In mankind’s interminable struggle for power, the motivations of certain individuals may be unclear as they attempt to manipulate people for political advantage. What is clear, however, is that control and lasting influence are the ultimate goals in the dangerous game of politics. This is reflected in William Shakespeare’s history play Henry IV, Part 1, which examines the titular monarch’s dubious claim to the English throne and his bid to maintain political control in the face of outright rebellion. Similarly, British journalist Mehdi Hasan in his 2015 opinion article on Al Jazeera.com ‘Aung San Suu Kyi’s Inexcusable Silence’ examines Suu Kyi’s political motivations for refusing to condemn the genocide of Rohingya Muslims in her native Myanmar. In both texts it is suggested that, while it may be difficult to pinpoint the political motivations of certain individuals, their goal is to consolidate power and control for themselves.

The political motivations of an authoritarian monarch are seldom as clear as their desire for strict control over their subjects. Shakespeare’s dramatic representation of Henry IV as morally ambiguous invites the audience to ponder his reasons for seizing power. By using the theatrical medium of production in this way, Shakespeare conveyed subtle warnings about the negative consequences of Machiavellian subterfuge and regicide. The play opens with a monologue by the stricken King as he expresses his perspective on the need for peace and unity in Britain, ‘So shaken as we are, so wan with care … No more the thirsty entrance of this soil/ Shall daub her lips with her own children’s blood’. The emotive language and imagery indicate that King Henry’s motivations for usurping his predecessor Richard II may be honourable, namely, to guide Britain towards lasting peace. However, the compelling competing perspective of Hotspur casts doubt on the King’s political motivations. In his impassioned dialogue with Sir Walter Blunt, Hotspur earnestly vows the King ‘broke oath on oath, committed wrong on wrong’ as he paved his way to power. In any event, King Henry’s desire to consolidate his control over Britain is clear. His drive to control his subjects and crush dissent is represented in his dialogue with Hotspur, ‘You tread upon my patience. But be sure/ I will henceforth rather be myself,/ Mighty, and to
be feared’. Similarly, in his private duologue with Hal, King Henry demonstrates his fear of losing political control to the Percy family who ‘shake the peace and safety of our throne’. Hence, while the dramatic ambiguity surrounding the character of King Henry leaves his political motivations open to interpretation, Shakespeare clearly represents King Henry’s single-minded ambition for unopposed control of Britain.

As with monarchs, the political motivations of prominent politicians need to be re-examined when it becomes clear that they crave power and control. In his article for Al Jazeera.com, ‘Aung San Suu Kyi’s Inexcusable Silence’, Mehdi Hasan represents his compelling perspective on Suu Kyi’s inaction regarding the genocide of Myanmar’s Rohingya Muslims. Hasan’s rhetorical question, ‘Shouldn’t we expect more from a Nobel Peace Prize laureate?’ represents widespread disenchantment with Suu Kyi as many perceive her as being motivated by ‘freedom’ and ‘peace’, as per her own words quoted in the article. Hasan asserts with an accusatory tone that Suu Kyi is more concerned with ‘courting the Buddhist majority … whose votes she needs’ than freedom and peace for the Rohingya. A similar moral ambiguity is observed in Shakespeare’s characterisation of King Henry who seized the throne from Richard II and had him murdered, then decried the human cost of civil war in England. However, Hasan goes further to urge that Suu Kyi’s hypocrisy should result in her public disgrace with the idiom, ‘it is well past time to take off the rose-tinted glasses’. His historical allusion ‘The words “Henry” and “Kissinger” come to mind’ suggests that Suu Kyi’s inaction over the Rohingya crisis is motivated by considerations of Realpolitik rather than the grand ideologies she espouses. He ultimately points to Suu Kyi’s goal of greater political control in Myanmar with the rhetorical question, ‘Why weren’t we listening when [Suu Kyi] told CNN in 2013 that she had “been a politician all along”, that her ambition was to become president of her country?’ Thus, Hasan’s critique of Suu Kyi demonstrates how perceptions of political motivations may vary, while politicians’ desire for greater power and control is clear and constant.

The political motivations for treason can be difficult to ascertain, especially when deception is employed to overthrow ‘anointed majesty’. Shakespeare’s characterisation of the treacherous Worcester in Henry IV, Part 1 ultimately vindicates King Henry’s political motivations and actions as the audience is confronted with a horrifying vision of England at war. Initially, Worcester is portrayed as motivated by a desire to protect the Percy family from the wrath of a tyrannical king: ‘To save our heads by raising of a head’. This metaphor invites the audience to empathise with the apparent plight of the Percy clan. Additionally, Worcester’s anger at what he perceived as King Henry’s betrayal of the Percy family is represented in the simile, ‘you used us so/ As that ungentle gull the cuckoo’s bird/ Useth the sparrow – did oppress our nest’. This highlights another possible motive for rebellion: resentment towards King Henry for misusing the Percy family’s earlier political support. Moreover, in Worcester’s brief swan song prior to his execution, he offers self-preservation as another motive for treason, ‘What I have done my safety urged me to’. Whatever his political motivations, it is clear that Worcester
sought to control the situation by forcing both sides into battle. This is
represented in a duologue in which he urges Vernon to conceal the
King’s ‘terms of love’ from Hotspur: ‘let not Harry know/ In any case
the offer of the King’. Worcester’s central part in the uprising against
King Henry is represented in the metaphor, ‘as the spring of all shall pay
for all’, which portrays his awareness of the perilous situation he
engineered. Thus, Shakespeare’s representation of Worcester’s misguided
bid for political control conveys an effective moral lesson, warning
against treason in an age of uncertainty over monarchical succession.

In sum, both William Shakespeare and Mehdi Hasan illustrate the
difficulty in pinpointing political motivations, particularly when those in
positions of power make public shows of being honourable. However,
what these composers do make clear is that power and control are the
ends that politicians use to justify their various means.