

Evasion

Taha Hussein

Kawkab al-Sharq, 15 February 1934

Sidqi Pasha has spoken at last, after having preferred silence, clung to it, and persisted in it; and what drew him out of this silence were words al-Muqattam published yesterday evening. Sidqi Pasha supposed that they had been revealed to al-Muqattam — indeed, Sidqi Pasha said that he had heard, days before, that revelation would descend upon al-Muqattam bearing these words.

When revelation descended upon al-Muqattam — if what Sidqi Pasha said is true — the lover of silence found no escape from breaking it, and the great dictator found no way around accepting this challenge, and answering words with words. One should not be taken in by what Sidqi Pasha said, for in truth Sidqi Pasha said nothing at all; he simply sensed that a revelation had descended upon al-Muqattam, and so he sent down a revelation of his own upon al-Ahram, and the whole matter turned into a rivalry of revelations, a war of words between a hidden person revealing things to al-Muqattam and a visible person revealing things to al-Ahram.

As for Egypt and its interests, as for justice, right, and their dignity, as for the truth of the matter touching Sidqi Pasha in the Corniche story, as for what people think of a man who oversaw the affairs of the state for more than three years, around whom reports and rumors multiplied, and around whom his adversaries stirred up suspicion, doubt, and conjecture — all of this amounts to nothing, carries no weight, so long as a hidden person can reveal things to al-Muqattam, and a visible person can reveal things to al-Ahram, and so long as readers can read what each of them reveals, and note that al-Muqattam's revealer was deft, and that al-Ahram's revealer was nimble and evasive, and so long as the whole affair can turn into a verbal rivalry resting on open statement and veiled allusion, with readers awarding the laurels of skill to one revealer or the other.

It is truly painful that Egypt's affairs should degenerate into this idle chatter, and that Egyptians should be expected to content themselves with this kind of jest in matters as far removed from idle chatter and jest as can be. The French did not content themselves with the innuendo and

insinuation that the evening and morning papers published when those financial scandals appeared in their midst; rather, the matter passed, with them, beyond the morning and evening papers to the ministry, then to parliament, then to the judiciary, then to the street ... and it ended, with them, in what is well known: the fall of two ministries, a violent upheaval put down with iron and fire in Paris and elsewhere, and the whole political order exposed to danger. Nor has the matter ended yet in France ... God alone knows when it will end, in what it will end, and how it will end.

We, praise God, are modest; we appreciate the differences between ourselves and France, and we know full well that we would be asking the impossible if we wanted a ministry to resign over the Corniche story as a ministry resigned over the Stavisky affair; we are the furthest people from asking for what the French did. We ask only for something very slight ... something among the easiest of our rights to ask for, and it is strange that we are not granted it ... We ask that those who bear responsibilities be questioned about the responsibilities they bear; we ask that those who spend public funds be questioned about what they spend of these funds; we ask that doubt and suspicion be cleared from those who conduct the affairs of the state, and who have the honor of heading the ministry.

We ask that people's opinion of the heads of ministries and of ministers not turn sour, and that they not say to one another: "Talk and rumor have multiplied around so-and-so, and he was unable — or unwilling — to prove himself above the talk and rumor, and the state was unable — or unwilling — to prove him above the talk and rumor" ... We ask, in the end, that Sidqi Pasha not be set apart from the rest of the Egyptians, and that Sidqi Pasha be questioned about what is attributed to him, just as Egyptians are questioned about what is attributed to them, and that it be proven in the end, plainly and clearly, that Sidqi Pasha is a politician beyond reproach, and that those who say of Sidqi Pasha what they say are merely slandering him, charging him with what he is innocent of, out of malice toward him, provocation against him, and incitement.

This is what we ask, and it is, as you see, a slight thing, of no consequence beside what the French asked for, and still ask for; and yet we are not granted even this that we ask. The state does not grant it to us, for a reason God knows and it knows; and Sidqi Pasha does not grant it to us, for a reason God knows and he knows ... The curious thing,

nonetheless, is that Sidqi Pasha speaks to the Egyptian Gazette, invoking true democracy and the proper application of the constitution, and he knows full well that he is able — should he wish — to realize true democracy, by placing himself on equal footing with the Egyptians, by submitting to the committee the statement it awaits from him, or by asking parliament to form a committee to question him and hear him out; yet Sidqi Pasha corrupts democracy when he does not give it access to himself, and all the while he calls for this very democracy, and proclaims it one of the necessities of Egyptian life, if the Egyptians want independence.

And the state knows of this what Sidqi Pasha knows, yet it takes the same stance toward it that Sidqi Pasha himself takes ... It wants to know the truth, and to make it known to people, yet it does not pursue knowing this truth, nor making it known to people; and after all this, we live in a democratic country with a constitution that makes all people equal before the law, and makes ministers accountable for their acts before parliament.

Stranger still is that Sidqi Pasha speaks to the Egyptian Gazette, declaring that by changing the order he had sought to strengthen the nation, to realize true democracy within it, and to enable it to win independence, while he himself takes a stance that can be described, at the very least, as the stance of one who makes war on democracy, who defies it, who weakens the nation, who widens the distance between it and independence, and widens the distance between it and the respect of the English and of others besides.

Sidqi Pasha declared in the newspapers that he was ready to submit to the Corniche committee whatever statement it needed, so as to prove that the link between him and the Corniche contractor was a clean link, beyond reproach; then it emerged that the Corniche committee could not question him. So we asked him to submit to it the statement he had promised to submit, and we pressed him in this request; then we gave him the choice between this and appealing to parliament to form a committee to examine whatever statement he had. But Sidqi Pasha did nothing, and chose nothing; he preferred silence instead, and forgot the promise he had made while holding forth and ranging freely in the newspapers. We asked the government to make arrangements for Sidqi Pasha to be questioned in parliament, and the government did nothing; we asked parliament to question Sidqi Pasha, and parliament did nothing; and we recorded, after that, that Sidqi Pasha is a privileged man, that

this privilege of his runs contrary to the constitution and the law, and that those who demand the abolition of the foreigners' privileges ought first to demand the abolition of the Egyptians' privileges — and still no one did anything.

Then yesterday those lines were published in al-Muqattam, and Sidqi Pasha stirred — would that he had not stirred — and Sidqi Pasha wrote — would that he had not written; for he did nothing more than prove that he is a privileged man, whom circumstance sets apart, or who sets himself apart from all the Egyptians, and defies the present government, and defies parliament along with it, it would seem, and defies the whole state, calm and untroubled, his lips adorned with that charming smile people talk about so much.

Al-Muqattam published that the committee was waiting for Sidqi Pasha to send it the statement he had promised to send; and Sidqi Pasha said that his position did not permit him to send the committee any statement at all. This means that Sidqi Pasha has discovered, in the end, just as the state too has discovered in the end, that the committee has no hold over him. At the outset, Sidqi Pasha had supposed that the committee did have a hold over him, and so he promised to submit to it whatever statement it needed; but once the plain truth of his position became clear to him, he swallowed his promise whole, and declared that he could not submit any statement to the committee at all. And the state, at the outset, had supposed — so it appears — that the committee had a hold over Sidqi Pasha; but once the plain truth became clear to it, it contented itself with those lines published in al-Muqattam yesterday, to which Sidqi Pasha replied with the reply published in al-Ahram this morning.

But the matter does not stop here; for Sidqi Pasha is a man who does the committee a favor, unwilling to leave it bewildered and adrift — and it is his right to do so, if he wishes, since the committee has no hold over him — but he does a favor to it, and to the government, and to its head, the good man, by letting a friend of his, one of those who hold standing in government and to whom the committee turns, in on the documents he has, and contents himself with that, wishing the committee to content itself with that from him. What generosity could match this generosity? What condescension could match this condescension? Sidqi Pasha is truly gentle with the committee, tender toward the government; he could have paid no heed to the committee or to the government, yet he nonetheless did them the favor of revealing the documents he has to a friend in

government to whom the committee turns.

Have you seen audacity to match this audacity? Have you seen defiance to match this defiance? Have you seen contempt for the ministry, the committee, and the public interest to match this contempt? Hundreds of thousands of pounds are spent, and people suspect, and the government suspects, the manner of their spending, and a committee is formed to investigate it — yet Sidqi Pasha contents himself with revealing the documents he has to a friend, so that this friend might speak of them to the government or the committee. A matter calling for formal investigation, and Sidqi Pasha handles it by informal arrangement. In this handling of his, he is a benefactor and a volunteer, under no one's authority — indeed, he expects the committee to thank him, and the government to thank him, for having revealed the documents he has to a few friends.

And say, after all this, that we live in a democratic country subject to the rulings of the constitution, which makes all people equal before the law, in which ministers are questioned before parliament, and in which public funds are surrounded by every kind of protection and care you could wish for, and more besides. Say all of this, and fear not that people will laugh at you, and fear not that foreigners especially will laugh at you, and fear not that the French will laugh at you, and have no doubt that our present life guarantees us the respect of the English, and persuades them that we are a free people, fit to negotiate with them, and fit to win independence.

And the good man reads these words that Sidqi Pasha writes in al-Ahram, swallows hard, looks in the mirror, and goes to the station to catch the train to Alexandria. And who knows? Perhaps he will delay the train's departure by a few minutes today, as he delayed it by a few minutes some days ago.

Al-Muqattam published that Sidqi Pasha had promised, in the newspapers, to submit the statement to the committee, and had given some members of the committee to understand that he was ready to submit this statement; yet Sidqi Pasha publishes in al-Ahram that he did not have the "honor" of meeting any member of the committee, and did not promise him the submission of this statement. What does Sidqi Pasha make, then, of the promise he put on record against himself in the newspapers, and which he cannot erase or deny? Why did he go back on this promise, and turn away from submitting the statement? Because he

had supposed that the committee had a hold over him; and once it became clear to him that he was shielded from the committee's questioning, he held forth and ranged freely, and took back the promise he had already made in the newspapers.

And what does Sidqi Pasha make of our affirming to him, confident as we are in what we say, that he did communicate with some members of the committee, and gave them to understand that he was ready to submit the statement? We do not claim that he met any member of the committee, but we do claim that he communicated with some members of the committee, and we think Sidqi Pasha would agree with us that it is possible for some people to communicate with others without meeting them, and possible for some to speak to others without seeing one another's faces.

We affirm, then, that Sidqi Pasha did communicate with some members of the committee, and did promise to submit the statement if the contractor did not submit it. What, then, makes Sidqi Pasha now go back on this spoken promise, as he went back on that written promise? There is nothing strange in it; for Sidqi Pasha is confident that the committee cannot question him, and for that reason Sidqi Pasha submits no statement to the committee, and it is enough for him to do a favor, revealing the documents he has to a friend who mediates between him and the committee by informal arrangement, resting on goodwill and a love of reform.

Nor does Sidqi Pasha make any mention of the parliamentary committee ... he has not mentioned it, no one has thought of it, and no one has any right to compel him to submit himself to investigation, so long as the state does not summon him to it. Sidqi Pasha, then, is now a man triumphant ... triumphant over his adversaries, who stirred up around him whatever they stirred up, and wished upon him whatever they wished, and were then driven back, repulsed; triumphant over the ministry, which cannot — or will not — question him about anything; triumphant over parliament, which does not wish to question him about anything; triumphant over all the Egyptians, for all the Egyptians want to know the truth of his stance on the Corniche story, and can find no way to it. And yet, for all this, we are a democratic country subject to the rule of the constitution, in which all people stand equal before the law, and in which ministers are questioned before parliament. And the strange thing is that we say this and write it without shame, and that Sidqi Pasha himself says as much to the English.