

Fief

Al-Musawwar, 2 May 1947.

Had we understood democracy as it truly is, the ruler would never doubt that he is a servant upon whom more duties rest than rights are owed him, and the governed would never doubt that he is sovereign in his own homeland, with no cause to fear the ruler or stand in awe of him, nor to flatter him or curry his favor! The ruler renders the right as the right of the whole state upon the governed, and the governed demands the right as the right of the whole people upon those who rule.

This is a feudalism graver in danger and more shameful than the old feudalism known in ancient times, which perhaps is still known, even now, in certain lands of the earth. For the old feudalism was a stage in the course of human society, called for by the circumstances of civilization at the time; it suited, in its own age, morality, religion, and statecraft alike. People rested easy in a natural, familiar order that had arisen without artifice, imposed by neither tyranny nor oppression.

But the feudalism I wish to speak of here is something that the nature of life never called for, that the progress of civilization never required, and in which people have never rested easy, nor can ever rest easy; for it runs contrary to the nature of things, contrary to what people believe about the nature of things, and contrary to how people conceive of life's realities and judge them.

The source of this odious feudalism is an error of understanding, an error of judgment, an error of estimation — and I am almost afraid to say that among its sources, too, is a corruption of morals and a coarseness of taste! For it is a basic principle that public interests belong to the whole people, and that governments and the various social bodies merely act on the people's behalf in realizing these interests, managing them, and tending to them. Public interests have been understood in this manner since the most ancient ages, and in settings differing from one another as widely as possible. The Greeks and the Romans understood them so, whatever their differing political systems; the Muslims understood them so, in their own distinguished golden ages; the Europeans and the Americans understood them so, and will go on understanding them so. A ministry, among the ministries of state, is not the property of the minister; it is the property of the state. Indeed, this ministry, among the ministries, is not even the property of the government as a whole; it is the

property of the state, which outlasts, and encompasses, and comprehends far more than any government. The government, in truth, is but a practical apparatus which the state contrives for the care of its interests and the management of its affairs, and the members of the government are, in truth, nothing more than a group of people in whom the state sees — rightly or wrongly — the competence and capacity to tend to these interests and manage them, for a time that may be short or long. The state charges them with this duty, employs them to carry it out, and watches over them as they carry it out, keeping them in their posts so long as it remains satisfied with them, and removing them from their posts should it grow displeased with them, or find fault in them, or sense in them any shortcoming or failure!

The members of government, then, are civil servants, neither more nor less; the body of government is a group of civil servants working together in solidarity, subject to the state's oversight, and exposed, like any civil servant, to the state's satisfaction and to its displeasure.

This is the basic principle that everyone knows and that everyone acknowledges, each one by himself, and when people meet and speak to one another. They learned it at school, they read it in books, and they read it in the newspapers morning and evening. But practice in Egypt — and in other countries resembling Egypt, closely or distantly — departs from this basic principle in the sharpest possible way, and contradicts it in the gravest possible way!

For a minister has scarcely taken his seat before vanity deceives him; it beguiles him away from himself, from his own authority, from his right and from his duty, and makes him forget that he is a civil servant appointed today who may be dismissed tomorrow, that he is subject to oversight, answerable for what he does and answerable for what he leaves undone, and liable to punishment for whatever lapse or failing he falls into! He forgets all of this; he forgets that he was not a minister yesterday, and that he may not be a minister tomorrow, and remembers only one single thing — that he can command and forbid, and that in his ministry there are officials who must obey him when he commands, and desist when he forbids. Vanity runs to excess within him, and he runs to excess in his own vanity, until he imagines himself entitled to his post for the rest of time, utterly forgetting that formula with which al-Muqattam used, in days gone by, to prepare the ground for the fall of ministries — namely, that governance is a term, not an eternity. And so he convinces himself, in his own private conscience, and then convinces the people

around him, that the ministry he holds is nothing but a fief granted to him and settled upon him, which he may dispose of exactly as lords once disposed of the fiefs granted to them!

The feudal system is a precise one: it has its lord, sometimes titled Duke, sometimes Marquis, sometimes Count. Then it has the lords who rank beneath this greatest lord, bearing various titles of honor, arranged in degrees one above another. Then, after that, it has the common mass, who must listen and obey, having no opinion on anything, nor any right to an opinion on anything! And this very system is applied, with perfect precision, in our ministries and our government departments: the minister is the greatest lord; then come the lordly under-secretaries; then come various ranks of directors, arranged in degrees one above another. And then, after all of them, comes the common mass, who must listen and obey — the mass made up of you, and me, and the likes of us, among God's own wretched servants!

And the party system in Egypt is not like the party system in other countries; for the party that takes up the governance receives Egypt as though she were a fief among fiefs, to be divided among the ministers, and governs her in the very manner that fiefs were once governed in ancient times, while regarding the parties out of power as part of that common mass whom God does not trouble Himself over — so why should people trouble themselves over them!

Governance in Egypt passes from hand to hand among the parties: today it belongs to this party, tomorrow to another. The party that governs today was not governing yesterday, and will not be governing tomorrow. This alone ought to teach the parties that when they take up governance, they are not receiving a fief, but being charged with a service. And yet the parties neither heed this lesson nor learn it; no sooner do they come to power than forgetfulness hastens to wipe every memory from their heads, and vanity hastens to cast thick veils between them and the future, until they are working only for their own day, remembering nothing of yesterday and taking no precaution for tomorrow — so that when the hour comes that must inevitably come, and the ruling parties are brought down to the dwellings of the common mass, and the ruled parties are raised up to the seats of power, nothing at all has changed: lords have simply passed on to become the ruled, and the once-ruled have come forward to become lords, and the governed go on forever complaining of the rulers' injustice, while the rulers go on forever mocking the governed's complaint!

Had we not come to measure things exactly as they ought to be measured under a democratic order, we would never look upon ministers and directors as lords whom it falls to us to obey and who have only to command; we would look upon them, rather, as agents to whom we have entrusted our own interests — and if they tend to those interests faithfully, so be it; and if they fail to tend to them, then the law and the constitution stand as a restraint upon everyone alike.

Yes — but the truth must be told, and the truth is that the rulers and the ruled in Egypt do not understand democracy as it truly is, and for that reason they do not pass governance back and forth among themselves, but rather pass injustice and despotism back and forth!

Governance, then, is nothing more and nothing less than a fief held by the ruling parties, and there is but one visible difference between it and the old feudalism: the old feudalism was fixed and settled for its holders, inherited by their offspring after their death; the new feudalism, by contrast, is itself migratory, never content to settle, and never subject to any law of inheritance. For this very reason, it is graver in danger than the old feudalism — for it is an opportunity that must be seized, lest it never return, or return only after a long while! And so those who rule must monopolize whatever they can monopolize, and must store up, from this very day, whatever might escape them tomorrow; and the governed, for their part, must lie in wait, scheme, and plot, keep their accounts, and prepare themselves for vengeance!

*And the old man — if you set him straight from his waywardness,
correction will never straighten what in him has grown bent!*