

Vexed ...

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The prime minister is vexed, thoroughly vexed, vexed to the point of nearly boiling into fury — but we, thank God, are not yet the object of that fury.

Or has it not already become clear that we are the object of that fury? And who will grant us the patience and endurance if the prime minister grows angry at us, or turns against us? For the prime minister is a patient man, and the anger of a patient man is a thing to be feared.

And yet he is vexed with his friend and rival, his chief and colleague — vexed with Sidqi Pasha.

People know that the current prime minister's anger at his predecessor is an old one, going back to the beginning of this year, when Sidqi Pasha struck at his two colleagues in the ministry and drove them from power outright. But that old anger was a quiet one, not alarming, a philosopher's anger that inspired no fear — the anger of one who disagreed on one side, and the anger of a wounded, indignant man on the other.

Then days passed, and after them came more days, and the two rivals met in Paris — God forgive us! — or rather, the rivals met in Paris. A blameless, honorable peace was concluded between them all: the new prime minister changed his opinion of the old one, secured the withdrawal of his resignation from the People's Party, and the waters ran clear, unclouded, flowing on unobstructed by any rock.

Then one ministry died, and the days brought forth another; Sidqi Pasha was the head of the dead ministry, and Abdel Fattah Yehia Pasha the head of the newborn one. The old rivalry between the two friends resumed — a rivalry as natural as between grave and throne, between death and life. The two chiefs quarreled: Sidqi Pasha denied that Abdel Fattah Pasha belonged to the People's Party, and Abdel Fattah Pasha denied that he had ever left it.

Much argument followed, and the matter ended, once it became clear that strength lay with life rather than death, with the throne rather

than the grave, in the People's Party and its chief Sidqi Pasha acknowledging that Abdel Fattah Yehia Pasha was a member of the party — indeed its deputy leader. But this acknowledgment did not come out with the delicacy and grace that would suit a prime minister and befit his standing; it came out with a roughness and coarseness suited to the leader of the People's Party, betraying what filled his heart: a resentful man's submission, an indignant man's surrender. For Sidqi Pasha said that the prime minister had asked him to return to the fold of the party. But the prime minister, by his own account, asked for nothing; rather, it was Sidqi Pasha who, while in Paris, asked him to withdraw his resignation, and he complied. God alone knows which of the two men was the one asking, and which the one asked.

For my part, I lean toward believing the prime minister; the rule is that heads of ministries do not ask — they command. If the prime minister had not withdrawn his resignation in Paris and wished to cancel it once he took office, he would have had no need to plead, to beg, or to ask; it would have sufficed him to issue his party chief an order canceling the resignation outright, and appointing him deputy leader of the party, or leader if he wished. But his modesty, his grace, and his courtesy kept him from wanting any such thing.

Still, there is another expression in Sidqi Pasha's statement that likely angered the prime minister more: a common figure of speech, but one unsuited to the occasion, unsuited to delicacy — the phrase "the party's pen." The pen's original meaning is well known to anyone who consults a dictionary, and however far one pushes the figurative sense, that old sense still makes itself felt. That sense does not befit heads of ministries, least of all the present prime minister, a man refined in the most exact meaning of the word. A refined man is not herded into pens; he is received in drawing rooms, sought out in offices of state, and does not mix with those herded into pens — he issues orders to those who manage the pens and what is in them.

Sidqi Pasha, then, failed to show good taste when he resorted to this sort of figure. And the prime minister is vexed by something else Sidqi Pasha said, something unbecoming to his dignity and that of his fellow ministers — and I fully side with him in that. Sidqi Pasha's judgment failed him when he touched on this delicate matter requiring alertness and careful phrasing, for he claimed that his party would support the ministry if it satisfied him on policy and competence. This wording angered the prime minister, and he has every right to be angered and to

protest; the policy of a ministry in office is its own affair, not the parties' affair — or, as the prime minister would put it, the affair of the executive power alone, and Sidqi Pasha now has no stake whatsoever in the executive power, nor does his party.

So then, what business has he with the policy? What say does he have in it?

This is an encroachment of one power upon another, and the constitution decrees the separation of powers; Montesquieu defends this separation. You may ask the prime minister: what, then, is the purpose of parliament? Why do ministries present their programs to it? Why is the speech from the throne delivered? Why do the senators and deputies debate it? The prime minister will tell you: all that is one thing, and the ministry's policy is another thing entirely. And if you wish to know what that other thing is, the prime minister will give you that famous answer: this is something neither we nor you know. As for us, it is certain that we do not know the ministry's policy, because it has not yet been published; and as for the ministers, it is certain that they do not know their own policy either, because they have not yet drawn it up — they are waiting until they finish subduing the Wafd and humbling the People's Party before they study public affairs and draw up their policy. Subduing the Wafd will be done within a week; humbling the People's Party within a day or two, if it has not already been done.

In any case, it is not for Sidqi Pasha and his men to bring up the ministry's policy, for doing so is an encroachment, and the prime minister is the last to accept an encroachment; and doing so violates the constitution, and it is strange indeed that a violation of the constitution should come from the very man who drafted the new one.

Nor did Sidqi Pasha stop his encroachment at the ministry's policy; he went on to bring up the ministers' competence, setting himself and his party up as examiners, judging the ministers competent and thus approving of them, or incompetent and thus bringing them down. This is excess that no reason sanctions, and that no philosophy, ancient or modern, endorses. Competence is a fixed attribute that does not leave those who possess it, and the prime minister alone is the judge of that competence; and since the prime minister has chosen his colleagues, they are competent — for had they not been competent, he would not, by his own account, have taken them on to assist him.

And you know that the prime minister is a man like any other before the premiership is conferred upon him; but once it is conferred, he becomes infallible, incapable of error!

It is not, then, Sidqi Pasha's place, nor his men's, to bring up the ministers' competence. Whoever doubts or denies this may ask the professors of philosophy at the Egyptian University, or at Al-Azhar, about fixed attributes — do they ever shift? — and about shifting attributes — do they ever settle? That is a branch of learning mastered only by the truly gifted, the perceptive, the deeply grounded.

The prime minister is vexed, in the end, by a third thing, or a fourth: what Sidqi Pasha said about governors working to turn People's Party men away from their party. Sidqi Pasha — so says the prime minister — has grossly distorted the government's words, for the men of the administration do nothing but enforce the law faithfully and honestly. This is a language Sidqi Pasha ought to understand perfectly well, since he is the one who set it in place: the men of the administration were enforcing the law faithfully and honestly when they committed the crimes of al-Badari, forcing Abdel Fattah Pasha to bring them up against Sidqi Pasha; they were enforcing the law faithfully and honestly, and are still enforcing it faithfully and honestly, when they turn their force and violence against the government's opponents among the opposition. So Sidqi Pasha has no cause to doubt the honesty and good faith of the men of the administration, seeing as they are his pupils, whose honesty and good faith he himself once attested.

So you see that the prime minister is vexed and up in arms, and you see that the prime minister is indignant and enraged, and if your heart is compassionate, you will join me in feeling for Sidqi Pasha, exposed to the prime minister's fury and outrage, his indignation and rage. And yet it was said that peace had been made between the two chiefs: the chief of the dead ministry, and the chief of the newborn one.

Are we to believe what was said yesterday morning, or what Al-Ahram published this morning about the prime minister? For my part, I believe both, for the two chiefs are in perfect agreement, as circumstances dictate, so long as each is a man who feels, who senses, who cares for status and power, and who refuses submission and surrender. You might ask me: how can these two great men be at once in harmony and at odds, over the same matter, at the same time — namely, power? I would answer that this is the mark of greatness: that flaws

gather in great men, and opposites reconcile within them.

And after all this, what is it to you? Why do you press this question so? Here are people offering you amusement and easing your worries, delighting you morning and evening; if you are wise, the least you can do is find it amusing, be entertained, and laugh, rather than ask about things that, once revealed, bring you nothing but trouble. So smile upon the days, for they have been smiling back at you, with a lovely mouth, ever since they brought forth for you this marvelous ministry.