

A Portrait...

by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

I shall not permit myself to probe too deeply into the events that have taken place in Egypt while there lies between my country and me this vast stretch of land and sea. I will only sketch what I felt in this distant place, as the news of these events came to me — carried over cable, wire, and air.

At first, my feelings were those of anxiety and apprehension, when the telephone from Paris brought me the earliest reports of the army's movement. Yet only a few hours later that anxiety and fear gave way to a kind of calm, mingled with keen curiosity and the desire to know the truth. The telephone from Rome had conveyed to me that the army's commander had not seized power for himself, nor resorted to violence, but had instead called for the affairs of government to be entrusted to a man of integrity — one in whom Egyptians of every inclination could place their trust.

No sooner did I hear the name of that man who was to form the new ministry than I felt a quiet satisfaction and a cautious optimism — tempered, however, with a trace of apprehension lest the situation should slip from the hands of those guiding it, and corruption should return just when reform had seemed within reach.

Then, as telegrams and telephone calls arrived from Rome and Paris, and newspapers and radio reports followed one after another, confidence returned, and hope revived. I felt that Egypt had found herself again, that she had not missed the path of success, nor strayed from the straight road. She had taken charge of her destiny, composed herself, and advanced upon the path of reform with steadiness and self-restraint — without excess toward herself or others.

Then, one morning, I read in the papers that a reign had reached its end, that a sultan's era had passed, and that a new sovereign was taking up the life of rule. Can I describe the surge of emotion that swept through me — the tumult of thoughts that filled my mind, the beating of my heart as it struggled to comprehend what had occurred?

I recalled another time long past, when the prime minister of the day bore the heavy burdens of government as one reign ended and another began. Then, too, it was 'Alī Māhir who took up the charge — as nobly and steadfastly as any man of honour could bear so grave a weight. He did not lose composure, nor did Egypt. All proceeded along a straight course: Parliament ratified what it must, elections were held freely and with dignity, calmly and in good faith; and their results were accepted by all Egyptians without dispute or resentment. The nation emerged from that crisis unscathed, untouched by intrigue.

In those days, the army had no need to intervene in public affairs. It remained at its post, performing its duty, keeping to itself. But this time, it was the army itself that set events in motion — not out of greed or ambition, nor from desire for gain or fear of loss, but because the civilian leaders had reached such impotence in correcting what was crooked and mending what was broken that it became inevitable for the soldiers to do what others had been prevented from doing.

God Almighty has said:

“Let there arise from among you a nation that calls to goodness, enjoins what is right, and forbids what is wrong — such are those who prosper.”

The army, in truth, was that nation — calling to the good, commanding right, forbidding wrong, hastening toward virtuous deeds, and supporting all this with the strength created to uphold justice, not to serve falsehood. We have been commanded: when we see an evil, we must change it with our hands. But our civilians were denied the power to act. If we cannot change it with our hands, we are to do so with our tongues — yet tongues were silenced, and pens forbidden to write. And if neither hand nor tongue may act, then we must reject the evil in our hearts — the weakest form of faith.

To this weakness we had been driven, forced into it by circumstance. We strove to resist evil in our hearts, seeking God's help, praying that He might send forth men of might and courage — men who would fear no blame in the cause of truth, who would speak and act and keep their promises. We protested in our hearts and whispered our dissent when we met in private, but we could not speak openly, nor proclaim the call to what is right, nor forbid what is wrong.

We thought and reproached ourselves for what we thought. We wrote and examined each sentence, each word, before committing it to paper. When we sent an article to the press, we knew it might never appear — for the censor stood in ambush. If, by chance, it was published — whether whole or mutilated — we waited in anxiety: would it pass in peace, or bring imprisonment, confinement, ruin to our private lives, or restrictions upon our freedom of movement?

I confess, I felt a heavy burden lifted from my shoulders as the ship bore me away from Egypt. I breathed deeply — for the first time in months — when I realised that the arm of authority could no longer reach me during my summer leave abroad. From then on, I wrote not for fear of prison or arrest, but only from fear of omission and distortion — of seeing my words altered, mutilated, or misused, of harming the newspaper that published my work.

I reached Italy, then France, and met people in Rome and Paris and elsewhere. I swear, I had never felt such shame as I did during that journey — until the recent events changed everything. My interlocutors were cautious, reluctant to wound me through my country. They said little but thought much, and I felt their restraint. I grew embarrassed, uneasy; my heart trembled and my tongue faltered, as though I were sitting with them upon burning coals.

They knew of Egypt's ills as well as I did. They knew that she had lost her freedom, that her sons lived under fear and dread, that a military ruler could humiliate them at will without fear of judgment or rebuke. They knew that judicial rulings were issued but not enforced, that authority ignored the courts, that military power had even sought to prevent the judiciary from hearing certain grievances. They knew all this — yet spoke of it only by hint or allusion. And I, too, was guarded in my replies. They were sparing in speech out of kindness to me; I was sparing out of shame for what had become of my country.

Even reading the newspapers was torment — bitter torment. How much they wrote about Egypt! How often they reproached her — sometimes rightly, more often falsely — until life in Europe became as distressing as it had been in Egypt. I found no relief, save the bitter solace of retreating to this remote village where I know no one and no one knows me, where I speak only with family and close companions. Here, I have stifled my anger, turning it over in solitude morning and evening. I read little of the newspapers, much of the old books — fleeing from the moderns to the ancients, seeking refuge in history from the misery of the present.

Then came news that matters in Egypt had begun to change. I wavered between doubt and belief — for how many times had things changed there this year without bringing good! But the reports followed one another, and the darkness of doubt lifted, the light of certainty flooded in from every

side. I felt that Egypt's dignity had been restored, that the shadow of tyranny had passed, that she was once more pursuing her path in the bright light of confidence and hope — fearing neither schemers nor conspirators, for the army had secured her internal peace.

And who can deny that if it is the army's duty to defend the nation from foreign enemies, it is equally its duty to defend her from internal foes? For corruption within the borders exposes the army itself to peril. The army had long tasted this bitterness, bearing it in patience — until patience itself became cowardice and endurance became servitude. Then the army rose up and said to its people: *"Have no fear. As long as we are with you, none shall harm you — whether the threat come from without or from within."*

May God bless the army for what it has done, and bless it for what it will yet do. May He bless Egypt in her army and protect her from the plots of plotters, the deceit of deceivers, and the treachery of traitors. May He shield her from those evil counsellors who think only of themselves before their country — who make of the nation a means to satisfy their greed and avenge their spite.

Egypt has found herself again in these past days. May she never lose herself a second time. Her hopes lie wide before her; her path is clear; her means of reform are within reach. Will she now walk that straight, luminous road toward her noble and boundless aspirations? Will she govern all her affairs with firmness, seriousness, justice, and fairness, so as to achieve, in her near future, a glory worthy of her distant past?

These are the thoughts that fill our hearts, the prayers that rise within our souls.

O God, hear — O God, answer.

— Ṭāhā Ḥusayn
al-Ahrām, 2 August 1952