

Whither . . .

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), November 3, 1934

Yes — where is this country being driven? And what is intended for it? And what might the days have in store for it? For we do not think there is a single Egyptian, whatever his standing, whatever his political persuasion, whatever his leanings and inclinations, who rises in the morning or retires at night without putting to himself and to his companions these very questions: where is this country being driven? What is intended for it? And what might the days have in store for it? Egypt has not known, since the Revolution, a moment that ended in such embarrassment as the one it has now reached, nor has her affairs ever fallen into such corruption and confusion as they have fallen into now. His Majesty the King is unwell, and ought not to burden himself with the attention to public affairs that he once bore, nor take upon himself the strain he once endured; and since yesterday, people's talk has been buzzing with the notion that the troubles of this ongoing crisis, laid before His Majesty in full detail, have told upon his health to some degree — so that a measure of anxiety has returned to people's hearts, and questions once said to have been deferred have stirred again, questions the English are now said to have altogether turned away from.

His Majesty the King, then, being unwell, cannot take up public affairs with the same vigor and resolute care he once brought to them — a vigor and care that used to consume from His Majesty time and effort which only the truly exceptional among the strong can afford to spend.

And the sitting cabinet hangs suspended — neither alive, that one might hope for it, nor dead, that one might mourn it and pass its business on to another cabinet — but simply suspended in mid-air, doing nothing, relinquishing nothing, nearer to death than to life, and itself a cause of the mounting troubles and the deepening embarrassment and the sharpening crisis. To whom, then, have Egypt's affairs fallen? On whom does their conduct now depend, and the resolution of these tangled troubles that only grow more embarrassing and more tangled with the passage of time?

Egyptians, looking now, see all their affairs fallen to two men. One is the Deputy High Commissioner, behind whom stands the British Foreign Office, and behind them the whole of English authority, the whole of English power, the whole of English cunning. The other is Ziwar Pasha,

head of the Royal Cabinet, who now stands where the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister ought to stand, negotiating over matters that heads of royal cabinets do not negotiate, and disputing matters that none but accountable statesmen ought to dispute — taking and giving, or showing himself ready to take and give, when it is not his place to expose himself to any of this or bear its weight. Whatever his character, whatever his intentions, whatever his intelligence and discernment, he is a man unaccountable, possessed of no constitutional standing that would permit him to bear the burdens of politics or shoulder their weight and their consequences; and he cannot, from any sound constitutional standpoint, say that the Council of Ministers stands behind him, since he is not a minister, and since the Council of Ministers can scarcely be said to exist at all; nor can he say that Parliament stands behind him, since he is not a minister, nor can he stand before Parliament, nor address it; and since the sitting Parliament, whatever people may think of it, stands dissolved and not assembled, with no way to reconvene it so long as His Majesty the King remains too unwell to open it, and so long as the cabinet remains suspended in this manner, between certain death and a life reduced to its last breath. Where, then, does Egypt's strength lie? Where does her support lie? Where does her trust lie, and what is the true nature of her standing now in these perilous negotiations under way since yesterday between Mr. Peterson and Ziwari Pasha? He who speaks for the English has behind him a power unmatched by any other power, a might unmatched by any other might, a cunning unmatched by any other cunning; while he who speaks for Egypt has behind him nothing constitutional in which he might take pride, or on which he might lean.

Nor does the matter stop there — it goes further still, to something graver yet. For we do not know whether this Egyptian people, neglected in the most disgraceful manner for more than four years, unheeded by anyone since this crisis first arose and through all the twists it has taken since, whether this Egyptian people supports Ziwari Pasha or forsakes him, nor whether it trusts Ziwari Pasha or withholds its trust — for the Egyptian people has, on the one hand, its own opinions of Ziwari Pasha; and on the other, neither Ziwari Pasha nor any of the accountable ministers, nor the unaccountable officials, has told the Egyptian people anything, or asked it anything, or shown it anything of the crisis's particulars. And so Mr. Peterson negotiates with the whole of England behind him, while Ziwari Pasha negotiates alone, the Egyptian people having taken toward him a distant stance amounting to a neutrality nearer to doubt than to trust and certainty.

Is it not the right of every Egyptian — indeed the duty of every Egyptian — to ask himself, and to ask others: where is this country being driven? What is intended for it? And what might the days have in store for it?

How could hearts not fill with fear, how could anxiety not lay claim to the whole of Egyptian life, now that the tragedy of this wretched era has reached the point where Egyptians look on as their affairs pass out of the hand of one unaccountable man only to fall into the hand of another unaccountable man?

Affairs lay with al-Ibrashi Pasha a week ago; they have now passed to Ziwar Pasha these last few days. Neither man is a man of government; neither man is recognized by the Constitution; neither man can speak for the people, in small matters or in great.

Ziwar Pasha may well be better than al-Ibrashi Pasha; Ziwar Pasha may well be more favored by the English, dearer to them, than al-Ibrashi Pasha. But the character of the two men, their share of honor, their measure of tact, are not the things that concern Egyptians, even if they are the things that concern the English. What concerns Egyptians is, first, that their affairs be in the hands of accountable men — and further, accountable men whom the people trust and approve of, whose words they do not suspect, whose actions raise no doubt — and beyond that, that these men answer to the nation for what they take and what they give. Where do we stand, then, from any of this now? And who can deny that the present crisis is being handled, on the Egyptian side, by purely autocratic means possessing not the slightest constitutional character? How, then, can Egyptians be expected, after all this, to feel reassured? How can they be expected to await tomorrow's events, or today's, without anxiety or unease?

Those now in charge of affairs in Egypt — foremost among them, naturally, Ziwar Pasha — would do well to remember the nation, and the nation alone; to accept that thinking of persons and of immediate advantage, permitted to statesmen at times, may become forbidden to them in the perilous hours that beset nations and peoples; and that the burdens carried on the conscience of statesmen may grow so heavy, in hours of danger, as to weigh their bearers down, compelling them to take one of two stances: either to make the nation a partner in what they do, thereby clearing their conscience before their country and before history, or to act alone and autocratically, thereby bearing the blame for

wronging their country and forfeiting what is right.

And those in charge of affairs on the English side would do well to know, with full certainty, that if it is their right to work for their own country, it is likewise incumbent upon them to have regard for their country's genuine interests as well.

England's genuine interests are not achieved, nor secured, through agreement with unaccountable persons who have behind them no backing from the people to rely on, no support to take shelter in; such interests are achieved and guaranteed only when the English come to an agreement with the people themselves, and no one else, and when they take, toward that agreement, the honorable constitutional paths, and no others. And all Egyptians would do well to be wary and to remain vigilant, for I do not know that their political life has ever faced a danger like the danger it faces now.

Taha Hussein

Al-Wadi, November 3, 1934.