As Obama himself acknowledged, 'no single speech,' however lofty and soaring in its promises, 'can eradicate years of mistrust' between the United States and the so-called Muslim world or untangle the messy Arab-Israeli conflict which is at the heart of American troubles in the region.

President Obama's much-anticipated speech to the Muslim world delivered on June 4 to 3,500 selected guests in the ornate auditorium of the century-old Cairo University has predictably drawn mixed reactions in different parts of the world including the Middle East itself as noted by some of the major American and British papers such as The New York Times (Varying Responses to Speech in Mideast Highlight Mideast Divisions) and The Financial Times (Caution Tempers Muslim Praise) and evident in commentaries in today's newspapers across the region from Egypt's Al-Ahram to Israel's Haaretz and further afield to Kenya's Daily Nation (Back Words with Action Muslim Leaders Now Tell Obama).

As the President himself acknowledged, 'no single speech,' however lofty and soaring in its promises, 'can eradicate years of mistrust,' repair the awful relations between the United States and the so-called Muslim world, untangle the messy Arab-Israeli conflict which is at the heart of American troubles in the region. The task is daunting if opinion surveys are anything to go by. While Egyptians expressed more confidence in President Obama than his predecessor, the figure was only 35 per cent (8 per cent for President Bush), and their favourable opinion of the United States itself remains low at 22 per cent.

It was indeed a powerful, smart speech. Some have even called it historic, reminiscent of President Kennedy's in Berlin or President Nixon's opening to China. It was delivered with the eloquence and mastery the president has become famous for. It was clearly a hit with the audience of carefully selected functionaries, friends and foes of the American and Egyptian governments, who gave him a standing ovation at the beginning and end of the speech. A remarkable reversal of fortunes for a US President: On his last visit to the Middle East President George Bush was pelted with a volley of shoes by an Iraqi journalist.

Many have remarked on President Obama's captivating charm and the respectful tone of his speech, its judicious invocation of his Muslim background on his father's side, Islamic contributions to world civilisation, the religious discourses and texts of the three great monotheistic religions, even its truthfulness. What caught my attention however, were its equivalences and silences.

He sought to address and diffuse what he called 'tension between the United States and Muslims around the world - tension rooted in historical forces that go beyond any current policy debate.' Like no other president before him, he outlined some of these forces – colonialism, proxy wars, and western insensitivities. But the very framing of the protagonists is problematic: It is between the United States and Islam, one a political entity, the other a religious community. Notwithstanding his concession that Islam and Muslims have been a part of the United States from the beginning - lest we forget many of the enslaved Africans, some estimates indicate up to a fifth or a quarter, were Muslim and the majority of United States Muslims are African Americans - Islam is presented as an external 'other'.

In this formulation, observes a perceptive commentator in The Guardian, the United States refers
to 'a concrete specific place, and Islam 'a vague construct subsuming peoples, practices, histories and countries more varied than similar. ‘Labelling America's "other" as a nebulous and all-encompassing "Islam" (even while professing rapprochement and respect) is a way to avoid acknowledging what does in fact unite and mobilise people across many Muslim-majority countries: Overwhelming popular opposition to increasingly intrusive and violent American military, political and economic interventions in many of those countries. This opposition – and the resistance it generates – has now become for supporters of those interventions, synonymous with "Islam".'

Another glaring parallel was the one President Obama drew between the lessons of the peaceful civil rights movement in the United States and the violent Palestinian resistance, that one led to progressive change, the other is doomed to failure. But these are two different struggles: One a struggle for civil rights by an oppressed racial minority, the other a struggle for statehood by an occupied nation. As the history of decolonisation shows, in which the Palestinian struggle ought to be placed – and indeed in which America's own struggle for independence belongs – independence struggles involved both peaceful and violent resistances. The nature of the resistance was in large measure determined by the attitudes of the imperial, colonial, or occupying powers.

This was clearly the case in Africa where independence was achieved through peaceful struggles in contexts where the metropolitan colonial power was willing to negotiate, while protracted armed struggles were waged in the more recalcitrant settler states where national freedom for the 'natives' was seen as incompatible with continued settler power and hegemony. We should not forget that in South Africa, which the president referred to as an exhibit of the universality of the American civil rights narrative, the struggle against apartheid involved generations of peaceful protests, armed struggle, and international sanctions which were opposed by much of the West. Historical analogies are always tempting, but when uttered by an American president they betray indifference to historical realities and such false analogies can produce wrong-headed policies with dire political consequences.

The silences were equally telling. The most troubling was the failure to fully address one of the fundamental reasons for the estrangement of the so-called Muslim world from the United States: The latter's support for authoritarian regimes. To be sure, the president talked about democracy, religious freedom, and women's rights, not to mention development, but in vague and bland terms. Indeed, as Heba Moyayef [10] notes, ‘Obama's speech essentially failed to address the dismal human rights record [11] of Egypt and its neighbors, beyond generalities. His words, greeted with both rapturous applause and moments of silence, were addressed to the whole Muslim world [12]. But he could and should have alluded in a far more direct way to the repressive practices of Egypt and many of its neighbours. Those troubled by the signs that the Obama administration [13] is downgrading the place of human rights in US foreign policy [14] will have found nothing reassuring in his speech.’

President Obama's rhetorical references to democracy and human rights were a disappointment not because the United States should pursue a democracy crusade as the Bush Administration sought to cover its unadorned imperial belligerence and hubris, but because its policies undermine democracy in many Muslim-majority countries and there was no sign in the speech itself - nor has there been in the new administration's foreign policy agenda as articulated thus far - that these policies are likely to change fundamentally in substance rather than style. The president acknowledged America's role in overthrowing a democratically elected government in Iran in 1953. But American interventions are not confined to the past. Today the United States continues to coddle dictatorships and frustrate democracy across the world where its strategic interests are at stake. The delivery of this very speech in Egypt, a country ruled by the autocratic President Hosni Mubarak for the past twenty-eight years, shows that old habits die hard indeed.

Interestingly, it has been reported that on his second visit to an African country in July – in case people and the press forget Egypt is in Africa – the president will go to Ghana rather than his father's homeland Kenya, because of the latter's troubled politics. Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, was also avoided to the chagrin and even anger of many Nigerian politicians and commentators apparently because of its unsavoury democratic credentials. The comment by the great Nigerian writer and human rights activist, Professor Wole Soyinka [15], underscores what is at stake for human rights and democracy campaigners in American presidential visits, especially President
Obama in Cairo: Equivalences and silences
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Obama, in whom much hope has been invested – quite unrealistically in my view – in many part of the world. Professor Soyinka praised the choice of Ghana, a relatively successful democracy, over Nigeria and added with poetic flourish: ‘If Obama decides to grace Nigeria with his presence, I will stone him. The message he is sending by going to Ghana is so obvious, is so brilliant that he must not render it flawed by coming to Nigeria any time soon.’

In the end, as President Obama himself has often stated, he will not be judged on delivering fine speeches, in which he excels, but on the actions taken by his Administration. Much of the world including the so-called Muslim world is used and inured to flowery rhetoric from their own demagogues and visiting western leaders who often preach what they don't practice, who come with promises of change that mask continuity. In essence, the issues are dazzlingly straightforward: The United States would do itself a lot of good if it curtailed its propensities for destructive interventions around the world and the so-called Muslim world would do itself a lot of good if it built truly democratic developmental states. It is only by promoting these mutually desirable conditions that symmetrical relations, principled rather than paternalistic partnerships, between the peoples of different faiths and civilisations in the developed and developing nations can be forged for the good of us all.

* This article first appeared in The Zeleza Post [16].
* PT Zeleza is editor of The Zeleza Post [17].
* Please send comments to editor@pambazuka.org [18] or comment online at http://www.pambazuka.org/ [19].

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(Article-Summary:
cc President Obama’s speech to the Muslim world delivered on 4 June was ‘powerful’ and ‘smart’, but PT Zeleza finds himself most interested in its ‘equivalences and silences’. With reference to media reactions and commentary from different parts of the world, Zeleza looks at Obama’s framing of the relationship between the US and Islam, the parallels Obama draws between ...read more [22]

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