# Living Political Ideas

## Introduction

Violence is a concept that has been with human beings since time immemorial and it is a tool that is used to ensure that there is the advancement of various interests, In addition, the threat of violence has also led to the establishment of the power of the state, which acts as a guardian to secure society against violence. Throughout history, violence has often been used by the state as means through which to not only sustain itself against rebellion, but also to protect those subject to it from outside threats of violence in the form of invasions and conquest. A result has been that violence and power have become irrevocably tied to one another to such an extent that it has become impossible to separate them. The exercise of power, therefore, involves either violence or the threat of violence in order to work effectively; meaning that these two concepts have become essential parts of political action.

## Violence and Power

In politics, violence is a term that is used to describe the way that violence that is perpetrated by either individuals or the state is used to bring about the achievement of political goals. In some instances, violence comes about because of a belief within the population that its political system will never provide them with an opportunity to make demands. In addition, violence can occur when the government fails to respond to the demands of its population; creating a justification for the use of violence n order to achieve political objectives (O'neil, 2015, p. 209). Through the use of violence, it not only becomes possible to gain the attention of the government, but there is also the potential of overthrowing it and establishing s system that is more responsive to the people. Similarly, there are instances all over the world where governments decide to use violence in order to make their populations more submissive to their rule. The intimidation of the population ensures that there is a reduction of the possibility of rebellion; ensuring the stability of the state and also greater opportunities for exercising power. There are also instances where governments are forced to defend their territories from outside invasions, or even seek to coerce others into undertaking actions that are favourable to them.

Power, on the other hand, is the ability to influence or have absolute control over the behavior of people subjected to an authority. The legitimacy of power is essential in bringing about a situation where a government or entity has authority over a population (DiCicco & Levy, 2014). Thus, while there are instances where power is seen as being evil and unjust, its exercise is an integral part of human nature and society cannot maintain stability without it. Power is most often exercised in a way that promotes the influence of superiors over subordinates so that the former are essentially the source of the power being exercised and can be considered to have a monopoly over it. Therefore, even through there might be legitimacy in the power itself, the individuals who exercise it do so at their own discretion and without necessarily consulting with the populations over which they rule. The establishment of power in the state is essential in bringing about the influence of a small number of individuals over the rest of society; meaning that even though power might sometimes be considered unjust, it provides the means through which to advance the vision of the elite for society.

Therefore, violence is the act of causing physical harm and the fear of such an action happening to them ensures that individuals in society submit to authority. Respect for the laws that has been set up as well as the advancement of the interests of the elite are all actions that come about because of the threat of violence. The threat of violence, rather than violence itself, can be used as a political tool because it ensures that there is the advancement of the power of the elite while at the same time bringing about the promotion of the interests of the state against other states. Stronger states often influence the actions of their weaker counterparts through the threat of violence; which is an extremely effective tool in international relations. An example of such a situation is where the threat of violence against its neighbours, especially Vietnam, has allowed China a free hand in the South China Sea, where Vietnam has territorial claims. Consequently, because China is not only economically but also militarily superior to Vietnam, the latter has only responded verbally to aggressive actions by China, but has opted not to act militarily because such an action could be disastrous for the country.

The threat of violence, both domestically and internationally, is essential in the exercise of and maintenance of power. This is because violence is an important tool in the establishment of the authority needed to safeguard the personal ambitions of rulers as well as the advancement of the interests of a nation or state. The exercise of violence in conjunction with power is the basis of the state because the latter often has the monopoly of both within society. Thus, while civilians are denied the right to undertake violent acts against one another, security forces, especially the police and military, can undertake violent actions against civilians if they believe that the latter are going against the exercise of power by the elite. This example shows that the nature of power is that there are the rulers and the ruled and that despite all efforts by individuals in society, there has to be an authority in whose hands most powers are vested in order to bring about social order. The failure to exercise power effectively often leads to its loss through violent actions perpetrated by other parties that are also interested in having and exercising power.

## Strategies and Political Impact

The exercise of violence and power are essential in making it possible for one group to establish dominance over another. Under such circumstances, the threat of violence ensures submission, where the weaker party, which does not have power or the ability to mete out punishment, is forced to accept the authority of the stronger party. During the colonial period, aboriginals were often forced to accept the rule of European powers because to do otherwise would have led to their being exterminated. European powers, after the initial use of force during conquest, established systems of governance that had the threat of force as an inducement to native populations to remain submissive. In the Kenya colony, for example, the British colonial government introduced an identity card system that essentially tied locals to the land in which they lived. Under this system, the native population in those areas occupied by European settlers could not move from one place to another without the express permission of their employers. If caught in the act, these individuals were not only severely punished, but also returned to their employers, who were also free to punish them as well. As seen in this example, the exercise of power involves the threat of violence in order to work effectively.

Another strategy of using violence and power is often seen when rebellions are quelled using state security forces. These forces, which are often highly trained in a bid to become more effective in tackling challenges to the exercise of power, are employed in order to ensure that the threat of violence is always present. One such instance was in Tiananmen Square in China, where the military opened fire on protesters who had gathered in an act of defiance towards the government. Since that time, there has been no significant challenge to the authority of the Communist Party of China, whose leaders have increasingly become more authoritarian, as seen in the leadership style of the current president, Xi Jinping. The threat of violence has also been made use of internationally as seen in the increasingly assertive stance that China has undertaken when it comes to protecting its rights. A consequence has been that violence and power, in addition to such concepts as nationalism, have become the means through which to bring about the achievement of Chinese national interests on the international scene. One of these interests is challenging the American hegemony over the South China Sea, where it has essentially exercised dominance since the end of the Second World War.

There are instances where violence and power are used together in order to justify actions that would otherwise not have been accepted by the population. Such actions usually come about following unexpected events that have a potential of making the population lose faith in their government; leading to the latter seeking to maintain its power through acts of strength. An example of such an action was that taken by the Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11. This event had caught the American government completely by surprise and the decision to invade Afghanistan afterwards was intended to regain public confidence in its ability to defend them by attacking a much weaker party. American military action in Afghanistan, and later Iraq, were exercises of power and violence aimed at satisfying a domestic audience that had suddenly become fearful of another attack similar to 9/11. The fear of such violence as witnessed in 9/11 ensured that there was public endorsement for the violent exercise of military power in Iraq and Afghanistan, which resulted in thousands of deaths, a majority of whom were civilians.

There are instances where violent movements come about in a bid to fight for social justice. An instance of this came about following the successes of the Civil Rights Movement and the failure of the government to ensure that instances of racism in the United States were brought to an end. A consequence was the rise of the Black Power movement, which sought to empower members of the black community in the country, and sometimes advocated for violent actions to counter state and individual racist actions. While this action received enthusiastic support in some parts of American society, especially within the black community, Hannah Arendt strongly differed with the increasingly violent actions of the Black Power movement which, she suggested, was having a negative effect on colleges in the United States. The militant student movements which had come about as a result seem to have shocked Arendt because she ends up blaming the members of the black community for the problem of violence (Arendt, 1969, p. 76). The opinions expressed by Arendt in her essay shows a failure to consider the situation in context, because at the time, the individuals in the Black Power movement sought to ensure that they achieved social justice through violent means since peaceful ones had failed to work effectively.

## The Significance of Power and the Nature of Violence

Power essentially involves control, where an individual or a group of individuals exercise their influence over the rest of society. Having control ensures that these individuals are able to chart the way forward for the entire state at their own discretion. The act of determining the future of a state or society is one of the most paramount aspect of human society and it has been exercised for millennia. It is what determines how the society will be structured and how it will interact with others. The influence of the United States across the world following the fall of the Soviet Union is an important aspect of power because this country managed to step into the power vacuum left by its former adversary, and establish its will over weaker countries across the world. A consequence of this exercise of power was that the United States became the global hegemon, until recently when Russia and China have sought to challenge its pre-eminence. Therefore, power is significant when it comes to seeking to promote the objectives of the state, with its exercise being tempered with the threat of violence in order to make it work more effectively.

Violence in itself is an extremely chaotic force because it is the natural state of human beings. Humans, as individuals, are highly competitive to such an extent that when they compete for meagre resources, they are more likely than not to end up turning to violence in order to gain these resources. Uncontrolled violence has the potential of leaving both parties involved in a worse off condition than when they begun attacking one another. This is where power comes in because it involves a stronger party establishing their dominance over those who are weaker, resulting in a significant reduction of violence because the weaker parties will have lost their independence of action and will have submitted themselves to the stronger one. One such instance was where the constantly fighting Mongol tribes were brought together into a single entity by Genghis Khan, and through his vision, forged them into a nation with a purpose. The result was the Mongol Empire, which stretched across Eurasia and was the largest land-based empire in history. This example shows that when the state has monopoly over violence, it becomes possible to mobilise resources that would otherwise have been used for fruitless internal conflict, for more constructive purposes.

Violence can either create or destroy power and it depends completely on the context within which it takes place. During the French Revolution, the violent actions of the rebels ensured that the Ancien Regime was overthrown and a republican form of government established. Therefore, while one form of government was destroyed through violent action, another was developed in the same process. Power can, therefore, be considered a basis of the state because it allows for the advancement of the influence of the ruler. However, power cannot be exercised without the threat of violence if those subjected to it do not acquiesce to the authority of the ruler. Power and violence go hand in hand in ensuring that there is not only the establishment of a strong state, but also one that is capable of bringing about the effective exercise of power. Despite its being an essential part of the exercise of power, violence, as seen above, also has the potential of destroying it, and this is the reason why its use has to be strictly controlled in order to prevent its misuse and rebellion against the authority using it.

## Peace or End of Government?

One of the most important aspects of government is that it relies on a combination of power and violence in order to propagate itself. This is especially the case where it is the government that has absolute power over its territory while also having a monopoly on the exercise of violence within it. Monopoly of violence is essential for a government to ensure that it secures itself against any forms of rebellions against its authority. Thus, having a monopoly over violence, it can use its security forces to most effectively because the latter have the authority to not only put down rebellions, but also ensure that the population remain submissive. This submissiveness is essential in helping to advance the power of the government because it ensures that it is able to exercise it over the population without any real challenge. In addition, the monopoly over violence can also be made use of to convince the population that the government is the only institution capable of defending them against attacks from outside forces. A result is that the population ends up upholding the authority of the government over them out of fear that they might lose the only real defence that they have against attacks from their neighbours.

The exaggeration of government capabilities to defend the population can be considered its way of ensuring that it maintains is power. In circumstances where society is advanced enough that individuals will not longer see the need for violence, it is possible that it could mean an end to absolute government control over society. It is likely that a system similar to that practiced in Switzerland, of direct democracy, could end up becoming the norm because society will see no need to have an all powerful representative government that no longer advances its interests. Peace has the potential of leading to an end of government as we know it because the latter would be denied the ability to exercise violence in order to maintain its power, especially in instances where a majority are willing to rebel against it. A direct form of government, devoid of representatives, ensures that power, rather than lying in the hands of the government, is instead in the hands of the people; meaning that all individuals in society collectively drive the political process without the need of coercion that the threat of violence might create.

## Power and its Legitimacy

In order for power to work, it requires the absolute obedience of all the parties within a society. Therefore, legitimacy can be considered a means through which governments are able to ensure that they are able to undertake to make political decisions and policies that affect the whole of society. Societal acceptance of a government and its structures is important in the development of means through which power can be exercised effectively because it provides the government with the coercive attributes the lead to the establishment of political authority. When an individual is given the acceptance of his authority over society, he attains the right to exercise it as he or she sees fit, and there are instances where there might be need to use coercion, or the threat of violence in order to ensure obedience from the population. In order to ensure that the exercise of power is legitimate, leaders often seek to promote the idea that it is the moral obligation of individuals to obey their authority. A consequence is that the belief that it is a moral duty to obey authority ensures that rulers are able to achieve security in the exercise of power because it is unlikely that they will be challenged.

The legitimacy of the exercise of power is important in ensuring that rebellion against authority is prevented. In democratic systems, power and the authority to wield it comes about through public deliberations, which ensure that power is used with the consent of the people. Deliberations concerning the exercise of power can be considered instrumental in bringing about legitimacy to an authority because it allows the latter to undertake actions that it deems necessary on behalf of society as a whole. However, because these deliberations, no matter what the outcome, is considered a legitimisation of power, it is difficult to assess the results of the way that power is used. This is especially considering that there are instances where deliberations by the chosen representatives of the population might end up seeking to advance their own interests rather than those of their people. Under such circumstances, power continues to be considered to have been legitimately used because it is in the hands of individuals that were selected by the population to represent them. A consequence of such a situation is that even though power was used legitimately, it was not used for the sake of the population, but rather in the interests of the elite; leading to the potential of a rebellion against the government taking place. Thus, the need to ensure that the exercise of power gains legitimacy is the reason behind the elite seeking to gain the support of all parties in society, whether political actors or civilians.

## Power and Violence and Backing by Political Parties

The exercise of authority in society is dependent not only on the backing of political parties, but also on coercion through the use of power and violence. There are instances where, even in democratic systems, political parties, whether in power or not, will support the use of violence on the population in order to ensure that the system itself is not disrupted. Backing by political parties ensures that there is the establishment of stability in the political system because it helps in bringing about predictability. All parties, whether or not in power, often seek to make use of the established system to their advantage and it is rare for those parties not in power to actively seek to overthrow it. An attempt by opposition political parties to bring about a violent revolution because to do so has the potential of leading to unpredictability since these parties could also end up being swept away alongside the one in government. Therefore, backing by political parties is an essential aspect of the exercise of power and the monopoly over violence because it allows the system to continue to thrive while at the same time providing these parties, especially those in opposition, with an opportunity to attain power through making use of the same system.

The integrity of the state is legitimised through the backing of political parties. It is extremely rare for all political parties involved in a system to have power at the same time and it is more common for only a single party to have power at a time. This means that other political parties have to ensure that they surrender their claims to power until such a time as an opportunity arises that will provide them with the public support they need to attain it. The need to safeguard their own interests makes political parties lend their support to the exercise of power because this situation allows them to maintain a system that is favourable to them. This is an argument that coincides with that made by Thomas Hobbes in The Leviathan, which promotes the idea that political authority in society is created through the establishment of a social contract. Hobbes argues that the authority to use power is established through consent where the individuals in society choose to give up their own independence to a sovereign in an act of self-preservation. The sovereign thus has the responsibility of making sure that that he protects the population against any threats that might arise (Hobbes, 2013, p. chapter 17). Hobbes’ argument can be made use of in the context of political parties because the latter, whether by coercion or consent, tend to back the system of the exercise of power in order to secure themselves within it.

Moreover, backing by political parties ensures that there is the advancement of the need to ensure that there is a rules-based political system. Such is the case in a situation where legitimacy is needed in order for power to be exercised effectively. Absolutist systems of government, such as the monarchy of Saudi Arabia, often have to undertake coercive measures in order to protect their own power and the right to use it. Under such situations, the power that they have does not give them authority over their population because it is essentially coercive. This is in line with the argument made by Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s work, On the Social Contract, which suggests that coercive power is an essential aspect of a civil state, and because of its coercive nature, lacks legitimacy (Rousseau, 2016, p. 59). This argument is pertinent to the argument that political backing is essential for a stable political system because in a situation where coercion is a requirement in the exercise of power, it leaves the political system vulnerable because it can lead to constant attempt to overthrow it. Revolutions take place under such systems of government because there is a failure to ensure the establishment of the backing of the political parties within it.

## Conclusion

The exercise of power and violence are essential aspects of a majority of systems of government. This is because states have the right to ensure that they make use of these tools not only to maintain their legitimacy, but also to prevent instances where uprisings might come up to overthrown them. However, despite the prerogative of the state to exercise power and its monopoly over violence, it has to ensure that it not only attains legitimacy from the population, but also the support of political parties in order for it to have the authority to make use of power and violence at its discretion.

## References

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