

Reform

Al-Balagh, 9 August 1952

I do not like to rush reform, because the worst reform is the improvised kind, which comes from no deep thought, sustained reflection or thorough study. But I want to take up matters that Egyptians have never stopped thinking about, ever since the Egyptian revolution after the First World War in general, and since the signing of the now-abrogated Anglo-Egyptian treaty in particular. I know of no people that has talked about poverty, ignorance and disease as much as the Egyptian people, ordinary and educated alike, have done for thirty years. But talk feeds no hungry man, clothes no naked man, teaches no ignorant man and cures no sick man.

It used to be said that reform was easy and faced only two obstacles: a narrow budget on one side, and on the other the tyrants and the self-seeking who stood in its way. The narrowness of the budget always came from a familiar error, common in many countries and in Egypt especially. Those who drew up the budget cared above all that income and outgo should balance, or revenue and expenditure in the Finance Ministry's language, and that balance was closer to an illusion than to anything else.

A group of clerks and accountants put figures on income and figures on expenditure, and took the greatest care that the figures for spending on public services should not exceed the figures for what was collected from them. They were proud and pleased when revenue exceeded expenditure, and saw in that skill at economy and good management of public funds.

We held, and how often people laughed at what we held, that the budget is balanced by matching the people's real need for reform against the amount raised from public resources. We demanded that revenue rise until it met the need for reform, and we refused to see reform squeezed so as not to exceed whatever money the state happened to have.

When we said this, or something like it, the finance men would laugh in our faces and say, with a good deal of pity and sympathy: this is the talk of a man who knows nothing about financial matters.

So too the Ministry of Health would need a certain sum to carry out part of its programme, and would be told: half of what you ask is enough; manage within what is allotted and do not exceed it; and if you can manage not to reach it, so much the better, for the best thing is not to reach it at all!

This was said to every ministry that dealt with some form of social reform. The Ministry of Health, which fights disease, was starved; the Ministry of Social Affairs, which fights poverty, was squeezed; the Ministry of Education, which drives ignorance from hearts and minds, was hemmed in. The budget had become an end and not a means, and reform came to be measured by revenue and not by the people's need for it.

Nor was it easy to demand more revenue. More revenue meant pressing the wealthy, and the wealthy are self-seeking by nature: they dislike spending, and hate nothing so much as a government that forces them to spend.

And these wealthy men take shelter behind a strong pillar: the greatest wealth-holder of all, who owns the largest possible share of the nation's fortune, who joins to his wealth the authority of the state, and who appoints governments and dismisses them, appointing them when he is pleased with their members and dismissing them when he is displeased.

It was natural, then, that governments should reckon very carefully with the wealthy and with the strong pillar they sheltered behind. Some governments spoke with pleasure and pride of not wanting to raise taxes, indeed of being determined not to raise them.

Harsh circumstances sometimes forced governments to raise more revenue, and they turned to indirect taxes, laid on what everyone needs, so that the poor and wretched grew poorer, more wretched and more miserable, while the rich man with his abundant wealth was hardly touched at all.

So in our country reform became mere talk, and earnestness about it became a danger to whoever attempted it or called for it, let alone insisted on it. Then it went further. Insistent calls for reform came to be called communism, or something close to it, which the authorities could not stomach, and those who made them might find prison doors opened to them and the wide earth closing in on them.

Whatever else I forget, I will not forget, and nor will the ministers of the last Wafd government, the night we went to take the constitutional oath before the former king.

When we had finished our oath, the Prime Minister expressed the hope that matters would go in the way that would serve the country and fulfil its hopes, and the former king replied with the same hope. But he soon turned from his remarks to the ministers and their chief and addressed the Minister of Education in particular, calling him by his name. He told him that he knew what he had been publishing in the newspapers, and warned him that his selection for the ministry was only a test, a last chance to come to himself and give up the inflammatory writing he had been pursuing.

The Minister of Education answered nothing. The ministers went out and spent days and weeks teasing their colleague, calling him by his name as the former king had, and reminding him of his inflammatory writing and of the chance he had been given to abandon it.

Clearly that Minister of Education did not take the chance and did not abandon anything he had advocated. He went on with education as he had planned before becoming minister, blocked only by what blocks every minister: the budget, and the finance men's notion of balancing income and expenditure.

A year passed, then another, and free general education was established. The third year came, and the cabinet began preparing the Speech from the Throne. The Minister of Education asked for a change in university policy: free university education, on condition that the universities admit from among holders of the secondary certificate only those truly able to benefit from the teaching.

But the Palace stood in the way of free university education. It kept it out of the Speech from the Throne and kept it from becoming a fact. Strangely, the Minister of Education had agreed on it with all three universities.

Then the Crown Prince was born, and the Council of Ministers met, wishing to show the joy of the government and the people at the birth of the Prince of Upper Egypt. Some ministers proposed exempting university students from the fees they had not yet paid. The Prime Minister asked the Minister of Education, laughing: "Are you content with this exemption?" The minister said: "No. I would be content only with

complete free tuition, and let that be our celebration of the Prince's birth." But the ministers laughed among themselves and settled for the decision they had taken.

That was not so of educational reform alone but of reform in every area of life. Reform had to come through laws or decrees, and laws and decrees could not be issued unless the Palace approved them, and the Palace's approval of certain reforms was neither easy nor readily won. We must say the truth here: the Palace had helpers in this fear of reform, which exposed their wealth to some loss, small or great.

The reader may think me as naïve as he likes, or "gullible," as people say, but I remember a series of articles, perhaps ten or more, on a single, simple theme: that the educational reform undertaken by the last Wafd government was outright communism.

It was communism, they said, for education to be free, and communism to open schools to a number of the people's sons who could not have entered them before. It was quite clear that the writer of those pieces did not himself believe what he wrote, for he had enough culture to tell communism from the spread of education. He wanted to quarrel with the government in power, to set the wealthy against it, and to set against it those who thought they had the right to appoint and dismiss governments and to approve laws and decrees or block them.

I want the reader to know that I am not a communist, never was one, and never will be. It is not that I fear the consequences of communism in Egypt for myself; I have run into many fearful things, and fear has never turned me from what I wanted. It is that I put freedom above everything else; that communism does not suit our Egyptian life, devout in Islam or Christianity, or the stage of progress we have reached; and that I believe our nature and our religion contain what we need to achieve social justice without Lenin's and Stalin's communism.

Still, I remember an ancient democracy of the fifth century BC that was not communist and spared no effort to uphold freedom and individuals' ownership of what they earned within the law, but did not hesitate to burden its rich with what its resources could not cover. It assigned its rich the building of warships, and the entertainment of the people by financing plays. From that severity toward the rich came Athens's mastery of the sea and the magnificent, lasting legacy of drama she left to humanity.

I do not want Egypt to press her rich as Athens pressed hers, but I see no harm in a revolutionary Egyptian democracy reviewing the distribution of taxes, taking from the rich to give back to the poor as Islam commands, and charging the rich with building schools and hospitals when their wealth allows it, taking from their money alms that purify and cleanse them, as God says in His noble Book. And I want all this done by law, with Parliament's consent, and not by the overbearing will of the rulers.

I no longer remember where, in one of my books more than fifteen years ago, I said that a man whose fortune yields him, say, thirty thousand pounds will still be rich when he spends half of that income on the taxes demanded of him to achieve the reform the country needs.

A true revolution, one that comes from the depths of the people, abolishes selfishness and puts something else in its place in people's hearts: unselfishness and sacrifice for the public good. I do not doubt that our revolution is true, or that it comes from the depths of the people, or that we have the right to see selfishness leave Egypt along with tyranny and to see unselfishness take its place in the hearts of the rich and the well-off, so that they spend freely on reform and remember that the good they do they will find with God, and that the ancient poet did not lie when he said:

*Whoever does good will never lack its reward;
no kindness is lost between God and men.*