The Ministry of Reform

Al-Balagh, 9 August 1945.

I do not know whether the Times was being serious or facetious when it praised the Prime Minister, in the article relayed to us today, for his wisdom in taking care not to turn aside from the grave task he has undertaken — the task of domestic reform — and for not following the Wafdists in their call to treat Egypt's demands concerning the treaty as matters of the most pressing urgency.

I do not know whether the Times was serious or facetious in this praise, but of one thing I am certain: that whether it meant it seriously or in jest, neither can possibly please the Prime Minister, nor please anyone who loves him, esteems him, and wishes him success. For it can give no satisfaction, and no pleasure, that the great conservative newspaper of Great Britain should praise the head of an Egyptian ministry as moderate and wise, precisely when the subject of that wisdom and that moderation is the nation's own demands.

I had wished for the Prime Minister that he might take the kind of stand that would lead al-Mal and the great conservative paper to call him extreme and excessive instead. For wisdom and moderation, in the Times's vocabulary, mean nothing other than pursuing the opinions that suit the inclinations of the most zealous conservatives, of men of capital, and of the representatives of the great imperial interests. These inclinations are not what the Egyptian people themselves feel, nor what reassures them, nor what they see as a fulfillment of their demands or an attainment of the complete independence they are entitled to — an independence free of every taint, one that bars the foreigner's hand from any interference whatsoever in the affairs of the Nile Valley.

The inclinations of the conservatives, of the zealots among the holders of the great imperial interests — in whose name and on whose behalf the Times offers its praise to the Prime Minister, for having taken a position of wisdom and moderation toward Egyptian demands — stand in exact opposition to the inclinations of the Egyptian people. For these zealous representatives of the great imperial interests hate to be shifted so much as a hair's breadth from their position in the world, and refuse to see Great Britain give up the least portion of her influence in any land on earth. They will accept no leniency, no shift from this position, except when circumstances force it upon them, and events compel them to

retreat, however slightly.

And when they do retreat, they do so unwillingly, taking care to retreat as little as possible, and taking care, even as they retreat, to watch for openings and seize opportunities, so that they might spring back, with force or with weakness, to recover all, or part, or more than what they had lost. So if these zealots are pleased with the position taken by the head of the Egyptian government on Egypt's demands, and praise him for it, and their great newspaper describes him as wise and moderate, this means, without any doubt, that his position suits the very inclinations stirring within them, and the very passions filling their hearts. And these conservative zealots, these holders of the great imperial interests, are skilled in every way, accomplished in every way: they praise with intent, commend with reserve, and encourage with caution.

So the Times praises the Prime Minister in this short, carefully crafted sentence that captures everything it wished to say, describing him as wise because he did not wish to turn away from domestic reform, nor to follow the Wafdists in their haste to demand independence. Then it goes on, in various turns of phrase, to flatter the Prime Minister at one moment and the Egyptian people at another. The desire the Prime Minister has shown for achieving independence, it says, represents the desire of all Egyptians. Egypt has shown the utmost and most complete sincerity in fulfilling the treaty, and has aided her ally to the furthest possible extent, and may well take pride in this. So says the Times, and it speaks the plain truth in saying it; for all Egyptians know that the Prime Minister is one of them, loving independence as they love it, aspiring to it as they aspire to it. But the Times itself has divided the Egyptians into two camps: one, moderate and wise, neither rushing independence nor hastening its steps toward it, nor letting it distract from domestic reform — and the Prime Minister stands at the head of this camp, worthy of praise and esteem.

And who would not praise the wise moderates, who do not burden the British Empire, who do not hasten the withdrawal of her troops from Egypt and the Sudan, and who do not press her to keep her hand out of Egyptian affairs?!

As for the other camp, it is hasty and restless, never sleeping and never letting others sleep, never resting and never letting others rest, seizing every opportunity to demand its rights. And the strange thing is

that it dares, in these very days — when the world's affairs are being reorganized and the fate of nations decided — to ask the British to make good on what they have promised a thousand times over: evacuation, and the settling of the outstanding questions between Egypt and Great Britain, placed on a foundation of genuine, complete independence. And this camp is the overwhelming majority of the Egyptian people, running alongside the Wafd toward no particular end, following it down no particular path, hastening to achieve independence, hastening evacuation, hastening a great many things, some reasonable and some not — for it is a hasty, impetuous Wafdist majority, knowing nothing of wisdom and moderation, caring nothing for the Prime Minister's own preference for deliberation and patience, and for waiting for whatever the days may bring, sooner or later, in the way of an opportunity for negotiations, whenever it should please the English, or whenever the conservative zealots themselves should ask for it.

And one of the characteristics of this unruly Wafdist majority is that it is distracted from this independence it so presses for by nothing at all — not even by domestic reform; it is forever demanding independence, with nothing to occupy it or turn it aside, not even food and clothing. How, then, could these Wafdists — who want neither wisdom nor moderation, who care for neither delay nor patience, but demand independence morning and evening — fail to be found repugnant? And how could the Prime Minister and his supporters fail to prefer, over such people, those who are skilled in patience and waiting, who love independence, yet do not mind waiting for it at great length, however deep their longing and yearning for it, because they prefer domestic reform, and see the need for it as more pressing than any haste toward independence?

Do you see that I was not mistaken when I asked, at the start of this piece, whether the Times was serious or facetious in its praise of the Prime Minister?

I have no doubt at all that it combined both jest and earnestness: earnest when it approves of the Prime Minister's patience and deliberation, facetious when it mentions the domestic reform the Prime Minister so prefers, and on which he spends all his effort and all his time, to the point of being distracted by it from completing independence.

The Times must be either facetious or simply unaware — and it seems highly unlikely that it is unaware, for it has correspondents in

Egypt who report to it whatever reform does or does not take place; and it most likely knows that the parliamentary session ended only the day before yesterday, after lasting seven months, during which the Chamber of Deputies met some thirty or sixty times — there are two accounts of the matter, each with its own interpretation and explanation — and that Parliament approved during this time matters of the gravest importance, reforming Egyptian life completely, and changing Egypt's social, economic, and educational affairs entirely, carrying Egypt suddenly from the grave decline into which the Wafdists had driven her to a grave advancement the wise moderates could never reach. And nothing demonstrates this more clearly than the fact that the people of Egypt look about and see nothing at all, and ask the reform government about reform and find no answer there — because it is busy achieving Egyptian demands instead. It has declared war, convened the Supreme Political Committee, sent a delegation to San Francisco, translated the United Nations Charter into Arabic and French, and broadcast it in both these languages, to the point that certain telegraph companies have come to rely on our own translation. By all of this it has raised Egypt's voice high, and very nearly butted Egypt's own head against the clouds; it has also founded the Arab League, and brought the Alexandria Protocol back from extremism and haste to wisdom and moderation. How, then, could it possibly find time for domestic reform as well, when God did not give any man two hearts within his breast?

And just so, the government is kept occupied with domestic reform away from independence, taking its time in demanding it, and waiting for God to send it along one day; and it is kept occupied with independence and the outward trappings of external sovereignty away from domestic reform, so that it legislates no law of real consequence, advances neither the economy nor society, protects no hungry person from hunger, finds no garment for anyone unclothed, cures no ignorant person of ignorance, nor any sick person of illness. It is busy while idle, and idle while busy, exactly as it would wish to be: it goes to its offices and returns to its homes, shuttles between the two chambers of Parliament, shuttles between Cairo and Alexandria, and when it falls silent, people call it the government of quiet and action, and when it speaks, they call it the government of sound reason, mature judgment, and well-chosen words.

And what more could Egyptians want than a government the Times itself describes as wise and moderate?! The Times is a great newspaper, widely read; when it praises an Egyptian government, it spreads that

praise throughout all of Egypt, raises Egypt's voice high among the nations, and secures for Egypt a distinguished place beneath the sun. What more could Egyptians want than this?!

They want independence, and they will have it one day, there is no doubt of that; they want to find food and clothing, so let them learn patience, endurance, contentment, and satisfaction with little. For all these are traits by which a noble people distinguishes itself, and all these are hardships that can well be borne for the sake of keeping the hasty, impetuous Wafdists out of the seats of government and the chairs of Parliament; and Egypt simply must discipline herself, and learn wisdom, moderation, and purposefulness, abandoning haste and impetuosity, and abandoning any excess in demanding independence before its proper hour has come and its due time has arrived.

Is it not strange that our Prime Minister should be said to be busy with domestic reform, and that for this reason he did not follow the Wafdists in their haste to demand independence?! Was the Times jesting or being serious when it wrote these words?! For the Times knows perfectly well that, were the present ministry to try to achieve in domestic reform what the last Wafdist ministry achieved, it might well need years upon years, and effort upon effort, without ever attaining it, or even a part of it.

A full year has very nearly passed since the present ministry took up the business of government, and Egyptians look about and see their own affairs having advanced backward rather than forward, risen downward rather than upward, until every Egyptian now asks himself: can things possibly go on this way much longer?! We can scarcely exempt any Egyptian from this question except this tiny ruling minority itself — and even this minority is neither satisfied nor at ease. And yet, after all this, it is still said that our Prime Minister did not wish to turn away from domestic reform toward a hasty pursuit of independence.

And so: is the Prime Minister himself content with this position in which the Times has placed him? Indeed, are the Prime Minister and his supporters in Parliament content with this position in which they have placed themselves, to the point of being described as wise and moderate — simply because they are busy with a reform of which they have brought about little or nothing at all?!

When will people be able to speak frankly with themselves? And when will the Prime Minister's own friends, intimates, and trusted

confidants be able to warn him against this position he has been forced into — a position Egypt herself is very nearly being forced into as well — the position of contentment, of satisfaction with little, of resting easy in a state no free people ought to rest easy in: the position of a people to whom one might say — and I sincerely hope no one will ever say it to them — that ancient Arabic line of verse:

Leave noble deeds; set not out in their pursuit — simply sit, for you are already fed and clothed.

And the truly painful thing is that the great majority of the Egyptian people have not even attained being fed and clothed at all.