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Some Truth about Truth Commissions

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Pakistan. Guatemala. South Africa. Tajikistan. Argentina. El Salvador. Bosnia. Only a few of the countries that have instituted or have announced the intention of instituting so-called Truth Commissions. Not only do officials from these countries advocate different memberships, durations, procedures, and consequences for their respective commissions, but they also intend different purposes as well. In fact, any Truth Commission serves a number of purposes: some intended, some unintentional; some of which people are aware, some of which they are not; some applicable to the entire country, some just to population segments--some, on the other hand, to various international observers and populations outside the country. Some of these purposes follow.

1. Truth commissions serve as a deterrent to misbehavior. Misbehavior may comprise war crimes, crimes against humanity, assassinations, murders, torture, disappearances, illegal incarcerations, sabotage, and other variants of political violence. The public acknowledgment of misbehavior--whether associated with legal penalty or not--is viewed as a punishment or example of omission training that decreases the probability of future misbehavior.
2. Truth commissions serve to assuage various cognitions, emotions, and motives of segments of the population. These psychological elements need to be assuaged so that "the nation" can "move beyond" tragedy towards constructive efforts at building a better today and tomorrow. Also, assuagement is assumed to be a deterrent to revenge-like misbehaviors by victims and victim supporters, preemptive misbehaviors of their intended targets, or revanchist and irredentist-like misbehaviors on the part of those who view themselves as having less power than in the past.
3. Truth commissions serve to mask that little has really changed in the power structure underlying a country's political functioning. Segments of the domestic and international populations will vary as to how easily they are willing to suspend disbelief and how easily they can comply, identify, or even introject in a manner "as if" the power structure has changed. So, there are two kinds of masks. One does indeed render true events as opaque. The other is merely a party to a charade.
4. Truth commissions serve to politically reinforce the rule of law. However, there is disagreement about whether justice can be appropriately distinguished from vengefulness and about whether publicizing "the truth" is enough or whether perpetrators of misbehavior need to be imprisoned for their crimes. For example, political futures and personal reputations are often harmed even when the perpetrators are not imprisoned.
5. Truth commissions serve to satisfy other psychological needs which support the above purposes. These needs are many and include (a) deriving meaning from chaos, (b) maintaining a sense of continuity with the past and future even during and after tragedy, and (c) reinforcing various ideologies and mythologies such as "all are subject to the law." This last exemplified in a speech by President Farooq Leghari of Pakistan who stated "Which patriot doesn't want accountability? Who wants dishonest people to lord over Pakistan? Whose blood doesn't boil at the plunder of his beloved country?"

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6. Truth commissions may serve to facilitate misbehavior by educating those susceptible to engaging in misbehavior as to effective methods for doing so. This is a noxious consequence of vicarious conditioning and insight learning.

The truth is that there are many truths. Also, only adhering to one truth, or rejecting it, may be the source of further political violence begetting yet further truth commissions. And even in cases where all sides in a struggle are treated similarly by a commission, is this a tribute to justice? Or a tribute to George Orwell's *Animal Farm* in which pig and human authorities end up looking and acting the same? (See Bell, R. (1996.) Truth commissions and war tribunals 1971-1996. Index on Censorship. <http://www.oneworld.org/index-oc>; Bhutto suffers rebuff, as former leader heads for victory in Pakistan. (February 4, 1997.) The New York Times. <http://www.nytimes.com>; Goldman, F. (December 23, 1996.) In Guatemala, all is forgotten. The New York Times. <http://www.nytimes.com>; Hayner, P.B. (1994.) Fifteen truth commissions, 1974 to 1994: A comparative study. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 16, 597-655; The truth about Steve Biko. (February 4, 1997.) The New York Times. <http://www.nytimes.com>.) (Keywords: Conflict resolution, Control, Justice, Lying, Moral, Organization, Truth)