

Surrender...

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), July 30, 1934

The newspapers reported some time ago that the office of the British High Commissioner had sent the Egyptian Ministry of Public Works a memorandum alleging that water is not distributed fairly among the people in certain parts of Egypt, and that smallholders and farmers are wronged and deprived so that a number of senior officials might monopolize the water for themselves. The newspapers pressed insistently to publicize this report, and called on the Ministry to make the truth of the matter clear to the people — and pressed just as insistently in that demand.

But the newspapers' insistence in publicizing the matter, and their insistence in their demand, achieved nothing at all, and did not draw the Ministry of Public Works, nor the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, out of this deep and suspicious silence.

At that point the newspapers moved on from insistently publicizing the matter and insistently demanding an answer, to challenging the Ministry outright and declaring flatly that the report was true beyond doubt or question. Some of them then began to speak of integrity in government, and to ask the Public Prosecution: why has it not investigated this affair as it has investigated other affairs before? And still the Ministry remained sunk in its deep and suspicious silence. Then, yesterday evening, Al-Muqattam reported that the Ministry of Public Works had responded to the High Commissioner's memorandum, establishing with conclusive proof that the Irrigation Department had never been implicated in any injustice or partiality, and that all Egyptians alike receive their share of water according to their need — with no advantage granted an official over a non-official, no advantage granted the powerful over the weak, no advantage granted a man with a title and rank over one without title or rank.

The meaning of all this is that the report is, at its core, true — since the Ministry has not, to this moment, denied it, despite this long and sustained insistence. And so: the office of the High Commissioner did indeed send a memorandum to the Ministry of Public Works, addressing irrigation and the distribution of water, and calling on the Ministry of Public Works, whether to dispel certain suspicions or to redress certain grievances. And the Ministry of Public Works did indeed respond to the

office of the High Commissioner, attempting to dispel these suspicions, and it may well have succeeded in what it set out to do. But the question that concerns us now is not the integrity of the administration, nor the fair distribution of water among Egyptians, nor whether the Irrigation Department rises above favoring the strong over the weak and showing partiality to the rich over the poor — for all these are matters we could discuss at great length, and they are, in any case, the subject of an ongoing dispute between the opposition and the cabinet, not in irrigation alone, but in irrigation and every other Egyptian public utility besides. Rather, the question that concerns us, that ought to concern every Egyptian, and on which we should like to know the opinion of the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister — not the opinion of the Minister of Public Works — is this: the interference of the office of the High Commissioner between Egyptians and the Egyptian cabinet in matters of this kind. What we know is this: whether Egyptians deal fairly or unfairly with other Egyptians, whether one group of Egyptians is favored over another in the matter of water, whether the cabinet shows partiality toward one Egyptian community over another — all these are purely Egyptian matters, touching foreigners neither nearly nor remotely, and they cannot therefore possibly be connected to whatever reservations the English hold on to, and cannot, under any circumstances, become the subject of an exchange between the office of the High Commissioner and the Egyptian cabinet. For the office of the High Commissioner, in raising such matters, oversteps whatever right it has reserved to itself — or whatever it calls its right — under the Declaration of February 28th. And the Egyptian cabinet, in accepting such an exchange from the office of the High Commissioner, betrays our independence, falls short in its duty to the nation itself, and grants the English a license the English themselves have never granted their own conduct.

Can the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister — who, by virtue of his very office, is the guardian of whatever independence remains in Egypt's hands, charged with increasing it, forbidden from diminishing it or exposing it to diminishment — can the Prime Minister tell us how the office of the High Commissioner managed to interfere in Egyptian affairs it has no business interfering in, and how he himself came to accept this interference, and to pass over it in silence — God forgive us — or even, if what Al-Mugattam reported yesterday is true, to sanction it, either responding himself or leaving a colleague to respond to this memorandum that the office of the High Commissioner sent to the Ministry of Public Works?

What we know is that duty required the Ministry of Public Works to do one of two things, and no third option existed. Either it should have simply disregarded this memorandum, on the grounds that it came from a party with no standing to send it — the barest minimum owed to independence, yet one that would at least have shown a preference for a quiet life, and a passive preservation of dignity. Or it should have forwarded the memorandum to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or to the Office of the Prime Minister, so that our good Prime Minister might respond to it himself — not by debating its substance, nor by rebutting the accusations or suspicions it contained, but by denying its very legitimacy on one count, and by objecting, on another, to its having been addressed to the Ministry of Public Works rather than to the Office of the Prime Minister or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

This is what we know, and what others know besides us — those who wish to believe that Egypt retains some measure of independence, and that the cabinet of the Good Man understands its duty to safeguard that independence, to stand watch over it, and to protect it from English encroachment.

But the cabinet of the Good Man understands these matters quite differently. We are independent, they seem to say, but our independence does not prevent a foreigner from doing justice between our weak and our strong, between our poor and our rich, and from bringing our own ministers back to justice should he sense injustice in them, and back to fairness should he sense bias or favoritism in them. And if our cabinet permits itself to accept English interference in a matter of this kind, how can we fault the people for taking their own complaints to the English? And if our cabinet permits itself to defend its own conduct before the office of the High Commissioner, how can we fault the people for calling upon that same office to take their side against it?

This is truly a grave matter, and it calls for a statement from the Prime Minister. We should like to know: is it true that the office of the High Commissioner interfered in irrigation affairs, and that the Ministry of Public Works responded to it in defense of the Irrigation Department?

For if this is true, then the cabinet has sinned against the nation itself; the cabinet has thrown open to the English a door they have long sought to force open — the door of the Cromer era. And the cabinet has consented to let the English sit as judges between itself and the Egyptians in matters that are purely and entirely Egyptian.

All of this amounts to grave offenses, which we do not believe the cabinet can afford to bear. Let the cabinet make the truth of this matter clear to us. We will not hesitate to praise it if it has indeed held the office of the High Commissioner to its proper limits, and brought it back to the respect it owes Egyptian independence. Nor will we hesitate to tell it plainly that its remaining in the seats of power would be a harm, if it has indeed become entangled in these offenses now laid at its door, and has accepted from the office of the High Commissioner this flagrant assault upon our independence.

And finally: the matter of this memorandum is a thousand times and more graver than the matter of integrity in government, and it is the duty of the Egyptian national press — a duty we do not believe it will fall short of — to press, and press again, until it compels the cabinet to speak plainly to the people about the truth of what has occurred.