

Serious or Jest?

It is said that liberty has returned to us—gracious, radiant, and smiling—after having been veiled from our sight for so many long years.

It is said, too, that Parliament expressed its gratitude to the Prime Minister for his eloquent and admirable statement in which he restored to us that liberty, smiling of countenance and bright of brow.

And it is said, moreover, that the newspapers themselves rejoiced at this declaration, by which the Prime Minister released our freedom from the dungeons where it had languished for almost six years.

So they say, and much more besides. But will the Prime Minister permit me not to believe that liberty has truly been restored to us, fair and shining-faced? And will he permit me to beg the people, likewise, not to believe that freedom has been given back to them, smiling and radiant?

For this liberty which the Prime Minister “released” when it suited him—only to reclaim it whenever he pleases—reminds one of Bashshār’s beloved in his famous verse:

*She turned away from one cheek, then the other,
And returned again like a breath withdrawn.*

We are free only for so long as the Prime Minister wishes us to be free; we are bound the moment he chooses to cast upon our necks, our hands, and our feet such chains and fetters as he desires.

The matter is simple: the Prime Minister has merely announced that he and his colleagues have decided to restore liberty to us **within certain limits and under specified conditions**.

Should we transgress those limits or overstep those conditions, he and his colleagues reserve the right to withdraw the gift, to revoke the favour, and to return us to our former state of tutelage—children once again, without power over our own hearts, minds, tongues, or pens.

As I read the Prime Minister’s statement, and the speeches and articles written around it, I recalled other words—words written, spoken, and acted in Paris six years before the French Revolution, that is to say, more than a century and a half ago—on the subject of freedom of opinion.

In that text it was said that a **system of liberty** had been established in Madrid, allowing people to say and write whatever they wished, provided they did not speak against the sovereign, or against religion, or politics, or morals, or public officials, or respected institutions, or the opera, or the theatre in general, or those entrusted with public duties. So long as they avoided all these matters, they might write in complete freedom—subject, of course, to the review of two or three censors.

So wrote the French author in 1784. And we, in 1945, could almost repeat his words exactly.

For all those subjects he listed may easily be reinterpreted to include, in our case, anything “military,” or “relating to supplies,” or “to security,” or to any other of those sacred matters which no one may touch, directly or indirectly, without the permission of the military governor and his censors.

The only difference is that **our censors** no longer reside in the offices of the newspapers. They sit wherever the military governor pleases. They do not censor articles before publication—to spare the writer and editor from liability—but rather after publication, in order to hold the writer, the editor, and the paper responsible, according to their own understanding of “responsibility,” not according to the law, nor the public prosecutor, nor the courts.

And yet, in spite of this, we are “free”: free to write as we wish.

It is this liberty, we are told, that the Prime Minister has bestowed upon us—a liberty at which senators, deputies, journalists, and, it is said, the people themselves, have all rejoiced.

But may the Prime Minister forgive me: I cannot rejoice, I cannot applaud, I cannot exult. For he has granted us nothing; he has freed nothing. He has merely cast upon us a certain look—a look which, if others can endure it, I cannot. For I dislike a government that looks upon its people as upon a child to be deceived with illusions and consoled with dreams.

The day the Prime Minister truly restores to us our complete liberty—the day he regards us with **trust and respect**, as a sensible man regards other rational men—will be the day he abolishes those restrictions **completely**, so that they cannot be reimposed except by the consent of Parliament. But as long as he merely deigns to grant the people this pale favour, saying in effect, “I grant you liberty for a time, to see whether you know how to use it; I shall judge your conduct; if you please me, I will continue your liberty, and if you displease me, I shall withdraw it”—as long as he does this, the arrangement will suit neither the dignity of the people nor the spirit of a democratic government dealing with a democratic nation.

For in a democracy, the government is not a wise guardian overseeing an immature ward, empowered to give or to withhold at will.

It is the **servant of the people**, bound to do what the people wish and to refrain from what they do not wish.

And the tongue by which the people command and forbid their government is Parliament.

Is this, then, the state to which the Prime Minister has brought matters? And is this the state to which Parliament has consented?

No. The Prime Minister has released liberty with one hand and held it fast with the other. Parliament applauded, the press approved, and the matter was declared settled—though it ought not to be.

For this liberty which he lets go with one hand and restrains with the other resembles **a captured gazelle** that once loved the open air and the wide expanse.

The hunter has taken her and tied her to a stake in his courtyard. When she has wearied of her captivity, when her weakness and wasting move his pity, he loosens the rope—but does not free her to roam where she will.

He lengthens her tether, so she moves to and fro, thinking herself free; while he smiles, knowing she can go no farther than the cord allows, and that he need only pull once to draw her back to the stake.

That is the exact image of the liberty proclaimed by the Prime Minister last Monday.

I know full well that civilized peoples cannot wander in the boundless air of absolute freedom, like wild gazelles in the open plain; yet the limits of freedom are not to be drawn in the office of the military governor or those of the censors.

They are to be drawn in the **office of the public prosecutor** and in the **halls of justice**.

Would the Prime Minister like another example?

Consider his “censors,” released under martial law to spread through newspaper offices and control printing and publication.

Last Monday he recalled them to their desks, from which they will go forth again whenever he wills. They are like **puppets** with which one sometimes amuses, and sometimes frightens, children—puppets moved by a single string held by an unseen hand behind the curtain.

The hand loosens the string, and the dolls move and dance; it tightens, and they fall still.

No one may ask the hand why it loosens or tightens: all depends on its will and pleasure.

Does the Prime Minister truly believe that such a policy befits a noble people, seeking to live a life of dignity under a free constitution?
And for what purpose, after all, is all this done?
To protect whom? To protect what?

The military affairs? Granted. We all agree that excessive vigilance there may be a necessary precaution.

But for everything else—civil affairs, the daily needs of Egyptian life—what prevents the government from presenting to Parliament whatever laws it deems necessary, to be passed urgently, as they say?

This year Parliament is calm, unburdened, meeting seldom; had the government presented such laws, it would not have hesitated to convene, nor to act.

Then, I ask again: **for whom are the emergency powers maintained?**

And **for what?**

I fear that people may come to believe that martial law endures only to protect a form of government that cannot survive without it.

I do not doubt that the Prime Minister would reject this utterly—and I, too, wish to reject it utterly. Therefore I ask him to abolish these restrictions once and for all, in a manner that makes their restoration, in whole or in part, dependent upon Parliament's approval.

If he does not—and I doubt that he will—then I ask Parliament to take that step itself: to enact the law or adopt whatever measure it sees fit, so that the abolition of these restraints becomes genuine, not a jest; real, not illusory; so that freedom is guaranteed, and its fate entrusted not to the Cabinet, nor to the military governor, but to the national legislature.

And if neither Parliament nor the government acts, then we shall have every right to believe that, in Egypt, liberty—and all that pertains to it—is nothing more than **words, mere words: a jest and a mockery.**

— **Ṭāhā Ḥusayn**

Al-Balāgh, 14 June 1945