

Faithful Voting and Global Concerns:

Global Issue Briefs for the 2020 U.S. Elections



Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

Issue 4: Sanctions

Sanctions: Nonviolent Tool or Lethal Weapon?

In a series of two-page briefs, Faithful Voting and Global Concerns, the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns addresses key global issues for voters to consider for the 2020 U.S. elections. Inspired by the gospel and Maryknoll missionaries' commitment to stand with vulnerable communities around the world, we urge U.S. citizens to consider these issues and vote to advance the cause of peace, social justice, and the integrity of creation.

See

Economic sanctions are often presented as a nonviolent alternative to military action by governments seeking to influence or coerce foreign leaders. Far from nonviolent, however, many sanctions target non-combatants and result in death on a scale comparable to war. There are many forms of sanctions, targeting different kinds of economic activity, from freezing a corrupt leader's assets to imposing broad trade embargos. Both their effectiveness and their lethal impact vary widely.

Economic sanctions became a popular tool of foreign policy during the 1970s and '80s when an international program of boycott, divestment, and sanctions was employed [against the apartheid regime](#) in South Africa. But the potential of sanctions to devastate vulnerable civilian populations – especially women and children – became evident when U.S.-led United Nations sanctions in Iraq in the 1990s and early 2000s reportedly led to the deaths of over [250,000 Iraqi children](#).

When sanctions are solely punitive and too broad, civilians pay the price. Under current U.S. sanctions in Iran, for example, essential items such as medical goods are exempt, but by targeting institutions such as national banks, shipping, and currency exchanges, sanctions make it exceedingly difficult for hospitals to import needed equipment and medicines.

The United States has increasingly employed sanctions with the [express goal](#) of [regime change](#), often seeking to inflict suffering on civilian populations to provoke them into rising up

against their own leaders. Studies have [repeatedly found](#) that this strategy has the opposite effect, leading populations to rally around otherwise-unpopular governments in the face of foreign economic aggression.

[Experts](#) suggest sanctions are most effective when employed by international coalitions, in conjunction with other diplomatic efforts, and with a combination of “carrots and sticks” offering the target country a clear path toward having them lifted. Instead, U.S. sanctions [under the current administration](#) have been leveled unilaterally, as punishment alone, without accompanying diplomatic efforts. The Iran nuclear agreement exemplified the kind of multifaceted approach most likely to succeed, but the [U.S. pulled out of this international agreement](#) in [2017](#).

U.S. Sanctions Today

- The U.S. Department of the Treasury maintains various forms of sanctions on over [30 targets](#) around the world, and the Department of State lists [20 sanctions programs](#) it helps to oversee.
- Most notable are broad-reaching sanctions on [Iran](#), [North Korea](#), [Venezuela](#), [Syria](#), and [Cuba](#), all of which have been condemned by [faith groups](#) and human rights organizations for harming civilians.

Coronavirus Connection

The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns has joined other organizations in calling for the immediate lifting of economic sanctions by the U.S. during the pandemic so that [North Korea](#), various [Middle Eastern countries](#), and [other sanctioned nations](#) can procure the necessary resources to fight the spread of the virus and bolster their economies.

Judge

Too often, the use of sanctions violates Catholic values of [nonviolence](#) and [just peace](#) by failing both to protect the vulnerable and to effectively advance the cause of reconciliation and sustainable peace. Even when employed with legitimate objectives such as halting corruption, human rights violations, or preparations for war, [Catholic social teaching](#) requires that sanctions “be used with great discernment and must be subjected to strict legal and ethical criteria.” They should be applied:

- Multilaterally,
- In conjunction with other diplomatic tools and ongoing dialogue,
- With a timetable and clear incentives for positive action,
- And must not result in harm to civilians.

Act

Sanctions are a complicated tool of international relations, taking myriad forms and functioning within a wider framework of diplomatic or military action. We should urge our candidates to commit to taking the following actions:

- Employ sanctions strategically and nonviolently, according to the criteria listed above;
- Listen to the voices of ordinary citizens and those who accompany them on the ground in targeted countries,
- Ease or lift sanctions that threaten civilians either directly or indirectly, especially in response to disasters such as a pandemic.

Maryknoll Experience



Maryknoll Father [Gerard Hammond](#) has made over 50 humanitarian trips to North Korea. “[Ordinary people](#) are suffering a lot because of sanctions,” he says. “They are tightening their belts; they need rice.” He sees compassion, not punishment, as the pathway to peace on the peninsula. “We act as a bridge between the two Koreas, so we try to create a climate of trust that can facilitate the work of those who will come after us.”

Pray

“May the risen Jesus grant hope to all the poor... May these, the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters... not be abandoned... In light of the present circumstances, may international sanctions be relaxed, since these make it difficult for countries on which they have been imposed to provide adequate support to their citizens.”

– Pope Francis, [Ubi et Orbi message](#), Easter 2020

Faithful Citizenship

Find out the candidates’ records on economic sanctions. Do they support U.S. engagement with other countries to transform conflicts through nonviolent diplomatic means? If a candidate’s position is unclear, reach out to the campaign and ask. Let them know you are concerned about the violence sanctions can inflict on vulnerable communities, get them on the record, and vote for strategic nonviolence and just peace!