

Review

Reason of state in the philosophical works of Niccolo Machiavelli

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Every state has its own reason of survival whether it is democratic or undemocratic, constitutional or unconstitutional, tyrannical or republican. Thus, the concept of reason of state depends on the nature of the state. Reason of state in a democratic order is different from that of undemocratic state. This study gave more emphasis on the philosophical works of Niccolo Machiavelli. Based on his philosophical works, the study argue that Machiavelli's reason of state in *The Prince*, even though it is implicit, is tyrannical or "reason of power" in its character and not fit for human habituation. On the other hand, his thought in the *Discourses* promotes constitutional reason of state. As a result, different thinkers considered him as one of the advocator of constitutional reason of state.

Key words: Reason of state, the prince, the discourses, reason of power.

INTRODUCTION

There is no common consensus among thinkers when the idea of reason of state commences. For some thinkers, the notion of reason of state begins around the end of the 16th century in the writings of Machiavelli (Viroli, 1992). However, according to Peter Burke, the idea of reason of state goes back to the 12 and 13th century. This view is supported by Maurizio Viroli. To him, the notion of reason of state was initiated in ancient Roman, mainly in the writings of Tacitus and Cicero. The works of Cicero preaches the idea of reason of state, as Fischer portrays, commands people to do what is necessary when there is no means to protect the welfare of the people, even if it may contradict with morality. However, Cicero discarded breaching of laws for the

sake of private interest in the names of the common good. Due to this reason, many thinkers believe that Romans were the first people who brought the theory of reason of state. For some writers, the term reason of state was first employed by Giovanni della Casa in 1547, a speech composed to the emperor Charles V, since the speech have the idea of reason of state. However, for Peter Burke, reason of state became popular in the works of Giovanni Botero (Korvela, 2006). This view is also supported by Fredrick (1957) by saying Giovanni Botero is one who invented the term reason of state. According to Federico Bonaventura, in the writings of Plato, the idea of reason of state was found since Plato's art of ruling the republic is upholding the thought of reason of state.

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Different writers described Machiavelli as the first man that introduced the term reason of state in his political writings (Viroli, 1992).

However, others believe that Machiavelli did not invent the term reason of state; instead, the idea traced back to ancient Roman and Greek. Of course, he did not use the term reason of state in his political thoughts. But his writing in *The Prince* advocates tyrannical reason of state. However, he was considered as the first modern writer who explained the principles of reason of state. According to Frederick (1957), the Athenians were the pioneer of the doctrine of reason of state in their discussion with the Melians by saying “might makes right” and power is an imperative instrument to rule.

Accordingly, there is no common understanding among thinkers when and how the idea of reason of state began. However, one thing is certain; Machiavelli was the one who promoted the idea of reason of state both in *The Prince* and *the Discourses on Tatius Livy*.

What is reason of state in general? Different thinkers defined reason of state differently on the nature of the state and other factors. Thus, there is no clear understanding among thinkers about the term reason of state. According to Scipione Ammirato, reason of state is defined as:

If a state is nothing more than domination, or rule, or reign, or empire, or any other name one might like to give it; reason of state will be nothing more than, reason of domination, of rule, of empire, of reign, or anything else .

Ammirato declared that reason of state can be good and bad. Good reason of state is the derogation of law for the interests of the people while bad reason of state is the derogation of the law for the interests of an individual(s). Even if reasons of state violate civil laws they should respect the law of God and natural laws (Viroli, 1992). Machiavelli’s reason of state in *The Prince* did not make any distinction between good and bad reason of state, rather the prince uses just any means to maintain his power and the state. Natural laws and the law of God are irrelevant for Machiavelli unless they contribute for his program.

According to Quentin Skinner, in reason of state, there is political pessimism since its aim is to make stability and order within the state. Therefore, reason of state is allied with the interest of the state. However, for Sheldon Wolin, the interests of the people and the state were not necessarily alike since princes could disregard recognized norms.

In a tyrannical system, rulers may give priority for their own interest than the interest of their subjects. Thus, for those who advocate the political thought of Aristotle, reason of state is taken as a danger for reasonable state, morality and religion. It makes religion instrument for the state. Therefore, Machiavelli’s reason of state in *The Prince* is a challenge for reasonable idea of politics. His

advice is apt for tyrants and the system of tyranny. Accordingly, his political thought in *The Prince* is awkward from the views of Christianity since he eliminated any religious confines on politics, and made the state superior (Korvela, 2006).

Therefore, reason of state is the notion that the good and the stability of the state is utmost, and the roles of the government should be for the triumph of this goal by using any means whether its legal or illegal, just or unjust. This will, in turn, affect the well-being and the life of the people since it aims to protect the security and the well-being of the state, the well-being of the subject will be violated and individuals will be sacrificed. Machiavelli’s reasons of state in *The Prince* erode the liberty, equality, and right of the subjects since he advises the prince to protect and maintain the security of the state and his power at any cost. His power politics in *The Prince* is reason of state of tyranny since he claims that through strong power, the security and orders of the state is maintained. The power of the prince is also unlimited; that is, the prince is above the law.

Brunetto Latini defined reason of state as the means of preserving supremacy over the people through different means (Korvela, 2006). Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini were responsible for the shift of politics to reason of state since Machiavelli rejected politics as the art of republic and promoted the notion of tyrannical reason of state. The end of politics is the quest of power and the prince should not be good man like that of the ancients. Like Machiavelli, Guicciardini argued that to maintain the state, the prince should reject moral values, religion, reasonable thinking, and the values of the society (Viroli, 1992). He shifted the intent of politics purposefully away from “civil philosophy”¹ to the art of the state. Both of them rejected the values of natural law and morality to rule the state. According to Peter Burke, reason of state is defined as the view that “national interests override moral laws” (Armitag, 2000).

According to Viroli (1992), for Giovanni Botero, reason of state means the knowledge of the means to establish, maintain and enlarge a state through domination and “reason of state is little else than reason of interest”. It is the universal art of ruling and offered ‘prudence’ as the key ingredient of the art of rule. Like Machiavelli and Guicciardini, Botero discarded natural law and he was also responsible for the breach of morality, justice, and religion. His definitions of reason of state are applied to both legitimate and illegitimate states. For others, the notion of reason of state merely recognizes the interests of the state and disregards morality, justice, and religion. So, reason of state is the art of preserving any state by any means. This definition is conflicting with morality, religion, justice, and values of the society.

Some writers defined reason of state in relation to

¹ The notion of “civil philosophy” that the writer used in this context is to mean ethics and law. See the book of Viroli *from Politics to Reason of State*.

politics. For example, according to Trajano Boccalini, politics is the art of safeguarding and expanding a state and reason of state is part of politics (Viroli, 1992). Tommaso Campanella² said that 'reason of state is an invention of tyranny; that justifies the violations of civil, natural, and divine laws in the interests of whoever is in power.' Reason of state which is an evil notion substitutes the right concept of politics.

Machiavelli's power politics in *The Prince* is a corrupt art and an evil for him. Indeed, it is not an art since art cannot perhaps instruct evil. Art is the true reason in realistic issues and aims to be a good thing. Politics as a right art should destroy tyranny by no means true ethics and true politics which contradict each other since truth can never oppose another truth. But Machiavelli's reason of state in *The Prince* contradicts ethics, morality and religion.

Ludovico Zuccolo, the Venetian³ writer, argued that the end of politics is to promote the common good while reasons of state focus on the interest of the ruler. According to Filippo Maria Bonini, 'politics is the daughters of reason and the mother of laws; reason of state is the mother of tyranny and the sister of atheism.' Politics is a good way of ruling the people while reason of state is the way of using any means whether just or unjust which is suitable to preserve any state which is the art of tyranny (Viroli, 1992).

Conversely, others said that reason of state is the correct way of ruling a state within and outside the state according to the constitution of the state and the power of other nations (Armitag, 2000). For Alberto Fabri, the notion of reason of state was derived from government since the presence of government led to the existence of reason of state (Viroli, 1992). According to Frederick (1957), all states have their own reasons of survival to defend themselves from internal and external enemies; and it is the doctrine that whatsoever is crucial to insure the survival of the state by any means.

The rule that determines the conduct of state is different from the rule that determines private conduct. Reason of state is a set of rules concerning the conducts of the state. The morality of the state is different from the morality of private individual. What is needed in private life may be unnecessary for the state. The virtue of private life may be in contradiction with the virtue of the state (Korvela, 2006).

During the medieval period, reason of state was used in a right way unlike the modern notion of reason of state for some thinkers since in the medieval period, the right means were used in order to protect the state and it was according to the law of nature and subordinate to higher reason of state. However, in the modern era, the idea of reason of state was considered as the reverse of ruling the state in justice (Viroli, 1992). Therefore, there are

right and wrong reasons of state. Reason of state is right when it focuses on the common interest and is limited by justice while it becomes wrong, when it focuses on self interest and evil acts. However, the prince is expected to recognize the bad means since in times of chaos, the ruler must save the state. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli (1998) argued that 'a prudent lord, therefore, cannot, observe faith, nor should he, when such observance turns against him and the causes that made him promise have been eliminated.' This expression shows that his advice for the prince promotes bad reason of state since he advises his compatriots to violate faith for their private interest not for the common interest, he also advises his compatriots to do evil and wicked activities to preserve and maintain the security of the state.

There are disagreements among thinkers in the relation between politics and reason of state. For some, reason of state and politics are two similar ideas. Conversely, others argued that politics and reason of state are two different things. Giovanni Antonio Papzzo claims that reason of state and politics are the same things since both of them come from God and the laws of nature. The gap between politics and reason of state followed the sorting of true and false reason of state. True reason of state is the ancient thought of politics like justice, prudence, virtue and aims at the preservation of people. False reason of state is the art of state and aims at demolishing humanity (Viroli, 1992). So, Machiavelli's reason of state is incompatible with Papzzo's definition since it is the arts of the state and it is a wicked form of reason of state. Machiavelli supports murder if it is necessary to secure the power of the prince.

For Ludovico Zuccolo, reason of state is to admit a deed which is appropriate to defend a state. There are different types of reason of states according to the nature of each state. Monarchical states have their own reason of state which is different from democratic states. So, reason of state is seen as the right means to preserve the state whether it is republic, or tyranny. Therefore, reason of state is not part of politics which is irrational to think about something evil, reason of state might be subordinate to something good (Viroli, 1992).

The principle of reason of state permits the state to take proper measures to maintain the security of the state. Constitutional reason of state allows the state to take measures to save the constitutional order. Many thinkers argued that reason of state is the art of government and aims at maintaining, and extending the state. Others advanced the view that reason of state is the game behind government deed. For Viroli (1992), reason of state focuses on the interests of the ruler not the good of the people. For Meinecke, reason of state is the rule of politics and the law of motion of the state. It orders the ruler on what he must do in order to maintain the common good. The notion of reason of state answers the assertions of the highest value or the life of the political community. If we discard this notion and desire to assert another highest value, then we are rejecting the

²Who was an Italian writer on reason of state;

³A resident of Venice;

state (Fredrick, 1957).

There are many thinkers that advocate constitutional reason of state like Harrington, Spinoza, and Montesquieu. Constitutional reason of state protects the freedom, justice, rights and the well-beings of the people. According to Harrington and Montesquieu, each state has its own reason of state. Reason of state, for Harrington, is “the administration of government” it is concerned with growth and perfection. Depending on the nature of the state, Harrington grouped reason of state as good and bad (Fredrick, 1957). Whereas according to Sadurski (2014), reason of state is equivalent to the common good.

As C.J. Frederick, cited Spinoza, in his book *Constitutional Reason of State* freedom is ‘even necessary for the preservation of the government. The safest way for a *civitas*...is...that every man should think what he likes and say what he thinks.’ Therefore, for Spinoza, the preservation of freedom is the true constitutional reason of state. However, in Machiavelli’s reason of state, in *The Prince*, there is no freedom of speech, and power is in the hands of the prince.

Thus, his reason of state is whatsoever the prince thinks is needed for the security and survival of the state. Spinoza advocates governments of laws and not of men. He said that ‘it is much better for us to live according to the laws and assured dictates of reason’ (Fredrick, 1957). The state which forbids freedom of thought causes its own destruction since “the true aim of government is liberty” (Fredrick, 1957). However, the issue of freedom in Machiavelli’s reason of state is unthinkable because it is tyrannical in its nature.

For Montesquieu, the only remedy of the protection of the state is through the establishment of “federative system” where power should be shared between the legislative, the executive, and the judiciary bodies (Fredrick, 1957). But for Machiavelli, all power of the state is concentrated in the hand of the prince and people did not have any sayings in politics. So, Machiavelli’s political thought in *The Prince* promotes the tyranny of reason of state.

Making philosophical discourses on reason of state in the philosophical works of Niccolo Machiavelli has a number of theoretical and practical relevance. Many philosophers believed that the political system of the world in modern era and post modernism were dominantly regulated by his philosophical thoughts. In his different works, Machiavelli focused on one central point which says; how the state survives at any cost and maintains its power. This question is the question of reason of state, and having a theoretical knowledge about his reason of state helps the political system of the world and how it functions. Besides in philosophy, conducting any forms of scholastic disputation enriches the academic arena and helps to broaden the horizon of the fields of the study.

The purpose of this study is to place more emphasis on

the philosophical works of Niccolo Machiavelli. The study argues that Machiavelli’s reason of state in *The Prince*, even though it is implicit, is tyrannical or “reason of power” in its character and not fit for human habituation. The study notes, however, that his thought in the discourses promotes constitutional reason of state.

Reason of state in the views of Machiavelli

Niccolò Machiavelli did not use the term reason of state in his political writings. However, implicitly in his political thoughts in *The Prince* and in *the Discourses*, he promotes tyrannical and constitutional reason of state respectively. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli (1981) argued that any actions and policies that promote the security of the state are justified since the preservation of the state is given priority over the welfare of its people.

To maintain and safeguard the state, all means are justified. In politics, one is guided by the harsh realities of political life. Therefore, the action of the state must be judged on the bases of its result. This is what reason of state for Machiavelli is. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli (1903) said that ‘he must not mind incurring the disgrace of those vices, without which it would be difficult to save the state.’ The primary activities of any prince should focus on power. The issue of morality and religion is different and cannot be combined with the system of the state. For Machiavelli, the power of the prince is imperative since it is used to preserve the state from external as well as internal enemies. As Machiavelli (1981) described, the state is not a moral being rather it is superior to religion.

According to Machiavelli (1998), the independence of the state in different spheres is crucial. The state should be founded on its own army and should have a strong and unified government. Power is a foundation of government and to establish a government, considering all men as wicked is essential. As he declared, the most powerful and great states in the world like the Roman was founded and maintained only by crime. He ignored the idea of humanity since the state was the absolute good of human existence and it had been served at any cost. For the good of the state, justice, freedom and rights might be violated.

Therefore, Machiavelli’s reason of state in *The Prince* violates the rights of man, dignity, human liberty, and justice. For him, the morality of the state and the morality of individuals are different. This implies that the state cannot function in the morality of Christianity since the morality of the Christian is harmful for the state (Korvela, 2006). In chapter 8, Machiavelli (1998) says sometimes ruling becomes triumphant through crimes. State is the supreme good over any other things. To maintain and secure the state, any measure is justified since he advises his compatriots to take any measure which is necessary to the state regardless of its rightness or wrongness, just or unjust. Machiavelli (1981) declared

the aforementioned thought as follows:

(T)he ruler must prepare to vary his conduct as the winds of fortune and changing circumstances constrain him, and not deviate from right conduct, but be capable of entering up on the path of the wrong doing when this becomes necessary.

So, for him, reason of state is the survival of the state by any means. Justice, freedom, right, morality and religion are irrelevant in themselves unless they contribute for his aim.

There are also different notions, in *The Prince*, that show his reason of state of tyranny. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli (1903) argued that the morality of the state and the morality of individuals are the two different things and this inconsistency brings its birth. For him, what was not acceptable in private life was sometimes necessary in political life and the virtue of individual will be harmful for political life. Therefore, reason of state is a set of rules concerning the conduct of the government which differs greatly from private moralities and virtues.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli (1998) stated that the action of any ruler is justifiable if it contributes to the peace, prosperity, and stability of the state. He acknowledges murder, violence and any forms of cruelty to protect the interests of the state since he appreciates the cruelty of Cesare Borgia in subduing the Romagna since it brings order to the earlier unruly region. Thus, Machiavelli believed that through cruelty and murder, the security and the order of any state can be preserved and this thought of Machiavelli is the reason of state of tyranny. Some writers consider him as the one that laid a foundation for the nation state and its central philosophy of "reason of state" (Seaman, 2007).

His concept of *virtù* is an essential part of his reason of state of tyranny in *The Prince* since the notion of *virtù* is crucial for the security and survival of the state. According to Machiavelli (1981), depending on one's own *virtù* is the basis to found a state. The cases of Romulus, Theseus and Cyrus were good examples to this. Machiavelli (1998) also said that *virtù* is whatever is best for the state and related with power.

In *the discourses*, Machiavelli (1996) expressed *virtù* as the Romans *virtù* which was the basis for the foundations of the Roman Empire or Romans reason of state. *Virtù* include courage, prowess and the willingness to fight for and the sacrifice of oneself for the *Patria*⁴. The notions of *virtù*, *fortuna*, and necessity are useful for Machiavelli's reason of state.

For him, necessity is beyond the law. Political life is ruled by the "laws of necessity". According to Thomas

Aquinas, "necessity is not subjected to law" (Fredrick, 1957) like Machiavelli. But whose necessity is that? Is it the true necessity of the state or the necessity of the tyrants? If it is the necessity of the tyrant, then it is a bad form of reason of state. If the necessity is the necessity of the state and the people, it is a good form of reason of state. Machiavelli's reason of state, in *The Prince*, is the government of men not government of laws because the state is the majestic good over anything.

The security and survival of the state is "*hors de discussion*"; that is, it is self-justifying as any absolute value (Fredrick 1957). Consequently, for him, reason of state is how to maintain, and preserve the power of the prince and the security of the state by any means.

Machiavelli's reason of state in *The Prince* from the views of different thinkers

Different thinkers and writers provided different interpretations for Machiavelli's reason of state in *The Prince*. For Korvela (2006), Machiavelli never employed the term reason of state in *The Prince*; he simply focused on "interest".

Following the emergence of absolute states, the notion of reason of state begins. Since the comings of different absolute states around the world, they need the theory of the state to rule. Then again, for Friedrich Meinecke, Machiavelli did not use the term reason of state in his writings. However, he was the first person who "thought through" the true nature and essence of reason of state, and who renovated the notion of reason of state.

According to Arienzo (2013), ancient writers never understood the problem in its right way since the ancient Greeks and Romans considered morality and political morality. According to Meinecke, for Augustine in ancient times 'without justice, states are nothing but great bands of robbers' (Fredrick, 1957). For Fredrick, the talk held between the Athenians and the Melians brings the notions of reason of state.

George L. Mosse asserts in the works of Machiavelli, the modern idea of reason of state was found since Machiavelli gave autonomous power and its own morality for the state. Indeed, the notion of reason of state in the modern time is usually linked with Machiavellianism since Machiavelli made religion to be subordinate to politics. However, the term reason of state became popular by Botero in 1589. It is after this time that reason of state denotes the political doctrines of Machiavelli. Therefore, for him, the state has its own morality and Christian morality did not function in the state (Korvela, 2006). Accordingly, Machiavelli's notion of reason of state undermines Christian morality.

Christopher Marlowe, in his Play *The Jew of Malta*, maintained that Machiavelli made conventional morality subordinate to the state. The making and preserving of the state is the first thing (Fredrick, 1957). According to James Harrington, Machiavelli wrote in his famous book,

⁴It refers to the state or the "fatherland" for Machiavelli. For further understanding please see Machiavelli's books *The Prince* and *the Discourses on Titus Livy*.

The Prince, the notion of reason of state of tyranny. Every state has its own reason of survival to defend itself from external and internal enemies (Fredrick, 1957).

Generally, the study argues that every state has its own reason of survival. But, the question is that, is the reason of survival conducive for the state itself or endangers it? Tyrannical and dictatorial states have their own reason of survival; however, the reason of survival of all these states affects the state itself and its people. Their reason of survival is not relevant for the state since the aims of preserving and defending the state by any means are not for the advantages of its people or the state but for the tyrants and dictators. The preserving of the state is nil unless it benefits its subjects.

Consequently, the first question that should be addressed is that why is the state preserving its order and security? Is it useful even for the state itself and for the common good? If it is so, then, reason of the state is appropriate even though it violates justice, morality, freedom, religion and sacrificed human life unless it is problematic. Democratic states have their own reason of survival in order to protect their constitutional order and the security of the state. This action is justified and apt since their aim is preserving the security of the state and the orders of the society. Its aim is to maintain peace and stability for its people. Accordingly, in reason of state, the following questions should be addressed. Why the does the states preserve their security and order? And does preserving the order of the state an end by itself?

Thus, the violations of conventional values to secure and maintain the state for the interest of the state and the people in a democratic state are justified. The timely violations of conventional values are for the sake of preserving and avoiding any further violations. However, the breaches of norms and institutions like religion in tyrannical and dictatorial states in the names of security and survival of the state is not justified. Since, the state does not have any extraordinary thing than to do an evil thing and to stay in power. The state by itself does not benefit from its survival. For example, the survival of reason of state of Adolf Hitler did not bring any worth for Germany rather it lost its people and history. Therefore, reason of state in tyrannical and dictatorial states is horrible and insignificant.

Therefore, in democratic states any form of violations for a time is reasonable when the survival of the state is endanger since their aim is to liberate the state and its people. According to Frederick (1957), the security and survival of the state can only be realized through risk-taking. However, the risk must promote further peace, order, and security for the state and its people but not for the private interest of the prince.

Besides, the study argues that Machiavelli's reason of state, in *The Prince*, is tyrannical but not fit for human habituation. For Machiavelli (1998), to preserve the security and order of the tyrant state by any means is justified including killing, deception, cunning, and any

wicked activities. The power of the prince is unlimited and the prince can do whatever he wants on his subjects. The people who do not have any roles in political affairs are considered as childish and immature. Machiavelli (1998) declared that men are wicked creatures and he advises his compatriots to reshape these wicked characters of men by imposing harsh punishments.

The system of Machiavelli's power politics by itself is tyrannical in its nature and in this system; any action that is against the state is justifiable. This political system by itself is not conducive for the people and the state. In times of civil war to protect the interest of the state, the prince might violate conventional values and even the life of individuals may be sacrificed. For example, according to Althusius, to defend the constitutional order, anything is justified in doing whatever the situation requires; like the violations of conventional values (Fredrick, 1957).

Milton also argued that the security and survival of the state are calling for the forceful suppression of those who would challenge freedom. Reason of state was built on governments' view with the general interest (Fredrick, 1957). These shows that to protect the common good of the people, timely violations of conventional values is justifiable since the state is beneficial from the system. But Machiavelli's reason of state that allows the violations of conventional values and the murders of the people in the names of the state, in *The Prince* did not bring communal benefits for the people and the state. He simply developed a system of government that would be employed to rule the state. So, the prince is only protecting the interest of the tyrant and not the interest of the people. For Machiavelli, the power of the prince is unlimited and above the law. This irresponsible prince could not be responsible for the interests of the people but for his power.

Conclusion

Every state has its own reason of survival. However the question is, is the reason of survival conducive for the state itself or endangers it? Tyrannical and dictatorial states have their own reason of survival but the reason of survival of all these states affects the state itself and its people. Their reason of survival is not relevant for the state since the aims of preserving and defending the state by any means are not for the advantages of its people or the state, but for the tyrants and dictators. Preserving the state is meaningless if it does not benefit its subjects. Accordingly, the first question that should be addressed is, why is the state preserving its order and security? Is it useful even for the state itself and for the common good? Niccolò Machiavelli in his political thoughts in *The Prince* and in *the Discourses* implicitly promotes tyrannical and constitutional reason of state respectively. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli argued that any actions that promote the security of the state are justified

since the preservation of the state is given priority over the welfare of its people. Therefore, reason of state is the survival of the state by any means. Justice, freedom, morality, and religion are irrelevant in themselves unless they contribute to his aim.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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