

The Politics of Endurance: Sanctions Resilience in Cuba and Iran

Written by Ninon de Buchet

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/04/29/the-politics-of-endurance-sanctions-resilience-in-cuba-and-iran/>

NINON DE BUCHET, APR 29 2025

This essay will draw on the examples of the US embargo on Cuba and anti-Iran sanctions to analyse the internal mechanisms that lead to target state resilience. It will argue that the regimes in Cuba and Iran have consolidated their power and legitimacy, firstly through economic reforms and the selective adoption of neoliberal policies to mitigate the effects of sanctions, and secondly through ideologically-supported national discourses of resistance. By implementing measures conducive to economic survival and social cohesion, both countries have endured decades of sanctions and resisted external attempts to induce regime change. The first part of the essay will explore sanctions resilience in theory and consider how failure to account for certain mechanisms within target states may render sanctions regimes counter-productive. The second section will turn to the examples of Cuba and Iran. It will begin by analysing the effects of specific policy changes, such as the legalisation of self-employment in Cuba and economic diversification in Iran as well as the emergence of resistance economies in both countries. It will then turn to population-centric social reforms, particularly in the education sector, and conclude that the two key mechanisms enabling Cuban and Iranian resilience to sanctions are the mitigation of political insecurity through economic reforms and the reinforcement of anti-Western national discourse through ideology.

The following analysis of resilience mechanisms will centre around post-1979 Revolution Iran and Cuba since its 'Special Period', the economic crisis that began after the fall of the Soviet Union and marked the intensification of the US sanctions regime (Hove, Ndawana, and Nhemachena 2020, 181). The main objective of sanctions in both cases has been to create enough hardship to induce policy change: In Cuba, the US sanctions sought an end to the Castro regime (Rodríguez 2024, 187); in Iran, although objectives have shifted since the implementation of sanctions, the principal aims have been democratisation and to stop the Islamic Republic from acquiring nuclear weapons (Esfandiary and Fitzpatrick 2011, 143). While research on sanctions resilience is abundant, less attention has been paid to the internal reforms that help regimes withstand economic pressure. This essay therefore aims to contribute to the growing literature on this topic, employing an interpretivist line of inquiry to explore Cuba and Iran's resilience-enhancing measures on the domestic level. Furthermore, by comparing a small island state and a resource-rich country, the essay looks beyond regime types and external trade relationships, focusing instead on sanctioned states' response to external pressure through societal mobilisation.

The essay will refer to the World Trade Organization's definition of economic resilience: "the ability of a system [...] to prevent and prepare for, cope with and recover from shocks" (World Trade Organization 2021, 7). It must be acknowledged that resilience does not mean economic prosperity. According to Human Rights Watch's World Report (2023, 171), the Cuban population suffers from food and medicine scarcity, regular blackouts, and a deterioration of living conditions. Similarly, US sanctions regularly compromise Iran's ability to provide basic social services, most notably during the Covid-19 pandemic (Abdoli 2020, 1464). Resilience is therefore equated to endurance, which Cuba and Iran have demonstrated through the longevity of their regimes and pursuit of unfavourable policies despite decades of sanction-related economic hardship.

Sanctions Resilience in Theory

To analyse the mechanisms that make sanctions fail, it is first vital to identify those that make them successful.

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Mainstream sanctions literature posits that once a certain threshold of economic suffering is reached, a sanctioned population will push for political change from the government (Hove, Ndawana, and Nhemachena 2020, 176). This assumption has led to the erroneous belief amongst certain policymakers that the more pressure is exerted on a population, the sooner its government will comply with a sender state's demands. Nephew questions this emphasis on inflicting suffering, noting that while this concept is crucial to sanctions' success, it simultaneously limits their impact in the long run: "Pain causes discomfort that most people seek to avoid, but it can also be managed, tolerated, and [...] adapted to, even to the profit of its recipient" (Nephew 2017, 9). The interplay of forces between governments means that widespread human suffering does not necessarily lead to the political concessions desired by a sender. Therefore, pain management or mitigation undertaken by a targeted regime can lessen the effects of sanctions and build resilience.

The failure of various sanctions regimes to achieve their stated objectives has reinvigorated the debate over the risks of unintended consequences. Sanction efficiency is generally measured by the initiating state's ability to change a target state's internal or external policies (Timofeev 2024, 151). As mentioned previously, this understanding of success overlooks longer-term developments, including adaptation. Galtung (1967, 388) contends that through adaptation, the conditions that seemed unacceptable at the onset of a conflict turn acceptable as the population becomes accustomed to hardship. Positivist accounts, which tend to overlook this process, have largely concluded that sanctions have been successful at constraining the material and military capabilities of states like Cuba and Iran (Kirkham, Jia, and Woo 2024, 48). Although this assertion is correct, it does not in itself guarantee sanction effectiveness: for sanctions aimed at effecting regime change to be considered successful, they must bring about a desired change in political leadership or policies within a target state. Though useful for analysing the immediate effects of sanctions, positivist accounts often fail to consider their long *durée* and the mechanisms by which they operate (Kirkham, Jia, and Woo 2024, 48). The longevity of the Castro regime and the Islamic Republic, as well as Iran's ongoing nuclear weapons programme, reveal the theoretical shortcomings of many mainstream interpretations of sanctions success.

Critical theories are therefore valuable for shedding light on the reciprocal nature of sanctions and the processes by which target states become resilient to external pressure. The Welfare State Regime Reproduction, for instance, outlines counter-hegemonic trends that can arise as a result of sanctions, including institutionally-driven popular mobilisation and the solidification of the national identity within a targeted society (Kirkham 2022, 352). A sanctioning state's intention of inducing political change may unintentionally engineer conditions favourable to regime consolidation. This is especially true for states with strong ideological regimes, which appear to be less responsive to the hardships generated by sanctions (Takeyh and Maloney 2011, 1297). In such cases, ideology can serve as a powerful guide for the behaviours of households and individuals, as doctrinaire Islam does in Iran (Kirkham 2022, 349). The success of sanctions thus hinges equally as much on the domestic policies and narratives adopted by a sanctioned regime as it does on the level of economic force being exerted by the sender.

Gramscian state theory also provides a useful lens for analysing the effectiveness of sanctions over time. In *Societies Under Siege*, Lee Jones (2015, 40) focuses on sanctioned societies themselves and the dynamic relationships between social forces. Kirkham takes this one step further: "[...] in the neo-Gramscian configuration strategic communications are conceptualised as activities that drive a long-term societal transformation by shifting people's knowledge, attitudes and identities" (2019, 51). Seen in this light, sanctioned states can use effective strategic communications to influence popular attitudes and national discourse. Sanction resilience can therefore largely be attributed to the formation of centrifugal social forces within a sanctioned society, a process that states themselves can encourage by offsetting economic suffering with neoliberal policies and building social cohesion through ideology.

Neo-Liberal Economic Reforms

The next section will consider the manifestation of sanctions resilience in the cases of Cuba and Iran, starting with economic mechanisms of resilience. The US Embargo, first established in 1952 and codified into law through the 1992 Torricelli Act and 1996 Helms-Burton Act, comprises a "system of unilateral coercive measures" that has effectively excluded Cuba from large sectors of the global economy (Rodríguez 2024, 189). Despite its success in

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curtailing the Cuban economy, it has utterly failed at its principal objective of bringing about a political opening of Cuba, instead feeding into national sentiment and legitimating the very regime it sought to overthrow (Sanchez 2003, 348).

This inability to incite democratisation through economic sanctions comes from two major economic reforms adopted by the Castro regime in 1993: the legalisation of foreign currency-holding and that of self-employment. The first consisted of embracing a dual-currency system that allowed Cuba to boost foreign investment and re-integrate the global economy, albeit with restraints (Hove, Ndawana, and Nhemachena 2020, 182). From this point on, Cubans were able to purchase goods that could previously only be found on the black market and receive remittances in US dollars from family abroad (Smith 1998, 536). The legalisation of self-employment, meanwhile, enabled the promotion of tourism and resulted in “unemployment relief, tax revenue, and the incorporation of more Cubans into the dollar economy” (Smith 1999, 49). These developments were crucial in stabilising the country following the 1989 economic crisis. The Castro regime’s adaptability and willingness to overturn Soviet policies ensured its survival at a time where the US sought to strangle the regime once and for all.

Both of the aforementioned reforms entailed the reversal of key revolutionary policies (Eckstein 2010, 1049). This demonstrates that an economic opening do not necessarily translate into meaningful political transformation. The paramountcy of regime survival meant that economic concessions and enduring poverty were preferable alternatives to capitulation. Sanchez (2003, 358) argues that “Perseverance is the name of the game,” describing how the government lowered the national standard of living to stay in power indefinitely despite grievous levels of hardship. This assertion captures exactly what went astray in the US’ imposition of sanctions: it did not anticipate Cuban endurance, bolstered as it was by government-led economic reforms. The result is an economy built on the principle of resistance and in service of an authoritarian regime that has shown itself willing to lower the quality of life of its citizens in exchange for the maintenance of its sovereignty.

The essay now turns to the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has been under a fluctuating and at times contentious system of unilateral and multilateral economic sanctions since its establishment in 1979 (Emami 2024, 175). Sanctions have succeeded in isolating Iran and weakening its largely oil-based economy, resulting in constant volatility (Zweiri and Nassar 2021, 94). Nevertheless, the Islamic Republic retains a firm hold over the state of Iran.

One of the key determinants of resilience to sanctions is the Khomeini regime’s adoption of resistance economy as a codified strategy in 2018 (Emami 2024, 188). Resistance economy, which aspires to the revolutionary ideal of economic independence, has been successful in launching economic discourse away from state control and towards neoliberal policies such as privatisation and market liberalisation (Anderson 2019, 656). Although the policies included in this concept are not directly aimed at overcoming sanction-related crises, as they were in Cuba, they affect all levels of Iranian society and government and set out to strengthen the country’s economic posture and secure political stability (Emami 2024, 171). Resistance economy therefore represents a step-change in Iran’s economic discourse, facilitating resilience through its commitment to self-reliance and emancipation from the Western-led world order that seeks to curtail Iran’s nuclear and revolutionary aspirations.

Another way in which economic reforms have undermined the negative effects of sanctions is through the mobilisation of domestic capabilities. Iran’s new policies do this by encouraging job creation and production (Anderson 2019, 657). This parallels Cuba’s aforementioned activation of the tourism industry through the legalisation of entrepreneurship. Resistance economy has also involved diversification into non-oil sectors, thus reducing vulnerability to international sanctions (Masoudi 2024, 182). Iran’s reforms mirror Cuba’s in their overall strategy of maximising domestic capacities to reduce political insecurity. By guaranteeing the regime’s survivability, this process of adaptation has enabled Iran to continue pursuing its revisionist agenda.

This strategy has been met with success, as illustrated by Iran’s maintenance of its nuclear programme and admission into the BRICS coalition in January 2024 (Ferragamo 2024; Mills 2024). In fact, rather than inducing regime change, Western sanctions have increasingly led the Republic of Iran to adopt a Hobbesian posture and enhance its self-reliance (Kirkham 2019, 51). The same observation can be drawn from Cuba, which has been able to weather 60 years of severe economic repression. In this manner, political survival in the wake of sanctions has

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been the key driver behind transformative economic reforms in Cuba and Iran. Both sanctioned regimes have devoted their economies to the pursuit of self-sufficiency and opposition to US hegemony.

Reforms in the Education Sector

The final section of this essay addresses Cuba and Iran's reforms in the education sector and how these have bolstered social cohesion and fuelled nationalist sentiment, thus rendering sanctions counter-productive. Since 1993, the Castro regime ensures that its earnings from tourism go into education, giving particular priority to social programmes deemed of being conducive to a more resilient Cuba (Hove, Ndawana, and Nhemachena 2020, 182). Thanks to investments into this critical sector, Cuba has acquired the most educated population in the Caribbean and a world-renowned medical cadre (Malott 2012, 234). A notable offshoot of these reforms has been the country's policy of medical internationalism, exemplified in its highly lucrative oil-for-doctors deal with Venezuela (Feinsilver 2008, 106). In addition to providing the Castro regime with a substantial new revenue stream, health diplomacy has helped Cuba garner political capital and global prestige (Feinsilver 2008, 105). Educational reforms therefore prop up the regime financially, legitimise it both at home and abroad, and indirectly support the dissemination of revolutionary principles in schools.

These developments are also vital to the consolidation of the national identity, one of the core counter-hegemonic trends outlined in WSR Reproduction. The widespread criticism faced by the US embargo for violating international law further exacerbates this process by lending credibility to anti-American rhetoric (Mishra 2024). Rather than encouraging the political opening of Cuba, US sanctions have pushed the island state to augment the resilience of its social services and consolidate its authority and ideological identity.

A similar process has taken shape in Iran through the exaltation of doctrinaire Islam. A central national priority that has remained unchanged by sanctions is the preservation of the theocratic government (Nephew 2017, 82). Iran's internal political framework is intrinsically tied to its religious identity, which is impressed upon the wider population through education. According to Kirkham (2019, 70), the Iranian identity is "constructed in the Islamic tradition, based upon religious education." Mehran (2003, 312) emphasises this further, labelling Iran's education system the 'key infrastructure' in shaping the youth's religious, moral, and political values. This shared identity is significant because it reinforces social cohesion and furthers the theocratic government's revisionist agenda by portraying Western culture as the antithesis of Shia morality. Thus, ideology supported by education can serve as a powerful resilience mechanism for targeted states. The examples of Cuba and Iran demonstrate the capacity of sanctioned regimes to turn social reforms into meaningful drivers of political consolidation.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the principal internal mechanisms of resilience in targeted states are political stabilisation through economic measures and national identity building through ideologically-driven social reform. Drawing on Gramscian and critical theory, the essay analysed the counter-productive effects of sanctions in Cuba and Iran. In the former, the introduction of neoliberal economic policies after the Special Period led to the regime's consolidation and fed into subsequent reforms to the education sector, reinvigorating Cuba's social services and promoting a cohesive and largely anti-Western national identity. In the latter, the implementation of resistance economy has encouraged a strategy of self-sufficiency to resist external shocks, while social cohesion and a revisionist collective consciousness are upheld by religious Shia education. Further research on target state resilience should consider how external mechanisms of resilience, such as trade partnerships and import substitution policies, helped Cuba and Iran withstand international sanctions.

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