

Curbing Political Violence Through Humancentric Dialogue

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Abstract: *This paper discusses the phenomenon of political violence from an ethical perspective by spotting a connection between political violence and power abuse. Drawing on various scholars, this paper proposes what is termed humancentric dialogue as means to prevent or reduce the possibility of power abuse and subsequent political violence. Humancentric dialogue depicts an informal interactive encounter between parties that seek to co-exist peacefully. It is an ethical moment that operates at the level of sensibility [human conscience] prior to making references to already established precepts or conditions for dialogue. People simply come together because they share the same destiny; the desire to co-exist peacefully and meaningfully. Humancentric dialogue is contrasted to political dialogue which primarily builds on already established political interests as a condition for dialogue. This paper recommends that the prioritisation of humancentric dialogue in conflicting situations has greater prospects of establishing genuine platforms for inclusive dialogue. Political arrangements can then take place via democratic forums, and eventually the rule of law as an indispensable measure of bringing about peaceful co-existence.*

Keywords: *Political Violence, Political Power, Humancentric Dialogue (Ethics).*

I. Introduction

Political violence is a concrete reality in contemporary societies. It arises in many forms but exhibits some basic characteristics (Kirisci 2022) [1]. Time and again, the headlines in newspapers and on television screens report about violence perpetrated by ruthless leaders with an objective of consolidating or furthering their political ambitions. It is extremely disheartening to see how innocent civilians unjustly suffer or lose their lives in needless wars masterminded by terrorist groups or some so called “world super powers” to protect their economic and geo-political interests. No one can measure the intensity of pain experienced by one who loses a beloved one.

Political violence is usually sparked by abuse of power through a forceful imposition on others one’s or a party’s mischievous political ideologies (Mack 2007) [2]. A number of ethicists and philosophers wisely spot a connection between political violence and abuse of power. For Arendt (1968, p. 113) [3], political violence is a consequence of silencing the adverse party and considering power as “an affair of one individual.” For Suazo (2014) [4], political violence erupts when citizens allow themselves to be silenced and manipulated by their leaders. For Werlin (2008) [5], political violence largely stems from fragile democratic structures and authoritarian regimes as evidenced in most underdeveloped countries. For Ryan and Haugaard (2012) [6], political violence arises when political leaders misleadingly understand power as the ability to control political structures and define for the people the kind of life they deem as good for all. For Ricoeur (2010) [7], political violence is part of the paradox inherent in power itself. Power can be used for good or bad intentions, for constructive and destructive ends. While power can be utilised to enhance peace, unity and the procurement of the common good for the members of a society, the same power can be exercised to generate political violence represented in evils such as war, imperialism, tyranny, terrorism, racial discrimination, etc. On this premise, a number of questions arise: Why is political power prone to abuse? Why do most peace-talks fail to achieve their intended objectives? What measures can be established to prevent or, at least, reduce the possibility of power abuse and subsequent political violence?

This paper intends to shed light on these challenging questions. Firstly, it attempts to define political violence within a framework of both ethics and politics. Secondly, it analyses the notion of political power and its problematic nature, taking into account the centrality and usefulness of political power in fostering a meaningful and peaceful co-existence. Thirdly and lastly, this paper makes appeal to an ethical theory and

practice known as *humancentric dialogue* which, when properly established, may serve as a means to deter or reduce the possibility of political violence in human societies.

II. Political Violence

Political violence is more and more becoming a central theme in ethical and political debates (Jarvis 2022) [8]. There is almost no country on the planet that has not experienced some form of political violence. In the context of this study, political violence designates a deliberate use of physical or non-physical force to achieve certain political goals. Examples of political violence include war, radical dictatorship, terrorism, ethnic cleansing, genocide, unwarranted torture, extra-judicial killings, racial discrimination, apartheid, imperialism, etc. Political violence can be perpetrated by an individual or a group of individuals against other individuals. It can also be committed by a nation against another nation or nations, or a state against civilians. Political violence threatens people's harmonious living. It inflicts immense pain and misery, especially on the less privileged people of this planet (Abah and Nwokwu 2015) [9].

Paradoxically, scenes of violence seem to appeal to a larger percentage of people's attention. Many people appear to be more interested in reporting, watching or reading about violence. News about violence (bad news) is what mainly circulates in newspapers and on television screens. Yet, marvellous things take place in this world, but are never reported on social media. Many men and women have selflessly and generously done and still do great things to uplift the lives of the less privileged, but their good acts pass unnoticed, for they do not make "news." But it becomes "attractive news" when, for instance, one of those selfless and generous people gets involved in a violent crime. It would be interesting, from a scholarly point of view, to find out why many human beings tend to be more drawn towards "bad news" or to violence-related things.

There is no doubt that power abuse in politics lies at the bottom of most political violence. Instead of pursuing the common good for all, some political leaders focus their attention on the enhancement of their own political interests. Many consolidate power around themselves and around their relatives and friends to the detriment of other institutions, especially economic or judicial institutions. Most dictatorial governments uphold the false principle that to be powerful is to silence the opposing parties, and where possible eliminate one's political opponents. Historically, most states are born out of violence whether by revolution, conquest, subjugation, forced marriage, or by other coercive means (Ricoeur 2007) [10].

The desire for political domination and expansionism continues to instill fear and panic in most contemporary societies. The threat for a nuclear war is no longer something to be taken lightly. With a decline in the legal and political authority of international bodies, some individuals and countries alike have empowered themselves to use their political power the way they want. Unnecessary wars are being waged. Many innocent lives are being lost. It is on this note that a fundamental question arises: Why is political power prone to abuse? How come political power sometimes spills into violence, despite the human capacity to rationalize about good governance and the good life?

III. Political Power and its Problematic Nature

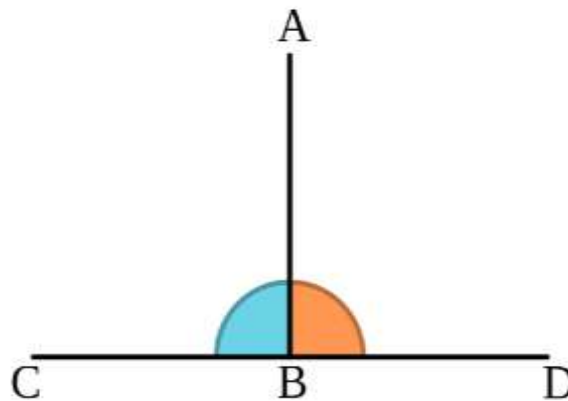
Political power describes an ability to exert some control or influence on others. It is political power that enables leaders to make decisions that apply to members of a group (Hague et al 2013) [11]. Most ethicists and political philosophers attest to the fact that political power is inherently problematic. For Ricoeur (1998, p. 97) [12], political power is fundamentally paradoxical; the paradox lies in "the two-sided nature of political power," namely, rationality (goodness) and violence (evil). On the one hand, human beings can intelligently and ingeniously use political power to create marvelous institutions that uplift peoples' standard of living and bring about peaceful co-existence. Yet, on the other hand, man can lamentably utilise political power to engender deplorable evils such as corruption, terrorism, inhuman torture, extra-judicial killings, etc., evils that are chiefly perpetrated for consolidating total control over others or maintaining a leader in power. Rationality (goodness) and violence (evil) are the dual and paradoxical originality of politics. There is always a confrontation between rationality and violence in the exercise of power (Ricoeur 1992) [13]. While such a paradox cannot be avoided, it can, nonetheless, be handled to allow human societies to flourish. It is precisely in the interaction between ethics and politics [as it shall be shown] that the confrontation between rationality and violence can be wisely handled.

The possibility of power abuse can be traced to the "untamed" passion for greatness which some philosophers, including Nietzsche (1966, p. 67) [14] call "will to power" or struggle for existence (*conatus essendi*). To exist, in this context, is to dominate or surpass others. Once one is overpowered by the passion for greatness, one begins to see nothing else other than oneself. One's personal ambitions override everything else.

Because of the passion for power, one sets up mechanisms of control. Language is part of it. Tyrants flatter their subjects through commanding or persuasive language with the intention of consolidating their power. This corresponds to Machiavelli's logic of *means*. Whatever can maintain the Prince in power is politically accepted; for the end justifies the means (Machiavelli 1988) [15]. It is at this level of existence that many evils are likely to be committed. What stands outside one's control appears as hostile to one's existence, and the best way to ensure one's existence is to silence or eliminate the obstacle.

The paradoxical nature of political power is precisely what constitutes a State. There is always a confrontation between the wishes of citizens and the political ambitions of their leaders. This tension can be hazily represented in the following orthogonal structure:

Orthogonal Structure (Fig.1.)



N.B. This orthogonal structure has been retrieved from the internet: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orthogonality>

The *horizontal axis* (CD) represents the wish of the people (citizens) to live together in just institutions, people capable of exercising what Arendt (1972, p. 143) [16] calls "power-in-common." The *vertical axis* (AB) refers to the hierarchical side of politics that differentiates the governing [rulers] from the governed [subjects]. It is at the point of intersection (B) that lays the paradox of political power, namely, rationality (goodness) and violence (evil). Leaders can use political power to improve people's lives, but can also use it to coercively advance their personal ambitions. The *horizontal axis* (CD), as mentioned earlier, stems from people's desire to co-exist peacefully and meaningfully. Ricoeur (1998, p. 99) [12] remarks that "this wishing to live together is silent, generally unnoticed, buried; one does not remark its existence until it falls apart, or when it is threatened." In other words, most leaders, when they are corrupted by power, tend to forget that political power belongs to the people. Leaders are leaders precisely because of those they lead. There is no leadership without subjects (citizens).

It is, therefore, this paradox in political power that renders political leadership problematic. If political leaders are not judiciously and constantly monitored, if political power is left unchecked, it can easily spill into violence. Yet, power itself is good. It is one of the excellences of humankind, but eminently prone to misuse. "Man is by nature a political animal" (Aristotle 1944, Section 1.1253a) [17]. Every society or any form of association is established with a focus on some good which represents people's ideals for a good life. However, the absurdity of the narrative is that some politicians deceive people that once they are voted into power they will ensure that all people's ideals are met. Yet, this is pure flattery. Very few leaders manage to concretize their political manifestoes, if they ever have them. But should one abandon the pursuit of good governance because of the paradoxical nature of political power? Are there no means of reasonably handling political power to allow human societies to flourish? Should peace-talks of any kind be abandoned for fear that the stronger will always have a lead on political negotiations? What measures can be laid to handle the paradox in political power, prevent or, at least, reduce the possibility of power abuse and subsequent political violence?

IV. Humancentric Dialogue

Humancentric dialogue depicts an informal interactive encounter between parties that seek to live in peace with each other. It is an ethical moment that operates at the level of human sensibility prior to making references to already established precepts or conditions for dialogue. In other words, the interactive encounter does not rely on pre-established rules or conditions for dialogue. People freely come together merely because they share the same destiny; the desire to co-exist peacefully and meaningfully. Humancentric dialogue largely relies on people's consciences and innermost intuitions that challenge every human being to become a brother or sister's keeper. Human beings are ontologically interdependence. A problem of a country becomes a problem for other countries. Genuine solidarity is a necessity for a peaceful co-existence on this planet.

Humancentric dialogue is contrasted to political dialogue which primarily builds on already established norms or legal obligations. Political dialogue is fundamentally persuasive in the sense that dialogue seeks to establish the sovereignty of power-holders. Humancentric dialogue on the other hand is impulsively neutral. It is not a forced dialogue. It simply comes from within, from the natural desire to lead a fulfilling life. Humancentric dialogue simply seeks to create genuine discursive platforms where individuals can freely and unconditionally air out their opinions about life in general and about their political status quo. Again, while political dialogue hinges on a set of established norms or principles for orientation purposes, humancentric dialogue simply takes place on the basis of human beings encountering fellow human beings.

Humancentric dialogue does not seek to persuade or impose on others one's innermost cherished ideas or political ideologies. Nor does it seek to put everyone in the same box. It rather aims at respecting alterity or the differences that exist among interlocutors. Without respect for alterity (otherness), dialogue is likely to end in animosity, enmity or hatred; hence, failing to achieve its purpose of arriving at a mutual understanding. It is in respecting alterity (otherness) that people in a given society can come together without feeling threatened or rejected by either party. Political dialogue habitually aims at convincing or persuading the others to accept one's opinion. It is dialogue oriented by a set of pre-established political strategies. However, if political dialogue is left unchecked, if it does not take into account certain ethical values such as love, honesty, integrity, commitment, solicitude, inclusiveness, kindness, understanding, consideration, etc., political dialogue is likely to lead to repression and violence.

Humancentric Dialogue and its Philosophical Foundation

Beneath humancentric dialogue is the anthropological insight that though humankind can commit unthinkable atrocities, human beings still embody some *goodness*. Phenomenologically, human beings are ambiguous beings. They can perform good acts but also disastrous ones. They can save life, but can also destroy it. Nevertheless, despite this ambiguous trait, human beings are inherently endowed with some *goodness* which, when carefully tapped, can contribute to meaningful co-existence. For Mandela (1994, pp. 260-261) [18], all human beings, even those considered as the worst criminals, have "a streak of goodness" which, when heartily touched, can "emerge unexpectedly..." For Oppenheim (2012, pp. 370-371) [19], humankind is endowed with an "innate duty" or a "spirit from within" that naturally compel human beings to become responsible for one another. The "goodness" in humankind is reflected in people's spontaneous reactions to attend to those in distress. Imagine the reflexes human beings have to save human life! For example, who would not naturally pay attention or engage oneself directly or indirectly in rescuing the victims of a terrible road accident? Surely a certain force from within would push one towards the scene or perhaps induce one to call the police or relevant authorities. Unfortunately, this *ethical impulse* (human goodness) is quite often concealed or obscured by a society's political or legal structures. People tend to lose their ethical sensitivities when human life is radically politicized or viciously commercialised. In other words, none-ethical politics can turn people into ferocious beings. Yet, under normal circumstances, each human being desires to live in peace with fellow human beings.

Other philosophers have sagely alluded to the ethical dimension defended in humancentric dialogue. Ricoeur (2007, pp. 334) [20] uses the expressions "ethics of politics" which suggests the creation of "spaces of freedom" to enable people to freely discuss their ordinary preoccupations. Spaces of freedom allow citizens to interact with one another and also with their leaders. The orthogonal structure (Fig. 1) epitomizes this reality. Humancentric dialogue, under normal circumstances, takes place at the shaded point of intersection (B) which links both the *horizontal axis* (CD) representing people's desire to live together in just institutions and the *vertical axis* (AB) which represents the hierarchical side of politics. It is precisely when the gap between the ruler and the subject widens that political violence is likely to occur. For Kaplan (2003) [21], citizens are likely to tolerate state violence and other sorts of abuses of power when they overlook the ethical facet of politics and see politics as simply a game of alliances. Thus, ethics and politics must always interact to avoid the spilling of political power into violence. Ethics provides pivotal checks and balances by curbing or putting restraints on

political violence. For Suazo (2014) [4], the introduction of ethics into politics allows human reason to judiciously restrain the possibility of the occurrence of political violence.

Humancentric dialogue is also echoed in Levinas' ethical-political philosophy. For him, dialogue begins with what he terms "proximity" (Levinas 2009, pp. 166-167) [22]. Proximity is an ethical encounter with other human beings at the level of sensibility prior to any reference to pre-established norms. The encounter between interlocutors is unconditional. It simply springs from the human desire to survive. One finds oneself giving way in favour of dialogue despite one's cherished principles, cultural beliefs, prejudices, legal demands, etc. Proximity creates a favourable ground for communication, understanding, agreement and, eventually, peace. Once humancentric dialogue has been established, the ground is already set for political dialogue. At this moment, the chances of successful political dialogue are significantly higher.

Perhaps an appropriate example to explain how ethics or humancentric dialogue may curb politically engendered violence can be noticed in the Biblical story about the adulterous woman whose life was saved by the presence of Jesus (John 8:1-11). According to the political obligations of the time (law), the adulterous woman was supposed to be stoned to death. But Jesus swiftly intervened in their political dialogue and injected in it an ethical dimension: "If any one of you has never sinned, let that person be the first to throw a stone at her." These words made the politicians change their minds. They all left the scene beginning with the elders, the experts in law. Ethics confronted politics (law) to make sure human life was respected, while, at the same time, condemning what was sinful. "Go now, but do not sin again," said Jesus to the woman.

In a nutshell, humancentric dialogue involves a back-and-forth movement between ethics [people's valued aspirations] and political stratagems. It is a mechanism of vigilance so that political dialogues may not lapse into violence or destruction of human life. In humancentric dialogue, the refusal to set principles or rules as conditions for dialogue is aimed at allowing humankind to intuitively pay attention to their innermost intuitions (conscience) where *human goodness* naturally expresses itself. Humancentric dialogue, for instance, is believed to have established a platform for the formation of a coalition government in South Africa in 1994 that saw the former "rebel" and prisoner, Nelson Mandela, become the first black President of the country, sharing power with his former "enemy" and "oppressor," Frederik de Klerk, as deputy president. This was indeed a fulfilment of Mandela's conviction as cited by Mathabane (2018, p. 127) [23] that: "if you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner."

V. Recommendations

As a mechanism of vigilance so that political dialogues may not lapse into violence, humancentric dialogue, modestly endorses the following five points: Firstly, governments or leaders should create more spaces of freedom to allow ordinary people to freely express themselves and actively participate in societal deliberations. Citizens should become more involved and vigilant in shaping their destiny. A society cannot survive when political doors are bolted. Human lives cannot flourish when there is no freedom of expression. Spaces of freedom ought to be constantly created to allow informal interactions to take place. Citizens and their leaders, whether political, cultural or religious, must be constantly reminded of their ethical obligations. Live is more bearable when it is lived with and for others in just institutions. Sometimes, political leaders should be challenged to listen to their innermost "consciences" before making political decisions. The appeal to human conscience may awaken their *inherent goodness* which naturally compels each human being to become a *brother or sister's keeper*. Human life must be safeguarded at all costs. Humanistic values such as kindness, compassion, solidarity, consideration, forgiveness, etc., must be given room in political deliberations. As such, leaders may cease to prioritise their self-centred political ambitions and begin to understand that political power is meant for serving those placed under their governance.

Secondly, citizens ought to courageously and fearlessly denounce any form of power abuse. When people allow fear to dominate their lives, they indirectly perpetuate despotism and other forms of political violence. People must assert themselves in order to free themselves from oppressive regimes. The denouncing of power abuse can be done in many ways, including the use of social media (Agbelengor, 2015) [24]. There should be freedom of press to allow people to express their opinions. Public discussions and debates are the guarantees of democracy.

Thirdly, measures should be set in place to strengthen the judiciary. The rule of law plays an important role in any human organisation. Mere agreement alone through humancentric dialogue is not enough to guarantee compliance or social integration on the ground. Mere agreement lacks a binding factor. For the common will to be effective it must be translated into law (Habermas 2001) [25]. There ought to be division of power against itself to allow people to actively participate in decision making as well as monitoring the trend of political movements. It is thus imperative to separate the legislative, executive and judicial functions of the

State. With an independent judiciary, the citizen will not be at the mercy of the State and its power. People will be largely protected by their very presence in the political arena.

Fourthly, education at all levels should aim at producing critical thinkers and ethically sound graduates (Gubazire, 2021) [26]. One cannot exercise one's political responsibility when one does not have the intellectual enlightenment to do so and a baggage of key moral values such as integrity, honesty, commitment, etc. Quite often, political violence arises when people, even the most educated ones, remain politically indifferent before regrettable situations of abuse of power. Critical education would challenge people [without inflaming violence] to take up their political commitment of shaping their history. In some societies, the leader is above the law. There is a proverb among the people of Malawi-Africa that: "*Mfumu silakwa*," meaning "a chief is never wrong." This is precisely a dreadful injustice to society. How can a society evolve if no one can challenge the chief? When no one can raise a voice, express an opinion, or challenge their leaders over their irresponsibility as leaders, then political evils, connected with abuse of political power, are likely to occur. This, again, shows how needful critical education is. With critical minds, citizens can develop the capacity to act in common. With critical minds, citizens will surely not allow themselves to be silenced all the time. Abraham Lincoln, as cited in Gubazire (2014, p. 93) [27], is believed to have said: "You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time."

Fifthly and lastly, humancentric dialogue endorses the use of nonviolent means in bringing about political changes in human societies. Violence generates more violence. Only peaceful resistance can bring about fundamental changes in a society affected by institutionalized injustices. Quite often, power-thirsty leaders create institutions aimed at allowing them to entrench themselves in power. They make sure they have control over the three powers of the State, namely, legislative, executive, and judiciary. The feasible way to dismantle such corrupt systems, while avoiding the spilling of innocent blood, is to embrace nonviolent resistance through attitudes and actions such as peaceful demonstrations, boycotts, fasting, hunger strikes, non-life-threatening civil disobedience, holding vigils, etc. When the State is characterized by murderous violence, and all platforms of dialogue are closed, people are forced to embrace what Ricoeur (2007, p. 246) [28] calls "ethics of distress" which naturally compels people to carry out peaceful demonstrations. Rebellions or revolutions are born in such circumstances. Some individuals sacrifice their lives in order to bring about political changes in the State. Human history has revealed that nonviolent resistance can bring down dictatorial or oppressive political regimes. Take the case of India with Mahatma Gandhi, the United States of America with Martin Luther King Jr., South Africa with Nelson Mandela, to mention but a few. All these men bore witness to nonviolence as a powerful weapon. Their peaceful resistance brought about incredible political and social reforms in their respective societies. It could thus be argued that in unbearable situations of injustices and oppression, if people courageously united their efforts and opted for nonviolent resistance, probably many human conflicts and injustices would be resolved without losing so many lives or destroying a large amount of property.

VI. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to discuss the problem of political violence as understood in ethical-political debates. Political violence represents a deliberate use of physical or non-physical force to achieve certain political goals. It is commonly sparked by abuse of political power; a phenomenon that displays itself in different forms and patterns. In an effort to deter or reduce the possibility of power abuse and subsequent political violence, this paper has modestly proposed an ethical theory and practice known as humancentric dialogue. Humancentric dialogue depicts an informal interactive encounter between parties that seek to co-exist peacefully. It operates at the level of sensibility [human conscience] prior to making references to already established precepts or conditions for dialogue. People simply come together because they share the same intention; the desire to co-exist peacefully and meaningfully. Humancentric dialogue builds on a "voice" from within that summons mankind to be each other's keeper. Humancentric dialogue is contrasted to political dialogue which mainly pivots on already established political interests as a condition for dialogue. This study has modestly recommended that the prioritisation of humancentric dialogue in conflicting situations has greater chances of establishing a platform for genuine and inclusive political dialogue. Humancentric dialogue presents itself as a mechanism of vigilance so that political power may not lapse into violence or destruction of human life. Nevertheless, the implementation of humancentric dialogue may not take place in radically dictatorial regimes. Such regimes are usually allergic to people's informal interactive gatherings for fear of mounting a rebellion against their leaders. Even then, efforts must be continuously made to seek avenues for humancentric dialogue through nonviolent attitudes and actions to avoid the spilling of innocent blood. Moreover, no empire lasts forever.

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