

Silence

Kawkab al-Sharq, 13 May 1933

Suspicious is this silence to which the Ministry has committed itself and grown settled in for some time now; and we had known it to love speech, to be enamored of it, to indulge in it to excess whenever need called for it, and whenever it did not, whenever expediency permitted it, and whenever expediency forbade it, whenever it had some way out through speech, and whenever it had none.

Al-Ahram published concerning it what it believed to be the truth, beyond doubt or question; the Ministry hastened to deny Al-Ahram, and Al-Ahram thereafter hastened to challenge the Ministry and its ministers — and so the Ministry fell silent, and the ministers fell silent, and both preferred their own comfort. This same Ministry, which used to speak whenever speech served it and whenever speech harmed it, has now, in these days, reduced itself to a deep, dense silence, from which no question, however pressed, can draw it out.

People alleged that it had settled the Jebel Aulia grants before the Senate had convened, and before the Cabinet itself had convened; and Kawkab al-Sharq, fearing that what people alleged might be true, asked the Ministry either to deny and disavow it, or to acknowledge it and clarify where the truth lay — but the Ministry preferred silence, and persisted in it! People further alleged that the matter of these grants had not been entered on the agenda placed before the Cabinet, but was added to it at a late hour! And Kawkab al-Sharq, fearing that what people alleged might be true, and fearing in particular that such rumors might sow in people's minds doubts and suspicions that ought never to be sown, asked the Ministry either to deny and disavow this, or to acknowledge it and explain its justification — but the Ministry preferred silence, and persisted in it. Then, on Thursday morning, the people awoke to find every newspaper agreed that the Senate had not approved the Public Works budget — some of these papers sympathetic to the Ministry, some opposed to it, some simply reporting on its behalf.

Now the Senate's session was no secret witnessed only by intimates; it was a public sitting, witnessed by friend and foe of the Ministry alike. The people were therefore excused for believing these papers, which have never been charged with falsehood, and are known for nothing but their diligence in seeking the truth and presenting it faithfully to their

readers in such matters. Then the Senate's official minutes appeared, and lo, they established the very opposite of what the papers had reported, informing us that the Chamber had in fact approved part of the budget — including the Jebel Aulia appropriation — and deferred the remainder to the following week.

Certain papers alleged that an inquiry was under way in the matter, and neither Al-Ahram nor any other paper — including the Ministry's own — troubled to clear itself of the charge of falsehood or error, so that people concluded they stood by what they had reported! Kawkab al-Sharq inquired into the true state of affairs, and hoped the Ministry would show the people the truth — but the Senate's own office remained silent, and the Ministry remained silent as well!

Al-Ahram, this very morning, reprinted some of what Kawkab al-Sharq had said on the matter, yet neither denied it nor acknowledged it, neither refuted it nor confirmed it, choosing instead a silence as deep as the Ministry's own.

It was Al-Balagh that first drew attention to this contradiction between the papers' account and the account in the official minutes; yet it too appeared silent yesterday, as Al-Ahram was silent, as Al-Sha'b was silent, as the Ministry was silent — perhaps awaiting an answer, and the outcome of the inquiry.

But this silence which the Ministry has adopted, and in which it has immersed itself, after being so long known for its abundance of speech, is a suspicious thing; for it makes people doubt what they ought never to doubt, and stirs in their minds thoughts that ought never to be stirred. We know well that silence may sometimes be more eloquent than speech; we know, too, that silence may be golden where speech is merely silver; we know, too, that silence sometimes offers a way out of a predicament, and sometimes spares one from entanglement in wrongdoing — but we also know that the eloquence of silence varies, and it is precisely this variation that stirs suspicion and drives one to doubt. For the eloquence of silence may be denial, and the eloquence of silence may be admission; the eloquence of silence may be hesitation, and the eloquence of silence may be confidence; this eloquence may be fear, and it may be reassurance; it may be doubt, and it may be certainty. People read this eloquence by its circumstantial signs, weigh it by its context, and judge in its favor or against it according to where their reckoning leads them. And for this reason, this silence to which the Ministry resorts is among the

least eloquent of silences — or, one might say, the least fortunate — for the bond between government and people stands in need of plain, forthright candor, and of clear, unambiguous positions that stir no doubt and awaken no suspicion. We would like to know, then, of what sort is the eloquence of this silence which the Government has grown so fond of, and settled into, these past days. Is it the silence of one who denies what has appeared in the papers, confident of its falsehood or its error? If so, why does it not proclaim this denial? Why does it not restore the papers from falsehood to truth, or from error to correctness? It is charged with taking care that nothing but the truth be circulated among the people — and it may well be exploiting this charge, overstepping its reasonable bounds, in many circumstances and with many papers that oppose it and do not share its view.

Or is it the eloquence of one who concedes that the papers erred not, nor lied? If so, why this silence over the wrongdoing, this quiet in the face of the outrage, this reluctance to clarify where the truth lies, to fix responsibility, and to identify those accountable? It is charged, before all else, with preserving the whole system — and its own particular order most of all — from any tampering, with protecting it from every corruption, and with safeguarding it from ill opinion, ugly judgment, or public suspicion.

The Ministry must say something — must say something in particular about the matter of these minutes; for it is the people's right to be assured and reassured that the official record is free of every kind of hesitation and equivocation it ought to hold itself above.

Did the Senate approve what the minutes say it approved of the Public Works budget, in which case the Cabinet's action on Thursday evening was constitutional beyond reproach? Or was the number of members present in the Senate insufficient, so that the budget was deferred to the following week — in which case what the Cabinet did on Thursday evening amounted to an overstepping of the Senate, a disposal of the budget before Parliament had approved it? Even were the only issue at stake that the Ministry's word would settle a truth, dispel a doubt, and instill in people's hearts confidence and reassurance regarding the official record, it would still be the Ministry's duty to speak, rather than persist in this silence. How much more so, then, when the matter goes beyond this to something else entirely — namely, whether an act of the Cabinet was constitutional, or in violation of the Constitution?

People had already spoken, and spoken at length, of the Public Works budget after it emerged from the Chamber of Deputies in that strange manner no one has yet forgotten; and the people had every right to speak, every right to be suspicious, for it was recorded in the minutes of the Chamber of Deputies itself that certain members had noted, at the taking of the vote, that the quorum was not legally sufficient — a remark to which the Speaker paid no heed. The papers reported that the number voting never exceeded thirty-five. The papers wrote on the matter, and denied that the Public Works budget had issued from the Chamber in a constitutionally valid manner; yet the Chamber said nothing, and the Ministry said nothing. The papers never changed their view, never retracted any part of this view — and here we are, witnessing in the Senate a story just like the story in the Chamber of Deputies, its subject the very same Public Works budget; and people believe that the haste over the Jebel Aulia project was the source of the constitutional violation in the Chamber of Deputies, and they believe that this same haste is the source of this very contradiction between what all the papers reported and what the Senate's minutes record.

How, then, can the Government stay silent over all this? How can it accept that doubts should rise and multiply around what ought, in the actions of the two Chambers and their official records, to bespeak nothing but honesty, integrity, truthfulness, and correctness?

People think of many things, and speak of them when they meet one another, or find themselves alone together; among these things are some that touch the present moment, and others that touch a time now past, yet still near enough that their minds were filled with suspicion over it, their tongues loosed in doubt over it, so that they were on the verge of complaining of it — indeed, have already complained of it. And people recall that recent past and connect it to the time we now live in, and speak of it at length, and draw conclusions, arriving by inference at many different conclusions. The newspapers are powerless to depict these conversations and conclusions of the people's, since the new laws do not permit them to; yet people go on talking regardless, on the grounds that the laws have not yet gone so far as to forbid them from speaking — and this talk is an evil with no good in it, for it exposes the Government's reputation to something it ought never to be exposed to.

Let the Ministry, then, do something about the matter of these minutes; or let the Ministry say something about the matter of these minutes; or let the Ministry issue whatever is needed to wipe every doubt

from people's minds, and remove from them every suspicion.