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Tavaana Interview Transcript



Vision and Motivation

I was born in 1975, at a time when my father was in jail under the old regime, and I believe that played a significant role in my early involvement in politics. In 1993, I entered the University of Elm-o San'at, a political campus like Amir Kabir, which the current President and some of his closest advisers attended.

My political profile back then at Elm-o San'at was not significant; I was just a dissident voice among others. Two years later, I joined the Azad University, as a computer major. That was also the beginning of a new era in Iran: new modern-looking publications were issued, electronic means of editing and publishing were introduced, and the first vanguard signs of the digital revolution were visible. Software like Zarnegar, desktop publishing and other programs became available, expanding and facilitating media circulation while reducing publishing costs. Anyone, even people without a technical background, could use a PC and laser printer to start publishing new media in an acceptable format, right from their garage!

Then came the 1997 presidential elections. At that time, I had become involved in the student movement while officially collaborating with various media outlets. When Khatami was elected president, political events accelerated: some journalists were arrested the following fall; Tehran's mayor was prosecuted the next spring; Khatami's Interior Minister was impeached; and there was increasing violence. That was also the time when I was arrested on several occasions. The last time was in 1998, when I spent about a month in jail at the Evin Penitentiary. When I was released, I thought that maybe I could help in the struggle for my goal, which was to open up the Iranian society which was imprisoned by totalitarianism and tradition, from abroad.

In 1999, I left the country. My first article ever, published only on the Internet, was released that year, on the Gooya news portal. At that time, none of the blogging/web

publishing tools we have today existed. Later on, Iranian blogs reached the one million mark, showing a very active Iranian presence in the blogosphere and on the Internet in general.

Leadership

I think that political democratic activism and being an effective political activist should be viewed as a professional job. Activists should integrate educational and research institutions that are focused on various democratic processes. Activists should be trained in institutions like these on how to run a democratic campaign, how to respect minority rights, or how to carry out political propaganda for parties, before transferring what they've learned to their own society. It's like any other job, and it doesn't matter whether you're selling democracy or shampoo; as an activist you need to learn in such institutions how to sell shampoo and related sales techniques, why this is a better shampoo, and why democracy is the best system of governance and the most cost-effective, humane, and egalitarian one, even economically speaking. Activists need to learn these techniques and transfer them into their own country.

In my opinion, democracy has a strong relation to a free, open and competitive economy. Without a free, open economy, you will have a state economy – a mafia type economy which, even in its free form, would not be transparent or competitive. And in such conditions, bringing about democracy would be very difficult. In addition to this, democracy has a set of values, universal values. Violating those values would make the system non-democratic. You have, for instance, minority rights and transfer of power in democratic institutions, parliament, and the executive branch.

I think what we need today is the educational hardware for a democratic discourse, as well as the popular democratic discourse carried out by the media. In particular, that means assisting democracy proponents inside Iran who have strongly-formed political ideas. Such individuals with political socialization should come to countries with a centuries-long history of democracy and learn the nitty-gritty of these techniques. Also,

democracy is not something for only the center of a country. What we need in Iran is a focus on peripheral regions, away from the center. Democracy starts from small constituencies. It is neither a top-down nor necessarily a bottom-up process.

Message to Iranian Activists

In my opinion, the biggest window of opportunity for political activists in Iran is now the Internet. Web 2.0 and 3.0, already present in Iran, have played a major role, as we have seen during the current movement, initiated by the rigged elections and its subsequent opposition in June 2009. It is only natural that a totalitarian system with billions of oil dollars would do its best to resist the opening up of such a window of opportunity.

But I do believe that this is the voice of 75 million people aspiring to freedom. Iran has gone through dramatic demographic, generational, and gender changes. No matter what it does, I am sure that this government cannot turn the clock back and roll back changes that have already taken root, even if it resorts to spending all its oil money, even if it borrows more money and takes the entire financial system towards bankruptcy, just to carry out its filtering policies. I am sure that they may even go as far as hiring thousands of people just to write comments on articles published on the Net, and they would even pay them for each comment they write. But none of these policies, even backed by millions or billions of dollars of financial support, can prevent 75 million people from writing what they want, bypassing filtering, and posting what they want on Balatarin.

I am sure that not even those who do this for money believe in what they do. They are simply making money in an atmosphere which no longer has any ideological incentives. I believe that the people of Iran will overcome this barrier. We will help them. I believe that we do need to help them indeed. So far as I am concerned, I promise that I will do anything I can in order to tear this wall of filtering down.

Bringing this wall of filtering down and bringing the voice of the Iranian people to the ears of the world should be our priority. This is the channel through which we can bring

our voice to be heard worldwide. This is the channel through which we can connect to our people. This is a channel through which we can transfer other countries' democratic transition experiences to Iran. And this is a channel through which we can help anyone, anywhere in the world, whose rights have been suppressed, whose voice has been silenced, whose vote has been stolen, and who has been arrested, jailed or tortured, to be heard throughout the world.