

The Rabble

Al-Balagh, 24 February 1946.

At five o'clock on the afternoon of last Thursday, it was reported that our Council of Ministers had met, studied the events that had occurred that day, and charged its chairman with lodging a protest against the English — because they had defied the demonstrators in Cairo, so that British vehicles stormed into their ranks and left many of them lying on the ground, some dead and some wounded; and because they had defied Egyptian sovereignty, arrogating to themselves the right to keep order and maintain security, when it is the Egyptian authority alone that ought to see to the keeping of order and the maintenance of security; and because they had defied the simplest principles of humanity, turning machine guns and rapid-fire rifles upon an unarmed crowd that wished no one any harm, and had only been driven to ward off the harm being poured upon it. The English had earlier agreed with the Egyptian government that Cairo would be off-limits to British soldiers on Thursday, and then broke this agreement for no known reason. Around eight o'clock, then, it was reported that the Council of Ministers had charged its chairman with lodging the protest, but it was also reported that their chairman had promised them he would protest — but only after learning the result of the investigation.

I do not know whether the ministers weighed all these considerations I have mentioned, or only some of them, or weighed other considerations altogether; but, as the reports have it, they asked their chairman to protest. At half past eight it was reported that the British had sent — or intended to send — an ultimatum to the Egyptian government, and rumors went in various directions as to what this ultimatum contained. Moments later it was said that the Prime Minister would address the people on the radio. And at a quarter past nine the Prime Minister addressed the people, laying — as he put it — the blame for what had happened upon the rabble, and speaking of matters not yet understood, which the investigation was expected to clarify; and then he announced, in a voice meant to sound resolute but which faltered and collapsed as a crumbling building collapses, that he would ban demonstrations and crack down hard on those who played with fire. The sum of all this is that the events of last Thursday had scarcely passed before a race began between the Egyptian ministry and the British embassy to see who would protest first. The Egyptian ministry meant to

protest, but did not; instead it waited for the results of the investigation. The British embassy did not mean to protest, yet it protested in fact, without waiting for any investigation at all. It issued, at the very same time, a statement to the people and to the world, just as the Prime Minister had issued a statement to the people. And in its statement it did exactly what the Prime Minister had done, with only a difference of tone and phrasing, laying upon the rabble the blame for what had happened, and taking these events as an excuse for the killing of the people and the assault upon Egyptian sovereignty on Egyptian soil.

It seems most likely that there is a weakness in our ministry, born of age and advancing years, which kept the ministry from being first to protest, though the right to protest was properly its own; and so the British embassy got there before it, with the curious result that the killer protests against the slain, and the aggressor casts blame upon the one he has wronged.

Whatever the Egyptian government's reply to the British protest may be, it will carry no weight and no significance at all; for a dignified government is one that does not wait to be forced by its adversary into a defensive posture, when the nature of things and the plain facts already placed it in a posture of anger over a right stolen, blood spilled, dignity insulted, and sovereignty squandered.

Nor did matters stop there, for the British protested verbally on Friday and in writing on Saturday, and went beyond every bound. They were not content with the ministry, as though they neither trusted it nor recognized it, but carried their protest up to His Majesty the King himself, while Sidqi Pasha declared, at that very same time, that the situation had not worsened — though by yesterday evening the situation had in fact reached the very extremity of worsening. The British were not content with assaulting the people and protesting to the government; they assaulted the government itself when they went over its head and carried their protest to the occupant of the throne, in a country said to be constitutional, possessed of a responsible ministry established precisely to deal with embassies, and to be dealt with by embassies, so as to spare the throne contacts of this kind, unsuited to the majesty and the elevation above such responsibilities that befit it and the state, whatever the circumstances! And yet Sidqi Pasha believes that the situation has not worsened. It seems most likely that the situation will never worsen, in Sidqi Pasha's eyes, unless circumstances force him to relinquish power and return to the Muhammad Ali Club, there to jest, morning and

evening, about the governments then in office, and to send from there to Al-Ahram his biting remarks on the conduct of this minister or that.

What admits of no doubt is that Sidqi Pasha's ministry is the least suited of all ministries to the circumstances now surrounding Egyptian life, both internally and externally. Everything has changed since Sidqi Pasha resigned in 1933: foreign affairs have changed, and the political circumstances of the world have changed, so that the smooth, gentle, traditional policy Sidqi Pasha once relied upon with the British ambassador in his previous ministry has lost all weight and all value, and everything now demands resolve, seriousness, firmness, and a readiness to go the full distance. Sidqi Pasha was Prime Minister in the days when Sir Percy Loraine was High Commissioner, and so he grew accustomed to governing on a basis other than that of independence — accustomed to governing on the basis that the British voice must be louder than the Egyptian voice; and although he was among those who signed the 1936 treaty, his mentality remains that of English domination and of ingratiating oneself with the English.

And Egyptian domestic life has changed too, so that the people now have hopes and ambitions that were not apparent during his first ministry, and governments have arisen that recognized these hopes and worked toward their realization, strengthening thereby the people's confidence in itself and its faith in its own right to social justice, and its firmness in attaining this right whatever the circumstances.

And Sidqi Pasha used to rage against this development, morning and evening, at the Muhammad Ali Club, mocking what governments called fairness, mocking what governments called easing the people's burdens, voicing his concern for the state's budget on the one hand and for the authority of the rich and the powerful on the other, dreading above all else that the people should become conscious of their rights and their dignity, and allowing the Egyptian nation only one purpose, which he regarded as the highest ideal of progress and advancement: that the land should be reclaimed and the people's health strengthened, so that the people might labor for their masters, and the land might yield for these masters whatever they wished to spend without reckoning. And nothing proves this better than the fact that Sidqi Pasha's mind remains today exactly as it was before: when he speaks of politics, he draws a distinction between the elite and the rabble, instinctively convinced that among men there are the great who rule and the small who submit, and that among men there are masters who are distinguished and the weak

who are exploited. And whatever events may unfold around him, he cannot change his nature, nor fashion for himself any new creed.

Nor is Sidqi Pasha alone in this conservative nature; he has many partners in it, who accept political and social development only reluctantly, because they are unable to resist it, let alone prevent it, and so they go along with it in pretense rather than sincerity, seizing opportunities through it and lying in wait around it, their tongues professing faith in it while their hearts deny it.

Sidqi Pasha and his associates know perfectly well that the constitution makes all Egyptians equal in rights and duties, drawing no distinction between rich and poor, strong and weak, the eminent and the obscure. And Sidqi Pasha knows that this equality is but a reflection of the nature of things, for all men have taken a single path into life, born of their mothers in the same manner, and they will all leave life by a single path, which is death; God brought them out of the earth and will return them to the earth, making no distinction among them in this, great or small.

Sidqi Pasha and his partners know this perfectly well, but they do not wish to believe it, nor to find any comfort in it, because they love to be distinguished, to be superior, to hold themselves above others and to think themselves great; and for this reason they speak of the elite, which must rule and be distinguished, and of the rabble, which must submit and be led. And stranger still, Sidqi Pasha and his partners know perfectly well that Egypt's elite is an elite only by accident, created from dust just as other men were created, and not created from fire as the devils were created; it was merely that the ill order of society allowed their near forebears to grow rich after poverty, to rise after lowliness, and to be educated after ignorance, so that they became a distinguished elite by sheer accident, when they might just as easily have remained, like the rest of this rabble, without any distinction at all.

For this reason, the Egyptians observe that their life oscillates perpetually between two eras: an era in which the words "rabble," "mob," and "riffraff," and other such words, are frequently invoked, words that proclaim the distinction of the distinguished and the submission of the submissive — and this is the era in which the few monopolize power for themselves, thinking more of themselves than of the people, relying more on their own distinction than on the strength of the people, depending more on their own cunning than on the people's support, for no reason

other than that they possess a privilege they are anxious to preserve and refuse to relinquish. And so, if the people grow angry, this anger does not concern them, nor harm them, nor trouble them, except when it endangers their own interests and privilege. But if the people aspire to progress, and their souls rise toward dignity and the betterment of their condition, this is what disturbs their rest and vexes them by night and by day — because the people's progress means the achievement of equality, and this means the abolition of privilege, and the abolition of privilege means that all men become masters alike, so that not one of them, like Sidqi Pasha, could speak on the radio and lay upon the rabble the blame for what has happened.

Have you seen, reader, that Sidqi Pasha's ministry is the least suited of all ministries to the circumstances of Egyptian life? Present Egyptian life demands a ministry in Egypt capable of standing firm against the English, of telling them "no," of protesting against them when they exceed the bounds of the treaty, of demanding of them, in resolve and firmness, that they not trifle with promises once given, nor break faith with pledges once affirmed, nor keep their soldiers stationed after their enemies have been defeated with Egypt's help, and after the protection of world security has passed into the hands of an international body.

And Sidqi Pasha is in no way part of any of this, for he has grown accustomed to nothing but negotiating with Sir Percy Loraine, the British High Commissioner. Scarcely a week had passed — what am I saying?! Scarcely three days had passed since his ministry was formed before these events occurred, and Sidqi Pasha proved too weak to bear the burden and meet the new circumstances; he faltered, he grew complacent, and let the English get there first with their protest, allowing their falsehood to appear and hold itself up high, and forcing Egypt's rightful claim to feel shame and hide itself away — because Sidqi Pasha is in no way a man of this age.

And Egyptian life in this age needs a ministry that feels with the people when the people feel, that suffers their pain and shares their misery, that refuses to be sated while they go hungry, refuses to take its ease while they are wretched, and refuses to feel secure while their blood is being spilled at the hands of the English.

And Sidqi Pasha is in no way part of any of this, and the proof of it is that he addressed the people after their blood had been spilled in Cairo, yet neither consoled them nor comforted them, nor declared to them that

he would see justice done to them after their wrong and restore their rights in full; instead he blamed them and rebuked them, and laid upon the rabble — that is, upon the people — the responsibility for the events, scarcely alluding to the aggressing English except with gentleness, delicacy, courtesy, and reticence.

All this because Sidqi Pasha and his like dwell in one valley, and the people dwell in another. Let this small handful, who compete for power and cling to it so desperately, believe me: the age of domination and privilege has passed, and only pretense now keeps it alive in Egypt, but pretense cannot be stretched on forever. Let these gentlemen give themselves rest, and give others rest from themselves; let them be content, if contentment is within their reach; let them enjoy whatever wealth, standing, and comfort God has granted them; and let them leave the wretched people to their noble struggle — so that the people may perhaps win some part of what they seek of their right, and perhaps ease, even if only a little, this hardship.