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Rotating Revolutions: Iran on Maya's Wheel

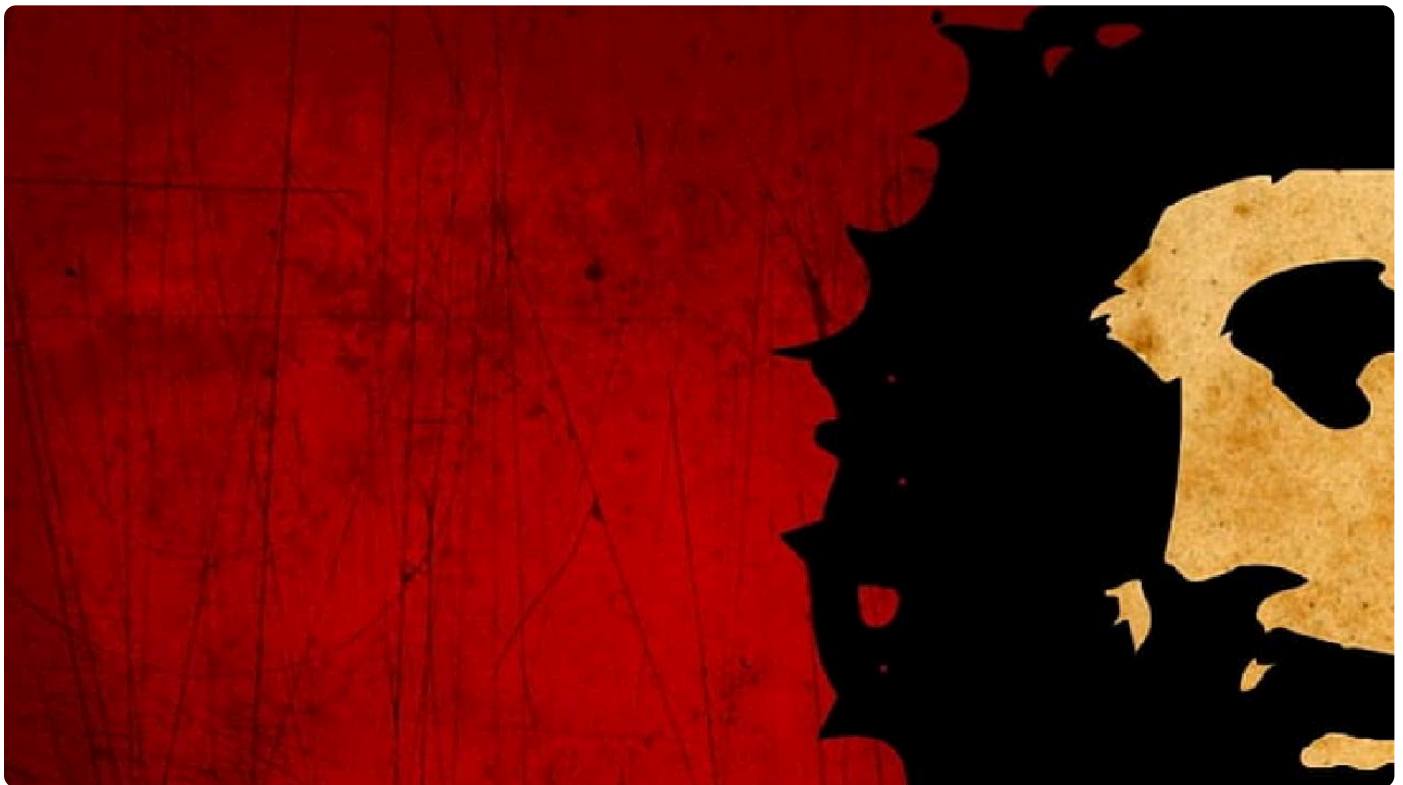
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By Acharya Prashant



Revolutions always promise change, and they usually deliver something that merely looks like change. But what is rarely asked is what must change. They speak endlessly about systems, rulers, laws, and institutions, yet remain silent about the one who demands, sustains, and replaces those systems. Regimes collapse, flags are replaced, slogans change, but something remains untouched. The anger finds new targets, the demand itself does not.

Iran offers a stark illustration

In 1979, Iranians overthrew a tyrant in the name of liberation; forty-six years later, their children are dying in the streets to overthrow the liberators. What began as the Islamic Revolution now feels, to large parts of its own population, like Islamic oppression, and the population that once welcomed Khomeini now turns on his successors with the same intensity. This is not irony, nor is it history repeating itself.

Photographs of Iranian women from the 1960s show them laughing in universities, driving cars, and walking freely in markets. Then came economic distress, wounded national pride, and the humiliation of a Shah widely seen as a puppet of Western powers. The revolution promised dignity. Within a generation, it delivered the morality police.

In September 2022, Mahsa Amini, a twenty-two-year-old Kurdish woman, was arrested for allegedly violating hijab rules. She died in custody three days later. Her death ignited the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement. Young women tore off headscarves, cut their hair in public squares, and faced bullets. Hundreds were killed. Thousands were detained, by many estimates far more. The regime, already strained on multiple fronts, now faces revolt from the very population it once claimed to have saved. This is not a full history of Iran's turmoil, only a glimpse, but it is enough to show how quickly "liberators" can harden into a new cage.

Consider what forty-six years of "liberation" have produced: inflation above forty percent, youth unemployment exceeding twenty percent, widespread food insecurity across large sections of the population, and more than half the population now under thirty-five, a generation that remembers only the Ayatollahs, not the Shah. Sanctions, oil dependence, and a powerful security state have all played their part in this decline, but they have not altered the basic pattern: those who promised salvation have become the new establishment.

The revolutionaries of 1979 have themselves become the old regime. The wheel has completed its turn. The young are preparing to turn it again, certain that this time will be different.

The question we refuse to ask is simple: when the wheel turns again, what will have changed?

Maya's Wheel

This is not peculiar to Iran. It is a human pattern, repeated across civilisations and centuries with such regularity that the fault clearly lies not in any particular system, but in the ego that builds and dismantles systems. The Katha Upanishad describes an outward-turned ego that keeps changing scenes and circumstances, while the inner self remains unchanged within. This is Maya's wheel, the illusion that the external world can deliver inner freedom.

In 1954, the psychologist Hans Eysenck studied committed Leftists and Rightists and argued something uncomfortable: at the extremes, Left and Right begin to resemble each other psychologically. Both display the same dogmatism, the same hunger for certainty, the same need to locate enemies outside themselves and submit to an inner centre that demands obedience. Their beliefs differ in content, but not in structure. For both, truth is membership: with us is truth, against us is lies. The fascist and the communist despise each other's conclusions, yet they share the same ego-structure, and, given power, they build prisons that look the same.

Iran's swing between Shah and Ayatollah makes this pattern visible across a nation's history. The secularist and the theocrat wear different costumes, speak different slogans, and invoke different gods. Yet both seek the same shelter for the ego: certainty, belonging, and, most of all, an enemy to blame. If the Islamic Republic falls tomorrow, what guarantee is there that its successor will not harden into another prison within a generation?

None. The ego has not changed. Only the name of the revolution has.

The Disillusionment That Never Teaches

Look beyond Iran and the pattern sharpens. After the Second World War, democracy was proclaimed humanity's guarantor of peace. Dictators had led the world into catastrophe; the belief was that self-rule would deliver sanity. That faith is now eroding across the globe. Extremist movements gain ground not by dismantling democratic institutions, but by being elected through them by fearful majorities. The crowd that once demanded the vote now uses it to empower those who promise concentration of power. The instrument of liberation becomes the instrument of its own undoing.

Watch the pattern at work in your own surroundings. The same man who marched for democracy in his youth can now be found sharing social media posts celebrating its erosion. The same woman who once wept at a dictator's fall now defends the rise of another, provided he wears her colours and repeats her slogans. The ego does not notice the contradiction. It rarely does. With its existential insecurities, it is far too busy needing enemies.

The same ego that once declared, "Democracy will solve our problems," now announces, "Democracy is our problem." First, we depend on a system, then we blame it, then we look for another. Like a drunk who blames the bottle, smashes it, and reaches for the next. The search for external saviours continues. The ego remains unexamined.

The Russian Revolution promised power to the workers. What emerged was Stalin, whose centralisation of authority arguably exceeded that of the Tsar. The Chinese Revolution promised liberation from feudal bondage. What emerged was Mao. Wherever the slogan was "Power to the common man," dictators arose. Why? Because the common man himself had not changed. He carried within him the same fear, the same greed, the same willingness to submit when weak and dominate when strong. These tendencies were then installed in every new structure he built. Revolution without self-knowledge is merely the rotation of masters.

The costume changes. The actor remains.

The Upanishadic sages did not begin by asking which system was best. They asked a different question, one that exposes the seeker behind every system: who is the one demanding systems? What is this ego, this "I" that attaches itself so desperately to ideologies, nations, revolutions? What does it want? And why does it keep missing what it wants?

This inquiry does not deny that systems matter; it would be foolish to pretend otherwise. A woman in Tehran who risks arrest for showing her hair lives a vastly different life from one who cannot. The difference is real, and it is worth fighting for with clarity. But if the fight remains only external, if it never turns inward to examine the ego that fights, it will produce another version of the same prison, decorated with different symbols and justified by different texts.

The real revolution is the one that examines the ego behind the revolt. It asks: what fear in me seeks ideology as shelter? What emptiness in me demands an external enemy? The enemy, it turns out, is not the Shah or the Ayatollah, not capitalism or communism, not tradition or modernity. The enemy is the unexamined ego-centre that operates identically under every flag, the "I" that remains unchanged as banners change.

When this ego-centre is finally seen, the compulsion weakens. Not because a new belief is adopted or a better ideology is found, but because the very mechanism of belief is exposed. Action continues, but it is no longer driven by the ego's blind compulsions that turn every solution into a new problem.

The Only Revolution That Does Not Rotate

Iran may well overthrow its theocratic government. The hijab laws may fall. Women may walk free in the streets of Tehran. These would be real gains, worth the blood that has been shed for them. But if the change's story is not accompanied by an internal reckoning, then, in a general sense, it is not a gain. The liberators will become

oppressors, and the oppressed will rise only to repeat the same role. History will continue its exhausting repetition, and each generation will blame the previous system while preparing the ground for the next failure without seeing it.

This is Maya's relentless cycle, and it includes us all. We say our condition is bad because of the Shah, then because of the Ayatollah, then because of democracy, capitalism, tradition, modernity, globalisation, nationalism. We will blame anything and anyone. The one thing we will never say, the one admission we will never make, is the only thing that is true: our condition is bad because we do not look within.

The only exit from this cycle is the inquiry the cycle is designed to avoid. Not a new ideology, not a better system, not a more enlightened leader, but the willingness of human beings to examine the ego with the same ruthlessness they have long reserved for their opponents. This is a revolution with no date, no flag, no anthem. It cannot be televised, broadcast, or turned into a movement. It can happen in silence, alone, in the moment when a person finally stops asking, "What is wrong with the world?" and begins to ask, "What in me is creating this world?"

That question, honestly pursued, is the end of Maya's wheel.

But who wants the wheel to end? The wheel is where the ego lives. To stop the wheel is to lose the rider. That is why revolutions are so popular and self-inquiry so rare. The former lets you keep the ego intact while changing your clothes and your slogans. Self-inquiry reveals that the one who keeps changing clothes was the problem from the start.

Iran will keep turning, and so will the rest of the world; the wheel has no intention of stopping on its own. It will turn until you have the courage to step off.

Acharya Prashant is a teacher and author whose work centres on self-inquiry and its application to contemporary life.; views are personal

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