



The Conscience of People in Power

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IN December 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted the universal declaration of human rights. The article 1 of the declaration reads, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." Let's overlook the gender bias of the word 'brotherhood' and concentrate on the words 'reasons and conscience'. So, UN General Assembly declares that as humans we possess both the ability to reason and conscience. That's really gratifying, particularly the element that we have got a conscience.

American Psychological Association defines conscience as "an individual's sense of right and wrong or of transgression against moral values". Cambridge dictionary explains it more clearly as the part of individuals that assesses the morality of their own actions and evokes feelings of guilt for wrongdoing or responsibility for things they have done. Given these definitions, it would not be an overstatement to say conscience is central to humanity. The world would, undoubtedly, be a heavenly place if we all had a conscience. But unfortunately, the world we live in is far from being a heavenly place - we have widespread injustice, discrimination, corruption, war, and everything.

Recall the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 when an estimated 800,000 people were massacred. The Rwandan population comprises, basically, two ethnic groups - Hutus and Tutsis. Although Hutus are the majority but the country was ruled by the Tutsis. According to a BBC news article published on April 4, 2019, Hutus ousted the Tutsi monarchy in 1959 which led to tens of thousands of Tutsis fleeing to neighbouring countries. A group of Tutsi exiles founded the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which launched an invasion of Rwanda in 1990. The conflict persisted until a peace agreement was reached in 1993. In April 1994 a plane carrying the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi - both Hutus - was shot down by unknown assailants killing them both and everyone else on the plane. Hutu extremists blamed the RPF for the incident and began a systematic campaign of slaughtering the Tutsis. At that time, ID cards included the ethnic identity of people, which made it easy for the militias formed by the ruling party's youth wing to identify and murder Tutsis by setting up roadblocks. Neighbours killed neighbours and even there were cases where husbands murdered their Tutsi wives. There were UN peacekeepers, Belgian troops, and French troops stationed in Rwanda but nobody did anything to stop the carnage that went on for more than three months. It finally ended only when RPF captured the capital Kigali and overthrew the Hutu government on July 4, 1994.

The same thing happened in Srebrenica. Srebrenica is a town in Bosnia-Herzegovina, one of the six breakaway nations from Yugoslavia - now Serbia. The breakup of Yugoslavia involved ethnic cleansing, mass killings, and other atrocities. The Holocaust Museum of Houston, USA states that Serbia initiated a campaign of ethnic cleansing in Bosnian territory, targeting Muslims. Many Muslim men and women were forced

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into concentration camps where they were subjected to torture, starvation, rape, and murder. In 1993, the UN Security Council designated specific Muslim territories, including Srebrenica, as "safe areas" under the protection of UN peacekeepers. However, in July 1995, Serbians entered Srebrenica without any resistance from the UN peacekeeping force and forcefully transported around 23,000 women, children, and elderly individuals to Muslim-held areas. And then they just slaughtered 8,000 men and boys whom they considered capable of fighting. The UN peacekeepers looked on and did not fire a single shot for their protection.

So, what happened to the conscience that humans are endowed with?

We uphold morality, ethics, conscience, etc. in our lives. We teach them to our children. But it looks like as we move from individuals to groups like organizations, governments, tribes, nations, etc. the collective conscience becomes challenged by dilemmas, doctrines, interests, vengeance, etc. to such an extent that they get waned and withered. Albert Camus, Nobel Laureate French philosopher, said, "By definition, a government has no conscience. Sometimes it has a policy, but nothing more." Indeed, there are plenty of examples in favour of his comment. Let's recall a few of them. In 1960, Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected Prime Minister of Congo was deposed in a military coup and subsequently assassinated - all orchestrated by Belgium, the former colonial ruler of Congo. In 1971, the US took the side of Pakistan in our Liberation War and Indo-Pak war despite the Pakistan military's genocide in Bangladesh. In 1973, the US engineered a military coup in Chile that overthrew and killed the country's elected President Salvador Allende and installed a dictator, General Pinochet. The US government continued to support Pinochet's regime although it perpetrated widespread human rights abuses, including torture, disappearances and extrajudicial killings.

In the present time, Myanmar's military regime has carried out systematic genocide against the Rohingya people and caused about a million Rohingyas to take refuge in Bangladesh. The regime is clinging to power using a strategy of violent repression against any kind of opposition. Against international condemnation and sanctions, China and Russia are harboring the military junta of Myanmar. Another example is Israel. It is relentlessly committing crimes against the Palestinians - killing, torturing, and evicting them from their homes. It is flagrantly disregarding international criticisms and UN resolutions. And the source of Israel's defiance is the backing of the USA.

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Every year the UN observes the International Day of Conscience on April 5. The idea is to remember the importance of the human conscience. The observance would probably be more effective if the UN narrows down its focus on the importance of the conscience of people in power since it affects the lives of many - billions of people on earth.

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