

**TODAY**

**WORLD NEWS**

- Home
- Kenya Today
- Today's News
- News
- Politics
- World News
- News Extra
- Opinion
- Business
- Sports
- Cutting Edge
- Daily Magazine
- Yesterday's News

**CLASSIFIEDS**

- Motor
- Property
- Obituaries
- Jobs
- Financial Reports
- Digital Paper
- Ringtones

**RSS**

**Advertising Rates**

- Permissions
- Archives

**INTERACT**

- Talk to Us
- Interact

**MORE NATION MEDIA**

- Mwananchi
- Sunday Nation
- The East African
- Let's Cook
- Business Daily NEW
- The Monitor (Uganda)

**How traditional Somali garb became an issue in US**

Story by MUIRU NGUGI  
Publication Date: 3/2/2008

Days to two crucial primaries that might determine who between Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton will be the Democratic Party nominee, the campaign has turned nasty.

This was the week when a picture of Obama in traditional Kenyan Somali garb appeared mysteriously on *Matt Drudge Report*, a prominent political blog.

It was also when vandals hit Obama's campaign headquarters in Texas, one of the states holding primaries on Tuesday. Buildings and vehicles were spray-painted with racial slurs.

But you would not have noticed the underlying tension by watching last Tuesday's debate, seen as the last chance for Hillary to blunt Obama's surging momentum, held between the two candidates in Ohio, the other state holding a primary on Tuesday.

The debate was distinguished by its emollient tone, although Clinton did attack Obama's alleged lack of experience in foreign affairs.

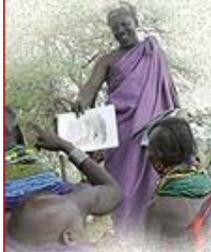
Clinton said that although she was prepared to do everything to win, she was still honoured "because it has been a campaign that is history-making." Obama on his part said he regarded Clinton as a "worthy nominee" who would be a much better president than Republic contender John McCain who has the Republican nomination all but sewn up.

This graciously magnanimous banter was an oblique reference to the prospect of the first black and the first female US president.

The contest between the two has been cast as one between the big feminist hope in Clinton, venerated as leader of the female army, and the equally big post-identity fundamentalists hope in Obama, whose inter-continental Horatio Alger biography is the postcard for post-modernist life.



Senator Barack Obama (right) is dressed as a Somali Elder by Sheikh Mahmed Hassan during his visit to Wajir, during the senator's visit to Kenya in 2006. Photo/FILE

**CLICK TO  
CREATE  
A HERO**

**AMREF**



So far, Obama is doing extremely well in the race, and is leading in the polls. In the latest *New York Times/CBS News* poll, 54 per cent of Democratic voters supported Obama against Clinton's 38 percent.

His campaign is also largely free of money issues. According to *Opensecrets.org*, a website that monitors campaign fundraising in the US, Obama has raised more money than Clinton – a cool \$138 million (Sh9.6 billion) against Clinton's \$134 million (Sh9.3 billion). In January alone, Obama raised \$36 million (Sh2.5 billion) against Clinton's \$18 million (Sh1.25 billion).

In a country where money is often the message and the medium, it means, at the very least, that Obama now has enough to pay for his own oxygen of publicity.

Obama is also leading Clinton in delegates, having 1,370 to her 1,274. To be nominated by the Democratic Party, a candidate needs 2,025. There are a total of 4,048 delegates at stake in the Democratic race, but the difference comprises the so-called "super delegates".

These are mainly party officials and prominent party members such as governors and former presidents. They are expected to "validate" the vote rather than determine it, but their role could gain importance if neither candidate pulled ahead convincingly.

This scenario is already being viewed with trepidation by Democrats and supportive pundits alike. Sandy Grady, a veteran journalist who has covered 16 national political conventions where candidates are formally nominated, wrote in the *USA Today*, the widest circulating newspaper here, that a persistent showdown between the two candidates could do more damage to the Democratic ticket than their Republican opponents.

What makes the race even more interesting is that Obama recently won 11 straight primaries and causes in states spread across the country. This has put Clinton, the front-runner throughout last year, in a desperate need for a comeback. The primaries in Texas and Ohio on Tuesday will either resuscitate her campaign or confer on Obama a momentum that will be hard to stop.

Some of the negative developments this coming week should be seen in that light. The Clinton campaign denied any involvement in the release of a controversial Obama photo. Matt Drudge claimed that it was circulated by the Clinton campaign staff.

The picture, taken during Obama's tour of Wajir, Kenya, in 2006, showed him wearing a white turban and a wrap around white robe, typical Kenyan attire for prominent elders in North-Eastern province.

Kenyans are unlikely to understand why a photo of a politician wearing traditional garb would cause a controversy. After all, Kenyan politicians are bestowed with traditional elder cloaks, staffs and stools from communities other than their own as a sign of respect and acceptance.

In the US, however, any association with things Islamic has recently tended to be considered particularly insensitive to American security interests.

The photo was clearly aimed at portraying Obama as a Muslim, a religion that scares the juices out of the American public because most terrorists who have attacked America in recent years have professed that faith.

On her part, Clinton accused Obama of running against her as "the status quo," of calling her "divisive" and "untruthful" and for questioning "her credibility."

Obama is not just facing attacks from the Clintons – and it is Clintons in plural because former President Bill is still campaigning for his wife, although in a more subdued, humbler manner after he was blamed for her loss in South Carolina.

This week, McCain gave a rather cheeky series of apologies, all over an incident that would probably have gone unremarked. It involved a Republican radio host who referred to Obama as "Barack Hussein Obama" when introducing McCain in Ohio. Of course "Hussein" is Obama's middle name.

It would not raise hackles were it not for the fact that it sounds "Islamic" and has the potential of being associated with terrorism by gullible Americans.

By apologising, without being asked to, McCain was simultaneously playing the good guy and lending publicity to an issue on which his campaign could capitalise later in the year should Obama become the Democratic nominee.

The Obama campaign probably had this issue in mind when they reacted to McCain's apology.

"It is a sign that if there is a McCain-Obama general election, it can be intensely competitive but the candidates will attempt to keep it respectful and focused on issues," said Obama campaign spokesman Bill Burton in an e-mail to the Press.

Clearly, the language in this response was forward-looking enough to attempt to pre-empt the dirty campaign tactics such as the speedboat issue that torpedoed John Kerry's presidential bid in 2004.

But the Islam thing was not about to go away. When controversial African-American cleric Louis Farrakhan, the head of Nation of Islam, uttered some supportive comments, Obama was compelled to denounce him, producing a gem of a sentence: 'I can't say to somebody that he can't say that he thinks I'm a good guy.'

This apparent obsession with Islam is rooted in the forlorn perception that something in Obama's background might contribute to his inelectability.

What these recent events indicate is that the race is likely to become even more heated in coming days. The sparks between the two Democratic candidates are nothing compared to when the Republic mean machines get trained on that nominee later in the year.

The building blocks for the dirty campaigns are already being gingerly laid on the internet where callous claims, which might be accorded more prominence after the conventions, are already being bandied around.

 [Print this Page](#)

 [Email this Story](#)

 [Save this Story](#)

ADVERTISEMENT



**Nation Media Group all rights reserved 2007**

[Front Page](#) | [Company Profile](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#)  
[Advertise Online](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Careers at Nation](#) | [Key Contacts](#)  
[Rights and Permissions](#) | [Feedback](#) | [FAQ's](#)

[Link to keywords](#)