

Protection (2)

Taha Hussein

Kawkab al-Sharq, 8 February 1934

We return today to this title, and to the subject we discussed yesterday, for it appears that this subject deserves to have the discussion of it continue; it is not so slight, so easy, or so trivial a matter that it ought to pass as other subjects the newspapers take up pass, only for the wind to carry them away as soon as the sun rises or evening falls.

This subject carries its great weight from several different angles: it is weighty because the Corniche story itself is weighty; because the money spent on it is considerable, nearly half a million pounds; because people have taken the greatest care over this enormous sum of Alexandria's money, and have been most anxious to know on what it was spent, how it was spent, and what benefit Alexandria gained from its spending; and because the present ministry has taken pains to show its concern for this matter, and earnestness in uncovering the truth of it, forming the committee it formed, and setting its members aside from their daily work — connected to their positions and to their private interests as well — to study and investigate this matter; and none of this happens unless the subject under investigation is truly weighty, deserving of this great attention from people, deserving that the ministry should depart, for its sake, from the patience, calm, and settled stillness resembling sleep that it has grown accustomed to.

The story of the Corniche was stirred up with an unaccustomed intensity, thrown before people as a boulder is thrown from a high, towering place, so that its impact made a violent clamor, drawing every person's attention, loosening every tongue, and occupying every conscience. And so long as this is the case, it appears there is no escaping that the investigation into this Corniche story must be carried through to the furthest point it ought to reach.

There is another aspect that makes this subject one of great weight, with far-reaching consequences for the life of the Egyptians: it is, in truth, a difficult trial of our political character, our understanding of democracy, our readiness to bear it, and to bear the burdens it charges us to take up. For democracy is not a matter of forms and appearances; democracy is one of the realities, with no substance, no stability, no

steadiness, and no worth, unless it rests upon upright character, strong dispositions, living consciences, and souls sincere in their love of it, and in their readiness to sacrifice everything for its sake.

The clearest mark of true democracy among living peoples is precisely its reverence for equality, its concern to uphold it, and its taking equality as the foundation of the ties between individuals and groups, and between the people and the government. If some people are set apart from others in matters touching justice and right, or if some people are given precedence over others in matters touching justice and right, then there is no equality, no democracy, no justice, and no right; there is only a politics built on monopoly, on a class system, or on something worse than a class system — built on this detestable order that favors one individual over a whole nation, that makes the law a just rule as measured against everyone, except this individual or that, whom it singles out, favors, and raises above the law.

All of this is an evil that does not suit the democratic order, nor the character of a democratic people, nor the life of a people meant to be raised in democratic discipline. The national duty upon every individual among the people, upon educated individuals especially, and most particularly upon those entrusted with leading the people, is to resist this corruption with all the strength and effort at their disposal, and to make sacrifices for its sake, even sacrifices the soul does not willingly make except with hardship and difficulty.

Nothing in democracy is felt more keenly than these matters that touch equality among individuals on the one hand, and that touch the collection, management, and spending of public funds on the other. For every country that cares for democratic life cares, by its very nature, for equality, and cares, by its very nature, for integrity, and for cleanliness of hand, heart, and conscience in everything that touches the people's money.

This is why we said, and still say, that the Corniche story stirred up these days is a precise and difficult trial of the democratic order in Egypt, and of the measure of official Egypt's feeling for the love of democracy, its reverence for it, and its sincerity in protecting it. For the Corniche story touches public funds, and the investigation into it is a test of equality. This investigation must end by bringing everything to light. And let all Egyptians know, and let the foreigners who watch Egyptian affairs know, that the Egyptian state is sincere in protecting Egyptian funds, and

sincere in achieving equality among Egyptians.

We noted yesterday that Sidqi Pasha was not questioned, and has not been questioned before the investigation committee, because it emerged — whether at the end or at the start, we do not know, or do not wish to know — that this committee cannot summon Sidqi Pasha, nor question him, because Sidqi Pasha was a minister, and ministers are questioned only before parliament. If this is true, and the investigation concludes without Sidqi Pasha being questioned in any respect, then a pillar of great weight among the pillars of democracy will have collapsed, and official Egypt will have put on record the collapse of this pillar — the pillar of equality. For there is no difference between Sidqi Pasha and the others who were questioned about the Corniche story before the investigation committee, except that Sidqi Pasha was a minister; and under no circumstances ought a ministerial post to serve as a fortress protecting Sidqi Pasha from being questioned about what he did, so that his answer might be heard, and judgment rendered for him or against him. A ministerial post is not a privilege; it is a service to the state, for which its holder draws a wage, and he must therefore render an account of his conduct in it, should the need arise to render that account.

The sole obstacle standing in the way of questioning Sidqi Pasha is that he was a minister, and that ministers are questioned only before parliament; there must then be some means found to remove this obstacle standing in the way of equality, and some means found for Sidqi Pasha to hear whatever question ought to be put to him, and for Sidqi Pasha to give whatever answer he has. And we do not think Sidqi Pasha himself would resent this or find it irksome; for Sidqi Pasha has already held forth and ranged freely, has spoken to the newspapers about the Corniche story, has written statements for them, and has defended himself before anyone attacked him. And whoever has done all this is assured and confident, resenting no question, hesitating neither to answer when called, nor to reply when a question is put to him.

From here we can lend our modest effort toward finding the means of removing this obstacle, for there are two paths, among the easiest things, by which this end might be reached. The first: Sidqi Pasha himself can achieve it, by going to the committee without being summoned, and offering it the statement he has, even without being asked. For it would be fitting that Sidqi Pasha hold himself in higher regard, love democracy more, and care more for the public interest than to prefer silence and stillness; since no one has summoned him, and no one has questioned

him, yet he is the one who spoke to the newspapers, with no one compelling him to speak — so let him speak to the committee without anyone compelling him to speak.

There is no doubt that Sidqi Pasha's statement to the committee would benefit and assist it; for Sidqi Pasha was minister of the interior, and Sidqi Pasha approved whatever he approved in the Corniche story, approving it hastily and without delay, and he has, in that, a view, a rationale, and explanations which it would be well for the committee to hear, so that it might base its judgment on sound ground. But if Sidqi Pasha should prefer ease, and choose to remain silent and still — and this is naturally his right — then we think the second path becomes unavoidable, and is then imposed upon the good man and the good man's ministry. This second path is that Sidqi Pasha be questioned before parliament, and the constitution has already set out how ministers are to be questioned and investigated.

We know that the law regulating this has not yet been issued. But the law's not having been issued neither annuls parliament's right, nor suspends its duty, nor exempts ministers from bearing the consequences of their acts. Parliament is able, within the bounds of the constitution, to form the parliamentary committee the constitution provides for, and this committee may regulate its own work and procedures for itself so long as the law has not been issued, and this committee may question Sidqi Pasha and hear him, and ascertain the truth of his stance regarding the Corniche story. And should this committee be formed and question Sidqi Pasha, it would protect equality, and prove that the constitution draws no distinction between ministers and non-ministers in bearing the consequences of their acts, and prove that the people's money has guardians who safeguard it, defend it, inquire into what has been lost of it, show people how it was lost, and call to account those who lost it.

By one or the other of these two paths, all Egyptians will know, and the foreigners who watch Egypt will know, that Egypt is a free, democratic country, in which no one is singled out for protection, whatever form it takes, and no one stands too high to render an account for what he has done. Let Sidqi Pasha choose, and let the prime minister choose, and let us wait to see whether Sidqi Pasha will go to the present committee, or whether Sidqi Pasha will be summoned before the committee parliament is to form.