

Opposition

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A declaration of innocence to the readers, to the Prime Minister, to the public prosecution, and to the judiciary, from free opposition, from bitter feuding, from dialogue and dispute over what has been said and what is being said, and from wrangling and contention over what has been rumored and is being rumored; for I have thought, and weighed, and then was given the choice, and chose — and found that constant obedience to the standing government is more upright and better guided, and that submission and compliance toward those who hold power is more useful and more profitable. I shall therefore hold fast to obedience and prefer submission, and shall call to both whoever loves safety for himself and prefers it to soundness, and let everyone know that I am a friend to the government, a companion to it, harboring for it pure loyalty and firm devotion.

For we live in days whose chief characteristic is that the values of things have changed within them, and the standards of judgment have been turned upside down. We used to know (because our fathers, our teachers, and our forebears taught us) that the man deserving of that name is one who knows his own dignity and the honor of his person, who does not bend with passing fancies, whose political creed does not change with every change of government, who is not alarmed by a threat of force if he believes himself in the right, and who does not yield to enticements when these enticements cost him what he does not approve, force him to what does not please him, and entangle him in what he would be ashamed of before others and would cringe from before his own conscience, were he alone with himself and listening to that conscience, in a time when people still listen to conscience.

We used to know this, and still hear it from men of good character, and teachers still teach it to pupils and students in schools and institutes of learning. But our life, these past two years, has charted for us a new course in matters of character, and has spread among us curious new opinions on personal dignity, national honor, and a man's concern for the good opinion of his peers and his fellow-citizens, and his dread of cringing before his own conscience when alone with it — all of these being, it now appears, mere flexible, supplementary notions, which take

whatever shape circumstance requires, which expand when self-interest calls for expansion, and contract when self-interest calls for contraction. The Agricultural Credit Bank came into being, state posts came into being, private hidden dealings with foreign banks came into being, and a number of political-party members slipped away from their own parties — all clear and manifest proof that this development has indeed taken hold in our moral and intellectual life, and in our social relations, both public and private.

And I do not know — nor, I think, does any other reader know — why I should resist this development and hold out against it. Am I anything but one man among men, who must live as men live, settling when they settle, growing restless when they grow restless, and pressing further into this development when they press further into it?!

I am, today, among the government's partisans. And if those who hold its reins should wish it to resign, and this national ministry that the Liberal Constitutionalists demand should rise to take up power and the burdens of rule, then I shall be among that ministry's partisans; and if the Wafd should take sole hold of power, it will find me an outspoken Wafdist; and if the Liberal Constitutionalists alone should hold power, they will find me, as well as they have ever known me, defending liberty and the constitution.

And I hope, in following this path, to attain a life contented, gentle, and innocent of the misery suffered by the partisans of the old creed in politics and in character.

I hope my land will not be sold, though I own no land; that the banks will not dictate to me, though the banks have no hold over me; that ministers will not scowl in my face, though I pay no mind to ministers' smiles. And I hope, above all this, that the prosecution will not summon me from one day to the next for questioning — though I have tried the prosecution's questioning before, and liked it, and desired more of it.

And yet I find in myself some resistance, and dream of opposing and quarreling with the government; for to depart from inherited custom and tradition is no easy matter. Witness the Minister of Tradition himself, who attends the theater and frequents gatherings not free of dancing, keeping pace with the times, yet abolishes the Institute of Drama and forbids dancing on the theater's own stage, in deference to tradition!

We all develop in one respect and resist development in another. And perhaps development, were we to ask the philosophers for its definition and its true nature, is nothing but this very position we all take, with the Minister of Tradition at our head. We watch, at the Opera, the tale of Chair No. 47 and that of the Chocolate-Seller, and see in these two tales what is permitted and what is forbidden. We encourage the actors with the state's money, that they may press further into their art and refine it, that more spectators may throng their playhouses — and then we set up committees to watch over them, and devise all manner of competitions among them, and then establish contests among writers and poets, over which of them shall produce the finest play!

All this in step with development — yet alongside it we resist the theater, and abolish its institute, and deem those who founded it sinners, transgressors against custom, morals, and religion. And by this we satisfy tradition!

I wish, then, to satisfy development, to keep pace with it and press on into it, and so I shall support this government with the utmost support, even though I am, in truth, its adversary, and shall back it most firmly, even though its methods of governing do not please me. And I wish, too, to satisfy tradition, and so I shall hold fast to dignity, honor, and good character, and shall resist the government and oppose it whenever I find fault with some part of its conduct, little or great. But I assure you I shall not satisfy tradition and good character at the expense of the standing government; rather, I reserve my fierce opposition and my harsh feuding for a Wafd government, or a Liberal Constitutionalist one, or a national ministry. For there is in these governments something of naivety and simplicity, if you will, that lets their opponents say to them whatever they wish without fear of harassment or embarrassment. The standing government, however, is too resolute, too skillful, and too shrewd to let its opponents' tongues run loose, or their pens flow unchecked!

Yet before announcing this opinion, I did not content myself with thinking and weighing alone, but consulted various sorts of people on the stance that ought to be taken toward our present government. And all of them agreed with me and confirmed me in my opinion.

I began with a group of shaykhs, and asked them whether opposing the present government was lawful or forbidden. They were divided, and their views differed.

As for the rigid conservatives among them — and they are, thank God, few — they permitted opposing this government if it erred in its purpose, exceeded the right, or exposed the public interest to danger. Some of them went further still, making this opposition obligatory, citing the well-known tradition: "There is no obedience to any creature in disobedience to the Creator."

As for the reformists among the shaykhs — and they are, thank God, many — they forbade this opposition absolutely and categorically, saying that God has commanded obedience to those in authority, and set no condition upon His command, but made it wholly unqualified.

Obedience to the government is therefore obligatory, whether it oppresses or acts justly; it alone has the reward of its justice, and it alone bears the sin of whatever oppression it falls into. It is commendable, they said, to ask God's forgiveness for the government if it oppresses, or to pray for it and praise it if it acts justly. And there is no harm, they said, in concealing the government's oppression and presenting it in the guise of justice, lest people's opinion of their rulers worsen, the bond of obedience be broken, and the affairs of Muslims fall into disorder!

As for the moderates among the shaykhs, they permitted opposition when it led to benefit and warded off harm, and forbade it when it exposed its author to the ruler's anger or displeasure.

It is plain and obvious that I shall go with the absolute majority, and forbid opposition categorically, and ask God's forgiveness for the government should it err or oppress — though I have, to this day, known of no error or oppression on its part.

Having finished with the shaykhs and learned their views, I turned to the men of modern constitutional law to consult them on opposition: what is the constitutional ruling upon it? This consultation proved difficult. I avoided the professors of law and the men of the courts' legal departments, since they are civil servants; and I avoided the men of the prosecution and the judiciary, since their posts raise them above such matters, and they, besides, wait to judge between the government's partisans and its opponents in whatever disputes arise between them; and I looked among the lawyers, and found them divided between the parties — some the government's loyalists, some its opponents — and none of them to be trusted in counsel.

But I was fortunate enough to find an elder among the masters of law, a jurist among the scholars of the constitution, who had withdrawn from public life and retired to his house, finding pleasure in nothing but reading and study. When I laid before him the question of opposition, he set down a book he was holding, let out a long, deep breath from his chest, and cast his gaze about as though he meant to pierce the walls of the room, to see whether some eavesdropper, partisan or opponent, stood behind them; then he said, in a calm voice full of conviction: I hold that the standing government is broad of chest, wide of forbearance, and great of patience; for legitimate opposition is that which takes place within parliament, or among the members of the parties that hold power. These alone represent the nation and speak in its name, for they are the nation from which the government is formed and from which the opposition is formed. As for the parties that boycotted the elections or failed in them, they are no part of the nation whatsoever; they stand on its margin until power is granted them, and nothing is required of them but silence and submission, no more and no less. I said: but what if the elections were rigged? He said: that is the talk of philosophers and critics! Jurists know only the fact of the matter, and so long as these elections produced a parliament, and so long as this parliament formed a ministry, and so long as parliament and ministry have withstood the vicissitudes of time, then they are the nation, and all else is on its margin! I said: but what if all that "else" is the whole nation? He said: no matter. The whole nation is on the margin; the whole nation must observe silence, submission, and obedience, until power is granted it...

And it is quite plain that I left this venerable jurist's presence believing in his opinion, convinced that I stand on the margin along with every other opponent, and that silence or support of the government is incumbent upon me, and that, beyond this, it is incumbent upon me to convince the Wafd, the Liberal Constitutionalists, and the independents that we all stand on the margin, and that we must therefore join the Prime Minister, or else hold our silence, until God decrees a matter that was bound to be decreed; and I owe it to the Prime Minister to spend in this persuasion whatever effort I possess; I shall write and shall orate, if oratory is permitted me; I shall visit the party leaders and those who are not leaders, and I hope I may succeed in sparing him the trouble of issuing any new exceptional laws.

And now, what do the government's opponents hold against it?! They reproach it on two essential counts. The first: that it has not

resolved the great economic crisis. And I do not know how the government can be asked to resolve the crisis, when the crisis is the very source of its strength and its life?! Has the crisis not placed everyone entirely in the government's grip, seeking its favor and fearing its displeasure?! They are bankrupt and it is wealthy; so whoever among them wishes to ward off bankruptcy joins it, and is saved, or at least finds some hope of salvation opening before him. Those, then, who demand that the government resolve the crisis are demanding that it lay down its arms — or rather, demanding that it commit suicide! And no sane, prudent government would throw itself into ruin; let the crisis therefore remain, that the government may remain.

The second: that it has not resolved the Egyptian Question. And the matter of the Egyptian Question is exactly like that of the economic crisis. Suppose our government were to negotiate with the English: either it fails in the negotiation, in which case it must resign, as previous ministries resigned when they failed in negotiations; or it succeeds, in which case we shall gain our independence, English neutrality will become true neutrality, and the field will be left clear between the nation and the ministry — and how deep, then, is the abyss into which the ministry would be feared to plunge!

So those who demand that the government resolve the Egyptian Question, like those who demand that it resolve the economic crisis, are really asking it to commit suicide, or to lay down its arms.

Believe me, Your Excellency the Prime Minister: the opponents are scheming against you, to drive you out — so beware of easing the crisis, or achieving independence, and leave the opponents to me; for I hope either to restrain them from you, or to drive them to you.