Excess . . .

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 15 January 1934

Among the most conspicuous crimes of governance against those who govern is that it corrupts them and makes them forget that their being entrusted with people's affairs is a contingent necessity — a necessity that is not beloved by the people, nor pleasant in its impact upon them, but is rather one of those hateful necessities which people endure only because they find no escape from it, and which, could they free themselves from it, they would not hesitate to do. For governance is a restriction upon freedom and a restraint upon people, preventing them from doing much of what they love. And were it not that people's life compels them to give up part of their right in order to enjoy the rest of it, no government would ever have taken root on earth, nor would rulers ever have arisen among men. Had rulers known this, been certain of it, and kept it present in their minds whenever they resolved to permit one thing or forbid another, they would have spared themselves much evil and spared the governed much that is hateful. But no sooner do they reach their posts than they forget everything, and imagine themselves masters when they are servants, principals when they are agents, a foundation among foundations when they are but one necessity among necessities. You will not find a free mind able to understand government except as a burdensome necessity — not sought for its own sake, nor endured because it is something desirable, but sought for the sake of something else, and endured only because enduring it is unavoidable.

Nor will you find a free mind that hesitates to hold that the first duty of government is to avoid entering into people's affairs, except when pressing necessities that cannot otherwise be averted compel it to do so. So if you see a government attempting to regulate everything for the people, laying its hand on everything, know that it is a burdensome, odious government, fit to be resented by the people, who will flee its authority wherever they find a way to escape it. It is for this reason that the statesmen of liberty have said that government, in every civilized country, is an instrument for preserving security and order among the people at home, and for repelling the enemy's raids on the country from abroad — and it is entirely for the best that government never overstep these bounds.

Were it not for the tyranny of governments, or the weakness of peoples, government would have no business concerning itself with education, nor with anything besides education, among the general and private affairs of the people that it regulates. So what are we to make of it when government concerns itself with regulating bathing — what people wear when they approach the water, what they take off when they immerse their bodies in it, what they put back on when they come out of the water, how they sit, how some of them draw near to others, how some of them keep apart from others, how they expose their bodies to the light of the sun, and how they fill their lungs with air?

This is a great deal for a government to meddle in, to the degree we see our government pursuing these days. The government's argument is that it wishes to preserve the people's morals and manners, to keep in them some measure of virtue, and to keep them away from what is unseemly. These are, on their face, worthy aims, but achieving them is not the business of governments; it is the business of preachers, who enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, who call to good and turn people away from evil, and it is the business of educators, who raise the young to cherish virtue, to hold fast to dignity, and to rise above the debasement of body and soul alike. As for the Ministry of the Interior, the most odious thing it can do is to regulate people's breathing, their movements, and their postures as they bathe, and as they sit on the seashore.

Nor does the Ministry stop at these bounds of excess; it goes beyond them to something still further and still more dangerous, for it claims for itself the right to pave, for Egyptians, the roads they take when they visit one another, to debate with Egyptians the number of guests invited to the banquets they hold for one another, and to call Egyptians to account for the greetings they exchange with one another — as though the Ministry had set itself up as a company of guardian angels, watching individuals and groups in every act they undertake, in every notion that crosses their minds, and in every word that passes their lips. It is not for this that ministries were established, nor for this that people consented to the establishment of systems of government among them. Nor does the Ministry stop even at these bounds; it goes beyond them to other bounds, far-reaching in their effect on people's lives. Consider how it regulates the affairs of university students, how it imposes on them the conduct they must follow, how it permits them what it — not they — loves, and forbids them what it — not they — hates, and how, in whatever education

laws it enacts, it pursues every device that would raise students to obedience, submission, and compliance rather than to freedom, the preservation of dignity, and the bearing of responsibilities that men must bear.

Then consider how it wants lawyers to behave just as it wants students to behave — in obedience and compliance — even in electing those who represent them in their syndicate. Then consider now how it wants journalists to behave just as it wants students and lawyers to behave — in obedience, submission, and compliance, in the abdication of reason, the squandering of the faculties of criticism, and the transformation into instruments that record what the Ministry wishes recorded, and omit what the Ministry wishes omitted; that speak when the Ministry wishes them to speak, and fall silent when the Ministry wishes them to fall silent. Excess in regulating everything, and in subjecting everything and everyone to this governmental authority, which was not created to expand but created to contract. For the truly free country is one whose people scarcely feel that they have rulers directing their affairs. But if people's life — when they rise in the morning, when they take to evening, when they wake, when they sleep, when they rest, when they work, when they think, when they speak — is, in all of it, a matter of connection with government, of reckoning with government, and of calculation as to what will pass between them and government, then this is no free country, and its people are no free people; it is rather a servile country, inhabited by a servile people.

How fitting it would be for the Ministry to reflect on all this, especially if it wishes to live triumphant through the people's forbearance and toleration of it. The nearest means to that end is for it to avoid the people, so that they in turn may avoid it, except in cases of the utmost necessity. For peoples do not win over their affection through constant harassment, nor through heavy-handed coercion, nor through pressure that oppresses the heart; rather, they win their affection through that generous freedom which makes them feel they are truly masters of themselves. And truly one of the strangest things is that, in this age in which we live, there exist ministers whom their posts corrupt, making them forget that they are a mere handful scarcely worth mentioning beside the peoples they govern, that their tenure in office is only for a time, that they are rulers today and will be ruled tomorrow — and who are led, after all this, to imagine that they can impose themselves, their will, and their domination upon the people by sheer force. But human

nature is never free of this weakness, which turns means into ends, and utterly effaces ends from the minds of ministers.

Who knows — perhaps it would be well to create new posts of admonition, meant to remind ministers of what is owed to them and what they owe. But how is one to find a way to create such posts, when ministers cannot abide the press, cannot bear with it, and would abolish it altogether if only they could?

Woe to the people from excess . . .

[Taha Hussein]

(*) Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 15 January 1934.