

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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American Research Center in Egypt
2, Midan Kasr al-Doubara
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THE END OF SUMMER

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Dear Peter;

A long and hot summer has finally come to an end. As if to announce the change of seasons a duststorm blew into town a few days ago. For a few hours the normally hazy Cairo skyline was nothing but a dense wash of ochre dust. From where I was standing at American University I could barely see the Egyptian Museum across Midan Tahrir, one of the city's busiest squares. By mid-afternoon it looked as if dusk was already upon us. The remaining light had a translucent, almost phosphorescent quality.

Even the normally intrepid traffic policemen were squinting and shielding their eyes, abandoning whatever traffic was still on the square to its own devices. The usual congestion and confusion at the busstop turned into a bit of a rumpus. Cairo's already overcrowded bus system could not handle the sudden onslaught of passengers. A new melee broke out each time a bus rounded the corner. A few unfortunate men were thrown to the ground as the crowd rushed forward. A large bag of ripe tomatoes spilled as its unhappy owner attempted to climb aboard one of the busses.

Although I have become quite adept at squeezing myself into overcrowded busses, this time I stood by until the crowd thinned out. On the Tahrir bridge that spans the Nile, people were still hurrying home. Visibility had been reduced to a few yards. Some peasant women were at a loss trying to hold onto their children while balancing baskets of vegetables on their heads in the strong wind. One woman slowly making her way toward Dokki had found a perfect solution to the dilemma. Holding three children by the hand, she carried an additional one on each shoulder. They in turn held on to a basket wedged on her head. In Zamalek the 26th of July street was strangely empty, like a midwestern city during a blizzard.

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A few days of cool weather followed the storm. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Even the politicians seemed caught up in the lull that followed the end of summer. Their incessant urge to engage in arguments seemed, at least temporarily, to have dissipated along with the heat. The press has been uncharacteristically quiet these last two weeks. Even the opposition papers have not been able to report any major scandal. The great debates of early summer on subsidies and other assorted economic ills have given way to an air of seeming insouciance as winter is upon us.

The only stir in this otherwise tranquil atmosphere have been the elections for the Majlis as-Shura, Egypt's Consultative Council. The Council was created - after a referendum that did little more than rubberstamp it - by former president Sadat in 1980. He clearly intended to use it as a means of checking the parliamentary opposition that existed at the time. Of its 210 members only 140 are elected. The remainder are appointed by the president. To make matters worse, this year the elections were run under so-called "absolute party lists." Whatever party obtained fifty percent of the vote in a province took all the seats. Since President Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) has a stranglehold over the crucial governorates, the opposition felt that the elections had in effect been rigged. The New Wafd (Egypt's main opposition party), the Unionist Progressive Party, and the three other opposition parties dissociated themselves early on from the proceedings. Elwi Hafez, the outspoken representative of the New Wafd called the Majlis a "family council." The Muslim fundamentalists didn't even bother to take a position or to make any statements.

No one really expected much of the election. A couple of NDP officials I interviewed about a week before the event seemed intent on defending the council, but they were simply too eager to be believable. So the real question in everyone's mind was - how big a fraud will the Shura Council elections be?

I asked the question in the aftermath of the elections to four Egyptians whose analysis I have come to trust fully, and also to an official at the US Embassy. They all agreed independently that the fraud had been massive. Only a few hours after the voting had ended, the government announced that the requisite number of votes to make the election valid - 20% of the eligible voters - had been reached. My sources doubted that the turn-out had even been close to that number. They reiterated again and again that apathy was widespread.

The night before the actual voting, a barrage of official propaganda had been aimed at the population. All night long one of the TV channels ran programs dedicated to what President Mubarak at one point called "our sacred patriotic duty." After this edifying speech came some more down-to-earth matters. A bevy of ministry officials demonstrated on screen how one had to vote, how to fill in the blank spaces, and how to stuff the folded ballots into the voting box.

In inimitable fashion the designers of the voting ballots had outdone themselves. The ballots were about the size of a newspaper page and had to be folded several times before they could - with great difficulty - be stuffed into the narrow slot of the ballot box. One of the officials on TV still hadn't managed to deposit his after several attempts.

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Diplomatically, the camera panned away from the box to the official's smiling (but slightly embarrassed) face.

Occasionally this practical demonstration was interrupted by a local celebrity who belted out a song in which the words "freedom, love, my country" were prominently featured. Since the other channel featured an episode of The Man from Atlantis, I had little choice but to watch the proceedings in their entirety.

That night I had a dream. I saw mile-long lines of voters impatiently waiting inside a huge building, trying to stuff their ballots into slots that were too narrow. Several officials were trying to help, but the people got angry and exasperated. There were many - too many - of these officials, all armed with walkie talkies, each giving different instructions to the voters. Soon no one knew where to go or what to do. A few soldiers guarded the entrance to the voting station, shooing away everyone without a ballot. But it was hot and soon they tired of their effort, and the place was slowly invaded by a horde of local entrepreneurs.

Young men in galabeyas hawked sweet tea, a peasant woman was roasting corn on a small charcoal fire for ten piasters a piece. Even the sweet potato vender managed to somehow get his little cart inside and slowly wound his way around the inside of the building, leaving a trail of fragrant smoke and discarded peels. A couple of shoeshines approached some men sitting on rickety chairs against a wall. The men took off their shoes and put their feet on a piece of cardboard the shoeshines carried with them. A few minutes later they returned with the shoes and pulled the cardboard from under the feet of the waiting men.

A blind man stumbled into the building and started to sing chapters from the Qur'an in a high-pitched voice. As he made his way through the crowd people stuffed his hands with five and ten piaster notes. In his wake an old Nubian shuffled along, selling matches and cheap plastic combs and a hundred other little trinkets.

The people, tired of waiting, were sitting on the floor in big circles of friends and relatives. Women pulled containers of beans dripping with olive oil from plastic baskets. Coarse loaves of baladi bread were spread out on a newspaper in the middle of each circle. Bowls of cucumber salad appeared out of nowhere. A sudden hush fell over the place as people sat eating, bending back and forth from the bowls of beans with chunks of bread in their hands. Even the officials and the soldiers had joined the feast after turning off their walkie talkies. Only the clinking of tea glasses and an occasional joyous belch intruded upon the silence.

Then the conversation picked up again as the men lazily leaned back against the wall and smoked their cigarettes. There was much laughter now and the sweet tea seller did brisk business. The blind singer launched into another song, recalling the Prophet's admonition to stay clear of sin. But the mood by now was one of gaiety, not for the recall of sin, and a couple of older men gently guided him outside.

Amidst all of this the ballot box stood deserted at the end of the room. The floor around it was covered with abandoned ballots. Some children were throwing them up in the air by the handful, like dried leaves on a sunny autumn day. No one paid them any attention. The officials and

the soldiers were playing backgammon on a board the tea seller carried with him. Already a few of the women were leaving to prepare the evening meal at home. The room emptied steadily. At last the officials ended their game, drank one last cup of tea, and sealed the ballot box with red wax.

An army truck pulled up outside and the box was tossed among many others.

"Good turn-out?" asked the officer as he signed the receipt.

"A real good turn-out," responded one of the officials. "But why, tell me, were the slots in the boxes so small?"

"To make sure there would be long lines," the officer smiled enigmatically, "short lines don't look good on election day."

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The results of the Shura Council election were, of course, entirely predictable in the absence of any opposition. I took the opportunity that day to go and photograph some of the cities I never got to this summer. To a westerner accustomed to stringent safety features in most cities, life in Cairo can at times seem quite dangerous. With all the urgent urban problems Cairo faces, safety measures for its inhabitants are often at the bottom of the list. Telephone cables often surface unexpectedly, snaring an occasional passerby. Reinforced steel rods sometimes protrude at eye level from bridges.

As a personal little diversion I have been accumulating a little file on what I consider to be the most unbelievable safety failures in the city. They range from Zamalek's horse carriages and Imbaba's donkey carts driving on highways without any lights or reflectors, to some truly spectacular potholes that make New York ones look like tiny pockmarks.

During one of my regular walks through Heliopolis I had noticed several missing manhole covers on the sidewalk of one of the suburb's busy streets. A child - or even an adult - could easily have tripped into it and fallen some five feet below onto a slab of concrete. One morning as I was heading to a photo studio ^h where some of my films are regularly developed I detoured briefly to take a shot of the manhole in question in order to add it to my "Believe It Or Not" collection.

Focusing and taking the actual picture took only a few seconds. I had barely walked a few yards away, however, when someone insistently tapped on my shoulder. A young soldier in impeccably pressed olive drabs asked me in arabic what I was doing. Almost immediately a tiny alarm bell went off in my head. I remembered the incident at the Qantara canal crossing when an irate security recruit had threatened to confiscate my camera after I starting taking a few pictures (See DJV-4). Only the forceful intervention of my guide had prevented this from happening at the time.

I immediately sensed I was in deeper trouble this time. The soldier belonged to the regular army and would not be cowed as the security recruit at Qantara had been. I pretended to speak or understand only a few words of arabic. I knew perfectly well, however, what I was being told. The sidewalk with the manhole bordered a military command post. Taken pictures here, said the young man, was absolutely "mamnu'"

"Mamnu'" is one of those words that inevitably crop up in everyday life in Egypt. It simply means that something is forbidden. It usually also implies that for all practical purposes the rule is made to be transgressed. It is mamnu' to enter one-way streets from the wrong end, but on several occasions I almost ran into cars that blithely ignored the signs - made worse at night by the fact that Egyptian drivers are reluctant to turn on their headlights. It is mamnu' to smoke on city busses but they often resemble smoking parlors. It is mamnu' to raise chickens and goats in the city center but almost every morning I wake up in fashionable Zamalek by the incessant crowing of roosters from a neighbor's roof.

If there is one instance, however, where the word mamnu' still carries any meaning, it is in regard to military matters. Years, even decades of an almost paranoid obsession with security matters have left a legacy in this country that will perhaps never disappear. To most Americans - and most educated Egyptians - even faintly familiar with intelligence gathering, the idea of someone trying to collect information by openly taking a picture of a military installation on a busy street seems preposterous. It could be done much more efficiently with a well-hidden camera from a speeding car, or in a thousand other ways.

The young soldier's charge that I might have tried to deliberately take a picture of the compound seemed ludicrous to me. I laughed at his suggestion in a sort of condescending way and walked away. This time his hand firmly grabbed my shoulder. The smile had disappeared from beneath the carefully groomed little moustache. His eyes were glinting with a determination I immediately recognized. I had ignored that whatever the young soldier himself believed in this case was entirely irrelevant. He had undoubtedly been told again and again that pictures of military installations were mamnu'. He was only following orders.

By now a couple of soldiers with submachine guns had emerged at the gate of the post. I had an inkling of what would follow. A journalist friend had been arrested three weeks earlier for asking a number of questions to people in the street concerning USAID. He had been taken to the muhhabarat (secret police) central station near the Citadel and was released after a few hours. Nervous and shaken, and with a warning that further "infringements" would lead to expulsion, he had been told that all interviews needed to be cleared through the foreign press office.

The young recruit told me to follow him into the building. We walked through the gate, past the armed guards, into a dingy little office. Some seats covered with dusty naudahyde stood alongside one wall. Linoleum covered the floor, its uncut edges pushed vertically against the walls.

I sat down and faced a burly middle-aged man in army fatigues with two stars on his epaulettes. The young soldier was nowhere to be seen any longer.

"What are you doing in Cairo?" I told him I was a tourist. It was better to avoid telling him anything at all about ICWA. The last time I had done that at the press office, suspicion had been written all over the director's face.

"Why are you taking pictures around here?" Telling him I was interested in photographing open manholes wouldn't wash. I said I wanted

some pictures of Heliopolis' architecture.

"Your camera please!" I pried my camera from my bag. I had only taken a couple of pictures that morning on a fresh roll of film. But there were thirteen other exposed rolls I had planned to have developed that day.

"Your passport please..." I had left my identification at home. He grew even more defensive, lecturing at length about the fact that every foreigner must always have identification.

"We'll need to check all this information out." I resigned myself to a lengthy stay at the station. A couple of young recruits manning the switchboard in an adjacent room glanced repeatedly through an opening in the wall.

The little room grew hotter as noon approached. Ashes were strewn all over a rickety coffeetable. On the wall facing me three drawings had been nailed to the wall. They all exhorted young soldiers to be aware of their patriotic duty.

In the one first a flustered young soldier is lost in a group of Egyptians, all pointing in different directions. His head is twisting back and forth, watching several things at once. The caption floating above his head reads: "Don't let a crowd disturb you from your duty."

In the second frame two women grab another recruit by his arms. One is wearing a muslim hijab, leaving only her face visible. On the soldier's right is a young westernized woman in a garrish red suit with bell-bottomed slacks, 1950s fashion. The caption admonishes the recruit to "Be aware of those who want to lead you astray, no matter how they may appear."

I found the posters faintly amusing. The third picture, however, is more frightening. It shows an upturned garbage can from which sheets of paper are floating to the ground. In the lower left corner the silhouette of a sinister-looking man is scrutinizing one of the pieces of paper with a magnifying glass. The caption is also more ominous this time: "Beware of suspicious persons, and report all incidents to your superiors." Obviously some overzealous recruit had followed the advice too literally this morning, accounting for my sitting in the stuffy, dirty room.

As time went by I grew sleepy from the heat. Small pangs of fear, however, kept gnawing at me. What if I couldn't contact anyone? What if I had to spend the night in some army jail? What would they do if they found the thirteen rolls of film in my bag? The silhouette in the third frame started to look increasingly familiar. For just a second I imagined it was me, the magnifying glass turned into a camera. Nonsense. Nothing could happen. Hadn't I given them the name of references at both the Belgian and the US Embassy? But what if they had conveniently forgotten to call them?

There was no alternative but to wait and relax. Several more officials entered the room, asking the some questions. Getting angry would only make matters worse. All of my interlocutors were now dressed as civilians. The matter had obviously been turned over to intelligence personnel. A balding man with a mild voice and manner was succeeded by a bully who told me in a stentorian voice that "matters looked bad!" Another softspoken official followed, and once again the bully. I was too much au courant with interrogation techniques not to see through the intimidation/cajoling sequence.

The questioning resumed for perhaps the fifth time. "What's your nationality?" Since I had entered the country on a Belgian passport, I had no choice.

"Belgian" I responded.

Within a few minutes an affable young man who spoke fluent french appeared. Did I live close to Brussels? What was Bruges like? I was astounded at the efficiency and the smoothness of the whole process. My answers seemingly satisfied him. Another official entered and whispered briefly to him in arabic. I could only make out an occassional word but gathered enough to know that my film had been developed and that no incriminating materials had been found on the prints.

Now the process of apologizing began. Another official entered and explained that the soldier "had been overzealous", that "Egypt is a poor country with many enemies." "And after all" he added, "taking pictures around here is mamnu'."

I walked out, a bit stunned by what had happened. It wasn't the first time I had been in trouble for taking pictures. There had been the incident at Qantara. A few weeks later I had been stopped in Sayyeda Zeinab, one of the poor sections of the city. In the case of the Zabalin I had spent several days within the community and had obtained permission before taking a few pictures for my report. Even so the people had been reluctant. A German photographer working for the tabloid Stern had upset several members of the community by photographing women picking through garbage and children in ragged clothes with scores of flies on their faces.

In Sayyeda Zeinab a taxi driver had driven by closely and told me in bad english - but the message could not be misconstrued - that "the police can touch you at any moment". And once while taking pictures of an overcrowded train pulling into Ramsis station one of the passengers jumped off, walked up, drew his hand horizontally across his throat in front of the camera and yelled obscenities. That time also the message was clear and I had left the area immediately.

What happened in Heliopolis was slightly different although, judging from similar incidents involving several friends, not really uncommon. I would not want to draw too large a conclusion from this single incident. But I reflected briefly on the fact that in a country where even the most rudimentary bureaucratic procedure can take hours to complete, my film had been professionally developed and printed in less than twenty minutes by the Egyptian army. It hints at the facilities at the disposal of that army and perhaps helps to explain why it is increasingly called upon to perform those tasks the civilian public sector is unable to shoulder. It also hints at the close control the security forces continue to exert in Egyptian life and society.

All the best,

Handwritten signature

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