The Song of Slack

When I criticize leaders great and small, critics often reply: "You're so naive. These leaders are under immense pressure to act as they do. Even if what they're doing is as bad as you say, *they have no choice*."

Question: What exactly does it mean to say, "Leaders have no choice but to do X"? Here are a few interpretations:

1. If leaders tried to do not-X, they would *instantly* lose their leadership position. The leader's only choice is to do X, or get fired and watch their replacement do X.

2. If leaders tried to do not-X on any *major* decision, they would soon lose their leadership position. So while leaders have a wiggle room on details, they're still tightly constrained.

3. If leaders tried to do not-X on *many* major decisions, they would have a markedly higher probability of prematurely losing their leadership position.

4. If leaders tried to do not-X on *many* major decisions, they would endure a lot of aggravating criticism.

If my critics mean #1, I say they're obviously wrong. Leaders almost *never* suddenly lose their job over a single "bad call." Crazed media scandals are the exception that proves the rule.

If my critics mean #2, I still say they're obviously wrong. New leaders standardly make a large number of rather arbitrary changes. When I talk to friends with office jobs, for example, they often tell me how a new boss suddenly rearranged the floor plan or telework policy because he happened to have an odd "management philosophy." And even when such decisions are plainly unpopular, these leaders usually hew to their eccentricities for years. This is even more obvious for politicians, who hold their jobs with near-certainty until the next election no matter how unpopular their decisions are.

If my critics mean #3, they might be right. But this hardly shows that leaders "have no choice" but to continue whatever specific policy I'm criticizing. Indeed, #3 means precisely the opposite. Maybe the leader in question couldn't do *everything* I want and retain power, but they can easily do the specific thing on my mind.

Finally, if my critics mean #4, they're definitely right. But so what? Plenty of people *choose* careers that practically guarantee a lifetime full of aggravating criticism. Since they choose it, they undeniably "have a choice."

Overall, then, it's my critics who are naive. In reality, leaders have considerable slack. Many have immense slack. Indeed, *that's the main reason why people want to be leaders!* It's hard to quench your thirst for power when you can only exercise your "power" one way.

Where, though, do my critics go wrong? While it's tempting to say, "Non-leaders are tightly constrained, so they assume their leaders are, too," this is a silly story. Every rank-and-file worker has *some* slack, so the natural inference is that their leaders have some, too. Probably more. In any case, most of my critics are tenured professors, who infamously swim in a sea of slack. At long as you half-heartedly teach 150 hours a year and keep your hands to yourself, you can do whatever you like. For tenured professors to deny the existence of slack is like fish denying the existence of water.

The better story comes from Mike Huemer's *Problem of Political Authority*. In chapter 6, "The Psychology of Authority," Huemer argues that human beings have a pronounced tendency to justify even the least-justifiable actions of authorities. Government is Stockholm Syndrome writ large. Responding to "The leader is wrong to do X" with "The leader has no choice but to do X" is yet another desperate effort to pretend that bad leaders aren't as bad as they seem. The sad reality is that they're even worse, for with great power comes great responsibility.

Though perhaps the best story is that my critics confuse past selection with present constraints. People in current leadership positions have plenty of slack. To *attain* such a leadership position, however, you generally have to tow the line. And in organizations prone to do evil, men and women of conscience do not tow the line. The reason leaders of bad organization do so much evil is not that they couldn't do good if they wanted to. It's that people who rise to the top of bad organizations are usually bad themselves.