

The Perils of Monopoly

By
Azhar Ibrahim Alwee

Defining Monopoly

Monopoly is a state of dominance of one powerful group over certain resources which limits the access of the other contending parties. Monopoly can be maintained either through coercion or through legal justification or the combination of both.

Monopoly is a state of imbalance. It creates a polarity of two extremes: on one hand, the Powerful group having excess of authority, and on the other, a deprived group with total dependence on the latter. It is an exploitation albeit guaranteed by the instruments of legitimate law or 'imagined' law. Monopoly can also be a state of suppressing others' opportunity to gain access, recognition or presence within a certain contested domain / resources / positions and the like.

Monopoly can manifest in almost all realms of life; in politics, economy, social, cultural, linguistic, intellectual, religion and aesthetics. Our interest in this section is monopoly in religious discourse, a subject that is rarely discussed or debated openly, thanks to the hegemonic provisions of the monopolizer.

Monopoly in Religious Discourse

Monopoly in religious discourse is a result of many interacting factors. First, we have to identify the group(s) that made claim as being the interpreter and the defender of the religious sanctity. This type of monopoly is not easily quantifiable with arrays of statistics and charts. But its presence can be detected from the following styles of thinking of the group that insist on their exclusive right over certain domain of thought or action.

(a) The claim for The Absolute vis-à-vis Absolute Claim. Here, the claim or defense for The Absolute has often been confused with the validity of an absolute claim that has been made by the monopolist. Put simply, a monopolist group's voice or opinion that is absolutist is made to be seen as representing the Divine Absolute whose command knows no dissent. The attributes and idioms of the Absolute in short, are used by the monopolist as an instrument for absolutism.

(b) Neither tolerance nor encouragement for Plurality. The power of monopoly rests on the hegemonic idea that the selected and anointed one is the dispenser for all thinking, values and norms for the congregation. Monopoly inevitably made mono claim, often in monotonous style. But the claim is enticing: The pervasive monopolist is the answer to all predicaments, to be accepted at all costs while dissent means a displeasure to The Absolute. Monopolist's interpretation is always asserted as '*holy*-stic' or comprehensive. Yet, divergence of views, beyond the monopolist's source, is seen as a deviation.

(c) The finality of the Custodian is equated as the Finality of the Universal Message. The monopolizer's insistence on finality of their interpretation is again confused with the Finality of Divine Universal Message. Such a thinking stemmed from the notion that the dispenser can pave the

way of certitude while contending views will only give rise to doubts and skepticisms – a danger to the faithful. But such insistence is sheer ignorance of the wisdom of our great savant, al-Ghazali who once said: “He who has not doubted has never obtained any certitude.” If one can stretch this wisdom further, then questioning the interpreter should never be equated with doubting the Message.

Who Shall Guard the Custodian?

The question of *Who Shall Guard the Custodian* has not been given due attention amongst us. This is because the democratic ideas of accountability of any person in the realm of action and ideas are yet to be developed in our consciousness. Ironically, we often speak, with inflated confidence, that we have *shura*, even claiming it superior than the known democratic techniques. The question here is not to say that our system is superior conceptually in comparison to others. The issue here is: Do we have a mechanism to see this concept operating, and most importantly, whether there is a mechanism to check the very institution that we idealized? Even if it is practiced or institutionalized, it becomes more often, a durbar for oligarchic or monopolistic cliques, whose interest (or infallibility) is the actual enemy of any collective dialogue and consensus.

Privileging only one group to be the definer, evaluator and organizer, is but a will to monopoly. In a group, regardless of its virtuous proclamations, the securing of its interest, be it good or bad, is inevitable. The challenge is this: How do we go about ensuring that the Custodian that we entrusted or the Custodian who made self-proclaimed position, can be subjected to some kind of accountability?

All ideas from any groups must be subjected to a thorough scrutiny and accountability. This is both the rights and duties of any civilized community. Accepting them by virtue of their privileged position is a sanctioning of monopoly. This is especially dangerous if the monopoly is in the realm of thought that influence our acts, belief, vision and sense of purpose. Eloquently John Dewey said: “And the monopolization of spiritual capital may in the end be more harmful than that of material capital.” A task ahead us is to appeal for the legitimacy of plurality in our midst to break the phalanx of monopoly. This is not impossible.

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