

Exhaustion . . .

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), September 27, 1934

It appears that the state is in want, these days, just as a great many individuals are in want. The crisis has grown so severe that it has reached the very furthest extremity of hardship, even if the government neither believes this nor wishes to admit it. It also appears that the state's poverty, its empty coffers, and its urgent need for money — to spend on the various forms of extravagance it has entangled itself in — together permit it what is permitted to no private individual: the confiscation of people's property, and the seizure of whatever they draw from the land, with no regard for the law, no respect for property, and no regard whatsoever for freedom. And it appears that the source of this distinction — which permits the state what it permits no individual, and authorizes the government to confiscate property — lies in the fact that the state is strong while the individual is weak, that the state is clever while the individual is foolish, or of only modest intelligence.

For the state has skillful ministers of vast resourcefulness and superior cleverness — men like His Excellency al-Qaisi Pasha and His Excellency Sabri Bey — and these clever, skillful ministers apparently know how to extract wealth from poverty, how to draw ease out of hardship, how to find for the state a way out of every difficulty and an exit from every constraint. And by virtue of this cleverness and this skill, they present the state in the guise of generous prosperity, even though in truth it is impoverished, or as good as impoverished, destitute, or as good as destitute. Last year, people were already complaining that the administration in the provinces — in Upper Egypt especially — was bearing down hard on them in the collection of taxes, requiring them to pay in advance, and refusing to content itself with what the law actually prescribed. And if they showed any refusal or any inability to comply, the administration would stand between them and the very fruits of the land into which they had poured their effort, their strength, their time, and their money — refusing to let them transport those fruits or dispose of them in any way until they had first paid, in advance, whatever sum was being demanded of them.

We recall that some of the great landowners complained of this last year to the Ministry of Finance, and that the Director of Fixed Revenues issued an order to his representatives in these landowners' province,

instructing them not to collect the state's dues except within the limits of the law. But the local administration, as we recall, paid no heed to the Director's order, and went on exactly as it had been going on — with harassment and exhaustion of the people. Weeks ago, Al-Siyasa renewed this complaint, demanding respect for the law and regard for the sanctities of property it protects. The very next day, Al-Siyasa reported to us that the Director-General of Public Security had spoken by telephone with our friend Haykal Bey, asking him what he knew of the matter — and Al-Siyasa supposed, as we supposed along with it, that the Director-General's interest in this affair would end in the lifting of this injustice, and in enabling people to do as they pleased with their own property, provided they had paid the state whatever taxes they owed, within the bounds of the law.

But Al-Ahram today renews the very same complaint Al-Siyasa raised weeks ago, and the very same complaint the public has been raising since last year. A man among the great landowners and ministers has asked Al-Ahram to put to the government the question of how it permits itself to violate the law to this degree — taking taxes from people before they are even due, and seizing agricultural produce without any legal writ of distraint whatsoever, but by sheer, arbitrary, violent force. Others have written to Al-Ahram that they went to congratulate the Director of Assiut upon his return from leave, and complained to him of this very injustice; he expressed his disapproval and declared that he would not permit any interference with people's property — but he added that he would be satisfied if the owners of the agricultural produce simply showed the administration documents indicating the locations where they stored their crops, so that the administration could, naturally, place a distraint upon them, thereby guaranteeing payment of the taxes owed.

All of which means that this injustice still stands, that the provisions of the law governing tax collection are still being disregarded, that property and its sanctity remain exposed to abuse and to the arbitrary excess of officials both senior and junior throughout the provinces — and all of this taking place under the shadow of the constitution, under the shadow of the law, before the very eyes of the Minister of the Interior, who sits as a member of the Chamber of Deputies, and before the very eyes of the Minister of Finance, who sits as a member of the Senate. It also means that those who claim Egypt enjoys comprehensive justice are lying either to themselves or to the public. It further means that those who imagine Egyptians are governed by right and justice, as the civilized

peoples of the twentieth century are governed, are mistaken in the most shameful way, and stray as far as one possibly can from the truth.

And it means, in the end, that those who suppose the era of unlawful confiscation of property, of seizure by sword and by force, has passed, are living in nothing but a world of illusion and fantasy.

It might, then, be preferable for the government simply to announce to the public that it has no wish to govern them by law and constitution, but wishes rather to govern them by whim and caprice; or that it has no wish to govern them by law and constitution, but wishes rather to govern them by whatever necessities — necessities we ourselves know nothing of, but which the government alone understands — dictate, in whatever forms of force, violence, injustice, and oppression those necessities may take. For there is no benefit in letting people believe they possess a fortress in the law and the constitution, only to find, when they take refuge in that fortress, neither protection nor shelter within it. Nor is there any benefit in letting people believe they are free to do as they wish with their own property, when in truth they are slaves whose property the state may dispose of exactly as it pleases. Nor, finally, is there any benefit in letting people believe they live in the twentieth century, when in truth they still live in the Middle Ages. Strength does not lie in deceiving people, catching them unawares — strength lies rather in dealing with them honestly, confronting them with the plain facts, and declaring to them openly that they will be governed in no other way, whether they are pleased by it or resent it. We would very much like to see the Minister of the Interior and the Minister of Finance give this some thought, and we would like to see them joined in that reflection by their learned colleague the Minister of Traditions, and by their chief, the good-natured man. Such reflection might well lead them to be honest with the public: to admit that the state is in need of money, that it faces the risk of bankruptcy unless it compels the people to pay their taxes in advance, and that necessity permits what is otherwise forbidden. And one thing beyond doubt is that Egyptians stand ready to meet such a calamity with patience, steadfastness, endurance, and a readiness for sacrifice — for they have long grown accustomed to enduring calamities, and to standing firm against misfortunes and crises. But if the state's treasury were instead full, its coffers overflowing, and our financial reputation genuinely matched our true condition, then we believe the ministers themselves would agree with us that lifting this injustice is something both the law and conscience demand. And we hold our ministers in too

high regard — whatever disagreements may divide us from them — to believe that people could think of them as men who commit injustice for love of injustice, who practice oppression out of a taste for oppression, who subdue the people simply because they find pleasure in subduing them.

Let the ministers give this matter some thought, and let them tell us something on the subject — for we would very much like to hear what they have to say.