

The End of Power; From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being in Charge Isn't What it Used to Be

By Moises Naim
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The title of Moises Naim's newest book is an apt summary of its basic thesis. *The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being in Charge Isn't What it Used to Be* is about exactly that: how the large institutions and bureaucracies that have controlled territory, ideology and wealth for the last several hundred years have been compelled to cede this control to numerous smaller players.

Although the book reviews a number of definitions of power, its consistent focus is on how institutional power in the modern period came to be defined in terms of size and scope. In modern times, the bigger you are, the more powerful you are. When Naim says that power is decaying - the book's battle cry - he means that our mainstream definition of power as bigness no longer holds true.

Much of the book is spent detailing how "power got big," as Naim puts it, and the ways in which power as bigness has been challenged. We readers learn how this challenge has manifested itself in different institutions and spheres of activity. These include not only governments, militaries and private corporations, but also religious institutions, unions, philanthropic organizations and the

professional media. While this approach admittedly can get a little tedious, its great virtue is in demonstrating how singularly unified our ideas about power have become. Regardless of the institution, it seems, we think that to be powerful is to be bigger than everyone else. We also learn how comprehensively the power of large institutions - regardless of their function - is being challenged.

This breadth makes Naim's book an excellent go-to cross-disciplinary resource for current research on political power. In his view, all of these institutions are changing as a result of three interrelated phenomena, which he labels the "more, mobility and mentality revolutions." The "more revolution" describes the fact that there is "more of everything now ... more people, countries, cities, political parties, armies; more goods and services, and more companies selling them; more weapons and more medicines; more students and more computers; more preachers and more criminals" (54). This may be a bit of a simplification, as there are also fewer of many other items in the world; Naim's real point is that there are a greater number of healthier people whose basic needs for food, water, and shelter have been fulfilled. They are, as a result, less easy to control and have the ability to overwhelm systems.

By "mobility revolution," Naim means that people, ideas and capital move around with greater ease than they once did, thanks to a variety of factors. For example, diaspora and immigrant communities alter the balance of power both within their own new communities and in the larger geopolitical balance by spreading ideas and passing remittances to their home countries. Finally, the "mentality revolution" describes the effect of these other two phenomena on how different populations

in the world think. As a result of exposure to more places, and people, and ideas, we - general populations the world over - are less likely than in previous eras to accept received wisdom or show obeisance to traditional forms of power. We question our governments, our churches, and the rights of corporate firms with greater force and effect than previously.

Naim's fundamental point is nuanced and subtle; it is that the environment within which power operates has changed in substantial and irreversible ways. As a result, even though many of the institutions and events that we observe on that landscape may not look so very different than in the recent past, their ability to operate effectively - to exercise their power freely - is not what it once was.

However, this thesis can be difficult to tease out. Rather than making this subtle point, Naim makes outsized claims about the demise of power from which he must repeatedly retreat, caveating at every step. Exxon Mobil, JP Morgan Chase, and The New York Times, each a traditional powerhouse, are not about to simply disappear from the scene: each has "immense resources and hard-to-replicate competitive advantages that ensure their dominance in industry." Instead, "they face a more dense and limiting set of constraints on their ability to act." It is not hard to imagine that the exigencies of publishing - and the need to make extravagant claims in order to sell books - were the driving force behind the hyperbolic tendencies in the text. Read carefully, however, and the nuanced point emerges.

What conclusions can we as readers draw from this state of affairs, and in what way should they be used to inform American policy-making? Naim offers a few answers, not least among them that the era of hegemonic

power, whether held by nation-states or companies, is decisively over. "Looking for a current or new hegemon or a committee of elite nations to reassert control is a fool's errand."

That raft of books, think tank treatises and discussions, whether in popular forums or more rarified policy spaces, over whether the United States or China will control the future; over whether the 21st century will be an American century; or over whether Western democracies will rise again to the fore - are all missing the point. Yes, relative power may reside in American and Chinese hands, but Naim's comprehensive review of big power demonstrates that the very framework within which we have defined power as intrinsically hegemonic has broken down. We must begin to think in new terms.

Beyond this general instruction, Naim does not offer much specific counsel. The last ten pages of the book are dedicated to solutions, and readers may wish that he had spent more time offering specific ways to approach this changed world. Indeed, in addition to suggesting that we must think in new ways about power, Naim tells us that we should increase our trust in the government and learn to strengthen political parties. This is an odd instruction, following over two hundred pages of strenuously argued prose about the fact that no one large institution, such as governments or even alliances of like-minded governments, can be restored to power.

I might suggest, alternatively, that if it is the case that we are inevitably living on a changed landscape of more actors, with greater mobility, we must prod our governments to put serious muscle into thinking about how to acknowledge and finally work with the political power that non-traditional, smaller actors wield. Rather than trying to revert to an era of

certain trust in centralized government, with expectations of power that no longer obtain, we could support a government that seeks to function effectively in the kind of world Naim describes.

As one step, we should define power in new terms. Naim is persuasive on the point that sheer size - whether of territory, population, financial means, or arsenal - is no longer a defining characteristic of power. In order to make government more effective, we need a better grasp on what kinds of characteristics should be enhanced.

Non-state actors of the type included in Naim's analysis must be included in this project, so we can move beyond understanding small actors' power simply as disruptive. Not all smaller actors, or "micropowers," to use Naim's terminology, are successful in their endeavors. We must understand the contexts and terms of success of these actors. This is in no small part because effective governance, as Naim and others have made clear, is increasingly a function of collaborative networks working toward a unified goal. If the U.S. government intends to serve in a leadership role addressing complex issues in the future, it will have to become more sophisticated about developing effective networks with specific characteristics aimed at particular problem sets. We will have to move beyond the era of the public-private partnership into one in which multiple actors with particular characteristics suited to different tasks are brought into effective working relationships.

This era begins with Naim's observations that power isn't "what it used to be," but it cannot end there. We must go on to figure out what power is now, in current conditions. Naim has long experience in, and great expertise in the arena of governance. His last book,

Illicit, was about illegal trafficking, and provided thoughtful and full ideas about how to address this complex problem. We will need similar thoughtfulness in the future as the world Naim describes continues to unfold. His new book is a useful place to open a mainstream discussion of how big governments, firms, militaries and churches must think about power, if they are to have any at all in the future. **PRISM**