

## **THE OBAMA SYNDROME: SURRENDER AT HOME, WAR ABROAD**

by Tariq Ali. New York, NY: Verso, 2010. \$16.95 U.S., hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-84467-449-7. Pages: 1-156.

*Reviewed by Dax D'Orazio*<sup>1</sup>

With another American election looming, the effort to define Barack Obama's presidential legacy will officially commence. After two consecutive terms and a series of major legislative initiatives ranging from health care reform to the Iranian nuclear deal, there will be no shortage of political accounting attempting to reconcile Obama's campaign words and his elected deeds. Political author and analyst Tariq Ali's *The Obama Syndrome* is what he calls 'a 'preliminary report on the first 1,000 days of the Obama presidency' (ix). Although certainly limited temporally, it is a worthwhile refresher for those looking to review what will soon become the Obama legacy. Further, it provides some particularly insightful commentary in the context of Hilary Clinton becoming the Democratic presidential candidate, an establishment politician with far less convincing progressive credentials than Obama (especially concerning foreign policy). Voters looking for more potent progressive reforms will again confront the dilemma of whether the 'lesser of two evils' approach to a two party system can ever meaningfully deliver. For those who have followed American politics closely – including critical commentary on issues such as foreign policy, Wall Street and health care – Ali's preliminary appraisal may not be a revelation. Nonetheless, for those seeking a relatively accessible post-mortem of 'Obamania' and the accompanying disillusionment of the left following the rollback of campaign promises, *The Obama Syndrome* is concise and incisive.

One key point overshadows much of Ali's book: the policies pursued by the Obama administration are not solely idealism constrained by the realities of American politics and an intransigent Republican Party. In many cases, Obama's policies reflect an ingratiation of status quo structures and institutions. Ali convincingly diagnoses an acute defeatist element to the administration's consensus driven approach in which the compromises and appeasements came one after another. He aptly

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describes Obama as “prone to use mass indifference as an excuse for his own opportunism” (88). In other words, Obama willingly truncated his momentum and political capital in favour of a more cautionary and consensual approach. Nowhere is this more conspicuously exhibited than the capitulation on health care policy, due largely to a failure to confront the oligopoly of private insurers that have resulted in exceedingly high per capita health care costs (94-96).

The first chapter is a retrospective of the election process itself and delves into some of the mischaracterized details of Obama’s past. Pointing to specific examples of Obama on the campaign trail – including the distancing of Reverend Jeremiah Wright as well as Obama’s sloganeering, lavish corporate donations, and admiring references to Ronald Reagan – Ali argues that progressive observers should have been more cautious. Yet, the massive mobilization of youth (across race and class) who genuinely believed that Obama could retreat the American empire and take head on ‘Democracy Inc.’ cannot be faulted. As Ali puts it, “Their enthusiasm was infectious” (6). Ali seems to believe that Obama was electable precisely because he did not constitute an existential threat to established order and, therefore, his presidential prerequisites included assuaging power blocs that ‘hope’ and ‘change’ would eventually meet reality. For proof one need look no further than the lion’s share of total campaign donations Obama garnered from the country’s largest corporations (32).

Perhaps the most poignant analysis inhabits the second chapter, an assessment of the foreign policy record of the Obama administration. Considering the history of American intervention in the Middle East, the author dedicates a significant portion of this section dissecting American policy in the region. According to Ali, “[t]here was no fundamental break in foreign policy” from his predecessors (38). In Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine, Obama failed to drastically alter a longstanding American predilection towards intervention and its attendant regional instability. Ali closes by refocusing his scope domestically and taking aim at some of the missed opportunities including health care reform and the economic crisis of 2008. Ali contends that the latter’s fallout was entrusted to a cadre of predictable advisers (even respected Keynesians were shunned with a wink to Wall Street) who set out to ‘re-regulate’ a financial system that simply required some occasional tailoring. Although beyond the immediate scope of Ali’s assessments, his book also evokes much wider political questions, including political strategy, electoral politics and the paradox of progressive incrementalism. For example, is it ethical to support liberal political projects that can, in some cases, deliver upon

their incrementalist credentials? Or, is it incumbent upon those seeking radical change to insist that American Democrats, for example, vigorously mobilize and educate for reforms like health care and immigration? More importantly, how can social movements translate grassroots support into political capital without compromising their vision and integrity?

Ali's argument does somewhat falter, but not due to a lack of evidence. The main setback is its polemical nature that fails to consider how American policy might be different with Obama's rivals in the White House, Democrat or Republican. Yet, there is still a redeeming quality to Ali's writing in that he mainly attempts to reconcile the public pre-election euphoria with Obama's actual policy record while in office. Although it is fair to say that many of the left exhibited cautious optimism, the brilliant marketing of Obama's campaign trail in tandem with his courtship of the American press solidified a genuine feeling that 'change' need not necessarily be a vacuous or rhetorical ploy. Obama's progressive credentials (either real or imagined) allowed him to uniquely garner unqualified support from wide swaths of the left, even amid policy that could easily be mistaken for Bush era bellicosity. Nonetheless, as time has passed, Obama appears more as an adept politician always striving for coveted consensus, eschewing confrontation and constantly offering apologetics for American exceptionalism. Ali captures this well. While reading this book you get the distinct sense that the original sin of Obama's presidency is that it offered this misguided optimism, at least partially obscured by the elation of genuine progressives.