Book Review: The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being In Charge Isn't What It Used to Be

Blog Admin

Power is shifting from large, stable armies to loose bands of insurgents, from corporate leviathans to nimble start-ups, and from presidential palaces to public squares. As a result, writes **Moisés Naím***, all leaders have less power than their predecessors, and the potential for upheaval is unprecedented. The author's insights into the halls of power from China to Sweden make this a fascinating read, finds* **Ainsley Elbra***.*

The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being In Charge Isn't What It Used to Be. Moisés Naím. Basic Books. March 2013.

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Moisés Naím is well placed to discuss global power, having served as Editor-in-Chief of Foreign Policy, an Executive Director of the World Bank, and currently at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. In his latest contribution, *The End of Power,* he asserts that "being in charge isn't what it used to be", principally due to the "decay of power". While dispersion of power might be a more accurate reflection, his point is clear: power is no longer located in traditional settings. The aim of the book is to ask readers to question the way we think about, talk about, and ultimately understand, power. His work is timely, and parallels the emergence of powerful fringe parties throughout the Western world and the increasingly powerful role being played by non-traditional military actors as recently seen in North Africa.
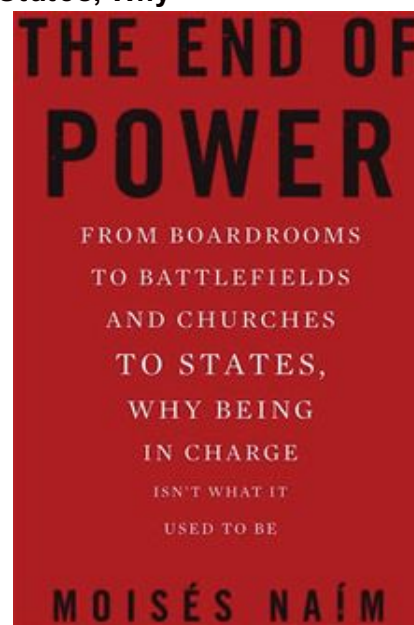
Naím makes use of his vast experience, guiding the reader through a nuanced understanding of power and how power "got big", before outlining his main thesis: that revolutions he categorises as More, Mobility, and Mentality have led to the decay of power. He argues that power is now easier to obtain but harder to keep and to use. Governments, large corporations and established religious organisations are finding that they wield far less power due to the emergence of what Naím defines as micropowers: fringe political parties, activists, hackers and leaderless young people in city squares. Competition between mega-powers is being sidelined by external threats from these micropowers that are increasingly able to "undermine, fence in or thwart megaplayers".

Before you mistake this for another polemic on the rise of China or the internet's fundamental ability force change, Naím is careful to ascertain that neither of these oft-quoted shifts are central to his thesis. In fact he suggests that the recent Arab Spring was the result of underlying issues only hastened through communication tools such as Twitter and Facebook, while he also suggests geopolitics is far more nuanced than the oft-quoted rise of China, the emergence of the BRICS or waning European influence.

Following his introduction to power and its recent evolution, Naím grounds his theory in several relevant examples, including the threat of micropowers to established political institutions, traditional defence forces, large corporations, and The Church and philanthropic organisations. The aim of these chapters is to illustrate the author's theory through familiar examples.

In Naím's chapter on the decay of political power he effectively argues that traditional political parties, and their leaders, are being threatened by the decay of power. Not only are fringe parties such as the Tea Party in the United States wielding far greater influence over the election strategies of major parties than their vote count would suggest, but an increasing number of individuals are actively participating in the political process. Highlighting the power of primaries, Naím points out that in preparation for the 2012 election, French Socialists embraced participation so wholeheartedly that all eligible voters (not only party members) were entitled to their say over the party's candidate. For Naím, increased participation is evidence that the status quo is fading, power is decaying and established political institutions such as long-standing parties are being forced to bend to meet the threat of micropowers.

Naim begins his chapter on military power by suggesting that traditional readings on war (think Sun Tzu) are rendering themselves less useful to today's leaders. Rather than fighting traditional enemies, or states, weaker powers such as pirates in the Gulf of Aden, Hezbollah or Al Qaeda have been able to inflict significant blows on larger powers. While the author argues that armed militants and guerrillas are nothing new, he notes the unwillingness of large powers to unleash their full military capabilities on these groups. Putting this down to the desire to avoid the political ramifications, the reader is reminded of the author's earlier argument highlighting the ability of single issue activists (another micropower) to garner significant public opinion on topics such as military abuses or even the birth of new nations such as South Sudan.

The author goes on to point out that not only are traditional armed forces threatened by weaker opponents, they are willingly imparting with their own power by engaging the services of private contractors to fill roles from procurement to prisoner interrogation. Again, Naím comes back to his central argument, while national armies are not about to disappear, their power is being eroded by micropowers. The ability of micropowers to reach more followers through improved communication methods is matched only by their access to remote warfare technology, from the crudest IED to the more recent emergence of drone technology – all of which supports to Naím's argument that, inevitably, the power of large military establishments is decaying.

While *The End of Power* is a compelling and thoughtful read, there remain some contradictions in the author's main arguments. Firstly, Naím observes that while the internet and the proliferation of social media tools that have emerged are undeniably transforming politics, activism and business, he argues they are not behind the decay of power. Instead he suggests their importance is exaggerated and misunderstood. In using the Arab Spring uprisings as an example, Naím is correct in suggesting that demography was behind the sudden surge in educated, unemployed young people rising up against authoritarian regimes. However, it is difficult to deny that their success was not in some part due to social media. While the author offers studies which show most social media support for these causes came from outside affected countries, it can be argued that mounting international pressure (and the withdrawal of international support in some cases) contributed to ongoing revolutions, garnered external support and put the necessary pressure on soon to depart leaders.

In addition, given the examples provided it may be more accurate to argue power is dispersing or diffusing, rather than decaying. In almost all the examples included in the book, power being sacrificed by traditional sources is being acquired by someone else, usually a micropower. This is most evident in the transfer of political power from major parties to fringe groups, from state militaries to terrorist organisations, and from established mainstream religions to smaller, more dynamic denominations.

Overall, however, this contribution is a timely reminder of the changing face of power across many facets of society. The author's insights into the halls of power, from China to Sweden, make this a fascinating read. While the recent financial crisis may have left us confused over whether companies are too big to fail, or whether we are returning to an era of big government, Naím is clear in his assertions that the powers of governments and corporations will continue to decay, largely due to the influence of a new generation of micropowers.

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Ainsley Elbra is completing her PhD in International Relations at the University of Sydney. Her research focuses on the role of private governance in Africa's extractive industries. More specifically, her work examines whether private governance initiatives, such as the EITI, assist in alleviating outcomes commonly associated with the resource curse. Prior to commencing her PhD she worked as a corporate banker responsible for a portfolio of Pacific-Island based clients and mining firms. She tweets at @ainsleyelbra. Read more reviews by Ainsley.