

The Many-Headed Ministry

By Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

It was our brilliant, astonishing government — a marvel of its kind. Until yesterday, it possessed three heads. Then the Security Council removed one, appointing it to the International Court of Justice. Thus our ministry, which had been three-headed, returned to having only two. Whether it remains so, or grows a third in place of the one dispatched to The Hague, will depend on the fate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs — if it is allowed to remain, to be reshuffled, and to receive a new minister.

Readers will, of course, remember that strange creature of legend which bore seven heads, and whenever an enemy cut one off, another immediately sprouted in its place — until a foe wiser than the rest discovered its fatal secret and destroyed it. Our ministry might have resembled that creature, for it could have had as many heads as there are ministers; yet only three managed to raise themselves to the level of “heads,” while the rest, whether through modesty or inertia, were content merely to serve as limbs, each busying itself with some department of the nation that counts itself fortunate under this “happy” regime.

The three heads are well known. One is, naturally, the **Prime Minister**. The word *ra'īs* — “chief” or “president” — is derived from *ra's*, “head”; he is therefore, by nature, a head. And like other heads of Egyptian ministries, he functions both as head and as hand — a head when he sits at the Council of Ministers, a hand when he occupies his office at the Ministry of the Interior. One might say he is ambidextrous: a right hand when he goes to the Interior, a left when he acts as substitute Foreign Minister during absences in London. And for a time, when the Minister of Knowledge and Enlightenment travelled to Sudan, he was even a *third* hand, poised somewhere between right and left.

The **second head** of this government was the one detached from its shoulders yesterday and seated instead upon a chair in the Court of Justice. What a head it was — held high across three continents: in Africa, where he worked from his Cairo office; in America, where he led our delegation to San Francisco; and in Europe, where he presided over our mission in London. He nearly became a head in a fourth continent, too, when he performed the pilgrimage to Mecca — had not the Minister of Health been appointed Prince of the Pilgrimage, borrowing for a time one of the ministry's hands and transforming it into yet another head.

Be that as it may, our Foreign Minister was a true head — of great consequence, and the vessel of many hopes: Egypt's hopes first, the Arab nations' next, and those of the Islamic world beyond. It was he, not Turkey or Iran, who won election to the Security Council. And he fulfilled these hopes with admirable perfection — as well he should, for he was a profound jurist, a capable judge, and an accomplished statesman. For that very reason, he entered houses by their doors, never by their back entrances. He could open doors deftly — and close them just as skillfully. Indeed, he shut the doors of the Security Council in the face of Egypt and her Arab sisters.

Egypt accepted his verdict, bowed to his judgment, and stood before that closed door, gazing at it in helpless submission — raising her head to defy it, then lowering it again in despair. One might say she raised one head and lowered another, for she possessed two at the time: one in the premiership, the other in the opposition bloc. When one rose at the home of

Makram Pasha, the other fell at the Council of Ministers — and the Egyptian people stood watching in amazement at these twin heads, never seeing one lifted without the other lowered.

What matters most is that the third head of our ministry managed to bolt shut the doors of the Security Council — and did so thoroughly. For Egypt and the Arab nations, we were told, are too insignificant to threaten the peace; hence their affairs are not the Council's concern. They are not suffering from consequences of war, but from lingering chronic ailments that predate it — and thus will not be discussed. One head of our ministry filled the air with protest and lament over the closing of the doors; another filled it with praise and thanksgiving for the same act. So the two heads quarreled, though they shared one body. The limbs of that body obeyed one head at times — crying and wailing — and the other at others — blessing and thanking. Meanwhile, the other Arab nations shrugged, lifted their shoulders, turned away from Egypt's three-headed government, broke the locks, and entered the Council chamber themselves — first with the cases of Syria and Lebanon, and soon with the question of Palestine. Thus they proved the solidarity of the Arab League, showing that Egypt represented them well in the Security Council, and that affairs on this stretch of the Mediterranean proceed, indeed, as well as they ever do.

In any case, we have now seen two of our government's prominent heads at work — both performing admirably and speaking eloquently. One fills Egypt with firmness, resolve, peace, and security: he declares in the Senate that he preserves order — and indeed, he preserves it so well that, at that very hour, a gang of bandits near Cairo attacked a train, wounded the postal guards, tied them up, stole what they could, and escaped untouched. For this was the same hour when our first head filled Egypt with firmness and calm!

The **second head**, we know, spoke and acted splendidly in London. He brought Egypt honor among the nations, for she was elected to the Security Council; but he weakened Arab solidarity, for he went one way and the Arab world another. The entire world admired his talent and rewarded it — electing him judge at the Court of Justice.

As for the **third head**, he is a marvel indeed. His specialty is to disturb the other two, and all the members of the ministry besides. He cries out when no cry is needed, then, having disturbed his colleagues' days and robbed them of their sleep, he suddenly falls silent, as though he had never stirred. His sole concern is to make a clamor, not to achieve results: he advances only to retreat, attacks only to surrender, protests only to yield. His aim is not action, but agitation — to unsettle, to exhaust, to worry. He is a restless head, incapable of rest and unwilling to let others rest.

Each day brings him a new resignation, and each day, a retraction of it. Once, when the first head was indisposed and the second away in London, he spoke in their name — or rather, usurped their place entirely. Whether the other two approved of what he said freely or under duress, I do not know. The absent head neither approved nor objected, for he heard nothing. The present head, I imagine, would have preferred silence, as is his habit, but was pressed by cunning senators into speaking, and could only affirm: *Yes, I agree*. What else could he say? Could he deny that he demanded complete evacuation of British forces by land, sea, and air? Could he deny that he refused any referendum on Sudan's future?

Makram Pasha's head bound the government to those positions with iron cords: total evacuation, no referendum — under any conditions. Could the Prime Minister deny them? He could not. Thus Makram's head triumphed gloriously over the other two in the Senate.

And yet, the Egyptian memorandum declared that our government wished to negotiate the Sudan question “in the light of Sudanese aspirations.” From whom, then, would these aspirations be “sought”? From the Sudanese themselves — that would be a referendum, which Makram rejected. Or from others — in which case, nothing would be sought at all. Hence, the ship steered by two captains must surely sink, and the body bearing three heads can live only in the realm of fable and wonder. And Egypt, since time immemorial, has belonged to that realm.

But our modern Egyptian marvel — this splendid three-headed ministry — possesses another curiosity besides its triple heads: something else, whose proper place I cannot quite determine. Should I call it a *tail*? Then ours is a guilty ministry. Or an *excellent nose*? Then it is a ministry distinguished by its nose. As our ancient poet said:

“They are the nose — all others mere tails;
who dares compare a camel's nose with its tail?”

Where, then, would the political establishment place itself on this strange body? It wishes, of course, to be the nose — and I cannot blame it, though Parliament and the Constitution may not approve. The ministry, on the other hand, would rather make it the tail, though this may wound its dignity. Perhaps the best solution is for it to be the nose when matters grow grave, and the tail when the wind blows fair.

One thing is beyond doubt: **Sidqi Pasha is angry**. He wanted the political establishment to be the nose, as it was in September and December. But the ministry has made it the tail, having received the British reply yet offered no meeting since — for reasons, as Sidqi Pasha tells *al-Ahrām*, “incomprehensible.” His anger can be frightening, though not always. He is angry not only on behalf of the political establishment, but also of Parliament, whose discussion of the negotiations has been postponed. He is angry, too, at the government for accepting “talks,” when in his view only full “negotiations” are acceptable.

The perceptive reader will understand: *negotiations* mean delegations sent to London — where Sidqi Pasha could join, and the political establishment could be the nose. *Talks*, on the other hand, are something the ministry handles alone, with Sidqi excluded — the establishment reduced to a tail. Hence his anger.

The great question now is: Will the government fear Sidqi Pasha's wrath, appease him, and offend the British by rejecting talks? Or will it mock his anger this time, offend him, and please the British by accepting them?

There is, I think, an ingenious solution — one that would satisfy everyone. Yesterday, the Security Council severed one of the ministry's heads. What harm, then, in cutting off its tail, if the political establishment be that tail? Many ministries have lived without tails. Or, if it be the nose, what harm in trimming it off? Many ministries have lived noseless.

Everything is possible. Our ministry survived with three heads; it lives now with two. Why should it not live without a tail? Or without a nose? Indeed, why not without either? Better

still — why not with *many* heads? That would be easy enough: a cabinet reshuffle is said to be near. Let every member of the political establishment become a minister. Then our government will have twenty heads instead of two — and that would surely make the Egyptian people laugh. And how very much the Egyptian people need to laugh in these days!

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