From Afar ... Our Revolution (3)

Al-Jumhuriya, 17 July 1954.

I know that between us and the French Revolution lies a long age, more than a century and a half, and I know that human life has taken vast strides in science, knowledge, and applied art that the French could not have imagined during their revolution, and I know that all of this requires that our thinking, in the middle of the twentieth century, be unlike the thinking of the French at the end of the eighteenth century, and that it would be foolish and misguided to demand of our revolution that it think as the French Revolution thought, or follow its course in the life it undertakes.

I know all of this, but I also know that the circumstances surrounding us resemble, in many respects, the circumstances that surrounded the French during their revolution; for the French, when they rose up, were subject to the injustice of kings, just as we were subject to it, and the mass of the people was subject to the exploitation of a particular class of citizens — the one that monopolized wealth, power, and authority — just as we were subject to a family that resembles that family in many respects, though not in every respect.

And the French sought to win their rights to freedom and dignity as against kings and nobles, to equality before the law without distinction between classes, and to brotherhood among citizens whatever their rank or station. And it was culture that cast these meanings into their minds and fixed them in their souls, and convinced them that God had created men free, that none of them ought to possess another, that the rich among them ought not to exploit the poor among them, that the strong among them ought not to subjugate the weak among them, and that they are all born in the same manner, and die in the same manner, and come to the same end, and that they all feel, think, express themselves, suffer, hope, and work in patterns most closely alike, most nearly similar, and that the arrogance of the strong is injustice, and the monopoly of the wealthy is oppression, and that God created the earth for all people and granted people their minds, their hearts, their intelligence, their feeling, and their material strength so that they might live on earth as brothers seeking God's bounty, cooperating in good, righteousness, and kindness, and that whatever transgression of some against others, and whatever monopoly of good by some to the exclusion of others, ought not to be the

result of corruption in the social and political order, weakness of morals, and a neglect of what no honorable man or right-minded people ought to neglect.

Culture cast all these meanings into the minds of the French and fixed them in their souls. Those among them able to read read it in the books of philosophers and writers, and spoke of it to those unable to read, and reconciled what they read and heard with the life they were living and the systems to which they were subject, and so they rose up and brought themselves and their homeland out of a life filled with oppression, injustice, and sin, into a life whose foundation they tried, as best they could, to make justice, righteousness, and cooperation in spreading good.

And we were like the French in all of this; we revived among ourselves the principles of Islam, which commands justice and kindness and forbids indecency and wrongdoing, and distinguishes no man from another except by piety. We rendered into our own language that culture which had shaped French life, along with whatever new cultures had been added to it, and a group among our writers, men of letters, and leaders of reform insisted on calling for the reform of our social and political systems, and their purification from tyranny and selfishness, from oppression, arrogance, and aggression.

And those of us able to read read all of this, and its benefit extended to those who do not read, and we weighed what we had revived of our own past, and what we had brought over of Europe's new learning, against the life we were living and the systems to which we were subject; and so we grew most deeply vexed with the state we were in, and tried to bring ourselves out of that hateful life into a better one, and the army made this possible for us — and it was its due to make this departure possible for us — because it is composed of our own sons and brothers, feeling the same pain we feel, aspiring to the same dignity we aspire to, and it held in its hand the power that enabled it to liberate the people, and it did not fall short when the opportunity arose, and God decreed success for it in what it attempted, so that our revolution became an accomplished fact two years ago.

In all these respects Egypt in the twentieth century resembles France in the eighteenth century, and in all these respects our revolution resembles the French Revolution in its origin, its causes, and the goals it pursues, and we have, besides all of this, favorable circumstances the

French did not have.

For the French rose up before steam and electricity had been discovered for use, and before people had been granted what has been granted to us of the abolition of distances in time and space, of the subduing of what is difficult and the easing of what is hard, and of superiority in harnessing nature to our purposes and our benefit.

So our duties during our revolution are vaster, harsher, and graver in danger than the duties of the French during theirs, because we possess means they did not possess.

And what I love in the history of the French Revolution — besides what it attempted of political and social justice — is its concern for spreading knowledge, broadcasting learning, and forming that free, thinking elite which drives the people forward, and enables the principles and tenets of the revolution to be realized, to settle, and to spread, not in the French homeland alone, but across the whole European continent, and in other parts of the world besides.

For the French Revolution concerned itself with organizing and encouraging scientific research and preparing the means for research scholars; it established the scientific academy with its various branches, and in doing so thought while acting and acted while thinking, and made the people feel itself a significant element among the elements of general human life.

I have mentioned the distinction of this elite, and I wish this statement to be entirely clear in the minds of those who read this discourse.

For I do not wish this elite to be distinguished by birth, nor to be distinguished by wealth, nor to be distinguished by authority's favor and partiality toward it, and its being singled out for benefit apart from other citizens; for all of this has gone, and must go, never to return.

Nor do I likewise wish this elite to be distinguished by that domination which people suppose to be learning but which is nothing of learning at all — I mean by it that domination which relies on measures of intelligence, and on what resembles measures of intelligence among the illusions of pedagogy, misunderstood in their true sense, which a group among us believes half of and denies the other half.

Rather, I wish it to distinguish itself by itself — by its diligence, its competence, and its talents — once all citizens are granted the opportunity for distinction in complete freedom, free of domination or constraint.

This elite will distinguish itself from among the sons of the whole people, not from the sons of the rich alone, nor the sons of the poor alone, nor the sons of the middle class alone, but from the sons of all Egyptians, because they are Egyptians, and for no other reason.

And I know that some will read these words and shake their heads and shrug their shoulders, and that the hearts of some among them will fill with resentment and indignation, and that one of their number may say something of the kind said from mountaintops. But I also know that many who read this discourse will read it with their hearts and their minds, and will find in it the truths of their own souls and the sum of their hopes, and will believe in it and work for it. And I promise these that success will be granted them tomorrow, even if it is not granted them today, and it is to them, and to the leaders of the revolution, that I address this discourse, on the understanding that it has not yet come to its end.