

***The Prince* - by Nicolo Machiavelli**

Book Review

Abdul Hafeez Khan Niazi*

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INTRODUCTION

The Prince, by Niccolo Machiavelli is a powerful and insightful look into the mind of a master politician who has an uninhibited sense of honesty and bluntness that leaves the reader staggered with astonishment. Written by Machiavelli after his own political demise, the book takes a sincere and yet cynical position in construing his ideas. With the translation, editing, and introduction by Daniel Donno, *The Prince* is a masterpiece of literary work that is a classic indeed. The writing style has a very authoritative voice to it, but with a conversational tone. It appears as though Machiavelli had great confidence in what he wrote and took for granted that others would agree to his views. There are many examples of the conversational tone such as the use of "I" found in many places, and a few examples are as follows: "...I say that republics have endured for many years.." (111), "I think that some people may be surprised when they see a certain general.." (119), and "I had not intended from recent Italian examples..." (52).

There are many instances where Machiavelli is extremely blunt. In reponding to whether it is better to be loved or feared, he says feared

* Major (Retd) Abdul Hafeez Khan Niazi, is M.Phil Research Scholar in Department of International Relation/ Political Science, Department of Qurtuba University Peshawar Campus.

because man is generally "ungrateful, fickle, dissembling, anxious to flee danger and covetous of gain", and goes on to say "...but above all, he *The Prince* should refrain from the property of others, for men are quicker to forget death of a father than the loss of a patrimony" (60). The book answers the commonly asked question that why did many of his contemporaries see him as evil? Perhaps because that he spoke the truth and that is not exactly what they wanted to hear. To make the opinion that Machiavelli is evil even more apparent, he says himself that "...he must stick to the good so long as he can, but, being compelled by necessity, he must be ready to take the way of evil" (63). Again, this is not exactly what people want to hear from someone that they wish to represent them, although it may be exactly what they wish their leader to do. It may not be that Machiavelli was any more evil than the next man, but he chose to be vocal about it and broke some unspoken laws of politics. In The Prince, he revealed all; more than some wanted to know. After reading this, you either love it or hate it, but I am sure you too will be impressed by *The Prince*. It's obviously the product of a shrewd intellect and a lifetime of experience and, there's no way to escape from the parallels of Machiavelli's day and that of ours. I believe that the common usage of *Machiavellian*, characterized by "cunning, duplicity, or bad faith" is based on a misunderstanding of Machiavelli's message.

Machiavelli's *The Prince* is undoubtedly his most famous work, the book that gave "Machiavellian" to the English language as a synonym for "deceitful." Machiavelli does not appear to quite deserve his reputation for immoral manipulation, however. The introduction by Donno provides a solid foundation for the rest of the book to build upon, and the insight into the background of Machiavelli is essential to understand the

perspective from which he writes. *The Prince* was written for a very specific purpose. In 1513, Machiavelli was living in forced retirement after the Medici family overthrew the republican government of Florence. His name had been on a list of possible enemies of the Medici's, so he was currently out of favor with the rulers of Florence. One reason for Machiavelli writing the book was as a means of returning to a position of power. It is notable in this regard that he advises "the wise prince" that the best friends he could find after taking control of a new state are his former enemies, because they will appreciate his friendship more than those who helped him into power. During his service in the Florentine government, he had had the opportunity to deal diplomatically with kings and princes from all parts of Europe, and he wrote *The Prince* as a gift to the new Medici rulers of Florence:

I have not found among my belongings anything that I might value more or prize so much as the knowledge of the deeds of great men, which I learned from a long experience in modern affairs and a continuous study of antiquity . . . [There] could not be a greater gift from me than to give you the means to be able, in a very brief time, to understand all that I, in many years and with many hardships and dangers, came to understand and to appreciate.

The other prime motivation behind *The Prince* was that Machiavelli viewed 1513 as a historic opportunity for Giuliano de' Medici, the ruler of Florence, to unite most of Italy and expel the French and Spanish "barbarians" from Italian soil. Giuliano's brother became Pope Leo X in March 11 of that year, and Machiavelli believed this was

the strongest position of any Italian prince since Pope Alexander VI and his son Cesare Borgia combined a similar amount of secular and religious power. *The Prince* was Machiavelli's advice to Giuliano on how best to use the opportunity presented by "Fortune" in 1513. *The Prince* was not published until seven years after Machiavelli's death, and was not really intended as a public work. Machiavelli's reputation has been largely created from reading his book without reference to its historical context.

Machiavelli's thesis can be summed up in his own words:

I . . . believe that the man who adapts his course of action to the nature of the times will succeed and, likewise, that the man who sets his course of action out of tune with the times will come to grief.

Contents Analysis:

The Prince a booklet of advice to a young prince can be taken as a crash course in power politics by the students of political science and strategic studies. Machiavelli, does not believe in ideals; for him the hard realities are the core issues; like "might is right". However, it does not mean that Machiavelli is advocating any kind of amorality. Whereas, he says that in order to do good in the long run a leader must remain in power, and in order to remain in power, bad things must sometimes be done:

"[the prince should] not deviate from what is good, if possible, but be able to do evil if constrained."

Therefore, *the Prince* analyzes the often-violent means by which political power is seized/attained and retained, and the circumstance in which it is lost. Being a political commentary *The Prince* draws his examples from

the political and social events of the time and past. The book is a declaration in plain language of the conduct of great men and the principles of princely governments. The book can be divided into four sections:

1. **The Types of Principalities:** Michiavelli lists four types of principalities.

- Hereditary principalities, which are inherited by the ruler.
- Mixed principalities, territories that are annexed to the ruler's existing territories.
- New principalities, which may be acquired by several methods: by one's own power, by the power of others, by criminal acts or extreme cruelty, or by the will of the people
- Ecclesiastical principalities, namely the papal states belonging to the catholic churches.

2. **The Character and Behavior of the Prince:** Michiavelli recommends the following character and behavior for princes:

- It is better to be miserly than generous.
- It is better to be cruel than merciful.
- It is better to break promises if keeping them would be against ones interest.
- Princes must avoid making them hated and despised; the goodwill of the people is a better defense than any fortress.
- Princes should undertake great projects to enhance their reputation.
- Princes should choose wise advisors to confide and consult with

3. **The Types of Armies:** A prince must always pay close attention to military affairs if he wants to remain in power. A prince must lay good foundation and those foundations include good laws and good armies. There cannot be good laws without good armies, and where there are good laws there must be good armies. The study of war should be a prince's main goal, for war is a ruler's only art. If princes become too refined to study this art they lose their state. The types of armies are:

- Mercenaries or Auxiliaries (loaned to you by another ruler) are both dangerous and unreliable, as they will maintain their interests preceding yours.
- Native troops composed of ones own citizens or subjects are by far the most desirable kind.

4. **Italy's Political Situation:** Michiavelli recommends the following:

- The rulers of Italy have lost their states by ignoring the political and military principles.
- Fortune controls half of human affairs, while free will controls the rest, leaving the prince adequate freedom to act. However, the few princes are capable to adopt their actions to times.
- His advice to the wise prince on these matters is completely based on pragmatism:

One will discover that something which appears to be a virtue, if pursued, will end in his destruction; while some other thing which seems to be a vice, if pursued, will result in his safety and his well-being.

Summary:

Even though politicians and rulers may have followed Machiavelli's advice, none could afford to admit it, even today. *The Prince* shows the good, bad, and ugly of politics. And some of it is very ugly, Machiavellian in fact. Let me paraphrase some of his advice, from the 26 short chapters:

1. Various kinds of principalities - A short introduction to what follows.
2. Hereditary principalities - These are easier to maintain or regain.
3. Mixed principalities - This is a territory occupied by an outside prince. The prince's friends, who helped him to gain power, will soon be added to the list of his many enemies, and the territory may be lost. Losing it a second time is less likely, as there are now people to punish. We find that a new ruler is likely to succeed in a land accustomed to rulers, if the old line of rulers is destroyed. Also, if there is a great difference in language, laws, and customs, between the conquered and the conquerors, then the new ruler will have great difficulties. He says that men must be either treated well or destroyed, as they can get revenge for lesser injuries. Machiavelli recommends establishing colonies. Defend weaker neighbors, and weaken stronger ones. A person who causes another to become powerful is ruined.
4. Why the kingdom of Darius, conquered by Alexander, did not rebel... after his (Alexander's) death - Darius had no secondary princes to rise up and rebel.
5. The way to govern territory which lived under their own laws - There are three ways to hold such a territory, ruin them, reside there in person, or let them live under their own laws, ruled by those who are friendly to you.

6. New principalities which are acquired by one's own arms and ability - A person of great ability may have difficulty conquering a land, but can retain it much more easily.

7. New principalities which are acquired by the arms of others, or by fortune - These people have great difficulty retaining power.

8. Those who have attained a principality by wickedness - Machiavelli reluctantly observes that villainy (mass murder, actually) works well in order to gain power, if the wickedness does not continue.

9. Civic principality - This prince was given the job by the citizens (easy to please) or the aristocracy (difficult to please).

10. How the strength of all principalities should be measured - A strong prince gains security with a strong army. A weak prince gains some security by fortifying his town, in preparation for a siege.

11. Ecclesiastical principalities - The prince is maintained by the church. He has no need to defend his principality.

12. The different kinds of militia, and mercenary soldiers - Mercenaries are useless and dangerous. Having your own army is recommended.

13. Auxiliary, mixed, and one's own troops - Asking a powerful neighbor to come and defend you with troops (called auxiliaries) is as useless as using mercenaries.

14. That which concerns a prince - A prince should think of, and study, nothing but war and its rules and discipline.

15. Things for which princes are praised or blamed - A prince cannot avoid all blame. He must avoid the scandal of vices that may cause him to lose power. Machiavelli elaborates in the following chapters.

16. Liberality and miserliness - A prince should be miserly with his own, or his subjects' wealth, and liberal with others' wealth.

17. Cruelty and clemency, and whether it is better to be loved or feared - A prince shouldn't mind charges of cruelty for the purpose of keeping his subjects united. In fact, excessive mercy can lead to bloodshed and ruin. It is all right for a prince to be feared, but not to be hated (See chapter 19).

18. The way in which princes should keep faith - When fighting by law (the way of men) fails, then one must fight by force (the way of beasts). The beasts that should be imitated are the lion and the fox. A prince should not keep faith when doing so is against his interest. A prince should *seem* to have the qualities of mercy, faith, humanity, sincerity, and religion. Whilst his main concern should be to stay in power by hook or by crook; by fair or by foul. He should not forget that success fortifies the means.

19. A prince should avoid being despised and hated - A prince becomes hated by taking the property and women of his subjects. He becomes despised by appearing changeable, frivolous, effeminate, timid, and irresolute. He should show grandeur, spirit, gravity, and fortitude. Conspiracies generally fail. Hatred comes as often by good works as by evil (See chapter 17).

20. Fortresses and other things - Do not disarm your own state. Disarm a new state, when you already have an old one. Machiavelli does not

recommend encouraging factions in order to keep a principality weak. Former enemies, given a place in the government, can be the most loyal. Fortresses are not safe, in general. The best fortress is the love of the people.

21. How a prince should gain a reputation - A prince should do great works and give proof of his power. He should be a true friend or a true enemy, and not remain neutral. A prince should appreciate, and reward, merit.

22. The secretaries of princes - A prince should choose secretaries who are capable and faithful. He should let them know that they cannot stand alone.

23. Flatterers should be avoided - A prince should choose a few wise men, and let them know that they can speak the truth, and then he should make his own decisions.

24. Why the princes of Italy have lost their states - He describes a few of the mistakes of these princes.

25. Fortune, and how it can be opposed - Fortune controls half of our actions, we control the other half. If a prince relies entirely on fortune, he is lost when it changes.

26. Exhortation to liberate Italy from the barbarians - Machiavelli hopes to help kick foreign rulers out of Italy.

Conclusion:

The Prince seems to describe a leader that Machiavelli views as ideal, and seems to suggest that he believes he would be the perfect leader. The book may be his own blueprint for seizing power or a guide for another to do so, it may also be revealing of the unspoken rules of politics that separate the leaders from the followers. Machiavelli's perception may seem distorted by cynicism, especially since at one point he was a highly important and respected official and now, just as Polonius said, reduced to "be no assistant to the state, but keep a farm and carters". No matter the circumstances The Prince was written under, it is definitely worth the time to read for those interested in learning about human nature and political science, the psychology of a leader and the qualities that may in fact make a successful leader. The Prince leaves an enlightened, yet terrified, reader.