

The Grounded Ship

Al-Balagh, 12 July 1945.

Does the Prime Minister know that his ship is aground, unable to advance or to retreat, but forced instead into a position it cannot get past — the very position an ancient poet once found himself forced into, when he said:

Passion halted me where you are: I can neither retreat from it, nor advance beyond it.

And I do not know whether it was passion that halted the Prime Minister's ship exactly where it stands, so that it can neither advance nor retreat, or whether it was something else that halted it; but the one thing beyond doubt is that the ship is aground, unable to sail on ahead, and unable to turn and retrace its course, settling exactly where it stood before the Prime Minister pushed it out into the surging, storm-tossed sea of government, as the Thousand and One Nights would put it.

Nor does the Prime Minister need us to furnish him proof that his ship is aground, unable either to proceed or to return; for the parliamentary session opened last January. It seems to me we are now in July, and that Parliament has scarcely accomplished anything, because the government has brought nothing before it, and it is now studying the budget in a manner both hurried and dawdling at once, if haste and delay can indeed occur together. The Chamber of Deputies is pushing the budget through rapidly, while the Senate meets only once a week, just enough to allow it, too, to push the budget through rapidly. Summer has advanced, the heat has intensified, the crescent of Sha'ban has appeared, and Ramadan is now making its way toward the people, or the people are making their way toward Ramadan; and once the month of fasting arrives, it will be best for Parliament to rest, or to let itself rest.

And this means that a full legislative year has been lost to Egypt, without a single step, wide or narrow, having been taken toward social, economic, or administrative reform; Egypt has simply remained exactly where the Wafd ministry left her, waiting for laws that would secure economic, social, and administrative progress, without gaining anything at all from such laws.

It used to be said that the present order had been established to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give security to the fearful, teach the ignorant, treat the sick, and rescue the distressed. And it is still being said that the Egyptians suffer from hunger, suffer from nakedness, suffer from fear, suffer from ignorance, suffer from illness, and suffer from all these things that drive them to anguish and to cry out for help, without finding, in any of this, anyone to save or rescue them.

This is still being said, sometimes in the Chamber of Deputies, sometimes in the newspapers, and always in people's clubs, their homes, their cities, and their villages. If so, then to what end was one order abolished and another put in its place?! To what end was one ministry dismissed and another installed in its place?!

And it used to be said that the present order had been established precisely to repair the instruments of government after corruption had seized them on every side. And it is still being said, in Parliament, in the newspapers, in the clubs, and in the streets, that the instruments of government still contain a great deal of corruption — charges leveled at some ministers and some senior officials, reports the ministers themselves submit to the prosecution so that the charges against them may be investigated, statements the ministries publish which the newspapers print and then openly cast doubt upon, flatly denying some of them with evidence and proof. If so, then to what end was one order abolished and another put in its place?! To what end was one ministry dismissed and another installed in its place?!

And it used to be said that the Wafd ministry had been excessive in granting exceptions, to the point of corrupting officials' hearts, minds, and inclinations, and that the new ministry would repair what the Wafd ministry had corrupted. And it is still being said, in the newspapers, in the clubs, and in the streets, that the present ministry grants exceptions just as its predecessor did, and that officials' hearts, minds, and inclinations have been struck by a very great deal of doubt, exposed to a very great deal of unease, and pervaded by a very great deal of despair and hopelessness. If so, then to what end was one order abolished and another put in its place?! To what end was one ministry dismissed and another installed in its place?!

And it used to be said that the present ministry would restore to the people their freedom, full and complete, allowing them to speak, to write, to give speeches, to assemble, and to move about freely, and the Prime

Minister himself announced as much in the Senate this past June 11th. And it is still being said that the prosecution has come to act as a censor, that people cannot assemble because the police prevent them from assembling, cannot give speeches because the police prevent them from speaking, cannot move about because military orders are issued forbidding their movement, and cannot receive in their own homes and clubs whomever they wish, because the police lay siege to some clubs, lay siege to some homes, and shadow some individuals wherever they go and wherever they come from. If so, then to what end was one order abolished and another put in its place?! To what end was one ministry dismissed and another installed in its place?!

And it used to be said that the Wafd ministry had squandered the homeland's rights and fallen short in its duty toward the nation itself, failing to complete independence, failing to liberate the Sudan, failing to achieve evacuation, failing to change the treaty. And it is still being said that the present ministry has likewise failed to complete independence, failed to liberate the Sudan, failed to achieve evacuation, and failed to change the treaty — indeed, that it is on the verge of adding to the shackles of the Anglo-Egyptian treaty yet other fetters, which the ministry accepted at San Francisco and which Parliament now wishes to bind us with in Cairo. If so, then to what end was one order abolished and another put in its place?! To what end was one ministry dismissed and another installed in its place?!

And it used to be said that the Wafd ministry had exposed the integrity of government to grave danger, and that the present ministry had come precisely to restore to government its integrity and its purity, making it as radiant as the light of the sun when it spreads, pure, clear, and splendid, across the world at the first hour of day. But the slightest reading of the newspapers, the slightest attention to people's conversations, the slightest knowledge of what the prosecution is now investigating — all of this shows that we are, in fact, exceedingly far from this radiant, splendid reputation.

I do not know of any minister who has been surrounded by the kind of doubt and suspicion that surrounds some of our ministers these days — doubts I sincerely hope the investigation will disprove, because, in the end, I am an Egyptian, and I do not wish for Egypt that certain things now being said of her ministers should be said of them at all.

Nor do I know of people having pressed, as openly and as unreservedly as they are pressing now, upon some ministers, demanding their resignation — not merely because political expediency requires it, but because their opponents are attributing to them things with which they ought not to remain in office at all; they ought, rather, to resign, so as to clear themselves of these charges, and so that the investigation may proceed with the composure, calm, and tranquility it ought to have.

Does the Prime Minister, after all this, still require proof that his ship is aground, held fast by events exactly where it stands, unable to advance or to retreat, just as passion once held fast the ancient Arab poet who said:

*Passion halted me where you are: I can neither retreat from it, nor
advance beyond it.*

And does the Prime Minister know the causes that forced his ship aground, or does he need us to point out some of these causes, if not all of them? Does the Prime Minister know that the gravest of these causes, and the one with the furthest-reaching effect, is the very composition of the ministry itself? For this outward coalition between hearts that cannot possibly come together, this outward agreement between inclinations that cannot possibly agree, this outward pretense of cooperation among people who agree neither in how they understand things, nor in how they judge them, nor in how they are moved by them, nor in how they pass verdict upon them — none of this is the sort of thing that could ever let the ship sail easily and smoothly, even when the wind itself is favorable.

These coalition parties were, and remain, utterly different from one another in nature and temperament, in inclination and disposition, united by one thing alone: the desire to take hold of government in order to demolish the Wafd utterly. But holding government is not an end in itself; it is only a means to reform and public service, and demolishing the Wafd is not among the ends reformers ought to pursue, because weakening it is a weakening of the Egyptian spirit itself, and weakening the Egyptian spirit is not reform — it is something else altogether, something other than reform.

These coalition parties, outwardly united but inwardly at odds with one another, and with their own conscience before God, cannot steer the ship on a gentle, steady course; rather, some of these parties push it forward while others pull it back, this party veers it to the right, that

party drives it to the left, until it is thrown into disorder and confusion, and is forced, in the end, either to sink, or to run aground.

And does the Prime Minister know that ministers' going each morning to their offices and returning each evening to their homes, signing a few papers and conducting a few routine daily tasks, does not mean that the ship is sailing on a gentle course, nor that the wind is blowing fair for it? It means only that the old saying — there is no possible improvement on what already exists — is a temporary truth which, even if it held true yesterday and holds true today, may well not hold true tomorrow, or the day after.

And the important thing is not whether the ship sails or does not sail, considered in itself, for that in itself carries no danger; what matters is that Egypt's affairs have been entrusted to this very ship, and to those steering it. If the ship becomes confused and disordered, and is forced to run aground, then Egypt's affairs are affected by this very confusion, disorder, and grounding — and the Prime Minister is too sincere a patriot, and loves Egypt too deeply, to expose her to so grave a danger.

It is certain that the Prime Minister knows more about the affairs of his own ministry than we do, and knows full well whether his ship is truly aground or still under way. But it is equally certain that, even if the Prime Minister reads in the newspapers what we read, he does not hear from people's conversations what we hear, and does not know, of the private concerns of individual citizens, of their inner thoughts and consciences, what we know — because he does not see the people as we see them, nor hear from them nor speak with them as we hear from them and speak with them. And the one thing we can sincerely affirm to the Prime Minister is that the people are neither content, nor at ease, nor optimistic, and that they are nearer to indignation, anxiety, and pessimism than to anything else. If the Prime Minister does not believe this, let him disguise himself, and go unnoticed among the people, and listen to them, and speak with them, as Harun al-Rashid used to do, according to what the storytellers tell us. Then the Prime Minister would see what he did not expect to see, and hear what he did not expect to hear, and return to his own home having formed, of his own ministry and of the people, an entirely new opinion.

Then the Prime Minister would hear from the people that they had expected everything of him except that he should endorse certain conduct now attributed to some of his ministers — conduct that, by all

accounts, suits neither the Prime Minister's own nature, nor his temperament, nor his own ideals of governance and of morality.

And then the Prime Minister would hear that the people had expected everything of him except that he should remain silent in the face of the grave criticism now being directed at some of his colleagues — because his silence can only be explained in one of two ways: either he endorses this conduct, though people had believed he would be the very last to endorse it or to tolerate it, or he is simply unable to free himself of certain colleagues despite everything being attributed to them and said about them, though people had expected him to be the very last to tolerate injustice or to bear, for the sake of holding office, what ought never to be borne.

And we assure the Prime Minister that we do not write this to him as critics, nor to disparage him, nor do we intend by it opposition in the ordinary sense of the word. We write it, rather, as sincere advisers offering him the most honest counsel, with the deepest loyalty, for there have been bonds between him and ourselves which we have not forgotten, and which may well impose upon us the duty to counsel him, and to be faithful in that counsel, even if this very faithfulness compels us to a certain frankness and severity — for a friend may at times be harsh with a friend, and an intimate may at times speak sharply to an intimate.

Let the Prime Minister, then, read this piece alone with himself, in the same sincerity with which we write it; let him face forward in his own affairs where he has so far faced only backward, let him review the events and troubles that have occurred since he took up the burdens of government, and let him then ask himself whether he is content to be the captain of a ship that has been forced, against its will, to run aground — and whether he can bear the responsibility for whatever consequences this grounding brings upon Egypt.