

Equality . . .

Al-Wadi, 5 August 1934

The most beautiful thing contained in the telegraphic dispatch that The Times' correspondent sent to his newspaper, discussing the head of the delegation's recent journey, is his criticism of the leader for refusing to cooperate with the other opposition parties on the basis of equality.

This criticism is truly elegant, and deserves both admiration and reflection, and interpretation, of a particular kind. For the head of the delegation is, in truth, an unjust man — the English acknowledge this of him, and his Egyptian rivals acknowledge it too — that he is the leader of the majority of the people, and that no reasonable conduct of the people's affairs is possible without him. Yet then the English tell him, and his Egyptian rivals tell him: what is the matter with you, that you should be unjust and overbearing, and refuse to work with the other politicians on the basis of equality? The English and the Egyptians believe that the Wafd is a true democratic image of the Egyptian people, and that the other parties are images of various kinds of minority — some genuine, some artificial and contrived. Then the English say, and some Egyptians say to the Wafd: what is the matter with you, that you will not cooperate with these kinds of minority, genuine or contrived, on the basis of equality?

And the precise meaning of this is that these Englishmen and Egyptians concede that a thousand is more than ten, yet at the same time ask themselves why a thousand should not equal ten. They concede that there is a clear, evident majority, and that the will of this majority is clear and evident, yet then ask themselves why the majority should not equal the minority, and why the will of the majority should not shrink and yield to the will of the minority. They concede that there are natural conditions that exist because God willed them to exist, yet then ask themselves why these conditions should not be overturned and changed, so that one might become equal to two, ten might become equal to a thousand, and the majority might become equal to the minority. And the strange thing is that when these Englishmen and Egyptians pose these questions to themselves and to others, it never occurs to them to answer that these conditions do not change, because God created them this way, and if God wills something, nothing can turn it back; that one cannot equal two, because the nature of things has always intended, and will always intend,

that one be half of two; and that a majority cannot equal a minority, because God shaped the human mind to grasp the natural disparity between the many and the few.

It never occurs to them to give these answers to those questions — even though they belong among the simplest and most basic of things, and even though, if these same questions were put to them in their own ordinary private lives, or in any public matter outside Egyptian politics, they would not hesitate to shake their heads, shrug their shoulders, and mock anyone who wished to overturn the order of nature and alter the facts of things. This is because these Englishmen, and their Egyptian friends, believe among themselves that matters ought not to run their natural course in Egypt, the way they run their natural course in other countries — whether because the natural course of things in Egypt would mean that the people's affairs belong to the people, and that democracy in Egypt would become a serious matter rather than a game, and constitutional life in Egypt a reality rather than a fantasy; and this is something the English seem to hate, and cannot stomach or feel at ease with. Or else because, if matters ran their natural course in Egypt, the people's affairs would fall to the majority of the people rather than to the minority, and the reins of government would pass to the head of the delegation and his companions, rather than to those Egyptians who oppose and contend against them. And these Egyptians cannot, deep within themselves, feel at ease with true democracy, or reconcile themselves, between their own consciences, to the place God has allotted them — that of an opposing minority, before a ruling majority. For they see themselves as the intelligent ones; they see themselves as the capable ones; they see themselves as more fit to govern, more skilled in managing affairs, and more deserving that Egypt's crisis be entrusted to them.

And so they prefer themselves over what is right, and place themselves above democracy, and seek to reach power by a crooked path, making people imagine that they are democrats, and advocates of true constitutional life, when in truth they are aristocrats, calling not for constitutional life, but for the rule of the minority over the majority.

This, it seems, is the true explanation for this elegant criticism that the English, and some Egyptians, direct at the head of the delegation, and at his companions among the Wafdist faithful. And it is clear that this criticism, if it can be understood coming from the English, cannot be understood coming from Egyptians. For the English are colonizers, and

by the very nature of their position, cannot feel at ease with Egypt's freedom, nor feel secure in her enjoyment of true democratic rule, nor find any comfort in the people's mastery over their own affairs, and the people's confidence in themselves, and the people's faith in their own rights — for all of this threatens colonialism, narrows the scope of English authority, and drives Egypt toward the true, sincere independence she desires. So it is no surprise that the English should feel cramped by the Wafd and its leader, nor that they should demand the majority shrink itself down to equal the minority, nor that they should resort to violence and intrigue, using both to push the majority away from power, should it refuse to submit to what they want.

All this can be understood coming from the English, and Egyptians understand it fully, and resist it with all due resistance — but it cannot be understood coming from Egyptians themselves. For if they truly want independence for their country, and are genuinely concerned that their country be truly free, and are sincere in what they proclaim about being advocates of freedom and guardians of the constitution, then they know full well that the path to independence, freedom, and constitutional government lies precisely in this: that the people's affairs belong to the majority of the people, not to its minority; that a thousand Egyptians outweigh ten; and that the right of a thousand outweighs the right of ten. And they know this full well, because they are men of intelligence, men of ability — and those in whom intelligence and ability come together do not remain ignorant of simple things, nor overlook basic principles. So then, what is the meaning of their demand that the majority be made equal to the minority? What is the meaning of their insistence that the leader of the majority relinquish the majority's own rights, for no reason but to allow them a share in the power they want, press for, and cannot resign themselves to being without, yet cannot rise up and shoulder its burdens on their own? It would be better, more reasonable, and far more fitting to intelligence, for them simply to declare that they do not love democracy, do not approve of it, do not accept it as a system of government, and that they prefer the rule of the minority to the rule of the majority. Were they to do so, they would bring their opinions into line with their conduct, make their words match their deeds, and be honest both in what they conceal and in what they proclaim — and Egyptians would then know how to dispute them in their opinion, or how to support them in it.

And stranger than all of this is that the English should acknowledge that the head of the delegation is a brave man, that the head of the

delegation is a man of integrity, that the head of the delegation is a man firm in his convictions, neither wavering nor defeated — and then go on to demand of him things that suit neither courage, nor integrity, nor firmness. For it is no act of courage for Mustafa al-Nahhas, leader of the majority, to sacrifice this majority's own rights merely to satisfy the English, or to satisfy a minority of Egyptians; nor is it an act of integrity for Mustafa al-Nahhas, entrusted with the people's rights, to bargain away these rights merely to satisfy the English and a minority of Egyptians; nor is it an act of firm conviction for Mustafa al-Nahhas, convinced that the people's affairs must belong to the majority of the people, to then declare that the people's affairs ought to belong to a tiny minority of the people's own sons, merely to satisfy the English and a faction of Egyptians.

This is strange indeed, built on contradiction and confusion, on the preference of self-interest, and the pursuit of passing desires. Yet the matter at stake is neither the satisfaction nor the displeasure of the English, nor the satisfaction nor the displeasure of the minority; it is rather, on the one hand, satisfying what is right, and cultivating sound political character in the people, on the other; and, on a third front, convincing the English and their friends that the Egyptian awakening is neither a game nor a jest. For what is right demands that the people's affairs belong to the majority in every democratic country, and this is the Wafd's own view, from which it will never depart, and the head of the delegation's own policy, over which he will never bargain. And the cultivation of sound political character demands of the Wafd and its leader an insistence on the people's rights, and a firmness in upholding them. This too is the Wafd's doctrine, from which it will never depart, and the leader's policy, which he will never dispute. And convincing the English and their friends that Egypt did not rise merely to amuse herself, but rose to strive until she wins independence, demands of the Wafd and its leader that the people's rights and hopes never be made a matter for haggling, nor an object of buying and selling. This too is the Wafd's doctrine, from which it will never depart, and the leader's policy, in which he will accept neither dispute nor debate. If there must be some give and take, if there must be argument and dispute, then let the people's rights be restored to them before all else, and let democracy be established in Egypt on its true, solid foundation — and only then, afterward, may there be room for give and take, dispute and debate between the parties, over the secondary, detailed questions that touch people's daily lives. But the highest rights of nations lie beyond discussion, and beyond dispute.

Taha Hussein

Al-Wadi, 5 August 1934.