

[Capsule]

Indirect Rule

Indirect Rule was a colonial system of governance that tried to integrate local political structures into the colonial state in a two-tiered system. Typically, the higher tier of government and administration was filled with public servants from the respective colonial power, while actual governance of 'the Natives' was delegated to 'tribal rulers'. Whereas the system was thought merely to integrate existing polities into the colonial state, it often created, and always deeply transformed, local political structures. As a consequence, indirect rule changed the political order and the relation between state and society in many colonized countries and contributed to the increasing role of ethnicity and patronage. While indirect rule is usually associated with British colonialism, many traits of the system are found in other colonies, as well.

When modern colonialism started to strive for real territorial government during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, it became quickly visible that colonial resources of domination were insufficient for an effective control of the entire population. In many countries, the number of civil servants from the 'motherlands' was rather insignificant, and attempts to replace effective control by subjugation through terror had often proven to be dangerous and inefficient. Colonial rule was mostly limited to some towns and to the areas immediately surrounding administrative and military posts. To increase its reach, colonial powers began to negotiate with local rulers and to co-opt them into their system of governance.

In India, Residents of the British East India Company managed to establish British suzerainty over local rulers, a system that was then taken over by the British government. In Natal (today part of South Africa), the British introduced a system of 'differentiation' between Whites and Africans, whereby Africans were subject to a different set of laws applied by local headmen in the mid-nineteenth century. These systems of indirect rule were gradually, and with much debate, adopted in other colonies. Between the World Wars, this arrangement, borne from failure rather than choice, was turned into a strategy, most notably by Lord Lugard, who published his *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* in 1922. Based on his experience as high commissioner (1900-1906) and governor-general (1912-1919) in Nigeria, Lugard systematized indirect rule into a coherent ideology of domination.

The system of indirect rule built on European assumptions about 'Native' societies. They were thought to be ahistoric, unchanging, paternalistic entities governed by chiefs and headmen. The role of the chiefs was conceptualized by many Europeans as similar to that of feudal lords in early-modern Europe. In consequence, each individual was thought to be member of a 'tribe' that was fully represented by its chief. If the colonial state established domination over the chief, it would be able to govern the whole group through him. In addition, 'Natives' were thought to be fundamentally different from Europeans. As such, they had to be subject to different laws stemming from their own 'customs' and to a different system of governance in line with their 'traditions'. The power of the idea of

indirect rule lay in the fact that it fit all these wrong assumptions about 'Natives', while at the same time solving the problem of insufficient resources.

In the ideological rivalry between the different colonial powers, indirect rule was most closely associated with British colonialism, while French rule, for example, was thought to be much more assimilatory and direct. Practical constraints, however, made some elements of indirect rule necessary for colonial administration in general. All colonial powers experimented with different forms of government, and differences between two colonies of the same power could be as great as those between colonies of different countries.

The application of indirect rule had important consequences that continue to shape many postcolonial societies. Among these were the re-traditionalization of local politics, the reinforcement of ethnicity and the creation of a rift between 'traditional' and 'modern' elites.

Pre-colonial political systems often did not meet the needs of the colonial state for a clear distribution of competences and an established hierarchy of power. All variants of political systems, from acephalous societies to authoritarian kingships, occurred. Power was often contested by several leaders or systems of leadership, and different types of power could balance each other. To make these divergent political systems compatible to colonial rule, the administration had to pick out leaders and institutions that could be strengthened and transformed into 'Chiefs' and 'Tribes'. As 'Natives' were thought best to be governed by 'traditional law', local norms and customs had to be identified and codified. Colonial officials usually relied on chiefs and old men to tell them about these customs. They took their partial point of view as reality and started to enforce it. Both by the identification of local leaders and by the codification of customary law, one group of actors was privileged over all others. For the leaders co-opted by the colonial state, their new position often constituted an important source of power and wealth.

The frame of reference in which this establishment of political domination took place was the 'tribe'. Every colonial subject was allocated to an ethnic group and subject to the authority of its leaders. Any access to the colonial state was channeled through 'traditional' authorities. This greatly increased the leverage of local rulers by providing the resources for internal patronage. Ethnic unities were established as politically and economically meaningful entities separately integrated into the colonial states. By creating a 'traditional' system of governance compatible to colonial administration, the practice of indirect rule simultaneously strengthened ethnicity and local class structures.

The most radical application of the principle of indirect rule was the homeland system in South African apartheid politics. The ideology of a fundamental difference between Europeans and 'Natives' finding its expression in different laws and different economic regimes for both, the principle of limited self-government and self-taxation of 'Natives', and the partition of a society into different isolated groups were all carried to extremes in the homeland system.

By making a principal difference between European and Native societies, indirect rule integrated local polities into the colonial state, while simultaneously excluding its citizens from political participation. It barred the way to upward mobility through local politics

and helped to create a rift between society and modern state that still shapes many postcolonial societies.

[1042 words]

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[Sidebar]