

Is legal rational  
authority the most  
rational type of  
authority



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In every society, whether pre-modern or modern, there has been a hierarchy of command of which everyone must adhere to. In order for this system to operate, there must be someone in charge. Since every human being is found in a group or an organization which may be a country, tribe, institution or a family, it is obvious that the hierarchy of command is also in different types and forms. Therefore, this essay is an attempt to show with reasoning, whether or not that legal-rational authority is the most rational type of authority as viewed by Max Weber.

It will first explain the three types of authority, then compare them in terms of rationality and applicability with present day examples and finally, a conclusion will be withdrawn. The word " authority" comes from the verb " authorize" which means " lead". It is defined as a transactional process characterized by active reciprocal interrelationships in which the values, training, and perceptions of members play a crucial role in defining and validating the power of leaders (Peter, 1963: 135). Authority rests on socially accepted norms that define compliance with certain orders as a social duty.

Norms are rules of conduct towards which members orient their behavior (Ibid: 223). An individual is considered an authority because of his technical expertise, combined with his ability to communicate effectively with the group (Basu, 1994). Rationality means the effectiveness of something while the word " legal" means " within the accepted formal rules". Therefore, legal-rational authority is belief in the legality of patterns of standard rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands.

Under this type, authority is held by legally established impersonal orders and extends to people by virtue of offices they hold. Their power is determined by their qualifications. As long as individuals hold these offices, they have a certain amount of power, but once they leave office, their authority is lost. This authority can develop because of the systems of laws which are in different societies. For example; a political system causes the development of legal-rational authority (Kathy, Ezinearticles. com. ).

Associated with this type of authority are constitutions, written documents, and established offices, regularised models of representation, regular elections and political procedures. These are developed in opposition to earlier systems such as monarchies or other traditional forms where there are no well developed set of rules. The subordinates within this type of authority accept the legality of rulers, believing in the right of those who have legitimate rights to exercise power (Ibid). Those with the power then exercise power based on this right of legitimacy. The subject persons to the commands are legal equals to those who obey " the law".

The " apparatus" that implements the system is also subject to the same principles, thus organization is continuous (Ravindra, 1991: 78). This examination of legal-rational authority led Weber to define an ideal-type bureaucracy which is a rationally and systematically constructed pure type of action, used as a measuring tool to determine the similarity between actual social institutions and defined ones. It incorporated hierarchy, written rules of conduct, promotion based on achievement, specialised division of labour and efficiency.

Information flows up the hierarchy of command and directives flow down. This ideal-type was intended to promote economic growth and prosperity. Many of its concepts are echoed in today's capitalist and political systems (Ob cit). Traditional Authority derives its legitimacy from the acceptance of it since hoary past e. g. in Swaziland (Peter, 1963). This is the type of authority in which the traditional rights of a powerful and dominant individual or group are accepted, or at least not challenged by subordinate individuals. These could be religious, sacred or spiritual, family or clan type structures.

The dominant individual could be a priest, clan readers, family head or some other patriarchal figure, or dominant elite might govern. In many cases, traditional authority is supported by myths or connection to the sacred, social artifacts such as a cross or flag, and by structures and institutions which perpetuate this authority (Nwabueze, 1992). Historically, traditional authority has been the most common form among governments. An example of such is the Queens and the Kings in the English Monarchy System, which most belonged to certain families in order to obtain their oppositions.

This authority is based on the belief in the sanctity of tradition, of " eternal yesterday". Because of the shift in human motivation, it is difficult for modern individuals to conceive of the hold that tradition had in pre-modern societies. If no one challenges the authority of a rational leader or group, the leader is likely to remain dominant (Kathy, [http:// EzineArticles. com.](http://EzineArticles.com)  ).

Charismatic authority exists when the control of others is based on an individual's personal characteristics such as extraordinary ethical, heroic or religiously virtuousness.

It is characterized by technical imperatives and dependence upon personal rule rather than upon objectives. Such a leader may be a prophet, a hero or a demagogue (Gabriel, 1973: 58). He can use informal sanctions at his command to directly force his “disciple officials” to obey his wishes or suffer consequences (Ravindra, 1991). In such a system, there is no administrative cadre but only a group of followers who hold posts on the basis of their charismatic leader. Thus there are no legal rules to govern the administrative class (Basu, 1994: 192).

Hitler; Jesus, Muhammad, Gandhi, Napoleon and Julius Caesar were all charismatic leaders. Weber considers charisma to be a driving and creative force which surges through traditional and established rules. The sole basis of charismatic authority is the recognition or acceptance of the claims of the leader by the followers. It can be revolutionary in nature, that is, it can easily degenerate into traditional authority and the power is exercised by those who surround the charismatic leader.

This authority represents the desire for disruption and change of the prevailing social order ([http:// www. oogle. com](http://www.oogle.com)). Comparisons between legal-rational, traditional and charismatic authority in terms of their rationality and applicability leads to the agreement of the statement, “Legal-rational authority is the most rational type of authority”. Reasons for this answer are given within the context of comparing these types of authority. Legal-rational authority is the strongest nowadays as seen by the increased number of countries with democratic leadership while charismatic authority was the strongest in the past.

An example of this is in times when the US President, George W. Bush wanted to invade Iraq. The tentative and dissident portions of the country relied on legal-rational authority for their power and influence. Legal-rational authority would require a mandate from the US Congress to go to war, but the charisma that Bush had was great enough to push aside this requirement for much of the pre-invasion debate and later enough to influence congress to permit it. It is also his charisma that made the legal authority of UN not to stop this invasion.

Nowadays, its absolutely the US Constitution guiding their president and not his charisma (Williams, 2003; 4). As compared to traditional authority, legal-rational authority manages, promotes and allocates responsibilities according to the qualifications of a person, for example in New York, just like at The University of Zambia, access to higher education is within the limits of an institution admission requirement. Under no circumstances are applicants denied admission because of race or ethnic background (William, 1972: 9).

Also the chain of command is carefully specified, and people are assigned jobs on the basis of their objective qualification to fulfill them. It is through this that they advance through the ranks (Gabriel, 1973: 4). In contrast, traditional authorities are composed of members appointed by a traditional leader, whom in most cases would appoint his relatives, mostly women as members (Kyde & Buur, 2006: 1). They also become supreme, for example, when allocating land, they may allocate it to any person of their wish (Ntsebeza, 2004: 4).

The process of ascension to the throne under legal-rational authority is accepted at least by three quarters of an organization for example, every Zambian President comes into power by means of voting but in charismatic authority, a problem arises when a leader dies or is impeached (Basu, 1994). Another example is Shaka Zulu. By tradition, Shaka wasn't eligible to succeed his father because he was an illegitimate son but his charisma (as a conqueror) led him to the throne but the problem of succession later arose when he was murdered (Hantobolo, 1978).

Hugh (1968), puts it that a vacant office should be filled by temporal appointee or shouldn't be filled for the rest of the term if there is no one who meets the qualifications of the office, this makes legal-rational authority most rational. Also, legal-rational authority is most rational because its bureaucratic features are seen in all other forms of authority. For example, record keeping exists in all other types of authority because if it never existed, no history of human life would have been known today.

This is also true for Anarchists-an ethnic group of people in Europe who opposes every type of authority. They say that they all lead to despotism and reformism, but they forget that they have many rules and norms they follow. These have sync with Weber's legal-rational authority (Williams, 2003: 4). Unlike other forms of authority, legal-rational authority is evident even in a simple organization-a family. A single child's obedience to his father manifests a legal relationship, since institutionalized norms demand such obedience (Peter, 1963: 223).

Legal-rational authority is most rational also because it excludes force and power and it only originates from a group not from isolated pairs like in charismatic and traditional authority. Most charismatic authorities result from decisions made by few people. ' If a colleague submits to the will of a friend on whom he has become dependent on, there relation is not legal-rational and such leads to the use of power and force' (Ibid). Differentiated from legal authority, power or force is the ability to impose one's will on another, regardless of other's wishes and despite any resistance he may offer.

This exercise is more likely to be indirect and coercive a combination of rewarding and punishing through the use of argument, debate and rhetoric. In contrast, legal-rational authority is democratic and visible almost in all organizations (Stuart, 1967). That oath taking before going into office has no spiritual beliefs under legal-rational authority, is another reason for it being most rational. Oath taking with spiritual beliefs is a distinctive feature of traditional authority (Nwabueze, 1992).

In Nigerian traditional authority; they discovered that oath taking using a Bible or Koran is considered as a mere ritual so they now use some juju called Owegbe which they believe that it harms whosoever mismanages his office. This juju made the Etu-Edo political party in 1960s to capture all 13 seats in Benin Division but this idea is retrograde, and contrary to the tenets of true democracy and abhorrent to its idea (Obid, 362). In Zambia, all political leaders undergo a harm-free oath taking called An Oath of Allegance before entering office. This is a most rational authority (Solesole, 2008).



Pension benefits in charismatic and traditional authority are not legally considered or respected. ' If a worker's employment ends when he reaches pensionable age and has satisfied the prescribed contribution conditions, a state retirement pension should be made payable to him' (Marsh and Soulsby, 1992: 313). Again, under charismatic or traditional authority, a leader may have a property right in his office because subordinates have little or no say over office property. ' The office exists for the public convenience, interest and necessity, not for an individual holding it.

An office may be considered as property in disputes arising between two or more persons claiming the right to hold the same office' (Hugh, 1968: 44). The case of Aaron Zulu, a DEC commissioner who sold or directed the sale of 118. 897 kilograms of gold to Societe financiered Seujut SA, at value less than the market price, is a good example of misuse of public or organization resources. Though this is from a democratic (legal-rational) authority, such cases are not as rampant as they are in either charismatic or traditional authority (The Post, Friday February 1, 2013).

In conclusion, even though all the three types of authority rest on normative constraints exerted by the collectivity of the subordinates, legal-rational authority proves itself to be the most rational type of authority by virtue of it being constitutionalised and democratic. As it has been explained in the essay above, its features are visible everywhere in every organization. No one would love to go against their wish or choice. This authority gives freedom of choice and without this type of authority, war and conflict was going to be everywhere.