

Predicaments

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Yes, it is not one predicament, nor two, but several predicaments that occupy the ministry these days — or, rather, occupy the ministry's leading men. For there remain among the ministers some modest souls who have not yet created for themselves predicaments to trouble them and keep them awake at night.

We know of no evident predicament belonging to the minister of public works, nor of any glaring one belonging to the minister of communications, nor of any predicament of the minister of agriculture that proclaims itself to people. These gentlemen among the ministers may well have predicaments that have not yet appeared, and may appear tomorrow or the day after, and the minister of religious endowments may also have a predicament, or predicaments, of which we know nothing as yet. But these gentlemen among the ministers remain, for now, modest; they have not spoken of themselves, nor invited people to speak of them. As for the ministry's leading men so far, their predicaments are serious ones, and their seriousness comes precisely from the fact that they created them for themselves, and wished them into being, to trouble them and sour their lives — whereas, had they left well enough alone, they would have gone their way calmly, conducting their business with a certain languor, or something resembling it, until God granted them that measure of rest, free of exertion, which He usually grants to ministers.

But they are earnest men, who love toil, and detest rest and ease of mind; so they manufacture predicaments for themselves, should none arise on their own, and should circumstance fail to produce one. And I do not know what more Egyptians could ask of them after this, seeing that they give politics its savor, and refuse to let politics sleep.

As for the prime minister, the good man, people have not known him to rest from predicaments since he formed his ministry, or since the ministry was formed for him. His first predicament was Sidqi Pasha, and he was not free of it except after long toil and heavy care, and who knows? Perhaps he is not free of it yet; for we read in the newspapers reports suggesting — if true — that Sidqi Pasha has not gone to sleep, but merely feigns it. Then there arose for the good man the predicament of

the accredited ministers and the chief justice's speech; then there arose for him the predicament of the High Commissioner, and the traditions governing the relations between himself and the High Commissioner. And who knows? Perhaps some other predicament has already arisen for him today, or will arise tomorrow; for the good man cannot live unless predicaments multiply around him.

As for the minister of the interior, the Wafd leader, and the Wafd leader's visits, are predicament enough for him — a predicament unlike other predicaments, a quandary unlike other quandaries. Close surveillance in Cairo, and boundless violence in the provinces. Activity that knows no lull, and vigilance that knows no sleep. Watches posted, troops massed, roads cut off, houses besieged, others occupied, and sport of the kind that, once begun, knows no end.

As for the minister of tradition, the Piastre Project is predicament enough for him, along with protecting its promoters and punishing those who chafe against it; he expels some, studies the circumstances of others, takes precaution against tomorrow by dissolving one union and forming another, closing one club and opening another. And even this does not suffice him, so that he must turn his mind to the dress of schoolteachers, drawing up a law or a decree imposing the turban and banning the fez — all the while preparing to deliver his splendid, masterly speech, to be given on Tuesday when the Arabic Language Academy is inaugurated at the Opera House.

As for the minister of finance — and what could tell you what the minister of finance is! — his predicaments never cease, his quandaries never end, and people's talk of him never runs dry, even as his own talk of himself grows sparse: from the question of the public debt to the question of private debt, from the tale of the cotton already sold to the tale of the cotton yet to be sold, from a dispute with the deputy to a dispute with the advisers, and from all this to the brokers of the exchange, whom he angers, then appeases, then angers again, then plays and toys with, in that deft manner none of the other ministers can match.

Circumstance, too, insisted that the minister of justice have a predicament — and what a predicament it was! One he had no need of, nor did the ministry as a whole have any need of it, were it not that the contagion had spread to the ministers, so that each of them took a liking to having his own predicament, to mattering, however much give and take surrounded him, and however long people's talk of him might run.

The minister of justice had been calm, and the lawyers had been calm, and things had gone along between them untroubled — neither smiling nor scowling, neither in revolt nor settled. But circumstance — and woe to people from circumstance! — would not rest until it had tempted him against the lawyers; and so he defied them, and he threatened them, and insisted that they hear him and obey him in whatever resolutions they adopted and whatever elections they undertook. And the lawyers refused him, and disobeyed his order, and elected Makram as their head, though the minister hated to see Makram as head. Thereupon the minister grew angry — and why should he not be angry?! Is he any less than the minister of tradition, or the minister of finance, or the minister of the interior, or the prime minister? They all grow angry, and they all strike out. Why should he not grow angry, why should he not strike out? Suppose he disliked anger and did not love it — how could he possibly accept that Makram should speak against him in the lawyers' name before His Majesty the King?! And so, let a law be drawn up, let it be laid before parliament and promulgated, let it be made retroactive, and let Makram and his companions be expelled from the lawyers' syndicate outright, that Egyptians may know they stand all equal before the ministers' will, and that the minister of tradition may know that he is not the only one with the power to expel students and professors, and that there is another minister with the power to expel heads and members from the lawyers' syndicate.

And so the minister of justice grew angry, as the other ministers had grown angry, and the minister of justice resolved to strike out, as the other ministers had struck out — but what then? The minister of justice resolves, but does not act, because he cannot act; for he is not contending with pupils, nor with professors, nor with civil servants, but with lawyers. And lawyers are men of contention, whom one must reckon with carefully. The minister of justice wished to defy the lawyers, and the lawyers accepted his challenge and stood firm against him: he did not invite their head to the opera gala, so they refused to attend the opera gala and held their own celebration in Heliopolis. He issued his law, and the lawyers refused to submit to it, for it violated the constitution, and men of law ought not submit to a violation of the constitution. He renewed his warning to them after the law was issued, just as he had warned them before it was issued; and they smiled at his second warning, just as they had smiled at his first, and confirmed Makram as their head after the law was issued, just as they had chosen Makram as their head before it was issued. And they declared to all Egyptians that, whatever

others among people might love to play games, they themselves do not play. And they declared to all Egyptians that, whatever others among people might not mind demeaning themselves and others, they themselves refuse to let themselves, or anyone, be demeaned. And their head declared to all Egyptians that if the lawyers had failed to convince the government, they had at least succeeded in convincing themselves, and that the man worthy of that name is the one who never oversteps the position conviction and a clear conscience impose upon him, whatever the circumstances may be. And their head declared to all Egyptians that the work of lawyers worthy of that name grows only greater, rises only higher, and gains in weight, and becomes the work of true men, when they raise the law to the level of justice, rather than lowering justice to the level of the law. And their general assembly declared to all Egyptians that the law the government had issued did not accord with justice, because it did not accord with the constitution, and that they would therefore neither obey it nor submit to its ruling, nor choose for themselves any head other than Makram. And they charged their head, Makram, with conveying this to the proper authorities, that it might reach the government which had issued the law.

And so what the minister of justice wished for came to pass, as it had come to pass for the other ministers; he had his predicament, just as his colleagues had theirs. And there is no way out of this predicament for the minister of justice but one of two paths: either he accepts the lawyers' decision and withdraws from his law whatever the lawyers reject, and in this stance lies a victory for right, justice, and the constitution, and a defeat for the ministry; or he refuses to accept the lawyers' stance and prepares another law against them, and in this stance lies a persistence in striking out, a continuing along the same path his fellow predicament-holders are following. The lawyers, and with them all Egyptians, emerge victorious in either case: victorious if the ministry yields to their view, victorious if the ministry insists on dealing with them by ways of force and oppression. For the wronged man is not weak, and the wronged man is not defeated, however much injustice is visited upon him; it is only when the wronged man accepts injustice, submits to it, and resigns himself to the unjust, that he grows weak and is defeated.

Let us see, then, which of the two paths the minister of justice will take!