

What Venezuela's Tragic Predicament Teaches Iran

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Analysts, including commentators sympathetic to Chavismo, are understandably offering a mix of explanations for Venezuela's tragic and worsening predicament this year. With a debate as urgent as this, it is tempting to contrast the US success in crushing the Latin American nation with the resilience of a more irritating adversary, Iran. The Islamic Republic has more than angered US administrations regularly by punching above its weight. Until Russia re-asserted itself in recent years, top American policy makers, and their think tank and media allies, for almost a generation declared Iran the most urgent foreign policy headache more consistently than they did any other foe.

Venezuela never rose nearly to that level of concern. There is, for example, nothing in its recent history to rattle Washington as did Israel's expulsion from Arab land in 2000 by Lebanese Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed militia, something even combined Arab armies have never accomplished. Yet Venezuela is paying a much steeper price than Iran for insubordination. Some of us may be wondering what wisdom Iran will draw from the uneven outcomes.

The first lesson Tehran will see as counter-revolution appears close to swallowing Venezuela confirms what Iran's strategic planners have known all along. They believe that making concessions makes no sense because no American administration will reliably accept co-existence with Iran as an independent player with legitimate security interests. So they argue that resisting Washington's demands is the only option. Venezuela does not have a nuclear or missile program and is not accused of sectarian expansionism, but is on the brink of US-orchestrated regime change anyway, which seems to prove Iran's point. There will therefore be no softening of Iran's defense doctrine in the foreseeable future. More in a moment on what the Venezuela racket is teaching Iran.

There's good reason to compare Venezuela and Iran. Except for Iran's larger population size and military muscle, and allowing for Venezuela's extreme dependence on food imports, the two nations' key strengths and liabilities are comparable. They depend equally on (uncertain) oil exports and both have been targeted with crippling sanctions and capital flight and seen their access to international finance evaporate. Their late 20th century revolutions relied equally on charismatic leadership and overwhelming participation of popular classes. Both have vastly increased services to their mass base and counted on high voter turnout ever since. Although both would welcome friendship with the United States, Washington demonizes them for (realistic) fear that their mass mobilization models and stubborn self-determination be contagious in Latin America and the Middle East.

The forces arrayed against Iran are, to say the least, formidable. The country has endured wrath and subversion from America's client regimes on its borders longer than has Venezuela. Furthermore, containing Iran or worse has long been declared top priority by

well-connected wealthy lobbies affiliated with AIPAC, whose bipartisan influence is unsurpassed.

If the US and its regional allies have not managed to destabilize Iran, it hasn't been for lack of trying. They even instigated civil war in Syria to bring Iran to its knees and failed. With the Islamic Republic still standing and stable, how to explain the fragility of Venezuela? Could it be that the two anti-imperialist revolutions are more different than they are similar?

It's a question worth exploring. In what follows, I will look beyond Iran's 1978-79 Islamic revolution for answers. I will suggest that the key years in Iranian history that most closely parallel the rise and forced decline of the Bolivarian revolution were 1952-53, when secular nationalism rose and collapsed in a US-engineered coup in Tehran. I will finish by positing that, if today a parallel to Iran's hardheaded national security doctrine is to be found in the Western Hemisphere, it's in Cuba rather than Venezuela.

Historic Ups and Downs

Desperation similar to Venezuela's is not unfamiliar in post-revolutionary Iran. Much like Venezuela this year, Iran was abandoned by world powers and reactionary neighboring states in 1980, who threw their weight behind Iraq's eight year war on Iran. When Saddam invaded (with a wink and a nod from Washington), Iran was in the grip of infighting and raised expectations of a revolution's first year. Its military was already decimated by plundered arms depots, a ban on arms imports, desertion and purges. Not to mention that Iran's assets, worth tens of billions of dollars, were ordered frozen in the US.

Food staples, fuel, and foreign exchange were strictly rationed and military hardware needs were procured on the international black market, laying the groundwork for future corruption that continues today. Untold thousands of skilled minds slipped on foot into Turkey and Pakistan in search of asylum in Europe and beyond. Under those circumstances, revolutionary Iran should have been easy prey for hostile Western powers that wanted their old privileges back.

But the national emergency came with its own game changer, a military innovation powerhouse named the Islamic Republic Revolutionary Guard, whose mature version today improves Iran's odds of withstanding forced regime change. Sworn to expand Iran's wartime self-reliance, IRGC has grown into a sophisticated network of defense and infrastructure industries that have largely evaded privatization. I have it on good authority that Venezuela has nothing that functions like IRGC's parallel national economy to help beat back foreign economic and military pressure. Washington designated the Guard a "foreign terrorist organization" earlier this month.

When the war ended in 1988, no one expected Iran, with hundreds of thousands maimed or killed and its treasury depleted, to emerge more stable than what Venezuela is looking like in April, 2019. But it was able within fifteen years to organize effective resistance to US occupation forces in Iraq, followed by a major role in obliterating Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Venezuela has been far less adventurous, but has nevertheless succumbed to US-sponsored counter-revolution.

In 1953 a similar fate befell Iran's wildly popular movement to restrict dictatorial monarchy and wrestle control of its oil industry from a British monopoly. The revered secular prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, inspired and rode an unprecedented wave of popular

demands for social justice and national rights. He argued Iran's case before the World Court and won while the UK organized an international boycott of Iranian oil. Within months, Mosaddegh's empowerment and reform program was cut short by a CIA coup. His nemesis, the young Shah, returned from brief exile and launched a 25 year dictatorship in which thousands lost their lives or livelihoods. (A few years after the regime change, I was among thousands of school children ordered to cheer for the motorcade of the visiting American dignitary behind the coup, President Eisenhower. My father, a ranking officer in Iran's royal army counter-intelligence, approved. Years later, less than a week after His Majesty fled the country again, never to return, my father was arrested and very nearly executed in retirement.)

Beware of Good Intentions

Unlike Washington hawks bent on re-conquering Venezuela today, Cold Warriors of yesteryear never claimed that brutalized Iranians needed to be rescued from their government. Rather, American propaganda against Mosaddegh's Iran centered on ostensible territorial integrity worries, as it does now. In 1953, underestimating the expansionist ambitions of the Soviet giant next door was the prime minister's declared principal sin. Fast forward to our time and Iranian exporters of revolution, not military intervention by the US and its Gulf allies, are conveniently faulted for Iraq's and Syria's instability. Nationalist Iran endangered Western civilization by ignoring Soviet agents in every Persian closet. The Islamic Republic is doing the same, according to secretary of state Mike Pompeo, by harboring Al-Qaeda sleeping cells.

While in office, Mosaddegh was by all accounts a genuine social democrat who believed firmly in civil society, pluralism and rule of law. He was fond of diplomacy and even traveled to Washington to naively ask for help against the British. Except in egregious rare cases, he largely respected freedom of assembly and opposition press, much like President Hugo Chavez would do years later in Venezuela. The world learned when it was too late that Britain had been paying more than a few media and parliamentary opponents to undercut Mosaddegh. There is every reason to believe that, had Western-funded "democracy promotion" and "human rights" NGOs been global in his era, Mosaddegh would have tolerated their in-country operations, too, as Venezuelan revolutionary authorities did for too long.

(With the shattering of Mosaddegh's National Front overnight, Iran's other secular major political force, the disgraced Tudeh communist party, also disintegrated, leaving religion as the next generation's hope for mass mobilization. Many frustrated opponents have since 1979 complained that the Islamization of government was itself a counter-revolution. Others, most notably reformist cleric and former speaker of parliament, Mehdi Karroubi, have not been shy to advocate privatization of oil to de-fund "undeserved" social spending. He has lived under house arrest for other reasons since 2011.)

The Islamic Republic's reform faction has for years argued that freedoms modeled by Mosaddegh would, if applied today, result in a strengthening of national unity and therefore advance Iran's sovereign defense. Their case is, sadly, not helped by the central role played by so-called "independent" opposition media and "civil society groups" in Venezuela's unsuccessful 2002 coup and catastrophic events this year.

Similarly, critics of vetting of candidates for elected office by Iran's Guardian Council now have Venezuela's counter-revolutionary parliament as proof of what can happen in a

country targeted by the global superpower when privileged subversives are free to form a legislative majority. We can be sure that Iran's elections officials feel vindicated.

If Cuba were to model its politics after Venezuela's more tolerant system, or if the Islamic Republic were to adopt Mosaddegh-style liberalism that it flirted with two decades ago under reformist President Khatami, risks of regime change could increase substantially. That's what Venezuela's devastation teaches Iran.

The horrible and worsening suffering of Venezuela's working majority in the hands of US-backed coup plotters will, alas, be seen in Tehran as one more reason to consider expanded civil liberties a luxury that Iran can ill afford. As far as Iranian authorities are concerned, there is apparently no better way to promote the common good than to be ever more vigilant and take no chances. If Mosaddegh were alive today, he might hesitate to disagree.

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