Arbitrary Rule...

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), July 30, 1934

There is no danger to security or to order, great or small, in Egyptian leaders visiting Egyptian towns, whatever those towns may be — provided the police, and those who oversee their conduct, know how to maintain perfect neutrality, neither exposing people to harm nor touching them with injury, nor confiscating their natural, sacred right to walk upon their own soil as free men, to breathe their own air as free men, and to meet one another as free men. The proof of this is that the Wafd leader visited Benha some weeks ago, and visited it at a moment of the most delicate and most sensitive kind, when minds were filled with conflicting suspicions, when tongues ran loose with contradictory talk, and when crowds gathered from the nearby and distant towns and villages alike — and yet the police that day showed a light touch, and no security was disturbed, no order was corrupted, not a single harsh word was spoken to anyone, and the Wafd leader returned from his visit unharmed, with no harm come to anyone else either.

The danger, then, never comes from leaders visiting the provinces, nor from leaders moving between towns and villages, but rather from the administration's arbitrary control over people, its domination of them, and its treating them in ways it has no right to treat them — with every variety of harshness and violence, every art of cruelty and tyranny.

Who gives the administration license to order Egyptians to walk upon one piece of Egyptian soil and not another, to take one Egyptian road and not another, when there is no evident danger, certain or even likely, in leaving Egyptians free to walk upon Egyptian soil as they please and to take whatever Egyptian roads they please? Who gives the administration license to divide an Egyptian city into two halves, and to separate those two halves from one another — forbidding people to pass from one to the other except by special permission, granted at times and withheld at others? The newspapers — including those loyal to the cabinet especially — have reported that the administration in Port Said forbade passage from the Arab quarter to the Frankish quarter except by permit, and issued special passes to officials who live in the Arab quarter and work in the European quarter, allowing them to move from quarter to quarter and to cross through these military zones that the police, on the administration's orders, have set up in Port Said.

To what end is all this? For what reason is all this? And who has claimed to the administration and to the cabinet that one half of Port Said has declared war on the other, and that it is now the administration's task to prevent this war from breaking out, to protect Egyptians from Egyptians, or to protect foreigners from Egyptians? Who gave one of the police chiefs license to beat that man who was driving the Wafd leader's car, simply because he departed from the administration's order and took a road other than the one prescribed for him? Since when has it been the right of the police to punish people, and to punish them by beating? And if the police are to be permitted to punish people for disobeying their orders, and to lay their bodies open to sticks and whips, then what use is the office of the prosecution, what use are the courts? And yet it is the cabinet's own newspapers that inform us that one of the police chiefs beat this driver yesterday — and did not beat him while he was committing the violation, in order to bring him back to obedience, but beat him only after the violation was already complete. He beat him as a punishment — though it was not his right to punish him at all, but only his right to bring him before the courts.

Egyptians are not livestock, and they are not slaves, and they will not accept being treated as livestock or slaves; nor will they accept the administration exercising this kind of arbitrary control over them, permitting them some of the land and forbidding them the rest of it, permitting them some of the air and forbidding them the rest of it, and punishing them by beating without trial. Egyptians are not livestock, nor are they slaves — they are free people whose freedom the constitution has guaranteed them, and so it is only natural, only reasonable, and only their right, that they should recoil from injustice and chafe at humiliation, and disdain being treated as livestock or slaves driven by sticks and whips — growing only fonder, as a result, of the leaders who smooth for them the paths of dignity and honor, and only more averse to those who treat them with contempt and abasement.

It is painful, certainly, when incidents occur that damage relations between the police and the people — but the burden of responsibility for such incidents must fall upon those who set the police against the people, who unleash the police upon them, and who exercise control over matters that are not theirs to control. When will those in authority learn that God has not granted them license, and that the law has not granted them license, to understand governance in the manner they have chosen to understand it? For governance, in this day and age, is a service rendered

to the people, not domination exercised over them, nor any form of overreach against them. It is a service owed to the whole people, without distinction between rich and poor, without distinction between the humble and the great, without distinction between the privileged and the common — for the law recognizes one thing only: that all Egyptians are equal, and that whatever distinctions once existed among them were abolished long ago before politics, before the administration, and before the courts. Those who draw distinctions between the rich and the poor sin against the law, and those who draw distinctions between the privileged and those they call the rabble or the mob sin equally against the law — for the life of an Egyptian, whoever he may be, is sacred, and the body of an Egyptian, whoever he may be, is inviolable, for the simple and sufficient reason that he is Egyptian. And so it is not for the administration to bar any Egyptian, whoever he may be, from any lawful pursuit, or from any permissible enjoyment of his natural right to the freedom the constitution holds sacred. Those who support the present cabinet and rush to its defense do it, and themselves, and their own nation, and the reputation of their country, nothing but harm, whenever they speak of the rabble and the mob, and whenever they speak of mere boys and the wretched with this sinful contempt. All these, too, are Egyptians, possessed of exactly the same rights as ministers — and ministers did not take up governance to serve one faction of Egyptians to the exclusion of another. They took it up to serve all Egyptians, including those very people they call the rabble and the mob. The proof of this is that this rabble and this mob enjoy the very same political rights the ministers themselves enjoy, and that the law safeguards their blood and upholds their dignity and their rights exactly as it safeguards the blood of ministers and upholds their dignity and their rights. And it is truly shameful indeed that Egyptians should draw distinctions between rich and poor, between the strong and the weak, in matters of the protection owed to their rights, the preservation of their dignity, and the guarding of what is sacred to them, in a country that claims to be democratic, and in an age said to be an age of liberty and of respect for human rights.

If the opponents of the present cabinet have anything to be proud of, it is this: that they are friends to all Egyptians without exception, defenders of the rights of all Egyptians without exception, caring for their poor before their rich, since the poor have the greater claim to care, and protecting their weak before their strong, since the weak are more deserving of protection. Those who fault the Wafd leader for visiting the Arab quarter, where dwell those they call the rabble and the mob, would

do better to fault themselves for the very disgrace in which they thereby entangle themselves.

Having said all this, we should like to offer the present cabinet a piece of advice — for perhaps the first or second time, after the thousandth, or the two-thousandth, or the many-thousandth: that it should understand governance as it truly is, that it should leave Egyptians free with the land of Egypt and the people of Egypt, that it should neither exercise arbitrary control nor overreach, and that it should not imagine the police to be its own private property — for its claim upon the police is no greater than the Wafd's own claim upon them. And we assure the present cabinet that if it understands governance as it truly is, and discharges its duty as duty ought to be discharged, then there will be no harm to security, no threat to order, and no clash between the people and the police. But the cabinet is afraid of the Wafd's visits to the provinces. And so it insists on nothing less than preventing them outright — and where it cannot prevent them, it insists on nothing less than spoiling them through exactly this kind of arbitrary control, which stirs up resentment and alienates the hearts of men.