

**Linguistic  
“revolution”?  
revolution”?**

**confusion:  
“counter-**



by Lev Tsitrin

The title of a recent [Middle East Forum’s webinar with Mehrdad Khonsari](#), a former Iranian diplomat who defected to the West after the Iranian revolution, “*Bring on the Iranian Counter-revolution*” rasped on my ear, since ayatollahs come across as “revolutionaries.” Are they?

One key characteristic of a revolution is its short duration: overnight, the composition of the ruling elite drastically changes as those in power wind up dead or exiled, and the newcomers take their place at the helm. But a revolution does not change the big picture. There are still the rulers and the ruled. Sure, the revolution turns yesterday’s revolutionaries into today’s establishment, and yesterday’s establishment into today’s revolutionaries, but the more things change, the more they stay the same – the new rulers are still rulers, the new

elite is still the elite, the new establishment is still the establishment. So why call a clique that is in power for 42 years “revolutionaries”?

I can see two possible reasons. The first one is that revolutions – events in which the establishment gets violently replaced – are, by their very nature, brutal. If the opposite is also true, brutality necessarily being the sign of a revolution, then ayatollahs are most certainly revolutionaries. Let’s give the credit where it is due: ayatollahs act brutally in suppressing any and all dissent. Whether revolutionaries have a monopoly on brutality is another story, however. In much of the world, brutality is the practical, day-to-day method of governance.

The better reason for calling ayatollahs “revolutionaries” is that, from their standpoint, their mission is not yet completed, since Shia Islam is not yet accepted as the ultimate Truth worldwide. It is only when every human, whether in Moscow or Delhi, in New York or Tokyo, in Beijing or Paris, in Canberra or Santiago, breathlessly longs for the news of triumphant return of a boy lost some twelve hundred years ago (but who is, by the most authoritative accounts, alive and well, and is known as the Hidden Imam) – in the interim obeying the Supreme Leader in Tehran who keeps the seat warm for that messianic boy while acting in his stead, will the revolution be complete. Until then, the revolution is on-going, ayatollahs – those true “revolutionaries” – leading the charge against the benighted and unbelieving world.

One could reasonably ask, what difference does it make how ayatollahs call themselves? Do labels matter?

Well, words are more than just labels. They connote concepts that can invoke strong emotions. There is something deeply appealing about being a “revolutionary” because this word has connotations of youth, of vibrancy, of freedom, of dashing action, of glamor – of putting one’s stamp on the world.

Someone who is a “revolutionary” is much more attractive than, say, a “bureaucrat” – someone who comes across as staid, boring, regular and dull – though of necessity, every revolution that achieved its goals turns into a bureaucracy, it being simply impossible to govern any other way, “perpetual revolution” touted by revolutionary romantics being impossible.

Ayatollahs surely understand the appeal of the word. For one, they do not want the enthusiasm from 1979 to cool off and go stale, so even while they have been bureaucrats for 42 years they still call themselves “revolutionaries.” Being seen as mere establishment apparatchiks, their enemies becoming “revolutionaries” would be catastrophic for their hold to power. Hence, they usurp the title of “revolutionaries” even though they lost it 42 years ago, the “revolutionaries” now being those – inside and outside Iran – who want to dump the ayatollahs and consign their regime to the ash heap of history.

Words matter. Today, “counter-revolutionaries” are the ayatollahs, for they are the establishment, Iran’s “revolutionary guards” being the “counter-revolutionary guards.” “Revolutionaries” are their opponents. And they should call themselves such. “Counter-revolution” connotes backwardness and obscurantism, and fits perfectly the ayatollahs and their support system. I’d suggest Mr. Mehrdad Khonsari calls his next public lecture *“Who’s a revolutionary, and who’s a counter-revolutionary in Iran.”* Khonsari and people in his camp are, clearly, the revolutionaries fighting the counter-revolutionary establishment that are the ayatollahs. Why won’t Iranian opposition, at home and abroad, call themselves “revolutionaries,” rather than cede – as they do now – this positive, energetic moniker to the obscurantist, counter-revolutionary ayatollahs?