

The consequences of ignoring realism

By

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The essence of realism is the ability to see things as they were, are, and can be instead of how human caprice wants them to be. This ability is the fundamental building block of any meaningful effort at personal and social reform. Adherence to realism provides the reasonable hope that actions taken under its guidance will cause less misery than whimsical social engineering, though there is no ultimate guarantee that realism will always lead to successful personal and social outcomes.

Realism's dialectical combination of free will and determinism makes it a superior heuristic for policymakers because it teaches people, endowed with free will, are capable of doing both the right and the wrong thing. It recognizes that this human choice is constrained by circumstances that precede and surround the act of choosing. In order for choices to be meaningful, realism prescribes they should be made in the context of a deep understanding of available alternatives. Unfortunately, the triple challenge of limited time, voluminous information, and lazy thinking makes realism look like an onerous job. When people and policymakers cannot decide rationally between alternatives, they invariably look towards broad-based consultations in the hope that mere numbers will supply the cognitive resources required for removing policy bottlenecks, conveniently forgetting that quantity does not always turn into quality. Faced with complex information in problem situations, their default response is to dumb it down by dismissing any serious intellectual effort to ponder it as a mere theoretical exercise divorced from the practical issues at hand. Indeed, there is no safety in numbers if there is mediocrity in numbers.

This is not much different from what happens to us when we start watching a movie in the middle. With some vague idea of what the plot is about, we are in the dark about how it began and can only guess about how it shall end since we have missed the many twists and turns that add critical nuance to the story. Most postcolonial countries exhibit this condition in their domestic and foreign policymaking.

In domestic terms, such misreading occurs typically when it is the question of setting development priorities or combating corruption. Using the lens of the analogy, given by famous Stanford psychologist, Philip Zimbardo, to explain the relationship between agent and social structure, we can see that a few actually or allegedly bad apples are binned with zeal and zing but the possibility that perhaps it is the apple barrel itself that is rotten is facilely ignored. The upshot is that the apple barrel continues to putrefy in plain sight.

In foreign policy terms, the potential rather than the actual capacity of the country for exercising influence in inter-state relations becomes the focus of diplomacy of most postcolonial states. Building narratives and managing perceptions become more important than building robust

theories that explain facts more powerfully and favourably than rival arguments. In the absence of strong indigenous explanatory models aiding clear foreign policy goals, diplomacy is deprived of its substance, which is the advancement of the national interest, and reduced to vacuous volubility and empty elegance.

The usual fate of such polities is a mass cultural hypochondria in which society, failing to treat its real ills, begins treating itself for the ills from which it is not even suffering with the result that the imagined ill finally becomes a real malady. This condition is painfully evident in contemporary Muslim societies in which the separation of state and religion is considered one of the core conditions for development.

No effort is made to consider that this separation was not originally a problem of Muslim societies but that of western Christianity, simply because there was no institution analogous to the medieval European church in Muslim societies against which the state needed to struggle for autonomy and sovereignty. The induction of the belief in the need for the separation between politics and religion in Muslim societies as a prerequisite for stepping into modernity first took place during the period of European colonial rule which thrived on a careful cultivation of multiple divisions and rifts in colonized societies.

We rarely realize that the question of the separation of powers was first posed in the context of the struggle between ecclesiastical authority and state authority in early modern Europe and was not supposed to set state institutions against each other as it inevitably did and continues to do in postcolonial developing polities.

We also do not pay attention to the fact that the European lore of the separation of powers was meant to enable not disable cooperation between different spheres. In the presence of these reflective lapses, it is not surprising that inter-institutional conflict in many Muslim societies ceases to be functional and becomes dysfunctional leading to political deadlock, social decline, and cultural ossification.

We would do well to remember that the gap between policy and development as well as the gulf between diplomacy and national interest can only be bridged through the widespread societal restoration of realism.

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