

An Honor and a Duty

I do not know whether this piece will reach the eyes of the President of the Republic and leader of the Revolution, Major-General Muḥammad Najīb. Yet I sincerely hope he reads it, for I have written it with him deeply in mind, with the highest esteem and admiration.

The subject of this article is quite simple. I came across it just now in an Italian newspaper of wide circulation and far-reaching voice — *La Domenica del Corriere*, the Sunday edition of *Corriere della Sera* — which brings to its readers the news they need when other papers rest on that day of the week.

A correspondent of this newspaper travelled to Marrakesh, visiting its great cities after the recent disturbances there. He wrote to his readers of what he saw and heard. Among his reports was one detail that gave rise to this reflection: he noted that the portraits of the Sultan, whom the French had deposed and exiled from his homeland, had been removed from their places and confiscated by the police. Yet no pictures of the new Sultan had been put up in their stead. The walls were left bare — except beside them hung portraits of Egypt's President and leader of the Revolution, Major-General Muḥammad Najīb.

It is not the Italian journalist's article that concerns me, nor will it much concern the readers of *al-Ahrām*. We all follow the news from Marrakesh in the world's papers — sometimes in detail, sometimes in brief; sometimes truthfully, often exaggeratedly.

But I wonder if the Egyptian reader feels what I felt upon reading this report — that mingled feeling of *painful pride* and *sorrowful joy*.

What pride could touch an Egyptian's heart more deeply, or echo longer in his soul, than reading in a foreign paper — one that neither flatters our President nor seeks favor from him, for it neither hopes for his benefit nor fears his disfavor — that his image now hangs beside that of a deposed Sultan in the markets and shops of Marrakesh's nationalist quarters? When the Sultan was exiled and his portraits torn down, Najīb's picture remained — a symbol of consolation and of hope for the Moroccan people.

What joy could equal this — to know that the leader of Egypt's Revolution, which freed her from tyranny and seeks to free her from colonial rule, has become a symbol of liberation not only in Egypt but in all the lands that still suffer under foreign domination and the treachery of some of their own?

It is a joy that fills the soul with gladness and contentment — yet tinged with sadness that tempers its sweetness. For those millions of Moroccans who kept Najīb's portrait when their beloved Sultan's was taken from them must feel a misery, a humiliation, a sorrow that we can scarcely imagine. They once believed themselves free — and colonialism has shown them that their freedom was but an illusion. They believed themselves honorable — and colonialism has shown them that honor cannot stand before cannon and machine gun. They believed they had a Sultan who embodied their liberty and dignity — and colonialism has struck him down, seized him, his sons, and his whole family as hostages on some island in the sea, uncertain whether they will remain or be sent elsewhere without warning or mercy.

And the colonizers did not only exile their Sultan; they banished even his images, those small emblems in which the Moroccans had found comfort and hope when colonialism's weight pressed too hard upon them.

So yes, we Egyptians may rejoice when we read in that foreign paper that Najīb's picture remains where the Sultan's once hung — offering back to the Moroccans a portion of the solace and hope they lost with his exile. But that joy is shadowed by a sting of injustice and grief. For Najīb is far from them; his picture can speak only in its eloquent silence, while they are in need of living speech that revives the heart — of living action that dispels despair, erases desolation, and restores to the spirit its love of life and faith that life is indeed worth living.

They need to believe that dignity is no illusion, that honor is no dream, and that these values are real — attainable truths whose fruit can be enjoyed by those who labor for them; that their toil will yield blessings not monopolized by tyrant or usurper or foreign oppressor.

Those Moroccans who look to Najīb's portrait long to see him in person — to tell him of their suffering, to hear from him words that renew their courage, affirming that colonialism will perish and that the hour has come for the downtrodden nations to grow strong, noble, and proud once again. But alas — where are they from Najīb, and where is Najīb from them?

With such mingled pride and sorrow I read that Italian report. And I have no doubt that the Moroccans' reverence for Najīb's image is an honor to this man who has saved his country from some of its evils and strives to save it from them all.

Nor do I doubt that Najīb will understand this honor as I do — for he is far from selfish and detests self-seeking. He will see that this honor belongs first to his country, which raised him up, breathed into him its spirited strength, and lifted him to the station he holds today. He will attribute it also to his comrades — those who strove with him and still strive to bring Egypt out of darkness into light, from weakness into strength, from humiliation into dignity and pride.

I am certain, too, that Najīb will interpret this tribute as it should be understood — as every Egyptian of conscience and honor should understand it: that true honor is not a matter of empty praise, nor of lavish compliments, nor of glorification meant merely to please.

Honor, in its essence, is a *duty*. It is a call to fulfill an obligation wholly and without neglect.

Only the hypocrites and flatterers praise in order to win favor, seeking the satisfaction and kindness of the one they praise, hoping for personal gain. But sincere and honest souls — those who neither flatter nor deceive, nor seek momentary profit — when they honor someone, they acknowledge a measure of his virtue and call upon him to add virtue to virtue, good to good. They record his beneficence and press him to continue it, to surpass himself.

This is how I understood the Moroccans' honoring of Najīb. And I am sure he understands it the same way. They praise what he has done for his country — and they expect him to go further along the path he has begun. They know that Egypt is a great nation and that Najīb is a great man; and that the greatness of nations and men alike excludes selfishness.

A great nation does not hoard its blessings for itself, nor a great man his efforts for his own person or even his own country. Out of the intensity of their virtue and their love of good, they share freely with all who need help and support.

There is now in the hearts of the Moroccans a painful knot we must help them untie — for we ourselves have known that knot, one heavy with shame and humiliation: the agony of being wronged in one's homeland, of being wounded in one's dignity, of being stripped of control over one's own

fate. It is therefore our duty to help restore their confidence, to ease their affliction, to remind them that trials may come and calamities may strike — but they soon pass. They are but the waves that surge and then subside, as the early leaders of Islam used to say when hardship befell them in the days of conquest.

We must make the Moroccans feel that they do not suffer alone — that their pain is shared by their brothers in language, history, and faith.

And I am convinced that the concerted aggression of the strong nations against the weak will ultimately benefit neither side. The life of mankind has changed, and so have the conditions that govern it. It is now certain that no reckless power can profit from oppression, and that once peoples awaken to their rights and demand them, nothing can stop them until they are gained.

All Egyptians must therefore feel, as their President does, that the Moroccans' honoring of his person is in truth an honoring of his country — and that this honor is a duty laid upon us: to do what we can to comfort our brothers in their distress, to prove ourselves worthy of their trust and of the esteem in which they hold us.

— **Ṭāhā Ḥusayn**

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