



The Female Obama

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Dayo Olopade – Wed Jun 9, 3:25 am ET

NEW YORK – Overlooked among Super Tuesday’s big wins for women, Kamala Harris may be the most ambitious of them all. Dayo Olopade talks to the exotic prosecutor vying to break California’s last glass ceiling.

This year’s “Super Tuesday” of primary [elections across the country](#) featured plenty of women to watch: Arkansas Senator Blanche Lincoln fought off a tough challenge from fellow Democrat Bill Halter; Nikki Haley, the Indian-American conservative battling allegations of “inappropriate sexual contact” will face a runoff for governor in South Carolina; and in [California](#), former eBay CEO Meg Whitman and Hewlett Packard executive Carly Fiorina emerged victorious after expensive, blistering primary campaigns.

But maybe the most interesting woman to watch is Kamala Devi Harris, the [district attorney](#) for San Francisco, whose Democratic primary win puts her on course to become the first African-American and Asian-American woman elected attorney general in California. Born to one of the first black economics professors at Stanford University and an Indian physician at a time when interracial marriage was still illegal in parts of America, she has already made history. Now, Harris’ challenge is to break through one of the last glass ceilings in California.



AP – This Tuesday, April 20, 2010 photo shows San Francisco District Attorney Kamala Harris who is running ...



“She’s running for what is considered one of the more nontraditional jobs as a woman,” says [Debbie Walsh](#) of the Center for American Women in Politics “So she has to be even better.”

The state has always been hospitable to women candidates—as both senators and the speaker of the House can attest. But there has never been a female attorney general—no less one with as exotic a background as Harris’. Sound familiar? Gwen Ifill, author of *The Breakthrough*, spotlighting a new class of [African-American politicians](#), [summed it up](#) for David Letterman: “They call her the female Barack Obama.”

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The 46-year-old Harris, who shares Obama’s greyhound physique and progressive politics, has long been one of the rising stars of the Democratic Party. Jonathan Parker, political director of Emily’s List, calls her “a superstar for the future.” And like Obama, she represents a new generation of public servants who easily cross lines of race and culture. Her varied endorsements—from Tyra Banks to the League of Conservation Voters—tell the tale. And she’s run a thoroughly modern campaign: When her chief opponent, former Facebook security officer Chris Kelly, attacked her record on crime on YouTube, she fired back using widespread complaints about Facebook’s privacy policies.

Sheathed in a black wool suit and several strands of pearls, Harris weighed the notion of making history in the lobby of the Willard Hotel in Washington earlier this spring. “As with anything there are advantages and disadvantages,” she said. “But I’ll tell you the advantages certainly stand out to me.” When Harris marched in a parade for Martin Luther King Day, an African-American man broke through the crowd with his three children, crying, “Look, that’s our DA.” Likewise, her campaign kickoff was packed with young women proud

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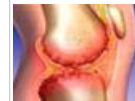
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that one of them was making change. "I was raised to be an independent woman," she continued, "not the victim of anything."

Like the technocrat-in-chief, Harris believes in "smart government." When she saw the statistics connecting violent crime, high school dropouts and elementary school truancy in San Francisco, she decided to begin prosecuting the parents of kids skipping class—an approach that reduced truancy rates by 23 percent. Harris' "back on track" pilot program, which has cut recidivism among [drug offenders](#) by supporting them in job training and education, has been embraced by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger as a model for California. The career prosecutor likens campaigning to the courtroom. "Running for office is similar to being a trial lawyer in a very long trial," she says. "It requires adrenaline and stamina; it requires being in shape mentally and emotionally. It's a marathon."

Indeed, Tuesday's primary vote could be just the first lap for Harris. The AG seat has long been a springboard to higher office; governors Christine Gregoire, Jennifer Granholm and Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano have also made the jump from top cop to their state's governor's mansions. In California, the springboard is a state tradition: "Very few extremely ambitious state level politicians would want state attorney general to be their last job in California government," says Frank Zimring, a professor at University of California [Berkeley School of Law](#). "But lots of people would like it to be their first."

Harris is similarly ambitious; according to one California political observer, she has "a healthy ego—but tell me a politician who doesn't." Still, she has her work cut out for her—not least being elected in November. Harris will face tough competition from the Republican nominee, Los Angeles County district attorney [Steve Cooley](#).

The battle of prosecutors will also be a referendum on reform within the largest and arguably most troubled criminal justice system in the country. California's Ninth [Circuit Court of Appeals](#) has mandated that the state reduce its jailed population by 40 percent, and Harris has taken up the cause of prison reform in a state whose overloaded prisons and harsh [sentencing guidelines](#)—including the controversial "three strikes law"—have become a pressing political and budgetary issue. "We're turning California's prisons into very expensive retirement communities for former burglars," says Mark Kleiman, UCLA professor and author of the prizewinning book *When Brute Force Fails*. "Three strikes is a big part of that problem." (California spends more than three times the national average on over-50 prisoners annually.)

There are other tough legal and political fights ahead, on issues from reforming immigration laws to defending national health-care legislation and civil rights for gays. On "three strikes," Harris will be shielding her left flank—Cooley has sponsored legislation reforming the politically popular but practically untenable law. Harris has long opposed the death penalty, though she said she would enforce it as AG. Cooley feels otherwise. Harris disagrees with the controversial Arizona statute that encourages police to demand proof of citizenship for suspects—and supports a path to citizenship for immigrants currently living in the U.S. illegally. "We can't be ostriches on this issue," she said at a recent candidate's forum.

The rising star may still fall victim to California's "unpredictable" politics, says Gautam Dutta, executive director of the Asian American Action Fund, which endorsed Harris and primary candidate Tom Lieu. Harris has already faced criticism for inflated conviction rates in San Francisco, as well as her role in mismanaging the city's crime lab—from which a technician allegedly stole cocaine. There have also been high-profile problems with the "Back on Track" initiative, such as when an illegal immigrant enrolled in the program was subsequently arrested for assault. Irked Bay Area police officers gunning for Harris set up a Facebook page slamming her as "more of a career politician than the crime-fighting attorney her campaign is making her out to be."

Heading into November, Harris must balance the tough-on-crime image essential to winning statewide with the liberal tendencies she shares with her sister, who served as executive director of California's ACLU, and brother-in-law, whom Obama appointed to the embattled civil rights division of the Justice Department. "It's not a crime to be a liberal in California," says Dutta. However, "she's running for what is considered one of the more nontraditional jobs as a woman," says Debbie Walsh of the Center for American Women in Politics "So she has to be even better."

Primarily, she needs to build a winning brand. "She's well thought of where she's thought of, but she doesn't have a strong statewide identity," says Zimring. And for that, the comparisons to the president might come in handy. Like Obama, Harris must balance administration and advocacy within a broken system. In his 2010 state of the union address, the president spoke about a "trust deficit" between ordinary citizens and their government. That's certainly the case in California, where state officials have dismal approval ratings and the budget deficit now tops \$30 billion. Managing the broken bureaucracy is almost as tough as steering the United States through two wars, an oil spill and an anemic economic recovery.

Rather than taking a page from recently deposed Alabama gubernatorial candidate Artur Davis, who ran away from the White House, Harris might try to capitalize on the president's still-strong numbers in California.

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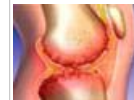
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"She distinguishes herself by being an African American, by being a Democrat, and by being young," says Zimring. "The more you cast it as a statewide political office instead of a niche in the Justice Department, the better she looks against Cooley."

Harris, who announced her ambitions just days after Obama's sweeping victory in November 2008, isn't so sure. "So many people trip in front of them because they're looking over there or up ahead," she says. "I'm knocking wood all the time."

Dayo Olopade is a political reporter for The Daily Beast and a Bernard Schwartz Fellow at the New America Foundation.

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