A Study on the Manifestations and Limitations of Dictators' Charismatic Authority

Qianxu Jing *

City of London Freemen's School, Ashtead, United Kingdom

* Corresponding Author Email: rellajing2009@gmail.com

Abstract. The paper examines the manifestations and limitations of charismatic authority by using Max Weber's theory of charisma as the analytical framework. This study focuses on combining Adolf Hitler's rule in Nazi Germany with Weber's theoretical analysis to examine how charismatic leaders create and sustain their power through emotional bonds, collective identification, and psychological manipulation. It shows how charismatic leaders rise during times of crisis by utilizing personal image and propaganda methods to enhance their authority. Although charismatic leaders can gain massive support from the public as they frequently offer redemption during crises, it ultimately creates a sense of instability due to the absence of formal institutions, over-reliance on one person, and misjudgment of problems. Therefore, this type of authority often suppresses opposition, lacks sustainable succession, and centralizes decision-making. The paper provides a deeper understanding of how charismatic leaders manipulate the public to establish their dominance, with further evaluation of the weaknesses of charismatic authority in comparison to Rational-Legal or Traditional authority. The paper also suggests that despite the emotional support and short-term effectiveness in consolidating power, charismatic authority indicates risks for long-term governance.

Keywords: Charismatic Authority, Hitler, Dictatorship.

1. Introduction

The question of political authority always sparks a large discussion in the field of social sciences. Thus, Max Weber's influential study of authority characterizes it into three distinct forms: traditional, rational-legal, and charismatic authority. Whilst the first two types of authority focus on institutional, customs, and imperial rule, charismatic authority is an exception because it goes through the individuals' charm. According to Weber, charismatic authority meant a power gained from an individual's "personal virtue [1]." It appears from the ruler's individual aim of "supernatural, superhuman or…exceptional powers [2]." Therefore, this type of authority disrupts the established order as it seems to be a revolutionary force. It shows the image of an individual who preserves themselves as a savior that develops a strong emotional bond with the public, allowing themselves to bypass the traditional and rational-legal institution means, so they can develop their dominance. The paper will examine the manifestations and the limitations of this type of charismatic authority with the support of Hitler's example as a historical case.

The study of charisma provides an important understanding for the reader about dictatorship, with the existing research from fellow scholars. For example, scholars like Micha Popper state in her research, "The development of Charismatic Leaders," that authority is characterized into two types: personalized charisma and socialized charisma. In the case of Hitler, it links to the personalized charisma, where all of the power is surrounded by one individual due to his cult of personality. After the leader gains power, it suggests that the leader uses all the power only for personal gain, and they often promote their own version of politics, which can be characterized by an ultimate exploitation of others [3]. Therefore, with the combination of other scholars' research, this paper will also discuss the limitations of charismatic leadership. It is crucial, as charismatic authority is indeed grounded in the obedience of an individual's personal qualities and persuasion skills.

Although charismatic authority disrupts the traditional order, it still exists in the pre-modern and modern world. North Korea's Kim family is a good case in point. Kim Il-sung advertised himself with ideological campaigns and portrayed himself as a "great leader" like a god. He often promises

stability, which the public yearns for at that period after the chaotic crisis of the Korean War. The limitations of this type of authority then slowly emerge, which this paper will talk about. For example, it is usually temporary and will eventually collapse if the leader fails and dies, as the charismatic authority is hugely dependent on one person's authority, so it is hard to pass on. This can be shown by the example of Mussolini or Stalin, as their political regime eventually collapsed after their death. It also hits the dark side as the types of authority often end with totalitarian and violent rule, where everything is decided by one person.

2. Theoretical Basis – Max Weber's Theory of Authority

Authority is always embedded in the course of history. This is because an individual must be present to ensure that society is united and that the system operates effectively. Power and authority can be seen as a crucial foundation of leadership. Power is to impose one's control and will on others, regardless of one's wishes or opinion, whereas authority is quite different in comparison to power. It suggests that the individual must be recognized or authorized to gain power. Therefore, Weber's theory of authority clearly explained the case. In his concept, he suggests that authority is a power that is accepted or acquired by others, which ultimately becomes legal.

Firstly, traditional authority refers to a power passed from the past through generations in a dictatorial way that can't be challenged by others or subordinates, which can be shown by the example of, English Monarch family. Rational-legal is indeed a type of power that an individual achieves through election as a leader or representation of their office. Their power is usually supported by general elections, constitutions, written documents, or laws. As a result, they are easily challenged by their subordinates as they have a lot of competitors. However, they will lose their power after they leave their office, which can be shown by most of the democratically elected governments in the world, like the leaders in Britain and France. According to Weber's concept, traditional power can stop the rational-legal power, as the power of an individual or a group is continuous and cannot be challenged. At last, charismatic authority is the focus of this article. It refers to one gaining power through his personality or his successful heroic events during the time of a social, economic, or political crisis, so the citizens usually have a strong emotional bond, trust, and hope in the leader, as Hitler is a good example. It is different from the other two types of authority as it does not go through a legally or traditionally established order. It is rather through the belief or acceptance of the followers towards the charm of the leader [4]. In Weber's theory of charisma, he suggests some significant characteristics of charismatic leadership. They are usually confident, influential, always bring emotional support, and create several miracles for their supporters. A charismatic leader has good communication and oratory skills, as they can persuade their followers easily, so their followers offer respect and charm.

Hitler had a strong charismatic characteristic because he could control his followers' minds by using the examples of their societal background at that period. He influenced the people who suffered from the Treaty of Versailles and the instability of the political system. For example, the Germans were constantly facing hunger, being humiliated because of their loss, being unemployed, facing an unstable society, economic loss, and violence. Hitler employed his oratory and performance skills carefully to persuade his audience with a simple political view and strong emotions. Therefore, his followers had been largely influenced by his thoughts under these conditions, and they built a sense of hope in him.

3. Manifestation of Dictators' Charismatic Authority

3.1. Aligning with Historical Context

The basic manifestation of the charismatic authority emerges during the period of harsh and profound social, economic crisis. Weber suggests in his theory that charisma rises in the time of "psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, or political distress [5]." The reason for that is that

the disasters create a sense of hope for stability and redemption for the people. The leaders, therefore, utilise the social pressure and present themselves as the heroes who can guide the nations and save them. In the case of Germany, starting from the Weimar Republic from 1919 to 1933. It presents a starting point and background for the rise of the charismatic authority of Hitler. For example, Germany was facing their economic, social, and political crisis at that time. After World War I, Germany was forced to pay 6.6 billion euros as compensation [6]. When Germany did not have enough money to pay, France and Belgium occupied the Ruhr in 1923, where most of the valuable economic resources were concentrated in Germany. They seized resources and killed over 137 Germans [7]. This causes a rise in unemployment, poverty, and homelessness. As a result, the crisis hugely destroyed Germany's economy and its dignity. Here, the people are more likely to be attracted by a single individual who offers promises, instead of an unreliable political system.

Unlike traditional and rational-legal authority, the charismatic authority directly flows to a person themselves, not to their parties or families. As mentioned before, charismatic leadership is seen from the qualities of the leader, which are personalized. Therefore, during the period of past institutional corruption, the new leaders will then have a stronger connection with their followers by providing personal promises of change. Another example of public mistrust and disappointment can again be shown by Germany's political and social situation during the 1920s. Politically, Germany's territorial and military power is largely restricted. For example, conscription is being banned, and only 100,000 men are allowed in the army [8]. Moreover, Germany lost a huge amount of territory. Alsace-Lorraine was returned to France, and its overseas territories are being controlled by other countries. Therefore, they lost 10 percent of their land, with 12.5 percent of their population found themselves in other countries [9].

Furthermore, the Germans felt angry and unjust, which foreshadows the rise of Hitler's charismatic authority. Events like the Munich Putsch, Knapp Putsch, Bavarian Uprising, and Spartacist Uprising show how the citizens were unsatisfied with the former government and wanted a change. Hitler is indeed the one who stood out with his promise of a change and a better future. He constantly reinforced that he is going to make Germany strong again, get back what they lost, and ensure that there is no more starvation. So, this is the reason why his charismatic authority shone during that period. Political and social crises act as a catalyst for the charismatic authority, as the citizens all changed their support for individuals due to the disappointment with the current government and institutional system, which consolidates Hitler's charismatic authority.

As a result, the list of examples during the crisis indicates the formation of charismatic authority. Charismatic authority is usually easier to form and consolidate during periods of social, economic, or political crisis. A major manifestation of this authority is that the leaders can grasp the emotional needs and psychological expectations of the public by providing emotional attachment and psychological security in turbulent environments. When people face instability or setbacks, they are more likely to trust and rely on a leader who demonstrates decisiveness and ability.

3.2. Skill in Shaping Personal Charisma

One of the important manifestations of charismatic authority is that leaders influence followers' cognition and emotions through personal image, speech skills, and symbolic behavior. Such leaders often carefully design their public image to possess trustworthiness, authority, or heroic qualities. They can use language, body language, and visual symbols to reinforce their sense of authority and attract the attention and recognition of followers. Hitler is a typical case in this regard: he created strong emotional resonance among his followers through speeches, image building, and propaganda strategies, but these specific practices were only used as conceptual explanations rather than the only form of charismatic authority.

The Nazi Party was extremely unpopular before the 1930s, with only under 5% of votes, but it became the largest and the most well-known party in Germany after 8 years [10]. Hitler started with the middle-class workers and consistently went to beer halls for his small-scale speeches from the beginning. Hitler utilized the Germans' pain at that period as he started from the foundations of the

social, economic, and political issues, then convinced the Germans that he was going to help them and get out of the situation by gradually increasing the volume of his voice to yelling with numerous hand gestures, such as arm waving [11]. He famously asks his audience to choose whether Germany is going to accept the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, accepting the results that they are a failure, or unite and work to get back what they lost [10]. As a result, Hitler's reputation and his speeches became more popular as he became the German chancellor on January 30, 1933. Here, it shows that the charismatic leader usually cultivated a public image of heroic determination and trustworthiness. By showing his understanding of the Germans, he showed the public that they are not alone. This can be supported by Claude Ake's research on "Charismatic Legitimation and Political Integration", which is based on Weber's theory. The paper mentioned that to achieve charismatic authority, the masses must feel emotionally committed to the leader, which suggests that it is crucial for the charismatic leaders to have an emotional connection with their followers [12].

Max Weber also argues that charismatic authority is not only formed by the extraordinary qualities of the leader, but also by the way they shape the image of themselves. It creates a sense of identification that can make them popular and distinct. This indicates one of the central keys for the charismatic authority: the charismatic leader is trying to show that they are part of the group, but ultimately above the group.

After Hitler held power, he created a distinct image of himself, which "hid his personality behind a carefully constructed image of a modest, kind and simple man [13]." By creating an image of a simple man, the leader often wants to show their followers that they are a group and reinforce their determination for a change.

The charismatic leader often creates an authoritative image of themselves, which further shows the public that they are trustworthy. The most well-known image is of Hitler with his toothbrush mustache. His outfit, like his military uniform, suits, and swastika armband, is mostly in a monochromatic colour palette. It can create a sense of authority, power, and seriousness in his followers. Hitler often wore platform shoes with his rigid posture to make himself look presiding and heroic [14]. As a result, the charismatic leader's followers are more likely to believe that their leaders are smart and powerful for getting them out of recession.

Propaganda is fundamental to the maintenance of the charismatic authority. Max Weber illustrates that charismatic leadership not only requires personal quality, but also a constant recognition by the followers. A good example is that Eckart, who helped him build up images, advertised that he was the right man to make Germany greater again. He described Hitler as the "saviour of the fatherland [13]." Heinrich Hoffman, who was the party's photographer, frequently helped Hitler to take the pictures, which authorizes and clearly shows his determination. Hoffman put these pictures onto postcards and portraits that can make more people see them [13]. The ally of Hitler, Alfred Rosenberg, wrote and celebrated how Hitler created huge emotional bonds between himself and his followers. Even after the court after the failure of the Beer Putsch, the judge allowed Hitler to express the truth of Germany and continue his propaganda. Hitler's words and speeches were all over Germany, and the book "Mein Kampf" that Hitler wrote in prison became the Bible for his followers, and it sold about 4 million copies in four years [13]. This ultimately shows that charismatic authority needs cooperation spaces. By using tools like Media and photography, the leader's images maintain the public's recognition and eventually ensure the longevity of the power for the charismatic leader.

3.3. Leveraging Emotional Resonance with the Masses

The most important manifestation is that charismatic and authoritative leaders can trigger and utilize emotional resonance among the public, transforming collective anxiety, anger, or hope into support for the leader. However, the resonance does not only rely on emotional identification and psychological attachment, but also on the institutional or legal authorization that is built on. Charismatic leaders use their words, actions, policies, or symbolic events to make their followers feel hopeful, directional, and a sense of belonging, thereby consolidating their authority. In Hitler's case,

his political, diplomatic, and military actions aligned with the public's psychological demands for national rejuvenation, thereby enhancing emotional identification.

Hitler used a numerous of political actions, diplomatic measures, and military operations events with his determined aim of making Germany strong again to show his followers that he could make the country better. After becoming Chancellor in 1933, Germany refused to continue paying war reparations and withdrew from the League of Nations and the World Disarmament Conference in the same year. In 1935, Germany reintroduced military conscription, and in March 1936, Germany remilitarized the Rhineland. Although Germany's military strength was insufficient and it faced pressure from the major powers, there was no military intervention, further demonstrating Hitler's audacity and decisiveness. The successful events from the charismatic leaders further led Hitler to maintain his' heroic image and qualities. Therefore, the charismatic leader is skilled at utilizing the emotional resonance of the public. However, this identification is not a rational algorithm but is an emotional conformity. The hold of his power and his charismatic authority were sustained as he understood the feelings of the Germans at that time well. Therefore, he directly used the solution that many of them desired during that period. That's why his charismatic authority spreads quickly and continues.

4. Limitations of Dictators' Charismatic Authority

Although charismatic authority can quickly consolidate power and mobilize public support, there is no perfect way of governing authority in the world, and it also has certain limitations. Specifically, charismatic authority will eventually rely on the leader's personal judgment and intuition, without the suggestions from others. The example can also be shown by the Nazi government. Their government structure is a pyramid, according to Hitler, with himself as the top apex of the pyramid. In a situation where decision-making power is highly centralized. Leaders often bypass institutional or advisory structures, which can lead to low efficiency, poor communication, and strategic errors. If any events do not happen successfully, it may lead to the failure of charismatic authority, which destroys the image of an ideal leader in the followers' minds. This can be shown by Hitler's failure of his cult of personality after the failure of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' invasion during World War Two. Thereby, excessive concentration of power on individuals limits the organization's ability to correctly respond to complex issues, as objections or professional advice may be overlooked by an individual. It then causes the second limitation of the charismatic authority.

Charismatic authority will rely on the symbolic achievements or successful behaviors of leaders during times of crisis. As mentioned before, charismatic authority not only depends on the leader's personality and the way they portray themselves, but also needs to be supported by their successful events. Followers' support is often based on their understanding of successful actions during 'miracles' or unstable periods, like Hitler's remilitarisation of the Rhineland, which creates massive support from the public because they are therefore determined that he is the one who can change the situation. When charismatic, authoritative leaders make misjudgments or overestimate their own abilities, the authority structure eventually becomes unstable, and public trust may rapidly decline. The high dependence on personal performance makes charismatic authority particularly susceptible to overconfidence and erroneous decisions.

The structure of charismatic authority can also easily lead to the suppression of opponents, in which violence and intimidation occur commonly. In a system dominated by a single leader, whether it is political, institutional, or social opposition, it is often suppressed to consolidate the leader's personal control. Fear or intimidation replaced institutionalized governance mechanisms, gradually transforming initial admiration into obedience based on fear. Even in a little village in Germany, when the shop owner refused to put Hitler's poster on the window, he was threatened with being sent to the concentration camp [13]. Moreover, the Nazi Party sent all of the people who opposed him during the unification of Austria to the work camp. Over time, the boundary between voluntary support and forced obedience may become blurred, making authority fragile and morally risky. The

strained controls from the leader ultimately created hate for the follower, which built up the foundation of the failure of the charismatic authority.

As the author mentioned before, charismatic authority is difficult to inherit. Unlike legitimate rational or traditional authority, it lacks institutionalized mechanisms for continuity or inheritance, like a constitution or judges. Therefore, the political system may be easy to collapse if something goes wrong. When a leader dies or loses influence, an organization or political structure is often unable to sustain itself independently and is prone to rapid decline or collapse. By leaving the whole country and the fellow citizens, Weber suggests that the authority lacks a sense of responsibility and accountability for both the leaders and their followers [15]. This structural vulnerability highlights the instability of systems that rely solely on personal charisma in long-term governance. In short, charismatic authority is a double-edged sword: it can inspire strong loyalty and quick mobilization, but it highly relies on the leader's personal judgment, successful behavior, and emotional connection with followers. These limitations indicate that although charismatic authority is attractive, from a long-term governance perspective, it is inherently unstable and difficult to sustain.

5. Conclusion

The type of authority operates in a powerful yet precarious field of leadership. The emergence of charismatic authority is at the public's dependency on an individual during a time of crisis. Thereby, the charismatic leaders seized their power through constant emotional manipulation of the public. By utilizing the public's collective trauma, working on personal image, and offering emotional resonance, charismatic leaders can constantly win the public's support and centralize their power. However, its back-draw remains as there is an unstable inherent system because the followers are over-relying on the leader's quality, instead of going through the institutional safeguard. This often leads to a strategic misjudgment, which drags the nation back to crisis. The study argues that the limitation of charismatic leadership often lacks long-term sustainability, which usually leads to opposition and succession crisis.

This research aims to examine the deep surface of the charismatic authority. Beyond its surface, it reveals the weakness of its structure and moral risks. The study further points out that establishing government on personal charisma rather than on institutional foundations contains certain risks. However, this study is limited as the author's primary focus is on one historical case. Hitler's Nazi regime gives evidence of extreme examples. Still, by having a wide range of comparative analyses of other dictatorships or the modern populist movement, it would help to support or strengthen these findings. Future research could explore the charismatic authority in modern contexts. For example, the digital-era populism, where social media in nowadays society often creates numerous emotional messages for the leaders. Additional studies may also be comparing the charismatic authority between different political systems, eras, countries, societal backgrounds, and cultures to identify the patterns for decline. This will ultimately provide a better understanding of how charismatic leadership in different places around the world works with their institutional frameworks and would emphasize a more detailed theory of power and governance, rather than only focusing on one person.

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