

Sabri-isms . . .

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 8 June 1934

Our brilliant Finance Minister, Sabri Bey, is caught between two possibilities. Either he is a sincere, good-hearted man, lavishly so in his sincerity and good nature, who genuinely believes that Egyptians stand equal before the law, and who believes that equality in democratic countries is a right held in common by all people, with no distinction in its enjoyment between the great and the small, between the wealthy and the poor, between the privileged and the unprivileged. And it is for this reason that he circulates among the provincial directors a firm circular commanding them to collect the state's taxes from those who have been slow to pay them, or who have evaded them, whoever they may be. For word had reached our brilliant minister that hundreds of thousands of pounds in state taxes still lay sleeping, undisturbed, in the hands of a group of large landowners and members of the representative bodies, who were not coming forward of their own accord to pay them, and the state's officials were not venturing to press them for payment. So our brilliant minister had no intention of letting taxes be collected only from the poor and ordinary folk, while leaving them to sleep peacefully in the hands of the wealthy, the large landowners, and those whom life's circumstances have distinguished by making them members of the representative bodies — and so he circulated his admirable firm circular.

If our brilliant Finance Minister is indeed so sincere and good-hearted that he genuinely believed all this, and came forward with what he put forward in sincere devotion to the firmness and resolve he displayed, then I regret most deeply that I asked of him today, before thirty-three Deputies ask it of him in two or three days' time, that he resign. For we do not live in an age when the burdens of government are shouldered by men of sincerity and good nature, who believe what is set down in books and flows from people's pens when they speak of liberty, brotherhood, and equality. Rather, we live in an age when life's circumstances have become desperately twisted, and ministers are left no choice but to have a plentiful measure of skill and tact, a sound understanding of how things actually are, and the full capacity to turn with the times, to proclaim their belief in equality loudly whenever occasion presents itself — and whenever it does not. Then when they are alone with themselves, with their friends, and with their supporters, they must not hesitate to acknowledge that this is talk said to people, that

circulates among them — but when it comes to execution, the matter is entirely different. Without this principle, affairs cannot be kept on course for ministers or for senior officials. Or perhaps our Finance Minister is a skilled man who has surpassed all people in skill, and a brilliant one who has outshone all people in brilliance — so he sees in justice, brotherhood, and equality only what the seasoned politicians and professors of this age see in them, yet has nonetheless taken the steps he has taken, and circulated the circular he circulated, according to a plan he devised within himself and a matter he kept locked away in his own secret. And it would seem that he looked out and saw that equality in these days is not realized among the Egyptians, and that Egyptian political life in these days is fit to satisfy no one. And what clearer and more striking proof of this could there be than that people live under the shade of the constitution and the law, yet things proceed among them back-to-front: the weak are treated with violence and harshness, while the powerful are left in negligence, and the privileged are extended every means of procrastination and evasion. If this was the minister's state of affairs, then I ask him, before thirty-three deputies ask it of him in two or three days' time, to resign. For a man who complies with the nature of life and the political circumstances of these days ought not to take charge of government. And a man who, in bearing the ministry's burdens, takes measures that damage the ministry's position and alienate large landowners and members of the representative bodies, ought not to shoulder those burdens.

The Finance Minister, then, deserves to resign in either case: he deserves to resign if he was sincere, because men of sincerity are unfit for government; and he deserves to resign if he was cunning, because cunning is impermissible for men of government — unless it is poured upon the ministry's opponents like a downpour, sent against them in a torrent, and conjures up for them such problems and stratagems as force them into an embarrassment beyond compare.

Yet for all this, the Finance Minister will not resign, unless the entire ministry resigns; and the Finance Minister will not vacate his dangerous post, unless others vacate their own dangerous posts. For the era in which the Prime Minister, grown irritated with a minister, would ask for his resignation in order to remove him from the cabinet, and then reconstitute the cabinet — or in which the Prime Minister, grown irritated with a minister, would dismiss him and choose his successor — that era has passed and is gone, with the departure of Sidqi Pasha from

power. We have entered an era that grants no room for the Prime Minister to bear the cabinet's burdens as they are, or to shed those burdens and give himself and others rest. And so long as the Finance Minister will not submit his resignation of his own accord, he is safe from being compelled to resign by the Prime Minister, especially when we consider that the Prime Minister may be no less inclined than his colleague the Finance Minister to realize this kind of equality, whether from sincerity or from policy. Nor need the Finance Minister fear the confidence vote on Monday. Some newspapers have been reporting that the majority of Deputies do not lean toward abandoning the minister, nor toward supporting the minority that opposes him and wishes to be rid of him. And you may perhaps recall that some members of the People's party spoke at a party meeting, laying blame on the ministry and going to excess in blaming it, on the grounds that it was not looking after its supporters as it ought, and was not extending to them the same warmth and sympathy they had previously received. The Prime Minister's response went no further than to announce that the ministry serves the public interest without partiality or favoritism, or words to that effect.

What all this means is that contingencies have arisen that make it difficult for the ministry to grant supporters and allies what they used to be granted, so that it is no longer in a position to satisfy them from today, and is naturally wholly incapable of satisfying its opponents and adversaries. Do I suppose this will end in the resignation that ought logically to follow, since the ministry has proved unable to satisfy both friends and enemies? Not at all. For the anger of the ministry's enemies at the ministry is not enough to topple it — witness the fact that it has been present ever since Sidqi Pasha sprang to power, and it brought down neither Sidqi Pasha nor Sidqi Pasha's successor. And the anger of the ministry's own supporters at the ministry will not topple it, because these supporters will grow angry within themselves, and will speak of their anger in clubs and assembly rooms, but will not grow angry officially, will not turn their backs on the ministry, and will not abandon the stance they have held since the very beginning of this era — which is a stance of trust and support. And that is because something is better than nothing, and because the present political life cannot continue unless it stays exactly as it is, untouched by any change or alteration whatsoever. The fall of the Finance Minister would bring with it the fall of the entire ministry, and the fall of the entire ministry would in turn bring confusion that could change all things dangerously. So let things remain as they are; let affairs proceed as they are proceeding, until

circumstances are able to reveal what they have in store for Egypt, and until God decrees what was ordained — and here, truly, are the brilliant Sabri-isms in all their splendor.

For the Finance Minister's circular is a resolute challenge to our present political life. It is a denial of this life, and a revolt against it, from a man who should have been its mainstay and its backbone. And the present political life will be compelled to endure this minister who denies it, and to support this man who contests it, and to keep the Finance Minister who defies it. And the minority of Deputies will ask the Finance Minister to apologize, and the Finance Minister will refuse to apologize. And the minority will call for a vote of no confidence in this minister, and the majority will deny them what they seek. And the Finance Minister will remain, and his circular will remain — the circular that demands serious collection of taxes from those who have delayed paying them, who have twisted away from them, among the large landowners and members of the representative bodies. And then some people will claim that the ministry has begun to set right what it has corrupted and to straighten what it has bent, and that it will draw from this reform and this correction a force enabling it to survive. But we have no doubt that it will draw from the Finance Minister's position only a weakness that will damage its cause still further. For Egypt is truly in need of reform, and this present ministry, and these people who support and back it, are not the men of the hoped-for reform, nor are they capable of it — since they did not rise for reform's sake, but for the sake of something else entirely, in which they were steeped to their ears. So it is difficult, indeed impossible, for them to transform themselves into the men of reform that the country needs.

[Taha Hussein]

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