A Crisis ...!

Al-Jumhuriya, 24 September 1955.

A reader can picture the crisis of French democracy as it now stands, shortly before the parliamentary session resumes: an executive power that possesses neither the strength it ought to have nor the authority the constitution grants it to resolve a grave problem, one of the gravest problems the Fourth Republic has faced — not because Parliament prevents it from doing so, for Parliament is now in recess, but because the parties threaten to abandon it on the day of reckoning, and because the ministers who belong to these parties do not submit to the decisions of the Council of Ministers, nor do they heed ministerial solidarity, nor do they resign from their posts, and because the holders of the enormous financial interests in North Africa are the ones directing affairs from behind the curtain!

This is what we are witnessing in France under its Fourth Republic, ever since the evil between it and the lands of the earth which the system of colonialism had condemned to submit to its authority grew great. I know of no crisis in the history of political life during this twentieth century that resembles it in the contradictions it carries — contradictions that tempt one to laughter at times, and to deep sorrow at other times, and that stir up lessons and morals useful, in any case, to those who study it and reflect upon it.

The French and non-French alike used to fault the Third French Republic for not loving stability in matters of government, but rather toying with its ministries — installing them in the morning and dismissing them in the evening — never wishing, under any circumstances, that their lives be prolonged, whoever their presidents and members might be. But the Fourth Republic, it appears, wishes to be still more playful with the affairs of government, and still more dismissive of its burdens, however heavily those burdens weighed upon that Third Republic which the last world war brought to its end.

For French ministries, ever since the current constitution was promulgated, scarcely rise to the burdens of government before they are relieved of rising to them, and scarcely take up some piece of work before they are utterly diverted from pursuing it; indeed, they may remain in power yet not be enabled to exercise it, and may possess authority yet be prevented from enforcing it.

And from this has arisen what did not occur under the Third Republic: the spread of disorder, the disturbance of order, and an imbalance between executive power and legislative power to a dangerous degree — one that has truly lost, or come close to losing, the prestige that rulers ought to have, the prestige that makes their decisions enforceable, their orders respected, and their authority above the objections of objectors and the opposition of opponents.

The source of this, it would appear, is the multiplicity of political parties, the clash of interests among these parties, the scramble of politicians over matters of government, the basing of politics upon scheming against ministers and plotting against them, the seizing of opportunities to bring them down, and the installing of others in their place until another opportunity presents itself to renew the scheming or plotting against them and the effort to bring them down as well.

This notorious disorder has not appeared, since the Fourth Republic was established, as it has appeared in these very days, when the crisis between France and North Africa grew intense, and when these momentous events occurred that struck the whole world with terror.

I do not wish today to speak of what is happening in Algeria or in Morocco, for all the ugliness and hideousness of these events; rather, I wish to depict this crisis from which democracy in France is suffering, so that whoever would deny it might deny it, and whoever would draw a lesson from it might draw one, and so that it might hold a useful lesson for those concerned with the politics of nations and with establishing democratic life among them upon a firm foundation.

Let the reader look, before anything else, at the plain facts, for they alone suffice, without need of any explanation. One day, it became clear to the sitting French ministry that matters in Morocco were faltering, that the danger of revolt against French authority there was growing day by day, and that the meagre, truncated, deformed measure of freedom granted to Tunisia had tempted the discontented in Morocco and Algeria to hope that their own conditions might change, and that they might be freed from direct foreign rule in some fashion; so disorder intensified in the Far Maghreb, and the revolt in Algeria organized itself in a fearsome manner.

The French government decided to seek a way out of this predicament, and to try to appease the Moroccans; so it dismissed the Resident-General and put another man in his place, a man known, it

seemed, for firmness and flexibility, penetrating insight and keen intelligence, and charged him with engaging the Moroccans across their various tendencies and inclinations, with coming to understand them, and with proposing to the government whatever he judged would extricate it from this impasse and establish the bond between it and Morocco upon foundations more upright and more solid than those on which the protectorate had rested until then. No sooner had this Resident-General arrived in Morocco and attempted to engage its people than everything there fell into turmoil.

The Europeans rose up because they sensed that a change was meant to be brought about, and feared that some harm they disliked might befall the enormous interests in their hands. And the Moroccans rose up because they sensed that a change was meant to be brought about, one that might allow them to pass out of the darkness they were in toward some measure of light. And the French colonists in Morocco took to seizing and manufacturing opportunities to assault the Moroccans and provoke them to anger over their dignity, their sanctities, and their rights. And the Resident-General could not visit a single town, nor pass through a single quarter, without disorder breaking out, wrongdoing growing, sins being committed, the innocent being killed, and peaceful civilians being subjected to cruelty — all so that the central government in Paris would feel that the French colonists in Morocco were discontented with this new Resident-General, repudiating any change that touched their interests, near or far, and prepared to resist this change whatever the circumstances.

And the central government looked, and found itself facing two revolts in Morocco: one a purely French revolt, wishing to preserve the protectorate in Morocco and to have the Moroccans ruled against their wishes whatever the consequences and whatever dangers might arise from that; the other a Moroccan revolt, wishing to restore rights to their rightful owners and to have the people of the country govern themselves as they themselves wished, not as the foreign colonists wished.

The strangest thing in the whole affair was that the French interest-holders residing in Paris, and their allies among the politicians and members of Parliament, were encouraging the French rebels in word and deed, by incitement both secret and open, and were pressing the government to dismiss the new Resident-General, to preserve and strengthen France's position in Morocco, and to deal with the Moroccans by force until they were brought into line, whatever effort this cost and

whatever loss of life, shedding of blood, and cruelty toward the innocent might result from it.

The Resident-General proceeded to carry out the policy laid down for him, and the central government tried to stand firm against the rebels and the discontented, but its firmness could not hold, for it sensed that its parliamentary majority was about to abandon it, and its president sensed that some of his fellow ministers were about to abandon him in deference to the opinion of their parties. So the government was forced to take this notorious step, which destroyed its prestige and emboldened the rebels and the discontented against it: it dismissed the Resident-General and sent another man in his place; but at the same time it decided to tackle the problem, to seek a solution for it, and to make direct contact with the politicians among the people of Morocco, to hear from them, to come to understand them, and to base its policy on whatever facts came to light. Curiously, it was reluctant to tackle this problem while Parliament was in session, and so waited until the parliamentary session had ended, and its president imagined that he could — within the bounds of executive authority's rightful powers — tackle the problem and solve it, and then come before Parliament at the start of the next session. But it was not long before it became clear that he had been excessive in his optimism; for while the members of Parliament are scattered on their summer holiday, the administrative bodies of the parties remain settled in Paris, watching the government closely, recording against it everything it does, never hesitating to alert it to what pleases them and warn it of what displeases them, and threatening to abandon it should it defy their wishes. So Parliament dispersed, but the parties, or their administrative bodies, took Parliament's place and wore the government down with hardship over its affairs.

Nevertheless, the head of the ministry proceeded with his policy, and formed from his ministry a special committee that made contact with the Moroccans across their various tendencies; it spoke to them and listened to them, and reached agreement with them, in the end, that the sitting Sultan be set aside, that the exiled Sultan be transferred to France, that a council of regency over the throne be established, and that a government representing the Moroccan people be formed to negotiate with the French government over the matter of the new order. It further agreed with them that all of these decisions be submitted to the exiled Sultan; for there was no way to bring about any reform the Moroccans would accept except through the exiled Sultan's ratification, since the

Moroccans believe in no one but him, trust no one but him, and act on no one's command and guidance but his. But the parties remained on the watch, observing the government's work, recognizing in it what they chose to recognize and repudiating what they chose to repudiate, resentful of most of it and satisfied with only the least of it, and the ministers representing these parties in the government submitted to their parties' command, pleased if their parties were pleased and resentful if their parties were resentful.

And the government advances one foot and withdraws the other, puts one forward in the morning only to draw it back by evening, and in any case tries to complete what it began, yielding to what must be yielded to, and sends a French mission to negotiate with the Sultan whom France had deposed from the throne and exiled to the far ends of the earth. This mission goes, negotiates with the Sultan, and returns satisfied, bearing the Sultan's agreement to everything settled between the government and the Moroccan politicians, and bearing from the Sultan a firm promise that he will do nothing to obstruct French policy, and that he will not leave France, should he be moved there, except with the French government's permission; so everything had been set right, and nothing remained but to carry out what had been agreed, and everything indicated that the matter had reached its conclusion.

The Council of Ministers meets under the presidency of the President of the Republic, and decides to carry out what had been agreed; and so the sitting Sultan will be set aside from the throne and will reside in Tangier, and the legitimate Sultan will be transferred from his distant exile to France, to reside there in comfort. The council of regency will be established, and a negotiating government formed. And here the President of the Republic writes a letter to the sitting Sultan, reminding him in it of Morocco's higher interest, and that this interest requires that he relinquish the throne and that the exiled Sultan not return to it. The President of the Republic guarantees the sitting Sultan's safety, and that of his supporters. He sent the letter to the Resident-General, so that he might convey it to the Sultan first, and take whatever action was necessary to carry out the agreed decisions second. But the parties remained on the watch, observing the government closely, issuing orders to their ministers, warning, cautioning, sending telegrams, and thundering.

The French had felt confident that the Moroccan problem would be solved the moment the President's letter reached the Resident-General;

but the letter arrives, and the Resident-General receives it, and then does not convey it to the Sultan at all, but keeps it with him — because he has received an order, from neither the Prime Minister nor the President of the Republic, to hold onto the letter.

He received this order from the Foreign Minister. How, then, did the Foreign Minister defy the order of the President of the Republic, the order of the Prime Minister, and the decision of the Council of Ministers assembled?! This is the question, and it has two answers: one apparent and official, which is that the Foreign Minister had no part in drafting this letter and had not read its text before it was sent; the other hidden, though the newspapers have spoken of it openly, which is that the party to which the Foreign Minister belongs is not satisfied with this letter, nor with the setting aside of the sitting Sultan, nor with bringing about any change in the system to which Morocco is subject. The President's letter was sent six days ago, and I am dictating this discussion on the seventeenth of this month, and the letter still lies dormant with the Resident-General, and the French ministry is bewildered, not knowing whether to advance or retreat; the French newspapers are in turmoil between resentment and satisfaction, between hope and despair. And the French people are occupied with two grave matters, one having no connection to Morocco — the strike spreading through all the cities of France, because workers are demanding higher wages — and the other bound up with both Morocco and Algeria together, because the government needs to establish order in these two countries after the grave unrest that has afflicted them and has not yet subsided. For this reason it needs more soldiers, and so it has no choice but to retain under arms, as the saying goes, the young men who have completed their military service and whose time has come to return to themselves, to their families, and to their own interests; nor does it have any choice but to call upon a group of young men who have completed their military service and returned to their families and taken up their civilian lives, to summon some of these to resume their military service anew, because the regular forces are not sufficient to face the dangers threatening security and order in these two countries. And here these young men grow resentful, and some of them openly attempt disobedience, and the families of these young men grow resentful, and no small number of newspapers grow resentful, and the Defense Committee of the National Assembly protests because it was not consulted before these young men were called back to military service.

The reader can picture, after all this, the crisis of French democracy as it now stands, shortly before the parliamentary session resumes: an executive power that possesses neither the strength it ought to have nor the authority the constitution grants it to resolve a grave problem, one of the gravest problems the Fourth Republic has faced — not because Parliament prevents it from doing so, for Parliament is now in recess, but because the parties threaten to abandon it on the day of reckoning, and because the ministers who belong to these parties do not submit to the decisions of the Council of Ministers, nor do they heed ministerial solidarity, nor do they resign from their posts, and because the holders of the enormous financial interests in North Africa are the ones directing affairs from behind the curtain. And nothing captures this democratic crisis in France more eloquently than a remark made by the former Foreign Minister who had deposed the exiled Sultan — a remark he made in the morning that paralyzed the government by evening, because he meant to paralyze it: "We have given the Moroccans more than they were asking for, and have made them covet us for ourselves." And I say this in the morning so that the government may not complete by evening what it had resolved upon; and evening had not yet come before the government found itself unable to complete what it had resolved upon, for no reason but its fear that the former Foreign Minister's party might abandon it, and so it would lose its majority and lose power. And stranger than all of this is that the true parliamentary majority in France, and in the National Assembly especially, is firmly resolved to solve the problem in Morocco in the way the Moroccans themselves would wish; but this majority is excluded from power, because it cannot form a government, and cannot govern, unless the leftists among the socialists and communists join it, and these have been kept from power for years. And from this has arisen the French governments' reliance upon a patchwork majority cobbled together from many parties. These many parties must all have a share in the ministry, and the ministry must reconcile the whims of these parties in all their variety, and should it fall short in any of this, it loses its posts. And thus democracy becomes a means rather than an end, and party life becomes the end itself, and party whims become the masters of the affairs of government, disposing of them as they please, and executive power comes to resemble nothing so much as a slave owned not by a single master but jointly by several different masters. Thanks be to God that there are other lands on earth where government rests upon the democratic system and is not exposed to any of this evil, because it is not subject to the domination of parties, but subject instead to the interest of the peoples.

As for me, I do not conceal from the reader that, ever since I began following this democratic crisis in France, I have altered that famous verse which Abu al-Tayyib [al-Mutanabbi] composed about Egypt ten centuries ago, putting the name of France in the place of Egypt, so that the verse becomes:

How many laughable things there are in France —
yet it is laughter that resembles weeping.