

And Now (V)

Kawkab al-Sharq (Hadith al-Massa), 17 April 1934.

Yes, and now we should like to know where contentment lies, and where discontent lies, and we should like to know where hope lies, and where despair lies, and we should like to know, in the end, for whom Egypt is now governed. As for where contentment with Egyptian life now lies, that is a question you may put whenever you wish, wherever you wish, to whomever you wish, and you may be perfectly confident that you will get the same negative answer whatever the circumstances, whatever the milieu, whoever is responsible — namely, that this contentment you are seeking is not in the hearts of the Egyptians, and cannot be in the hearts of the Egyptians across all their classes, their differing stations, and their unequal shares of culture and education — excepting only the ministers, those who resemble ministers, and the partisans of ministers.

And these are a group you can count, and can verify in the counting, so that when you have finished this precise verification and tally, you may add to them as many again, or twice as many, as a gift and a free gesture from yourself, and even after all that you will not reach a thousand of them, nor will you exceed hundreds. These may tell you they are content; they may assure you they are content; they may swear to you with their utmost oaths that they are content — yet for all that you may doubt, you may suspect, indeed you may be certain, that they are discontented: discontented with their opponents who deny the present Egyptian order, discontented with their critics who have no confidence in these days' methods of governing, discontented at the very least with the Egyptian people, if not discontented with the whole art of governing Egypt.

As for the Egyptians themselves, setting aside these people, ask them whenever you wish, however you wish, wherever you wish: does contentment have a place in their hearts, does contentment find any way into their souls? They will agree on a single answer, with no disagreement among them, and their tongues will utter a single word without hesitation: no. Ask the civil servants, and you will learn that they are discontented, because they have no confidence in justice, and because they do not find the rest that a civil servant in civilized countries finds in knowing that he has received his due of fairness and equality, that he can trust his share of justice and equity, that he is safe from favoritism corrupting his life.

Ask the educated who do not work in state offices, and they will tell you they are discontented, because everything around them is wretched, and they will tell you they are discontented because they do not feel what an educated man feels in his own country — that he is free, held in regard, his inviolability respected, his dignity preserved, that no foreigner is set above him, that no ignorant man is preferred over him, that he is not looked upon as mere refuse, of no use and from which no use is hoped. Ask the peasants — and woe to the peasants! and woe to the feelings of mercy and pity within you when you ask the peasants! indeed, when you see the peasants, indeed when you hear news of the peasants! There is wretchedness and want, there is misery and hardship, there is abasement and destitution, there is whatever you wish and whatever you do not wish of those kinds of toil and distress that one would never have expected to afflict people in the twentieth century.

Ask the laborers, indeed ask the unemployed, ask whomever you wish among the Egyptians about his condition, and about the condition of other Egyptians; you will hear nothing but complaint, you will see nothing but discontent, you will be certain of nothing but turmoil of soul and heart. Then ask whomever you wish among these Egyptians the causes of this discontent that fills the Egyptians' souls, and they will recount to you, from their public and private affairs, what we have summarized in the preceding chapters; and do not ask the politicians who quarrel with the men of this era, for their views are known and their doctrines plain.

And perhaps, if you love justice untouched by bias, uninfluenced by inclination and passion, you will dislike asking the politicians after their position has become clear, and after it has become plain that they deny everything in this happy era; and so, once you have satisfied your need by asking the Egyptians, and have come to know what they know, and have become certain that they are the people furthest from contentment and nearest to discontent, leave them for the foreigners; ask these foreigners where contentment lies in their hearts, where ease of mind resides in their souls. You will hear from them an answer that astonishes you at first, but that you will not deny upon reflection; you will hear from them an answer resembling the Egyptians' own: they are not content, and they are not at ease.

And yet they were proclaiming contentment not long ago; and yet they were lavish in their praise of Sidqi Pasha and his associates not long ago; and yet everything that appeared of their affairs pointed to contentment, indeed to delight and rejoicing — but despite all this they

are not content now, nor at ease, but rather most intensely discontented, most greatly anxious. Why? Because the Egyptians themselves are discontented and anxious; because all of life in Egypt is discontented, anxious, and disturbed; and because the foreigner cannot be content, nor at ease, unless those around him are content, and the people he lives among and deals with every day are at ease; and because a poor opinion of the foreigner has found its way into the Egyptians' souls, owing to what has appeared of the officials' excess, in this era, in satisfying foreigners, favoring them, and granting them good and kindness ahead of the sons of the homeland.

And once a poor opinion of foreigners has reached the hearts of the citizens, it must inevitably reach the hearts of the foreigners themselves, and the relations between nationals and foreigners must inevitably come to rest on doubt and suspicion, on caution and wariness, on fear and the expectation of harm — and none of this is the sort of thing that settles contentment in hearts and wards discontent off from souls.

Then set aside the Egyptians, and set aside the foreigners too, and turn to Sidqi himself, founder of the present order, establisher of this new and happy era, and to those friends and loyalists who remain to him, however few they may be; ask them: are they content? Indeed, ask them: does contentment find any way into their souls? You will get from them the very same answer you got from the Egyptians and the foreigners — no — and you will learn from them what you learned from the Egyptians and the foreigners, that contentment knows no way into their souls; and there is no doubt that the reasons driving them to discontent and depriving them of the pleasure of contentment and ease are entirely unlike the reasons that stand between the Egyptians and the foreigners and contentment and ease — but they are discontented and anxious all the same, and they deny the very era they themselves established; they expected something of it and reaped from it things they did not expect and did not reckon on. And suppose the Prime Minister and his associates were removed from power as Sidqi Pasha was removed from it; they would be as discontented as Sidqi Pasha was then discontented, just as the Prime Minister himself was discontented in those months he spent between leaving the Ministry and returning to the premiership — so where, then, is contentment to be found, when it exists neither in the souls of the Egyptians, nor in the souls of the foreigners, nor in the souls of those who established this very era?

Ask the English about it; for they are the ones who might be content, and they are the ones who might be at ease; they are content because strength and might belong to them, because dominion and authority are theirs, and because they do not dislike the Egyptians' turmoil and the corruption of their affairs — indeed they may profit from this turmoil and this corruption of affairs. And yet, is it true that the English are content? And is it true that their political gifts have fallen so short that they cannot even grasp this elementary truth: that the turmoil of parties may benefit them, but the turmoil of the whole people cannot possibly benefit them or be of any use to them, because the turmoil of the whole people is apt to ruin everything, for them and for the people itself?

We do not think the English have resolved to govern Egypt as colonies are governed; they are too shrewd and too skillful for that, and they are too weak and too incapable for it, should they covet it; and so there is no position between two positions, but rather one of two positions: either the bond between Egypt and England rests on goodwill and right — and how far it now stands from resting on goodwill and right! — or it rests on dominion and force, on oppression and tyranny, on subjugation and humiliation. And the English know full well, for they have learned by experience, that there is no way to the latter; that if it succeeds now on the surface of things, it is bound to fail tomorrow without a doubt; and that if they come to imagine themselves in control of the matter, it will sow in the Egyptians' hearts — God forgive the expression — indeed in the very earth and sky of Egypt, in its water and its air, a strong, deep, far-reaching hatred that they cannot withstand however strong they are, and cannot master however much they dominate land and sea.

The bond between Egyptians and English cannot rest on anything but one of these two foundations. As for the wavering position between the two, as for the oscillation between severity and leniency, as for the hesitation between right and wrong, as for professing neutrality while concealing interference — the English see its effects now, and see them as slight on the surface of things, but they are capable of carrying the experiment further; and on that day they will see that its results are not the sort to please, nor to satisfy, nor to suit the dignity of civilized peoples, nor the ambitions of strong, dominant peoples.

And here you may put the second of the questions with which we opened this chapter: where does hope lie? And where does despair lie? And you need not toil long awaiting the answer to this question; for the

Egyptians are utterly discontented, but they are very far indeed from despair and hopelessness; because this injustice they suffer is not the first injustice they have known, and because this ordeal they endure is not the first ordeal they have weathered. They have been tried as other nations have been tried, and they have learned, as other nations have learned, that despair finds no way into the souls of living peoples, even though it may find a way into the souls of weak individuals.

They are discontented, but this very discontent is proof of life, and a sign of hope; for had they been despairing, or close to despair, they would have accepted what they deny, and consented to what they reject, and found happiness in what they regard as misery and wretchedness.

There is no despair in the hearts of the Egyptians; seek it, if you wish, in other hearts, and perhaps you will find it there, or find something resembling it.

Then put the third question we posed at the head of this article: for whom is Egypt now governed? It is not governed for the Egyptians, else they would not be discontented, nor complain, nor find life so oppressive; so for whom, then, is Egypt now governed? Ask the English about this, and ask these hundreds who display contentment and delight; perhaps the English, and perhaps these hundreds, can give you an answer to this question.

Then, after all these questions, put a fourth and final question: for whom ought Egypt to be governed? If you want an answer to this question, seek it with right, seek it with justice, seek it with the living consciences of living nations, and do not forget, after all this, to seek it also in the hearts and consciences of the Egyptians, in the Egyptians' hopes, and in their history too; for you may be confident that there you will find the plain, clear, decisive answer, in which there is neither ambiguity nor obscurity.