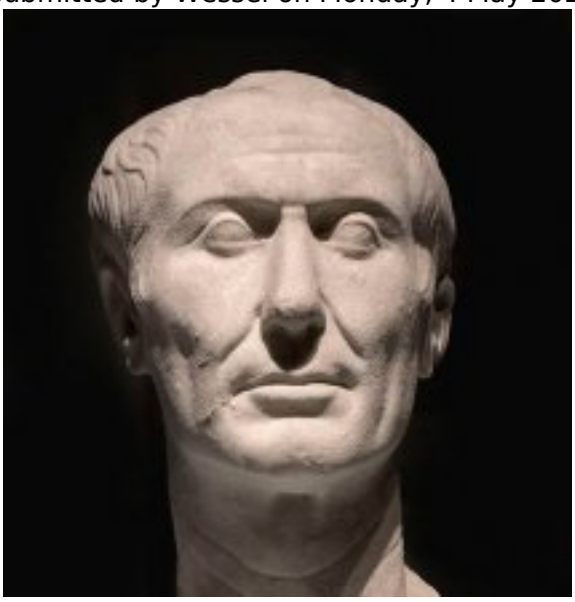
Dictators and Democracies [1]

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Read time: 12 minutes
The Romans were in trouble. The small nation, still confined to only a small patch of land in western central Italy, was being threatened by its neighbours. War was looming. Less than a decade before, the Romans had abolished the monarchy and banished their king, vowing never to be ruled by a tyrant again. They instituted a republic. With the new system of governance came many freedoms. But the decision making machine sometimes moved slowly. Now was a time for action. They decided to elect a man called Titus Lartius as dictator. For a limited time, he was given absolute authority over the Romans. By doing this, the Romans had a man who could make quick decisions and take the swift action necessary to steer them through the crisis. War passed without casualty as Lartius worked to strengthen Rome's position, making their enemies less eager to attack. Before his six month term as dictator expired, Lartius stepped down from the position, and life returned to normal in the Republic.

In ancient times, the word “dictator” did not have the negative connotation that it has today. The Romans have an impressive history where dictators would follow Lartius' example and step out of the position of dictator before the term expired1. Unlike the ancient Romans, the world today is suspicious of people who have absolute power. There have been too many examples of brutal or incompetent kings and rulers: nobody wants to go through that again.

But modern democracies have retained the old Roman system, where great danger can cause the leaders of a government to temporarily gain near absolute power. Normal democratic process is suspended, laws and regulations are passed more easily, and citizen's freedoms can be restricted in order to effectively and decisively deal with the treat. When the threat has passed, the country is supposed to return to its normal democratic processes.

At the time of writing, South Africa is in a State of Emergency over COVID-19. A State of Emergency is a provision made in the Constitution which allows the government (for a limited time) to function in a nearly unrestricted manner to get through some crisis. While most citizens obey, many are experiencing cognitive dissonance: the current state of affairs is unprecedented in the 26 year history of democratic South Africa. Many threats of legal action have been made, but the independent judiciary (the courts) have quashed these. People struggle to comprehend that they do not get a say in this time, and what the government says, goes. For now, we live under strict rules, and have a small taste of the draconian measures under which my wife's grandmother lived in an enemy occupied country during the Second World War.

Many people fear what the outcomes of the current measures are going to be on the economy, people's health, and so on. Much ink has been spilled on this by people more qualified to write on it than I am. My purpose is not to add to this discussion. I instead want to discuss something different: something of which the current situation is a stark reminder, but by no means limited to pandemics or other crises.

Even before the pandemic and the state of emergency, there were signs of trouble. South Africa does not have the wealth of North America, Europe or certain countries in Asia. Yet, it is ambitious in its social welfare (which, in a country with high unemployment, high incidence of AIDS and TB, historical injustices, and massive economic disparity, is necessary). While it economically has been toeing the line between free market liberties and the socialist manifesto of the ruling party, that party has become bolder about their other responsibilities for creating a better society.

The South African government has controversially proposed the introduction of comprehensive sexual education (CSE) into the school curriculum. During the consultation process, several concerns have been raised [2], and conservative religious leaders were berated [3]. There have been concerns about the attitude of the government towards people who wish to home school their children [4]. Yet another proposed law could make adoption more difficult [5]2. Several other laws [6] have recently been proposed or promulgated which would further restrict freedoms of companies or individuals with the aim of protecting individuals (sometimes from themselves). Even the local government in Cape Town have been trying to push [7] through freedom restricting by-laws [8].

There are many other laws being considered which are causing alarm to many South Africans. But my intention is not actually to specifically discuss the current state of South African politics. The above are given merely as examples of a more fundamental concern. I am also not saying that all points of all the proposed reforms are bad. But there is a common theme running through them: government knows best.

A long time ago, a complex civil government, such as the Roman Republic or the later Roman Empire, did not concern itself with education or with how children were raised. There have, of course, always been laws regarding families: if some people are allowed by law to marry their siblings, people will do that, even if most other people think that is bad or wrong (for whatever reason). Even in ancient times, laws regulated such matters in addition to them also being cultural taboos. But today governments have almost exclusively taken over the roles and the tasks which for a long time were carried out by independent or religious institutions, or even which resulted from societal mores. Christians set up the first civil hospitals and orphanages in Europe. Monasteries were places where people could get an education in a turbulent world [9]. Indeed, contrary to popular belief, Christians valued education, because it revealed knowledge of God's creation. And so universities and schools were established. Over time these became regulated and even taken over by the state. This is not necessarily a bad thing in and of itself: it is good, for example, to have a minimum standard which a hospital or orphanage must meet (otherwise it might end up doing more harm than good). It is also good for a state to have a policy that children should be protected and receive an education. But too much regulation causes problems. My wife works for an NGO and gets excited by what can be possible when private organisations can collaborate with public institutions. But when the state wants to only have the public institutions and stamp out the private organisations, it causes a problem. The state then knows best, and is above criticism, and private institutions are only a nuisance and a hindrance.

Much of the good which Christians have done were not explicitly mandated by the Bible. There are no commands such as “thou shalt establish a university”, or “thou shalt open a hospital”. These things came about after understanding God's design and purpose of the world and humanity. There was a desire for learning and understanding God's creation. The sick, even if they were poor and terminally ill, were recognised as being God's creations suffering because of a corrupted world into which Christians must not only speak, but act as well. If the world was designed for these things, then it should not be a surprise that pursuing them would lead to other good things. New knowledge leads to a better understanding, and command, of the natural world, up to leaving the world and exploring the solar system around us. Lives saved lead not only to experience for those who did so who are then more efficient at saving lives in the future, but those who were saved can continue to enrich the world with their knowledge and artistry.

It becomes a problem, though, if we take what is good, and the good effects which it had, and we decouple it from where it came. A secular government [10] does this. The goal then no longer becomes education for the sake of knowledge, but the “correct kind of education” which accords with the government's aims. The goal of healthcare is no longer compassion for the individual for the individual's sake, but to prevent further and later strain on the country's healthcare system. The goal is not to protect the family, but to be in vogue with progressive ideas on the family and sexuality. And children are not their parents' responsibility: they are blank slates on which the government can write their mores and values.

A dictator snaps a finger, and a new rule or regulation is in place. The people scramble to not run afoul of it. If the ruling Gestapo announces that nobody should be out after sunset, everybody makes sure they are inside before nightfall, end of story. But with a democracy, a draconian regulation is seen coming from far away. While it in theory can be stopped, in reality partisan politics often have already decided the outcome. As someone once said, “democracy is mob rule of the majority over the minority”. The intention of democracy is to guard the freedoms of individuals living within that democracy. But we are seeing more and more that democracy becomes heavy-handed against those who do not think or speak as they “ought”. It is a slow process: like watching the water recede before the tsunami appears.

As has been said, there have been enough tyrants to not normally want someone to have absolute power, at least not indefinitely. But there are times when it is necessary: those are times when having such power is not enviable at all. At the moment, every decision made by the government during the COVID-19 crisis is (democratically) scrutinised and criticised by those with the luxuries of being locked in their homes and with nothing else to do. But the government knows very well that they get to decide who lives or dies. Lifting the lock down will mean more infected people. Keeping lock down in place drives the poor and the hungry to desperation. “Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown,” as Shakespeare wrote3. And so we must pray for them, while we watch them and gently speak out against hastened decisions and regulations.

But just as we closely watch our dictators appointed in an hour of need, we need to watch our democracies. Humanity has the capability to justify anything, even the restriction of freedoms in the name of freedom, and persecution of certain groups, despite our past experiences. It is tempting to want to absolve ourselves of many responsibilities and hand them over to the state [11]. One can be indoctrinated into the belief that secularism is a “neutral” worldview and, therefore, harmless.

But even if our freedoms are eroded; even if democracy ends up persecuting Christians worse than the ancient Romans emperors did; and even if the crowd cheers as the lions tear apart the Christians (in such an absolute worst case scenario), the Christian is not to grumble or shake their fists at the world. “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you.” We can pray that some of the compassion which the ancient Christians spoke into and lived out in the pagan world still remains, and that the world will treat according to their example. But while we are aliens and strangers in the world, it can never truly be our home. The good which was built yesterday has become corrupted today. That does not mean that we should stop building [12]: merely that we cannot worship—or become comfortable with—what we have built.

- 1. This, of course, changed with Julius Caesar, who became dictator for life, and after whom the Roman Empire was established with its emperors. Caesar was popular with the masses; the only controversy came from the social elite (who could hold office in the Republic) and who eventually assassinated him. But that is a story for another day.
- 2. There are cultural reasons for wanting to do so. Many people in South Africa believe that their departed ancestors intercede for them with God. They therefore need to keep their ancestors pleased to remain in good standing with God. When a child is put up for adoption, a slight is made against the family, particularly if the adoption happens across tribal or racial lines. It displeases the ancestors for the child to “lose the family name”, so to speak. By increasing regulation on adoption, particularly if that means reducing private adoptions, fewer people will adopt. (Incidentally, this is the same reason why many babies are exposed after birth: it is preferable to leave a newborn's fate in the hands of the ancestors than to

offend the ancestors by directly giving the child up for adoption.) To the government's credit, however, they already view adoption as a last-ditch effort, preferring that everything possible is done either to keep the child with the birth parents, or have the child placed within the extended family.

- 3. Henry IV. Part II.

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