

Should Power Necessarily Corrupt?

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Lord Acton said, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”. Why does this happen? Perhaps we can find the answer in the words of Bertrand de Jouvenel, which are. “A society of sheep must in time beget a government of wolves”. In other words, if society is not vigilant in defending its own rights and it constantly acquiesces by silence in the wrongdoings of politicians, it will get a bad government. The opportunities offered by politics to do illegal deeds and thus make personal gains will tempt the politicians and the power which flows from politics will corrupt them. It is only in a society where politicians are called to account, the people are willing to vote out of power those who govern badly, there is genuine freedom of speech and there is a sense of duty, that power can be the instrument of promoting public welfare instead of being the means by which a politician can profit personally. It is here that one must recall the words of Abraham Lincoln who said, “If you once forfeit the confidence of your fellow citizens, you can never regain their respect and esteem. You may fool all of the people some of the time; you can even fool some of the people all the time; but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time”. From the above statements of thinkers we can deduce that for politics to be meaningful, honest, people oriented and effective we need the following:-

1. There should be no wielding of power indefinitely, which means that the term in office of a person in power must be limited by law and that power should be transferable by the people through a system of clean, honest election.
2. There must be freedom of speech, thought and expression so that the people can tell the politicians what they think about them and force the politicians to listen to the voice of reason
3. There must be a sense of duty, of those in power, of those in opposition and of the average, common citizen.
4. The electorate must exercise a wise choice based on a rational review of what different political parties have to offer and how well the politicians in power have performed. Fighting elections only on account of religion, caste, social groups having a collective identity which substitutes uniformity for reasoned action, automatically converts the electorate into a flock of sheep and the government they beget would thus truly be a government of predators rather than a government of public servants.
5. The process of elections must instill in politicians a fear of losing the confidence of the people because if the people vote rationally and not like a flock of sheep, then the politician would know that if he is not respected and trusted he cannot hope to be re-elected. This point is very important because it is only when politicians learn that only when their actions generate confidence that they can hope to continue in power.

There is a saying, “For forms of government let fools contend; what governs best is best”. This would be the very antithesis of democracy. It is often contended that a dictatorship, especially in the kind of situation of near anarchy that many democracies find themselves, a dictatorship would be the best form of government, provided the dictator were a benevolent tyrant. The very expression is an exercise in self contradiction because according to the

Chambers Twenty-first Century Dictionary, benevolent means “showing or involving kindness and generosity, enterprise set up and run for the benefit of others rather than for profit; charitable”. The same dictionary defines ‘tyrant’ in the following words, “a cruel, unjust and oppressive ruler with absolute power: someone who uses authority or power cruelly and unjustly”. There is, therefore, no such a thing as a benevolent tyrant. In our own immediate neighbourhood, Pakistan, we have had the absolute rule of Field Marshall Ayub, Gen. Zia Ul Haq and Gen. Pervez Musharaf. All were initially welcomed by the people because they claimed to replace by orderliness the chaotic conditions created by civilian governments. All ended up by being hated because they all ruled absolutely. Absolute rule shuts out criticism because a dictator would certainly like to hear only what he wants to hear and he would certainly not appreciate what George Orwell said, “If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear”. A dictator does not want to give this freedom because he does not like to listen to unpleasant things; he lives increasingly in a world in which true information does not flow to him and, therefore, he does not know what people think about him or how is government functioning. Therefore, first his minions begin to misuse such authority as may vest in them as officials of the tyrant, then they become corrupt and ultimately the corruption reaches all the way to the top. This is a prime example of absolute power corrupting absolutely.

There are two books which, according to me, must be read by everyone who is in the least bit interested in government. The first is William Shirer’s book ‘The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich’. The other is Alan Bullock’s ‘Hitler--A Study In Tyranny’. Hitler started as a small time politician who was deeply hurt by the humiliation suffered by Germany when it lost the First World War. The Weimar Republic which replaced the Kaiser was very weak and quite unable to stand up to the exorbitant demands of the Allies or to work purposefully to restore the shattered economy of Germany, which had suffered a great deal because of the First World War. A weak government, an economy in the throes of depression, massive unemployment and a highly devalued currency, occupation of parts of Germany by foreign troops and the massive burden of wartime reparations imposed by the Allies created fertile ground for radicalisation of German politics. Hitler had somewhat woolly ideas about restoring German pride. He was influenced by Nietzsche and racist thoughts about the superiority of the Aryan people and from this emerged a philosophy that if Germany were to prosper it must throw out the Weimar Republic and establish an ultra nationalist government which could provide strong rule to Germany. From this was born the Nazi Party which won the election that overthrew the Weimar Republic and which, in 1933, led Hitler to legislate the Enabling Act which gave him the power to rule by decree. He used this Act to assume absolute power, abolish the parliament and take control of both the civilian government and the military in Germany.

Hitler’s government from the very beginning decided to exterminate the Jews, to avenge the defeat of Germany in the First World War by occupying the whole of Europe and by destroying the regime in Russia and toward this end he moved relentlessly to re-arm Germany, build its armed forces and, subsequently, first take over Austria, then Czechoslovakia and then Poland and thus he entered into the Second World War. I narrate these events because what all this did to Hitler was to corrupt him so utterly and absolutely that not only did all power flow from him but he thereby developed a megalomania in which he thought he knew everything. Therefore, he began to intervene even at micro level in military affairs, culminating in the disastrous defeat at Stalingrad, El Alamein and the loss of the whole of North Africa. This is an example of not only power corrupting but of power creating a megalomania in which the tyrant

begins to border on the insane. Ultimately it is the democracies that triumphed, because whereas decision making appears slow, because it represents debate and collective wisdom, it is for superior to the whims of a dictator.

From the world stage let us come to India. Despite the fact that India is a democracy with a strong Constitution, when the Allahabad High Court ruled that Indira Gandhi had indulged in corrupt practices and, therefore, her election was invalid, an attempt was made to neutralise this judgment by declaring a State of Emergency under Article 352 of the Constitution. This was a totally colourable exercise of constitutional authority but it did temporarily pass unto government the authority to rule absolutely, with neither the judiciary nor the legislature being competent to exercise the checks and balances which our Constitution mandated. The story of the Emergency has been told so many times by people much more competent than I to comment. In some matters a degree of efficiency was restored to government, but because government was no longer accountable there was a sharp increase in corruption also. Perhaps we have never recovered from that trauma despite the fact that the absolute power enjoyed from 1975 to 1977 was nevertheless tempered by the very Constitution it attempted to suppress and never became a true dictatorship. It inconvenienced, ever terrorised people, but it never advanced to becoming a true, unbridled tyranny. That makes the Emergency period one of an inefficient tyranny, which suffered from the twin ills of attempted absolute power coupled with inefficient democratic functioning.

Democracy itself is that form of the government which limits absolute power and, therefore, its greatness is that it acts as a check on absolute corruption. India may be corrupt, but because our democracy has checks and balances, our people have that freedom of thought and expression which could call the actions of government into question and, therefore, force the politicians to render account, we cannot become a dictatorship. The courts are a powerful organ in this behalf, as are such constitutional authorities as the Comptroller and Accountant General. Therefore, the large number of scandals which have been detected and revealed in the matter of spectrum allocation, organising the Commonwealth Games or allocation of coal blocks are all indicators that no one enjoys absolute power in India and that wrongdoing can be checked and punished. Genuine democracy and more of it is what India needs. What people condemn as excessive freedom bordering on anarchy is in fact our shield and buckler against absolute rule and the corruption which flows from it.

In the United States of America the President and the Governors of States are restricted from holding office for more than two terms of four years each. They cannot be removed by a vote of no confidence, which means that the government enjoys a degree of stability, but neither the President nor the Governor of a State enjoys absolute power or, for that matter, power in excess of the minimum needed for conducting the executive affairs of the country. Because there is a limit on how long that particular office may be enjoyed, there is neither an incentive for using unfair means to pervert power, nor is there an environment of dynastic rule whereby son takes over from father. In the Westminster form of government there is no limit to how long a person may hold office. A person may aspire for the post of Prime Minister or other senior political posts, but the convention in Britain is that when a person should retire he or she is made to retire. Margaret Thatcher had to go because her party so ordained. This happened with Tony Blair also. Unfortunately in India there is neither a convention, nor a system of thinking within a political party which decides on political retirement, nor a legal restriction on how long an office may be held. Therefore, we have cases of Members of Parliament winning their fifth or sixth

election, Chief Ministers continuing in power for long periods of time and even the most aged politicians hanging on to the reins of power long past the age when they should have retired. My own suspicion is that a great deal of corruption arises out of the desire of politicians to hang on to office, a desire emulated by retiring senior civil servants and judges. Perhaps it is time for us to think about a retirement age for politicians and also a cap on the number of years that a person may be a Member of a State Legislature or Parliament, as also the number of years that he may hold public office. If we enforce this strictly then, perhaps, we may possibly see a reduction in corruption at high levels.

There are certain other reforms that we need, not economic reforms which beggar the common man, but serious political reforms:

1. Our political parties have to do thinking on what their own role is in the Indian democracy. All democracies need parties which, while believing in the basic tenets of democracy, have their own ideologies, agendas and programmes. One or more such party would be in government and there would be a counterpart opposition. For these parties, therefore, being in power should be no great gain and losing power no great loss.
2. The parties must rigidly adhere to a code whereby local candidates are promoted, there is genuine intra party democracy and there is a complete absence of caste and religion based politics.
3. The parties' own structure must be democratic and office bearers must be democratically elected.
4. Party funding should be open, the accounts must be available for inspection and at all times the working of the party should be above board.
5. Because the parties should have internal democracy, each party must have a mechanism whereby if any member of the party, especially one holding high public office, is accused of wrongdoing, including corruption, the party itself investigates the matter and takes strict action against the offender. This would reduce wrongdoing.
6. Elections should be fought on issues and not on the basis of personalities. Issue based politics tends to be more honest than personality based politics, especially because those in power would know that trying to hide or bypass issues will only arouse public anger and this would manifest itself as an adverse voting pattern at the next election.
7. All political parties should agree on a minimum agenda of governance. If this is done the present wildcat political assaults on individuals and parties would cease and instead we would have a degree of politics based on clean, open electoral competition between candidates who are also intrinsically clean. If the politicians realise that power is an instrument for enhancing public welfare and not a mechanism by which they can enrich themselves, the tendency of power to corrupt would be substantially reduced.

Our objective should be to prove Lord Acton wrong because if the enjoyment of absolute power is eradicated altogether from the system, if power itself can be enjoyed only for a finite period, if abuse or misuse of power results in deprivation of power, then power need not necessarily corrupt. Come on India, together we can do this!
