

# **Between Literature and Politics — On the Forming of Cabinets . . .**

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This is an event well worth the attention of men of letters — if only men of letters had leisure enough for everything that always deserves their attention. The great French statesman Barthou gave it his attention in the book we mentioned in an earlier piece, his book "The Politician," leaving behind a delightful, entertaining chapter on it that Egyptians might well enjoy reading, finding in it both pleasure and diversion — and finding in it, too, things that resemble, in many respects, what has been happening among us ever since we first came to know the forming of cabinets, and ever since we began living a democratic life, whether genuine or counterfeit.

There is nothing strange in this. Human natures differ, and yet, for all that, they resemble one another, as Ibn Khaldun says; and those who study the phases of social life must necessarily observe both the differences among human natures and the resemblances among them, and reconcile these two seemingly contradictory laws — for it is precisely this contradiction that forms the substance of that marvelous harmony upon which the life of communities rests.

The forming of cabinets in Egypt resembles, in its outward appearance and in some of its underlying realities, the forming of cabinets in France; yet in another respect it differs from it quite plainly, for the natures and temperaments of Egyptians, and the circumstances of internal and external politics that surround them, and the circumstances of the parties while Parliament sits, and while it is absent or suspended, differ sharply from the natures of the French and the circumstances surrounding them. What ought most clearly to draw the attention of men of letters, in the forming of cabinets, is this subtle, hidden agitation that moves among the cabinet hopefuls — or, better, that radiates outward from the prime minister-designate, the way a fine, invisible current radiates outward, moving now right, now left, pressing forward and pressing back, leaving no house inhabited by a cabinet hopeful without forcing its way in, or gliding into it unseen, then making its way through that house until it reaches the hopeful's very room, his very chamber, touching him with a light touch that wakes him if he sleeps, rouses him if he is inattentive, and turns him from his business if he is occupied; and it

goes on stirring before them all with a suspicious agitation, dancing before their eyes an alluring dance, until the hopeful fixes upon it his gaze, his thought, his whole attention — and then it has already crept into him, glided through him, run in his veins as blood runs, taken command of his heart and his very reason, seized his conscience and his feeling, and turned him wholly in upon himself, away from everything else; and it forges between him and the prime minister-designate ties that are hidden, yet strong and firm, ties that never break but only grow stronger and firmer still, should the summons reach the hopeful from the prime minister-designate by the mouth of a messenger sent to him, or by telephone carrying it to him — and these ties go on strengthening and intensifying until the hopeful becomes a minister; and they remain strong and unbroken until the cabinet is finally formed — at which point the hopeful, as it happens, has been left out of it after all, never prepared for it, or never truly meant to take part in it.

This agitation, radiating from the prime minister-designate to all the cabinet hopefuls, is something like an electric ray — carrying hope within it, and despair; carrying expectation, and fear — and is, from this angle, a wellspring of a whole range of emotions and shades of feeling, both in the soul of the prime minister-designate from whom this ray emanates, and in the souls of the hopefuls upon whom it ultimately falls, and in the souls of the friends who surround the prime minister-designate and the hopefuls alike. And if the crisis is a grave and serious one, and the cabinet being formed is one on which great matters depend, whether hoped for or feared, then this ray does not take long to widen and extend, until it touches everyone, and stirs in their hearts every variety of emotion and feeling.

No sooner does the prime minister-designate sense that all thought is turning toward him to form the cabinet than he begins to think, whether he wishes to or not, of the colleagues who will work with him — and at once he is agitated, bewildered, the matter thrown into the sharpest confusion, for these colleagues are many. They are always more than they ought to be, even when the country is poor in men; and it is not the colleagues alone who are many, but the friends too, many more than they ought to be, more than the prime minister-designate can even reckon. It is certain that His Excellency Nessim Pasha spent the years of his recent political retirement thinking of few men of politics, and few men of politics thought of him; he may well have imagined that he had forgotten these people, and that they had forgotten him — and there is no

doubt that they had indeed forgotten him, since he was neither a source of fear nor a source of hope. He, too, may well have forgotten them, occupied instead with what occupies any man in retirement — the affairs of his own private life — remembering only that small number bound to him by ties of pure affection, or by the ties of courtesy that connect men of standing to one another.

But it is equally certain that His Excellency Tawfiq Nessim Pasha, looking about him one day — one morning, or one evening — found his private chamber suddenly filled with phantoms and shadows; and these phantoms and shadows may well have danced before His Excellency in a strange, unbroken dance; and he may well have fixed his gaze upon them until he made out this man, and that man, and another, among the cabinet hopefuls; and he may well have begun to examine them with a harsh and candid examination, not without a touch of severity, not without a touch of roughness, for it took place in private, with no one else to witness it; and he may well have rejected most of these men, because they did not acquit themselves well in the examination.

But the matter did not stop there. How quickly these phantoms and shadows took on flesh and bone; how quickly the space around the prime minister-designate's house grew crowded with motorcars and carriages, and with those who came on foot as well; how many calling cards were left behind; how often the telephone rang.

Let us leave the prime minister-designate — harsh toward these phantoms while they were still phantoms, then courteous and gentle with them, torn among them, fleeing from them once they turned to flesh — and turn instead to the hopefuls themselves. Every one of them thought of Nessim from the moment the newspapers began to speak of him. Every one of them asked himself: Does Nessim think of me, or has he forgotten me? Does Nessim look my way, or turn from me? Will Nessim call on me, or leave me aside? And each of them prepared for himself two utterly contradictory postures: one of pure devotion and sincere support for Nessim, should he be called; and one of bitter enmity and fierce war against Nessim, should he see another preferred over him. And each of them waited, torn between these two postures — now hope would prevail and push him to the right, and he would praise Nessim to himself; now despair would prevail and push him to the left, and he would condemn Nessim to himself. Yet through all this he remained guarded when he spoke, cautious when he met people, and stirred up around himself a haze of hope that spread word of his own candidacy far and wide — until,

when it was announced that Nessim would officially form the cabinet, one could hardly ask about the fluttering hearts, the fearful souls, the struggle between hope and despair, the contest between longing and dejection, the agitation in the room as they waited for a messenger to come, or a ring the telephone might sound through every corner of the house.

And do not ask what Barthou paints, in his most beautiful depiction, of these moments of waiting: every car that stops in the street, or passes through it, is a car that has surely come from the direction of the prime minister-designate; every knock that touches the door announces the arrival of the prime minister-designate's messenger; every jingle of the telephone bell is a summons from the prime minister-designate. The waiting may grow long, and grow hard, and become longer and heavier than can be borne, until the hopeful leaves his house and hurries either straight to the prime minister-designate's house, or to wherever he might meet someone capable, once seen, of reminding the prime minister-designate of him, or drawing the prime minister-designate's attention his way.

The prime minister-designate, then, is agitated and bewildered amid colleagues beyond counting; the colleagues themselves are agitated and bewildered between fear and hope; the friends of the prime minister-designate and of the colleagues see all this and grow agitated and bewildered in turn; the newspapers depict it all, and the people read it all, and they too — being Egyptians after all — grow agitated in turn, until the whole atmosphere is one of agitation and bewilderment, all because one man has been charged with forming a cabinet, and must choose his aides from among the ministers.

Barthou tells his readers some delightful jests. One day, some prankster played a trick on one of the cabinet hopefuls, informing him by telephone that the prime minister-designate was summoning him and offering him such-and-such a ministry. The man hurried to the prime minister-designate — who happened to be Barthou himself — and no sooner had he reached the prime minister-designate's house than he met another hopeful who had likewise just arrived; the two entered together, and the prime minister-designate received them in bewilderment and confusion, since he had summoned neither of them, nor charged anyone with summoning them. Of the two men, one was an elder statesman, dignified in bearing, who spent a few moments with the prime minister-designate, and, seeing that no ministry was mentioned to him,

understood, and took his leave. The other, a young deputy, could not bear the prime minister-designate's silence, and rushed to thank him, announcing his acceptance of a place in the cabinet — obliging the prime minister-designate to thank him for his readiness, and to offer his apologies.

Another man, charged with forming a cabinet, wished to sound out Clemenceau, to learn whether he would support him or abandon him — though he had no wish for Clemenceau to join his cabinet. He became, one day, a visitor at Clemenceau's house; and when the Tiger — for Clemenceau it was — received him, the man said: "I have not come to offer you a place in the cabinet." Clemenceau replied: "And well you do not — for had you offered me a place, I should have chosen the premiership itself." "Of course," said the man, "but I have come to consult you." Clemenceau replied: "It is a want of taste to trouble people from the morning to consult them on a matter they have no wish to be consulted on."

We have no shortage of such anecdotes ourselves. People still remember that minister who departed this life — and the prime minister-designate who summoned him had likewise already departed this life — for no sooner had word reached him that he had been chosen for a ministerial post than he flung himself upon the messenger's hand and covered it with kisses. And people remember a hulking minister, tall of stature, broad of neck, loud of voice, who, the moment word reached him in Alexandria that the prime minister-designate had chosen him, hurried to accept, asking only which ministry it was to be, without asking anything of the cabinet's program, or of his colleagues and aides. A friend told us of a hulking minister — tall of stature, broad of neck, loud of voice, narrow of mind — who, at one time, served in a certain cabinet and made a habit of persecuting some of his subordinate officials.

When one such official grew weary of this persecution, he asked one of the former prime ministers to lend him his car, and drove it to the minister's house; and when he met him, he confided that so-and-so was recommending him for the next cabinet — and there is no need to ask how the minister suddenly esteemed this official, thanked him, and showered him with attention from the very next day. But the cabinet met its death before the new one was formed, and no one gave a further thought to the deceived minister.

If people permitted themselves to write down and publish all the comic episodes they know of, which Nessim Pasha's forming of his cabinet has stirred up and continues to stir up, they would keep readers entertained for a very long time — but modesty, decorum, and regard for people's standing forbid it, and prevent its publication.

Would that those who know all this might set it down in private memoirs — for history need not be entirely solemn; indeed, it is all to the good that it should contain something to laugh at, something to amuse. We are told we are on the threshold of a democratic life — and what good is democracy, if people cannot laugh at their politicians and their ministers?

Taha Hussein

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