

# Selectorate Theory and the Modern “Prince”

Written by Jimmy Zhongmin Zhang

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### Introduction

Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph Siverson, and James Morrow’s selectorate theory attempts to explain the behavior of leaders in politics, business, and other positions of power. According to Mesquita et al., “the self-interested calculations and actions of rulers are the driving force of all politics... [Leaders do what they do] to come to power, to stay in power and, to the extent that they can, to keep control over money.”[1] To achieve these goals, a ruler needs the help of an inner circle. Mesquita et al. present the example of Louis XIV, who “forged a symbiotic relationship with his inner circle. He could not hope to thrive in power without their help, and they could not hope to reap the benefits of their positions without remaining loyal to him.”[2] Mesquita et al. also argue that “No one rules alone; no one has absolute authority. All that varies is how many backs have to be scratched and how big the supply of back available for scratching.”[3]

With these theories in mind, Mesquita et al. define the “nominal selectorate” as “every person who has at least some legal say in choosing their leader.”[4] The “essential coalition,” on the other hand, is the “small group of essential supporters, without whom the leader would be finished.”[5] Mesquita et al. argue that the ruler is inclined to co-opt or reward this “essential coalition,” politically or economically, to keep coalition members loyal and to maintain power, often at the expense of the masses.

Mesquita et al.’s model greatly differs from Machiavelli’s prescriptions for rulers outlined in *The Prince*. According to Machiavelli, the ruler should, first and foremost, satisfy and create lasting relationships with the populace to maintain power and security, eventually enabling the prince to win glory.[6]

I argue that for the modern ruler, Machiavelli’s recommendation for popular support is vastly preferable to relying on a small, essential coalition of elites. Rulers following Machiavelli’s model are far better at maintaining power and stability because their strategy provides superior coalition supervision and economic management. Additionally, Machiavellian rulers are more likely to gain positive recognition from the international community. I will begin this paper with a comparative study of both models by focusing on effective coalition supervision, economic resource management, and how these two factors contribute to state stability under each model. Then, I will examine empirical historical examples of rulers operating under the Machiavellian model and selectorate theory, and evaluate whether a cause and effect relationship exists between the type of model employed and historical acclaim. Finally, I will explore technological advancement as a factor that might have marginally increased the tenability of selectorate theory. After conceding technological advancement, I will still defend that Machiavellian populism is superior.

### Effective Coalition Supervision

Machiavelli and Mesquita et al. share similar views about the logistics and reasons for coalition formation.

According to Mesquita et al., “Staying in power requires the support of others. This support is only forthcoming if a leader provides his essentials with more benefits than they might expect to receive under alternative leadership or government.”[7] This implies that if the essentials are dissatisfied with the current ruler, they will rise up and conspire, and seek alternative leadership. Machiavelli makes a similar argument in *The Prince* regarding foreign rulers.

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Machiavelli writes, “men willingly change their lords in the belief that they will fare better; this belief makes them take up arms against him.”[8] Additionally, Machiavelli recommends for the ruler to prevent a powerful foreigner from entering, and make sure he satisfies the people.

[A prince] should make himself head and defender of the neighboring lesser powers, and contrive to weaken the powerful in that province and to take care that through some accident a foreigner as powerful as he does not enter there. And it will always turn out that a foreigner will be brought in by those in the province who are malcontent either because of too much ambition or out of fear... and the order of things is that as soon as a powerful foreigner enters a province, all those in it who are less powerful adhere to him, moved by the envy they have against whoever has held power over them.[9]

This counsels that “those in a province who are malcontent” have an incentive to seek alternative leadership from a “powerful foreigner” because of envy they have against the previous ruler.

However, the two models propose vastly different recommendations regarding coalition size and composition. Machiavelli’s theory relies on forming a coalition with the populace and providing benefits to them, while Mesquita et al.’s theory recommends forming a coalition with a small group of elites. I argue that forming a large coalition with the populace, as Machiavelli recommends, is superior for maintaining a hold on power.

Machiavelli recommends forming a coalition with the populace for two main reasons. Firstly, in *The Prince*, Machiavelli argues that “a prince can never secure himself against a hostile people, as they are too many; against the great, he can secure himself, as they are few.” [10] Machiavelli supports this contention by presenting the example of Nabis, prince of the Spartans, who “withstood a siege by all Greece and by one of Rome’s most victorious armies, and defended his fatherland and his state against them; and when danger supervened it was enough for him to secure himself only against a few, which would not have been enough if he had had a hostile people.”[11]

Secondly, Machiavelli argues that the “great” are a threat to the ruler. According to Machiavelli, “One cannot satisfy the great with decency and without injury to others, but one can satisfy the people; for the end of the people is more decent than that of the great, since the great want to oppress and the people want not to be oppressed.”[12] This distinction shows that to form a coalition with the elites, a ruler must actively play a part in oppression and hurt others. Because the people simply want to be left alone by the elite, the ruler can more easily satisfy the populace in this regard, gain their support, and form a coalition with them. Machiavelli goes on to explain that “the worst that a prince can expect from a hostile people is to be abandoned by it; but from the great, when they are hostile, he must fear not only being abandoned but that they may come against him, for since there is more foresight and more astuteness in the great, they always move in time to save themselves, and they seek rank from those they hope will win.”[13] This demonstrates that the “great” are often ambitious and conniving, desirous of the prince’s position and power, but the people’s ambitions are not as prevailing.

However, Machiavelli also highlights limited instances where the “great” can be trusted, describing two different categories of the “great:” those who are obligated to the ruler, and those who are not. According to Machiavelli, “[The great] who are obligated [to the prince], and not rapacious, must be honored and loved.”[14] Machiavelli explains that the “great” who are not obligated to the prince should be trusted if they demonstrate “a natural defect of spirit” because weak spirited elites make good counsel and are not inclined to betrayal.[15] However, Machiavelli recommends caution around ambitious, non-obligated elites, because they will always ruin the ruler in adversity, and care more about themselves.[16]

On the other hand, the key to retaining power in selectorate theory is co-opting the small number of elites in the essential coalition, not forming an alliance with the populace.

Mesquita et al. claim that a system of co-optation can persuade elites in the essential coalition to keep a ruler in power over alternative leadership. According to Mesquita et al., “Your backers would rather be you than be dependent on you. Your big advantage over them is that you know where the money is and they don’t. Give your coalition just enough so that they don’t shop around for someone to replace you and not a penny more.”[17] I argue

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that simply co-opting supporters economically may help to increase short term coalition satisfaction, and allow elites to favor the sitting ruler over alternative leadership. However, ambitious elites don't want to “shop around” for someone to replace the ruler, they want to be the ruler. Co-optation does not adequately address Machiavelli's assertion that “[non-obligated, ambitious elites] are thinking more for themselves; and the prince must be on guard against them, and fear them as if they were open enemies, because in adversity they will always help ruin him.”[18] Also, if elites execute a successful *coup d'état*, they will eventually gain access to all of the state's resources, which is much greater than their current compensation, giving ambitious elites a strong incentive to attempt to seize power. Because of this, elites are not likely to care “that [the ruler] knows where the money is.”

Additionally, Mesquita et al. argue that obligated elites should be trusted, recommending that the ruler surround himself with a loyal essential coalition to keep the ambitions of the elites in check, that “successful leaders surround themselves with trusted friends and family, and rid themselves of any ambitious supporters.”[19] However, primarily relying on this small group of obligated elites is still problematic, because sometimes, even obligated elites are “rapacious,” and even family members might seek to take the ruler's place. For example, civil wars between ambitious brothers competing for the throne were so common that Sultan Mehmed II introduced a policy of judicial fratricide, which called for the murder of all other brothers when a ruler succeeded in seizing the throne to ensure stability.[20] Additionally, as Machiavelli expounds, it is far easier for a ruler to defend himself against a small faction of elites than against an organized movement of people.

The ambition and conniving nature of elites is one disadvantage of selectorate theory as compared to a populist, Machiavellian model, but taking economic resources from the populace in order to co-opt the elite also provokes popular dissatisfaction and revolts.

### Economic Resource Management

The Machiavellian model and selectorate theory also propose different recommendations regarding property and economic resource management.

Machiavelli avers that “The Prince should nonetheless make himself feared in such a mode that if he does not acquire love, he escapes hatred, because being feared and not being hated can go together very well. This he will always do if he abstains from the property of his citizens, and from their women; and if he also needs to proceed against someone's life, he must do it when there is suitable justification and manifest cause for it.”[21] He argues that the ruler should try his best not to be hated by the populace, because hatred enables conspiracy and revolt, and causes the ruler to fear “everything and everyone.”[22] Additionally, Machiavelli implies that confiscating property from the citizens or instituting arbitrary executions may incite hate among the populace, and this can be highly problematic.

Machiavelli goes on to explain, “Above all, [a prince] must abstain from the property of others, because men forget the death of a father more quickly than the loss of a patrimony. Furthermore, causes for taking away property are never lacking, and he who begins to live by rapine always finds cause of seize others' property; and on the contrary, causes for taking life are rarer and disappear more quickly.”[23] We can see that the populace has more of an incentive to conspire in response to common seizures of property than occasional punishments and executions. Indeed, Machiavelli writes, “what makes [a prince] hated above all is to be rapacious and a usurper of the property and the women of his subjects.”[24]

Machiavelli supports these contentions by presenting the example of Cesare Borgia in Romagna. Borgia was able to satisfy the people, first by installing Remirro de Orco, “a cruel and ready man,” to “reduce [Romagna] to peace and unity.”[25] After Remirro became hated, Borgia was able to “purge the spirits of that people and gain them entirely to himself” by killing Remirro, and “the ferocity of [Remirro's ghastly death] left the people at once satisfied and stupefied.”[26] Borgia made sure to punish Remirro only when there was “suitable justification and manifest cause”; he refrained from seizing property, eliminated Remirro, who had become hated, and thereby satisfied the populace.

Mesquita et al. propose different recommendations for distributing economic resources and property. According to

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Mesquita et al, “The most effective cash flow for leaders is one that makes lots of people poor and redistributes money to keep select people – their supporters – wealthy.”[27] However, as demonstrated by Machiavelli, economic co-optation at the expense of the masses can cause the ruler to be hated by the populace, inciting “conspiracy” and possible revolt, which may prove disastrous to the ruler’s stability.

In *the Dictator’s Handbook*, Mesquita et al. outline examples of some rulers following the economic recommendations in selectorate theory, often with disastrous results. Mesquita writes, “Bravo to Senior General Than Shwe of Myanmar, who made sure following the 2008 Nargis cyclone that food relief was controlled and sold on the black market by his military supporters rather than letting aid go to the people – at least 138,000 and maybe as many as 500,000 of whom died in the disaster.”[28] However, Than Shwe resigned soon after in 2010 and refused to run for the Presidency.[29] Additionally, “[Aung Sun] Suu Kii and 42 other members of her party took their seats in parliament [in May 2012] following a historic by-election in a year of dramatic reforms.”[30] Successful mobilization of Suu Kii’s party, disassembly of Burma’s military junta, and continuing democratic reforms were motivated in great part by the discontent and marginalization of Burma’s populace by Than Shwe’s regime.

Mesquita et al. also present Robert Mugabe as a ruler who successfully employed the economic recommendations in selectorate theory. However, in practice, co-optation had disastrous effects on Zimbabwe’s economy. According to Mesquita et al., “Robert Mugabe’s government seizes [white farmers’] land. The cover for these seizures is land redistribution to poor blacks who were dispossessed under colonial rule. The reality is much different. The land invariably ends up in the hands of cronies, none of whom are farmers.”[31] Seizing land from the populace to give to the “essential coalition” is the antithesis of Machiavelli’s recommendations, and the economic repercussions of co-optation remain painfully evident in Zimbabwe today. According to the Telegraph, Zimbabwean hyperinflation peaked at 231 million percent in 2008, and was greatly caused by Mugabe’s seizure of farmland.[32] This is highly problematic to the stability of Mugabe’s government, because poor economic conditions lead to scarcity of food, water, and shelter, and incentivize crime, conspiracy, and disorder.

Machiavelli’s military advice also positively impacts economic resources and state stability. Machiavelli argues that allying with the people is the best way to increase the internal and external security of the state. He mentions that “A prince should have two fears: one within, on account of his subjects; the other outside, on account of external powers. From the latter one is defended with good arms and good friends; and if one has good arms, one will always have good friends.”[33] Machiavelli explains the concept of “good arms” further in Chapter XX, that “when [the subjects] are armed, those arms become yours; those whom you suspected become faithful, and those who were faithful remain so; and from subjects they are made into your partisans.”[34] Machiavelli implies that by giving arms to the populace, a ruler is able to demonstrate his trust in the people, reduce suspicions, and better unify the populace in defense of external threats. Machiavelli also cautions against mercenaries, arguing that “mercenary arms, when they have won, need more time and greater opportunity to hurt you, since they are not one whole body and have been found and paid for by you...a wise prince, therefore, has always avoided these arms and turned to his own.”[35]

However, in Mesquita et al.’s model, the ruler often faces coups or conspiracies and has to use money to prevent usurpations of power. Mesquita et al. write in *the Dictator’s Handbook*, “Bravo to Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe who, whenever facing a threat of a military coup, manages finally to pay his army, keeping their loyalty against all odds.”[36] I argue that once paying the military becomes necessary, soldiers become mercenaries, because they are bound not by a trustworthy relationship with the ruler, but by money, and this is extremely problematic. Machiavelli supports his contention that mercenaries are dangerous by presenting the example of Hiero of Syracuse, who could “neither keep [mercenaries] or let them go, and had them all cut to pieces, and then made war with his arms and not with alien arms.”[37] Machiavelli’s recommendations to arm the populace as a whole and refrain from confiscating private property from the masses are far more advantageous because a ruler can avoid being hated by the populace, prevent military coups or conspiracies in the first place, and conserve economic resources, because it is no longer necessary to pay off the military to gain trust.

Machiavelli’s model is clearly superior at maintaining stable, long term management of economic resources, does not result in popular discontent, and does not incentivize revolts.

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## Historical Acclaim

Machiavelli recommends that a ruler gain favor with the people to maximize coalition supervision, efficient economic resource management, and state stability. However, historical acclaim is also a critical consideration that Machiavelli incorporates into each step of his analysis.

In Mesquita et al.'s selectorate theory, not only does co-optation of the essential coalition alienate the populace and incentivize revolts, as explained above, but arbitrary punishment and confiscation of property can have a negative impact on a ruler's long term historical acclaim. Machiavelli demonstrates this by presenting the example of Agathocles.

In Chapter VIII of *The Prince*, “Machiavelli writes, “One cannot call it virtue to kill one's citizens, betray one's friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion; these modes can enable one to acquire empire, but not glory... [Agathocles's] savage cruelty and inhumanity, together with his infinite crimes, do not permit him to be celebrated among the most excellent men.”[38]

Mesquita et al. neglect to analyze the consideration of glory, or long term historical acclaim, anywhere in their model of selectorate theory. We will look at the examples of Kim Jong Il and Robert Mugabe as rulers that Mesquita et al. claim to have followed the recommendations in selectorate theory, and analyze historical remembrance. Then, we will look the historical acclaim of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Mustafa Ataturk as two rulers who have followed Machiavellian recommendations.

Mesquita et al. argue that “sick, starving, ignorant people are unlikely to revolt. All seems quiet among North Korea's masses, who deify their Dear Leader as the sole source of whatever meager, life-sustaining resources they have. Who makes revolution? It is the great in-between; those who are neither immiserated nor coddled. The former are too weak and cowered to revolt. The latter are content and have no reason to revolt.”[39] As Mesquita et al. explain, North Korea is a rare example of a country where selectorate theory is used successfully to maintain a regime. However, even if Kim Jong Il used selectorate theory to maintain power, he did not gain international historical acclaim by Machiavellian standards, because of arbitrary imprisonment, intimidation, and execution of the populace. For example, according to the testimony of a Korean prison camp survivor,

“One day Kang's grandfather simply disappeared without word or trace. Several weeks later, agents came to Kang's father's home, announced that the grandfather had committed an (unspecified) act of high treason, and took the entire family — except for Kang's mother, who, coming from a high political family herself, was required to divorce Kang's father at that point— to *Kwan-li-so* No. 15 at Yodok.”[40]

Although Kim Jong Il is widely admired within North Korea, he has been viciously satirized in the international media, particularly in the movie *Team America World Police*, where he was portrayed as a lonesome, arrogant man[41] controlled by a cockroach,[42] as well as in the *Kim Jong Il Show* on *MadTV*. [43] These negative satires are likely to be remembered long after Kim Jong Il's death, and “savage cruelty” did not enable Kim to gain glory.

Mesquita et al. also present Robert Mugabe as a ruler who successfully followed selectorate theory recommendations. Although Mugabe is able to maintain power to this day by co-opting a small faction of elites in the ZANU-PF party, Mugabe does not have a positive reputation in the international community because of arbitrary seizures of property, imprisonment of the populace, and torture.[44] While Mugabe is not satirized as viciously in the media, the United Nations General Assembly, as well as United States, UK, and South African officials, have condemned Mugabe's presidency.[45]

Few rulers have used selectorate theory to hold on to power successfully, with the Kim family and Robert Mugabe being isolated examples, and even today, Robert Mugabe's regime is starting to collapse. Opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai defeated Robert Mugabe in the first round of Zimbabwe's 2008 elections, but dropped out of the runoff election, fearing for his life and citing voter intimidation techniques by the government.[46] However, Mugabe's defeat in the first round of elections highlighted popular discontent, and there is no telling how much longer Mugabe

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can continue holding onto power against the will of the people.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Mustafa Ataturk are rulers who followed many recommendations in the Machiavellian model and enjoy widespread historical acclaim even after their deaths. FDR recognized the value of connecting to the populace to gain trust, and was able to satisfy the majority of his people even in the midst of the Great Depression and World War II by reaching out via “fireside chats.” FDR instituted the Japanese Internment camps through the Department of Justice only after carefully evaluating the plausible threat of non-citizens to United States national security, following the Machiavellian recommendation of ensuring “suitable justification and manifest cause” to be cruel.

Mustafa Ataturk also enjoys widespread public support in Turkey and throughout the world. Because Ataturk was so instrumental at connecting to the people and modernizing the Ottoman Empire, even his involvement in the Armenian Genocide is not enough to tarnish his modern day acclaim. In fact, a popular Turkish documentary, *Mustafa*, offered a largely sympathetic description of Ataturk’s personal life with limited criticism of the leader, but even then, was very controversial to some conservative Turkish viewers, who claimed it portrayed Ataturk in a negative light.[47]

As demonstrated by historical evidence, Machiavellian rulers like FDR and Ataturk enjoy positive historical renown in spite of acts of cruelty like the Japanese Internment camps and the Armenian Genocide. However, rulers who manage to hold power by co-opting the elites, like Robert Mugabe or the Kim family, suffer depressing, shameful, and sometimes even pathetic reputations in the international arena. I argue that while selectorate theory “can enable one to acquire empire,” rulers following selectorate theory recommendations more often do hold on to power for long, and certainly do not acquire glory, or historical acclaim.

## Technological Advancements

Technological advancements may have made it easier for the ruler to suppress organized rebellions of the populace, and may have marginally increased the tenability of selectorate theory. However, I will attempt to defend that the Machiavellian model is still superior.

When Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, swords, bows, and axes were still widely used by militaries.[48] While pistols were common, they normally couldn’t hit a target outside the range of 50 steps. Additionally, while artillery and rifles have just been developed, they were often expensive, and usage was not always practical.[49] Because of these factors, the number of combatants on each side often determined battle victory.

However, the advent of modern weapons like the assault rifle has shifted the spectrum of force to an offense-dominant system, and the number of combatants is becoming less important; the types of weapons used by each side become deciding factors for victory. It is now far easier for the essential coalition to suppress organized rebellions using long range automatic firearms, especially if revolting citizens possess only melee weapons or no weapons at all. Therefore, Machiavelli’s statement that “a prince can never secure himself against a hostile people, as they are too many; against the great, he can secure himself, as they are few”[50] becomes less accurate. A ruler can still secure himself in the midst of a popular revolt, particularly if the ruler and essential coalition possess superior firepower.

However, guerilla warfare and international organizations are two modern considerations that still facilitate the success of popular revolts. Guerilla warfare has become even more practical in the modern offense-dominant arena. For example, in the first Battle of Benghazi, despite fewer numbers and inferior weapons, the anti-Gadhafi forces were still able to score a decisive victory against Loyalist forces using guerilla warfare and surprise attacks with stones, crude bombs, and bulldozers.[51]

International organizations are another important factor that can regulate disputes in the international community. In an interconnected world, the United Nations Security Council has an incentive to occasionally provide assistance to principled, popular revolutions against oppressive governments. For example, despite differences in international opinion, the United Nations Security Council was still able to jointly establish a No Fly Zone in Libya and approve “all

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necessary measures to protect civilians,” which aided the popular revolt.[52]

Most importantly, technological developments still do not allow for rulers operating under selectorate theory to gain long term historical acclaim. Machiavelli’s model is still superior and allows rulers to maximize coalition supervision, efficient economic resource management, and internal and external security, as well as acquire glory.

## Conclusion

Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al. claim in *The Dictator’s Handbook* that “the problem is that doing what is best for the people can be awfully bad for staying in power.”[53] Although Mesquita et al. might be correct that co-opting the elites can allow for staying in power short term, co-optation becomes unsustainable long term and can be extremely problematic for economic and political stability. I have argued that rulers following Machiavelli’s populist model are better able to maximize coalition supervision, manage economic resources efficiently, maintain state security, and gain long term historical acclaim even after they are gone.

Bueno de Mesquita et al. attempt to illustrate how modern leaders actually behave, while Machiavelli attempts to provide advice to leaders about how to behave. Perhaps it is unfortunate that so many modern leaders choose to follow selectorate theory. If more leaders followed Machiavelli’s recommendations, the world might be bit more stable today, both politically and economically.

I acknowledge the help of Professor Baltés and the Writing Resources Center for helping me organize and clarify my arguments.

[1] Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce, and Alastair Smith. *The Dictator’s Handbook*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2011, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

[2] *The Dictator’s Handbook*, pp. 4.

[3] Ibid

[4] Ibid

[5] *The Dictator’s Handbook*, pp. 17.

[6] I will define glory as kleos, and the ability to be remembered positively. Examples will be explained later.

[7] *The Dictator’s Handbook*, pp. 14.

[8] *The Prince*, III, pp. 8.

[9] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, III, pp. 11.

[10] *The Prince*, IX, pp. 39.

[11] *The Prince*, IX, pp. 41

[12] *The Prince*, IX, pp. 39.

[13] Ibid

[14] *The Prince*, IX, pp. 40.

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[15] Ibid

[16] Ibid

[17] *The Dictator's Handbook*, pp. 18.

[18] *The Prince*, IX, pp. 40.

[19] *The Dictator's Handbook*, pp. 58.

[20] Poor Mojo's Newswire, "On the Ottoman Empire's law of fratricide and love of executions." 6 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.poormojo.org/pmjadaily/archives/037331.php>>

[21] *The Prince*, XVII, pp. 67.

[22] *The Prince*, XIX, pp. 74.

[23] Ibid

[24] *The Prince*, XIX, pp. 72.

[25] *The Prince*, VII, pp. 29.

[26] *The Prince*, VII, pp. 30.

[27] *The Dictator's Handbook*, pp. 18.

[28] Ibid

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[33] *The Prince*, XIX, pp. 72.

[34] *The Prince*, XX, pp. 83.

[35] *The Prince*, XIII, pp. 55.

[36] *The Dictator's Handbook*, pp. 18.

[37] *The Prince*, XIII, pp. 56.

[38] *The Prince*, VIII, pp. 35.



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[39] *The Dictator’s Handbook*, pp. 103.

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[42] *Ibid.* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9Rhdwqjc1k>>.

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[44] Jestina Mukoko, Oslo Freedom Forum, 2012. < <http://www.oslofreedomforum.com/speakers/jestina-mukoko.html>>

[45] MSNBC, “World condemnation of Zimbabwe Grows.” 25 Jun. 2008. <[http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/25361747/ns/world\\_news-africa/t/world-condemnation-zimbabwe-grows/#.UG9wt1Gcfl](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/25361747/ns/world_news-africa/t/world-condemnation-zimbabwe-grows/#.UG9wt1Gcfl)>.

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[50] See 6

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