Chains of Corruption: Power, Systems, and Individuals

Kutay Kurt

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1. Power

Power does not liberate man; on the contrary, it chains him.

Although human history may seem like an epic quest for freedom, this struggle has often resulted in the creation of new forms of bondage. Power begins as a tool in the hands of individuals and societies; however, throughout history, this tool has frequently become the master.

In Ancient Rome, the rise of Julius Caesar began as the triumph of a hero; yet this power opened the door to a corruption that transformed the republic into an empire. In the modern era, alongside this, the accessibility and rapid attainability of fame have made humanity's ancient vulnerabilities before power even more apparent. Today, a person can reach millions, rise to the skies overnight, and be deemed a "phenomenon" with just a few taps on a screen.

Yet this sudden ascent catches the soul bare and defenseless. The glow of fame is not only a light, but also a consuming fire. In that light, one becomes visible—but also melts away within it. The sound of applause turns into a hum that drowns out the inner voice; the desire for approval replaces self-respect.

The individual, estranged from their own reality, dons masks to gain the crowd's applause, forsakes depth to attract attention, and quietly consumes themselves—beginning to walk upon the ashes of their own being.

In short, power—despite changing eras and contexts—condemns man to a consistent cycle. A journey that begins in victory becomes overshadowed by ambition and greed; and in the end, collapse becomes inevitable. Is this cycle the destiny of humanity, or can these chains be broken?

The allure of power reflects the human soul like a mirror—laying bare its fears, greed, and weaknesses. Man is pure at birth; he knows neither hatred, ambition, nor destructive desires. What corrupts him is not these instincts themselves, but the societal structures, competitive systems, and thirst for power that nourish and empower them. Lord Acton's famous aphorism, "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," strikingly encapsulates this truth. Niccolò Machiavelli, on the other hand, argued that the desire for power is an inseparable part of human nature, yet emphasized that when left unchecked, this desire would drag society into chaos.

Power both builds and destroys the individual and society; and this paradox gives rise to one of the most fundamental questions in human history: Can man escape this cycle of corruption?

This essay explores why and how power bends the human being, how systems fuel corruption, and why it is so difficult for individuals to remain pure. Through an analysis stretching from historical examples to the dynamics of modern societies, we will examine the effects of power on individuals and societies, the role of systems in this process, and whether it is possible to break free from this cycle.

This is not an outburst, nor a complaint—it is an inquiry and an invitation. A call to move beyond anger and despair, to seek the truth with our reason, to resist with our will, and to break the chains of corruption with courage.

2. The Psychology of Power

Power does not merely exist in the human mind as a tool; over time, it transforms into a force that shapes one's identity and perception of the world. When a person gains power, they begin to reshape not only their surroundings but also their inner world.

This transformation often goes unnoticed; the individual first encounters small privileges, then begins to feel special, and eventually comes to perceive this new status as a norm.

To understand these psychological processes, experiments in psychology are quite striking. David Kipnis's "Power Drunk" experiment clearly demonstrates how power changes an individual.

Kipnis divided participants into two groups—managers and subordinates—and granted decision-making and commanding authority to the managers. Within a short period, those in managerial positions replaced their previous empathy and understanding with feelings of superiority, belittling and mocking their subordinates. More importantly, over time these individuals abandoned their ethical values and felt comfortable making unethical decisions.

This experiment clearly reveals that power has dramatic effects not only on those around the powerful individual but also on the individual's own inner world.

Similarly, the Stanford Prison Experiment exposes how quickly power and social roles can change people. In that study, psychologically healthy university students were randomly assigned the roles of guards or prisoners; within days, those playing guards began exhibiting unexpectedly sadistic behaviors.

At first, the guards behaved mildly authoritarian, but as days passed, they tested the limits of their power—humiliating, punishing, and inflicting psychological harm on the prisoners. The most striking aspect was how easily the students adapted to these new identities and came to view their behaviors as normal.

The fundamental conclusion here is clear: power easily unleashes the darkness and sadistic tendencies within a person, distancing them from their own moral compass.

Gaining power is not the only transformation; the losses incurred along the way deeply affect an individual. Throughout history and in modern societies, those who pay great prices to obtain power become willing to do anything to maintain it.

For them, power is no longer just a tool but also seen as compensation for the sacrifices they made. Losing power means, to them, losing not only authority but also all their efforts, sacrifices, and even their sense of self.

For example, looking at political struggles throughout history, one can see many leaders who went to extreme lengths to avoid losing power. In the Roman Empire, Emperor Nero did not hesitate to eliminate even those closest to him to preserve his authority.

In modern times, many political figures, unwilling to lose elections or their seats, have disregarded democratic values and resorted to repressive methods. This shows that the influence of power on a person extends beyond simply acquiring it; the desire to hold onto power can drive one to cross all ethical and moral boundaries.

There lies an even heavier paradox in the psychology of power: failing to obtain power can be as corrupting as possessing it. Individuals who aspire to power but have not yet attained it gradually become obsessed, seeing nothing but power.

This is the psychology of corruption on the path to power—indeed, it applies intensely to most goals people set, but in the case of power, the effect is even more pronounced.

Every step taken toward power, every concession made, every unethical move eats away at the individual's inner self, driving them blindly toward their goal. In other words, power corrupts those who seek it as well as those who hold it. It is truly a double-edged sword, and the outcome is the same: the inevitability of corruption.

The psychology of power erodes empathy and alienates the individual from themselves. Powerful people find it difficult to understand others' pain, viewing those around them as mere instruments for achieving their own ends. This process advances gradually; what begins as small compromises eventually reshapes one's entire character.

In psychology, this is also called "power intoxication." Once someone attains power, they start distorting reality through their own perspectives, shutting out criticism and perceiving any feedback as a threat.

In such a state, the individual creates their own reality and becomes blind to the world around them. This blindness makes relinquishing power nearly impossible, because power becomes an addiction.

Examples of this phenomenon are especially evident among globally famous figures. Ye (formerly Kanye West) reacts with explosive anger at the slightest criticism, and his antisemitic statements and irrational outbursts rapidly undermined his brand and reputation. Alec Baldwin has made headlines for uncontrolled reactions and physical altercations, illustrating the loss of self-control that power can induce. Aziz Ansari, at the height of his rise, faced severe scrutiny over personal boundary violations and was forced to reevaluate both his image and his grasp on reality.

The common thread among these examples is clear: unchallenged fame and influence erode an individual's internal compass, weakening emotional bonds with the world and isolating them. Power eventually darkens one's mirror—leaving them unable to see either themselves or others in that murky reflection.

In conclusion, gaining and maintaining power places an immense burden on a person. Few can bear this burden healthily; power brings corruption, the loss of empathy, and self-alienation.

A person clings to their power because relinquishing it would mean questioning themselves, their past, and their actions. To avoid this reckoning, people cling ever tighter to their chains of power.

The psychology of power is a test of human nature's limits—and sadly, very few pass this test.

3. The Flaws of Systems

Human beings, by their nature, are open to change in the face of power; yet what brings this potential into being is the structure of the systems in which they exist. An individual begins their journey essentially in a neutral position; however, the flaws of the orders that shape them fan the desire for power, laying the groundwork for corruption.

Most systems are, by design, intended to grant power to humans. Yet the mechanisms that distribute and manage power also create the conditions for its abuse.

Absolute power is a precondition for succumbing to human weaknesses; unfortunately, many systems choose to concentrate power wholly—or at least largely—in a single point rather than distribute it fairly. Here the system's fundamental flaw emerges: the weakness of the mechanisms that control power and their vulnerability in the face of human nature's frailties.

Let us examine this through political systems. In today's politics, an individual's path to political power often demands a long and grueling journey. The individual spends years in this pursuit; during this process they pay numerous material and moral costs, and it is precisely at this point that the shadow of corruption begins to fall.

At the end of years of struggle, very few people still preserve the ideals they started with. Even a politician who initially set out with good intentions changes over time due to the heavy sacrifices they have made and the exhausting struggle they have endured; the effort to make up for what they have lost and sacrificed begins to corrupt them from within. Even if the individual themselves has made almost no sacrifices, the mere fact that the people they encounter in this struggle are subject to the same process casts the same shadow over them.

Once any of these factors come into play, the issue is no longer society's welfare but rather the justification of the individual's own struggle. From this point on, the person in question dares to resort to unethical methods to obtain power.

The same process applies to individuals who have already attained power. A person who gains at least a bit of power after long and arduous struggles becomes corrupt both because of their cause and because of the influence of the power they hold, and they begin to regard any means as legitimate in order not to lose that power. For losing their current position means not only losing the power they possess but also the sacrifices they have made over the years, the prices they have paid, and even their very self. Power thus ceases to be a privilege and becomes an existential necessity that cannot be lost. Consequently, a person who holds power does not want to relinquish it; the violation of ethical and moral values becomes almost inevitable.

History is full of tragedies nourished by the mistakes of systems that can provide many examples of the above. In the early 20th century, Germany's democratic Weimar Republic, weakened by economic depression and political crises, transformed into an authoritarian regime that made Hitler's rise possible. This situation shows how, at moments when a system is left vulnerable, the desire for power in human nature can transform into a ruthless reality. Similarly, the First Republic established after the French Revolution was born with the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity but quickly turned into the Reign of Terror, with the lust for power erasing those ideals and causing the revolution to devour its own children.

In modern societies, this dynamic manifests in different ways. Today, many democratic countries appear pluralistic and free on the surface, yet behind the scenes power is concentrated in the hands of a small group and is continuously fed through media and economic privileges. The power of media manipulation, economic elites' intervention in politics, and opaque lobbying activities corrode systems from within and point to the inevitability of corruption.

The critical point here is this: weaknesses in human nature are fixed and unchanging; systems either suppress these weaknesses or bring them to light. Systems lacking mechanisms to share, balance, and supervise power lay the groundwork for these weaknesses to sprout. When individuals encounter power under conditions created by such systems, they struggle to control themselves, and thus power deviates from its purpose and transforms into a corrupting force.

In conclusion, the true culprit of corruption is not only human nature but also the systems that nourish and direct its weaknesses. If systems lack mechanisms to control human nature, power will always produce corruption. In other words, the real issue is not human nature but the flaws in the orders that govern and shape it.

If systems are not rethought and power is not balanced by mechanisms independent of human weaknesses, history will inevitably repeat itself.

4. The Burden of Blame

Human nature inevitably bends when confronted with power. The seeds of corruption are not sown within an individual at birth; however, power is among the most fertile soils for germinating those seeds. Every person who takes power into their hands inevitably changes. The extent of that change is directly related to the amount of power possessed, the individual's own character, and the incentive mechanisms of the environment they inhabit.

There are psychological studies demonstrating that this change observed in individuals with power is universal.

For example, research conducted by Dacher Keltner has shown that individuals with power experience a marked decline in their ability to understand others' emotions and to empathize. This phenomenon, called the "Power Paradox," reveals that power reshapes not only the external world but also the individual's inner world: powerful individuals show an increased tendency to instrumentalize those around them and come to see themselves as more justified and superior.

This can be seen in countless examples throughout history. For instance, Napoleon Bonaparte, who as a lieutenant represented the ideals of the revolution, began to see himself as having the right to determine Europe's fate once he became emperor. Stalin, who was a revolutionary freedom fighter, established an empire of fear over his own people after assuming power. Mao Zedong, who began his journey with the promise of liberating the people, completed it with destructive movements such as the Cultural Revolution, costing the lives of millions.

Jeffrey Epstein initially gained prominence by investing in education and science with the narrative of supporting the brilliant minds of the future; however, he soon transformed this influence into a network of exploitation for his own benefit, and, protected by money, was able to conceal his horrific crimes of child abuse for decades. Bernie Madoff was a respected investment advisor who set out with promises of stability and gains in the financial markets; yet he orchestrated one of the largest frauds in history, ruining the lives of millions.

Harvey Weinstein championed the liberation of art as a powerful producer supporting independent cinema in Hollywood; yet in later years, he used that power to systematically sexually assault dozens of women, becoming a dark figure. Kanye West, with his artistic genius and musical innovation, became a cultural icon; but over time he found himself at the center of fame and transformed into a figure who shook both his own psychological balance and societal sensibilities with public outbursts of anger and antisemitic remarks.

Elizabeth Holmes, on the other hand, generated worldwide excitement with the promise of revolutionizing health technology and making hospitals more accessible; however, she placed investor interest above scientific accuracy, positioning herself at the center of a billion-dollar fraud.

What is striking in these examples is that each of them set out with a specific purpose, often firmly committed to their own beliefs, ideals, or goals.

Yet when they came into contact with power, these purposes gradually took on a different shape; the justice, freedom, success, or influence they initially sought gave way to a desire for control, a sense of superiority, and a perspective centered on their own interests. In this way, the individual came into conflict with the values they had begun with and ultimately destroyed those very values themselves.

Here the critical question is: If corruption is inevitable, is every corrupted individual completely innocent?

This question presents a profound dilemma that challenges the boundaries of human nature and moral responsibility. The human mind is inclined to divide the world into sharp categories such as good–evil, right–wrong, guilty–innocent. When we witness an injustice, we look for someone to blame. However, in the matter of corruption, this binary structure collapses: reality is blurred and complex. Every individual is susceptible to some degree of corruption when faced with power; yet the extent of this corruption is shaped by the individual's will and the pressures of the system. Individuals are neither entirely guilty nor entirely innocent, because human behavior is the complex interaction of personal choices and environmental influences.

People begin life with a pure consciousness when they are born. They are neither born killers nor born dictators. From infancy, they are shaped by signals from their surroundings. Good and evil are not absolute truths etched into human nature; they are concepts learned, experienced, and developed over time. For this reason, judging corrupt individuals solely based on the system offers an incomplete assessment. For example, in the Stanford Prison Experiment, ordinary people, when assigned the role of guards, quickly became cruel.

This change was not only the result of the system and the roles assigned; it was also influenced by individuals' tendency to accept those roles without question. The system shapes the individual, but how much the individual submits to that shaping depends on their will.

A similar dynamic can be observed in political careers. A candidate working for society gradually becomes surrounded by corrupted individuals; lies, power plays, and unethical concessions become the norm. In this environment, one begins to think, "Why should I remain honest?"

Honesty can imply weakness and a deviation from goals. The system pushes the individual toward corruption; but this does not eliminate the individual's entire responsibility. Because the individual makes decisions about how far to go in the face of these pressures and which ethical boundaries to cross.

Small-scale corruptions—for example, minor compromises or decisions driven by self-interest—are inevitable; however, the individual can refuse to let this corruption reach a large and destructive scale. For example, a leader can choose to enact reform from within the system and thus avoid major corruption.

To understand that the individual is not entirely innocent, one must consider the degrees of corruption. The system can push the individual toward corruption; but how much the individual resists this process, the point at which they abandon their ideals, or misuse their power determines their level of responsibility.

Throughout history, figures who have rejected major corruption demonstrate that this will is possible. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, while he could have obtained almost unlimited authority, used this power not for personal gain but to build an institutional republic based on popular sovereignty, reason, and science. Nelson Mandela, despite years of apartheid oppression, chose reconciliation over revenge and preferred to address the past on the basis of justice and peace.

Albert Einstein did not turn his scientific authority into political power; despite his contribution to the creation of the atomic bomb, he later waged an active struggle against nuclear armament.

Malala Yousafzai, after gaining global fame and political influence, used that power not for her personal career but for the education of girls; she acted with a sense of collective responsibility rather than personal gain.

Each of these examples shows that, regardless of the form power takes, corruption is not inevitable; it can be transformed by resilience, awareness, and moral will.

On the other hand, Stalin's empire of fear and Mao's destructive Cultural Revolution are products of embracing the power offered by the system without question and of their own ambitions. These leaders amplified the small-scale beginnings of corruption into a great moral collapse, thereby increasing their culpability.

Large-scale corruptions are not limited to the political realm either. Every individual who confronts power—be they an artist, a businessperson, or a media figure—faces this test. The sense of inviolability that comes with success can, over time, distort one's perception of reality and lead to the destruction of their own inner balance.

For example, Sean Combs (Puff Daddy), one of the most influential figures in the music industry, has been accused of establishing a network of power characterized by luxury, violence, and coercion at the height of his fame and media influence. Recent lawsuits and testimonies reveal not just a personal downfall but a systematic corruption scheme hidden behind the guise of stardom.

In the economy, Elizabeth Holmes set out with the claim of "transforming the world," yet with a technology promise devoid of scientific foundation, she played with the health of tens of thousands, abusing investor trust and public resources. In another example, Carlos Ghosn, who emerged as a reformist leader in the global automotive sector, used company resources for his own lavish expenses; as he distanced himself from accountability, he shattered corporate ethical values. Moreover, his flight from justice made the scale of this corruption visible on a global level.

All these examples show how power, regardless of its sphere, can transform the individual. Sometimes a spotlight, sometimes a seat, sometimes a slogan is enough to mislead a person's moral compass.

In short, every individual carries a risk of corruption when confronted with power; this is a shared truth of human nature and systemic structures. Yet major corruption—abandonment of ideals altogether, abuse of power, or harm to society—can always be rejected.

At this point, it must be acknowledged that corruption is neither entirely individual nor entirely systemic. The individual is a product of the system; yet they are also an agent shaping that system. By nature, humans possess both weaknesses and virtues. A corrupted individual is not entirely innocent because their will comes into play in the decisions to submit to pressure, protect their interests, or abuse power.

Yet they are not entirely guilty; no human can exist with a pure will outside of a system that fosters corruption. This dilemma shares guilt between the individual and the system: the individual is responsible for their own choices; the system is responsible for the conditions that complicate those choices. This fact shows that guilt is not personal but structural.

But structural does not mean placing the blame on the individuals who established the system. For those individuals are also products of their own times, conditions, and limited knowledge.

For example, the founders who wrote the American Constitution recognized the potential for corruption in human nature and therefore constructed the separation of powers. However, in modern times, even these mechanisms have proved insufficient; there have been periods when power and money have become centralized and democratic principles have eroded. In other words, no matter how well-intentioned its design, no system can be completely independent of the influence of human nature.

It is easy to attribute blame to a single individual, a single era, or a single system; but this flattens reality.

The roots of corruption lie much deeper: in the convergence of the desire for power, status anxiety, the instinct for survival, and social dynamics.

Therefore, it is not fair to explain corruption solely by individuals' moral shortcomings.

Accurately understanding the source of corruption is the first step to a solution: blame should not be sought in individuals but in the systems, structural flaws, and societal blind spots that render individuals vulnerable to corruption.

On the shoulders of today's people rests a responsibility heavier than the wreckage of the past. We will either repeat the same mistakes and place another brick on the ruin, or we will break the chains and create perfect systems from the ashes of the past.

5. Breaking the Chains

As we can see, corruption is a shadow that forms in the soul of every person who embraces power. No individual is completely free from this shadow. Yet this reality calls not for despair but for conscious responsibility. Our task is not to deny the existence of corruption, but to create systems that will limit its destructive impact, safeguard human dignity, and institutionalize justice.

This struggle begins first within our own inner world; without questioning how we behave when power is in our hands, no systemic transformation can endure. Power is like a vine that wraps around the individual's soul; if it is not pruned regularly, it will eventually choke the conscience. As evidenced by the power-poisoning experiment, even small authorities can, over time, erase empathy and replace it with a sense of superiority. Acknowledging this truth requires us to monitor ourselves regularly and remain open to criticism. For instance, establishing small groups in which decision-makers within a company give each other anonymous feedback every month makes the boundaries of power usage visible and heightens personal awareness.

We must also remember that power does not reside solely in a high-ranking position within a company; economic capital, media visibility, influence on social networks, access to information, and social recognition are all potent forms of power. One person's wealth grants the ability to influence others' decisions and access resources; another's fame gives direct control over perceptions and the power to rally crowds.

For example, having tens of millions of followers on social media carries more persuasive and guiding potential than many official authorities. Therefore, when designing systems to prevent corruption, it is not enough to focus solely on corporate hierarchies; economic, cultural, and digital power centers must also be identified and regulated. It is critical—both personally and societally—for individuals to recognize these different forms of power they hold and to assume responsibility through self-regulation in their daily actions in order to curb corruption.

Moreover, cultivating individuals who understand that power is not only a right but also a grave responsibility is possible through ethical education programs that equip everyone in leadership and positions of responsibility with a mindset that continually questions their use of power.

In addition, the effects of power use should be monitored not only during the process but also afterward; all decisions made and authorities exercised must be recorded in regular reports, which should remain accessible even after power is relinquished. This makes it difficult to fall into the comfort of "it will be forgotten anyway" and prevents individual weaknesses from taking root silently within the system.

As history shows, the absence of systemic oversight has the potential to corrupt individuals' behavior rapidly.

In the Stanford Prison Experiment, students became so absorbed in their guard and prisoner roles within just a few days that they exhibited cruelty and submission they would not normally display. In that unchecked environment, moral compasses collapsed in a matter of days.

Similarly, in Ancient Rome during the Republic, limiting the term of the offices of consul and tribune to one year prevented the concentration of absolute power in a single hand, enabling Rome to maintain stable governance for many years.

Likewise, the Magna Carta, adopted in 1215, was one of the most significant steps taken in England to bind royal powers to the law and curb the king's arbitrary actions. This document established the principle that rulers must adhere to the law and the social contract, paving the way for subsequent constitutional traditions and the balance of powers.

These structures provided lasting benefits to societies by limiting the natural tendency of power to centralize. Even today, if a leader's decisions in any institution go unchecked, individual weaknesses can produce equally destructive consequences across the system. Meanwhile, the transparent monitoring and accountability of decision-making processes remain among the strongest deterrents to corruption. Therefore, sharing all decisions made within any community in real time and openly for everyone is not merely a goodwill gesture but a fundamental requirement for preserving social health and justice.

In addition to individual and systemic awareness, structural measures against the nature of power itself are essential to prevent corruption. One such measure, when feasible, is to limit the duration of roles and authorities. Power roots itself more deeply the longer it is held, and the more entrenched it becomes, the more it distances the holder from reality; therefore, it is important to review positions at regular intervals and, if necessary, transfer authority.

However, this process should not be carried out as a mechanical obligation but should consider the individual's ethical conduct, performance, and balance in power use during their term. In this way, it will both prevent corruption and preserve the individual's sense of expertise and belonging. At the same time, concentrating decision-making mechanisms in a single hand is risky; distributing power among different individuals and committees prevents personal flaws from holding the system hostage.

For example, thanks to the practice of direct democracy in Switzerland, citizens' direct participation in decision-making mechanisms through referenda ensures the continual scrutiny of decision-makers and allows the will of the people to balance the system. This model is an effective example of preventing individual corruption from taking root silently within a system.

In addition, not only internal institutional oversight but also public accountability is an important factor in curbing corruption. Making decisions accessible to everyone ensures that those in power operate under constant public scrutiny and limits arbitrariness.

The measures presented here are the building blocks of the steps that must be taken to stem massive corruption. If communities adopt these principles not only as guidelines but as the supporting pillars of their structures, much of the devastation, suffering, and loss experienced repeatedly throughout history will become impossible to relive.

Such systems, by neutralizing not only individual mistakes but also societal weaknesses, will leave behind the pain forged by history's blood and tears and put an end to humanity's recurring tragedies.

However, this redemption will not happen spontaneously. The prosperity of individuals is only possible through the solid systems created by societies of individuals. As these systems are perfected to prevent corruption, individual lives will directly improve. In a world that suffocates great corruption, the pains of the past will be largely left behind; humanity will, for the first time in history, find itself in absolute peace. Only then will there be not just temporary victories but a lasting ascent for the sake of humanity.

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