

Attire

Kawkab al-Sharq, 9 June 1933

[Editor's note: The Minister of Education, Muhammad Hilmi Issa Pasha, had issued a decree requiring primary and compulsory school teachers to wear traditional Egyptian dress; anyone refusing to comply was to resign or be dismissed. His view was that the presence of teachers in European dress in the villages created a distance between them and the villagers, and that harmony required them to wear the same clothes as the people. The teachers complied with the decree.]

Personal liberty is said to be guaranteed to all Egyptians by a clear and explicit provision of the Constitution, and it is said that this provision was not altered or amended or changed when the old Constitution was replaced by the new one. Yet it appears that this provision was placed in the Constitution merely as ornamentation and embellishment — because all constitutions contain something like it, and because all modern nations are most anxious to be known as guarantors of personal liberty for their people. Egypt, as you know, is part of Europe, and so it ought to have a constitution like those of other European countries, and its constitution ought to contain provisions like those found in European constitutions and rest on the same principles and foundations as European constitutions — otherwise Egypt would not be part of Europe, its people would not be considered civilized, and its state would not deserve to be counted among the advanced nations.

These very provisions may themselves be unsound and worthless, and the Constitution may in itself be a form of words from which no benefit and no good comes; yet in any case it is something indispensable in these times for every country that wishes to be regarded with admiration and esteem. So let us have a constitution, and let this constitution contain provisions guaranteeing full liberty to individuals and groups within the limits of the law — but let us be skilled and clever in respecting this constitution and implementing these provisions. For foreigners have not gone deeply into studying our affairs and learning our news and circumstances, nor into verifying whether we respect the Constitution or disregard it. They will be satisfied that we have a constitution and that our constitution resembles their own. And if we deceive the Europeans about ourselves and give them the impression that we are a people like them, then between ourselves we may do as we please and regard this personal liberty guaranteed by the Constitution in the way it deserves to be regarded.

For the truth is that this personal liberty is a form of nonsense, a genre of farce, and people in general do not deserve to enjoy it or to be left alone with it. And who can claim that a people like the opposition politicians deserve to enjoy their personal liberty within the limits of the law — speaking what they wish, doing what they will, and travelling throughout the land of Egypt wherever they please? And who can

claim it is good to leave these people free to exercise the personal liberty that permits them to speak, to be active, and to travel — for no sooner do they speak or stir or move about than the people who love them draw close, and the people who admire them are captivated, and suddenly they and the people together become a threat to security and order, and a threat to the ministry even before security and order!

Therefore the personal liberty of these people must be curtailed, and they must be granted only as much of it as enables them to eat, drink, and sleep. Whatever exceeds this should be withheld from them, and they should not partake of it without the permission of the Minister of the Interior! And who can claim that these people who call themselves members of the public — the artisan and the farmer, the merchant and the civil servant — deserve to enjoy this personal liberty? They are incompetent, unable to think well about their own affairs and their own interests. They are ever in need of guardians to teach them how to live and how to conduct themselves in the matters of life. Their share of naivety is immense: they see a provision in the Constitution that genuinely guarantees their personal liberty, and they forget that respecting this personal liberty in texts and on paper is one thing, and respecting it in practice in daily life is quite another.

Look at how the primary and compulsory school teachers were deceived about this plain and obvious truth, and imagined to themselves that they were free — able to choose whatever dress and style they pleased, whatever suited their interests and inclinations. And so many of them abandoned the turban for the tarbush, and the jibba and caftan for the jacket and trousers — whereupon their affairs and the affairs of the villages were corrupted, their situations and the situations of the villages were thrown into disorder, people grew suspicious of them and thought ill of them. What do you make of a people who put on trousers and are thereby turned away from frequenting mosques and performing prayers? Who covered their heads with a tarbush and were thereby cut off from the capacity for preaching and guidance? Do you think these people deserve to enjoy personal liberty, even if a thousand constitutions were to guarantee it? Certainly not. Their bodies must be wrapped in jibbas and caftans, their noses pressed to the ground! They must be made to choose between personal liberty and their livelihood! Whoever among them wishes to eat and drink and feed and water his family, let him relinquish this personal liberty of his! And whoever among them wishes to enjoy this new-fangled novelty and be a free man — wearing what he himself pleases and not what his superiors please — let him relinquish his post in education and the livelihood from which he lives, and let him seek his sustenance and his family's sustenance from this personal liberty, and let him seek his home and his family's home from this personal liberty. Teachers must choose between their posts in education and the dignity of free men. Whoever wishes to be a teacher, let him relinquish his dignity; and whoever among them

wishes to be dignified, let him relinquish teaching.

You read this and are astonished, imagining that I am venturing very far into jest and mockery — but I do not like jest or mockery on this subject. I am depicting the real and undoubted truth. You can read elsewhere a circular issued by the Governor of Dakahliyya to primary and compulsory school teachers, offering them the choice between European dress and their posts in education, giving them a two-month delay in which to choose, and binding them by a pledge that they have received and read this circular and are therefore bound by it.

And if after that you wish to reconcile this governor's action with what the Constitution guarantees the people by way of personal liberty, you will be wasting your time for nothing and squandering your effort in vain — for the governor by this action is violating personal liberty, deliberately tyrannizing over these teachers, and contravening the most basic rules of right and justice and the most obvious principles of the Constitution and the law. The state has no right under any circumstances, nor does the regional authority under any circumstances, to intervene between people and their clothing to this extent.

And you know full well that the governor wears a tarbush and a jacket and trousers. He is a Muslim man who represents an Islamic government. It would be incumbent upon him, if Islam's rites were respected in this country, to attend the five daily prayers every day in the public mosque. Does he attend them? If he does attend them, does he change his dress every time he goes to pray? Or does he go in his European dress? And if he does not attend them, what is God's judgment upon him? What is the judgment of the Islamic state upon him? What is the view of the Islamic Parliament? Why does he command people to do good and forget himself? Why does he compel people to change their dress while keeping his own unchanged and unaltered? Who gave him this authority to tyrannize over people's lives and livelihoods and to use it as a means of tampering with people's liberty and dignity? What is the worth of a teacher who becomes a slave to the governor and wears what the governor pleases rather than what he himself pleases? And what is the worth of the child this enslaved teacher raises? Will he be raised as a free youth or a servile one? And suppose these teachers refused to submit to this governor's order and were removed from their posts and their livelihoods cut off — what would the state do with them? Would it provide for them without work? Or would it leave them as vagrants, dying of hunger if they chose virtue, and committing sins if they chose to live?

We wish to believe that the central authority in Cairo is too wise, too resolute, and too self-respecting to allow this mischief in which the governors go beyond all bounds — for if it does so, it will open a great door to sedition. People may fall into

dissension in their opinions and doctrines; they must not be made to fall into dissension over their clothing and attire. And who has claimed that the turban calls people to prayer and enjoins what is right, while the tarbush calls people to disobedience and enjoins what is wrong? Are all our ministers and statesmen who wear the tarbush rebels against God — those who abandon prayer, enjoin what is wrong, and forbid what is right? If so, what are they doing in their posts? And how does this accord with the fact that the state religion is Islam? And if the tarbush is sinful to this degree, why does Parliament not issue a law prohibiting it for all people? And why is the tarbush permitted to all teachers except primary and compulsory school teachers?

Is it really true that the turban enjoins what is right and forbids what is wrong? Then why is it that the Al-Azhar sheikh who occupies the post of inspector of religious education has no scruple — so it is said — about stealing a small amount of money from state funds? God forgive us — from the funds of Muslims? And why does the Grand Sheikh remain silent about this sheikh, or keep silent about him, neither clearing him of the charge of theft nor punishing him for it?

No — enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong are not effects of the turban or the tarbush. They are effects of sound upbringing and proper education. And we have not yet learned of any primary school teacher who stole from state funds, or travelled in second class and claimed from the state the fare for first class.

The Minister of the Interior must put a stop to the Governor of Dakahliyya's tyranny and order his agents in the provinces to desist from this foolish mischief that is on the verge of opening upon Egypt gates of evil that there is no way to close!!!!