

**Ali Afshari**  
**Tavaana Interview Transcript**



## **Vision and Motivation**

First, let me thank you for this opportunity to have a chat with you. Regarding the reasons and motivations that brought me into politics, there was my family environment in the first place. We have always had a politically oriented family, always at the forefront of political debates and discussions during family gatherings. Then comes my father's influence, notably through his library, fully endowed with political materials. There, I could read opposition materials which prompted political motivation in me. At the end, I shall mention the influence of Polytechnic University in Tehran, which is a notoriously political campus. It was there, at Polytechnic University, that I fully engaged in political activities.

Undoubtedly, the role of the society as a whole was also critical in giving a political twist to my life. At the time I entered University, the Iranian society showed significant signs of internal dynamics. People were active. The atmosphere had become positively charged with hope. Society as a whole was very dynamic. And the dynamics of change were at works within the society. There really was a strong collective will for change. All this prompted in me the motivation and the thrust towards politics and political engagement in life.

## **Leadership**

In my opinion, what makes and distinguishes a leader from other political activists is primarily his or her capacity to grasp his/her environment and the needs and aspiration of those willing to follow his or her leadership. A leader is a trust builder. A leader prompts and stimulates the motivations and aspirations of his or her followers. A leader has fore and foremost, the capacity to mobilize those who follow his or her lead. This is

what, in my opinion, distinguishes a leader from, say, an ordinary activist or even a manager. As a matter of fact, leadership means prompting, stimulating, invigorating and mobilizing all forces.

## Goals and Objectives

The goals I have been pursuing and what motivated me at first as well as all those in my generation, was the need, for me and for all of us, to reach a better life, a better environment for life and for development, I mean both personal and collective development. But, alongside this, what we were also pursuing was a more general, a less personal, a more national and collective interest. That which has been, over the past 100 years, the collective objective of all Iranians, as a nation, since the Constitutional Revolution: achieving freedom and democracy and living standards which better suits Iran and Iranians in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. It was the combination of these personal, collective and national aspirations that has been driving my political engagement.

Of course, I had to prioritize my goals. At the beginning, our activities were mainly Union centered and culturally oriented. Our main goal back then was to insufflate the spirit of team work among the students so to make them hopeful about to prospect of real change within their everyday lives, their personal wellbeing and their studies. In those days, the official point of view divided the students into two groups: “those who are with us” and “those who are against us”. The former benefited from all the academic privileges of which the latter were denied. Therefore, our goal was to break this line of segregation and elevate the level of participation among all students. At a later stage, our long term objective became to propagate and expand the newly created atmosphere of team work and collective participation from the campus to the country as a whole.

## Civic Environment

It goes without saying that when I got to University, the atmosphere was quite different from what we know today. Back then the political atmosphere was heavily charged with security measures. On one hand, there was the regime which expected the students to behave according to its own model and standards, and, on the other hand, there was the left wing of the regime which contended itself with a limited criticism of the status quo. But there was also an underlying current which took the students to demand freedom for the society as a whole and move towards a more modern atmosphere. At that juncture, I oriented my efforts towards that same collective goal of freedom, an approach which benefited from the adhesion of the majority of the students. This meant that students must have the freedom to express themselves within the University, dress the way they choose to dress and behave the way they want to behave, without an imposed model of behavior. I mean students in the general sense of the word, meaning that students must be respected as such and not with suffixes such as “Islamic” or “Hezbollah” or “pious” or “religious” students. The breaking of this kind of closed atmospheres which prevailed in those days upon Iranian campuses made up the central part of our efforts.

## Audience

Our interlocutors were made up of several layers. First, there were students throughout Iranian campuses which, as a whole, formed the student movement. Then, there was our general audience within the society itself. In addition to these, we had other political and social and civil activists as our interlocutors, in other words, all those who, in one way or another, were critical of the status quo and demanded change. Finally, there were intellectuals with whom we tried to act as an articulation point to and a junction with the overall society.

## Supporters and Opponents

Our proponents, as well as our opponents, were divided into several different groups. Our main supporters were those students whom, active on the Union arena, were demanding freedom, institutional independence for their universities and a better livelihood; art students who were asking cultural liberties on campuses so they could freely perform their chosen artistic activities; political students demanding freedom, justice and human rights; and, in general, all those within the society who, critical of the status quo, were aspiring for more freedom, justice and human rights. All these groups, that is all those inclined towards modernity, made up the body of our supporters. On the other hand, the core of the hostility towards us was formed by the regime and its academic arms within the campuses; the more traditional forces within the society; and interest groups with particular positions and privileges to defend. All these groups were vehemently opposing our efforts towards change.

Outside the campuses, civil and political activists as well as women, youth, NGOs and labor activists formed the core of our supporters, while the paramilitary Bassidj and parts of the Guardians Corps and pressure groups such as the Ansar al-Hezbollah, made the bunch of the hostile groups opposing us.

## Outreach Activities

We used several methods to bridge with our interlocutors. First, there was the organizational method and techniques. We formed cells, from dormitories to all corners of the campus, from artistic and academic circles to athletic ones, cells from which our message circulated to all parts of the student life. We also set up free forums and made good use of any existing one we could get a hold of: meetings, gatherings, speeches, seminars, medias and, in particular, foreign media outlets.

It goes without saying that, compared to our time, today's Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), from the Internet to social networking interfaces

such as Face Book to satellite and Web-based TV networks, they all play a central role in bringing students together, tightening their networks, enhancing and facilitating recruitment and membership, bridging student circles with social and international networks.

During my long experience as an activist and, more particularly, as a student activist, I have been able to form large, pluralistic coalitions. When I say I, I mean We! For instance, we have been able to form Student Unions which, within Iranian universities, have played the role of an umbrella for various student organizations. On the other hand, we were able to organize politically motivated students, around the common aspirations of freedom, justice and human rights, as a fraction within the Office for the Consolidation of Unity (OCU). Groups outside this organization could also join this collective effort centered on common demands, and thus form a large coalition of student forces. On the social arena, we took a significant part in the 18-member 2d of Khordâd Reformist Front. Finally, at a later stage, we actively participated in the formation of a large political coalition of forces demanding that a referendum be held on the current regime and the constitution of a new one.

OCU is the largest Union within Iran's University system. Its members are chosen according to a cluster model: first, students elect their departmental representatives within the so called Islamic Student Associations; the latter will then elect the representatives of their respective campuses, while, at the same time, choosing the members of the Central Bureau of the OCU, made up of representatives of all campuses nationwide. The OCU is present in more than sixty Universities. The 18-member Reformist Front, known as 2d of Khordâd, is, on the other hand, made up of various political organizations among which are the Islamic Participation Front, the Society of Combatant Clerics, the Organization of the Mujahidin of the Islamic Revolution, the House of Labor, the Islamic Labor Party and the Managers of Reconstruction.