

Is Killing a Tyrant Ever Justified?

In his work [*De rege et regis institutione*](#) (1599), Jesuit priest Juan de Mariana examines the limits of political power, which, in sixteenth-century Europe, was exercised by monarchs. According to Mariana, monarchs should be subject to the same moral standards as the governed. Should they deviate from the principles of natural law by confiscating the legitimate property of the people, levying taxes against the consent of the governed or usurping the functions of the parliament, it is the right of the people to assassinate a ruler that has turned into tyrant.

Today, there is a wide consensus about what turns a legitimate ruler into a despot. The unjustified use of violence against unarmed citizens, the repeated violation of human rights or the impoverishment of a country due to destructive economic policies are considered sufficient reasons to remove any ruler from power. But actually carrying this out is fraught with peril.

We recently [witnessed](#) the assassination attempt of Venezuelan dictator Nicolas Maduro, who was attacked by a drone while giving a speech in Caracas. Maduro has plunged his country into the most severe [economic crisis](#) of the last decades, trampling on [human rights](#) and ending the democratic system along the way. This makes Maduro the prototype of ruler that Mariana would have qualified as a tyrant. But is tyrannicide ethically justified?

From a retributive-justice perspective, the killing of a despot seems legitimate. In the case of Maduro, millions of people have been harmed by the action of the Venezuelan government: political opponents have been imprisoned and [tortured](#), children are dying of [starvation](#) as a direct consequence of pauperizing economic policies, alleged

criminals have been [killed](#) without due process, etc.

Those directly affected by these crimes could call for justice and demand a proportional punishment, which in many cases would involve the death of the dictator. Fair as this may sound, other aspects must be considered. First, in modern states, justice is channeled through centralized legal systems, precisely to avoid people taking the law into their own hands. In this case, however, trusting the Venezuelan legal system to judge and punish Maduro in a country where judicial independence is nonexistent seems naïve.

Second, the killing of a tyrant is no simple task. In the process, innocent people could lose their lives. In fact, the drone attack against Maduro, as it was planned, could have killed people other than the tyrant and his accomplices. Were the assassination of a despot to cause the loss of innocent lives, the morality of such an action would be questionable, to say the least.

But let's assume that there is a way to prevent collateral damage and that the tyrannicide could be undertaken without the loss of innocent lives. Would it make it ethical? To answer this question, we need to look beyond deontological ethics and address the issue from a utilitarian perspective. In other words, it is essential to analyze the potential consequences of killing a tyrant to undertake a comprehensive ethical assessment.

At first sight, it seems that the removal of a dictator from power (even by violent means) must be necessarily ethical since, in the long term, it should pave the way to political freedom and economic prosperity. History suggests, however, that this hasn't always been the case. For instance, the overthrow and subsequent assassination of Muammar Gadhafi in 2011 has resulted in a series of civil wars that have killed [thousands of people](#) so far, turning Libya into a failed state.

If we apply this line of reasoning to Venezuela, nothing guarantees that the assassination of Maduro will improve the

current situation in Venezuela. In fact, it could make things worse. Since the bulk of the army is still under the control of the regime, the killing of the tyrant would likely result in the repression and death of hundreds of innocents, doing no favor to the cause of liberty in the South American country.

The corollary is simple: the ethical assessment of tyrannicide must also include the potential consequences of such an action, applying the precautionary principle if one believes that the cure could be worse than the disease. Otherwise, a legitimate act of justice could lead to a situation worse than the one that the assassination was aimed to resolve.

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