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Has Iran mismanaged its Corona crisis?

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The undermining of the Corona pandemic has made Iran the worst hit country in the West Asian region reeling from this unprecedented public health crisis. The majority of nations around the world are struggling due to this pandemic and Iran is emerging as one of the world's worst affected by the outbreak. However, the power struggles within the hierarchy in the country has mired the Iranian strategic planning to counter this global pandemic. One of the biggest reasons for this has been the dual power structure in Iran in which the Supreme Leader controls the armed forces, while Iranian President Hassan Rouhani heads the civilian administration. The rising discontentment against the Rouhani government in the nation struggling with reinforced American sanctions, unemployment, and the distrust of their leaders, has made the situation worse in Iran.

At present there are more than 70,000 corona patients in Iran with more than 4400 people dead due to this virus. The rate of infections and deaths due to this has not slowed down and the majority of deaths and infections

are in the capital city, Tehran. The religious city of Qom has been identified as the center of virus outbreak in the country. It is important to mention here that Qom city sees the majority of Shi'a pilgrims visiting various holy sites. The lack of ample and up to date medical facilities due to sanctions has made the situation worse in Iran. The American embargo not only prohibits American companies and individuals from conducting business with their Iranian counterparts but also imposes sanctions on companies in other countries thereby restraining them from doing business with Iranian companies. This also includes the sale of medicines and other medical supplies. Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has blamed the American sanctions for compromising the Iranian healthcare system during this global crisis. Though Iran is receiving medical and monetary support from the World Health Organization (WHO) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) for tackling this crisis, still the Iranian government maintains that the companies find it difficult to process payments with banks unwilling to risk breaking the

American rules and risk sanctions themselves— this is, however, denied by the American authorities.

Critics of the Iranian government are alleging that although the latter knew about the outbreak, it avoided doing anything to curtail the infection or develop a strategy to inform the public about it. At the same time, cynicism and religious ideology has also been responsible for damaging the government's judgement to act against corona infection. Due to this, being one of the most populated countries in the West Asian region, Iran has become one of the pandemic epicenters. The government has also come under severe criticism when it chose not to close the shrine in Qom, which is the holy city and is visited by millions of Shi'a Muslim pilgrims every year. As mentioned above, the city of Qom is at the center of the outbreak. Furthermore, government's decision to not impose the lockdown as soon as the outbreak happened in the city of Mashhad has also been severely criticized. Though the travel to China from Iran was curtailed since February 2020, however, the lack of domestic measures has become one of the foremost reasons for the drastic outbreak of this virus. Not implementing the lockdown and social distancing at the local level led Iran to become one of the worst corona hit nations.

There is one school of thought that believes that Iran struggles to maintain good ties with China in the wake of increasing stringent American sanctions on the crippling Iranian

economy. Therefore, it can be said that the maximum pressure strategy of the Trump administration against Iran pushed it more towards China. This led Iran to ignore the health hazard that emerged from China's Wuhan district. The systemic failure of the Iranian government to take note of the impending peril eventually led to the high death toll in Iran. The inability of Iranian government to tackle this public health threat also indicates the lack of science centered innovation and health and medical industry in the country. This colossal public health menace posed by the corona virus is making every country around the world think about strengthening its public health systems; developing the weapons of mass destruction such as nuclear and missile programmes is not even being contemplated by them. This fact applies to Iran as well, as it is struggling due to its economy being in shambles.

Definitely, domestic political mismanagement, lack of international support and increasing domestic hostility against the western world have complicated Iran's response to the corona virus threat. Along with it, Rouhani government's policy solecism has become the primary reason for the contamination and the probable export of the virus. The weakened government and economy due to almost four decades of sanctions has left Iran incompetent to tackle the current corona virus outbreak. The unreliability of Tehran amongst the international community – apart from WHO and China – has

also become one of the contributors to Iran's mismanagement of this pandemic. It is quite clear that Iran squandered a number of opportunities to address and contain this threat due to various domestic political and religious and ideological compulsions. The exponential rise in the number of casualties due to this deadly virus led the government to move in with strict measures. However, the ideological and religious commitments – which are a part of the psyche of some government officials as well as Iranian society – clearly hindered the government's response towards this pandemic; especially related measures such as the closure of religious sites which attract sizeable number of pilgrims from around the world.

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