

Sieves...

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), September 8, 1934

Do not object to this title, and do not find anything strange in it — for it seems, in fact, a title well suited to the facts of the matter, and equally well suited to the need at hand. The cabinet's actions surely require some kind of sieve, to strain out whatever is foul and keep back whatever is sound. And the proper place for this sieve, or for these sieves, ought first and foremost to be the halls of representation — the Chamber of Deputies, and then the Senate — and, apart from the Chamber of Deputies, in those other houses scattered throughout Cairo and Alexandria from which the newspapers are issued. These sieves are precisely suited to taking the cabinet's actions in hand for purification and cleansing, for revision and refinement, until they become well suited to the public interest, well matched to actual need, and free of harm.

But the cabinet, it would seem, does not care for sifting, and has no wish for its actions to pass through any sieve whatsoever. As for the sieve of Parliament, the cabinet frees itself of it whenever it finds a way to do so — freeing itself of it, while Parliament sits, through maneuvering and manipulation, and through enticement and intimidation as well, to use the phrase the Sidqi men were fond of — but freeing itself of it, in a manner particularly its own, one requiring a certain skill and dexterity: namely, the method of delay and postponement, and the issuing of laws during Parliament's absence.

In just this fashion the cabinet freed itself from Parliament's sieve in the matter of the lawyers, and in the matter of the second-round examination at the Faculty of Law, and in the matter of these financial appropriations that never seem to come to an end, and show no wish to.

It had wanted to free itself in the matter of the press as well, and had very nearly achieved what it wanted, had it not been for a hidden sieve — one neither you nor I know anything about — that appeared to it from a quarter it never anticipated. This sieve shook the matter of the press, and sifted it thoroughly, dividing it into three parts, which one of the evening papers published yesterday. We shall discuss these parts presently.

As for the sieve of the press, the cabinet finds it intolerable and mocks it at one and the same time — intolerable, in that it would gladly

cut it to pieces, and grieves bitterly that it cannot achieve as thorough a cutting as it would like; mocking, in that it pays no attention to what it says, cares nothing for whatever error it might point out, or whatever right course it might urge upon it. And in all this the cabinet follows its own headstrong will, heeding neither the wishes of Parliament nor the counsel of the press, but stopping short instead before certain other things it cannot simply pass by, either ignoring them or defying them outright — and these things, it would seem, are precisely what came between the cabinet and the persecution of the press and its journalists that it had wanted.

It appears, then, that the cabinet has genuinely failed to impose its will upon the newspapers, and appears forced to acknowledge this failure, however deeply it is ashamed of the acknowledgment. And the newspapers that support it, and those that stand loosely behind it, wish to go gently with it, to show it sympathy, to arrange for it a graceful retreat, and to present its failure in the guise of generosity and magnanimity, in the guise of mercy and compassion, and a preference for patience and deliberation.

The cabinet had wanted — because a senior legal official had advised it to want this — to amend certain articles of the Penal Code, to strengthen the protection of reputations and public morals, and the protection of the dignity of ministers and rulers. And the cabinet had wanted — because this same senior legal official had advised it to want this — to shackle history and bind its writers, and to protect the dead from criticism. And the cabinet had wanted, further — because this same senior legal official had advised it to want this too — to reconsider the Press Law and devise for the newspapers a new regime, narrow and exacting, to be applied to Egyptians and foreigners alike. And the cabinet's will, it was said, was firm and resolute, determined and pressing, brooking neither delay nor deliberation — for it placed its faith in the infallibility of this senior legal official, believing that when he thought, he could not err; that when he advised, he could not deceive; and that when he spoke, he spoke from no mere personal inclination. And the cabinet felt secure against Parliament's sieve, since Parliament was absent, and since, whenever it did convene, it would find itself confronted with an accomplished fact, not easily undone.

And the cabinet mocked the sieve of the press. And how should it have paid it any heed, when it meant to persecute it so thoroughly? But the cabinet wanted one thing, and God Almighty wanted another. And

when God wills something, nothing can turn it aside, whoever the opposing party might be — even a senior legal official. As for shackling history and placing chains upon the necks and hands of historians, the cabinet has, according to one of its own newspapers, abandoned this altogether and finally. And this senior legal official has been forced to content himself with returning from the campaign empty-handed, and to accept, whether gladly or bitterly, that history has slipped free of the rulers' authority, and preserved its own sacred freedom. As for reconsidering the Press Law and devising a new regime to be applied to Egyptians and foreigners alike, the cabinet has, according to this same newspaper, postponed it — whether to present it to Parliament, or to negotiate it with the foreign powers, or for both reasons together, or perhaps for another reason entirely: namely, to let the whole matter be quietly forgotten, carried off wherever the wind might carry it. And this senior legal official has been forced to accept, whether gladly or bitterly, that the Press Law will remain exactly as Sidqi Pasha left it, until God brings to pass whatever has already been ordained. Nothing remains, then, but the protection of reputations, and the persons of ministers and rulers. It is said the cabinet is in earnest about this — but the cabinet's own newspaper advises it to postpone and to wait until Parliament convenes.

And since the cabinet has already abandoned two-thirds of the proposal submitted to it by this senior legal official, it should be a simple matter to abandon the remaining third as well, or to wait some further time before pursuing it.

This senior legal official has already been patient for an age over his proposal; let him be patient a month or two longer over what remains of it. There is regret in haste, which the wise ought always to avoid, and there is safety in deliberation, which the intelligent ought always to seek.

It is entirely possible that the cabinet will heed this newspaper's advice, and postpone the remaining third of the proposal until Parliament convenes — especially if haste in the matter would run contrary to the constitution, and outside the bounds of proper order. It seems most likely that this newspaper is simply paving the way for the cabinet's retreat, easing for it the burden of accepting that retreat, and smoothing the path toward it. Be that as it may, we commend these hidden sieves for their excellent service, and for what they have managed to achieve: the protection of history, and the preservation of that certain something the press still enjoys which resembles freedom, though it is nothing of the

kind.

It seems most likely that these hidden sieves are none other than the consciences of the ministers, and of some of those who advise them. God Almighty is capable of guiding these sieves to postpone the third part of this senior legal official's proposal as well, and He is capable of keeping the vigilance of these sieves ever alert, standing between the ministers and any violation of the constitution, any confiscation of freedom, and any entanglement of the kind they have already found themselves caught up in until now.