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## Obama on defensive as he prepares to address the US

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WASHINGTON // Facing an increasingly anxious US public and a bitterly divided Congress, Barack Obama will deliver his first State of the Union address today, seeking to defend his administration's policies and lay out his initiatives for 2010.

He is expected to sound a largely populist tone, shifting his administration's emphasis to fixing the economy and creating jobs, a priority for US voters and politicians headed for elections in November. He will probably highlight a job-creation bill of US\$154 billion (Dh566bn) recently passed by the House and point to a package of proposals announced on Monday to help middle-class families. Hoping to head off widespread concern about the country's rising debt, Mr Obama will propose a three-year spending freeze in non-security discretionary funding, which will cut \$250bn from the deficit over the next decade, the White House announced on Tuesday.



How Barack Obama will proceed with his imperilled healthcare legislation is one of the biggest questions ahead of the US president's first State of the Union address. **Danny Moloshok / Reuters**

The annual speech, mandated by the constitution, comes as Mr Obama's approval ratings have sagged and as his agenda, which had been moving forward at a breakneck pace, has now stalled amid resurgent Republican opposition.

In recent months, Democrats have lost the support of independent voters, three nationally important elections, and their filibuster-proof majority in the Senate. Mr Obama's top domestic priority, healthcare reform, is now on life-support, while his other goals – regulating banks and passing energy legislation – could also be in serious danger.

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Many will look to the president, known for his oratory, to stop the bleeding, rally supporters and regain some of the momentum in this speech. John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, described the address as a major moment for the president to re-grab the initiative.

"He needs to summon all the powers of inspiration and leadership he has to try to build support and reframe his agenda," Mr Weingart said.

However, Gene Healy, a scholar on the presidency and vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute, said he has limited expectations for what the president can achieve in a single speech. "There's this notion that the bully pulpit is enormously powerful and can fundamentally change the direction of the country through the power of words," he said. "I don't see that happening."

Mr Obama's presidency, so far, has been marked by sweeping policies, from signing the \$787bn economic stimulus package to nearly tripling the number of US troops in Afghanistan.

But some goals he set during his campaign have turned out to be harder to achieve than the administration envisioned. The closing of the prison at Guantanamo Bay has already missed a self-imposed one-year deadline; Mr Obama's attempt to invigorate the Middle East peace process has become bogged down without making substantial headway; his pledge to bring bipartisanship to Washington has instead given way to a hyper-polarised political landscape in the House and Senate.

Some of the perceived shortcoming is the result of the impossibly high expectations that greeted Mr Obama in office.

But Mr Healy, author of *The Cult of the Presidency: America's Dangerous Devotion to Executive Power*, said Mr Obama and his rhetoric of change are also to blame. "Nobody has stoked public expectations irresponsibly for the presidency as much as Barack

Obama," he said.

The president's popularity rating hovers around 50 per cent, down from highs of more than 65 per cent at the beginning of his presidency, according to Real Clear Politics, which averages the major opinion polls. A recent analysis by Gallup showed that only Ronald Reagan – who eventually rebounded to win a second term – had a lower approval rating entering the second year of his presidency. Mr Obama is strongly opposed by Republicans and discontent is palpable among independents, the demographic that delivered him the White House in 2008.

The most stunning sign of that discontent came this month when Democrats lost Edward Kennedy's Senate seat in Massachusetts to a little-known Republican state senator, Scott Brown. Voters in that state, among the most liberal in the United States, were turned off by healthcare reform and spooked by the soaring federal deficit and high unemployment.

Some Democrats have blamed themselves for not clearly explaining the value of their policies to the public. David Plouffe, Mr Obama's presidential campaign manager, who was recently hired for an expanded role in the White House, wrote in an e-mail to supporters on Monday: "We must regroup, refocus, and re-engage on the vital work ahead."

The State of the Union, which airs on every major network and will attract tens of millions of viewers, is the best chance for Mr Obama to pivot his message quickly. His speech last year to a joint session of Congress – though not technically a State of the Union speech – was watched by 52 million people, according to the Nielsen Co, which tracks television viewership.

Almost two in every five members of the public, 39 per cent, think that Mr Obama's State of the Union speech will be more important than previous ones, the highest such percentage since George W Bush's State of the Union speech on the eve of the Iraq war, according to a survey of 1,500 adults by the Pew Research Centre. The economy, jobs and combating terrorism were voters' top three priorities, the Pew survey showed.

The biggest question, of course, is how the president will proceed with his imperilled healthcare legislation. While administration officials say they will not drop the initiative, it remains unclear whether the White House will seek to force final passage on legislation approved by the Senate or pass a series of smaller and less controversial reforms. Many expect an answer to come in the address.

Robert Lehrman, who served as chief speech writer for Al Gore, the former vice president, said Mr Obama will be looking to strike a delicate political balance with his words between sympathising with populist anger and making the case for pressing ahead with his agenda.

"He has to walk a tightrope," said Mr Lehrman, author of <>The Political Speechwriters' Companion. "On the one hand he has to show people who are disappointed with his first year that he understands how they feel. But on the other hand, he cannot abandon the things he campaigned for."

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