

Appendix 3

Understanding ‘Political Will’

Defining ‘Political Will’ -- Narrowly

When the success or failure of development policies is discussed, we frequently hear it said that ‘political will’ – or the lack of it – affected the outcome. But it is often unclear what this term means. ‘Political will’ is commonly used as a catch-all concept, the meaning of which is so vague that it does little to enrich our understanding of the political and policy processes. There is, however, a way to make it a useful analytical tool. We must begin by giving ‘political will’ a quite specific and narrow meaning. Let us define it as ‘the determination of an individual political actor to do and say things that will produce a desired outcome’. This definition has several important implications.

First, it omits a number of things. The incapacity of political or administrative instruments to achieve an outcome is excluded. So is an insufficiency of material resources. So are institutional (or other) impediments and opposition from interest groups which may prevent the desired outcome from occurring. And so are several other things which are discussed more fully below. The strength or weakness of an individual political actor’s determination may occasionally explain an outcome, but it is usually much more complicated. Political outcomes are almost always multi-causal, and we must avoid the common practice of including many things that have little to do with a leader’s determination under the heading ‘political will’. This implies that we need to situate ‘political will’ within a number of other features of a given political system if we are to understand what has happened – and we discuss that later in this chapter..

Second, if a leader is to develop ‘political will’ to change or achieve something, s/he must have at least some imagination – some capacity to envision how things might be different. But it makes sense to treat imagination and ‘political will’ (the leader’s determination to seek change) separately. Imagination precedes ‘political will’, and is essential to its development, but it is not the same thing.

Third, ‘political will’ is an attribute possessed by individual political actors. If we speak of collective ‘political will’, we encounter difficulties. If a senior politician displays ‘political will’, other individuals may come to share it, but if

we then refer to a collective ‘political will’, we begin to anthropomorphise and thus to mislead. We also discuss this later in this chapter.

‘Political Will’ to What Purpose?

One last implication of this definition deserves to be treated separately. ‘Political will’ – defined in this way -- is a neutral concept. It can produce both benign and invidious outcomes. Lincoln had ‘political will’ in abundance, but so did Hitler. We therefore need to avoid celebrating ‘political will’ for its own sake, and to ask what purpose it is serving.

This question may seem obvious, but it is sometimes overlooked. In 1999, the head of a major donor agency (not DFID) in an important less developed country told a political scientist that his agency was so frustrated by government inaction that it was lending special support to three politicians who had exhibited strong ‘political will’. His visitor explained that one of the three was indeed applying his ‘will’ to development efforts, but that the second was mainly preoccupied with control of every facet of public life, and the third was widely perceived to be a psychopath. The donor agency investigated and revised its strategy accordingly.

A second point is worth stressing here. The over-riding purpose to which almost every politician applies his or her ‘political will’ is the enhancement of his or her influence and reputation. If s/he believes that constructive reform serves those purposes, s/he is likely to pursue it. If reform appears not to serve those ends, s/he will do little or nothing to pursue it. It follows that efforts should be made to persuade politicians that reform does indeed serve those ends – as we demonstrate in this study. This is easily said, but donors often lack influence over key leaders. But there is much that they can do to shape public debates and elite perceptions, and this is one sphere in which attempts are often worth making.

Finally, even among politicians with constructive intentions, ‘political will’ may sometimes run to excess. It may do damage by causing a leader to try to change too much too quickly, or to press so hard to achieve a goal that s/he loses the finesse needed to get results. A leader may become insensitive to the need to make tactical adjustments, so that his/her inclination and capacity to make them is dangerously undermined. Or by causing the policy and political processes to depend too much on an individual, excessive ‘political will’ may prevent change from becoming sufficiently institutionalised. It may also do damage by causing a leader to present policy initiatives in unsubtle ways.

Analysing ‘Political Will’

There are two ways to analyse political will – both of which we use in this study. First, analysts can focus on the incentives and disincentives faced by a

leader who is contemplating a possible action, and those faced by other political actors who might support or oppose that action. Second, analysts can focus on the motives, thinking and feelings of a leader – and of other political actors – to pursue those aims.

This latter approach requires (among other things) psychological analysis which is less easy, reliable and measurable than assessments of incentives and disincentives. But since studies of incentives and disincentives do not tell the whole story, we need to make some use of this latter approach. As we do so, we need to acknowledge frankly the limitations on our ability to get inside the thoughts and feelings of any leader. We cannot prove in a rigorous way that certain things are true. But we can still seek to construct highly plausible arguments that they are true.

Thus for example, when we consider Digvijay Singh's risky, emotional decision to accept all of the recommendations of a *Dalit* (ex-untouchable) conference that he convened (discussed in chapter three), we must use both sets of tools. We can – as economists would – speak of his determination not to be risk averse, and of the incentives that he saw in taking this bold step. He believed that it would enhance his reputation over the long term – and in his view, that outweighed the short term disincentives that existed because many non-*Dalits* would oppose the decision. But we can also use evidence from two interviews. The first was with an aide with whom he conferred at the moment of decision, who testified to the unusual emotion with which Singh spoke. The second was with Singh himself, in which he described his thinking and feelings at that moment. This sort of evidence lends itself to a more psychological (and fuller) assessment of his motivations – and motivations loom large in the literature on leadership.

The paragraph above helps us to see how we may recognise the existence of 'political will'. When a political actor is willing to commit precious time, energy, funds and political capital to achieve change – when s/he is prepared to take risks and to incur opportunity costs to that end – we can safely conclude that s/he is exhibiting 'political will'.

The Individual and the Collective

We often see references to collective 'political will', but our evidence has made us deeply sceptical of this notion. When a leader displays 'political will', s/he may influence the thinking and actions of other individual political actors. But to speak of collective will is to underplay the individuality of those other actors, each of whom possesses (or lacks) a will of his/her own. References to collective political will also overlook the fact that in most instances where a leader successfully projects his or her will, many other political actors fail to share his/her enthusiasm for what is occurring.

An identity of view between a leader and large numbers of other actors – which the words ‘collective political will’ imply – seldom exists. So if we ask how a leader can inspire ‘collective political will’, we ask about events that are so rare as to have only marginal importance. It makes more sense to ask what a leader can do to get other political actors – whatever their actual thoughts and feelings -- to behave in ways that permit his or her ‘political will’ to prevail.

We list below a number of the more important ways in which a leader may accomplish this. Note that only the first of them produces anything like an identity of view between the leader and other political actors – or what might loosely but (we think) unhelpfully be called ‘collective political will’.

- A leader may persuade others genuinely to share first his/her belief that an initiative is constructive, and second his/her determination to pursue it. This is easier in some instances than in others -- because some initiatives appear especially likely to prove popular, and/or because the environment in which some initiatives are undertaken is particularly favourable. For example, Museveni was able to ‘sell’ his initiative to provide universal primary education in Uganda because it was widely believed that this was an urgent priority. Cardoso was able to ‘sell’ most of his pro-poor initiatives, partly because of a broad consensus that poverty had to be addressed, and partly because poorer groups in Brazil had (unlike their counterparts in Uganda and Madhya Pradesh) long been mobilized and organised into a political force capable of making an impact.
- A leader may create incentives and disincentives that persuade other political actors to support or at least to tolerate the pursuit of an initiative, even if (as is usually the case) they do not entirely share his/her enthusiasm for it. Singh persuaded his legislators to welcome the Education Guarantee Scheme to create new schools in villages that lacked them because they could claim credit for this achievement, even though they had almost nothing to do with it. Cardoso organised the disbursements for schools under the Bolsa Escola programme in a way that yielded greater funds for municipalities that could draw more pupils into classrooms. These are examples of incentives, but the latter arrangement also implied penalties – disincentives – for municipalities that failed to cooperate.
- A leader may (only occasionally, on our evidence) design an initiative in ways that cause little or no dismay and opposition from potential adversaries. Singh’s Education Guarantee Scheme and several programmes in other sectors entailed the hiring of large numbers of para-professionals, but he carefully avoided undermining the remuneration and conditions of employment for conventional government employees working in the same sectors. The latter thus felt unthreatened. Many of Singh’s and some of Museveni’s pro-poor initiatives were not particularly expensive, so that they raised

few hackles among interest groups which might have resisted the diversion to pro-poor schemes of massive funds from programmes dear to their hearts.

- A leader may distract potential opponents of his/her initiatives – either by downplaying them and publicising other issues of more concern to those opponents, or by providing potential opponents with attractive opportunities on other fronts to distract and compensate them. Singh achieved and sustained his dominance of policy-making by permitting other ministers and legislators to cultivate their personal bases and to enrich themselves by illicit means.

All but the first of the items in this list do not refer to methods which produce an identity of view between a leader and other actors (that is, what might be termed a ‘collective political will’). Instead, they identify strategies that leaders may use to change formal institutions and informal political dynamics to make it more likely that their ‘political will’ prevails -- in the absence of such an identity of view. In other words, they call attention to other features of the political landscape, beyond the narrow confines of various political actors’ determination and beliefs – that is, of their ‘will’. So they remind us that to understand any leader’s success or failure in projecting ‘political will’, we must situate his/her determination within a broader and much more complex context. This crucial point deserves to be examined in greater detail.

Situating ‘Political Will’ within a Broader Context

We are reminded of the importance of the broader context when we consider the precise manner in which a leader exerts ‘political will’ – when, for example, we ask what his or her principal aims are. Does s/he focus mainly on changing the way that state institutions at higher levels work, in order to change the perceptions and behaviour of elite political actors (as Cardoso did)? Or does s/he focus on creating opportunities at the grassroots for ordinary people -- not least the poor – to exert influence within the political and policy processes, in order to change popular perceptions and behaviour (as Singh did)?¹ In answering those questions, we are forced to situate efforts to project ‘political will’ within the broader social and (especially) political context.

If we consider the processes that sustain, intensify or undermine a leader’s ‘political will’, we are again compelled to examine that broader context. When a leader seeks to project his/her ‘will’ by taking individual action and by involving others in collective action, s/he receives feedback from that context, through the political system. This may encourage him or her to continue in that vein, or to act still more assertively. Or it may indicate that there are major disincentives in continuing in that vein, so that s/he changes course. This

¹ Museveni’s state-building task was so enormous that he had to operate extensively at both levels, although his emphasis was on popular perceptions and behaviour.

obviously implies that the formal and informal political structures and the interest groups with which a leader interacts influence whether his or her 'political will' waxes or wanes.

We need to identify the elements or features of political systems within which 'political will' operates – partly to remind ourselves of what it is not. We have just noted that various features' influence whether a political actor acquires, sustains or loses 'political will'. But a discussion of them will also indicate that 'political will' plays a rather limited role in determining outcomes.

What are they? Let us answer by focusing on things that can cause political leaders to lose 'political will'. (Most of the comments below can be reversed to show how 'political will' may gain strength.) A leader may lose 'political will' when s/he concludes that one or more of the following things are true.

- That opposition to a possible action from organised interests will suffice to thwart it or to make it too politically damaging.
- That the available administrative instruments are incapable of implementing a possible action effectively.
- That the political instruments (party organisations, alliances with interest groups and other parties) available to the leader are incapable of providing adequate support for a possible action.
- That a possible action may disrupt delicate understandings with interest groups or other political parties which form the government's political/social base, so that the action may undermine the stability of the government, or its capacity, or other intended initiatives in the future – or all of these things.
- That a possible action may depart too radically from conventional administrative or political practice to be workable.
- That a possible action may trigger too much social and/or political conflict to be worthwhile.
- That a possible action may encourage unrealistic expectations among certain interest groups, which will eventually lead to disappointment, alienation and distrust, thus undermining other intended initiatives in the future.
- That the legal or constitutional impediments to a possible action are too formidable to overcome, and efforts to remove those impediments might prove too costly or fail.
- That his/her government possesses too few material resources (usually, these days, funds) to make a possible action feasible.
- That a possible action may cause too much damage to the economy to be undertaken – by, for example, triggering the flight of investment funds or damage to the currency, or by injuring and/or alienating key forces in the domestic economy.
- That prevailing attitudes among political actors and/or the populace more generally are too inhospitable to a possible action for it to be

acceptable. (No matter how shrewdly the action is presented and explained, a leader may not overcome these hostile attitudes.)

- That a possible action may damage his/her reputation.
- That recent failures or frustrating outcomes indicate that s/he is losing political momentum, so that the damage to his/her confidence is sufficient to make still further assertive actions appear unwise.
- That other issues or crises are so compelling that a possible action must be shelved for the time being.

By calling attention to these things, we are not suggesting that 'political will' is unimportant. It is essential that we understand how determined a political leader is, and whether over time, s/he gains, sustains or loses 'political will'. But the long list of other factors set out above indicates that 'political will' – which needs to be defined quite narrowly -- provides only a small part of the explanation for any political outcome. Analysts must avoid the temptation to let the term 'political will' become a form of shorthand for 'politics' more generally. 'Politics' entails far more than 'political will', as we suggest above.