Consolidation and Corruption of Power: The Role and Use of Fear in the Political Leadership of Idi Amin Dada and Saloth Sar/Pol Pot

It is popularly acknowledged from the speeches of John Dalberg-Acton, John Adams, and from the streets that power leads to corruption [power corrupts], and absolute power corrupts absolutely. To some extent, power can corrupt the individual, and to some extent, the fear of loss of power, the personality, attitude, behaviour, the [political] philosophy, etc. of a leader can equally corrupt the power, authority or position that one holds just as John Steinbeck reiterated: “Power does not corrupt. Fear corrupts… perhaps the fear of loss of power”. It is with this reason that this article seeks to establish that although power can corrupt the individual, however, fear of loss of power, the lust for consolidating position, over-ambition, etc. are most prominent forces that make the idea of “power” or “authority” seem corrupted. Thus, it is the desire to consolidate power and the fear of loss of power that corrupts the authority, power, or position that one holds. To address the issue and justify the hypothesis, the leadership/regimes of Idi Amin Dada and Saloth Sar/Pol Pot have been used as a case study.

Keywords: Consolidation and Corruption of Power, Fear, Political Leadership, Idi Amin Dada, Saloth Sar/Pol Pot

Introduction

Many are the quotes that suggest that power, authority, or the position of a person tends to corrupt the person. Examples of such suppositions can be found in the speeches of John Dalberg-Acton who believe that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely\(^1\); and John Adams who believes that “because power corrupts, society’s demands for moral authority and character increase as the importance of the position increases”\(^2\). However, I suppose that power can corrupt the individual, but not always. When a leader does not know the true purpose and concept of leadership in addition to behavioral defects, then the personality, fear, low self-esteem, over-ambition, etc. of the leader would make the leader corrupt but not power corrupting the


leader just as John Steinbeck has noted: “Power does not corrupt. Fear corrupts... perhaps the fear of loss of power”.3

Concerning leadership, the question we need to regularly ask is ‘why’? ‘Why’ do leaders make certain decisions? ‘Why’ should that decision be taken? ‘Why’ not any other strategy? ‘Why’ must it be this plan and action? The answers to some of these questions are circumstantial, situational, and quite subjective. But when it comes to mass murder and atrocities under a political leader, it becomes baffling to synthesize the cause of action. Could it (massacres) be a punishment to offenders, or one’s desire to stay on power, or fear of loss of power that make us witness killings and other draconian measures under some political leaders? I highly presume the acquisition of power and the fear of loss of power as some of the major causes of mass murder witnessed under certain regimes. To re-emphasize and establish this hypothesis, the leadership styles of Idi Amin Dada and Pol Pot have been used as a case study. By this, prominences are given to some of their actions and inactions during their reign. It will, however, suffice to do a brief conceptual review of fear in the context of leadership before the main discussion.

Conceptualization of Fear in Leadership

According to Westernmayr (1915: 250), “fear is the great force that prompts to acts of self-preservation and operates as effectively in the brute as in the human animal.”4 Since fear can be conceived as a force that stimulates the individual to act in a certain manner, it then follows that there is cause-of-fear which motivates the individual to act either to defend himself or otherwise. It is interesting to know why fear drives some political leaders and managers to act the way they do. Within the framework of leadership, the innate character, personality, mindset, and behavioural issues of the leader can make him corrupt if, especially, there is the fear of being ousted and the urge to satisfy personal interest as against cooperating benefit and the desire to consolidate power.

Whenever leaders become obsessed and over-ambitious with power, the fear of losing it makes him corrupt but not power corrupting the leader since it is people who seek power and occupy state institutions. Leaders who are corrupt fear that the people they lead will demand accurate account, transparency, justice, and fairness during and after the tenure of office. If these become problematic for the leader, then he employs diabolic means, which has nothing to do with the form of government, the rules, or whatsoever, to have his way out. This corrupt power but not power corrupting the leader or the individual.

On the contrary, John Adams, who believes that power corrupts, however, goes further to draw a sharp contrast by stating that society’s demands for moral authority and character must increase “as the importance of the position increases.” By analysis, although John Adams affirms that power corrupts, he quickly asserted that much focus should be placed on morality and character of state officials or leaders. It is only through these means can corruption of individuals be curtailed.

With referencing to power, leadership, and fear, John Adams categorically stated that:

“Fear is the foundation of most governments”; “I have accepted a seat in the House of Representatives, and thereby have consented to my own ruin, to your ruin, and to the ruin of our children. I give you this warning that you may prepare your mind for your fate”; “Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.”

By interpretation, we can understand from divergent perspectives that the real issue with leadership is not only about the form of government and the institutions thereof but the underlying motivating factor for which leaders take certain measures and act the way they consider appropriate. Any society or cooperate body can opt for any form of government but the wellbeing of the organization is morality and character. If there are defects in the morals and character of the leader, then the result is ruining other people and the leader himself.

According to Gregory Claeys (2017), we can find such behaviorisms

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6Ibid.
under absolute leaders or totalitarian regimes.\textsuperscript{7} For Claeys (2017), absolute leaders like Pol Pot and Idi Amin use fear as a force and a motion to do the absurd. In this type of regime, political leaders use fear to create and maintain their power, and through fear, they go to the extreme and become so destructive as we witness the mass destruction that occurred under the regimes of Stalinism, the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz, Idi Amin in Uganda, and Pol Pot’s rule in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979.\textsuperscript{8}

Regimes like Idi Amin and Pol Pot mostly lack attitude, the true purpose of leadership, and low self-esteem motivated by fear. When this happens, fear begins to control the leader thereby making him corrupt especially when the person is much preoccupied about holding onto position forever. These are some basic root causes of ‘corrupted leadership’ just as John Steinbeck reiterated: “Power does not corrupt. Fear corrupts... perhaps the fear of loss of power”.\textsuperscript{9}

The presence of fear of loss of power plays a mental threat to many leaders. According to Myles Munroe (2005), leadership demands mental reconditioning and attitude.\textsuperscript{10} In the view of Munroe, the key to the purposeful and true leadership is an attitude rather than aptitude. In other words, it’s not ability — it’s mentality. What you think is even more important than what you do.\textsuperscript{11} Thus, when a leader fears of losing his power and position, and in his mind thinks of consolidating his power eternally, then every possible means, by fair or foul means, would be employed to the leader’s satisfaction. This is the more reason why a leader has to have an incorporation of positive attitudes toward governing better. Incorporation of positive attitudes is also the more reason why Munroe stated that a leader can’t have vision without courage, a leader can’t have courage without compassion (sympathy, empathy, concern, kind-heartedness, care, consideration, etc.), and a leader can’t have compassion without strategy or policy if the said

\textsuperscript{7}Gregory Claeys, Dystopia: A Natural History: A Study of Modern Despotism, Its Antecedents, and Its Literary Diffractions (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2017), 113ff.


\textsuperscript{9}John Steinbeck, John Steinbeck Quotes, https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/john_adams_389106

\textsuperscript{10}Myles Munroe, The Spirit of Leadership (USA: Whitaker House, 2005), 210.

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid, 211.
leader wants to be an effective leader. However, when the fear of losing power and entrenchment of position dominates the mind of the leader, then one thing becomes obvious – corruption of power. To make sure leaders do not make fear pollute the position they occupy, then they need to have different and a new psychological orientation such as us learning new attitudinal behaviors. According to Munroe (2005), ‘attitude is a learned behavior, created by our beliefs, which are produced by our thoughts.’ In this case, the leader is his attitude and behaviors and the position he occupies. For this reason, Munroe, arguing in the same line with Ralph Waldo Emerson, put forth that we can change our attitudes by changing our beliefs, by changing our thoughts about everything in life – including ourselves. This is also the reason why Ralph W. Emerson said, “What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us”. Until we (leaders, and everybody) change our attitude, were are mere leaders engulfed by fear – leadership by name without being matured leaders.

Hypothesis

Effective institutions and rules indeed augment good governance, but the institution or the form of governance alone cannot produce effective and good leadership. The fact is that it is humans who make up institutions. Each individual has his own psychological makeup. Whatever the person is made up of, his thinking; his [political] philosophy; and his understanding of nature, human life, the purpose of life are all the individuals’ but not the institutions. If the institutions are made of people with and without attitude, then it is (un)polluted individuals whose behaviors affect policy implementations, institutions, and power or authority.

Similarly, if the leader does not know the true purpose of leadership as reiterated by Munroe (2005) into consideration, the institution is a mere name the use of fear as a motivation becomes the norm of the day just as Westernmayr (1915) suggests. According to

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12Myles Munroe, The Spirit of Leadership (USA: Whitaker House, 2005), 211.
13Ibid, 211-212.
14Ibid, 212.
van Wyk (2007), formal institutions shall exist but are merely symbolic rather than democratic tenets if power is centralized and dominated by one man.16

So the question is: is it power that corrupts the individual? Or the desire to consolidate power, the fear of losing power, and the lack of attitude on the part of the leader that makes the leader corrupt and in the long run affect the institution? My assumption is that power does not corrupt but rather the fear of losing power, the desire to entrench one’s position, and lack of attitude corrupt the leader who has the power to lead. For this reason, I am in support of Myles Munroe (2005) that attitude determines everything. It is worthy to know the principles, precepts, and skills of leadership. Nonetheless, without mental reorientation, attitude, the purpose of leadership, etc., the learned ideas on leadership become redundant. If this happens, the institutions that are manned by people, and the idea of power seem to be corrupted.17

Consolidation and Corruption of Power: The Role and Use of Fear in the Political Leadership of Idi Amin Dada

Sources have it that Idi Amin Dada Oumee was born sometime between 1925 and 1927 in Koboko, West Nile Province, in Uganda.18 His father was a Kakwa, a tribe that exists in Uganda, Zaire (now Congo), and Sudan.19 As a boy, Amin spent much time tending goats and working in the fields. He embraced Islam and attained a fourth-grade education. He was brought up in Lugazi, Uganda, by his mother.20 As Amin grew he matched the qualifications for military service desired by

Joining the army as a private in 1946, Amin impressed his superiors by being a good swimmer, rugby player, and boxer. He won the Uganda heavyweight boxing championship in 1951, a title he held for nine years. He was promoted to corporal in 1949.21

It is recounted that there existed terrors and mayhems during the leadership of Idi Amin which made the world watched in disgust and without the ability to act against the growing insanity and destructiveness of Amin’s regime.22 As things became as they were in Uganda at the time, Amin could not think of anything than the fear of losing his power as a dictator. It should not be surprising that since issues under Amin’s regime became sensitive to many Ugandans and the rest of the world, he feared being ousted, arrested, and prosecuted. For him to deal with his own fears was to eliminate and neutralize any suspected enemy. Idi Amin’s fear of being ousted – losing power – led him to act in such a way that, he used his own demise (fear) to put fear into the citizens, foreigners, and embassies such as the United States of America so that he can consolidate his position. Gordon Kerr (2011) has recounted that: “Closing the American Embassy in Uganda due to concern about Amin’s increasingly erratic behaviour, US Ambassador Thomas Melady did not mince his words when he described the dictator as ‘racist, erratic and unpredictable, brutal, inept, bellicose, irrational, ridiculous, and militaristic’."

After climbing the ladder from bottom-up – serving as a private in the King’s African Rifles, part of the British Colonial Army,23 in Kenya from 1947 until 1949 when his unit was deployed in Somali to fight Somali Shifta rebels who were engaged in violence there; fighting in 1952 against the Mau Mau rebels in Kenya as a newly promoted corporal; a sergeant in 1953; warrant officer in the British Colonial Army in 1954; a lieutenant in 1961; a captain by the following year and

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then as a major the year after that; and as a Deputy Commander of the Ugandan Army in 1964 – Idi Amin Dada gained a lot of experience in the battlefield. In addition to these achievements chalked, it is evidenced that Idi Amin Dada’s rise to power came through his association with the then Prime Minister, Milton Obote.\footnote{Encyclopedia of World Biography. Idi Amin Biography, https://www.notablebiographies.com/amp/A-An/Amin-Idi.html; Gordon Kerr, Evil Psychopaths: Dangerous and Deranged (UK: Canary Press, 2011)}

It seemed to appear that the two political figures had the same goal and vision. It became public suspicion that both the Prime Minister and the Deputy Commander of the Ugandan Army planned together and behind closed doors supplied Congolese rebels with arms in exchange for gold and ivory.\footnote{Lanzen Laurie H., and Cherie D. A., eds. Biography Today: Profiles of People of Interest to Young Readers. World Leaders Series: Modern African Leaders, Vol. 2, (Detroit, United States: Omnigraphics, Inc., 1997), 21-23; Gordon Kerr, Evil Psychopaths: Dangerous and Deranged (UK: Canary Press, 2011).} The actions of these two leaders became doubtful by the Ugandan Parliament. For this reason, in 1966, the Ugandan Parliament demanded an investigation. Although their action was a suspicious nature, the next move of action made it clear that the two have been working behind closed doors for their own interest. Both Obote and Amin may have forecasted that their actions will lead them into trouble. For the fear losing power and being prosecuted if found guilty, Milton Obote hurriedly seized power and went ahead to abolish the purely ceremonial presidency held by the Kabaka – or King – Edward Mutesa II of Buganda.\footnote{Gordon Kerr, Evil Psychopaths: Dangerous and Deranged (UK: Canary Press, 2011); Lanzen Laurie H., and Cherie D. A., eds. Biography Today: Profiles of People of Interest to Young Readers. World Leaders Series: Modern African Leaders, Vol. 2, (Detroit, United States: Omnigraphics, Inc., 1997), 20.} With this done, Prime Minister Milton Obote became President while his partner, Amin Dada (who led an attack on the Kabaka’s palace), was promoted to Colonel and given command of the Ugandan Army and Air Force.\footnote{Lanzen Laurie H., and Cherie D. A., eds. Biography Today: Profiles of People of Interest to Young Readers. World Leaders Series: Modern African Leaders, Vol. 2, (Detroit, United States: Omnigraphics, Inc., 1997), 21ff.} It can be deduced that the fear (of being prosecuted and losing position) became the motivation for their subsequent actions after the Ugandan Parliament wanted to investigate Obote and Amin as John
Steinbeck believes\textsuperscript{28}. They could have responded to the call of the parliament and defend themselves to the suspected charges leveled against them if they knew that they were innocent. Their failure to appear before the parliament, and the fear of losing whatever benefits they were enjoying curtesy the position they occupied, led them to act against the state’s interest. The result was the two becoming the giant rulers of Uganda. Nonetheless, the two associates became enemies since each equally feared that the other may betray the other. This action of theirs has nothing to do with the institution but character, attitude, and mindset. According to Kerr (2011), in October 1970, Obote demoted Amin, and when Amin heard that he was about to be arrested for misappropriating army funds – a similar incidence for which the two were to appear before the parliament – Amin became afraid and manipulated and used the army against Obote. As the army commander, Amin Dada, with the help of the army, staged a military coup and seized power while Obote was at a Commonwealth summit meeting in Singapore.\textsuperscript{29}

Henceforth, Uganda came under Amin’s leadership. As usual for many leaders who seize power unconstitutionally, Idi Amin’s initial plan was to cleanse the system of corruption until the next election is held. For Amin, he did not want the office of the presidency or become a politician but as a cleanser, savior, and be a personification of virtue and principle. This was a mere excuse since both Obote and Amin had shown fear of the other. For Amin, the best way to gain eternal prominence and control was to do away with his president, Obote. To act in a way that people would trust his course of action, Idi Amin initially appeared neutral by releasing political prisoners and allowed the remains of the late Kabaka, who had died in exile in London, to be brought back to Uganda for burial. A brilliant move exhibited by Amin Dada. As Kerr (2011) reiterated, this move was “cleverly appeasing the former regime’s supporters”. His initial actions appeared benevolent which gained popularity amongst foreign powers. As a result, Kerr stated that “the British Foreign Office labeling him ‘a splendid type and a good football player.’” However, intrinsically, the fear of giving out

\bibitem{steinbeck} John Steinbeck, \textit{John Steinbeck Quotes}, https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/john_adams_389106

and losing power became the dominant force and a factor in his next actions.

Amin Dada could have handed down power as he claimed after his cleanup exercise in the government of Uganda but he refused. But when was he going to say cleansing is done? The more he acted to cleanse the system, the more he wanted to consolidate his position. Hereafter, the killing began within a few days of him taking office. It is estimated by the International Commission of Jurists that, during the leadership of Idi Amin Dada in the 1970s, the number of deaths in Uganda was at least 80,000. Thus, the death toll under the leadership of Amin Dada was a matter of estimation. In the estimation of the Amnesty International, about 500,000 Ugandans were killed. Per the estimations and the victims of deaths under Amin’s leadership, high official ranking members of the state perished. Among these high profiles of Ugandans were Benedicto Kiwanuka (former Prime Minister), Janani Luwum (the Anglican Archbishop), Joseph Mubiru (former Governor of the Central Bank), Frank Kalimuzo (Vice Chancellor of Makerere University), Byron Kawadwa (playwright), Erinayo Wilson Oryema and Charles Oboth Ofumbi (cabinet ministers).

What could have accounted for the murder under the regime of Amin Dada? The simplest answer a sympathizer of Amin can give is that those victims were either corrupt or committed treasonable offenses that could have endangered the security and development of Uganda. Nonetheless, by eradicating people suspected to be a threat to the leadership of Idi Amin and the state resulted in fear and panic across almost countrywide. It could be conceived that, probably, for the fear that his position was likely to be threatened by some high profile people of Uganda, especially, from Obote’s camp, who disliked the dictator, Amin Dada decided to use some cruel method as a tool to

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likewise put fear into his suspects or opponents to secure his position as a sole and absolute ruler of Uganda.

It has been recounted that a week after the coup, Amin declared himself both President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. After these declarations, Amin Dada feared that the supporters of Milton Obote and the state’s established institutions may plot against him. For this reason, Idi Amin immediately suspended bits of the Ugandan Constitution and replaced courts of law with military tribunals. This indicates that Idi Amin was afraid that he may be measured and overthrown in a similar manner he had done to Obote. After all, both had worked closely together to overthrow the Kabaka. So Amin did not want to give any room for the immediate and future overthrow of his regime.

What then must be done to consolidate his power? Amin made sure that to do away with any future threat and loss of power, a new re-organization of Uganda was done to his advantage. It is therefore not surprising that Amin renamed the Government House in Kampala as ‘The Command Post’ and replacing the previous internal security bureau with the ominous State Research Bureau, gangs of uniformed men who, according to sources, “wore dark glasses even at midnight and whose business of death and horrific torture was fully endorsed by Amin”, as reiterated by Gordon Kerr, 2011.

The fear of Amin losing power became more opened and obvious when about 20,000 Ugandan refugees who had joined Milton Obote in exile in neighbouring Tanzania failed the attempt to restore the former President Obote to power in 1972. By this time, Amin, whose psychology has been highly dominated by fear of overthrow and losing his newly forcefully acquired position began another military cleansing by eliminating his suspected supporters of Milton Obote from the armed forces, largely those who were of the Acholi or Lango ethnic groups. It has been estimated that by early 1972, more than 5,000 of

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these troops had been killed and more than 10,000 civilians had disappeared never to be seen again.\textsuperscript{35} According to Battiata (1989), the International Commission of Jurists titled the Idi Amin Dada’s rule a “reign of terror.” In another estimation, the human rights organization Amnesty International projected that between 50,000 and 300,000 Ugandans disappeared in 1977, during the reign of Idi Amin Dada.\textsuperscript{36}

To consolidate his position, Amin had to furnish the activities of his supporters, especially those who formed the bulk of his army. The idea is that if the soldiers are well taken care of, Amin Dada will forever get their loyalty thereby providing security and spy for him. When this happens, then Amin stands to fear no one else. So, to make sure he deals with his own fears in such a manner, it is reported that much of the money that did come into the country from foreign earnings was spent by the government on tax-free luxuries to keep his soldiers pleased. Moreover, according to Kerr (2011), the Boeing 707 and Hercules C130 that made up the entire fleet of Ugandan Airlines, made a frequent flight to London’s Gatwick Airport where it would load up with radios, whiskey, cars, and other luxury items for about 21,000 army officers who were under the leadership of Amin Dada.

Not only did fear of losing power and the desire to consolidate power made Amin Dada treat his suspects and opponents in draconian tactics but also turned against some foreigners and diplomats living in Uganda. For example, Amin Dada expelled all the Asians who ran the country’s sugar mills. He decreed the expulsion of about 60,000 Asians in Uganda who held British passports and later changed to the expulsion of the country’s entire Asian population of about 80,000, excluding professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and teachers.\textsuperscript{37} When Britain broke off diplomatic relations with Uganda in 1977, he retaliated by declaring that he had defeated the British. In celebration, he awarded himself the CBE (Conqueror of the British Empire in Africa

and Uganda in particular. His new title, as announced on Ugandan radio, was ‘His Excellency President for Life, Field Marshal Al Hadji Doctor Idi Amin Dada, Lord of All the Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Sea, VC, DSO, MC, CBE.’

As Nordlinger (2015) puts it:

He destroyed a great many of his countrymen. How many? The most commonly accepted death toll is 300,000. Some say higher, some say lower. In any case, he was known as “the Butcher of Uganda.” Simply giving the titles of some of the books and documentaries about him will convey what Amin and his regime were like: “A State of Blood,” “Ghosts of Kampala,” “Culture of the Sepulchre,” “Inside Idi Amin’s Terror Machine,” “The Man Who Ate His Archbishop’s Liver?,” “Escape from Idi Amin’s Slaughterhouse,” “Hitler in Africa,” “Death-Light in Africa” .

Things had eventually begun to conspire against him by 1978. There was increasing anger at his actions within Uganda and a number of his ministers fled into exile. Amin thought himself to be invincible by this time. Within the borders of Uganda, Amin successfully consolidated his power. However, the more the fear of loss of power engulfed his thinking, the more brutal he became. He, therefore, decided to turn his attention to border countries. In an attempt at deflecting attention away from the deteriorating situation at home, he sent troops into Tanzania. The then Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere mobilized his army and retaliated, supported by Ugandan rebels, opponents of Amin. Despite aid from Libya’s President Gaddafi, Amin’s army was broken and defeated by Nyerere and his joint forces.

What Amin feared has come to pass as he attacked Tanzania. The anticipated loss of power from the camp of Obote was easily squashed by Amin but not Julius Nyerere. Amin’s fear of opposition and defeat from border countries indeed has come to pass as Kampala, Uganda, came under the control of Julius Nyerere. “The Conqueror of the British Empire” is himself conquered. Of course, Amin would not stay to be captured and tried. On 11 April 1979, Amin fled from Kampala to Gaddafi’s Libya for an asylum. He later left Libya for Saudi Arabia. Upon all the attempts made to come back, Amin could not succeed. For example, in 1989, he tried to come back to Uganda for a possible attack but he was driven away by the then Zairian President Mobutu Sese Seko when Idi Amin Dada reached Kinshasa at the head of an armed group. Amin retreated and went back into exile, in Saudi Arabia, where he died on 16 August 2003. He was never to be held accountable for events under his leadership.

Consolidation and Corruption of Power:

The Role and Use of Fear in the Leadership of Saloth Sar/Pol Pot

Saloth Sar, aka Pol Pot, born on 19 May 1925 [Erken, 2006: 118, puts the day and month at 25 May] in Prek Sbauv, in the Cambodian province of Kampong Thom, was a leader of the communist Khmer Rouge which captured Phnom Pen, the Cambodian capital, on 17 April

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Unlike Idi Amin who had a somewhat rough beginning, Pol Pot belonged to a member of the landowning class, to a fairly well-off family of Chinese-Khmer origins. As a student of a Catholic high-school in Phnom Penh, Pol Pot used the opportunity to regularly visit the royal palace in Phnom Penh where his sister was a concubine of the king, Sisowath Monivong. Pol Pot later moved out of the capital, Phnom Penh, to a technical school where he earned a scholarship that sent him to France to study radio electricity in Paris. While still in France, between 1949 and 1953, Pol Pot associated himself with the French Communist Party (FPC), and a member of a secret Marxist cell that had taken control of the Khmer Student’s Association. In 1959 Pol Pot returned to Cambodia and began working for the young and inexperienced Cambodian Communist group, evaluating groups in Southeast Asia that engaged in rebellion against their governments.

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*Ian Harris, Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice,* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 160.


When Cambodia was given independence by the 1954 Geneva Conference, and the monarchy was restored after the French departure from the country, the Cambodian King Norodom Sihanouk began playing the different parties off against each other, suppressing what he believed to be extremist groups with force. This attempt made the monarch quite unpopular and the political scene of Cambodia began to change as interested individuals in the state’s affair and opposition to the government started propagating their political philosophies in the background. Sooner than expected, Pol Pot seized the opportunity to march against the government.

It is recorded that while teaching French history and literature at a private college, Saloth worked closely with the parties of the left. In 1963, he was elected Secretary of the Central Committee and was forced into hiding. He hid on the Vietnamese border, making contact with North Vietnamese units who were fighting the war against South Vietnam. The Vietnamese helped Saloth establish a base camp where he worked with his lieutenants on devising an ideology for the Khmer Rouge, as he called his party. In January 1968, Saloth launched a national uprising, attacking an army base at Battambang. The Cambodian army was able to keep the attack under control but Saloth’s men were able to capture several weapons. Hereafter, Saloth Sar’s leadership style began to change. Decisions were no longer made on a

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collective basis. He began to act like an absolutist ruler of his party and had his own compound and private staff.\textsuperscript{57}

Two years after Saloth’s launch of the national attack on Cambodia, civil crises arose which placed Saloth in a comfortable position as the monarch seek his support. In 1970, a civil war broke out in Cambodia following the coup d’état of Lon Nol. Power was now switched to Lon Nol who formed the new government. As a consequence, the former, King Norodom Sihanouk and his supporters, then joined up with the Khmer Rouge as a united front in opposition to the new government.\textsuperscript{58} Per the account, due to the incompetence and corruption of the new government, the popularity of the Khmer Rouge rose with the result that they came out of their clandestine operations to wage war openly against the government.\textsuperscript{59} By early 1972, he had an army of 35,000 troops that could be supplemented by 100,000 irregulars, funded with $5 million a year provided by the Chinese in addition to other medical supplies.\textsuperscript{60}

As the Vietnamese began to withdraw, the Khmer Rouge began to make progress. Many lives were lost during efforts to capture Phnom Penh in 1973 but by the middle of the year, he controlled two-thirds of the country. He besieged the city and launched a series of purges of government officials and educated people, just as Idi Amin of Uganda.\textsuperscript{61}


An uprising by the Cham minority in regions the Khmer Rouge controlled was followed by Saloth’s orders to torture rebels, including the innocent.\(^1\) It was an experiment that would later be extended to the entire population of the country.\(^2\)

On 17 April 1975, Phnom Penh fell into the hands of the Khmer Rouge.\(^3\) Saloth Sar then assumed the name of “Brother Number One”\(^4\) or Pol Pot, a designation assigned to him by the Chinese authorities which stands for “Politique potentielle” (or someone with political potential). From this point, 1975 was designated Year Zero by the Khmer Rouge.\(^5\) According to Kerr, between 1975 and 1979, Pol Pot imposed a kind of collective national “psychopathic behaviour on his country in pursuit of political ideals.” Polin (1980) titles Pol Pot’s regime as “diabolic sweetness”. It was a programme of extermination, torture, and ethnic cleansing that resulted in the deaths between 750,000 and 1.7 million people, representing about twenty-six percent of the total Cambodian population.\(^6\)

Once ethnic cleansing has begun, Saloth will do no better than what was considered as a corrupt government that was associated with the previous regimes. The idea is that, once the previous regimes were


\(\text{\textsuperscript{67}Gordon Kerr, \textit{Evil Psychopaths: Dangerous and Deranged} (UK: Canary Press, 2011)\textsuperscript{65}}\)


suspected of corruptible tendencies and behaviours, Saloth’s takeover will be quite different from the so-called corrupt government in the past few years. Ironically, Saloth’s uprising and control of state affairs was an absolute power control. This brings us to the hypothesis carved for this write-up. Why should Pol Pot behave act as an absolute ruler? Did he entertain any fear of being ousted as he has done to the previous regime? Or he, like Idi Amin, just decided to use cleansing, murder, and torture as a tool to entrench his newly acquired position?

According to Kerr (2011), the first signs of his need for absolute control became evident around this time when he forced minorities to abandon their traditional styles of dress and adornment in favour of Cambodian styles. Not only did he regulated dress code but also endorsed a programme of making all land holdings the same size, a similar technique employed by Gaius Julius Caesar in the last century of the Roman Republic when he defeated Pompey and became a dictator as recounted by Appian (I: 4ff), Caesar (1951), Plutarch (1914 & 1919: 523-577), Suetonius (I: 30-40), Scullard (1982:112), and Chrissanthos (2001: 63). All means of public transport were banned, such as bicycles and mopeds. They were policies designed to please the peasants who had none of these things anyway and to disenfranchise the wealthier town and city dwellers.

Like Idi Amin, Pol Pot envisages entrenchment of power and the fear of losing power. He had taken control of Cambodia by brute and realized that the means by which he has come to power can be employed by his opponents to remove him from office. As a result, he became incredible than the preceding regimes. He did not want to have any relation with some foreigners living in the city. Like Idi Amin, Saloth Sar immediately expelled foreigners from the country, embassies closed, religion banned, and all foreign medical and economic aid was prohibited. It is also stated that about fifty percent of the estimated number of 450,000 people of Chinese origin living in Cambodia at the

time were killed. What at all did Saloth want to achieve apart from consolidating his position and the fear of any internal and external attacks from those who disliked his leadership?

To be that absolute ruler he wanted, newspapers, radio, and television stations were closed, and also limiting the use of mail and telephone. Money was withdrawn from circulation and businesses were wound up, education halted, health care banned and parental authority was done away with. Once these are done, he stands to fear no one since he has used his own fears to exert fear into the populace. Once he feared being overthrown, captured, tried, or assassinated, the more draconian or harsh measures he took to control Cambodia. The silence of culture became the topic in the reign of Pol Pot.

As he had been taking measures to consolidate his power over the country, Pol Pot had discovered that it had been difficult to force the inhabitants of towns and cities to adhere to his political philosophy (socialist tenets). For this reason, Saloth Sar concluded that the only answer was to send the entire population of the country’s metropolises into the countryside to work as itinerants. He made sure all of Cambodia’s towns and cities were evacuated against their will. According to Kerr (2011), the 2,000,000 inhabitants of Phnom Penh were sent into the countryside on foot and at gunpoint. Undoubtedly there was an American occupation of Vietnam, but to appear genuine with

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his policy of evacuation, Pol Pot justified his action by saying there is “a threat of American bombing raids”. 

Nonetheless, it is thought that in this action of his, Pol Pot became responsible for about 20,000 individuals who perished during the forced evacuation. Those who made it to the field had to work unceasingly under harsh conditions. According to Claeys (2017), “nearly 1,500 a day, died of famine, neglect, overwork, or murder by the Khmer Rouge”. Freeborn citizens became slaves. The least mistake committed could lead to murder by shooting or severe flogging. He was, during, and after his reign, accused of a series of crimes against humanity.

To be more protected and entrench his position, Pol Pot, like Idi Ami, made sure life was simple and easy-going for his fighting men or bodyguards within the Khmer Rouge. If the fighting men are well fed, Pol Pot can use them to carry out his callous activities. According to reports, there was a list of names that needed to be taken care of. According to sources, Saloth Sar launched a series of purges to

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exterminate remnants of the society that had existed before the declaration “Year Zero”.\textsuperscript{81}

He had compiled a list of people to be killed following a Khmer Rouge victory. The list included the wealthy, the educated, Buddhist, monks, teachers, doctors, lawyers, and government officials.\textsuperscript{82} All these categories of people were murdered alongside their families. Some sources disclosed that, like Idi Amin, Saloth had many of his own colleagues who had fought alongside him shot or axed to death.\textsuperscript{83} Why would he engineer such acts if not for fear of losing power and entrenching his authority? It was also forbidden for people to gather in groups of more than two. Thus, Pol Pot tried all possible measures to instill fear in the people to deal with his own fears of being ousted.\textsuperscript{84} If not so, what was the rationale behind Pol Pot’s behaviour and the killings?

As the saying goes: whatever has a beginning has an end. As the reign of Idi Amin, things began to deteriorate for Pol Pot too. By 1977, Saloth Sar’s relationship with Vietnamese who supported him in the initial stage begun to deteriorate. In the long run, it led to clashes along the two countries’ border.\textsuperscript{85} In May 1977, Vietnamese planes attacked Cambodia, and in the autumn of the same year, Saloth and his troops counteracted by raiding into Vietnamese territory. Saloth managed to


put the situation under control by driving back the Vietnamese attackers. There was a second attack on Saloth’s Cambodia by the Vietnamese in 1978.\textsuperscript{86} This time, the Vietnamese became victorious and as usual, just like Idi Amin, Saloth Sar fled from Phnom Penh to Thailand to reorganize for a comeback.\textsuperscript{87} As he could not carry out his plan from exile, he had no option than to allow the coalition government to steer the state’s affair.

By 1985, he resigned from the part but maintained a position as the leader of the Khmer Rouge in the background. According to Shivakumar (1998), Pol Pot remained politically active after officially resigning in 1989.\textsuperscript{88} In 1986, Saloth Sar traveled to China for treatment for cancer of the face. Returning to Cambodia, he refused to talk peace and continued the struggle against the coalition government now ruling the country. In 1995, he had a stroke that left him paralyzed down his left side. The government had a policy of encouraging individuals in the Khmer Rouge to defect or make peace. When Son Sen, who Saloth Sar hand-picked to join the coalition, tried to make a settlement with the government in 1997, Pol Pot had him executed\textsuperscript{89} and also ordered the killing of eleven members of his family.\textsuperscript{90}

Eventually, he was arrested in November 1997, presented to the world in a show trial, and sentenced to house arrest for life.\textsuperscript{91} On 15 April 1997, it was announced that the Khmer Rouge had agreed to hand Pol Pot over to an international tribunal. But luckily for him to escape

\textsuperscript{87}Ibid, 2; Documentation Center of Cambodia, \textit{Fact Sheet: Pol Pot and His Prisoners at Secret Prison S-21}. (Cambodia: The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), 2011).
possible punishment by the tribunal, he died in bed later in the night of
the day his people presented him to the tribunal. Like Idi Amin Dada,
Pol Pot was never punished for the atrocities committed.92

Conclusion

By comparing the regimes of Idi Amin Dada and Pol Pot, their
actions and inactions, the atrocities and deaths that happened under
their watch, it suffices to conclude that position, authority or power do
not corrupt entirely as people like John Dalberg-Acton put it. The
regimes of Idi Amin and Pol Pot have demonstrated that the desire to
consolidate power and the fear of losing power make some leaders
behave the way they do as John Steinbeck claims. The atrocities, the
killings, and the silence of culture were all strategies adopted to deal
with their own fears of being ousted. Thus, positions that people
occupy in whatever form it may take do not make the person corrupt
but rather it is the person’s fear of losing power in addition to lack of
attitude, lack of true purpose of leadership, and overambition that
corrupt the person but not the position/authority that corrupts. By
using Idi Amin Dada and Saloth Sar/Pol Pot as a case study, I conclude
and reaffirms John Steinbeck’s statement that: “Power does not corrupt.
Fear corrupts... perhaps the fear of loss of power”, and that we need to
focus and place much emphasis on attitude, morality, and character
training of the individual and state officials or leaders. If this is
achieved, we would not be pondering on “power corrupts” but how
power is corrupted due to our own attitudes, behaviours, characters,
and [political] philosophies of humankind, society, and the world at
large.

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