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Some Truth about Truth Commissions II

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Abstract. In "Some Truth about Truth Commissions," 1(12), 1-3, IBPP described some of the main purposes and consequences of political truth commissions. In the present article, IBPP describes some of the problems inherent in discharging one potential responsibility of such commissions--managing the disposition of secret files developed by a previous government on the citizens that government allegedly represented.

How to handle the secret files--those that were developed by investigators and informers on the professional, social, and personal details of individual citizens; those that were allegedly developed to protect national security or--if not the same thing--the security of a government or--if not the same thing--some of its officials and--definitely not the same thing--to appeal to prurient interests. The files may have been developed by communist governments, an apartheid regime, a rightist dictatorship, or a personality cult-imbued regime that defies characterization on a left-right or conservative-liberal continuum. The question on how to handle the files is germane to all.

The common approaches to handling the files include (1) destroying them all, (2) employing them to ethically and morally bar miscreants from positions of public trust, (3) employing them to blackmail, coerce, and threaten people for one's own gain, and (4) providing them to those people who were informed and investigated as the most just course.

Determining the correct approach for a particular country, people, or situation is difficult. (1) The files may have been tampered with before the transfer of power between governments. Apocryphal information may have been added. Accurate information may have been deleted. (2) File information may be inaccurate even though the compilers attempted to be accurate. At fault here would be the unreliability of informants, unreliable collection and analysis techniques, and so on. (3) Some files or portions of information within files have been lost through carelessness or inadequate management or categorization. (4) Some information in the files--even within the context of a new administration--must not be divulged to protect security sources and methods as well as the legitimate security of the government and the people it represents. (5) Some information in the files--even if not significantly related to national security--may needlessly embarrass or inconvenience people in violation of commonly accepted notions of fair play or other cultural tenets.

Regardless of the actual state of affairs with the files, an additional psychological concern exists. People have expectations about whether they have files and--if the files exist--what is in them. These expectations are often notoriously resistant to disconfirmation by real and alleged fact. Thus, the truth being put out by the truth commission--be it called this or an entity of reconciliation, history, information, or restitution--becomes more or less true courtesy of expectations that may have even less correspondence with the truth.

Some people believe that the truth shall set you free. With truth commissions, the truth often has been set loose--and is unable to be found, even unable to be recognized. (See Bowlin, J.R., & Stromberg, P.G. (1997.) Representation and reality in the study of culture. *American Anthropologist*, 99, 123-134; Daley,

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S. (September 6, 1997.) Truth panel Issues apology for criticism of deKlerk. The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Perlez, J. (September 6, 1997.) A country reluctant to give up its secrets. The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Sanville, J.B. (1997.) Philosophical considerations in analysis. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 25, 19-25.) (Keywords: Conflict Resolution, Control, Justice, Lying, Moral, Organization.)