

Reshuffle

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1 This, then, is what the newspapers are saying will touch the French ministry; for one of its members may need to be questioned, or investigated, over the financial scandal that has lately come to light in that country. This minister, the wire reports say, hastened to clear himself of what was charged against him, or said of him, in an official statement he published in the newspapers. But he will resign nonetheless, because he himself does not wish otherwise, and because his colleagues do not wish otherwise, and because tradition does not wish a man who directs the affairs of government, in any capacity whatsoever, to be questioned in a matter such as this. The wire reports say, too, that the French ministry will be forced to stand before parliament in its own defense within a day or two, for violent attacks have been leveled directly against it, and it cannot remain silent under these attacks, even were it inclined or minded to, for parliament would never accept such silence from it, nor approve it in that. And the wire reports say, too, that the French prime minister has bound himself not to let the ministry leave any door closed that might lead to the truth of this scandal, but to throw every such door wide open, whatever the circumstances, and whoever the persons that opening those doors wide might expose.

2 We read all this news, and it stirs in our minds a host of thoughts, which some of us ponder at length or briefly, which some of us discuss among ourselves in clubs and at the evening gatherings of Ramadan, and which always lead us back to thinking of ourselves, and of whatever misfortunes befall us or events occur among us. As for the simple-minded and shallow thinkers, they are dazzled by the figures, the names, and the offices; they marvel that a scandal such as this should occur in a great, civilized country like France, and marvel that the sum the forgers embezzled from people rises into the hundreds of millions, and marvel that the names of certain ministers, deputies, and politicians are mentioned in connection with this scandal. And some of them are not content with this marveling, but pass from it to doubting the worth of civilization and progress, and the soundness of democratic institutions and their immunity to corruption. And some of them rush to conclude that Egypt is well off, since no one has embezzled millions from its people, and since the names of its ministers and deputies have not been linked to

such scandals, and since, were such scandals actually to come to light in Egypt, they would never be of a kind to shake ministries, or force ministers to resign, or compel the Chamber of Deputies to question or interpellate them — for Egyptian ministers, whoever they may be, and Egyptian deputies, whoever they may be, and Egyptian politicians, whoever they may be, cannot, and ought not, have their names linked to such sins.

3 And so, Egypt is well, and all the evil lies in that foreign country where the people's authority grows so great, and democracy reaches its utmost extent, whereas in a country like Egypt, where only a modest, measured share of democracy is taken up, everything runs along in the best possible way. So think the simple-minded and the shallow thinkers, and perhaps they even thank God for having spared them democracy and its burdens and its filth, and for not having made them the talk of the wires, the newspapers, and people in every corner of the earth. These people would do well to come back to their senses somewhat, to have the veil of naivety lifted from their eyes, and to free themselves of this shallow, short-sighted view; for these faults they attribute to democracy are, in truth, nothing but merits and virtues which democracy has every right to boast of, and which good sense has every right to take as a reason to love democracy and seek more of it.

4 For it is not democracy's fault that crimes are committed and sins perpetrated; rather, democracy's fault would be to commit crimes and then conceal them, to perpetrate sins and then let them remain unknown. Democracy's fault would be to let crimes and sins come to light, and then take no criminals and punish no sinners. Democracy's fault would be to let crimes and sins come to light, and then take, from among the criminals and sinners, only the weak and the obscure — those whom hands can reach and before whom the doors of prisons can be closed, with no high office, standing, or exalted position rising up to shield them.

5 These are the faults for which democracy ought to be held to account, and for which any system of government ought to be held to account, should they be found under its shelter; for these are the true sins, this is corruption beyond which there is no further corruption, this is the sanctioning of evil and the abetting of evildoers. As for the commission of crime and the perpetration of sin, these are but a manifestation of human weakness, found everywhere, observed in every setting, witnessed in every generation. Philosophers, moralists, men of religion, and men of law have wearied themselves, and have not managed

to purify people's souls of every sin, but they have managed — and this is what matters — to set a penalty for every sin, to discover the means of taking hold of sinners, and to surround society with a strong, impregnable fence that protects it from their harm, as far as human means allow the innocent to be protected from criminals.

6 Democracy's opponents may say of it whatever they please, but they will never be able to deny that it is as far as can be from concealing crimes and sins; indeed, it is the system most conducive of all to the exposure of criminals and sinners. Nor will they be able to deny that it grants leniency to the criminal and the sinner, or that it distinguishes between one criminal and another, between one sinner and another. These are not faults that can be charged against democracy worthy of that name, such as French, English, or American democracy; and were France not a truly democratic country, such a scandal would never have come to light in it — rather, it, and others like it, would have occurred, and then found the means to remain hidden, means that would have enabled their authors and perpetrators, we will not say to escape the hand of justice, but to live the life of lords and leaders, the life of noble chiefs whom suspicion cannot reach and ill opinion can find no way to touch.

7 We would like people to consider that whoever embezzles a single dinar from one man is, like whoever embezzles every last dinar from all men, an enemy of the community; for he has stolen from one of its members, and is fit to steal from all of it should he find the means to do so. And whoever kills one man without right is, as the noble Quran says, as though he had killed all mankind, an enemy of the whole community; for he has killed a single one of its members, and had he been able, he would have left not one of them alive on earth. The magnitude of the sums, however grave its danger, does not change the essence of the sin. Is it true, then, that a scandal such as the one that has come to light in France could never occur in a country like Egypt? For my part, I doubt this very greatly. I am inclined to believe that Egyptian life, were it subjected to true democratic authority, would at the very least reveal, at first, a great deal of evil. But suppose these great scandals do not occur in Egypt, because Egyptians have not yet attained the skill needed for their sinners to commit such grave sins, and because Egyptians do not possess the wealth needed for their embezzlers to embezzle hundreds of millions — there is no doubt whatsoever that other scandals occur in Egypt, suited to what skill and what wealth Egyptians do possess. We

would like to know how Egyptian democracy uncovers these scandals, and how Egyptian democracy punishes those responsible for them. As for the law, there is nothing to be said against it, and as for the judiciary, there is nothing to be said against it; whenever a criminal or sinner is exposed and falls into the hand of justice, there is no doubt he will meet with the same punishment a criminal or sinner would meet in any civilized country. But what matters is that the criminal be discovered; what matters is that the hand of justice take hold of him. And we would also like to know where the political traditions of our democracy stand with respect to those who violate the law, depart from morality, rebel against integrity, and toy with tradition. Say what you will, but you will never be able to deny that there are Egyptian ministers who have been openly accused of violating the law, of whom the newspapers have said that they placed their own interests above the interests of the state, that they toyed with the state's funds, that they profited personally from their positions, and that they benefited their patrons and intimates at the state's expense. Tell me, then, when has one of these ministers ever resigned, or been dismissed, for any of this? One newspaper spent long weeks accusing a colleague of Sidqi Pasha's of overstepping the law and placing his own right above the right of the state, and the matter ended with this newspaper demanding that Sidqi Pasha's ministry refer it to the prosecution and the judiciary, either to establish against the minister what it had charged him with, or to show that the minister was innocent. Do you suppose the minister resigned to establish his innocence? Do you suppose the minister was dismissed so that he might establish his innocence, and so that the ministry might remain free of suspicion? Or do you suppose the newspaper was referred to the judiciary? None of this happened; the minister simply went on enjoying power until some opportunity arose to remove him from the ministry, unexpectedly.

8 And I know no more than you of these scandals that poured down upon the Egyptian atmosphere once the rift appeared between the prime minister and Sidqi Pasha, nor of these questions the deputies showered upon certain ministers concerning these scandals. Tell me, then, which of these scandals was referred to the judiciary? Which of the ministers, past or present, was questioned about any of these scandals, little or much? All of them are well, secure, safe, settled, enjoying life, content and glad. And those who suffered from these ministers' deeds are compelled to swallow their suffering whole, and to be scorched by its fire. And then some claim that democracy invites scandals and prepares the ground for sin! No; had our ministers learned, or had tradition taught them, to

resign or be dismissed whenever suspicion surrounded them, or doubt attached itself to their deeds, Egypt would now be in a state quite different from this one.

9 Believe me, dear reader! I would far rather have the kind of life in which a story like Stavisky's can occur, shaking the whole ministry and the whole parliament, than the kind of life in which a tragedy like that of Badari, or the story of Hanna Naaman and the like, occurs, and not so much as two goats lock horns over it, as the old Bedouin proverb says.