

Negotiation

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It is not between the English and the Egyptians over the Egyptian Question, for England has now abandoned negotiation on that score, and the pillars of this blessed era have despaired of it. Nor is it between Egypt and France over the question of the Debt, for France has insisted that neither the debt nor its interest be paid to her except in gold, and Italy has gone along with her in this, while England, our dear friend, has kept silent about the pair of them, and the matter has passed beyond anything negotiation could remedy. Nor is it between Egypt and any other power of East or West, for our relations with these powers are settled and firm, needing no give and take, no changing or replacing — though the German Minister Plenipotentiary does call from time to time upon the Foreign Ministry, protesting the doings of the Zionists. No: it is a negotiation between official Egypt, residing in Alexandria, and the Prime Minister, residing in Versailles.

And people are ignorant of the subject of these negotiations, or scarcely know of it anything beyond some small matter that cannot be settled or established with certainty. Al-Ahram claims that the Prime Minister has demands he wishes met before he returns to Egypt, but Al-Ahram does not specify these demands, nor even allude to them; and Al-Muqattam hints, very obliquely indeed, at something of the kind, when it mentions that the Prime Minister was touched by a measure of anger, strong or slight, when the Deputy Minister of Finance wished to travel to the United States to ascertain the truth of the efforts Washington's government is expending to raise prices. But Al-Muqattam, like Al-Ahram, scarcely explains this standing dispute that has occasioned the opening of negotiations between Alexandria and Versailles, by way of Paris.

Yes, by way of Paris — for Alexandria does not negotiate directly with Versailles, nor does the Bulkley Palace negotiate directly with the Trianon Hotel; rather, the Egyptian Legation mediates between the two cities, and our Minister Plenipotentiary shuttles between the two palaces. And matters must needs proceed along this course, for legations were not founded, and ministers plenipotentiary not appointed, merely to hold receptions and welcome the Minister of Traditions to luncheon tables — legations were founded, and ministers plenipotentiary appointed, for something rather more serious than all that.

And if the question of the Debt is not one in which our Minister Plenipotentiary in Paris need exert himself between the Bulkley Palace and the Quai d'Orsay, or between His Excellency Salib Bey Sami and Monsieur Paul Boncour, then this standing dispute offers our minister something else to exert himself over: shuttling between His Excellency Shafik Pasha, the Acting Prime Minister, and His Excellency Sidqi Pasha, the substantive Prime Minister.

They likewise wish our affairs to remain forever a source of amusement, even when matters grow serious, and when the moment calls for anything but amusement. Be that as it may, there are indeed negotiations underway between Alexandria and Versailles, in which His Excellency Fakhry Pasha is exerting himself, and it is our strong suspicion that, by the time we write this chapter, these negotiations will already have ended, and Versailles's answer will have come, carrying to Alexandria the news of "yes" — or carrying the news of "no."

And upon "yes" or "no" hang the affairs of Egypt in the days just ahead. For who can say? Perhaps this "yes" will enable the Prime Minister to complete his programme, so that he takes the train, crosses the sea, and tenders his resignation once he has rested; or perhaps this "no" will stand in the way of completing that programme, so that the Prime Minister remains in Versailles and returns to Egypt whenever these people wish it — not whenever circumstance wills it.

And it is perfectly plain that the grave negotiations agitating the telegraph wires, or rippling through the air of the atmosphere, have nothing to do with the splendid celebration that the People's Party wishes to hold for the Prime Minister upon his return. The People's Party's business, we hope, and the business of its celebration and its reception, is far too slight a thing, in the eyes of God, of the people, and of the state, for official negotiations to be conducted over it through the Egyptian Legation in the capital of the Third French Republic — unless the old Arab proverb should prove true, that "the greatest fire springs from the smallest spark," and this modest celebration should turn out to have stirred up a crisis that had long, from a distant age, been wanting to erupt. And it is perfectly plain, too, that these negotiations are not between the ministers as ministers, and the Prime Minister as Prime Minister — for it might seem strange indeed, to those who know the present ministry, and its opinion of itself, and the people's opinion of it, and the English opinion of it in particular, that a dispute should erupt between it and its chief so violent that the Prime Minister should submit

to it (the talismans) or the final communiqué, and that long, wide-ranging negotiations should pass between them, stirring unusual activity in our Legation in Paris — activity which, should it drag on some while, might well become the talk of the ambassadors residing in the City of Light. It must be, then, that this dispute, which Al-Ahram mentions and Al-Muqattam alludes to, has erupted between the Prime Minister and some quarter among the higher authorities capable of opposing the Prime Minister, such that its opposition provokes a sharp ministerial crisis. We do not prophesy, nor do we wish to, nor can we assert anything with certainty; but we do observe, modestly, sensing withal, in that very modesty, a measure of astonishment: that the Minister of Traditions must be exceedingly vexed, his pleasure spoiled in the luncheon held for him yesterday at the Egyptian Legation — a luncheon which the Prime Minister did not attend, whether because he is ill, or weary, or because he is, at one and the same time, furious and resentful. The Minister of Traditions must indeed be vexed, for this sudden crisis has departed from tradition and violated its sanctities, and has cast its rules and principles to the wind — or to the horizon, as they say. For when have people ever seen a crisis arise, then intensify, then grow acute, with the Prime Minister absent from the seat of the ministry? And when have people ever seen a minister plenipotentiary charged with brokering quarrel or peace between the Prime Minister and his fellow members? But the Minister of Traditions is hardy and patient, resolute and firm, able to bear such an innovation as circumstances, which perhaps could not be averted, have forced upon him.

Do you not see that Sidqi Pasha's headship of the ministry costs Egypt every variety of excess, some of it amusing, some of it grievous? For had any prime minister, in any country not blessed by God with the boon of an untroubled mind, been struck by what struck Sidqi Pasha of long and heavy illness, he would have given himself rest, and given his ministry rest, and given his nation rest, from every hardship, and would have resigned, preferring for himself health, and preferring for his homeland benefit and the soundness of affairs. But Sidqi Pasha fell ill in January, and took the cure in Egypt for three months and part of a month, then travelled to Europe and took the cure there for three months and part of a month, remaining ill seven months altogether — neither working, nor resigning, nor loath to burden the state with charges, the least and lightest of which is his own salary for work he cannot perform, together with the expenses attaching to this suspended work, some of them disbursed in Egypt, some disbursed in Europe. And when these

seven months came to an end, it occurred to the Prime Minister to call resignation to mind and reflect upon it — but he does not call it to mind as people call it to mind, nor reflect upon it as people reflect upon it; rather, he denies it, then hints at it, then declares it outright, then writes to Egypt, then stirs up negotiations between himself and Egypt, then compels his ministry to stand in this suspended position, which no one could envy. And it would have been far easier and simpler for him to seek God's counsel: if he found himself capable of retaining the post, he would retain it; if he found himself incapable of that, he would resign from afar and settle wherever he pleased, or else keep the matter quiet, return to Egypt, and then resign as people resign. But as for all these manoeuvrings and evasions, this advancing and this holding back, they profit no one — they do not even profit the Prime Minister himself. And if the present ministry's position must be pictured somehow, it is the position of one who wishes to give up his own life, but finds in it hardship and difficulty, and so remains suspended between death and life for a long while.

And after all this: Egypt faces calamities, and Egypt faces problems, graver and further-reaching in their effect upon her life than whether the present ministry remains or withdraws from power. This economic crisis threatens the gravest harm, and swift, decisive action is needed to stand between Egypt and ruin. This question of the debts is on the verge of turning into a catastrophe the like of which Egypt has not seen in the modern age, and a resolute policy is needed to turn back its sweeping harm. And this matter of security grows more corrupt by the day, and the ministry's incapacity to control it grows by the hour, and resolute, decisive efforts are needed if people are to feel secure in their persons and in what remains of their wealth. It is one of two things: either the ministry is capable of remaining, and fit to remain, in which case let it declare as much to the people, and rise, if it can, to the work it must rise to; or else the ministry is incapable of remaining, unfit to remain, in which case let it yield its place to a ministry that will face these problems and stand between Egypt and her descent into this bottomless abyss. Egypt's life has hung suspended between despair and hope ever since the Prime Minister's illness, and it is time this suspension came to an end, time Egypt's affairs found stability, and continuing in this folly has become nothing less than a grave crime against the nation.