Leadership and the Land – On Power and Political Community

Saaim Japanwala

In the process of examining the dynamics between the rulers and the ruled, the fundamental questions arise: How is the relation between political individuals and the state best understood? Many theorists have often polarized around two extremes, authority derived from the rational consent of the governed, and the power secured through the effective force of the ruler. Thomas Hobbes established that the state's primary justification is to provide security and peace, making political obedience a rational decision against anarchy. Conversely, Niccolò Machiavelli demonstrates that the maintenance of a state is a practical challenge that requires a leader to act with virtù, often placing the necessity of power above moral ideals. While these views appear to be in tension, neither alone is sufficient to explain the survival of a state. A complete understanding of the political relationship demands a merger of both, the rational need for protection, alongside the forceful execution of authority.

The relationship between political individuals and the state is best captured as a dynamic of a centralized authority grounded in both effective leadership and rational justification. While Machiavelli argues that stable governance requires a ruler to be decisive and strategic; Hobbes demonstrates that individuals submitting to an authority, through a social contract, to ensure peace and survival. Therefore, a state is most effective when united under a strong ruler whose authority is supported by the consent of individuals seeking protection from the disorder and anarchy within.

Thomas Hobbes, the author of *Leviathan*, presents a profoundly pessimistic account of human nature, arguing that without a common authority to restrain them, individuals will

inevitably fall into conflict. He maintains that people are driven by fear, self-preservation, and competition, and that these motivations lead them to rival one another for limited goods. As Hobbes explains "from this equality of ability, ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore, if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies."[1] This natural equality, combined with self-interest produces a condition in which distrust and violence are unavoidable. To create a society that does not promote a destructive condition, Hobbes argues that individuals must agree to form an agreement, a social contract, in which they surrender their natural liberty to a common authority capable of securing peace. He writes that the only way to secure stability is for the people to "confer all their power and strength upon one man, or upon one assembly of men, that may reduce all their wills, by plurality of voices[2]" creating a sovereign with absolute authority. The sovereign body possesses the power to enforce laws, punish transgressions, and prevent the reversion to the state of nature. Ultimately, Hobbes portrays political authority is a rational outcome; individuals submit to an absolute sovereign not because of loyalty, but because only centralized authority can guarantee their survival.

In *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli offers a sharp and politically grounded view of human nature that parallels Hobbes's pessimistic view in *Leviathan* but places a far greater emphasis on how a leader must act, focusing on the practical 'how' of leadership rather than the 'why.' Machiavelli argues that individuals are fundamentally self-interested and capricious[1]. Noting the untrustworthy dispositions of individuals, he describes men as: "ungrateful, fickle,

[1] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 83.
[2] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 114.

false, cowardly, [and] covetous, and as long as you succeed, they are yours entirely; they will offer you their blood, property, life and children… when the need is far distant; but when it approaches, they turn against you.[3]" Because citizens are guided by their self-interest, their loyalty to political authority is feeble and contingent; they follow rulers only when it serves their own benefit. To manage this unpredictability, Machiavelli insists a ruler must possess virtù, which is not moral virtue, but the necessary skill, strategy and decisive action needed to master circumstance. The instability produced by human nature makes the idea of moral idealism a futile basis of rule, as "for it is the nature of men to be bound by the benefits they confer as much as by those they receive.[4]" Rulers who expect individuals to act loyally without virtù will inevitably lose power – for they cannot be trusted to prioritize the common good over the pursuit of immediate desires. Machiavelli insists that the primary objective of any ruler must be the preservation of the state, even when doing so requires employing strategies that conflict with traditional moral norms.

Thomas Hobbes and Niccolò Machiavelli respond to the instability created by human nature with political solutions that concentrate authority in the hands of a single, decisive ruler. For Hobbes, the only way to escape the chaos of the "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short[5]" state of nature is for individuals to establish a sovereign leader through a social contract. This

[3] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince,* trans. W.K Marriot (1515; repr., Public Domain Edition), 79.
[4] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince,* trans. W.K Marriot (1515; repr., Public Domain Edition), 50.
[5] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 84.

sovereign, the Leviathan, is an authoritative body with absolute power to enforce laws, restrain conflict and ensure peaceful conduct. The Leviathan is justified not by moral qualities but by its capacity to guarantee survival and prevent a return to the destructive state of nature. On the other hand, Machiavelli reaches a similar conclusion from a different angle: because individuals naturally have a self-interested drive, and are unreliable, a stable political order depends on a prince who can command obedience through strength, strategic action, and decisiveness. In a world where Hobbes grounds authority in collective rational agreement through the social contract, Machiavelli grounds it in the ruler's ability to maintain control, often through fear, necessity, and practicality. Both philosophers ultimately converge on the idea that strong and effective governance requires a centralized, decisive authority capable of restraining human tendencies towards instability.

To understand how centralized authority can be both effective and legitimately justified, it is necessary to find a middle ground between Hobbes's account of political obedience and Machiavelli's model of decisive leadership. Hobbes correctly argues that individuals cannot rely on their own self-restraint; without a common authority they will ultimately fall into the insecurity and conflict caused by the state of nature. Showing that people will rationally consent to a sovereign when that authority protects them from a threat of violence, making political obligation in a collective agreement rather than being solely an arbitrary coercive force. Yet the

Hobbesian thought overestimates the durability of mere consent, as rational agreement alone cannot maintain stability when individual passion outweighs collective drive. Machiavelli addresses this limitation, accurately observing that people are fickle, self-interested, and unreliable. Therefore, a ruler must possess virtù – the act of being decisive and strategic under changing circumstances to be an effective sovereign. Further arguing that that fear provides more reliable obedience than affection[6], showing that authority must be able to secure compliance even when loyalty fades. Machiavelli insists that rulers must sometimes act outside of traditional morality to preserve the state, since moral idealism collapses when confronted with human

unpredictability. Idealism, being too unrealistic a basis for governance, is rejected by Machiavelli in favor of a pragmatic approach. Neither philosophical idea is sufficient alone, as Hobbes provides the rational basis for legitimate authority, while Machiavelli provides the practical *virtù* needed to secure and maintain the state.

The synthesis of ideas is illustrated clearly in the early Turkish Republic under the control of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Atatürk rooted his leadership in authority but also rationally justified it. In the aftermath of the collapse of that Ottoman Empire, Turkey faced a condition resembling the State of Nature described by Hobbes, full of political fragmentation, foreign occupation and internal disorder. Atatürk claimed the fall of the Ottoman Sultanate would force the Turks into adopting a foreign order which to them would be equal to 'slaves', "For such a nation it is better to disappear than survive as [a] slave! …We continued our war to defend our rights and independence, and this is sacred for us. And I have a belief that no power could deprive a nation

[6] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince,* trans. W.K Marriot (1515; repr., Public Domain Edition), 82.

from its right to life.[7]" Because citizens viewed the centralized authority as the only means of escaping instability, reflecting Hobbes's argument that political obedience is rooted in the desire for security and stability rather than coercion alone. Their rational surrender

of political autonomy to the new Republic was the Hobbesian contract fulfilled: sacrificing private liberty to gain collective, sovereign security. Yet Turkeys transformation cannot be explained by Hobbesian legitimacy without also including Machiavellian leadership. The success of Atatürk also depended on the very qualities Machiavelli identified as a successful ruler, a leader rises to power using his virtù. Atatürk relied on national military power to defeat foreign forces,

mirroring Machiavelli's insistence that the prince must rely on his own arms and make war his sole study. He acted swiftly and decisively to eliminate threats to a new order; abolishing the Sultanate and Caliphate and supressing conservative rebellions, demonstrating Machiavelli's principle that a founder must inflict necessary force to secure state stability. His radical reforms, from secularizing the legal system to changing the alphabet, reflect Machiavelli's belief that a great founder must reshape the character on the people to establish a durable state. The Turkish republic exemplifies how Hobbesian consent and Machiavellian strength combine to create a stable political order. Where authority was both desire by the people and effectively exercised by a leader capable of transforming a nation out of chaos.

[7] Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, "The National Struggle and the Turkish War of Independence," Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism, accessed December 4, 2025, https://www.ktb.gov.tr/EN-104188/thenationalstruggle-and-the-turkish-war-of-independence.html.

While the synthesis of Machiavellian force and Hobbesian authority is necessary for a state's flourishment, it creates a constant danger of degeneration into a self-serving despotism such as the regime of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. Gaddafi's rule relied almost entirely on the Machiavellian tactics of coercion, military dominance and ruthless elimination of rivals to secure his personal authoritarian grip, only for his state to ultimately collapse. Unlike Atatürk, who directed his virtù towards founding a unified modern republic, Gaddafi corrupted the Machiavellian imperative, utilizing force for self-preservation and personal gain rather than collective stability of the state. Crucially, Gaddafi lacked the rational and voluntary foundation of authority that Hobbes argues is essential for political obedience. His power did not rest on a voluntary social contract for collective security, but on arbitrary coercion, surveillance and the manipulation of tribes. As a result, the state depended entirely on Gaddafi's control, failing the Hobbesian mandate that the sovereign must be seen as a guarantor of a better life. When Gaddafi's authority was challenged, the absence of a rational foundation meant there was no state structure left to hold society together, resulting in immediate political failure; an instant reversion to the state of nature, filled with anarchy, political fragmentation and war[8]. Libya under Gaddafi's rule demonstrates that Machiavellian strength alone is unstable and fails to fulfill the state's promise, underscoring the necessity of Hobbesian rational legitimacy.

The complex challenge of political stability is not resolved by choosing between idealism and pragmatism, but by successful unifying them. As demonstrated, the relationship between

[8] Mieczyslaw Poduszynski, "Rethinking the Dominant Narratives of Libya's Failed Democratic Transition," ResetDoc, July 28, 2024, https://www.resetdoc.org/rethinking-dominant-narratives-libyas-failed-democratic-transition/.

political individuals and the state is best captures as a dynamic of centralized authority grounded in both effective leadership and rational justification. The endurance of a sovereign power rests on successfully merging Machiavelli's decisive virtù with Hobbes's rational social contract to guarantee peace. Atatürk's Turkey confirms this model by merging force with popular consent to escape the state of nature. Conversely, Gaddafi's reliance on pure arbitrary coercion, divorced from any rational foundation, caused his state to collapse into anarchy, an instant reversion to the state of nature. Ultimately the state's survival demands that power be wielded effectively, but

---

also justified rationally. Proving that Machiavellian strength alone is unstable and inadequate without Hobbesian legitimacy.

Word Count: 2025.

Bibliography.

Atatürk, Mustafa Kemal. "*The National Struggle and the Turkish War of Independence*." Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Accessed December 4, 2025. - https://www.ktb.gov.tr/EN-104188/the-national-struggle-and-the-turkish-warofindependence.html.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Edited by J. C. A. Gaskin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Machiavelli, Niccolò. *The Prince*. Translated by W. K. Marriott. Public Domain Edition.

Poduszynski, Mieczyslaw. "*Rethinking the Dominant Narratives of Libya's Failed Democratic Transition*." ResetDoc, **July 28, 2024** https://www.resetdoc.org/rethinking-dominant-narrativeslibyas-failed-democratic-transition/.