

The Repeated Talk...

I have never been astonished — except at one thing: that the Egyptians have not grown tired of negotiations, and that their patience has not snapped since the British first began this endless talk when they rescinded their protectorate. We have heard the same talk so often that we have learned it by heart; we have tried it so many times that all it has brought us is division, rancour and corruption. Yet experience is the best teacher and should warn the prudent against wasting effort on fruitless pursuits.

Reading the British statements about negotiations these days, I am struck by their sameness: they are the very words they used a third of a century ago when 'Adl — may God have mercy on him — conducted the talks, and the same phrases have been repeated every time an Egyptian negotiator met them in London or in Cairo. It is astonishing that neither we nor they have grown bored of this reheated discourse. I can understand why the British do not tire of it: the talk suits them — it gives them room to delay and it extends the reasons for their continued presence in Egypt. Few things do they hate so much as withdrawal. Accordingly, they stall and manoeuvre, tighten and relax, never steady except long enough to twist anew. As for us, nothing should matter to us as much as withdrawal.

Why do we not hasten it — not merely speak about it, but bring it about? We have spoken until our throats are hoarse and written until our pens are spent; we have thought until thought itself has grown cramped. It is time to draw the curtain on this absurd tale that will not end, to drop the play of words and take up serious action. We must allow elderly men who have spent their youth waiting for withdrawal — some of whom have died and some of whom still wait — to live long enough to see their country free, even for a single hour before death claims them; we must let young people expend their energies on the reforms the country needs, rather than on the boring waiting that kills the spirit and weakens resolve. We must raise children who will know their homeland only as a free land, cleansed of foreign occupation, and acknowledged by the world as entitled to dignity, honour, and independence.

The British have used the talk of negotiations precisely to divide us into parties and factions that, in plotting against one another, assist in their own undoing. Now, I think, we must show the British what we ourselves have learned — make it perfectly clear to them, beyond doubt or ambiguity, that this renewed talk will not split the ranks that have joined together, nor will it return us to the fragmentation of the past. It will not produce for them, as before, the factions and party divisions that served their interests. What it will produce is a people unified in word and heart, supporting those who speak for them and determined that this idle talk end as soon as possible — either yielding a benefit that will profit not only Egyptians but the democratic world at large, or producing harm that will not only wound Egypt but will also afflict Britain and unsettle this vital region of the world.

It is time, I think, to make those who speak for us to the British understand that we, behind them, share their impatience with delay; we are weary of waiting just as they are weary of it. We want only one thing: to put an end to this nonsense of words and turn to serious action — either to implement the reforms we need, or to achieve the withdrawal that must come, whatever its cost and however grave the trials it entails. This revolution of ours did not rise only against domestic tyranny; it rose against foreign tyranny too. Indeed, the struggle against internal despotism was only a means toward the greater revolution: to make Egypt truly and genuinely for the Egyptians, so that every Egyptian may feel, in the fullest sense of the word, free in his country.

The British have declared for years their intention to withdraw their troops from Egypt — yet years have passed and that declaration has produced nothing. Ṣidqī — may God have mercy on him — negotiated and reached nothing; the Wafd government negotiated and achieved nothing. And now they speak again of readiness to leave. Let them once be sincere in their beginnings: after seventy years of words and promises, let them be believed, or else we must make it clear once and for all that we are no longer those who are taken in by talk and empty phrases.

It is not to the British alone that we must speak; above all, we must speak to ourselves — a stern, free conversation with our own souls. A free people has only two acceptable options, no third: either a life of noble dignity, or a violent struggle in which those who take up arms face horrors and many may lay down their lives.

Egypt today is receiving the martyrs felled by external aggression and internal treachery; our meeting with them ought to be a lesson that reaches into consciences and hearts. If the people have not yet learned, let them learn now: freedom does not suit a soft, complacent life. It is won at the highest cost — by offering lives as price — and preserved through continuous effort toward strength, honour and the power to repel humiliation and repel the invading foe. If the people have not yet learned, let them learn that comfort, ease, and indulgence are not to be sought until full and genuine independence has been achieved — the kind of independence that shelters a people and permits them to enjoy life without fear, without being robbed of its fruits by a tyrant, an occupier, or a treacherous compatriot.

We must not greet our martyrs with empty compassion that avails them nothing — hollow words rolled off tongues, insincere tears shed and then soon forgotten while we return to the false comforts of life. True compassion for these martyrs is active: it wells from the heart and rises from the depths of conscience; it is practical and determined never to let their tragedy recur. It means completing Egypt's material and moral strength so that she is not taken by surprise, so that she is not prey to the greedy, and so that some of her own do not betray her when real danger comes.

We must meet our martyrs with this genuine, solemn, purposeful compassion. Let our encounter with them be a covenant we make with ourselves — not a clamour that fills the air and deafens the ears, but a firm, solemn silence in which we vow to honour their rights and to preserve our dignity. The first sign of that dignity is to reject and abhor foreign occupation, and to call upon God as witness to the support of those who fight to cleanse the homeland of its evils.

I would have every Egyptian, whether he attended the public ceremony or not, to meet our martyrs in spirit. Perhaps a single memory is more useful than attendance in body; we should receive all our martyrs with our hearts, having accepted the duty that dignity and the legacy of coming generations impose upon us. Let the day on which we receive these martyrs be the day of our pledge to the revolution and its leader: that we will support them by every means at our disposal, bolster them while they negotiate, respond to their call if negotiations fail to produce what we seek — and that this day will be the day on which, before God, we swear never to be deceived again by that old repeated talk of negotiations.

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

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