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Iran

Iranians, Elections, Sanctions: Oppressed by the Islamic Republic and Starved by the International Regime

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Note from LeftEast editors: The 2021 presidential elections were held in Iran on June 18th. The incumbent president, Hassan Rouhani was ineligible to run, being constricted by the 1979 Constitution to two consecutive terms. The Guardian Council, which oversees elections, also disqualified an unusually large number of prospective candidates, including former President Mahmud Ahmedinejad and all of the candidates popularly considered "reformists." "Principalist" Ebrahim Raisi won 72% of the vote. In the leadup to the elections there were calls to boycott them, and Reporters without Borders reported 42 cases of journalists being summoned or threatened for writing about candidates. The election had the lowest turnout (49%,) of presidential elections in the Islamic Republic's history. 14% of all votes cast were blank or invalid.

On November 8, 2000, in a comment regarding uncertain election results, [Bill Clinton said](#), "the American people have now spoken, but it's going to take a little while to determine exactly what they said." In the case of the Iranian presidential elections that took place on June 18, 2021, as well as in prior Iranian elections, the equivalent statement would be something along the lines of: 'the Iranian people have not been allowed to speak, but we already know exactly what they would say,' or 'the Iranians Have Spoken but Were Not Allowed to Say Anything.'

Most Iranians, like most Americans, or the majority of any population anywhere in the world for that matter, would choose the freedom to vote without any hindrances. This much is certain.

This time around, more than half of eligible Iranian voters boycotted the whole show, precisely because they refused to accept anything less than free and fair elections. In various parts of the country, several Iranian citizens used their cellphones to record the [deserted voting centers](#) and make a statement, telling the world that their silence is indeed an unmistakable political statement.

The declared winner of the elections is the hardline cleric Ebrahim Raisi, who has been at the heart of the regime's violence against Iranians for four decades. He was appointed General Prosecutor of the city of Karaj in 1980, when he was only twenty years old. Then, he became the Prosecutor General of Hamedan and later the Deputy Prosecutor of Tehran. In 1988, as one of the four members of the notorious "[death commission](#)," he played a major role in the execution of thousands of political prisoners, whose bodies were buried in unidentified mass graves. Raisi has continued to hold top positions within the juridical establishment of the regime, prosecuting tens of thousands of political prisoners. Since 1988, he has always held an influential office in the regime's penal apparatuses, such as the Prosecutor of Tehran, the First Deputy to the Head of the Judiciary, the Prosecutor General of Iran, and finally the Head of the Judiciary. In 2018, he referred to the 1988 massacre of thousands of political prisoners as "one of the proud achievements of the system." (see page 13 of [this report](#)).

Aware of numerous reports that indicate Raisi's involvement in vast human rights violations and crimes against humanity, on June 19, 2021, [Agnès Callamard](#), the Secretary General of Amnesty International, stated, "We continue to call for Ebrahim Raisi to be investigated for his involvement in past and ongoing crimes under international law, including by states that exercise universal jurisdiction."

However, it is not likely that calls from Amnesty International and other human rights organizations, as well as the Iranian opposition, will lead to an effective international effort to persecute Raisi. What could and should be done to prevent another embarrassing blow to post-WWII international law, international human rights law, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights may be too complicated to even mention here.

Nonetheless, we can easily point out what should not be done in the name of punishing the Iranian regime: namely, an economic embargo on the country. There are many countries that were, or have been, subjected to economic embargoes, including North Korea, Iraq, Myanmar, Cuba, Venezuela, and Syria to name a few, and in every case, the embargo intensified the targeted population's suffering and further disempowered them politically.

To date, American or wider international economic embargoes have not led to a single regime change since 1950, when the first sanctions were imposed on North Korea, and 1962, when J. F. Kennedy's administration put an embargo on Cuba. In fact, we could deduce from past experiences that embargoes have the opposite effect. North Korea and Cuba suffered from the longest and most severe American and international embargoes. There were of course various partial sanctions on the Soviet Union and Eastern European states within the East bloc, but none reached the length and the severity of the North Korean and Cuban cases. Is it a coincidence that both regimes, despite their significant differences, have survived three decades after the fall of the Soviet Union and its East European satellite states?

Saddam Hussein's Iraq was subjected to a tightened embargo by the [United Nations](#) from 1990 until 2003. In this case, I have first-hand experience, as I witnessed how the impoverishment of the vast majority of the Iraqi population in the 1990s completely paralyzed civil society. It was as if the regime's oppression was not enough, so the United Nations imposed a [devastating blockade](#) on the Iraqis, resulting in starvation and near-total deterioration of the health and education systems. The embargo completely disempowered Iraqis, rendering the potential for popular revolt against the regime next to impossible. Eventually, it took another devastating US war to remove Saddam Hussein. Iraqi survivors and new generations continue to pay the price for the economic embargo that destroyed the country's infrastructure and an American invasion that ended up turning Iraq into a failed state.

Referring to the actual genocidal effects of the sanctions, in 1999, [Noam Chomsky](#) said, "the number of Iraqi people who have died in the last eight years as a result of the sanctions exceeds the death toll due to all the weapons of mass destruction used in human history." The following passage by Domenico Losurdo on the embargo on Iraq is also worth quoting here:

We are dealing with a kind of postmodern version of the concentration camp. In the age of globalization, there is no need to deport a people: it is enough to block the flow of food and medicines - especially if one succeeds in destroying aqueducts, drainage systems and health infrastructure with 'intelligent' bombing, as happened in Iraq. What will future historians say about this 'man-made famine', this collective death sentence, pronounced not in the course of a ruthless civil war or a dramatic life-and-death struggle between great powers, but in 'peace' time, without even the justification of the Cold War? [1]

"Man-made famine" is indeed more fitting to describe what happened in 1990-2003, or the ongoing situations in North Korea and Venezuela, than the starvations that were caused by Stalin's economic policies, simply because in the case of sanctions, the famine is an entirely intentional and premeditated outcome of the crime, as opposed to unexpected, or at worst, partly or arguably intended, results of state policies. By the same token there is no exaggeration in labeling such indiscriminatory embargoes on a whole population, "weapons of mass destruction," or means of creating a "postmodern version of the concentration camp."

Raisi should be "investigated for the crimes against humanity of murder, enforced disappearance and torture," as the [Secretary General of Amnesty International](#) said. Also, the regime should be prevented from causing more threats to the region, but it has become clear that international economic sanctions will not achieve any such foreign policy goals. The economic deprivation of any population can only bring about more political deprivation. Put briefly, there is no grounds or rationale for justifying economic sanctions against Iranians, or North Koreans, Cubans, and Venezuelans for that matter. The only sanctions that should be imposed and rather widely are those that are carefully designed to end arms trade and industry. In other cases, so called "smart sanctions" may be effective if they target

individual officials and fanatical organizations.

Despite all the international sanctions and the regime's manipulation of scarce sources of livelihood, Raisi's regime still does not have the support of the majority of Iranians. Whatever the international players do or do not do, they should immediately stop penalizing the primary victims of the regime, the peoples of Iran. In addition to the endless suffering of innocent people, the only tangible outcome to be expected from the continued economic sanctions is the antagonization of more and more ordinary Iranians, which is precisely what the fundamentalist regime aims to accomplish. We are talking about an extremely despotic and discriminatory regime that portrays the West as the mortal enemy of Iranians. Yet, the policy and decision makers in the United States continue to act as if this is exactly the message they want to deliver to ordinary Iranians.

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Source [Left East](#).

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[1] Losurdo, D. (2015), *War and Revolution: Rethinking the 20th Century*, trans. G. Elliott, London: Verso, 305.