

Discipline...! (1)

Al-Balagh, 31 July 1945.

Perhaps the strongest thing felt these days by those Egyptians who do not enjoy the government's favor and approval — and these are, of course, most Egyptians — is that the government is engaged in disciplining them more than in caring for them; for it does not, thank God, take them gently, nor govern them with leniency, but proceeds in its policy toward them with firmness, resolve, and a conspicuous show of severity.

And nothing demonstrates this more clearly than our government's conception of freedom, and the way it comes down hard on those who wish to be free, simply because God created them to be free. For Egyptians are watched: they may not assemble unless the government grants them leave to assemble, may not give speeches unless the government grants them leave to speak, and cannot feel secure in their writing unless the government is pleased with what they write; and if they write something that grieves or displeases it, then, while censorship was in force, it simply blocked publication, but once censorship was abolished, the prosecution stepped in instead to investigate and keep on investigating, to send writers to pretrial detention, and to impose financial sureties in an unbroken, never-ending stream. I have no wish to dispute with the prosecution over the investigations it calls for, nor over the pretrial detentions it orders, nor over the financial sureties it imposes; for the prosecution is a judicial authority, with a law before it that it enforces as it sees fit, answerable before its own conscience and before the law for that enforcement. What I want — and it is my right to want — is to draw Egyptians' attention to the fact that God did not create governments to discipline the governed, but created them to safeguard their rights and look after their interests. A government is their servant, no more and no less. It is not the servant's place to discipline the one he serves; rather, it is his duty to obey him, to carry out his commands, to submit to his will, and to relinquish his post whenever the people wish it, for the people are masters of themselves and masters of their own government, entitled to dismiss it from this charge. It is likewise my right to remind Egyptians that they are entitled to demand the amendment of existing laws whenever they see some benefit in amending them, or some harm in leaving them as they are. Respecting the law as it stands is a natural thing, but respecting the law is one matter, and sanctifying it is

quite another. Laws were made to serve peoples; peoples were not created to sanctify laws. And if it is the prosecution's right and duty to enforce the laws as it sees fit, then it is equally our right to demand the amendment of these laws whenever our need for such amendment becomes apparent.

And it may be a curious thing worth Egyptians' notice that we know of no country on God's earth, in these very days, where writers are placed in pretrial detention over matters of opinion, except Egypt — Egypt alone; Egypt, who took no part in the war until it had already laid down its arms, Egypt, who bore the burdens of the war, and has reaped from its fruits, to this day, nothing but this tightening of the screws upon her own sons — not only upon their livelihoods, but upon their freedoms as well.

Zayd once spoke to the people of Basra, asking them to pray to God for their own imams, who disciplined and governed them by the authority God had granted them — but that was twelve centuries ago, and we ourselves are now the ones who grant the government whatever authority lies in its hand, and we are equally able to take back what we have granted.

It is thus our right to impose upon the government whatever we see fit to impose upon it in the public interest.

And we see the public interest, just now, in demanding that it amend the laws so that the prosecution is no longer permitted to order pretrial detention in matters of opinion.

The government has adopted a law — God forgive the expression, a mere decree-law — forbidding the courts from hearing cases brought in connection with the exceptions. This law remains in serious doubt as to its constitutionality, yet the government has adopted it all the same.

And we demand that the government take the constitutional steps needed to amend the laws we are asking to have amended; and if it does not, then Parliament was not brought into being merely to come and go, to give speeches and listen to speeches, but was brought into being to impose upon the government whatever the people want, and to compel the government to do whatever the people want. Let Parliament, then, take up the amendment of these laws itself, if the government does not respond to what it is being called upon to do. And let the senators and deputies know that it does Egypt no honor for people abroad to say of her that her writers and thinkers are cast into the depths of her prisons on

remand, before any sentence is even passed against them, merely for having written something that does not please or satisfy the government.

If the government does not do what we are calling upon it to do, and if Parliament does not do what we are asking of it, then it is the Egyptians' right to conclude that their democracy is mere words, that their freedom is empty talk, and that they are living under a government that wishes to discipline them and compel them toward what it itself believes, rather than toward what they themselves believe to be right and good.

The Wafd papers have decided not to appear tomorrow, in order to draw the government's attention, Parliament's attention, and the people's attention, to the fact that there is an evil in Egypt that must be lifted — an evil now falling upon the very freedom the constitution guarantees, the freedom the war itself was fought to protect and secure: freedom of opinion.

People may have a great deal to say about the Wafd papers' disappearance tomorrow, but the important thing is that the people should know that freedom of opinion among them is being continually injured, and it may well matter that a single day should pass in which the prosecution need not launch an investigation, in which the government need not read anything displeasing to it, and in which the field is left clear to those who, left to themselves, seek only quarrel and combat.

And who knows — perhaps the disappearance of the Wafdist papers tomorrow will inspire the government with some measure of earnestness, and move it to reconsider its policy, and show it that power may grow great and fierce, but freedom will always remain stronger still — especially when power resorts to confiscation, when it prefers disappearance to visibility, and prefers silence to speech.

Let the government beware lest the newspapers' disappearance grow frequent, and let the government beware lest the writers' silence become unbroken.