

## Is Regime Change Ever a Good Policy?

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Recently the political climate in Pakistan has been abuzz with the phrase “regime change.” This has added fuel to the fire, which was already raging quite wildly! The fact that regime change is a reality that the world has witnessed quite often is a given but the fact that regime change can gain a successful outcome – for the initiator and the receiver – is to be pondered upon. To put the answer bluntly, it is almost always a bad idea for both parties involved! Consider.

Generally, two types of regime change have been witnessed throughout history. One, through the democratic process. This mostly involves foreign funding to destabilise and then change a sitting government through political reengineering, revolution or coup. Two, via overt or covert external means. This typically includes military intervention, invasion or even coercive diplomacy. In both cases, the attempt at regime change has been a disaster in the making!

The logic of regime change is even more perplexing. It envisages a ‘one size fits all’ notion of a political system – frequently democracy – where the receiver is behaving in a way that the initiator finds hostile, intolerable and disadvantageous. And the initiator believes that installing a new political setup will correct that behaviour and make it more amenable to its cause. The reasons for regime change can also be plenty! Competing for influence with another power, clash of personal doctrine and ideology with a ruler, weak state falling into the hands of a powerful enemy, stopping the growing influence of a rival state and forcing allegiance to a particular cause.

Nevertheless, even if one was to grudgingly concede the logic and reasons for regime change as realistic, the outcomes of past attempts cannot be deemed anything but a failure. 1953 – The Iran coup. Shah Reza Pahlavi was installed on the throne by the American and British governments at the cost of democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh. This regime change backfired for the initiators in the long term as the Shah was instrumental in starting the Iranian nuclear programme and then any later political setup – in the form of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his political progenies – became hostile to the United States to an extent that it is now always at loggerheads with the Americans! Perhaps to the misfortune of the Iranian people who have seen problems galore over the last many decades. 1956 – the Suez disaster. Britain, France and Israel wanted to ouster Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser after the latter had nationalised the Suez Canal Company. The initial strategy of Israel invading the Sinai Peninsula went well but the later approach of Britain and France capturing land on the pretext of ‘protecting the canal’ failed. The superpowers of the time – the United States and the Soviet

Union – forced the initiators to withdraw and Nasser was still standing with his prestige increased! 1982 – Israel’s Lebanon gamble. Using the backdrop of the attempted assassination of the Israeli ambassador in London, but mostly to install a pro-Israeli government in Lebanon, Israel invaded its neighbour. The region went up in flames, the ramifications of which can still be felt today, especially with the poor and hapless population that just couldn’t recover from the devastation and destruction from the subsequent civil war. Israel managed to corner the PLO for some time but ultimately oversaw the creation of Hezbollah! 2003 – toppling Saddam. This is perhaps one of the most well known and most spectacular failures of regime change! Post 9/11 Bush junior’s administration embarked upon an ambitious and harebrained scheme to transform the Middle East. It started with Iraq. While defeating Saddam was not an issue, what came after was anything but a walk in the park! This attempt cost the lives of over 7000 US military personnel, left over 60,000 American soldiers wounded and had a price tag of trillions of dollars. Neither the outcome nor the duration and cost were as the White House had predicted at the start of this conflict. There are many other examples of regime change failures. Saddam Hussein’s own attempt of installing a sympathetic government in Kuwait, Egyptian Prime Minister Nasser’s failed support for progressive forces in Yemen, the US ousting Qaddafi but leaving Libya in the dust and the lurch of the Islamic State. The list goes on and on!

After all that, one wonders why regime change is still an appetising option for so many. The CATO institute suggests five main reasons for this behaviour. First, due to their numerous doctrinal biases, some government officials still believe that regime change will be cheap and easy. Second, leaders of foreign opposition movements make the objective seem more straightforward than it would be, mostly because of the gains it gets them. Third, policymakers often rely on mental models and cognitive bias that forces them to focus on the upsides and dismiss the downsides and then they tend to ignore information contradicting their ideals. Fourth, the wrong belief that overthrowing a foreign government is the end of the job, which it never is! Fifth, false expectation that the newly installed political setup will somehow be quickly more amenable towards the initiators as opposed to all the opposing cultural, societal and local expectations of that region.

Two things are apparent. One, regime change is catastrophic for all parties involved, especially the receiver state. Two – and more dangerous than the former – there is ample evidence that it has happened a lot of times in the past and will, unfortunately, keep on happening in the future. For these two conclusions alone, all potential receiver states should stand up, take note and remain vigilant.