

Why do some failing states never fail

Written by Administrator
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With Russia's help, corrupt regimes in Iran and Venezuela have prospered from catastrophe

Roger Boyes - Wednesday February 26 2020, 12.01am, The Times

Iran looks this week like the unluckiest country in the world. A rigged, widely boycotted parliamentary election has brought in a new cohort of hardliners. The supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is still smarting from having seen his favourite general killed by a US missile. The accidental shooting down of a Ukrainian airliner by trigger-happy Revolutionary Guards highlighted the country's chronic failure of government.

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Every extended middle-class family has a relative who wants to emigrate. Students and workers are still ready to take to the streets. To top it all, the coronavirus has claimed, by one estimate, at least 50 lives. Neighbouring countries are closing their borders, quarantining a pariah state.

Iran should be a simmering cauldron right now, on the cusp of revolutionary change. Instead, this unhappy nation is learning to live with its victimhood. The West needs to understand the deeper meaning of this apparent resilience. Led by the United States, we have been demanding that leaders in Iran, Venezuela and Syria either reverse aggressive policies or step down. The harder we push, the tougher our sanctions, the faster these failing states seem to turn into hellholes. But rather than this stoking domestic support for regime change, leaders seem to hang on to power quite comfortably.

Syria's Bashar al-Assad may be standing on the rubble of his country but no one doubts that he will win, with Russia's help, his final battle in Idlib. Nicolás Maduro was written off last year and the West courted a potential rival in Juan Guaidó, but Maduro's still at the helm, even though hospitals are falling apart and people are fleeing in their millions (the number of refugees from Maduro's misrule is expected to reach six million this year, thus overtaking even Assad's ugly record). There are food shortages, power cuts, the currency is foundering. A cup of coffee in Caracas last year cost 450 bolivares. Now it costs 30,000.

Obviously, these are dictatorships backed by secret police, snatch squads and goons who tear out fingernails. They know how to batten down resistance. And since they still have a few bargaining chips — oil in the case of Venezuela and Iran, a naval port in Syria — they can count on the brawn of Russia.

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Crucially, though, the ruling cliques have adapted to and profited from sanctions. To be head of customs in these countries is to be on the road to self-enrichment. Whole new patterns of kleptocracy have opened up. The Venezuelan economy runs on US dollars and the Maduro court, in league with criminal gangs, can turn the flow of imported goods on and off, maximising personal profit. Black marketeers and smugglers have become a new class and, together with the security establishment, see their future as linked to Maduro. To prevent the economy from being completely paralysed, Maduro's ministers are leasing back premises expropriated by his predecessor, Hugo Chavez.

In Iran, businesses linked to the Revolutionary Guard have grown rich on the back of political connections. In Syria, the golden circle starts with the Assad clan and stretches outwards in a way that makes a nonsense of the sanctions that bar individuals from travelling to the West or accessing their bank accounts. It is a system built on trusted couriers and the active connivance of Russia. Those co-opted into the process naturally remain loyal to the regime. They take precautions — wealth is hidden, extravagant purchases are made abroad by personal shoppers — but they don't yet fear the anger of the masses. The lesson they have learnt over the past five years is that enforced poverty depoliticises rather than radicalises the population.

Revolutions erupt because of rising but thwarted expectations. So the primary task of kleptocrats is to banish ambition. The ambitious, the able-bodied, the desperate flee the country in droves. And the leaders are OK with that, too. One day, they figure, the pressure of refugees mounting up in western countries will force the outside world to strike a deal with leaders who have demonstrated their survival skills. Allowing their states to fail gives them a perverse advantage: it makes them indispensable.

As a result many people in these miserable states don't even pretend to trust their leaders. Better muddle through with the ruler we know, is the short-term calculation, than topple him and risk the wholesale collapse of society. They keep their focus on family, not state; the health of

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their children and elders. Venezuela used to have the best-funded health system in Latin America. Now nursing staff have to pump incubators by hand for newborn babies.

Such everyday tragedies have to inform our policies. There have always been reservations about sending convoys of aid to the poorest subjects in these states. The message of sanctions — stop your malign activities or we will punish you — could be undermined. Helping the downtrodden could be seen as a sign of western sentimentality rather than resolve. But we shouldn't overthink this.

Whether in Iran, Venezuela or Syria, humanitarian aid, clearly marked as coming from a concerned international community, should be part of our response to mismanaged dictatorships. It makes our argument for us: your leaders are too incompetent or too avaricious to perform the basic duties of governance. The brunt of sanctions should now fall on the main enabler of rogue states: Russia.