

Monash academic predicts the likely Obama effect

By Tom Guan

Few people can deny the significance of last year's US election. Aside from the usual rhetoric of change and hope, can the new administration really change the way it deals with the world? In his Castan Centre public lecture soon after the November 2008 election, Waleed Aly asked what the US election signifies. To this question, he provided an engaging and original interpretation to the change that is occurring in the United States.

Mr Aly is a lecturer in the School of Social and Political Inquiry and the Global Terrorism Research Centre at Monash University. He formerly sat on the Board of the Islamic Council of Victoria and is a prominent writer, writing frequently in Fairfax newspapers.

The lecture started with Mr Aly asking what kind of change is coming, and what change has already occurred. With the mainstream media focused on ambiguous grand notions of change and hope, it was refreshing to see Mr Aly provide a precise and surgical analysis of this topic. Mr Aly emphasised that the foreign policy of the new administration will not be radically different, labelling Mr Obama's decision to close Guantanamo Bay as a decision that was expected, rather than a shift in policy.

Mr Aly is sceptical that any change has occurred in counter terrorism strategies. He emphasised the evolving nature of Al-Qaeda: that is it no longer an organisation, but an ideal. Citing other terrorism experts, Mr Aly asserted that tactics by the Bush administration were inadequate, and claimed that Obama's tactic of prioritising the hunt for Bin Ladin was straight out of the Bush playbook. Mr Aly noted that killing Bin Ladin does not automatically nullify the Al-Qaeda threat.

Mr Aly's ideas flowed on seamlessly from concrete foreign policy discussions to nuanced discussions on abstract change in the US electorate. Whereas US foreign policy may be a ponderous beast resisting change, the US electorate has undergone a significant shift towards being "cosmopolitan". Perhaps what the US election really signified was the changing attitude of the American people. Mr Aly noted that never before did Americans consider what the world thought of them as being a major election issue. According to Mr Aly, the "insularity" of the American people has been flipped around, making the electorate "reflective" and "introspective".

Mr Aly continued to bring out original observations on the election. The contrasts between the Obama and McCain rallies could not be more stark, he stated, noting that McCain's pivotal line was "country first", and that this notion was becoming old and tired. Obama, on the other hand, always looked brand new, and dazzling in his rallies. When Obama addressed the crowd, he was not only addressing the American public, but also the world. Mr Aly skilfully wove this observation of McCain into his next point about change. The old traditional focus on "insular" domestic policies are inadequate to win an election, and it explained in part why McCain lost.

Following the conclusion of the lecture, question time allowed for further debate. The issues raised stressed the reliance of the world on the United States, but also the fact that the United States needs the rest of the world. As Mr Aly emphasised in his lecture, the challenges of climate change, terrorism and global finance cannot be solved by one nation alone. The real change, perhaps, is a renewed hope for the world to work together in solving its problems.

Where are they now (?)

Natalie Bugalski

Castan Centre alumnus Natalie Bugalski works as a human rights advocate for the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) in Cambodia. COHRE is the leading International human rights NGO campaigning for the protection of housing rights and the prevention of forced eviction.

After finishing her law degree at Monash University, Natalie undertook articles at Deacons. During articles, she worked as a secondee to the Public Interest Law Clearing House where she did refugee work. Natalie then made the switch back to academia to pursue her PhD.

While at Monash, Natalie worked as a researcher in the Castan Centre and investigated a number of human rights areas. Her thesis looked at the impact of multilateral institutions (the International

Monetary Fund and the World Bank) on human rights and the right to adequate housing in Timor Leste, Vanuatu and Cambodia. While undertaking her PhD, Natalie worked on the Timor Leste Justice Campaign and eventually started working for COHRE in its Melbourne office. At COHRE, her focus countries were, incidentally, East Timor, Vanuatu and Cambodia.

In November 2007, COHRE moved its office from Melbourne to Cambodia to allow it to be directly involved at the grass roots level in building up the NGO housing rights network in Cambodia and working within the communities that are threatened with evictions, a prevalent issue in Cambodia. COHRE is involved in advocacy work and undertakes community training to empower

people threatened with displacement as a result of distorted or corrupted development models within countries.

Natalie works with communities to train them about their rights under both international and domestic law, and to devise strategies to fight for their rights and make their governments accountable.

One of the big cases Natalie has been working on is the Dey Krahorm community evictions, where 400 families were violently and forcibly evicted by police and bulldozers from their homes in the Dey Krahorm community in January this year.

For more information about CHORE and the Dey Krahorm evictions, please visit www.cohre.org/Cambodia