

Electricity

Kawkab al-Sharq, 11 May 1933

Never has electricity spread through the ministerial atmosphere as it has spread in these days. The ministry's friends and loyal supporters do themselves and their own reason an injustice if they claim that the ministry's atmosphere is calm, free of turmoil, clear and unclouded. And they do themselves and their reason an injustice if they refuse to admit that the ministry has found every path narrowing before it, has been assailed from every side, that the air in which it lives has turned foul, that it is hemmed in from every direction, and has been forced to take up a defensive position — the kind of defensive position whose occupant, driven to desperation and despair, scruples at nothing, even inclining toward recourse to charms and talismans and spells, to visiting shrines, and turning aside to the tombs of saints.

There was a time when the ministry showed some measure of strength and force, of impregnability and violence. It would claim to the people — and its friends and patrons would claim along with it — that its opponents among the opposition were slandering it and rising against it, saying untrue things about it, inciting the people against it with lies; and so it would attack them in one unbroken assault, egging itself on against them, unleashing its papers upon them, overstepping in all this the bounds of the constitution and the law, so that it trespassed against liberty, and prevented its opponents from speaking and from moving about; and it trespassed against the law itself, so that it forbade its adversaries even reasonable, permissible criticism, while it permitted its friends and patrons not merely what the law alone forbade, but what morality itself forbade as well!!

And the ministry's justification for this was the protection of order, and restraining the opposition lest they rise up against it or assault it! But now the ministry finds itself surrounded, and its own patrons and friends have joined in disowning it.

Here is the Chamber of Deputies, unable to emerge from one interpellation before entering another; and here is the Senate, adjourning without approving the Public Works budget, putting off this budget for a whole week — even though the ministry's need was pressing, even though the ministry's necessity was urgent for the budget to be approved yesterday, so that the Council of Ministers might settle the Jabal

al-Awliya tenders, if it has not settled them already.

Al-Ahram has observed, and pressed the observation; and the other papers have observed along with it, and pressed the observation too, that the ministry is rushing the matter of Jabal al-Awliya, wanting to settle its tenders before the Senate has even approved this project's allocation in the Public Works budget! And people have begun to ask themselves the source of this haste, when there is ample time in hand. And they have begun to ask themselves the source of this overstepping of the Senate, when the very constitution now in force does not permit the government to overstep or bypass it. The ministry stopped its ears and would listen to no one, and answered no one. The Prime Minister travelled off to rest for five days, during which people's talk multiplied, until the tale-tellers told their tales, and the rumour-mongers spread their rumours, and the claimants claimed that the matter of Jabal al-Awliya had already been settled, and that the company whose tender the ministry had approved had already received authorization to begin work from the Minister of Public Works — though the Senate had not yet met to approve the allocation, nor had the Council of Ministers yet met to consider the tenders.

And Al-Kawkab asked, again and again, about the talk of these talkers and the rumours of these rumour-mongers, and Al-Kawkab requested, again and again, that the government give the lie to this news — but the ministry stopped its ears and would hear nothing, and bound its tongue fast and said nothing.

And the talk went on and spread with rumour, and how ugly talk and rumour become when they touch on tenders, and on whatever resembles tenders, whatever touches on money. In the midst of all this, one of the contractors came forward complaining, pressing his complaint, laying his case before the Minister of Public Works at one moment, before the Prime Minister at another, until at last, driven by his distress, he petitioned Sidqi Pasha himself, in a letter the papers published, a letter not free of open violence, nor of a hint verging on threat, asking that his complaint be laid before the Council of Ministers.

Then matters grow disturbed within the Senate itself: its Finance Committee objects to serious matters in the Minister of Public Works's budget. And talk is put about and broadcast of a resignation from this committee, and of that resignation's withdrawal, until the atmosphere around the Ministry of Public Works turns thoroughly ugly. Then the

Senate convenes yesterday evening, and its session neither clears the air nor purifies it; its discussions and debates bring the ministry neither reassurance nor calm; and it disperses without having approved this budget, around which talk had multiplied and rumour had spread; and the Council of Ministers, meeting today, finds itself between two courses: either it settles these tenders, thereby overstepping the Senate and its constitutional right to approve financial allocations before the government begins to spend them, or it postpones these tenders until the Senate meets again in a week's time. In which case the Prime Minister will travel off while the Council has not yet settled this grave matter. And in which case the Senate may well refuse to approve the budget at its next sitting, and the ministers may prove as powerless as they proved yesterday to control and steer it, and matters will fall apart.

And we have not even touched on what anger and resentment might arise from postponing these tenders, which the ministry had been pushing hard toward approval. If, on top of all this, you observe that the Public Works budget was all but smuggled out of the Chamber of Deputies and sent on to the Senate without a quorum having voted on it, you will know that the ministry is living in a new atmosphere — one that can be described, at the very least, as suffocating — and that electricity has spread through it to a degree never before known in the history of this present ministry! And if you observe the relation between the ministry and parliament, and recall what the leader of the official opposition declared in the Chamber of Deputies — that the Chamber is answerable to the ministry, rather than the ministry being answerable to the Chamber — and recall too that there are deputies who boast of the Prime Minister's confidence in them and his satisfaction with them — and recall also what we constantly witness, of deputies and senators racing ahead of what the government wants and pressing it to achieve what it desires — you cannot help but notice, in both chambers now, an open uprising against the ministry; and that this uprising is not without danger, even though it did not come about spontaneously, nor occur without clear or obscure motives driving it to appear and take these two different forms: the form of interpellation in the Chamber of Deputies, and the form of objection to the Public Works budget in the Senate.

It would be childish talk, then, to say that all is calm in the ministry's atmosphere, that the deputies today are as compliant as they were yesterday, and the senators today as submissive as they were yesterday — it is childish talk to say such a thing, and the ministers and their

patrons must admit that they are now living a straitened life in a suffocating atmosphere, passing through one of the hardest times they have known since they took up the burdens of governing.

And the symptoms of this feeling were plainly and clearly visible yesterday on the ministers in the Senate: they were fortunate neither in what they said nor in what they did; among them was the flustered one, the faltering one, the feeble one. And what would you make of the Minister of Public Works, reading chapters written by the newspapers before the chamber and attempting to answer them, until some member had to remind him that this was no business of the chamber's, nor of the ministers'.

And what would you make of the Minister of Traditions, defending the exception, only to be silenced by a member of the chamber, who told him: competence in officials is the basic principle — whoever lacks competence has forfeited his post.

The ministers were fortunate neither in what they said nor in what they did, nor did they hold the reins of the chamber firmly yesterday, because their capacity to resist, their strength to attack, their readiness to meet emergencies, had all weakened within them — and it had weakened within them only because the atmosphere around them had turned foul, and because the ground beneath their feet had begun to tremble.

It appears the contagion has spread from the Chamber of Deputies to the Senate: members were cut off, some forbidden to speak, some ordered to lower their voices, and one of them did not hesitate to cry out in anger: "You are truly treating us just as our colleagues are treated in the Chamber of Deputies!" — as though the deputies had become the very byword for accepting whatever the chair hands out to them of command and prohibition and lecturing. Then the Senate's presidency wished to halt the debate, the opportunity having presented itself to settle the budget and extricate the ministry from its predicament — but some members insisted on speaking, and when they were forbidden to speak, they and their companions with them dispersed; and the presidency looked and found the number no longer a quorum, and found signing the budget yesterday impossible.

And, strangely, the Senate's presidency did not, in this matter, follow the conduct of the presidency in the Chamber of Deputies: it did not push the budget through despite the paucity of members, but rather

postponed it a whole week, in deference to the will of the constitution and of order, and to a matter whose course runs by a decree that admits no reversal.

Then the ministerial papers claim that the ministry's affairs are proceeding just as it could wish, and that the ministry has never, on any day, been stronger, more secure, or more assured of survival than it is today!

As for us, we do not rush to judge events, nor do we indulge in excessive interpretation of the movements of the interpellating deputies, or of the rebellious senators; but we do permit ourselves to doubt that the Prime Minister will leave the country before resigning, or that he will prolong his stay in Europe before resigning — for everything around the Prime Minister has turned so foul that even his supporters' attachment to him, and their submission to him, has been corrupted. And when the political atmosphere has turned this foul, it is no longer fit to sustain life.