the perils of showmanship politics and leadership

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In a previous article published in April 2025, I discussed the need for research to inform the policy formulation and policy making process. In particular, the centrality of the case study approach. Such an approach is one that incorporates 'anthropological, sociological and ethnographic methods, is locality-defined, community based, devoutly partisan to those who are on the margins, qualitative in substance, and longitudinal in scope.'

On this occasion, I would like to focus on expanding further on the significance and impact of research, and what would be the implications if policies and actions are undertaken by groups, whether institutional or non-institutional, State or non-State, without taking into consideration the key findings and lessons provided by social and grounded research.

In the celebrated work Orientalism, published in 1978, Edward Said explained how the exploration and conquest of the Middle East and Egypt, for instance, Napoleon being involved not only the military and force, but also writers, academics and geographers in his legion. It was through these groups, Said argued, that the imagination and idea of the Orient, or the Other, was created. It affirmed and illustrated the dictum: knowledge is power. At around the same time, Michel Foucault, the acclaimed French historian and philosopher, also wrote and published his work, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, in 1975. Through this work and many others by Foucault, he inverted the notion: power is knowledge. He argued how methods of control and authority also shaped knowledge and understandings of the world and societies. Examples include teachers and schools, doctors and the hospital and medical fraternity, and psychiatrists and the medical and correctional institutions.

As I have started with a condensed discussion of historians and literary scholars, it opens an avenue to what is the relation and significance of such theoretical and academic references to policy makers and analysts, government officers, and political leaders?

I would argue that these concepts, the relation between them, and furthering the balance or equilibrium that must exist among these two concepts in informing our views on public policies and international relations, should be made known to the community of thought leaders.

A case study illustrating this, is the recent conflict between Iran and Israel. The conflict commenced openly on the 13th of June, 2025, when Israel launched air strikes that killed Iranian military leaders and nuclear scientists. It seemed to be heading towards an escalation and regional conflict but then reached an abrupt stop on the 24th of June 2025 with the announcement of a ceasefire by the U.S. president, Donald Trump.

While the views held by various groups and individuals may be polarizing, there are key lessons or points that stand out and cannot be ignored. The first, returns to the fundamental significance of knowledge and research. Every engagement with any society and community should be guided by a clear and accurate understanding of the people within any social order or body politic. This includes the political system, social relations and solidarity, cultural traditions and history, and the national psyche that prevails in that particular society, as well as nation.

The second, refers to the varieties of means and approaches to understanding knowledge, and deriving information. In this context, the comprehension of the language, or the mediums of communication used by communities in a society or locality is pivotal. Efforts to create content and articulate views that seek to provide descriptions of an issue are misleading if one does not speak or use the language of the society or nation one is studying.

It is for this reason that in the times prior to and during the epoch of colonialism, the field of orientalism and the roles of philologists and linguists were prominent. These groups of scholars joined global expeditions and trade - alluded by Edward Said in his discussion of orientalism. Being grounded or having rootedness to the community or society that one is engaging in, is equally pertinent in addition to the grasp of the local language. It would be ill-advised if one were to speak of and provide expert or policy advice on a social order or body politic that one has never been to or reached. It is here, then, that proximity becomes fundamental.

The third lesson would be implications and instability. For any knowledge that is misconceived, decision that is misjudged, and policy or action that is mis-implemented, the consequences are political chaos and economic downturn. As nations and societies have become more globalized, and regions become interdependent, any conflict or disorder will have repercussions that will compound in its effects over geographical locations, and time; suffering and social disorder will exacerbate and multiply over time.

It is in this milieu of discussions on comparative politics, public policies and international relations, that there is analytical effort and question, as well as one of ethics and a moral compass.

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In navigating political conflicts and global challenges, the values of wisdom and vision are paramount. Showmanship, rhetorical speeches and slogans, gladiatorship politics and leadership, and the affinity for threats and violence are counter-productive traits to address the delicate conditions of today's world.

To conclude, we return to the thoughts expressed by Michel Foucault. The notion that power is knowledge, is a reminder. While we know that power shapes knowledge, and that those who hold power dictate conversations and discourses, the propensity for absolute power risks obfuscating grounded realities and challenges. Problems that may be thousands of kilometers away from us, or may just be present in our local community and neighborhood. When power is disconnected from and incongruent to lives, experiences and realities, then turmoil, poverty and suffering, conflict and violence always follows.

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