

Chapter 1

Ethics in Political Life

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the role of ethics in political life. It is in two parts. In Part 1, the relation between ethics and politics and the moral standards on which the politicians and policies framed by them should be judged is considered. It is also analysed why certain ethical norms well accepted in a society may not be appropriate for politicians due to their obligation to the public office or the nature of politics. In Part 2, the problem of political corruption and areas in which infraction of moral standards in political life occurs across the globe in different countries is discussed. It is also analysed whether objective norms are feasible on which politicians can be judged for their ethical values when they deviate from moral standards applicable to ordinary citizens. While focussing on this, it is argued that greater public vigilance, more vital international institutions, and an ethically strong community can improve moral norms in political life.

INTRODUCTION

Politics is understood to mean “winning and using of power to govern society” (Collins English Dictionary, 1996). It includes any activity concerned with acquisition of power. Politicians devote themselves to governance through institutions evolved for this purpose. Ethics on the other hand is concerned with moral values and norms based on which individuals or the society decide various issues and people live their life. The process of governing a state involves security and public order. It implies framing laws and rules for social and economic development which are in accordance with the ethical values of the society. As the business of the state is to look after the interest of its citizens and conduct international relations so as to best promote the country’s interest, ethical principles are often ignored in political life. The author plans to describe in this chapter the ethical concerns which influence life of a politician, the extent to which these differ from the moral values applicable to ordinary citizens, the conflict faced by politicians between requirements of governing a State and adherence to certain moral standards during the process of governance and the problems which may arise when normative ethical principles are applied during governance. It also describes how politicians have lust for power and misuse the state

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-4117-3.ch001

power to enrich themselves at the cost of common man. While realising the limitations of use of moral principles in governance for reasons of State, it is suggested that stricter societal vigilance can vastly improve adherence to ethical norms by politicians.

The objective of this chapter is to explore role of ethical values in political life, nature of deviation from such values by politicians during governance due to reasons of state, and possibility of developing a more moral system of governance.

BACKGROUND

For more than two millennium societies have evolved various institutional mechanisms to provide for an orderly conduct of their affairs. Ethical principles in political life of the society had a key role in governance during this period in political systems. According to Kanglee (1972) the famous Indian sage Kautiliya, in his treatise on governance written about 350-400 BC, advised the king that in the happiness of the subjects lay the happiness of the king and what was dear to the king was not beneficial for him but what was dear to the subjects was. (p 47). In a cross country study of India, China, the Greeks and Christianity, while reviewing the political advices given by different advisors and thinkers Girardin (2012) mentions about another Indian sage Manu who advised that within his realm the king should act in accordance with rules with similar thoughts echoed in Taoism, by Confucius and later Men Zi in China. Confucius thought that exemplary virtue of king was being just, clever, sincere, patient and detached. Men Zi later advised that quality of law matters and effective rule requires not only humanity but just laws (pp 23-25). In Europe after the adoption of Christianity by the Roman kings, church had a major say in political life. Later the people presented a charter to the king in England and asserted their rights. All these civilizations laid emphasis on ruler to follow ethical norms while dealing with their subjects. In the 16th century Niccolò Machiavelli an Italian political thinker strongly disagreed with this approach and propounded a theory of extreme political realism. He argued in his famous work “The Prince” that in matters of state end justifies means. He advised the king as below

For that reason, let a prince have the credit of conquering and holding his state, the means will always be considered honest, and he will always be praised by everybody, because the vulgar are always taken by what a thing seems to be and by what comes of it: and in the world there are only the vulgar,... (para 6, chapter XVIII)

He thought that tyranny, deceit or dishonest means were justified in the interest of the state. He did not see much need for moral values in handling issues concerning state

While many societies were governed by Kings for long and had advice for adherence to ethical values in their system of governance as mentioned above, there were also democratic traditions in different parts of the world since nearly 2500 years back. These systems being based on public reasoning or balloting provided a strong foundation for promoting ethical values in political life'. Greece at that time had a strong tradition of democracy. According to Adkins (1984) Greek philosopher Aristotle considered politics being for the practical good. He thought of it as an association of people where they come together for sake of an excellent life. He also felt that human beings whether by themselves or acting together as a group have common goal and hence there is no distinction between best man and best constitution (pp,29-30).

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