

# EGYPT AT THE CROSS ROADS

By J. CROSSLEY

**A**N extraordinary situation prevails at the moment in Egypt, and there is every evidence that the country is faced with a political crisis of such a magnitude as will have far-reaching consequences throughout Egypt and the whole of the Near East. The position is one which is also causing a great deal of embarrassment to the British Residency and will raise many knotty problems for the newly-appointed British Resident Governor, Sir George Lloyd. In his efforts to steer a middle course between the reactionary unconstitutional policy of the British bayonet-supported Cabinet of Ziwar Pasha, and the rising tide of Nationalism, which is once again throwing into high relief the strange dominant personality of Saad Zagloul Pasha, Sir George Lloyd will find himself in a more difficult position than that which at any time confronted his predecessor, Lord Allenby, during his term of office. The anomaly with which he is faced is that the Residency has undoubtedly connived behind the scenes at the wrecking of the Constitution which was wrung from the British Government in 1922, and has openly identified itself with the Ziwar Ministry which was appointed by King Fuad after the events of last year arising out of the assassination of Sir Lee Stack, the Sirdar of Egypt and Governor of the Sudan.

In order better to understand what is taking place in Egypt to-day it is necessary to review briefly the circumstances which have led up to the present political crisis.

It was in 1922 that, after a long series of negotiations and much haggling, following on the report of the Milner Commission of Enquiry, which was sent out by the British Government to Egypt for the purpose of preparing the ground for the granting of the long promised independence and constitution, and after the famous visit of Zagloul Pasha to Britain and France at the head of the delegation of the Wafd, that the then Coalition Government decided there was no other way out of their difficulties save by the

restoration of the independence of Egypt and the granting of a constitution to the country.

Accordingly this was nominally done, but the promise of sovereignty was belied by the provision for the maintenance of British armed forces in Egypt, while several other important questions were left in abeyance for future settlement. The main questions so left were—

(1) The future control of the Suez Canal.

(2) The question of the future control of the Sudan, which at that time was under a joint Anglo-Egyptian control (Egypt finding most of the money for development and maintaining an army in the Sudan, and Britain doing most of the "controlling," mainly in the interests of the Cotton Syndicates).

(3) The question of the future status of British officials and functionaries resident in Egypt and the Sudan, who monopolised practically the whole of the important posts in the various departments.

These questions were left to be settled in future negotiations, but it can safely be said that Britain never entertained the slightest idea of relinquishing her right to her hold on the Suez Canal, the extension of her influence in the Sudan, or the exaction of the maximum amount of compensation for displaced British officials.

In the elections which took place immediately following the granting of the Constitution, Zagloul Pasha was returned at the head of the Government with an overwhelming majority of votes, and was appointed Premier. His term of office was characterised by a vacillating policy on the question of negotiations with Britain on the outstanding questions to be settled. Also he pursued a policy, evidently with an eye to currying favour with Britain, of persecution of the workers' movement. His savage repression of the Alexandria strikes and his prosecution and imprisonment of the leaders, including many members of the Communist Party of Egypt, a number of whom are still lying in Egyptian gaols; his forcible breaking up of the splendid Confederation of Labour, the confiscation of its funds and closing of its premises followed by the creation of an "official" Confederation of Labour as a wing of the Wafd with a criminal embezzler of State funds at its head, as Secretary, who was brought out of prison for this purpose; these acts mark Zagloul as a retrograde of the worst type and aroused deep resentment amongst the town workers.

At the height of his popularity, disintegration began to take place in the Wafd amongst the followers of Zagloul. Under the leadership of Hafiz Bey Ramadan a section of the extreme Nationalists who were disgusted with Zagloul's temporising policy with Britain, and who maintained an attitude of no compromise, split away and formed the Hisb-el-Watani Party. In the opposite direction those sections of the rising bourgeoisie who found that their interests were more bound up with the progress and development of British and foreign capital, and who were terrified at the thought of the Nationalist movement swinging more and more to the left, broke away and formed the Liberal Constitutionalist and Unionist parties.

Round the outstanding questions a storm of controversy arose, and Cairo, Alexandria and the other main towns of Egypt were a seething mass of political excitement. The immense student population at the secondary schools and colleges of Cairo were in a constant state of excitement, and school strikes and demonstrations were of almost daily recurrence.

During this time Britain was demonstrating her intention not to allow the control of the Suez Canal to go out of her grasp, and it was during the period of Zagloul's Ministry that the great Air Base was constructed at Ismalia on the Suez. Great excitement prevailed also in the Sudan and culminated in a rebellion of the Egyptian forces, which was suppressed with the utmost rigour by the British army, augmented by hastily summoned troops from India.

The climax was reached by the assassination of Sir Lee Stack in the streets of Cairo in November, 1924. Seizing with avidity on this unfortunate incident, Lord Allenby immediately presented the Egyptian Government with an infamous ultimatum which demanded an official apology from the Government, an indemnity of £500,000, prohibition of all political demonstrations, speedy arrest and punishment of the criminals, increase to the Sudanese Government of powers of irrigation beyond the area of 300,000 feddans previously agreed upon, withdrawal of all Egyptian troops from the Sudan, and unconditional withdrawal of opposition to the claims of British officials, residents and functionaries.

To the first four points, namely—the Apology, Indemnity, Prohibition of Political Demonstrations, Arrest and Punishment of the Criminals, Zagloul and his Government agreed under protest. On the remaining points of the Ultimatum, namely—the extension of the area of irrigation in the Sudan, the withdrawal of Egyptian troops, and the withdrawal of opposition to the claims of British residents, Zagloul refused to accept the terms of the Ultimatum, and gave a blank refusal.

On this intimation being conveyed to Lord Allenby, he immediately ordered the seizure of the Customs at Alexandria and Port Said, forcibly disbanded the Egyptian army in the Sudan, and placed the whole of Egypt under martial law. Thus, at one stroke, Britain, through the agency of its devoted henchman, was able to annex the coveted prize of the Sudan in the interests of the cotton-growing associations which have been steadily building up their prestige, and feverishly commenced the scheme of gigantic barrages on the upper reaches of the Nile in the Sudan, which when ultimately completed will give the control of this mighty river, the life blood of Egypt's teeming population, into the hands of the Sudanese Government and place the whole of Egypt at the mercy and caprice of Great Britain as the dominating power.

Zagloul and his Ministry immediately resigned, and under pressure on the Court by the Residency, King Fuad selected a reactionary Ministry with Ziwar Pasha, leader of the Ittahadists, or Unionist Party, at its head.

Under this most reactionary Ministry, with its slavish subservience to the Court and to the British occupation, every vestige of liberty and every remaining scrap of the constitution was ruthlessly destroyed. Workers' organisations were terrorised into impotence, and by an extensive and elaborate system of spying all known workers of radical tendencies were persecuted. On June 5 of this year the Government suppressed the only workers' paper, *Al-Hisab*, and its editor, Mr. Jaboux, along with twelve others was arrested on the charge of being engaged in Communist activities. Amongst those arrested was Miss Charlotte Rosenthal, daughter of Mr. Rosenthal, the jeweller, of Alexandria, who was deported during Zagloul's administration, but was afterwards repatriated, mainly thanks to the efforts of prominent members of the British

Labour movement and of the *Daily Herald*. *All these comrades are still in prison without trial.*

During this period the power and popularity of Zaghloul grew tremendously, and at last so great became the demand for a restoration of Parliament that the Ministry was obliged to yield. In the elections to the Parliament which ultimately took place in April of this year, every artifice of coercion was used by the Ministry in its efforts to secure the defeat of Zaghloul. All but *official* or Ministerial supporters were refused the right of meetings, and elector-delegates known to belong to the Wafd were, in scores of cases, confined to their houses for weeks under penalty of imprisonment. In spite of everything, however, the Wafd secured a majority of votes over all the other combined parties. The Hisb-el-Watani (Extreme Nationalists), in their hatred of Zaghloul, sided with the Ministerialists, and in the process were hopelessly snowed under, and succeeded in returning only six members. When the Parliament assembled the Chamber voted Zaghloul as President and another member of the Wafd as Vice-President. Ziwar Pasha, the Premier, immediately left the chamber, sought an audience with King Fuad, who only four hours earlier had officially opened the Parliament, laid his resignation before him, which the king refused to accept, and returned to the chamber with the king's authority to dissolve it. Thus, after only 12 hours' duration, Egypt was once more without a parliament, and once more unbridled reaction was placed in the saddle. It seems pretty clear what the rôle of the Court was during this period. Under the guidance of his clever adviser, Nashaat Pasha, King Fuad has evidently been playing to bring the Constitution into ridicule and impotence so that the excuse may be afforded ultimately for the destruction of the Constitution and the establishment of an absolute monarchy on the old Eastern pattern. Having temporarily triumphed over the Nationalist forces of the Wafd by the dissolution of the Parliament, Ziwar and his Ministry found that all was not smooth sailing, for a struggle developed between the Ministry and the Court. This came to a head during Ziwar's visit to London in September and October, when, during his absence, a ministerial crisis was caused by the resignation of Sidky Pasha and others of the Ministry. A hasty reshuffling of the Ministry took place, and

Ziwar cabled instructions to the effect that the portfolio for the Ministry of the Interior be left open for himself.

The news of the split was the signal for wild jubilation amongst the Nationalist and other enemies of Ziwar, and all the old elements of popular political enthusiasm were revived, street demonstrations, by students and others, school strikes, and great agitation in the Press. One significant feature of this revival is the re-union which has taken place between the forces of the Wafd and of the Hisb-el-Watani.

It is here very important to note that the great revival of Nationalism is assuming a very much deeper and wider significance than has characterised the Nationalist movement in the past. Throughout the Arabic Press of Cairo and Alexandria there has been for the last nine months or so a tremendous interest taken in the Nationalist struggles of Abdel Krim in Morocco, and much of the money needed by Abdel Krim to conduct his heroic campaign against predatory French imperialism has undoubtedly been raised by appeals throughout Egypt and the other Near Eastern countries. The Arab demonstrations against the Balfour declaration establishing Palestine as a Jewish National Home, the struggles of the Arabs in Hedjaz, Iraq, and now the revolt against French imperialism in Syria by the Druses and other sections of the Arab communities, all these things are having their repercussion in Egypt, and are symptomatic of the revival of a great Pan-Islamic movement which, however vague at the present moment, will undoubtedly take shape and direction during the coming months.

It is with such a background therefore that the aged Zagloul Pasha once more steps on the stage. After being refused the demand for the reassembly of the old Parliament in the House of Representatives, a meeting of Members of Parliament was called to take place at the Continental Savoy Hotel, Cairo. In spite of the fact that the Ministry of the Interior prohibited the meeting, and deployed forces of soldiers round the building, the assembly was held and attended by upwards of 130 deputies. A resolution was formulated for presentation to the king demanding the restoration of the Constitution, and this was carried with wild enthusiasm.

The newspaper, *El-Ahram*, in the course of an article entitled " Let us all Unite for Independence," states :

We must not forget that we have always been working for independence and that the Constitution will never be well safeguarded as long as England rules in Egypt. Egypt has been deprived of enjoying the Constitutional regime by the English ; the first Egyptian Parliament of 1881 could not live under pressure, and the new Parliament was dissolved twice under the effect of British policy. . . . Let the new agreement of parties be the first step towards a better understanding. Let us all make efforts, with good faith, for the attainment of a genuine independence which should have no relation whatever with the Milner independence or the independence of 1922. We must know how to call things by their right names.

Zagloul Pasha is also reported to have stated that the present situation will lead to revolution unless the Ministry permits the restoration of the Constitution. In any fresh election it is almost a certainty that Zagloul would be returned at the head of a government by an overwhelming majority. Now, therefore, Egypt stands once again at the cross-roads, and the path she takes will have an enormous influence on the whole of the Near Eastern situation. The question is being asked by all thoughtful working-class students of Eastern problems : will Zagloul in his coming hour of triumph use the golden opportunity thus placed in his hands to atone for his unenviable reputation as an autocrat by restoring to the workers the right of full liberty of speech and press and the right of Trade Union and working-class political combination ? Will he lift Nationalist politics out of the morass of personal intrigue and egotism and, together with the best elements of the radical nationalist movements, adopt a policy of abolition of all the terrible crying evils of poverty and sweating under which the whole of the great masses of Egyptian workmen and fellaheen are staggering ? Or, on the other hand, will he once more resume his previous policy of repression of all those elements which dare to overstep the extremely narrow bounds of the limited nationalism which has previously characterised the Wafd ?

Egypt is entering upon troubled seas. A great Nationalist Party with a great Nationalist leader is her need at the moment. The slogan of this party should be " All power to the federated free Arab republics of the Near East." Will Saad Zagloul Pasha fill this rôle ? We hope but doubt.