

Has the Hour of Farewell Drawn Near?

Al-Balagh, 14 August 1945.

It is said that the Council of Ministers considered abolishing martial law during its last meeting, and it is said that it did not merely speak of this, but began to lay practical groundwork for it in a manner I do not know, but it appears that the Egyptian government is waiting for news of Japan's unconditional surrender to reach it before it announces the abolition of martial law.

And this is, without doubt, a good thing, for Egypt will then be restored to her natural life, one not subject to military rule, in which the freedoms of individuals and groups are bound only by the limits drawn by the general law.

Egypt has tasted both the bitterness and the sweetness of martial law since 1939. It is only natural, then, that Egypt should grow weary of this bitterness and this sweetness alike, and that she should aspire to her former life, in which nothing tries her but the rigor of the law, and in which individuals need not fear for their freedom on account of the judgment of the general military governor or any particular military governor, nor on account of how that judgment is swayed by the differing temperaments among our military governors, by their differing susceptibility to events, by their differing understanding and assessment of them, and by the differing conclusions they draw from them.

It may seem strange to say that Egypt has tasted the sweetness of martial law, for it is firmly settled in people's minds that martial law is a necessary evil; but who can claim that an evil is wholly bitter, containing no good whatsoever?!

Among the good that those now complaining of martial law, and wishing to see it removed and abolished, may yet come to miss, is this happy censorship which Egyptians enjoyed for years, which allowed them to live a contented, comfortable life, free of effort and toil, knowing of affairs only what the government wished them to know, and ignorant of affairs only in what the government wished them to remain ignorant of.

A shade was spread over them, filled with tenderness, love, mercy, and compassion, shielding them from the alarmism of the news agencies

that spread bad tidings in times of danger, filling hearts with dread and panic, and that spread tidings wavering between good and ill, filling hearts with anxiety and apprehension; shielding them from this radio that broadcasts whatever it broadcasts and circulates whatever it circulates, pleasing a little, distressing much, and disquieting always; shielding them from those journalists who worm their way in here and there, who plug their ears with their fingers yet still manage to hear — as though nature had fitted them with secret ears, unseen yet recording everything! — and who then return with these disquieting, frightening, or (as the men of law put it) "agitating" tidings of theirs, to publish them in their papers; and lo, hearts grow anxious, lo, souls grow troubled, and lo, life becomes a hell, or something resembling one.

Under the shade of this happy censorship, Egypt was soft, happy, and at ease, waking content and retiring content, ignorant of whatever events and calamities fate might be bringing about; and people were free for their own affairs, preoccupied with themselves, devoted to their own interests morning and evening, having left the consequences of events and the conscience of the days to the government, which monopolized them, held them in its exclusive keeping, and showed the people of them whatever it wished, while concealing from the people whatever it wished.

Egypt, then, was happy and content, ignorant of the realities of things, so that her imagination was free to invent, in place of those realities she did not know, whatever events and misfortunes might fill their place. And what could be more delightful than that the truth should escape you, so that you task your imagination with inventing something in its stead — something you deny at first, yet go on thinking about until you grow reassured by it?! And then you come to believe it and see it as true, then broadcast it and persuade people that it is the truth; and lo, you are living, and lo, the people around you are living, a life made up of illusion and built upon invention, a life composed of dreams as the life of happy children is composed of dreams.

All this was among the happy effects that censorship used to bestow upon us, effects some of which were uncovered once the Council of Ministers suspended this censorship this past June, whereupon we fell into the depths of misery and the extremity of wretchedness. The reports of the news agencies toyed with us, the skill of the journalists played with our minds, and the realities appeared to us hateful and hideous, bringing no rest to the heart, no security to the soul, but only frightening us at times and wearying us at others, never once bringing pleasure under any

circumstance.

In the days of the happy censorship, ministers erred and got things right, did wrong and did good, were unjust and were just; but censorship used to conceal from us the ministers' errors and show us their correctness, used to fold away from us their wrongdoing and spread abroad their good deeds, used to cast thick veils between us and the ministers' injustice, and spread between us and the ministers' justice brilliant, splendid lights; so that we lived secure, soft, and confident that our affairs were proceeding as well as the affairs of any people possibly could: unbroken correctness, continuous beneficence, and complete and perfect justice.

But when censorship was suspended, we saw our ministers and their aides as people see one another, and we saw the error that had been hidden from us, and we saw the lapse into wrongdoing at times and the transgression against justice at other times; so we grew distressed and indignant, and the ministers grew angry at our distress and indignation, and relations between us and our rulers soured — relations that need not have soured, had the Prime Minister not declared one day before the members of Parliament that he had decided to suspend censorship save in matters pertaining to military affairs.

This fierceness, whose fire blazed up between the government and the opposition press, had been quite remote from us, and our own souls had been entirely innocent of it; until this strange notion occurred to the Council of Ministers, our souls were cast back into their old fierceness, and lo, the journalists searching, digging, and publishing, and lo, we reading and growing greatly angry and laughing a little, sometimes demanding the resignation of this minister, sometimes of that one, and constantly insisting on the resignation of the entire ministry. And lo, the ministers, like us, growing greatly angry and laughing a little, clinging to their seats in their chairs for fear these chairs might be shaken beneath them, so that some of them might fall, and it might be said of them what is said.

Nor did the harm stop at what stirred up between us and our ministers in the way of our ill opinion of them and their ill opinion of us; rather, harm also struck a group among us who had been calm and at ease before censorship was abolished. It struck the journalists first; for ministers are human beings who can show forbearance when angered and forgive when offended, yet they are human beings who sometimes

lose their composure, whose forbearance fails them from time to time, and who cannot manage forgiveness when matters grow serious — and though the Council of Ministers stripped them of the power of censorship, it could not strip them of the right to complain to the public prosecution; so they complain, and the prosecution grows active, and investigations begin today, whether or not they ever end, and the doors of prison open for pretrial detention.

Picture for yourself all the hardship arising from all this: the hardship of the journalists worn down by investigation and harmed by imprisonment; the hardship of the prosecution worn down by question and answer, by argument and counter-argument, over matters it would perhaps rather not be troubled with, little or much; the hardship of the lawyers who witness the investigation if permitted to witness it, and who burn with rage if barred from witnessing it, who file objections from prison, and who plead before judges, sometimes securing the release of the imprisoned, and sometimes failing to do so; and the hardship of the judges who waste their time reading things they might perhaps prefer to spend reading other things instead.

All of this, because the Prime Minister was swayed by what some writer wrote to him, or what some elder said to him, so he suspended censorship — whereas had he simply left it to shade us with its ample shade, he would have given us rest, and found rest himself.

But the harm is not confined to these alone; for the journalists have families who suffer with their suffering and rejoice with their joy, and these families had been content and at ease under the shade of censorship, but have now become anxious and fearful, their breadwinner leaving them at the start of the day with no knowing whether he will return to them by its end or not.

And there is a class of officials in the government bureaus and departments whom censorship had taught to prize the virtue of silence, and to guard the government's secrets jealously from those unworthy of them. But once censorship was suspended, their tongues grew long again, and the skill of the journalists played upon them, so that they spoke plainly at times and hinted at other times, and the journalists exploited both their plain speech and their hints; then their superiors accused them, and poured affliction upon them, so that innocent people among their sons, daughters, and wives — who had been secure and at ease — suffered on their account; for when the Prime Minister suspended

this happy censorship, he made all of them prey to anxiety and fear.

And it is certain that the Prime Minister and his colleagues were not thinking of all this; rather, they simply believed those writers who kept telling them censorship was an evil, and kept demanding its abolition. Had they thought through all these consequences, and considered all these results, they would have taken much longer to deliberate before venturing upon this grave step, and would have let our happy censorship stand.

You might say that censorship is indeed an evil — there is no doubt of that — and that it is a necessary evil when the necessities of war call for it, and that true democracy requires that people be free to criticize ministers and leaders. If ministers and leaders wish to avoid criticism and be safe from its harm, then let them simply govern well, favor justice, and strive for fairness.

You might say all this, but you know full well that all of it is talk with no substance to it; for true democracy remains, at the very least in Egypt, a fantasy not yet realized, and ministers who spare themselves criticism by favoring sound governance, comprehensive justice, and unbroken fairness are figures we encounter only in books and storytellers' tales.

The truth is that a minister is not truly a minister unless he exposes himself to criticism by overstepping this right, little or much. And what worth has authority if it affords its holder no measure of arbitrary power?! "And powerless is he who does not act the tyrant," as Ibn Abi Rabi'a said!

So let there be no harm in ministers acting the tyrant, no harm in journalists criticizing, no harm in the prosecution investigating, nor in the prisons receiving writers!

And there is no escaping what cannot be escaped. For our life has run its course along this path, so that we must either accept things as God willed them to be, or else press and insist upon the Prime Minister that he graciously ask the Council of Ministers to restore censorship, that he may give us rest and find rest himself; for Egypt has grown accustomed to censorship and has settled into it, and is like al-Mutanabbi, who cannot console himself once he has grown attached, and grows weary once he has come to love — for al-Mutanabbi used to claim that he was so attached to the ways of youth that he grieved over his own graying hair. So are we like al-Mutanabbi: restored to freedom,

we grieve over the loss of censorship! Let the Prime Minister, then, keep his censorship upon us, for it offers a surer guarantee of security and a firmer assurance of well-being.

The Prime Minister has announced that he has permitted public gatherings, and praise be to God that he permitted them in word and not in deed; praise be to God that he barred the head of the Wafd delegation from traveling to Port Said, thereby sparing the Allied armies a grave danger, sparing Egypt the wrath of the three great powers waging their relentless war against Japan, sparing the head of the Wafd delegation himself the burden of this grave responsibility, and sparing many an Egyptian the prosecution's investigation and pretrial detention ... and so on, through this endless string of stories.

And we are told today that the Council of Ministers is laying the groundwork for abolishing martial law, abolishing it entirely. Do Egyptians grasp the meaning of this sentence?! Do Egyptians know that the complete and genuine abolition of martial law will strip the Prime Minister of his standing as military governor, will bar him from restoring censorship should he wish to restore it out of mercy, kindness, and tenderness toward us, and will deprive him of the power to bar the head of the Wafd delegation from traveling about, paying visits, delivering speeches, and having them heard?! Do Egyptians grasp that we are exposed to this tremendous danger, that we are about to become free to say what we please and do what we please, subject to nothing but the rulings of the general law?! Do Egyptians not shudder at this danger?! Do they find within themselves the courage to face it?!

As for myself, I am gravely apprehensive of it, deeply afraid of it, and had I known the Prime Minister would accept my advice, I would have asked him not to hasten the abolition of martial law, just as he did not hasten the pursuit of Egyptian rights from the English, and to consider that Egypt can bear the diminishment of her external and internal independence until the opportunity presents itself; for Egypt can likewise bear the diminishment of her freedom, and the continuance of martial law, until the opportunity presents itself!

And I assure the Prime Minister that Egyptians will be unbearable once freedom is restored to them! They will talk, and talk a great deal; they will shout, and shout a great deal; they will gather, and gather to excess; and the members of the Wafd will scatter across the lands of the earth, one speaking in the East, another in the West, every one of them

calling for a referendum of the people and the restoration of rule to the true majority, every one of them calling for the demand of complete and total independence. What business is this of ours, and this trouble?! Why should we not simply shut this door, which, once opened, we cannot know who will enter by it, and who will leave by it?

I must find within myself some measure of consolation, should the Prime Minister resolve upon abolishing martial law; for martial law was not in force when the constitution was suspended for three renewable years, nor was it in force when the constitution was abolished and another put in its place, nor was it in force in the various periods of political upheaval. And yet, the ministries of those periods knew well how to bind tongues, snap pens, send people off to prison, and bar their opponents from any activity; so if the Prime Minister finds no escape from abolishing martial law, let him at the very least look to our very recent history, and take as his example those who governed Egypt with firmness and resolve, and who struck down the hands of those who wished the people to govern themselves, by themselves, for themselves. And Sidqi Pasha, praise be to God, is alive and in full health, and is well able to offer counsel and give valuable advice.

But if the Prime Minister insists on nothing but abolishing martial law, and on turning away from the example of Sidqi Pasha and others of resolute firmness like him, then I cannot bear responsibility for whatever grave matters the ministry will be exposed to, and we along with it.

Let the Prime Minister choose, then, between two options, with no third: firmness, resolve, strength, and severity on the one hand; or discord and rivalry, followed by resignation, and whatever troubles come after it.

In closing, I confess — and this time without any jest — that I would rather martial law remain, with all its severity and hardship, than see it abolished in word while it persists in deed. So if al-Nokrashi Pasha truly wishes to abolish martial law, and sees no escape from doing so, then let him pledge to himself, before his own conscience, before his Lord, and before his people, that he will not alter the provisions of the constitution, will not burden the laws beyond what they can bear, and will not govern after the manner of a people he knows all too well — for he has tasted their harshness and violence, and we would not wish to taste the like of it from him, now that the matter has passed into his hands.