

ESSAY

POWER TENDS TO CORRUPT, AND ABSOLUTE POWER CORRUPTS ABSOLUTELY

OUTLINE

1. INTRODUCTION

- A. Anecdotal example of Moguls/the Mughal Empire
- B. Competitive drive in humans
- C. Race of 'survival of the fittest'
- D. Hobbesian concept of human nature
- E. Overview of national and global examples
- F. Thesis statement in favour of the argument and recommending checks on absolute power

2. Understanding the Nature of Power: What Does Power Constitute?

- A. From physical strength to influence over resources
- B. Examples of power in the Holy Quran

3. The Tendency of Power to Corrupt: A Glance at History

- A. Roman politician and general Mark Antony

4. Power and Corruption: An Insight into Colonialism's Misadventures

- A. British Raj in India
- B. Mistreatment of indigenous/aboriginal populations in North America and Australia

5. Power and A Sense of Impunity: Contemporary Examples

- A. Israel's genocide in Gaza
- B. The weakness of the Security Council

6. The Tendency of Power to Corrupt: A Literary Reflection

- A. Novel "Lord of the Flies" by William Golding (1954)

7. Power Does Not Corrupt Everyone: Presenting a Counter Argument

- A. Exceptional kings mentioned in the Holy Quran: Solomon, David, Dhal Qurayn

8. The Need for a System of Checks and Balances

- A. Example of limitation on the power of the United Nations General Assembly
- B. Executive, legislative and judiciary: branches of government in a democracy

9. CONCLUSION

- A. Reiterating the role of unchecked power to highlight intrinsic evil impulses
- B. Re-asserting the importance of governing and curbing the excesses of power before it gets out of hand
- C. Quotation

Power Tends to Corrupt and Absolute Power Corrupts Absolutely.

The annals of history reveal that the descendants of Babar, figuratively and literally, "came; saw; and conquered" the Indian sub-continent. One of Babar's descendants, Akbar, even went so far as to propagate a whole new religion - the Din-e-Ilahi. The annals of history, sadly, but surely, also reveal how the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar was presented with the heads of his two sons on a platter, while he was spending his last days imprisoned in Rangoon. The majestic Mughal empire met a sorry fate when its rulers became immersed in luxuries and opulence, oblivious to the cautious and judicious exercise of power in individual and state affairs.

This trajectory of the rise and ultimate doom of a powerful dynasty in the history of the sub-continent proves that power has a tendency to corrupt one's moral and ethical standing to the point of ultimate annihilation.

Indeed, many a human has sacrificed his mental sanity, moral uprightness and physical safety at the metaphorical altar of the deity of 'Power'. Humans have

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an innate tendency to dominate and subjugate their fellow species. The competitive impulse results in arms race, trade wars, border skirmishes, full blown wars, genocidal warfare etc. Perhaps, Darwin's concept of "survival of the fittest" will eventually lead to human extinction if things continue in the same fashion! The Hobbesian concept of innate selfishness of humans is another evidence in favour of power seeking to exert influence over others who are weaker than one. This is referred to as the "realist" view of power in terms of international relations. Be it the Israeli warfare in Gaza or the project of colonial powers in the erstwhile colonies, the destruction wreaked by unchecked power is quite evident. Hence, this essay argues in favour of this statement, highlights various examples to prove this stance and also suggests a system of ethical and legal principles to curb the adverse influence of excess power.

The word 'power' invokes a variety of meanings in one's mind. On one hand, there is raw physical strength which is an indicator of physical

power. The Bible as well as the Quran mention 'Saul' or 'Tahel' as a physically powerful monarch who was favoured by God and led the Israelites to victory over Goliath's army. Another form of power is mental or intellectual superiority. This is the basis of academic achievements and technical prowess.

Apart from this, the most common notion of power is maintaining territorial sovereignty and socio-political clout.

The various manifestations of power depict its fluid nature. The question that comes to mind is whether it is the nature of power to tempt and to corrupt or it is the human nature that yields to evil impulses of domination and subjugation over one's fellow humans. This is somewhat akin to the cyclical question whether the hen came first or the egg! This essay contends that power, in all its meanings, creates a set of circumstances that, in themselves, are neither good nor bad, but actually create an environment of 'utility' or 'exploitation' of resources, whereby the outcome may be positive or negative. It is eventually in the hands of the person who wields authority to

decide the use and limits of power.

This dual use of power to achieve a good end in welfare of community versus its use to further egoistic and harmful practices, is delineated through various examples in the Holy Quran. The Quran mentions powerful figures who were either corrupted by their control over God-given resources or rewarded by God for using power sagaciously and wisely. The examples of the former are the Pharaoh, a politically powerful individual, Aaron and Walid bin Mugherra, financial moguls of their times, and a few other affluent and influential civilizations who disobeyed God by using their power to advance selfish, narrow and egoistic interests. On the other hand, the examples of the latter include kings like David and Solomon, who were prophets of God, and people like Khidr and Dhul Qurnain who were intellectually and politically distinguished. They utilized their power to achieve benefit for their communities and please God. In their case, there is an exception to the maxim 'Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely'. However, the vast majority of mankind takes after the 'Pharaohs' and the 'Waleeds', instead of

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following in the footsteps of those who avoided the pitfalls of absolute power.

There are a number of ways in which any person or nation can fall in the abyss of moral depravity and corruption due to an excess of power. One example that comes to mind is that of the Roman politician and general Mark Antony. He was an enormously powerful leader of Rome. He was a part of the 'triumvirate', a group of three men who had the entire Roman empire at their service. Antony abandoned his wife for his romantic interest, Cleopatra, the Queen of Egypt. His coalition partners tried to make him renounce his life of indulgence and disrepute, but he did not pay heed to them. Resultantly, he was defeated in battle and lost his life.

A couple of centuries separate Antony from the white colonialists who set out on an adventure of mercantilism. The Europeans set up colonies in India, North America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The colonialist project is a glaring manifestation of a false sense of superiority and impunity. The colonial masters persecuted the aboriginals in

Australia and New Zealand, in Canada and the USA. Mass graves of children have been discovered in these so-called hubs of 'enlightenment', proving their exercise of torture and brutal power to exterminate the innocent and wipe away their languages and cultures. Likewise, the Jallianwala Bagh incident during the British Raj manifests the immorality of the morally conscious colonialists suffering from the ailment of the 'white man's burden'.

This streak of impunity and barbarity appears once again on the global platform in the form of Israel's monstrous atrocities against the innocent people of Palestine. Both the United States and the State of Israel are culpable in perpetuating a genocide, but they do not realize it as such. The moral lapses of the powerful and the depraved are also reflected in the weakness of the Security Council, an imperative organ of the United States. Whenever the United Nations General Assembly tries to pass a resolution that does not favour any one of the five permanent members of the Security Council, they exercise veto to block the passage of

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the resolution. This reflects the weakness of the world leaders and global powers in promoting and upholding justice and peace.

This innate nature of man versus an external nature is, interestingly, the main part of a novel written by William Golding. "Lord of the Flies" portrays how small children, left unattended by adults, can turn into manipulators, violent autocrats, sadists and murderers. The fictional character of Jack Merridew is a prototype of real-life dictators and autocrats who destroy everything in the mad rush for supremacist rule.

However, it must be kept in mind that exceptions are always there, such as the powerful kings and individuals in the Holy Quran who did not let power corrupt them, rather utilized their means and resources to create better societies, spread goodness and implement good governance.

This means that there must be a framework of rules and moral principles for powerful nations and people to emulate. These principles consist of ethical values like justice,

equality and honesty. There is a need to incorporate these values in the current legal and political practices worldwide.

Even the most powerful organizations and people follow some principles which serve as checks on them. For instance, the UNGA, United Nations General

Assembly, is a very powerful organ of the UNO. It can pass resolutions which can also have a legally binding effect in some cases. It has access to billions of dollars and helps in improving the lives of millions around the world.

In spite of this, the Charter of the UNO has certain articles which limit and curb its power so that it does not breach the sovereignty of states.

Another pertinent example of the necessary limits on power are the three branches of government - the executive, the legislature and the judiciary - which serve to decentralize power and prevent its accumulation in the hands of any one branch. Thus, there are precedents in the practice of nations to show that a system of checks and balances ensures that power does not corrode into corruption.

To conclude, this essay highlights numerous historical, regional, global and literary cases to analyze the

exercise of power by various individuals and nations. Some groups of men have violated the trust of power and its responsible use such as the current Israeli regime and their ideological brothers in the BJP-RSS collusion in India. On the other hand, there are examples of leaders who have used power in a benign way such as the democratic countries who keep a watch on the powers held by their leaders. Indeed, absolute power must be reined in through moderation, temperance, wisdom and a sense of fair play. These values and principles need to operate in national and international politics as well as in one's individual sphere of influence. Only then will it be possible to create a culture where power is exercised to advance collective welfare of community and is treated as a valuable trust and responsibility. In the words of Seneca, "He who has great power should use it lightly."

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