

Centralization and Corruption: The Political Dilemma of the Late Roman Empire

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ABSTRACT

The essay is to explore the causes of the political dilemma in the late Roman Empire from centralization and corruption. This phenomenon has been observed in recent years, and various scholars have proposed various explanations for it, especially on the collapse of the Roman Empire. The essay uses the case study method to interpret the Roman political structure and links to centralization and corruption. Through the case study of the Roman political dilemma, the essay aims to recognize that one of the reasons that cause the collapse of the Roman Empire are political over-centralization and corruption. The result of the essay reveals that the Roman political dilemma derives from centralization and corruption, even though the Roman Empire benefits from centralization in the beginning. In conclusion, the essay deepens our understanding of the political dilemma in the late Roman Empire. To a certain extent, it will illustrate that the shape of the Roman political dilemma is a long-term process under the rulers' abnormal rules. Furthermore, the essay can help understand how to critically evaluate the Roman political dilemma in the future and demonstrate that political centralization and corruption are common problems that lead to political dilemmas in other countries. Admittedly, the essay is limited because Rome is real history, and the existence of Rome is a fact. It does not require scholars to provide many personal views, so this qualitative essay can only analyze why the collapse of Rome happened based on the existing facts. Further studies can investigate more reasons and debates regarding the collapse of the Roman Empire.

Keywords: *Political Dilemma, Roman Empire, Centralization, Corruption*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Roman Empire is the proud history of the West and the world as a whole, and has an irreplaceable place in studying human history. Not only did the Roman Empire create unprecedented prosperity in the history of the West, but also many of the significant attempts and reforms are undertaken by Western societies in modern times and the problems they faced all happened in the Roman Empire. For example, the establishment of a global empire through military conquest, the establishment of urban civilization, the circulation of money and inflation, the development of commerce and trade, the problems of unemployment and employment, the monopolization of resources, the excessive gap between rich and poor, the concept of the world, parliamentary politics, the legal and judicial systems, the emergence of human ideologies, the clash and intermingling of cultures, and a series of other issues that have been repeatedly discussed in contemporary history, and which European countries have even taken as their

legal societies [1]. European countries even cite it as the source of the establishment of their legal societies.

The history of the Roman Empire indeed has a lot to offer to human civilization, but the decline of the Roman Empire cannot be considered part of its history, and it is a great tragedy that the world will regret and marvel at even if it is displayed alone.

The Roman Empire experienced a long period of turmoil in the 3rd century. Towards the end of the 3rd century, Emperor Diocletian reformed the administrative system of the Roman Empire, consolidating the Roman government by strengthening centralized power and effectively stabilizing the situation in the various regions of the Roman Empire [2]. Since then, the rulers of the Roman Empire have followed the centralized bureaucratic system but have not improved it further. The excessive centralization not only shook the foundation of the Roman Empire in the Mediterranean but made the entire system less efficient and indirectly led to corruption, political instability, administrative

weaknesses, and the rulers' difficulty in controlling the increasingly centralized bureaucracy.

Augustus' instructions before his death pointed out that the Roman Empire should extend to the permanent barriers and boundaries defined by nature, West to the Atlantic, north to the Rhine and Danube, east to the Euphrates, and south to the Arabian Peninsula and the African desert. However, such an eternal empire, which ideally should have had a vast territory, eventually fell into decline and disintegration during internal and external troubles [1]. This is a great tragedy full of irony and drama, and it seems that in this tragedy, one may not be able to determine through the available historical facts exactly what caused Rome's decline. There may be more than one reason for this, but the end of an empire can be attributed to the inability to centralize its territory, the gradual ossification of its institutions, the loss of binding laws, the fragmentation of its territory, the corruption of its officials, and the goodwill of its people.

This essay will focus on Emperor Diocletian's establishment on the concept of four emperors and then explain how Diocletian's policy impacts the development of political centralization and eventually cause the negative impacts of corruption. It is necessary to understand how these factors interact with each other and influence the late Roman Empire. Also, this research will be a valuable reference to help audiences have a fundamental perception towards the Roman circumstances at that time and apply political theories to the analysis of the political dilemma in the late Roman Empire.

The essay's research question is how centralization and corruption lead to the political dilemma in the late Roman Empire. This research question is complex because the collapse of the Roman Empire is the result of chain reactions within various factors, and the reflection of the Roman political dilemma will provide an in-depth view of the problem of the Roman failure.

The essay is divided into several sections. After the introduction, the essay will discuss the origin of the Roman Empire's centralized power system. Next, the essay will identify the disadvantages of over-centralization and institutional decay. The essay will then reveal the disillusionment caused by centralization and corruption. Finally, the conclusion will summarize all sections, emphasize the significance of this research and demonstrate potential limitations.

2. ORIGIN OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE'S CENTRALIZED SYSTEM OF POWER

Due to the decline of the slave economy, the Roman Empire was in severe crisis from the third century AD onwards. Rural areas were depleted, cities declined, civil wars raged, and the imperial government was completely paralyzed. This chaos lasted until the end of the third

century, when Emperor Diocletian ended the protracted civil wars and stabilized the Roman Empire after a long period of turmoil [2]. After Diocletian stabilized his power, he set out to reform the Roman Empire and made drastic changes to its internal administrative system, as he believed that the Roman Empire was on the verge of collapse and could not sustain itself after fifty years of internal instability. Accordingly, it began a series of reforms to prevent the empire from falling back into anarchy and keep it alive. These included the division of the empire into two for ease of administration, the establishment of a new system of succession to the throne, the strengthening of centralized power and the complete stripping away of the facade of the Roman Republic (which had previously been an empire without an empire and remained a Roman republic), as well as economic reforms to address the extreme inflation that was occurring at the time [3]. One crucial manifestation was the establishment of a highly centralized bureaucracy to replace the previous model of local autonomy that had governed the Mediterranean region of the Roman Empire.

Emperor Diocletian's reforms were of great importance in the history of the Roman Empire. In the centuries that followed, the imperial dynasties that ruled the Roman Empire changed, but the centralized bureaucracy established by Emperor Diocletian continued to be used by successive rulers of the Roman Empire. The administrative system established by Emperor Diocletian addressed the problems faced by the Roman Empire in his time, and therefore his reform of the Roman administrative system could be said to have been based on the specific conditions of the Roman Empire in his time [4].

Diocletian was convinced that the sheer size of the empire, combined with the threat from external enemies, imposed administrative and military responsibilities and burdens far beyond the capacity of any individual. Therefore, he first gave the title of Caesar to his former comrade in arms, Maximian, and in 286 added him as Augustus. Thus, Maximian officially became the vice-emperor of the Roman Empire and co-ruler of Diocletian [4]. Maximian ruled the west and was stationed in Milan in northern Italy to stop the Germanic invasion and was responsible for suppressing the Bacardi revolt and the revolt of the African people.

Diocletian placed his palace in Nicomedia on the Marmara coast, close to the Persian border, to alert the East. Diocletian found the empire threatened by barbarian attacks all around and needed to place heavy troops and an emperor on all sides. Therefore, in 293 A.D., Diocletian changed the rule of two emperors into four emperors, adding two emperors to serve as assistants to himself and Maximian. One was Galerius of Cyrenaica, and the other was Constantius I of Nesus, both of whom were given the title of Caesar, slightly below Augustus. Diocletian claimed Galerius as his adopted son, and

Maximian claimed Constantius I as his adopted son. The four emperors ruled different parts of the empire, with each of the four commanding an army, which was known as tetrarchy [5]. None of the emperors had Rome as their capital. Moreover, Diocletian stipulated that Augustus had to hand over his power after completing his 20-year term, and his successor Caesar succeeded Augustus, while a new Caesar, the new heir, was appointed. This was the first precise regulation of the succession of the throne in Roman history [6].

The tetrarchy system was intended to establish a peaceful transfer of power to avoid civil strife further. For almost a century after the reforms of the emperor Diocletian, the Roman Empire was generally relatively stable, with no major upheavals. The eventual fall of the Roman Empire was also due to external factors such as the barbarians. Therefore, Emperor Diocletian's reforms solved some of the problems faced by the Roman Empire at that time to a certain extent. However, any system of state administration needs to be improved with the times. As time went on, the disadvantages of a centralized bureaucracy began to emerge from the mid-fourth century onward.

3. THE DISADVANTAGES OF OVER-CENTRALIZATION AND INSTITUTIONAL DECAY

After the formation of the late Roman bureaucracy, many officials appeared in the provinces of the Roman Empire to directly administer the affairs of the provinces on behalf of the Roman central government, gradually replacing the functions of the autonomous administrative bodies in each province [7]. In this way, the central government of the Roman Empire was able to rule more directly and intervene promptly, but this centralization also brought some disadvantages compared to the previous autonomy.

Firstly, the centralization of the administrative system led to an impenetrable bureaucracy in the Roman Empire. The decrees issued by the emperor, or the central government had to be approved and passed on from one level to another before finally being implemented throughout the Roman Empire. However, due to the transportation constraints of the time, the lengthy approval process sometimes greatly affected the timeliness of policies. In the official documents of the Roman Empire preserved in the Theodosian Code, the decrees issued by the imperial court are marked with the date when the emperor issued the decree and the date when the relevant persons officially received the decree [8]. From this, we can see that there was often a long interval between the official promulgation of a decree by the emperor and its final receipt by the officials. This was particularly fatal in the late Roman Empire, where the chaos of the late Roman Empire forced the Roman army to engage in one war after another against foreigners, and

where the technical constraints of the time prevented the timely communication of imperial decrees, leaving the army on the warpath extremely passive in receiving and communicating decrees. This was only the tip of the iceberg of the drawbacks of excessive centralization, but what was even more deadly than the decline in administrative efficiency was the more severe problem of official corruption that emerged in the late empire as the system became more rigid.

The late Roman Empire established a centralized bureaucratic system of monarchy. During the reigns of Diocletian (284-305) and Constantine (306-337), the Roman Empire completed the transition from a patriarchal to a monarchical system. With the establishment of the monarchy, all positions associated with the republic, such as consul, administrator, and conservator, became honorary titles, and the Roman Senate lost all contact with the court and the actual administration [7].

The emperor and the bureaucracy headed by the emperor concentrated all power, which was the political change and the change of government functions in the late imperial period. The emperor became the supreme master of the hierarchical and centralized state apparatus. The emperor controlled foreign policy, waged wars at will, raised taxes and spent them as he pleased. He appointed all the administrative officials and dealt with internal affairs and military matters at will. He had the power of life and death over his subjects, and he was also the source of legislation, making new laws and repealing old ones at will [9]. The price was marked, and money was needed to pave the way to official success, and after being an official, there was a frenzy of wealth collection. The vicious circle was formed, and even during the civil war, the election of local officials once had to rely on buying the votes of the Roman masses to rise to power.

4. THE DISILLUSIONMENT CAUSED BY CENTRALIZATION AND CORRUPTION

Antioch was then one of the major cities of the Roman Empire, almost the apex of the East. While Ammianus was proud of its material prosperity, he did not feel the same pride for his fellow citizens, a mixed population of Greeks, Jews, Syrians and other nationalities whose unity was only reflected in their devotion to luxury and the pursuit of pleasure. Thus, there was no cohesion within late Rome out of imperial pride, and the mixed population of foreigners gathered in Antioch only to share in the abundance of goods and pleasures that the Roman Empire brought with it [10]. However, this was only the case with the late Roman citizens and even more so with the Roman army.

Since Marius's military reforms replaced the citizen-soldier with a professional soldier, the supreme command of the army was in the hands of Augustus

alone. However, the increase in social status and wealth made the soldiers more and more arrogant, not only did bribery prevail in the barracks, but also turned the relationship between soldiers and generals into a purely monetary one, and the emperor's dependence on and favoring of the army significantly increased the corruption of the officers and soldiers and to some extent weakened their fighting ability [11]. Thus, they have weakened their fighting ability to a certain extent.

As for the Roman army, the number of citizens eligible for citizenship decreased, and many citizens died in battle. Thus, Rome was facing a severe crisis of citizenship. In addition, the commodity economy affected the Roman army. The soldiers no longer revered the ancient republican tradition of defending their country but coveted more spoils and rewards from their generals, which seriously affected military discipline and began to breed a culture of corruption within the army. It is recorded that Roman soldiers had long worn body armor, but with the relaxation of military discipline and the lack of training, the soldiers' physical strength and perseverance could not bear the strain of military service and complained that the armor was heavy, and they were extremely reluctant to wear it. The soldiers also lost the habit of fortifying their camps, so they became the target of barbarian cavalry attacks [12].

Nevertheless, even if such a weak-armed force could barely go into battle, it still had no way to defend itself against the enemy's blows effectively and usually had to flee with its armor dismantled. The decay of military discipline was also one of the major reasons for the decline of the Roman Empire.

Such a large Roman empire needed an orderly and stable internal governance strategy and an external fighting force to deter neighboring nations and states. However, in the late Roman period, there was a massive and inefficient bureaucracy, an evil army and bureaucracy that took bribes and corruption, and unmotivated people who were addicted to sex and sex, which led to a total collapse from the inside out. With the frequent changes of monarchs and some of the tyrants in the late Roman Empire, it can be said that the Roman Empire had lost entirely the need to exist at the end of the period.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, the essay firstly has illustrated some examples of Emperor Diocletian's contributions to Roman political centralization. Then it has focused on the case study of the establishment of the Roman bureaucracy and how it reflects drawbacks of centralization. After that, it has discussed the effects based on the interactions of centralization and corruption. Following that, it has been revealed that there is no cohesion among Roman citizens and the military. By

doing so, the essay has answered the research question from the perspectives of centralization and corruption.

This paper holds that political over centralization and corruption are the two main reasons for the political dilemma of the late Roman Empire, although the rule of the Roman Empire benefited from centralization at the beginning. This paper helps to understand how to critically evaluate the future political dilemma of Rome, and proves that political centralization and corruption are common problems leading to the political dilemma of other countries. At the same time, this paper deepens the academic understanding of the political dilemma in the late Roman Empire. To some extent, it will show that the formation of Roman political dilemma is a long-term process under the abnormal rules of the rulers. Although there are still some deficiencies in this paper, further research will more comprehensively answer the causes and disputes of the collapse of the Roman Empire in the future.

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