

Farce

Kawkab al-Sharq, 12 June 1933

Whenever Muslims complain of the missionaries' aggression against their young men and young women, and of the missionaries' coercing these young men and women to leave Islam and enter into Christianity, Parliament displays a measure of activity, the Cabinet displays a measure of concern, and the Sheikh al-Akbar writes to the Prime Minister — or calls upon the Prime Minister in person — and then everything subsides except the missionaries' aggression, and everything settles except the missionaries' turbulence. Parliament, the Cabinet, and the Sheikh sleep their fill, and Parliament, the Cabinet, and the Sheikh dream that the affairs of Muslims are proceeding in the best possible way. They rest secure that no harm will touch their sons and daughters, no coercion befall them. They are content that Islam will not be assailed within the very abode of Islam — until, when the missionaries' aggression appears once more and the Muslims' complaints resume, Parliament, the Cabinet, and the Sheikh persist all the more deeply in this calm, sweet sleep, in these soft and smiling dreams, and the Cabinet's newspapers rise up to defend the Cabinet, Parliament, and the Sheikh, repeating what Al-Sha'b says today: that the sin in this lies upon the nation, not upon the government, since it is the nation that sends its sons to where the missionaries toy with them and coerce them into what they do not desire. But if the sons and daughters of the Muslims are exposed to the missionaries' aggression and tyranny, then the Muslims, it seems, ought not to blame any parliament, any cabinet, or any sheikh — they are entitled only to blame themselves! And the meaning of that is that Parliament can do nothing, that the Cabinet can do nothing, and that the Sheikh al-Akbar can do nothing. The meaning of that is that the matter ought to be left between the Muslims and the missionaries. If the Muslims truly cherish their religion, and truly cherish their dignity, then let them keep their sons and daughters away from the missionaries' schools. And so the Muslims ought to understand that Parliament, the government, and the Sheikh together wash their hands of the missionary affair, declare themselves powerless to remedy it, and lay the whole burden of it upon the Muslims alone — if indeed Al-Sha'b truly represents the view of the present Cabinet. People well know that the missionaries do not announce to the people of Egypt that they open their schools for proselytizing; they open them, they say, for education — and so people are deceived, and send their sons and daughters to these schools; and

when it later becomes apparent that the missionaries do not merely teach, but attempt to draw the boys out of their religion, then indeed the Muslims have every right to withdraw from these schools — but have they the right to take revenge for themselves if the government refuses, or proves powerless, to take revenge on their behalf? Have they the right to answer evil with evil, and aggression with aggression? If the government refrains, or proves powerless, to check the mischief and aggression of the missionaries, have the Muslims the right to close the missionaries' schools themselves, should the government refrain or prove powerless to close them? Have they the right to banish the missionaries from the land, should the government refrain or prove powerless to banish them? Al-Sha'b will say no, and we too say no. We too would hate to see the Muslims answer evil with evil, and aggression with aggression, and take justice into their own hands against those who assail their religion and their dignity — but on this condition: that the Cabinet know its duty, and rise to discharge it with frankness, resolve, and sincerity. If it fails to do so, whether from incapacity or from neglect, then it has every right — indeed, it is its duty — to resign, so that another Cabinet may take its place, one not too feeble to rise to its duty, nor too fearful of the burdens that duty entails.

And if the Cabinet and its supporters consider the business of governing to be a species of farce, in which appearances suffice without substance, in which the mere declaration of duty discharged is reckoned as good as duty actually discharged, then let them know that the people has not yet reached such a degree of refinement as would allow it to treat government as an instrument of indulgence, a branch of the arts of farce. The people remains, to this day, convinced that government is an instrument of seriousness, charged with duties it is bound to perform. If it fails to perform them, it is bound to resign; and if it fails even in that, then it is to be feared that the people will see justice done for itself — will guard its own dignity, if the government will not guard it; will protect its own religion, if the government will not protect it; will punish the aggressors, if the government will not punish them.

And whenever the people complains of the economic crisis, and presses its complaint because the crisis presses upon it, Parliament displays a measure of activity, the Cabinet multiplies its speeches, and it is made to appear — to Parliament and to the Cabinet alike — that they have discharged their duty by this display of activity, by this abundance of speech. And if the crisis, in its relentlessness, goes on to ruin, or very

nearly ruin, everything, and the Egyptians persist in their complaints, the Cabinet rises up and declares, as Al-Ittihād declared only days ago, that the sin of the crisis lies upon the nation, not upon the government, because the nation is extravagant and wasteful, understands nothing of economy, neither values it nor shows any inclination toward it. And the meaning of that — if Al-Ittihād truly represents the government's view — is that the government would absolve itself of the sin of the crisis exactly as it absolves itself of the sin of proselytizing: either because it does not wish to do anything of substance, or because it is incapable of doing anything of substance. But the people has not taken the government — as we have said — to be an instrument of indulgence, a shade of decoration. If the government fails to achieve its serious purposes, it is bound to resign; and if it fails even in that, then it is the people's own right to rise to its duties, and to set its own affairs in order, whatever the result of such a rising or the consequences of such a reform may be. Were the Cabinet to look upon its own affairs and the people's affairs with a glance of seriousness and sincerity, it would keep some watch over its newspapers, and would forbid them to write such drivel, to broadcast such ravings. For if people were to believe the Cabinet's newspapers, and absolve their government of all responsibility, and yet rise up for themselves to claim what is rightfully theirs, the result would be exactly that ruinous, destructive revolution which the government does not want and toward which it feels no inclination — the very revolution the government fears even to mention or to contemplate. And if the government neither desires revolution, nor wishes the people to seek justice for itself, then the most binding duty upon it is that it should seek justice on the people's behalf, establish true justice among them, truly repel the aggression of aggressors against them, and look upon its own standing with the people with the gaze of an earnest worker, not the gaze of a negligent jester. For the people's patience may run long, and may grow so taut that it comes to seem to the government nearer to weakness than to anything else, nearer to extinction and surrender than to resistance and endurance. But the temperament of peoples is not so light and so easy a thing as the governments imagine, which neglect the people's affairs and hold them in contempt. Many a calm has been followed by turbulence; many a stillness has stirred up commotion; many an indulgence in ease has bred corruption and evil.

And whenever the Ministry of Education is afflicted with some absurd faction among the men of instruction, who set absurd questions for the public examinations, and the Ministry proves unable to perceive

the absurdity in these questions, or to judge their excessive difficulty, and so approves them — and then the students are made to answer them — and then their absurdity becomes plain to all, admitting neither doubt nor argument, so that the students complain, and their fathers complain of this exhaustion, and the students cry out and their fathers cry out at this contempt for the efforts and hopes of the young — Parliament displays a measure of concern, yet the examination proceeds on its course nonetheless; the markers proceed with their marking nonetheless; the injustice continues to fall upon the students and upon their fathers nonetheless; nothing whatsoever changes — only promises and talk, with which people are diverted for a while, until the results appear, scandalous; and those who pass, pass undeservedly, and those who fail, fail undeservedly; and a committee, or several committees, are formed to investigate, or to do something resembling investigation; and then the summer ends, and the new academic year begins, and people forget the matter of the examination, and are occupied, instead of with this injustice, with escaping some other injustice — with the stratagem of getting their sons admitted to government schools, or exempted from fees, so that their sons may be accepted into the schools at all.

And so forgetting, too, becomes an instrument of governance, a device of policy. People complain and cry out, and the government makes them promises and raises their hopes, deceiving them with illusions and expectations, and enlisting time and forgetfulness against them, to carry them from one evil to another, from one wretchedness to a worse.

And the Cabinet has succeeded, to this day, in enlisting time and forgetfulness against the people — but it is only right that the Cabinet should consider that everything has a limit at which it stops, a boundary at which it ends; and that forgetfulness itself, even if it relieved matters yesterday, may not relieve them today, and even if it helps today, may not help tomorrow; and that to quiet complaint by diversion, and by enlisting forgetfulness against it, is no part of seriousness, no part of sincerity — it is nothing but play, the whole of play, and deception, the whole of deception. And peoples may indeed be deceived by the play of players, and the deception of deceivers, once and again — but it is exceedingly difficult for this deception to go on befalling them without limit and without end.

The government must, then, place its trust in God, and face matters with the frankness and courage with which they ought to be faced, and must rely neither upon diversion nor upon forgetfulness. For reliance

upon these has now become, as it appears, neither useful nor profitable. It must make plain to the people that it is truly an Islamic government, which has indeed risen to protect Islam, to attend to the affairs of Muslims, and to restrain the missionaries from assailing the faith. It must take its courage in both hands — as the French say — and close down a single one of these foreign schools that wrong Muslims in the persons of their sons and daughters, and assault their minds with mesmerism and their bodies with the whip. It must take its courage in both hands and banish from the land a single one of these missionaries who exploit its weakness and impotence to press their assault upon the dignity of Egyptians and upon their official religion — though I daresay the government will do nothing of the sort, because it fears foreigners more than it fears Egyptians, because it has more pity for foreigners than for Egyptians, and because it prefers to please foreigners over protecting its own official religion, which it claims to have been established to protect and to exalt.

The government must truly summon up its courage, and face the economic crisis with the decisive, candid solutions it ought to face it with — not these crooked, limping half-measures with which people are merely diverted. But I daresay it is too feeble for that: too feeble to touch the taxes, too feeble to take a decisive stand on the question of the debt, too feeble even to press a little upon the foreign banks — because it relies upon foreigners more than it relies upon Egyptians, and is more anxious to please them than to please the Egyptians.

The Ministry of Education must place its trust in God, and abolish this absurd examination of theirs, and seek out some man among the best of men, of sound mind and pure intention, to set it acceptable, reasonable questions — though I daresay it will do no such thing, because it fears the Englishman who forced it into this absurd position more than it fears these thousands of Egyptians whose lives this absurdity has ruined in these very days! The Ministry of Education must also place its trust in God, and open an inquiry into this professor who set, for boys sitting the primary certificate, this witty and curious question — a question that only the mind of the Ministry of Education could find palatable: (“A sea and a river boast of themselves: what do they say?”)

Is it not, as they say, a stroke of ill fortune and evil destiny that the lives of thousands of the sons of Egypt should be entrusted to such a brilliant professor — one who asks boys of nine and ten what the sea and the river say when they boast of themselves? But the Ministry of

Education will not investigate this absurd examiner of theirs, nor will it task him with writing out, himself, what the sea and the river say when they boast — and I guarantee you that if it did, and gathered all its officials together in a single examination hall, and required every one of them to write what the sea and the river say when they boast, and then published what they wrote, it would have all Egypt laughing the whole summer long.

And after all this, why will the Minister of Traditions not accept this proposal? I assure him that, were he to adopt it, it would distract and divert the people, and turn them away from the government, from criticizing it, and from following its doings, for a month or two.

Take whatever you wish of the government's doings, and you will find that it shows in it the appearance of seriousness, until, once you have examined the matter closely, you see that the whole affair is farce upon farce, vanity upon vanity, an affectation behind which there lies nothing at all. And it is no strange thing that this should be the way of one government among governments; what is strange is that the affairs of a government should ever run straight when farce and jest are the very pillars of its policy.