

Once a government acts like a tribe, it needs someone to graze its donkeys

A story by Salam Al Rassi

I have worked for twenty years as an employee in various government departments in Lebanon. During this time I had never gained an appreciation or reward or even an one-off promotion simply because I refused to be a *protégé* to a ruler or a clergyman.

I followed my uncle's advice who used to work as a hirer of donkeys (*mkari*) and used to always say: "Don't tie your halter to the manger of politicians, because once you do that they will deem you weak."

Because I had no connections with influential people, I used to carry out not only my job, but also the job of those who were higher than me in rank but much lower in intelligence.

I discovered that some government civil servants do not bear any responsibility since they consider themselves the true "children of the government". Unlike the rest of officials and employees, they used to work according to the rule which says: "Instead of sorting out a file, just pass it to someone *else*, until God takes care of it".

However, I used to console myself every time I remembered the words of some old people in my town who used to repeat: "A dignified person has to be like the ever-green oak tree which once grew in our village square and used to attract the sparrow hawks to its peak and the wild rabbits grazing in its shadow." But I felt and still feel sad every time I remember how the Turks cut off that tree before they were uprooted from our country shortly after the First World War.

One day, a citizen entered my office to ask about the fate of a file, which was sent to me that morning from another department. While reading it, I discovered that it was passed over from one official to another twenty times. It was surprising to find out that anyone of the twenty officials could have finished the authorization and saved the poor fellow twenty trips to the ministry.

After I wrote down my comments on the petition and had it typed, I carried it myself to the authoritative source, had it signed, took it back to my desk, registered it in the official record book and finally took it to the man who was waiting and watching my movements with surprise.

He thanked me and with signs of astonishment on his face, he said: "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," I said.

"I would like to know what's your job here."

"A donkey grazer," I replied.

"What do you mean.... I don't understand", he said.

"Do you have time to listen to a small story?" I said. "Yes, I have all the time," he replied.

So I told the story:

Once a man sought refuge at one tribe. The leader of the tribe took him round to introduce him to the rest of the clan.

'This is the Sheikh of the Arabs, Hmaydan. And this one is the leader of the tribe, Shinwan. And this is the prince of our people, Abu Swaydan.'

Then they all looked at the man and asked: 'And who are you?'

'I am the donkey grazer. I've heard of your need for someone capable of grazing your donkeys ... so here I am.'

'And how did you know that we need someone to graze our *donkeys*?'

'Well, if each one of you is either a Sheikh or a leader or a Prince, who will be left then to graze your donkeys.'

When I finished my story the man looked at me and said "It's really true." And added: "When the government acts like a tribe, it for sure needs someone *to graze* its donkeys..."

From the book An-Naas Bin-Naas, published by Naufal. Translated from Arabic and adapted into English by Hanna Habib H. Farha