

From Afar ... Our Revolution (1)

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Egypt is preparing these days to celebrate the second anniversary of her revolution, after celebrating, last month, the first anniversary of her republic.

And it is perhaps fitting that we seize this occasion, among the anniversaries of the revolution, to think about it deeply and honestly, free of every taint, and of ambitions and self-interest in particular among such taints.

For ambitions, great or slight, and interests, near or distant, influence people's thinking — against their will — in a manner that can at the very least be described as apt to lead them astray from their true aim, and to divert them from the path of reform toward whatever suits their ambitions and their interests.

I should like my fellow citizens to bear witness that, in writing what I write, I seek no ambition, great or small, and I ask for no benefit, distant or near.

I have reached, praise be to God, an age at which a man ought to be free of ambitions and interests alike; and the Messenger of God, peace be upon him, spoke the truth when he said: "When a man reaches sixty years, God has granted him his excuse in life."

These remarks, which I address to the leaders of the revolution, and to the Prime Minister in particular, are offered purely for the sake of God, and then for the sake of the nation; it matters nothing to me whether those who are pleased are pleased with them, or those who are displeased are displeased; what matters to me is that they reach the hearts and minds of my fellow citizens, and stir in them a strong sense of the burdens they bear, and drive them to think deeply about the way to bear these burdens as well as possible — so that the years to come in our lives are not wasted in vain, and do not pass without leaving lasting marks that future generations will value, remembering us fondly, honoring us, and acknowledging that we kept faith with what we pledged to the nation; that we did not squander our time idly, did not favor ourselves with good things to the exclusion of others, and did not let

reflection on the day we live in distract us from reflection on the many days to come, in which the generations after us will live.

I know of nothing that so aids sound thinking, correct judgment, and right opinion as distance, in time or in place, from the matter we try to think about or judge; for when we live it in Egypt, for instance, we are affected by the daily events occurring around us, and by people's opinions of these events and their judgments upon them, and this distracts us from thinking about what is of far greater consequence and far more lasting effect, because it is more general, more comprehensive, and more enduring.

If, then, we are far from Egypt and remote from its daily events, and nothing of these events reaches us but their echoes, that helps us to free ourselves of these passing symptoms that occur today only to vanish tomorrow, and helps us think only of what deserves to endure and persist.

I am writing now from Paris, which is itself preparing to celebrate an anniversary of the French Revolution, and so I recall the terror that attended that revolution, and I thank God, from the depths of my soul, that our revolution remains, to this day, free of reproach, and that whatever harm has touched some people from its dangers has so far remained slight and remediable. I hope that our revolution will remain, as it began, pure of every wrong, innocent of any evil beyond remedy or repair.

I also recall the fertility that distinguished that revolution, and the splendid, lasting marks it left on French, European, and human life, and I hope our revolution will leave, in the life of the Egyptians — indeed, in the life of the Arabs, indeed, in the life of the whole East — marks like those the French Revolution left on European and world life; for the French Revolution freed its homeland from the tyranny of kings and from the sphere of feudalism, instilled in its people a sense of human rights and dignity, and of the freedom, fraternity, and equality owed to people, and spread this sentiment through Europe and then through many lands of the earth, and all of this had its effect on the life of modern humanity; and it went on to introduce, into the French homeland, institutions that changed its economic, political, social, and intellectual life in a manner that came close to being total.

And our revolution, still in its infancy, has already begun to leave serious marks on our Egyptian life: it has freed the people from the

tyranny of kings; it has followed the path of justice in distributing the nation's wealth among the citizens through the agrarian reform it has enacted; it has instilled in the Egyptians a sense of their right to freedom, dignity, and independence; it has spread this fertile sentiment to the countries around it; it is striving — successfully, God willing — to free the homeland from colonialism and its near and distant effects; and it is striving — successfully too, God willing — to introduce economic, political, social, and cultural institutions that will secure for the Egyptians a life befitting their ancient glory and their vast, far-reaching hopes.

The first duty incumbent upon educated Egyptians, at this stage in the stages of their revolution, is to give it sincere counsel, and to grant it, from within themselves, whatever lights its path and shows it the landmarks of the good, so that it may advance toward its goal with steady steps, as free of error as it is given to people to be free of error. We have been commanded to speak the truth, to call to the good, and to enjoin what is right, whatever toil that costs us, and whatever harm it exposes us to.

There is no good in a counselor who is not fair, nor in an advisor who is not honest; and the worst of people is he who rushes to deny and dwells on fault, who does not acknowledge good to those who do good, nor bears witness to the good done by those who have done good. It is a wrong against truth and an injustice against history for anyone to deny that our revolution has done Egypt nothing but good when it changed her political system, replaced the monarchy with a republic, restored to the people their full political right, and relieved them of that absurd system — the system of hereditary kingship, which rests on no foundation of right, justice, or religion, but rests, before all else, on selfishness, injustice, and arrogance, and on the sanctification of one particular family or one particular individual, even though no human being, whoever he may be, has any right to sanctification, or to arrogance, or to monopolizing rule over other people.

It is likewise an injustice against history, and a departure from right and justice, for anyone to deny that our revolution did Egypt good when it enacted the agrarian reform it enacted, which spreads ownership among the classes of the people, narrows the distances between these classes, and abolishes the gap between those who own property and indulge excessively in ownership, and spend and indulge excessively in spending, monopolizing the good to the exclusion of others, and those who have

nothing to own, nothing to spend, and nothing with which to ward off misfortune from themselves.

In these two matters, the revolution has unquestionably done Egypt good, but that good needs a great deal of time, a great deal of effort, and a great deal of patience, to produce its effects and reach the goals it ought to reach.

Establishing a republic in place of a monarchy is unquestionably a good, but the republic needs time, effort, and patience to take root, settle, and attach itself to the hearts of all citizens, to win their souls, and to secure from them that faith which drives them to sustain it with care and attention, to redeem it with their persons and their wealth, and to sacrifice for its sake what they hold most dear. None of this is granted in a year or two, and none of it is granted by the mere announcement of the republican system; rather, it needs the institutions to be put in place that ensure the republic makes citizens deeply aware that it is the political system that secures for them their right to freedom and dignity, and to govern themselves, by themselves and for themselves, not for the benefit of this class or that, nor for the benefit of this individual or that, but for the benefit of them all, across their different classes, ranks, and shares of wealth — with no distinction between the strong rich man, the destitute poor man, and whoever stands midway between the two.

The Constitutional Committee is proceeding to draft these institutions, and it will finish drafting them tomorrow or the day after; but we must persuade ourselves that drafting the constitution, the people's acceptance of it, its promulgation, and the start of its implementation, will not suffice to establish the republic firmly; rather, establishing it firmly will require a long trial of this constitution, until it becomes clear to the citizens, after its implementation, that it is indeed the constitution suited to their need, their capacity, and their hopes.

For a constitution is nothing but a human work, and human works are neither free of error nor guaranteed perfection; they need rather to be tested, revised, and reconsidered from time to time.

It would be a grave error indeed, and a grave danger indeed, to imagine that the proclamation of the republic has truly granted us the republican system, or to imagine that the proclamation of the republican constitution has firmly established the republic and secured for it safety and permanence.

And the agrarian reform the revolution has enacted is unquestionably a good, but it needs a long time and strenuous effort to be fully implemented and to bear its fruits; it is not enough that its law be proclaimed and announced to the people, nor that the land be distributed to those who did not previously own it; there remains, after all this, or alongside all this, the task of organizing cooperation among the landowners, so that they can obtain whatever tools and various means they need to cultivate the land distributed to them — a cultivation that allows the national economy the growth and prosperity it ought to have — and none of this is accomplished in a year, or two years, or several years.

And even if the agrarian reform here is carried out in the best way possible, it may yet need other kinds of reform, beyond the agrarian, for our national economy to be set right, for social justice to be achieved among the citizens, and for the gaps between classes to narrow. There is no escaping industrial reform, and commercial reform, and enabling the whole people to benefit, within the bounds of right and justice, from what agriculture, industry, and trade yield, and from the fruits that the whole of national activity yields.

All of this needs time, effort, patience, and perseverance, pursued with confidence and hope, and with strength and resolve.

All of this means that the revolution must sink deep into the hearts of every citizen, mingle with their blood, and settle in their souls, becoming the revolution of them all when they gather together, and the revolution of each one of them when he is alone with himself; and that is more apt to enable the revolution to reach its goals in the swiftest possible time, without exposure to the grave errors that arise from differences of opinion, divergent passions, and conflicting doctrines — one faction of the people clinging to love of the worn-out old and the preservation of ancient institutions, another faction rushing headlong toward extreme and excessive innovation, and a third faction wavering between the other two, together with whatever conflict arises from all this among the adherents of different doctrines, divergent passions, and clashing inclinations.

A wise people is one that makes good use of the experiences of the peoples before it, and the experiences of the peoples around it, hastening to draw the good from these experiences and avoiding their evil, thereby guarding itself against the lapses, errors, and mistakes that other peoples failed to guard against.

We have seen what horrors arose from the French people's conflicting passions during their revolution, and likewise what disasters and calamities arose from the conflicting passions of other peoples during their revolutions — calamities that kept the history of these revolutions from being pure and unblemished, but rather stained it with the redness of blood, and filled it with sorrow, fear, and an unending gloom.

It is more fitting, then, that we profit from all that we have learned of this, that our learned among us enlighten those who have not been granted learning, that we all cooperate in righteousness and piety, and that no faction among us cooperate in sin and aggression; that we preserve for our fledgling revolution the clarity and purity that have been granted it, and that we strive to wipe away whatever blemishes and harm have clung to it.

Yet none of this alone suffices to bring our revolution to its goal, of preparing for our people the happiness, advancement, and independence they deserve, in the most precise, the widest, and the deepest senses of that word.

We have seen that the revolution needs a long time to achieve what it wants to achieve of its aims, and how often we read, in the books of contemporary Frenchmen, that their revolution has not yet ended, because it has not achieved all that it wanted to achieve of its aims!

It is essential, then, that we prepare for our revolution the elite among the sons of the people, those able to bear its burdens and assist its leaders, adding their efforts to its efforts and their energy to its energy; and this can come about only through proper education, which brings a portion of the sons of the people to the highest and broadest degree a human being can attain of keen intelligence, sound judgment, and precise knowledge of the realities of things — so that they may understand the needs, hopes, and interests of the people, and assess all of this amid the circumstances surrounding the people in both its internal and external life.

The discussion of all this grows long and branches out widely, so let us defer it to another article soon to come.