

Riddle

Its solution lies with two men: the “Prime Minister” and the “Minister of the Interior.” Every tongue insists that a third man, one of the highest officials, may also share with these two powerful ministers the ability to solve the riddle, but people refuse to name him openly and refer to him only by hints and insinuations. As for us, we seek the answer only from those officially capable of giving it—that is, the “Prime Minister” and the “Minister of the Interior.”

This riddle surrounds His Excellency Ahmad Kamel Bey, Director of Public Security. The man rose to protect public security in a manner unmatched by anyone before him except the Minister of the Interior himself when he once held the same office. The result of Ahmad Kamel Bey’s astonishing competence was that crimes steadily diminished, then diminished further, until they disappeared altogether.

Days, weeks, and months passed without a single crime occurring on Egyptian soil, until people themselves began to feel uneasy. Some sociologists maintain that crime is a natural social phenomenon that no organized society can or should entirely escape. Thus when people saw Egypt apparently cured of criminals and criminality, they became frightened and began to suspect that society itself was somehow unhealthy because it no longer performed its “natural” social functions.

But the Ministry understood politics and sociology better than ordinary people. It praised the Director of Public Security for his brilliance and efficiency because he had preserved lives, protected honor and property, and enabled the government to boast proudly that it had achieved what no ministry anywhere on earth had achieved before: the complete eradication of crime.

Accordingly the government recognized the Director’s merits and recorded his achievements, though it found itself unable to reward him adequately. It therefore hinted at its gratitude in modest fashion by granting him an additional annual allowance of three hundred pounds.

Yet while people reproached the Ministry for failing to reward this extraordinarily capable official sufficiently, the Cabinet held its first meeting after the return of the great Prime Minister. It met not in a government building nor on a working day, but in the private residence of the Minister of the Interior on a day of rest.

And there it adopted a decision whose effect upon Egyptians resembled the explosion that recently terrified the People’s Club and the newspaper *Al-Shaab*, unsettling the police the previous evening.

The decision removed the Director of Public Security from his post and seconded him instead to work within the Cabinet itself.

Once tempers cooled and hearts settled, people wandered through countless interpretations of this serious decision, which remains hidden behind secrecy and forbidden knowledge.

Some interpreters claimed that the origin of this decision lay in the theories of sociologists such as Émile Durkheim, who argued that crime is a natural phenomenon in social life just as illness is natural in healthy bodies.

Just as people must sometimes fall ill so that physicians may practice medicine, pharmacists may live from their trade, medical schools may function, professors may teach, laboratories may be built, nurses employed, and industries thrive producing medicines—so too, these theorists argued, society must contain crime in order for public security departments to exist, for directors and inspectors to rise through the ranks, for prosecutors, judges, lawyers, and clerks to work, for newspapers to publish stories, and for ministers to display their effectiveness in preserving order.

But the Director of Public Security had abolished crime so completely that he seemed almost to prove—God forgive us! indeed, he truly proved—that certain offices and perhaps entire branches of government had become unnecessary.

Thus the Cabinet faced a dilemma: should it continue along with the Director of Public Security until the security department itself, perhaps even the police, prosecutors, and courts, became redundant? Or should it remove him from his post so that Egyptian life might return to its previous condition?

The Cabinet, full of mercy toward Egyptians and compassion for all those officials who live through and from public security, chose the latter course and transferred—or more precisely seconded—the Director elsewhere.

Others proposed a different explanation. They argued that the government had merely obeyed the old proverb: “Begin with yourself and those dependent upon you.” The Ministry, they said, naturally chose to think first of itself before thinking of the people.

The government observed that the Director of Public Security had reformed his department with unmatched success and maintained security with unparalleled efficiency. Other ministries and

departments therefore became jealous of Public Security and the Ministry of the Interior.

Every department wanted Ahmad Kamel Bey to supervise its affairs. Every ministry wished him to pass through it and reform its administration. Conflicts multiplied among ministries competing for his services.

The Cabinet therefore decided to act fairly and satisfy these demands by beginning with the most important institution of all: the Cabinet itself. Ahmad Kamel Bey was thus seconded to work directly in the Council of Ministers. Once he successfully reformed this supreme institution as he had reformed Public Security, he could then be transferred from ministry to ministry until the entire machinery of government had been thoroughly repaired.

Supporters of this interpretation added: have you not heard what newspapers report—that the Prime Minister, or at least the Cabinet, intends to promote the Director of Public Security to a higher rank after increasing his salary, so that he will become an Undersecretary rather than merely a Director■General?

This promotion, they said, was merely preparation. Once the great reformer entered the ministries as an Undersecretary, he would possess authority over all their departments collectively rather than piecemeal, thereby speeding reform and saving time.

Others dismissed all this as wild speculation and insisted upon a simpler explanation. The government itself—or at least its unofficial spokesmen—had repeatedly declared that the Prime Minister was exhausted and in need of care, rest, and relief from strain.

He therefore required a trusted and competent man beside him within the Cabinet to ease his burdens and present difficult matters gently and efficiently. The Prime Minister trusted the Director of Public Security both because of his competence and because of their personal relationship.

There is nothing blameworthy, they argued, in the Prime Minister reserving such rare administrative talent for himself, since the welfare of all Egypt depends upon the Prime Minister's health and the smooth operation of the Cabinet.

Still others mocked all these elaborate interpretations and urged people to adopt the simplest explanation of all. Perhaps the Minister of the Interior had simply become dissatisfied with the Director

of Public Security.

The Minister himself possesses distinguished expertise in matters of security, just as the Director does, and Egyptians have a proverb that a ship sinks when two captains command it. Thus the Minister of the Interior, despite his illness, preferred that control of public security remain in his own hands and therefore requested that the Director be transferred to Cabinet work.

Who knows? Perhaps the recent allowance granted to the Director had merely prepared the way for this secondment, and perhaps the rumored future promotion will merely crown it.

The serious-minded observers concluded differently. However much people speculate, analyze, or invent explanations, they said, the affair still contains a mystery that only the Prime Minister himself can clarify.

The public has the right to know why Public Security has been left without a director at a time when security requires greater care than ever before. The public also has the right to understand the nature of the new duties assigned to this seconded official within the Cabinet.

For it is neither reasonable nor compatible with Egypt's urgent need for economy—something the Ministry itself constantly acknowledges—that a senior official should receive fifteen hundred pounds merely to present documents to the Prime Minister.

After all, the Prime Minister already possesses an office, a chief of staff, a secretary-general, and an entire corps of employees to assist him.

There is therefore a secret hidden in this matter, one that only the Prime Minister and the Minister of the Interior can reveal and explain. It is better not to indulge in wild guesses but to await clarification from those capable of providing it.

And so the discussion ended, with everyone still awaiting an explanation. Yet I fear their waiting may prove very long indeed—and perhaps endless.