The Democratic People

Al-Musawwar, 20 September 1940.

We are a democratic nation, loving our liberty and jealous of it. And yet a great many among the Egyptian people doubt whether they truly enjoy democracy at all. So if matters should grow earnest, it would be among the gravest of dangers and the ugliest of wrongs for us to meet the coming trials with our hearts divided and our consciences estranged from one another; it is our duty to reconcile these divided hearts, and to persuade every Egyptian conscience that Egyptian democracy is not, and must never be, the preserve of one faction of Egyptians to the exclusion of another, but a common inheritance shared by all Egyptians alike.

What chiefly distinguishes public life in democratic nations is that it is never imposed upon the people, but proceeds from the people itself; the people are never driven toward it nor compelled into it, but seek it out of their own desire and their own will.

And it is for this reason that democratic peoples are held responsible for their own actions, enjoying their fruits just as they bear their ills; for it is they themselves who willed them, and no one imposed them, nor did any tyranny or oppression compel them to it.

And it is for this reason, too, that it is only natural to say to a democratic people, should its life be endangered: come, defend yourselves, guard your dignity, hold fast to your liberty, and sacrifice your effort, your wealth, and the lives of your sons for the sake of your honor and your sovereignty.

These words, said to a democratic people, land in the best possible place and reach to the very depths of its conscience, driving it to action, to struggle, and to whatever sacrifice that struggle may demand.

And these same words, said to a democratic people, are tasted and understood by that people, each word finding in it its plain and evident meaning. They feel this meaning keenly in every action its members undertake, together or apart, and in every word its members speak, together or apart, as well — for they observe, in their daily life, that they rise free and go about free, that they speak freely and act freely. They do whatever they wish, with nothing to turn them from it save the law itself, framed to suit the rights and liberty of individuals and communities, and

to order these rights and this liberty. And they refrain from whatever they wish to refrain from, driven to it by nothing but themselves, with no violent or arbitrary power imposing it upon them.

Each individual, then, if he rises to defend his homeland, defends himself first, and his homeland and his fellow citizens second — unlike those peoples subdued by a violent power that holds their affairs in its own grip, driving them toward what it itself wills, not toward what they themselves will, and turning them away from what it wishes to turn them from, even when they themselves might be strongly inclined to embrace it. Such peoples are driven to war against their own inclination, and plunge into its depths with reluctance and distaste. Victory, should it be granted them, brings them no real enjoyment, no true savor, since it is a victory born not of their own will but of compulsion; and should defeat overtake them, they drink its bitterness doubled over, since it is a defeat born not of any error a free people itself committed, nor of any failing a people drove itself to while unconstrained, but born instead of the high-handedness of tyrants, the arbitrariness of the arbitrary, and the despotism of rulers over matters in which they had no right to be despotic. From this we observe that when democratic peoples plunge into the depths of war, it is only natural that they should be shown everything concerning the war's affairs, and that their leaders and statesmen should conceal from them nothing, whether good or ill; for these leaders and statesmen do not alone bear the burdens of a war they neither started nor monopolized, but bear them together with the rest of the people's sons, since it was the people itself that undertook the war and charged them with its leadership and the ordering of its affairs. They report the news of the war to the people as free men, unburdened of ultimate responsibility, and expect from the people nothing but what a successful commander expects — encouragement and support — or what a failed commander expects — blame and reproach.

As for those peoples upon whom war is imposed against their will, who are driven to fight with no desire for it, they know nothing of the war's true course except what their commanders and masters choose to tell them, and these tell them only what they themselves wish, and show them only what they wish them to see, pursuing in this their own interest far more than the people's interest, and taking far greater care to spare themselves blame than to enlighten the people about its own affairs or confront it with the plain truth.

And I think people cannot fail to notice the vast difference between what Mr. Churchill says to the British people, and what the French ministers used to say to the French people before the defeat, and what the leaders and masters of the Germans and the Italians say to the German people and the Italian people. The former speak frankly to their people of the facts, warn them of danger, point out their weaknesses, and guide them to their sources of strength; they strengthen hope in the people's soul, but do not mislead or deceive them about whatever cause for concern the unknown future may hold in store, nor about whatever calls for caution and prudence. The latter dress up war for their people and make them desire it, make light of its losses, belittle its true cost while exaggerating the prospect of victory, and go to excess in magnifying its importance. The former need the people's support and counsel, and so are frank with it that true support and counsel come only from desire, not from dread, from will, not from submission and compliance. The latter want only obedience and submission, and so are never frank but only alarm and mislead — since obedience and submission spring only from fear and dread, never from security, trust, and conviction.

Such, then, is the condition of war among these two kinds of peoples: some fight because they find no escape from war, and because their honor, their interests, and their concern for their own free and independent life drive them to fight. Others fight because they too find no escape from war, but because, were they not to fight, they would expose themselves to every manner of horror within their own internal life — if the enemy's weapons do not kill them, the weapons of their own leaders and masters among their fellow citizens will. And there is a third kind of people, wavering between these two, torn between these two camps, possessing liberty's outward appearance and democracy's forms and shapes, yet once you examine its true condition, you find its liberty nothing but words, and its democracy nothing but a species of playacting.

And so if war should descend upon the territory of such a people, it stands exposed to the gravest of dangers and the ugliest of them as well; for its outward appearance pictures it as rising to fight for its liberty, its dignity, and its independent life, while its true condition stands at the farthest remove from this — since it does not feel its own liberty, does not find its dignity secure, and does not trust in its own independent existence. It fights under orders, and struggles only because driven to struggle, even as people suppose it to be fighting in defense of the

homeland and in guard of its rights. And it is exposed to everything that befalls one who undertakes great deeds without belief or conviction, outwardly strong but inwardly weak — forward in what the eye sees, yet hesitant in what reason perceives and conscience feels.

Its leaders and masters tell it: come, defend your liberty! And its tongue says: yes — but its heart says: where is this liberty I am asked to defend?! Its chiefs and those who manage its affairs tell it: come, hold fast to your dignity! And its tongue says: yes — but its heart says: I find no taste in this dignity, no savor whatsoever, and if dignity must indeed be held fast to, then it is not this foreign enemy I ought first to fight, but rather my own chiefs and leaders, from whom I ought first to wrest this dignity. And its leaders and those who manage its affairs tell it: come, defend your independent life! And its tongue says: yes — but its heart says: I would love to be free and independent in my own relations with you, that I might be free and independent in my relations with foreigners as well. Until, when matters grow earnest and the horror draws near, you see such people advancing without confidence, struggling without belief in the struggle, exposed to all that befalls the unbelieving — to failure and weakness, to collapse and faltering, and then to submission and surrender.

As for peoples who submit openly and plainly to a tyrannical power, they may find in this submission a repugnant species of belief, unworthy of noble humanity — yet it nonetheless satisfies them and drives them to action and to a readiness for self-sacrifice in struggle. Something of this has indeed shown itself in this war; for the French saw, among their enemies in the battle for France, a thing truly astonishing: they saw thousands of men, hundreds of thousands even, rushing eagerly toward death, falling into it as moths fall into flame, heedless of harm and never flinching from danger, all the while uttering but a single word — the name of their tyrant leader, the German.

And peoples may believe in error and spend themselves utterly in its cause — but the worst evil of all, the very worst, is for peoples to believe neither in error nor in guidance, standing instead confused and hesitant between the two, finding in their own belief and in the conviction of their own consciences nothing to drive them toward one or the other.

This, then, is the gravest danger there is, and the very worst evil there is; for one cannot ask of the individual that he lay down his life or shed his blood, except where this is the path to a lofty ideal, a road

toward the fulfillment of some hope dear to the soul and beloved to the heart, for whose sake the laying down of lives and the shedding of blood becomes a light thing to bear.

What, then, must we do, now that the portents of war have begun to cry out against us from every direction, now that the dangers of war have begun to press in upon us from every quarter, and it has become among the most likely and the most readily conceivable things that we shall be scorched by its fire, whether willingly or not? I think the answer to this question is an easy one, requiring no great thought, and close at hand. We are, beyond any doubt, a democratic nation; we have expended fierce efforts for the sake of democracy, borne heavy burdens for its sake, and sacrificed a very great deal for its sake. And were we given the choice between democracy and any other system of government, we should not hesitate in our choice — for we made that choice long ago.

We are, then, a democratic nation, loving our liberty and jealous of it, prizing our dignity and holding fast to it, whatever hardship and toil this may cost us; and I do not doubt for a moment that, should our democracy be exposed to danger or to the threat that comes to it from abroad, we should redouble our effort without hesitation and press our sacrifice to the furthest extreme, to repel the aggression against this democracy and preserve it from being lost.

All of this is true beyond doubt — but there is another truth beyond doubt as well, namely that a great many among the Egyptian people doubt whether they truly enjoy this democracy at all, and their hearts find no reassurance that they are receiving their rightful share of democracy's blessing; and some may believe that Egyptian democracy is open to one faction of Egyptians while forbidden to another. So if matters should grow earnest and the horror should draw near, it would be among the gravest of dangers and the ugliest of wrongs for us to meet the coming trials with our hearts divided, our consciences estranged from one another, and our belief in the high ideal we are asked to defend neither shared nor equal among us.

If, then, there is a duty we must discharge before danger seizes us from every quarter of our land, it is this: to reconcile these divided hearts, to bring these conflicting passions into harmony, and to persuade every Egyptian conscience that Egyptian democracy is no plaything but the most earnest of earnest things; that Egyptian democracy is not, and must never be, the preserve of one faction of Egyptians to the exclusion

of another, but a common inheritance shared by all Egyptians alike; that political and social justice is no tree beneath whose shade only some may shelter while others may not, but a blessed tree whose root is firm and whose branches reach the sky, sheltering all Egyptians alike — and perhaps capable of sheltering non-Egyptians too; and that the political and social rights which the Egyptian constitution sets down for Egyptians are not granted to some while withheld from others, just as the political and social duties it imposes are not imposed upon some while spared to others, and just as the duties that war, should we be forced to it, will demand of us, will never be imposed upon some while spared to others.

You may ask me: what is the way to achieve this unity, and to spread this common belief among all Egyptians alike? My answer to that is a simple one: this question ought not to be addressed to me, but rather to those who are charged with the affairs of Egyptian politics, and who devote to them whatever time and effort lies within their power.