

Iran: the case for human rights-based sanctions

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When the killing machine begins its deadly harvest, the fine line that separates indifference from complicity vanishes before our eyes. As Iran's deadly repression continues apace, Western democracies cannot continue pretending it is business as usual. Before the June 12 presidential elections, many reasons were adduced for not contemplating further measures to pressure Iran: Russia and China were not on board; sanctions needed time to yield results; US engagement was on the table. And talking tough to Iran – including possibly more sanctions – would have given succour to the radicals inside the regime without yielding substantial results in the short term.

This logic has cost us precious time. Russia and China are still not on board and an imperfect sanctions regime is better than none at all in the race against time. With the most intransigent elements of Iran's ruling elites now firmly in power, temporising has gained the international community nothing. As for engagement, speaking to a regime that concocts enemies abroad to justify repression at home is unlikely to yield a suitable compromise – a system that relies on repression to survive is rarely prone to concessions unless its very survival is in question. Shaking its leaders' blood-stained hands as if nothing has happened will not buy the West a deal – it will only buy time for the regime.

Widespread popular protests and considerable cracks in the leadership in Tehran have also exposed another aspect of Iran's power politics which Western diplomats would be foolish to ignore: the regime's legitimacy rests on shaky ground. The extent of its repression and the inability to fully impose order three months after it rigged the elections are a measure of such internal weakness.

Herein then lies the dilemma for the international community – and especially for Western democracies. Relying on the possibility of an Iranian democratic counterrevolution to unblock the nuclear impasse is more a hope than a strategy. The demise of the Islamic Republic could happen tomorrow, in six months, or in six years. The nuclear programme's timeline is much shorter.

Understandably then, the US administration still hopes to persuade the regime to relent on its nuclear programme. But Europeans need not face the dilemma of engagement over sanctions. After all, Europe has done both for the last six years, proving that the one does not preclude the other. Henceforth, dialogue with Tehran cannot be had at the price of ignoring the regime's blatant rigging of the results, its brutal repression of peaceful street protests, and the crackdown on reformist figures across the clerical establishment, the political elites and the media.

A Western strategy to confront Iran must therefore rely on a number of tools, which centre on two goals. First, Iran's nuclear ambitions must be thwarted at all costs, for a regime that behaves so erratically and brutally against its own people cannot be relied upon to act rationally in international relations. Second, Iran's people must become a central component of our strategy, as an interested audience if not as an active ally.

In order to ensure the people of Iran remain confident that the West will not sacrifice their aspirations on the altar of a compromise with their torturers, four steps are required. First, diplomatic engagement on the nuclear file; second, symbolic sanctions that signal our displeasure at Iran's internal conduct and our condemnation of its human rights abuses; third, a strong effort at public diplomacy directed at the Iranian people; and fourth, a concerted strategy of tough economic sanctions to be rolled out the minute that engagement fails.

Recent events have cast serious doubt on the possibility that engagement can work. Yet engagement has its value. It gives time to convince recalcitrant allies and sceptics of sanctions that all avenues for compromise have been sufficiently tried. It gives the regime a chance to change behaviour. And it communicates to the Iranian people that the West is ready to talk to Iran before it inflicts economic pain on its people. It puts the burden of failure on the regime itself.

That is why immediately adopting a set of largely symbolic and diplomatic measures would have several important benefits. It would signal to Iran's dissidents that they are not alone, but it would also enable the West to modulate its sanctions strategy, hitting now but leaving the heavy ammunition for later.

The West stands for democracy and human rights. Iran's regime has shown its true face as a crude violator of both. Isolating it by recalling Western ambassadors, denying visas or transit rights to senior Iranian officials involved in the repression, suspending bilateral cultural and trade dialogue until further notice are all arsenals in our diplomatic toolkit. None of these measures would hurt the chances of a nuclear deal; none would thwart US engagement. But they would allow a gradual escalation of sanctions should that policy be chosen later by America and its allies.

Our indifference to Iran's human rights abuses did not help our diplomatic agenda before June 12 – and it may now help the regime feel confident that its internal repression is cost-free. Morally, Western democracies cannot afford to be bystanders. They should exact a heavy price from Iran for its brutal ways.