



RESEARCH PAPER

Economic Sanctions, Resistance Economies and Authoritarian Adaptation: A Comparative Study of Iran's Resilience from Rouhani to Raisi

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the reasons why, contrary to the expectations of many, the international sanctions were of benefit to the authoritarian regime of Iran, under President Hassan Rouhani. It draws upon a close reading of official speeches, policy documents, and other reports in order to establish that despite the fact that sanctions worsened the economy the sanctions did not drive the country into greater liberty. The elite was secure due to strong friends and employment and could continue the running of the government by changing the trade partners of the country. The research concludes that the only way of strengthening the authoritarian regime and harming common citizens is through broad, non-targeted sanctions. Sanctions must target particular malpractices, collaborate with other nations, and be accompanied by diplomatic assistance and invitations to civil organizations to prevent empowering hard-liner leaders in the future.

Keywords: Economic Sanctions, Resistance Economies, Authoritarian Adaptation, Iran's Resilience, Rouhani, Raisi

Introduction

Economic sanctions have emerged as a key tool of foreign policy, especially used by Western nations to put pressure on authoritarian governments to change their ways. Since several US administrations and international coalitions have imposed various types of economic limitations on Iran in an effort to constrain its nuclear ambitions and regional influence, Iran has been a prominent target of such sanctions for decades.

Iran's modern history is characterized by a difficult and dynamic time during Hassan Rouhani's administration (2013-2021). A diplomatic breakthrough was marked by 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), but Rouhani's government quickly faced fresh economic hardship and isolation when the US solely quit from the accord in 2018 (Alir, & Firnas, 2024). Another wave of sanctions due to the change of policy had a terrible negative impact on the economy of Iran, reducing oil sales, and leaving massive social devastation. Although the regime was not politically liberalized or even collapsed, the Islamic Republic remained firm. The regime would adjust their techniques and apply political, ideological and economic instruments to remain in power instead of collapsing. It demonstrates that even an authoritarian regime can evolve and endure extreme external pressure and this begs the question about the effectiveness of sanctions as well as how the regime perpetuates itself. However, the question of sanctions and their impact on authoritarian regimes, even though economists believe that it is possible to change the regimes, remains a debated issue. The bulk of the studies on Iran, particularly under the presidency of Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021), has been practical within the general economic impacts of the sanctions and on the nuclear talks. It has not quite explored the nature of sanctions and their alteration of the internal political structure and strategies of a regime. The adaptation, restructuring, and

survival of regimes such as Iran during the continuous economic strain is not well comprehended. The research paper will examine the reaction of the authoritarian regime in Iran to sanctions under the leadership of Rouhani (Tabatabai, Ariane, 2020). It seeks to discover the political adjustment engagements and resilience procedures that enable the regime to withstand severe external stresses. Although numerous researches have focused on the outcome of sanctions toward authoritarian regimes, there is a dearth of works to study how authoritarian regimes, particularly Iran, adjust and make themselves more robust (Escribà-, Folch, 2010). Besides, studies on Iran under Rouhani have not provided an in-depth analysis on how sanctions strengthened regime and why political mobilization was not commensurate to the adverse economic impacts. This paper aims to bridge that gap by examining the internal political and economic processes in Iran in the course of the sanction period and offering novel insights into the strength of authoritarian regimes.

Literature Review

Economic sanctions on Iran have endured the Rouhani and Raisi governments. It demonstrates its adjustment and innovation. Although sanctions are severe, Iran has maintained its political and economic ambitions by fighting and being strong. This is evident in its nuclear program that it still follows and in the diversification of its economy in spite of the high international pressure. The subsequent sections examine the principal Iranian resistance to sanctions.

Economic Diversification and Innovation

Iran has broadened its trades and applied new economic concepts to cope with the sanctions. It has made more efforts to work with other nations and sought alternative trade routes to ensure that sanctions do not have such a significant impact on its oil deals (Alir & Firnas, n.d.). The auto industry of Iran demonstrates the way it is able to develop even in its isolated state. Iran has developed a robust car industry using the local factory and foreign technology, which indicates its matter of industrial strength (Mehri, 2017).

Resistance Economy and Global Engagement

They tend to believe that Iran is completely isolated, but it cooperates with the world. It has diversified its trade both in places and products which makes it stronger and the important goods continue to enter and leave (Batmtanghelidj, 2024). Central to the plan of Iran is the notion of a resistance economy. It allows Iran to transform within the sanctions, without interfering with major employment and enterprises (Batmtanghelidj, 2024).

Limitations of Sanctions

Sanctions have not generally caused Iran to abandon its significant policy, including nuclear program. One of the factors is because the government is ideologically motivated; the government is more concerned with politics than money (Khan, Muzaffar & Khan, 2019; Takeyh & Maloney, 2011). One-party regimes such as Iran can be quite effective in coping with sanctions compared to other ones; this is why their resilience is important (Portela & Mora-Sanguinetti, 2023). The way Iran manages to cope with sanctions indicates that its policies are effective, yet it is not easy to comprehend what it will bring to its economy and relations with other countries. The issue of resistance and trading internationally provides Iran with opportunities and challenges of its economic diplomacy.

Material and Methods

Content analysis was utilized to analyze key speeches, the policy documents, and official announcements of the Iranian military and political leaders in the period. This strategy was useful in pointing to common themes, narratives, and rhetorical strategies

employed to package domestic and international issues and legitimize policy decisions. Another comparative analysis was made between the responses of Iran and the other sanctioned authoritarian governments to investigate the change and similarities in language in different contexts and times. It was this combination of techniques that allowed the close analysis of the construction of the official narratives by the Iranian government and a more accurate insight into its role in the larger framework of the authoritarian resilience in sanctions.

Theoretical framework

Authoritarian Resilience Theory

Authoritarian Resilience Theory (ART) was developed in order to understand why certain one-party governments, which most notably turned out to be the Communist Party (CCP) in China, survived beyond 1989 when most people thought that they were going to disintegrate. According to Andrew Nathan (2003), the CCP remains powerful due to the process of institutionalization, i.e. written and unwritten rules that serve as guidelines to the leaders and as a way of changing the regime in case of necessity. He enumerates four important pillars, namely; the rules that rule leadership succession and violent power struggles prevail; the system that encourages good leaders, reduces the competition among rival groups; a division of responsibilities among strong and independent state agencies; and the means in which ordinary people join in and feel legitimate, while leaders retain control. ART has suggested that it is not only through force that authoritarian regimes survive but also by ensuring daily operations go detail Lessley and by providing partial access to bureaucracies and other administrative places.

The theory also indicates that great autocracies become modernized through abandonment of unrealistic promises, appointing competent officials, simplification of rules and ensuring that people articulate themselves more freely. Nathan observes that Chinese leaders grapple with corruption, privatize, abide by the rules of the World Trade Organization and modernize, at the expense of opposition and maintenance of power. These actions correspond to what Talcott Parsons has referred to as the modern state requirements yet Nathan cautions that in reality, such transformations end up strengthening the authoritarian system. ART believes in the possibility of new rules and not a regime collapse because of outside shocks such as economic sanctions.

Critics state that ART makes these institutions appear stronger than they are. According to Bruce Gilley (2003), authoritarian governments tend to misuse, corrupt and experience legitimacy crisis since it all lies in the hands of few people. He explains that the facade of tranquility in China conceals periods of building up and falling, and that being able to connect requires normative coherence - the institutions must be in agreement with the ideals proclaimed by the party. Powerful strike hard campaigns can stop crime but contravene the rule of law, which is detrimental to legitimacy. Cheng Li (2012) also insinuates that nepotism, corruption, and faction struggle witnessed in the aftermath of the Bo Xilai affair are indicative of the weaknesses of the CCP. Li presents authoritarian resilience as a frozen system that opposes democracy and combines the resilience of China as a whole with the strength of the party, noting that the further openness of the society and the opposing elite groups disturb unity of the regime.

Recent studies introduce informal descriptions of resilience. The framework by Irina Busygina examines the usefulness of central regional relationship and patronage networks. Russian and Azerbaijani studies indicate that patronage allows the leaders to share resources, address local grievances, and reduce the openness of the division in the area. These results indicate that resilience is not only brought about by formal rules but individual connections and economic favors that hold on to the ruling group.

In Iran, ART is useful to understand why the heavy economic sanctions have not resulted in the liberty of the country under the presidency of Hassan Rouhani. The Iranian government changed by discussing a resistance economy, reinforcing loyal institutions such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, trade diversification and establishing patronage networks. These actions are a reflection of the institutional and informal aspects ART talks about. These additions, critics argue, can conceal enormous issues and promote more corruption and faction struggles.

The framework implies that direct pressure on particular leaders and rent-seeking webs, as well as providing aid to the civil society, can be more effective than general tactics that unintentionally support authoritarian resilience.

Results and Discussion

Did Sanctions Weaken or Strengthen the Regime?

The aim of imposing sanctions on Iran was to undermine the strength of the nation and isolate it particularly following the withdrawal of the JCPOA by the U.S. in the year 2018. However, the sanctions did not weaken the government but on the contrary, strengthened it. The governments receiving strong ideological support can produce a rally-around-the-flag effect by positioning sanctions as assaults by foreign countries and increasing their legitimacy as a result. This has been particularly evident because the Iranian politics blend both anti-imperialist and religious concepts. The government has talked of the economic frustrations of the sanctions as a patriotic sacrifice and a civilizational struggle with Western imperialism as a way of curbing the anger towards the leaders. This shift of the blame also brings together the conservative supporters and those who view resistance as a moral obligation.

Sanctions as a catalyst for Regime legitimacy

Approximately 2 million tweets of Iranian manipulators have been analyzed and it was discovered that even individuals who used to attack the regime were more pro-government after the wide-ranging U.S. penalties. Specific sanctions against certain elites also led to a significantly smaller rallying effect indicating that overall economic distress made people more proximate to the state than did policies that targeted individual officials. It demonstrates the influence of the structure of sanctions on the perception of society: general sanctions produce a sense of collective victimization, blur political lines, and aid the official narratives of opposition. This has been exploited by the Iranian regime whereby they show sanctions as attacks to the people but not to the government. The integration of nationalistic messages with flexibility in the economy ensured that the regime remained steady.

Economic adaptation and Nationalist Mobilization

The government established a resistance economy that promoted the production of more commodities inside the country, increased informal trade with its neighbours, including China and Iraq, and relied on the state-owned business activity such as the conglomerates of the IRGC. Such measures reduced the short-term harm of sanctions and were demonstrated on the domestic level as evidence that Iran was capable of resisting the hostility of the West. Material suffering was associated with preservation of Islam and national sovereignty and social messages emphasized the fact that suffering was a patriotic and religious obligation. Sanctions actually enhanced the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of the major economic blocs due to the joint policy of economic readjustment and ideological mobilization although they weakened the state. There is evidence to indicate that the sanctions did not cause destabilization of the system as was feared among authorities.

The 2017 presidential elections saw a higher voter turnout of almost 70% despite worsening economic issues and while protest over economic complaints also broke out in 2017 and 2019, they were quickly put down before becoming a movement that threatened the regime. These incidents show that all the sanctions increased popular discontent, they also gave the Regime a scapegoat for economic failure, which undermined domestic reform pressure and strengthen its reliance on hardline institutions (Babak, 2024). Thus, in concert with the regime's institutional control, the rally-around-the-flag eliminated any possible threats from moderate political actors as well as popular protests. Sanctions have the unintended consequences of strengthening the exact governments, they are intended to undermine in authoritarian systems with deeply ingrained ideological legitimacy. Sanctions helped the regime shift the blame away from internal mismanagement, strengthen narratives of external aggression, and create a sense of a common national flight, all of which strengthened Iran's authoritarian resilience. Through economic hardship as a political instrument, the state could enhance the degree of repression, quiet reformers and employ nationalist mobilization as a means to consolidate the power base. Sanctions were used as the tool of authoritarian legitimization of the Islamic Republic and its reinforcement of the revolutionary identity instead of being a winner of democratization. Iran sanctions are thus one of the best examples of how external pressure when applied without considering the internal politics may instead of crippling a regime give it greater strength.

Cost Benefit Analysis of the Regime

Islamic Republic has enjoyed the fruits of economic sanctions, aimed at toppling the Iranian government, but instead economic sanctions have empowered the elite hands and ensured that the regime remains intact. The article How Iran Resistance Economy influences the resilience of the regime is an excellent example of this connection (Busygina, I, 2024). The report demonstrates that Iran's economic isolation policy resulted in the establishment of a "resistance of economy", which encouraged local production, import substitution, and smuggling networks to lessen dependency on imports. The regime could be able to lessen sanctions while also strengthening state-owned enterprises and organizations like the IRGC if up to 70% of Iran's imports were replaced by domestically made goods. This change bolstered elite business networks, boosted self-reliance and cemented control among key regime actors. State propaganda benefited greatly from the story line which explained that maintaining sanctions as a group effort strengthened allegiance to the government and justified putting elite survival ahead of the general welfare.

Unequal costs and Regime Resilience

Priority-based welfare schemes shielded Iranian elites specially those working in the public sector and institutions connected to the clerical industry, while the general populace delt with hyperinflation, rapidly rising unemployment, and currency collapse. One example is that even though the economy decreases significantly during the sanctions the ruling bloc, which included state employees, bureaucrats, and members of the IRGC, remained to enjoy preferential access to resources, social services, and subsidies, which decreased the likelihood of elite defections. Sanctions, meanwhile, severely damaged public health facilities. After 2009, 39.2% of these metrics changed, and a few of them got considerably worse after 2018. Chronic diseases like COPD, hypertension, and thalassemia increased mortality, household food spending increased, and out-of-pocket medical expenses skyrocketed (Christian, V. Soest, 2024) As public and private healthcare facilities faced financial and logistical isolation, these tendencies also occurred in tandem with a decline in access to necessary medications and medical equipment. Despite humanitarian exceptions, Globalization and Health and Human Rights Watch claim that sanctions disrupted pharmaceutical and banking supply chains, leading to shortages of life-saving medications for people with HIV/AIDS, cancer, epilepsy, and hemophilia. According to HRW, the banks and companies were reluctant to sanction payments to humanitarian goods as they feared sanctions, which also affected patients with unusual diseases.

These problems do not shake the authoritarian regime of Iran. The elites maintain their privileges through manipulating social benefits and leaving normal citizens with the burden of unfair costs. Iran's privilege-based welfare system was a crucial element, as Rethinking Iran noted. Families of state contractors, military personnel, and public employees were shielded from income shocks and inflation, whereas those in the unorganized sector were not. According to consumption surveys, elites stayed safe while the actual spending of disadvantaged populations decreased. Economic suffering therefore did not result in political pressure since the most powerful people were protected from adversity. From a cost-benefit analysis, penalties had little effect on politics but had significant negative effects on society, including decreased GDP growth, severe inflation, and service deprivation.

In a nutshell, sanctions caused the Iranian people significant economic pain but did not break up the unity of the elite. Instead, the government adjusted through social programs that gave preference to politically powerful groups, import substitution, and frameworks for resistance economies. Although public health suffered greatly - decreased access to care, greater mortality and illness - elites were protected. According to the regime, improved Institutional control and strengthened ideological legitimacy were among the advantages, but marginalized groups bore the majority of the disadvantages. In actuality, Iran's authoritarian resilience grew stronger as the ruling class endured hardships while the rest of society prospered. Therefore, sanctions were a measure to strengthen the authoritarian system rather than to overthrow the dictatorship.

Assessment against Theoretical Expectations

Leading research suggests that sanction's impacts differ greatly depending on the type of government despite the fact that they are frequently marketed as instruments of regime change. The seminal work examines more than 120 penalty instances from 1960 to 1997 in various authoritarian countries (Escribà-Folch, Abel, 2010). Political systems that rely significantly on patronage from trade profits or foreign aid such as monarchies and personalist regimes are particularly vulnerable to destabilization through sanctions, according to their research. In these systems, the regime's ability to use patronage to separate loyalty is directly undermined when external revenue is cut off, which raises the possibility of an elite coupe or defection. On the other hand, military and one-party systems which have more sophisticated state institutions and wider revenue bases are more likely to withstand economic shocks by escalating repression and transferring fiscal burdens.

Iran's Strategic Adaptation and Pressure-Proofing

Christian provides a more comprehensive conceptual framework of how authoritarian governments use "Pressure-Proofing"—changing institutional posture, narratives, and economic adaptation to counteract the effects of sanctions. Authoritarian governments typically use sanctions to paint foreign powers as Imperial aggressors in order to mobilize support at home under nationalist rhetoric. Approximately three quarters of nations that are subjects to UN, US or EU sanctions are autocratic. Two testable theoretical expectations are suggested by these contributions taken together:

Under sanctions, the single-party/military hybrid Iranian regime type, which is headed by clerical elites, should be difficult to overthrow.

Instead of collapsing, Iran is expected to use repression tactics, institutional adaptation, and discursive pressure proofing to turn outside pressure into legitimacy.

The sanctions imposed in 2018 caused a catastrophic economic down turn but Iran's political power persisted. The state reduced capital-intensive long-term projects, increased internal revenue collection and redirected spending toward elite loyal institutions (such as

IRGC state and entitlements and public sector salaries) rather than breaking apart under financial strain—exactly the Cooptation-repression shift. Iran vigorously supported resistance economy strategies, emphasized sovereignty and self-reliance, and galvanized nationalist sentiment. In order to influence public opinion in its favor, the administration used Fridays Sermons, official media, and ecclesiastical messages to depict penalties as unfair aggression. A rally-around-the-flag effect was made possible, by shifting internal responsibility to outside parties.

Why sanctions failed

Despite harsh sanctions, Iran's leadership was able to preserve electoral legitimacy symbols: reformist individuals were suppressed, protest movements failed to unite into long-term political alternatives, and turn out in the 2017 and 2021 elections remained high at about 70%. Import substitution, commerce with China and Russia and the growth of semi-state organizations like the IRGC are all part of the region's economic adaptation plan. The IRGC'S capacity to control above 50% of oil exports of Iran by using "ghost fleet" tankers and the shadow economy to get around sanctions is a prime example of this adaption of the elite network. This program, which circumvented official institutions and boosted revenue for regime-affiliated organizations, was consistent with von Soest's portrayal of regime's converting sanctions into financial benefits for devoted groups.

Additionally, victimization and moral fortitude were highlighted in public messaging. State media described the sanctions as "economic terrorism" or "medical-terrorism", arguing that the west intended to punish citizens rather than challenge Regime policy. Resistance language that promoted unity and down played domestic criticism was consistent with this story. As a regime type that is adapted to resilience and thorough effective pressure-proofing. Iran therefore, fulfilled both theoretical assumptions. The regime's capacity to weaponize ideology, reallocate fiscal resources, coopt a sizeable portion of elites, and reorganize trade avoidance methods all directly contributed to its survival and, in some ways, its strengthening. The structure and adaptation of Iran's regime techniques were perfectly suited to withstand sanctions, which is why they failed to destabilize the country. This is where theory and practice intersect. According to above concepts, coercive sanctions cause personalist regimes to fall; but, Iran's hybrid single-party, religious-military dictatorship instead focused on consolidating elite authority and redistributing fiscal constraints-limited oil revenue, shortages of foreign exchange, and growing subsidy burden. Sanctions enhanced Iran's ideological legitimacy by fostering institutional resilience and strategic narrative control. This thesis uses Iran as a case study to support that theoretical model: sanction pressure tends to fail at bringing about change in the absence of regime-type vulnerability or elite-division, but it can also strengthen authoritarian resilience through, structured, flexible, and symbolic mechanism. Therefore, Iran is a prime example of how authoritarian survival maybe orchestrated despite persistent pressure from the global economy.

Limitations and Broader implications of findings

The findings are interesting, yet they have certain limits. The political situation in Iran made it difficult to acquire original data hence the researchers were forced to rely on secondary sources which may be biased. The paper considers only the presidency of Rouhani and not what has occurred following the election of Ebrahim Raisi into power. Since the local and international forces are required to intervene simultaneously, there is still no easy way of demonstrating a direct cause-and-effect relation between sanctions and the response of the government.

In general, Iran demonstrates that the mixed economic sanctions are effective. They may give harm to the economy, but also assist an authoritarian society. This paper argues that sanctions were intended to undermine the government but instead they strengthened

it as it was able to change and elite power remained intact and a nationalist narrative was propagated. Sanctions may fail to achieve the intended result without protecting individuals, dialogues with other nations, and assistance of autonomous organizations, which make the regime more powerful.

We must have numerous tricks to address the sources of authoritarian control and what the people desire to have in order to achieve the long-lasting change. This change can hardly be brought about by economic pressure itself.

Theoretical implications

The paper provides theoretical support for the claim that broad penalties can have unforeseen implications by allowing authoritarian regimes to adjust and even solidify their hold on power. Sanctions in the Iranian situation allowed the dictatorship to concentrate resources in loyalist networks and stifle independent society activity, increasing economic suffering for common people. This was a political weapon that leaders used to point the finger to outsiders and unite their nation. Nevertheless, punishments just strengthened the authoritarian rule and did not contribute to democracy.

Conclusion

The case of Iran under the leadership of Hassan Rouhani reveals that broad economic sanctions are detrimental to the economy of the country but they do not bring democracy. The research question was the following: do sanctions undermine an authoritarian rule or strengthen it? The solution is inclined towards strengthening it. The sanctions demonstrate numbers have resulted in the economy collapsing, the money losing its value, and the scarcity of basic commodities. Nonetheless, the regime continued operating by transferring money to the altruistic groups, enlisting the assistance of the Guard, and extending gifts and favors. According to them, the sanctions were an alien invasion, and the leaders began a story of resistance-economy in order to indicate that they would not need external assistance, evoke a sense of national pride, and to evade blame. The same elites remained in power and institutions made people silent, and special assistance was keeping workers and religious leaders safe. The findings support the assumption that sanctions tend not to destabilize single-party or military-religious regimes and even legitimize autocracy. As a policy, comprehensive sanctions can enhance autocracy. Instead, it should be better to take money out of the wrongdoers, maintain the humanitarian assistance, provide actual diplomatic offers, and collaborate with other states. Constant assistance to free media and civil organizations is essential to provide people with a mouthpiece. Our future endeavor ought to explore Iran and other such regimes to determine what they have in common to survive and the manner in which computer spying combines with financial reduction. The research was limited: it used only the secondary information and only one country. It would help add negotiations with rebels and see past the time of Rouhani.

Recommendations

The results of the study are important in policy making. Sanctions have a higher chance of succeeding when they target individuals, organizations, and companies that have connections with authoritarian regimes. It is not nice to hit anyone without considering the fact that it hurts the economy.

The pressure should be accompanied by actual motivations to comply with rules, such as providing a slow removal of restrictions in case of perceived changes. One nation on its own allows the government you are targeting to exploit the differences between the nations that are imposing sanctions on them to evade the regulations. There are countries to cooperate with.

Moreover, a consistent global support of the free media, civil society and safe communication systems can enable the society to be stronger.

The protection of human needs should also be considered in any sanctions plan to ensure that people have the opportunity to obtain food, medicine, and other essentials.

More research is also identified in the study. A comparison of the various authoritarian nations that are under sanctions may reveal how they remain powerful. When a punishment is removed, over time, studies can follow to determine the duration of these changes.

We should also learn how authoritarian control that is supported by technology is associated with trade interruption as more nations employ digital spying tools in the targeted nations.

The impact of sanction on certain classes of people, such as women, youth, and disadvantaged individuals, is easier to comprehend using in-depth research.

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