

In black America, few dare hope for racial change



by Kerry Sheridan

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WASHINGTON (AFP) – Despite Barack Obama's message of change and hope, fears persist in the black community about what his election as president could mean for the legacy of racism in America.

Namely, that it might mean nothing at all.

"America is still one of the most segregated countries by race and by class in the industrialized world," said Dedrick Muhammad, research associate at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, a think tank for social justice.

Muhammad pointed to research showing that black Americans remain far behind the rest of the country economically, with median wealth one-tenth of that in white America, and one in three black children born into poverty.

Like most black Americans, Muhammad supports Obama's historic bid to become America's first black president.

However, he said the Illinois senator's campaign tactic of largely avoiding discussion of race in his campaign has "driven me crazy."

"What saddens me today is that we don't talk about black-white inequality," he said. "I see in Obama a winning strategy, but it is sad to me."

For the 47-year-old son of a white American mother and black Kenyan father to gain the lead he currently holds over his Republican rival John McCain, Obama has had to tip-toe around any potential racial controversy, analysts say.

"Obama has very carefully avoided discussing race except when he had to," said Gary Weaver, an author and professor of cross-cultural studies at American University, noting Obama made just one major policy address on race during the campaign.

"I think there genuinely are people who are afraid that somehow an African-American as president would destroy the purity of the country," he said.

But even Obama's relative silence has not muted the issue. Weaver pointed to numerous attempts by his opponents to raise the topic of race, some of them blatant, others covert.

"There are enough coded messages coming out from the Republican side," said Weaver, ranging from mentions of his "urban" agenda that contrast with images of mainly white rural America, to assertions of "socialism" in his economic policy that implicitly tie him to foreigners.

"These coded messages subtly get across the issue of race," said Weaver.

Despite America's attempts to move past racial prejudice, research has shown that racial bias lingers in the United States, 40 years after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

A recent study by San Diego State University and the University of Chicago on politics and racial attitudes suggested that "ethnicity and national identity may play a larger role than often realized in how political candidates are perceived."

"A black candidate is implicitly conceived of as being less American than a white candidate," it said.

Prominent African-Americans have said they understand Obama's need to keep the black community at arm's length in order to win.

But they say that kind of dance leaves many unanswered questions about Obama's commitment to black issues in terms of poverty, employment opportunities and substandard education, if he does win on November 4.

"To me it sounds more like the African-American community is a kind of hidden mistress. Everybody assumes an affair is going on but nobody is quite sure," said Joy Zarembka, author of "The Pigment of Your Imagination: Mixed Race in a Global Society."

Zarembka said the new emphasis by Obama supporters on the buzzword "post-racial" ignores the importance of the black community, and she is concerned that an Obama victory could eliminate policies that aim to give minorities a better chance at employment and education.

"I have great concerns about an affirmative action policy that moves forward in a race-neutral way," she said.

John Johnson, political action chair of the Virginia State conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), said he has heard those types of concerns, but believes Obama presents a new narrative on blacks in American society.

"There is an opportunity to uplift the race. The role model potential is outstanding," he said, adding that an Obama victory could have a wider effect on accepting diversity in America.

"I think it will have an impact on making all of America more comfortable with all Americans."

Lena Williams, 58, author of "It's the Little Things: Everyday Interactions That Anger, Annoy, and Divide the Races," said that when she volunteered for the Obama campaign, the younger and more enthusiastic supporters asked why she was so "mellow."

"America has a way of breaking your heart," she answered. "It makes you very cautious."

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