

Two Days!

al-Siyasa, 25 August 1924

Two days: the 12th of January in Egypt, and the 11th of May in France. The two are remarkably alike in many respects: both, first of all, were election days — the Egyptian Chamber of Deputies was elected on one of them, the French Chamber of Deputies on the other. They are alike in another respect too: both were profoundly shaped by that social storm which has been sweeping through the modern world for some time now, a storm the modern world has been thrown into turmoil by, country after country, until it has triumphed, or very nearly triumphed, everywhere.

If we wish to characterize this storm accurately, the first thing we can say of it is that it aims at one single thing in every country it passes through: the replacement of the classes overseeing the system of government, if not the demolition of that entire system.

In truth, this social-political storm has demolished the system of government in many countries, and failed to demolish it in others, contenting itself instead with merely transferring it from one class to another. It demolished it in Russia and in Germany; it failed to demolish it in England, where it simply installed Labour in place of the Liberals and Conservatives; it failed to demolish it in France, where it installed the parties of the Left in place of the parties of the Centre. You might say it demolished the system in Egypt, installing democratic rule in place of autocratic rule; or you might equally say it failed to demolish the system in Egypt at all, since the outward form of the Egyptian government has not changed entirely — but it did transfer power from the class that had been competing over ministerial posts before the 22nd of January to a different class altogether, the class that made up the Chamber of Deputies elected on the 12th of January, the vast majority of whom would never, before the Constitution, have dreamed of reaching a ministerial post.

Whatever the case may be, this social storm has, in every country it has passed through, transferred power from one class to another, from one camp to another. It is not my purpose in this piece to offer you a full sociological study comparing the various manifestations of this storm across the different countries it has swept through; a daily newspaper is hardly the place for such a study. But it so happened that, after witnessing the symptoms of this storm in Egypt ever since parliament

was elected, I found myself able to witness its symptoms in France as well, over this summer. And I noticed, among these symptoms in the two countries, a certain resemblance worth thinking through — and it is this resemblance I want to speak to you about.

I want to speak to you, and at the same time I want to avoid angering anyone; it is not a wise thing, these days, for a writer to anger anyone — particularly when that "anyone" happens to be among those entrusted with overseeing public affairs and holding the reins of government.

And while French writers pay no mind to angering today's masters, and feel no fear of the French Chamber of Deputies' displeasure, the difference between France and Egypt remains great: France has long grown accustomed to liberty and constitutional life, and some genuine corruption of that would have to set in before the writers of the Centre and Right would ever fear the anger of the parties of the Left. Egypt, by contrast, has only recently known liberty, and even more recently known constitutional life; and so writers of the Left in Egypt must take care to guard themselves against the party of the Right, and can only write with caution and patience.

The first thing one notices, among the points of resemblance between the 12th of January and the 11th of May, is that the parties victorious on these two days won their victories through sheer, boundless extravagance in promising, and equally boundless extravagance in criticizing — to the point of dazzling the public, seizing its mind, making it forget itself and forget the actual facts, and opening before it doors of hope scarcely describable or credible in ordinary life. These masses had grown weary of the rulers they had known, come to despise their ways of governing, and resented them for hardships that were, in truth, no doing and no fault of theirs. And how quickly they inclined to be rid of these rulers! And how quickly they handed power over to those who had been so extravagant in criticism on the one hand, and in promises on the other!

In truth, they did not hand power over to them out of genuine conviction and certainty in every case; the simple among them were convinced and certain simply because they were simple, while the rest were neither convinced nor certain at all — they merely wanted to rid themselves of the governments they had grown tired of, and the governmental methods they had grown weary of, and so went along with the crowd, and voted for these victorious parties, much as that Latin

peasant once did, when the assembly of the people gathered to ostracize one of two rival leaders, Aristides and Themistocles.

Aristides was the more just of the two men, the more upright, and the more devoted to character and honour; the people loved him and were genuinely fond of him, but they resented his rule, because he was no skilled flatterer of the public.

While the assembly of the people was voting on which of the two leaders would be ostracized, this peasant approached Aristides, not recognizing him, handed him a shard of pottery, and asked him to write Aristides's name on it. Aristides asked him: "And why do you wish to banish this man? What grievance do you hold against him?" The peasant answered: "No grievance at all — I am simply weary of hearing him called 'the Just'!"...

In just the same way, many people voted for today's masters, in both Egypt and France, on the 12th of January and the 11th of May, and victory came to them, here and there alike; and the masses set about waiting for today's masters, in both places, to make good on these enchanting promises, and realize these dazzling hopes. And it appears they will be waiting a very long time, here and there alike — for a promise is one thing, and fulfilment is quite another; and only an honourable man refrains from promising unless he has assured himself he can actually deliver; and electoral systems, and electoral campaigning — in the view of certain parties, at least — seem to exempt the campaigner from any need to measure his promises against his ability to keep them.

The victorious parties in Egypt and France never once considered, before the election, that they might actually have to face practical governance, and that they were bound, in fairness, to be sparing in their promises — both so as not to embarrass themselves once victorious, and so as not to do the nation itself a disservice, corrupting its mind and blurring, for it, the line between the possible and the impossible. And so, once they came to power and began grappling with practical governance, they followed paths that would strike you as merely laughable, if you looked at them untouched by national sentiment or national interest — but that are genuinely painful to observe, if you look at them moved by love of your own country and concern for its welfare. They followed the very same paths as the parties that had governed before them, yet could not bring themselves to admit their own inability to find any other path;

their conduct, in truth, was the very conduct of those who had preceded them — except that they now speak a different language, and boast of things those predecessors never boasted of, because those predecessors were modest, and fair to themselves and to others, while these men know nothing of modesty, and deceive the public and deceive themselves — and perhaps deceive themselves even before they deceive anyone else. This holds true on the substantive questions: you may recall, for instance, that today's masters in Egypt are carrying through the very Compensations and Indemnities and the 28 February Declaration.

You may recall, too, that today's masters defended the Public Assemblies Law, and were alarmed when the parliamentary body moved to repeal it — and yet they, in turn, speak of the men of the 28 February Declaration exactly the way they speak of them, and of the men of the Compensations and Indemnities exactly the way they speak of them. And you may know, too, that today's masters in France follow, in foreign policy, precisely the same paths their predecessors followed, in flat contradiction of their own political and social doctrines. The sitting French Prime Minister cannot concede a single one of France's claims to reparations; the sitting French Prime Minister cannot agree to evacuate the Ruhr before France's right to reparations is guaranteed; the French Prime Minister cannot neglect the implementation of a single clause of the Treaty of Versailles.

And how loudly the parties of the Left once cried out! How much they criticized! How indignant they were at the Treaty of Versailles, and at the policy of those who oversaw its implementation! That is one side of the matter.

But there is another side — a practical, concrete one, if I may put it that way — in which today's masters in Egypt and today's masters in France resemble one another: domestic policy.

The conduct of the two parties in the two countries is one and the same, differing only in that it carries in France a certain wit or elegance it may lack in Egypt. Both parties tamper freely with public office and officials, favouring whoever supported them before the election over whoever opposed them, or simply remained neutral.

It is genuinely amusing to read, in France, of the reshuffling of directors and prefects, and the forced retirement of some of them, and to compare it with the reshuffling that preceded it in Egypt. Both parties open shelters, so to speak, to house their own partisans and clients, with

no regard whatsoever for their ability, their competence, or the nation's actual need for them — regarding, instead, a single thing alone: that they were partisans and clients, and worked hard in the electoral campaign, and must therefore be rewarded for what they did in that campaign.

Both parties permit their own partisans and clients things forbidden to their opponents and dissenters. Just as today's masters in Egypt, once they took power, gave their partisans free rein to demonstrate, chant, and carry on however they liked, until it began to seem to them that this might itself pose a danger to them, at which point they began restricting that very freedom and pressing that restriction further — so too do today's masters in France permit their own partisans and clients demonstrations and forms of chanting the French themselves never expected to see in France; the current French government granted a stretch of the railway network to Communist demonstrators, and allowed them to twin French children with German children under the shadow of red flags.

We must, in fairness, admit that the victorious French party in France has gone further than the victorious Egyptian party in Egypt. And the explanation for this is simple enough: France is genuinely independent, not occupied by the English, and pays no mind to foreign oversight.

And so her government enjoys far greater freedom of action than the Egyptian government. Who knows — if the Egyptian Parliament and the Egyptian government possessed the same degree of independence and genuine sovereignty as the French Parliament and the French government, who knows what the Egyptian Parliament and the Egyptian government would do with their friends and their enemies?! ...

Before the French Parliament sits a general amnesty bill in which the victorious party has exceeded every reasonable bound: it wishes to grant a complete, sweeping pardon for every crime committed during the war — whether or not such crimes are of the pardonable kind, whether they amount to nothing more than ordinary offences, or to outright treason against the nation.

Nor does it stop there: it wishes to erase these crimes entirely, as though they had never occurred, and to compensate the offenders for whatever they lost by virtue of their conviction and their time spent in prison. It wants officials among them restored to their posts, with their time in prison counted toward their service, so that none of it is lost to

them — in pension entitlements, for instance, nor in rank, nor in any of the other rights owed to officials.

The Chamber of Deputies has since approved this bill, and our honourable deputies Abu Samra and Abd al-Rahman al-Rafi'i may take some comfort in this: their French opposition counterparts proved just as unable to debate or defend their own views, hampered by exactly the same troubles that afflict the opposition in Egypt — obstruction, shouting-down, and the tyranny of the majority over the minority.

Now that we have observed this resemblance between these two days, and between the two parties who triumphed on them on either shore of the Mediterranean, it may be worth asking after the source of this resemblance between two parties utterly different in race, character, custom, language, and temperament, yet entirely alike in their political methods.

Here again, I want to avoid angering anyone — though French writers say exactly what I am about to say, and more, without paying any mind to who might be angered by it.

The source of this resemblance, taken as a whole, comes down to a single thing: the intellectual level of these two parties. I do wrong no one, and overstep no bound of fairness, in saying that the scholarly level of the sitting parliamentary majorities in Egypt and in France is nothing one could genuinely take pride in. There may well be individuals of real distinction among this majority, but the majority itself is not marked by real learning — least of all the kind of rigorous learning that takes root in the soul, distinguishes it, raises it above pettiness, and equips it to understand things as they are and as they ought to be, and to weigh actual reality against the ideal.

If I could, I would say that the minds of these two majorities lack a very great deal of depth and sharpness; their range is very narrow, unable to hold many things at once, holding only a very small set of simple truths, and even these they lack the sharpness to properly digest or absorb. Their understanding of things is consequently deficient in every respect: they mouth hollow phrases without ever truly grasping their meaning, and without ever genuinely being convinced of that meaning.

This is what leads them into a whole set of egregious errors, arising not from any ill will, but simply from incapacity and deficiency. I want to

offer you an example of this — and it is a strange thing that the very same example applies, right now, to both Egypt and France. This example is education.

It is a strange thing that our own parliamentary majority holds higher education in such disregard, showing so little concern for it — I am almost tempted to say it detests and despises it — not because it wants Egypt to remain ignorant, but because it simply fails to appreciate higher education as it deserves. And it can be excused for this, for it is genuinely ignorant of what higher education is; and this is why it allowed the Prime Minister to announce, without objection, that he did not understand what a university was, nor what benefit it might have for the nation — swallowing this whole, the way one swallows a piece of candy.

And this is why it allowed the Ministry of Education to commit whatever absurdities it committed — putting the University project to sleep, abolishing the Supreme Council, paralyzing the Technical Bureau, and establishing that toothless, useless technical committee in their place.

The French parliamentary majority has followed exactly the same course: it began its own education policy by abolishing the very system Poincaré's ministry had instituted for the general teaching of Latin and Greek, and is now preparing all manner of schemes aimed at nothing less than reducing secondary education to its simplest, most basic level.

Among the most extraordinary things I have read of the victorious French party's education policy is a resolution just issued by the congress of primary-school teachers currently meeting in Lyon. This congress passed a resolution the Socialist Ministry of Education is quite likely to adopt: that the teaching of French history in primary schools be abolished, and lessons in the history of humanity put in its place... because French history, it seems, calls to mind France's own glory and her military and martial power, and this victorious party wants to erase war altogether — and so it must erase the memory of France's own martial glory from the souls of Frenchmen.

I have no wish to debate this political doctrine itself, but I do observe that the men who drafted this resolution, had they not been half-educated men, could easily have reconciled their own political doctrine with the national interest, and devised some way of teaching French history that let the French remember their own national glory without inclining them toward war. But they are half-educated men, their

minds lacking depth and sharpness; minds unable to hold many things at once, unable even to digest the small, simple truths they do manage to hold.

I could carry this inquiry a good deal further than the point I have reached, but I will stop here, and set down two truths. The first is a particular one: that the 12th of January in Egypt and the 11th of May in France truly do resemble one another. The second is a general one: that utter ruin awaits any country ruled by the half-educated.