized community development initiatives are empowered in such a way that diminishes feelings of alienation and the kind of discontent that can lead to violence. People with community organizing backgrounds would intuitively know, for example, that for reconstruction and reconciliation in Iraq to endure it needs to be locally driven--a lesson the United States finally seems to be learning after billions of dollars have been spent and insecurity has reigned there for years.

Ultimately, community organizing is about rallying people's participation. Most likely, the community organizing perspective of Senator Obama helped his presidential campaign put in place strategies that generated historic levels of grassroots support throughout the country and enabled him to overcome significant odds to win the Democratic nomination. As for the Republicans, regardless of who they vote for, those who support their party for the very reason it was founded--to better enable the people of states and communities to manage their own affairs--should recognize the value of the community organizing endeavor.

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