

Reconciliation . . .

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 14 June 1934

Reconciliation is permissible between Muslims, except a reconciliation that makes lawful what is forbidden, or forbids what is lawful. And reconciliation is permissible between Deputies and Ministers, except a reconciliation that squanders a right belonging to the state, or burdens it with obligations beyond its capacity. There had been a dispute between certain ministers and certain Deputies, which grew heated and serious, until some quarters feared its harm, and strove to mend it, and skilled mediators worked toward this mending — men well versed in caution, and adept at guarding against the worsening of troubles in days when it is best that troubles not appear. Then God ordained that a session of reconciliation be held the day before yesterday in one of the chambers of Parliament, attended by the angry Deputies, and attended, on behalf of the Ministry, by three of its members, including the Prime Minister — who had either appointed themselves, or been appointed by their colleagues, to this arduous negotiation, or one feared to be arduous. Among these three ministers was not the Finance Minister, who is the very root of the quarrel and the one who stirred up the dispute. People were divided in interpreting his absence from this session. Some claimed that he did not attend because he cared nothing for reconciliation, gave it no thought, and made no effort toward it — indeed, that he did not even wish to listen to those who sought it. It was, they said, all the same to him whether the contented remained contented or the angry remained angry, for he was convinced that he had intended nothing but good, and had done nothing but what was right and just; and because he possessed, and still possesses, clear and conclusive proof, sufficient to silence any disputant and cut off any adversary's argument, establishing beyond doubt what he had set down in his circular — that among the members of the representative bodies were some who had benefited from an impermissible exemption, evading taxes and delaying in paying what they owed. And a man who holds such conclusive proof in his hand cares nothing for quarrel or quarrelers, nor is he troubled that his opponents band together against him, or that his adversaries press their war against him relentlessly. The Finance Minister is a man whose most distinctive traits are two. The first is that he is a man of brilliance, who cares for no one but the brilliant, and the brilliant in Egypt are few, scarcely extending beyond the Council of Ministers. So the Finance Minister cares for his fellow ministers, though in varying degrees, according to their

varying degrees of brilliance.

The second is that he is bitter as colocynth, or more bitter than colocynth, to those who cannot stomach his brilliance, cannot understand it, or cannot feel at ease with it. And he pities the common people for this brilliance and this bitterness of his, together. So if a quarrel or a dispute arises between him and them, he confronts them from a distance — not out of fear of them, but out of concern for them. It was for this reason that he confronted the stock-exchange brokers from a distance, and it was for this reason that he confronted the angry Deputies from a distance. All he grants his weaker adversaries, by way of favor, is to graciously delegate the Prime Minister, that good man, in his place, to soothe their feelings, as the common people put it, and to restore them to calm and stability, as the sophisticates put it. It was for this reason that he delegated the Prime Minister in his stead, or let the Prime Minister go on placating the brokers, just as he let him go on placating the Deputies the day before yesterday, while he himself turned to other, weightier matters, more deserving of great men's attention than placating brokers and a handful of Deputies. Other people claimed that it was the ministers themselves who refused to let their colleague, the Finance Minister, attend the sessions of reconciliation, because they know that he is always successful in what he does, but rarely successful in what he says. They feared that he might attend a session of reconciliation and utter some remark meant for good, but ending in sweeping harm. And people have not yet forgotten that the Minister of War once put on record, in the Chamber of Deputies, that he is unlucky in speech.

It was his colleagues, then, who kept him from attending the session of reconciliation held the day before yesterday, out of their own concern that this reconciliation should actually succeed, and their fear that it might turn instead into a violent quarrel. Still others claimed that the Finance Minister did not attend the session of reconciliation the day before yesterday out of fear and apprehension, since the angry Deputies wanted him to apologize, and would accept nothing less from him; and he had no wish to apologize, so he feared that if he attended the session, he might be drawn, willingly or unwillingly, into what he did not want. And the amusing thing is that his adversaries among the Deputies, when summoned to the session of reconciliation, expected to meet their adversary there; but when they did not see him, they asked after him, and pressed insistently for his presence. As for the Prime Minister, he chose silence; as for the Minister of Agriculture, he grew somewhat flustered,

and said that his colleague was occupied in the Senate; but as for the Minister of the Interior, he was too eloquent to remain silent, too composed to be flustered, and too clever to trouble himself with an answer. And so he replied to the questioners that it was the Prime Minister who had called for this reconciliation in the first place; then he rose still further in his reply, and turned questioner himself after having been questioned, saying: would it not satisfy you that the Prime Minister himself should be judge in this dispute? And which of the Deputies could say that a government headed by the Prime Minister would not give satisfaction?

And so the Prime Minister found himself scorched by the heat of this war, though he had neither started it nor invited it. And the Finance Minister remained far from the field, watching, listening, smiling, and reciting the words of the old poet:

*Battalion after battalion I put on like armor,
until, when they grew entangled, I shook them from my hands.*

Yet the war was never fierce or violent, for there is a blessing in the Prime Minister's speech, and a sweetness in the Prime Minister's voice, that restores hearts to their clarity, and souls to their purity. No sooner had the Prime Minister addressed the Deputies with a single one of his soothing words than he achieved all the satisfaction he sought. And so reconciliation was reached — but between whom? This is the question that must be answered. Reconciliation was reached between the Deputies and the Prime Minister, but they were never adversaries to begin with; the actual dispute was between the Deputies and the Finance Minister. So was reconciliation reached between them and him? And which of the two sides backed down from its position and apologized to the other? Did the Finance Minister withdraw his circular from the provincial directors, the district officers, and the headmen? Did the Finance Minister acknowledge that there were no overdue taxes among a group of members of the representative bodies? Did the Finance Minister change his instructions to the directors, officers, and headmen, ordering them to collect taxes from all Egyptians on a footing of equality, to seize the assets of all tax evaders without distinction between Deputies and non-Deputies, and to refer the matter of all embezzlers to the Public Prosecution without distinction between Deputies and non-Deputies? Certainly not. As far as we know, the Finance Minister withdrew no circular; as far as we know, the Finance Minister changed not one of

these orders. And the Finance Minister is too brilliant, too clever, and too close to heroism, to be defeated in this stance, or to change an opinion he does not doubt is correct. So then — between whom was this reconciliation reached? And on what basis was it established?

Do not believe what is being rumored, and broadcast, and filling every ear — that the anger of the angry was never over this circular, but over another, secret one. The anger was indeed over this very circular; and when news of the secret instructions was made public, the anger only intensified, until it boiled in the breasts of the angry. It may well be that the Finance Minister issued no secret circular other than the one Al-Ahram published and over which the angry grew angry; but it is certain that this circular, issued by the Finance Minister, did reach the directors, and that instructions were issued for its execution to the officers, and then to the headmen. And whoever told the Prime Minister that he had seen, in the register of some headman, a telephoned instruction touching this matter, was not mistaken. And so the brilliant, heroic Finance Minister remains fixed in his place, unmoving, firm in his position, unchanging — proclaiming to all people that there are sums owed to the state that have fallen overdue among a group of members of the representative bodies, and that these sums must be collected, even should that require seizure, and referral of the matter to the Public Prosecution. So then — between whom was this reconciliation reached? And on what basis was it established? It was between the Deputies and the Prime Minister, who were never adversaries in the first place. Or say, if you prefer, that there was no reconciliation at all, but only a settlement — an assistance in swallowing the cup, and an acceptance, by the angry, of this bitter cup that Sabri Bey had offered them. And what shame is there in their drinking a bitter cup? Does its bitterness not come precisely from the fact that the draught it contains is right, and justice, and equality? We think the Finance Minister did not enter into this forbidden reconciliation, which squanders a right belonging to the state or burdens it with what it cannot bear; but this changes nothing of a truly painful situation — namely, that a minister who wished to enforce the law found himself risen against, banded together against, by upward of thirty of the law's own guardians.

And we think that the Finance Minister, the Prime Minister, and all those concerned that Egypt should be a civilized country, of good reputation and pure character, will agree with us that this is excessive indeed.

Taha Hussein

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