



**CRITICIZING OBAMA AND THE ESTABLISHED ORDER:
COMPLEXITY, COMPROMISE AND CONSEQUENCES**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 06-09-11, p.A7

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

If there is one lesson to be lifted and learned from the storm of enraged and relentless attacks on the motive, commitment and character of Professor Cornel West, it is that Black people are *in no ways* ready for any public criticism of President Obama by other Blacks. But no one can honestly argue an immunity from criticism for any person, organization, ethnic group, or country, if they have even a modicum of familiarity with moral reasoning, the human tendency to err, miss the mark and do evil and unworthy things, or the indispensable role criticism and challenge play in holding leaders and governments accountable.

The expression of our right and responsibility to hold those who govern accountable is as ancient as the sacred teachings of the *Husia* of ancient Egypt in which the sage Djedi tells Pharaoh Khufu that he can neither kill nor experiment on even a nameless prisoner, for he too is a noble image of the Divine. It is also expressed in the *Husia* by the peasant, Khunanpu, who tells the governmental official, Rensi, "Hold back the flood in order to do justice. The true balancing of the land is the doing of justice. Do not tell lies for you are great. Do not act lightly for you have weight. Do not speak falsely for you are the balance. And do not deviate for you are the standard." Indeed, "Doing justice is breath to the nose."

Likewise, it is as recent as Martin Luther King's criticism of the country's imperial war in Vietnam and the unconscionable waste of human lives and resources for human good; Fannie Lou Hamer's courageous questioning of

America's hypocritical and empty claims to be the home of the brave and the land of the free; and Malcolm X's criticism of America's imperial rampages and *herrenvolk* (master race) democracy that makes us victims instead of beneficiaries. It is, then, part of our ethical self-understanding and social justice tradition as a people to criticize the established order, hold it accountable, and challenge it to live up to its campaign promises and progressive talk, its claimed highest values and vision for a just and good society. Thus, Prof. Cornel West, like Rev. Jeremiah Wright, who came under similar attacks for criticizing the established order, fits well within this social justice tradition, especially the Black Christian dimension of this larger tradition called "prophetic witness."

But the response to West was a result of a complexity of factors which begin with the deep commitment Black people have for Pres. Obama as a Black person, a symbol of achievement and hope, and their fear that anything said critical of him undermines his office and chances for re-election and that if he "fails," it will be used to indict all of us. Moreover, there is a general reluctance to inadvertently add to the vicious and relentless campaign against him by the right-wing. Furthermore, the concern was heightened by the harshness and public expression of the criticism and its violating the unspoken community protocol of immunity from criticism for Obama.

In another case, few would deny Cornel West's integrity, commitment to Black people and the struggle or deny the relevance of the social justice issues he raised of: inattentiveness to the vulnerable;

**CRITICIZING OBAMA AND THE ESTABLISHED ORDER:
COMPLEXITY, COMPROMISE AND CONSEQUENCES**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 06-09-11, p.A7

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

unemployment; mass imprisonment; war-mongering and waste; Guantanamo; bailout for banks rather than homeowners; and inadequate advocacy for everyday and working people. But weighed against the importance attached to Obama, West is considered both grossly wrong and woefully out-of-line. Consequently, he is redefined from prophetic witness to wayward brother of questionable commitment and character.

It is said that Obama is working within structural constraints that the presidency and public office impose and thus he has to compromise and sometimes “go along to get along.” But he is a moral agent and must be principled and set boundaries for such so-called “pragmatic politics.” Nor should he and his supporters use this tactical adjustment as an excuse or “reason” for him not to act justly and not to act in defense and furtherance of the interests and aspirations of the masses of people of this country or not to respect the rights of the peoples of the world. And he should not let the right-wing lend him a language for defining patriotism or America, making laws, engaging labor, or approaching life, or let them prescribe borders and boundaries of race and class he dares not cross in speech or action.

But to both cherish the achievement and challenge the wrong and unjust, we must rebuild our Movement and join with other movements to organize broad-based constituencies and communities in a larger national and international thrust for real and radical social change and good in and for the world. A serious movement would see the White House, regardless of its occupant, as one field of struggle, support progressive policies generated from within it and put

forth policies it should embrace and implement.

Even Obama has asked us and all progressives to challenge and support him by building and sustaining a movement that puts forth an agenda of change we want and will work and struggle for. In his better and beginning days, he declared, “Change doesn’t come from Washington, it comes to Washington.” But in the euphoria of the moment, many mistook the man for the movement and the occupation of the office became the central and to some, the only issue. And it is this, among other things discussed, that has led to an unpromising and precarious self-silencing that leaves us without the hope and agenda we can take in our hands, mull over in our minds, and use to generate a progressive and even radical practice worthy of our history and our social justice tradition as a people.

When Harry Belafonte, an important and respected critical voice in the interest of social justice, peace and struggle, was asked whether or not criticizing Obama publicly and now would undermine him, hurt his re-election chances, and bring on a worst alternative, he answered in the negative. He said, “I think we will not undermine him, but undermine the hopes of this nation, if we don’t criticize him.” Indeed, he said, “nothing will happen but good for Barack Obama and the United States of America and indeed the world, if everybody stepped to the table and said ‘this is the course we must be on’.” And this, of necessity, will be a fundamentally different and new course for the country, dedicated to realizing unfulfilled promises and possibilities of freedom, justice, peace, well-being and flourishing for everyone, here and throughout the world.

Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of Kwanzaa; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* and *Introduction to Black Studies*, 4th Edition, www.MaulanaKarenga.org.