

Defiance ...

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Call it a defiance of national sentiment, and call it a defiance of national dignity, and call it a defiance of the Chamber of Deputies, and call it, if you wish, a defiance of tradition, coming from the ministry of tradition itself, in the presence of the minister of tradition — you will not be wrong in some of that, nor wrong in all of it, nor will you overstep what is right and true; for the minister of communications yesterday defied all of it at once, and took toward it the stance of one who holds power, who wills what he wills and knows nothing can turn back his will. As for national sentiment and national dignity, they bore this defiance patiently, as they have borne its like for years now; and as for the Chamber of Deputies, it met this defiance in silence, and one of its members voiced his regret over it, and the deputies met their colleague's regret with silence of their own, and God spared the faithful the need to fight.

As for tradition, it laughed at this defiance, for it knows the minister, and he has known it, for a long time now; the understanding between tradition and both the present ministry and the ministry before it is settled and registered, that tradition shall be easy and yielding, pliant, good-tempered, abundantly patient, never angered except when asked to be angered, and never stirred to revolt except when it is wanted to revolt. And so the minister of communications bore patiently, for a month and part of a month, that question a deputy had put to him about a speech he gave in French at an official ceremony for an official conference; and once the month and part of the month had passed, and the deputies had forgotten both question and answer, the minister recalled them, and delivered his answer yesterday.

The most likely explanation is that the minister recalled this question, and mentioned that he had been awaiting an answer for a month and part of a month, for two reasons: first, that there has been much talk these days of a Language Academy convening, with members arriving from every corner of the earth, East and West, to revive and reform the Arabic language, and make it a great language worthy of the great state called the Egyptian state; and second, that an official ceremony is being held today to open an official conference, at which

official speeches will be delivered; and so the Language Academy reminds the minister that Egypt has an official language, which is Arabic, and reminds Egyptians of this language, and that it is reasonable, natural, and good, and perhaps even a duty, that the state should attend to its official language in its gatherings and conferences.

And the postal conference reminds the minister that most of the delegates are foreigners, and that our Arabic language is a rich language, rough in its letters, weighty in its words, forceful in its impact, wounding to delicate ears, and distressing to refined hearts, and that good taste demands we receive our guests well, neither wounding their ears nor distressing their hearts, nor placing before them what they cannot understand.

So the minister found himself, between these two considerations, in a position not free of some perplexity at first, and some perplexity is unavoidable for every minister these days, for perplexity — as we said yesterday — is the very substance of ministerial life, and especially of the present ministry.

The minister of communications stood perplexed between Egyptians and the foreign delegates, between the official language and the international language, between duty and taste, between tradition and innovation, between pleasing the deputies and displeasing the delegates; but the minister's perplexity did not last, and his hesitation did not continue, for formality is set aside, gladly, between him and his fellow citizens, and formality is set aside between the state's ministers and the state's language. So let the Egyptians bear it, and let the state's language bear it, and let the minister of communications go forward with resolve and determination, with far-reaching ambition and piercing decisiveness, and let him satisfy taste at the expense of duty, and satisfy innovation at the expense of tradition, and satisfy the foreigners at the expense of the Egyptians, and let him announce all this to the Chamber of Deputies, so that the deputy who questioned him after the aviation conference will not think to question him again after the postal conference.

The deputy heard him and regretted it; the deputies heard him and fell silent. And what would you have had the deputy do besides regret it?! And what would you have had the deputies do besides fall silent?!

The minister has willed it, and who could possibly turn back the minister's will?! The minister delivered his speech in French at the aviation conference, and he is now delivering his speech in French at the

postal conference; he announced this to the deputies with easy assurance, and warned the deputies of it with firm resolve, and the deputies grew assured as he was assured, and the deputies accepted what he had resolved upon, and we too are obliged to grow assured and to accept, just as the minister and the deputies grew assured and accepted.

The Language Academy will convene, and will attempt to revive and reform the language, and the state will spend ten thousand pounds on it every year, and people in East and West will say that Egypt has a Language Academy, and people in East and West will say that Egypt is the leading nation of the Eastern countries, and the home of the Arabic language, and the source of life, strength, vigor, preservation, and renewal throughout the lands of the Arab East; all of this will come to pass, and there is no harm in any of it; for Arabic is the people's language, which Egyptians speak when they meet one another and are alone together, and the ministry is generous, bountiful, and gracious, for it reforms, for the people's sake, the people's language, and the people should be content with this much, since the people would be reckless, insolent, and overweening to ask the ministry for anything more!

And it should be enough for this reckless, insolent, overweening people that the ministers condescend to speak its language in their council, and in the Chamber of Deputies, and in the Senate. But for the people to ask them to speak this language at gatherings and conferences — that is tyranny, and tyranny is ugly when it comes from peoples, though sweet when it comes from individuals; and ministries exist precisely to discipline peoples, restrain them from tyranny, guard them against excess, and return them to the modesty, restraint, and moderation proper to them in what they do and what they say.

For all these reasons, the minister of communications announced yesterday in the Chamber of Deputies that he had delivered his speech in French at the aviation conference because French is the international language, and because it is the language the foreign delegates understand, and that he would deliver his speech at the postal conference in French as well, because it is the international language, and because it is the language the foreign delegates understand, and because the entire proceedings of that conference would be conducted in French. And the minister had a strong proof that nothing could stand against, nor could any argument rise to oppose it, a proof persuasive by its very nature, embarrassing to any opponent, and conclusive against any objection: that

the Prince of Wales in England had, at one conference or another, delivered an opening address in French. And if the heir to the entire English state, and to the entire British Empire, speaks in French at some conferences and neglects the English language entirely, then what is there to stop a minister of the Egyptian state from following his example, and treading his path, delivering his speech in French and neglecting the Arabic language entirely?! And do Egyptians presume to expect their ministers to guard their language more jealously than the Prince of Wales guards the English language?! And do Egyptians ask more of their ministers than the English ask of their heir to the throne?! And if the Egyptian ministers have found so fine a model, and so fine an example, should they go against it, or turn aside from its path?!

There is, in the Chamber of Deputies, a certain ingratitude and failure to acknowledge a kindness; for the minister promised that the invitation cards would be printed in both Arabic and French, and announced that the invitation cards for the postal conference had indeed been printed in both languages, yet the deputies did not applaud him, nor did they rise to thank him for this momentous deed; and yet the minister had raised their Arabic language to where it is printed on the invitation cards to the postal conference, and to where it stands side by side with French on a single card! But the Egyptians are a people given to injustice.

Stranger still than all this is that the men of religion, foremost among them his eminence the Grand Imam, will be privately angered at this bold neglect of the Arabic language, and this defiance of it carried out with such daring, since it is the language of upright Islam and the noble Qur'an; but I would wish the men of religion, foremost among them his eminence the Grand Imam, not to be angry, for their anger will do no good and serve no purpose on the one hand, and they have a consolation on the other, which is that most of the delegates are not Muslims; so the minister is sparing the language of Islam and the Qur'an the indignity of being spoken to foreigners of other faiths. And the upholders of tradition, and those who guard the letter of the constitution, will be angered too, since Arabic is the state's official language by the text of the constitution; but I advise them not to be angry either, for French is also an official language of the state. Is it not true that the official gazette is published in it, just as it is published in Arabic?! And it has been claimed that the new constitution itself was first drawn up in French, and only afterward translated into Arabic!

A certain former minister told me that the state found translating the constitution into Arabic a hardship and a labor; so there is, then, no formality between the language of the Nile and the language of the Seine, and no harm in the language of the Seine being the official language of conferences, with the leave of the Chamber of Deputies!

As for the minister of tradition, it is certain that he was angered on tradition's behalf, but it is also certain that his anger, like tradition's anger, was slight and mild, not enough to produce any serious rift between him and his colleague the minister of communications.

As for the good man, who knows whether he gave this matter any thought at all, or whether it never once crossed his mind?!