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III.9 On the principle of despotic government

- The Spirit of Law - Book III. On the principles of the three governments -

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As there must be virtue in a republic, and honor in a monarchy, there must be fear in a despotic government ; for virtue there is not necessary, and honor would be dangerous.

The vast power of the prince passes directly to those to whom he entrusts it. People capable of great self-esteem would be in a position to foment revolutions. Fear must therefore quiet every man's courage, and snuff out even the slightest feeling of ambition.

A moderated government can as much as it wants, and with no risk, relax its constraints. It maintains itself by its laws and by its inner strength. But when, in the despotic government, the prince ceases for an instant to lift his hand, if he cannot instantly destroy those who occupy the highest places, [1] all is lost : for in the absence of what drives the government, namely fear, the people are left with no protector.

It is apparently in this sense that qadis have argued that the sultan was not required to keep his word or his oath when to do so would limit his authority. [2]

The people must be judged by the laws, and the great by the prince's whim ; the head of the least of the subjects must be safe, and that of the pashas ever at risk. Not without trembling can one speak of these monstrous governments. The sophi of Persia, dethroned in our own time by Miriveis, saw the government perish before the conquest because he had not spilled enough blood. [3]

History tells us that the horrible cruelties of Domitian so frightened the governors that the people recovered somewhat under his reign. [4] And so it is that a torrent that wreaks havoc on one side leaves on the other a countryside where the eye perceives meadows in the distance.

[1] As often happens in a military aristocracy.

[2] [Paul] Rycaut, *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*.

[3] See the history of this revolution by Father du Cerceau.

[4] His government was military, which is one species of despotic government.