

# **Authority as a Strategy toward an End: Power**

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### *Introduction*

The growing chasm in our society between the governed and the government is creating a whole set of problematic situations. The position of the people against the war in Iraq was and is growingly against that of the government in the United States. The French people largely rejected the European constitution whereas the government supported it strongly. These two issues are recent examples of the discord between the people and the government. It seems that the government, most of the time, is pursuing a policy that is different from that which the people voted it in for. Many observers are of the opinion that the government is working for its own interests, which are totally different from that of the citizens. Many a critic has pointed out that the interests of the ruling class, which are interwoven with that of the corporate elite especially those of giant corporations, are overriding the interests of the ordinary citizens in the present socio-political and economic dispensation.

Socio-political pundits and the citizenry that vote in governments continuously question the authority that governments derive from the people “through the ballot box”. There is a growing general mistrust of government and its authority. Citizens are not satisfied with the government that they have and this dissatisfaction is felt in almost all nations of the world, from the self proclaimed “perfect democracy” of the United States of America where citizens cannot see any tangible difference between the GOP and the Democrats to France where the interests of the governing elite are virtually on another wave band from that of the citizens. In the United Kingdom, the labour party tends to be more capitalist oriented than the Conservatives in its economic policies. Nigerians still consider most of their government officials as foreign agents because of the policies that they are implementing which the people consider highly detrimental to their welfare but highly advantageous for the rich and for foreign interests, and pockets of armed militants are challenging the legitimacy of the government in various parts of the nation.

### *Search for a working definition*

The growing animosity between the government and the governed brings the perpetual argument on power and authority to the forefront of contemporary political debate. It poses the major question on whether governmental authority is still derived from the people in the democratic systems of government that we have today? And if the answer is positive, to what end is that authority employed? Can that authority be exercised and recognized by the governed without the power that maintains it? Is there a fundamental difference between the power of a democratic government and that of a non-democratic one? Our hypothesis is that authority is just a means of consolidating the power of a government. This power depends on raw violence. Therefore, authority can be considered as a diplomatic way of imposing power on the people. It makes it possible for the people to accept the notion that the power of their rulers is legal. It inculcates obedience in the people and makes any disobedience appear dangerous. Seen from this angle, democratic authority appears not to be different from other authorities because the essence of authority is the violence (power) that supports it. In order to answer the questions above, we would like to refer to Max Weber's definition of power in his *Basic Concepts of Sociology*. Weber states that:

**"Power"** is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out one's own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests. The concept of "power" is sociologically formless. All conceivable qualities of a person and all conceivable combinations of circumstances may put oneself in a position to perform one's will in a given situation.<sup>1</sup>

Going by this definition, it becomes very difficult to separate power from authority. To portray the conundrum of power and authority, we tried to see what definition Weber gives to authority. We discovered that Weber did not really separate authority from power. He described authority instead of defining it, linking authority as we

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<sup>1</sup> Max WEBER, *Basic Concepts in Sociology*, Translated & with an introduction by H.P. Secher. New York: The Citadel Press, 1962 at <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=11309421> accessed on 13. 02.2007.

have it today to the state, and tried to explain the origin of authority that is considered legitimate. In this description, he stated that:

Like the political institutions historically preceding it, the state is a relation of men dominating men, a relation supported by means of legitimate (i.e. considered to be legitimate) violence. If the state is to exist, the dominated must obey the authority claimed by the powers that be.<sup>2</sup>

Authority for him is derived from domination, and as we can see from the definition of power above, domination remains the driving force in order to obtain authority. And to succeed in this drive for authority, Weber insisted that the ruling class must ensure that their domination is not just recognized and accepted by the dominated, but must be obeyed. To obtain this obedience, the authority must be backed up by "legitimate" violence. How can that authority/violence be upheld as legitimate and not be disobeyed? By making sure that violence is monopolised by the ruling class who represents the state. In other words, any challenge of that authority must be dealt with, using the violence that the state alone has at its disposal. If the authority of a state relies on its monopoly of violence to be legitimate, can that authority be separated from the violence that institutes it? Max Weber declared, in *Politics as a Vocation* cited here above, that "If no social institutions existed which knew the use of violence, the concept of "state" would be eliminated, and a condition would emerge that could be designated as "anarchy" in the specific sense of this word." That is to say that trying to separate authority from power in a political state will be an effort in futility, as one cannot exist without the other. Can authority be separated from power in any other situation, outside politics ?

Power is the problem that has to be resolved. What struck me, observing the human sciences, was that the development of all these branches of knowledge could in no way be dissociated from the exercise of power. So the birth of the human sciences

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<sup>2</sup> Max WEBER, *Politics as a Vocation*, 1919. Extracts at <<http://www.mdx.ac.uk/www/study/xWeb.htm>> accessed on 13. 02. 2007.

goes hand in hand with the installation of new mechanisms of power.<sup>3</sup>

The above is the answer given by Michel Foucault when accused of reducing everything to power. Although he dissociated himself from the quote ‘Knowledge is power’, the above statement points out nonetheless that he believes so. He equally noted that pure sciences are a source of power in our modern society. Foucault says that power is not substance but “only a certain type of relation between individuals” this relation can occur anywhere and at anytime. A parallel can be established between this statement and that of Weber that we saw earlier which states that the concept of power is sociologically formless. This answers the question above; authority and power seem to be difficult to separate even outside the political realm. The broad nature of this interrelationship between power and authority is what made us limit our analysis to the link between authority and the powers of the state and its organs in a democratic system.

### *Democratic authority and power in the United States*

Democracy is said to be the government of the people, by the people and for the people. A democratic government is supposed to be the embodiment of the will of the people. Its authority comes from the people through the ballot box. If that authority is legitimate and accepted by the people that elected the government, then the authority of the government is supreme because it emanates from the citizenry. A democratic government therefore is not supposed to use power/violence to enforce its policies. If we follow Alice Schwarzer’s “you take power but bow to authority” statement, it means that authority can be separated from power and that authority is sufficient in itself. It is recognized and respected by all. A democracy is supposed to be the epitome of authority. But when we look at our democratic systems, we observe that pure authority is inexistent and that raw power in the form of physical and psychological violence is the main historical foundation of our democracies and it is still its ultimate guarantor. If

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<sup>3</sup> Michel FOUCAULT, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings*, 1977-1984, Lawrence D. Kritzman (ed.), 1988 at <http://www.comm.umn.edu/Foucault/ppc.html> accessed on 13. 02.2007.

we use American civilization as an example, we observe that the most democratic government in the world is at the same time the one that relies most on raw power, that is to say pure violence in order to establish its authority domestically and internationally. The reason behind this double paradox of authority and power, democracy and violence can be traced back to the foundations of the United States.

The declaration of American independence from Britain was equally a declaration of violence because every reasonable person knew that Britain would not fold its hands and watch one of its most valuable possessions snatched out of its control, thus the war that ensued was not a surprise. The democracy that was established after the war of independence through the constitution, which carefully created a strong standing army, at the head of which the President acts as Commander in Chief, was to be continuously watered with the blood of Americans just as Thomas Jefferson predicted in his “tree of liberty being refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants”<sup>4</sup> statement. To maintain the authority of the government, the Union had to fight against the Confederates in one of the bloodiest conflicts in human history. The authority of the government went to the victor as usual, the vanquished was obliged to bow to that authority. Why did the vanquished accept this arrangement? It was accepted because of the fact that the power of violence being wielded by the victor is greater than that of the vanquished. That appears to be the most logical reason. It was neither because of a sudden realization by the Confederates that the authority of Abraham Lincoln was worthy of their respect nor that their cause was morally or ethically wrong. They bowed not to the authority of the Union but to the superior power of violence of the Union.

In the same vein, upholding the principles of the constitution of the United States has not always been peaceful. Authority on its own has never achieved much without the inherent fear of power/violence that protects it. Sometimes, the raw power of state violence has to be used to maintain the respect of authority. Most of the major changes in the United States history were achieved through outright use of power and state violence. A good example of these on the domestic front was the

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<sup>4</sup> Howard ZINN, *A People's History of the United States*, New York: Harper Collins, Perennial Classics, 2001, p. 95.

deployment of parts of 101st Airborne Division in response to the use of the National Guard by Governor Orval Faubus of Arkansas to prevent the implementation of the Supreme Court decision on *Brown vs. Board of Education*. President Eisenhower subsequently federalized the Arkansas National Guard.

In a related issue, Federal Marshals were sent to Alabama when Governor Wallace personally blocked the university door in order to prevent the enrolment of two Black students. In the urban riots in Watts Los Angeles in 1965 and the subsequent riots of 1967/68 in numerous US cities, the armed forces were largely used to quell the uprisings. The most recent use of large-scale armed violence by the state in the United States was during the Los Angeles Riots of 1992.

### *The use of the Armed Forces in private disputes*

The armed forces have equally been used in private disputes with the notorious Ludlow Massacre as an example. When miners working at the Ludlow mines<sup>5</sup>, with the help of the United Mine Workers of America, staged a protest against their poor working conditions, the Colorado National Guard was sent to repress the movement. On April 20, 1914, during a confrontation between the miners and the National Guard, twenty miners were killed and dozens wounded. These examples show us that the authority of the government must be backed with violent power in order to maintain it. Even in a democratic society, the use of violence is highly needed for the people in power to maintain their authority. This authority is a means toward more power. In a democratic system, the use of raw power (physical violence) is limited compared to a totalitarian system but that does not mean that the objective of those in power is any different in these two systems. The main difference between the two is just the means used to arrive to their common end. Howard Zinn in his book *A People's History of the United States* observed that the elite of the United States has managed to stick to power and to maintain their control over the other citizens by an uncanny system of divide and rule governance. He states that:

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<sup>5</sup> Three of the largest of the mines, Colorado Fuel & Iron Company (CF&I), the Rocky Mountain Fuel Company (RMF), and the Victor-American Fuel Company (VAF) were owned by the Rockefellers.

The American system is the most ingenious system of control in world history [...]. And that “there is no system of control with more openings, apertures, lee ways, flexibilities, rewards for the chosen, winning tickets in lotteries. There is none that disperses its controls more complexly through the voting system, the work situation, the church, the family, the school, the mass media – none more successful in mollifying opposition with reforms, isolating people from one another, creating patriotic loyalty.”<sup>6</sup>

The *raison d'être* of any government, democratic or otherwise, is to be able to govern, that is to control. In order to control the others, each government finds the best means of legitimising its authority over the governed. This control works only when there is a strong penalty for those that question or disobey the authority of the government. In the United States, the means of legitimising government's authority is by claiming democratic authority from the people. But the best way of knowing who has the power, the people or the elite is by using the “who benefits” theory<sup>7</sup> as suggested by Bertell Ollman in his introduction to a collection of essays on the United States Constitution. Zinn observes that 1 percent of the population has been holding a third of the wealth of the nation and the remaining 99 percent have been battling over the leftover. That means that the benefits go to the ruling elite and their acolytes in business. Any attempt to change the status quo is curbed with state power. The ever-increasing budget allocation to the Department of Homeland Security confirms the importance given to the power of the state with the programmatic request for 2007 fixed at \$35.6 billion.<sup>8</sup> More powers are being allotted to law enforcement agencies. If the authority of a democratic government were based on its integrity and trustworthiness, the opposite would have been the case. 217 years should have been enough to make the citizenry understand that the authority of the government is supreme. Instead, what we have is a growing state of disrespect and distrust of the government by the governed. It may be interesting to withdraw the police and other

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* p. 632.

<sup>7</sup> Bertell OLLMAN, Jonathan BIRNBAUM, *The United States Constitution, 200 Years of Anti-Federalist, Abolitionist, Feminist, Muckraking, Progressive and Especially Socialist Criticism*, New York: New York UP, 1990, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Budget of the United States Government: Fiscal Year 2007 <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/usbudget/fy07/pdf/budget/dhs.pdf> accessed on 13.02.2007.

armed security forces of the government in the United States or any other “democracy” for that matter and see how the authority of the government will fare without its raw power. Having seen the link between authority and power in the domestic affairs of the US, let us take a look at this link on the international scene.

### **U.S. Power and Authority in the World**

On the international front, to maintain the authority of the United States in global affairs, the military is widely used to force the international community, allies and foes alike, to bow to the authority of the USA. With the 2007 budget request at \$439.3 billion, the U.S. military budget is number one and represents more than 43 percent of global military spending<sup>9</sup>. The use of violence has been the mark of US Foreign Relations for long, from the Mexican wars till today. William Blum noted that,

From 1945 to 2003, the United States attempted to overthrow more than 40 foreign governments, and to crush more than 30 populist-nationalist movements fighting against intolerable regimes. In the process, the US bombed some 25 countries, caused the end of life for several million people, and condemned many millions more to a life of agony and despair.<sup>10</sup>

To have more authority domestically and internationally, a country must have a formidable military force. That means an ever-ready power of violence at its disposal. That is the only authority that is bowed to. A powerful government obtains its authority from the military power at its disposal. It gets away with anything like refusing to sign treaties that it does not like, Kyoto for example, or refusing to recognize global institutions that it cannot control like the international criminal court of Justice. This does not however prevent it from imposing these on other countries. The current war in Iraq and the growing rumour on the possible invasion of Iran as we all know are all against international laws, but who can oppose the United

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<sup>9</sup> Shah ANUP, *World Military Spending*, <http://www.globalissues.org/Geopolitics/ArmsTrade/Spending.asp#InContextUSMilitarySpendingVersusRestoftheWorld> accessed on 11.02.2007.

<sup>10</sup> William BLUM, *Killing Hope U.S. military and C.I.A. interventions since World War 2*, Monroe: Common Courage Press Updated, 2004, p.392.

States 'authority'? Nobody. Is this use of violence to achieve authority peculiar to the United States? We do not think so.

### *Authority and Power across time*

The use of the power of violence to impose and legitimise authority has always been the rule rather than the exception. All through known human political history from ancient Egypt, to Tsu Tzu's era in ancient China, from the Greek civilisation to the Roman Empire, Authority has always been used to legitimise the quest for the monopoly of power. The United States took over from the United Kingdom that was doing exactly the same thing with their various military invasions, slave trade, colonization and the famous gunboat diplomacy etc. When the UK was weakened down by the two World Wars and could no longer continue dictating its wishes to the world, a more powerful nation stepped into its shoes. France like the United Kingdom equally had her own days of "glory" under Napoleon Bonaparte. Russia had her own golden days too with the USSR. The hegemony of American civilization today is normal, just like the other nations before it have had their days of glory, so has America had hers and continues to enjoy it with the bitter parts too. The authority enjoyed by nations in the global arena is generally equivalent to the firepower at their disposal directly or indirectly. The five nations wielding veto powers at the United Nations are those with the highest level of violence at their disposal. The veto powers of the U.S., China, England, France and Russia are linked to nothing else but their military power. The only thing that their authorities in the international community have in common is not democratic principles but the violence at their disposal. These military powers ensure authority, and authority guarantees more power. The authority they claim is an accessory that guarantees power. This authority-to-power syndrome is not only reserved for big nations, less powerful countries can equally make use of it.

Successive Nigerian military governments were internationally recognized and allowed to participate in international affairs once they did not disobey international economic engagements like uninterrupted supply of crude oil to the international markets. Although their exercise of power was mostly used domestically, they nevertheless had authority over other African nations through their

various peacekeeping missions in troubled African nations. Once again, the authority that they acquired came through military force and the willingness to use it to consolidate their power. The out-going Nigerian democratic government of General Obasanjo is not different from the military ones before it. In order to consolidate its powers, it has been using the same violence-begat-authority and authority-begat-more power system that the other regimes used before it. The destruction of Odi and Opia/Ikenyan communities by government armed forces which left over 2,000 inhabitants dead in 1999 is not different from the modus operandi of the other undemocratic regimes before it. Till date, the democratic authority of the Nigerian government has never been questioned by anybody. The main question remains: is democratic authority different from non-democratic one?

If we follow the logic behind the theory of democratic government which recognizes the citizenry as the sole source of authority, we may assume that democratic authority, since it emanates from the people, suffices to assure a good governance and to assuage the thirst for domination that is found in totalitarian and autocratic regimes, democracy theoretically is supposed to be a social system with politicians as the servants of the people. But the reality is far from that. Politicians in a democratic government are not different from those in the other systems in their quest for power. And democratically elected governments have not spared the use of their authority when compared to their non-democratic counterparts. The qualities needed to become a ruler in a democratic government appear to be the same as those needed in a non-democratic one. The ruling class remains the same wherever they may be. The difference is mostly based on the reaction of the citizenry. If it appears easier to get them to accept the authority of the minority ruling class by force, force would be used, but if this appears to be more difficult, then other means must be devised to get them to accept the authority of the ruling class. And as we can see across time, democracy has never been handed down without the people fighting for it. And even after that, the rulers still try to gain as much power as possible, always testing their limits.

A passive citizenry will end up losing its democratic institutions as has happened in Germany under Hitler, in Nigeria and many other developing nations after independence. Whenever possible, a

democratically elected leader can metamorphose into an absolute ruler. The cases of Omar Bongo in Gabon, Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, and Late Houphet Boigny in Côte d'Ivoire are good examples in Africa. In Europe and the USA, it is still very rare to see a President that has the possibility of remaining in power after his first term resign and leave the seat for others. Presidents and Prime Ministers have always fought tooth and nail to remain in power as long as they can and to obtain absolute powers as President De Gaulle of France did. And many have abused their constitutional powers. The present situation in the US whereby the approval rating of the President is at its lowest does not stop the President and his cabinet from ruling. Are we to consider the rule of the current administration as that of authority or of sheer force? Modern democracy is more of a competition in deception where the most clever among the ruling class gets to deceive the voters and make them give him or her the mandate for four, five or seven years as the case may be. Once the mandate is secured, the ruler and his group move in and use the power at their disposal as they saw fit to keep the citizenry at their place till the next election season. In-between the elections, citizens virtually have no say in the running of the country, they can demonstrate as much as they want, but that does not change much. That the majority of Americans is against the foreign policies of the current administration is not going to change much in US foreign policy till next year's presidential elections.

### **Conclusion**

After analysing the definitions of power and authority given by Weber and Foucault and applying them to our study, we can conclude by stating that theoretically, democracy appears to be the best system incarnating good governance and the will of the people thus bearing legitimate authority, but in essence, the role of power and authority differs little from the one in other systems of governance. The quest for power remains the driving force behind any politician seeking an office. This power and authority are interwoven and cannot be separated. Democracy gives him the authority to legitimise the use of that power. We will end this work with the same recurring question: where will authority, democratic or otherwise, be without the monopoly of violence (power) that maintains the state and permits it to punish disobedient citizens?

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