

Between Contentment and Discontent

It is said that every revolution is born of a mingled mood of discontent and contentment, of despair and hope — discontent with a way of life that must change, and contentment with a way of life that must be realized; despair at existing institutions that must vanish, and hope for new ones that must take root.

Revolution, then, is a compound of pessimism and optimism — pessimism toward what has existed and still exists because it fails to match what ought to be, and optimism rooted in faith in reform, the desire for it, and the energy to pursue it.

All these moods, however, must remain in balance. If discontent, despair, and pessimism prevail, they paralyze the will, stifle effort, and breed surrender. If contentment, hope, and optimism prevail unchecked, they lull us into illusion, comfort us with imagination, and sap our vigor.

Those who lead and manage a revolution must keep this balance in view. They must not paint life so darkly as to breed despair, nor so brightly as to inspire extravagant hopes that end in disappointment and distrust.

I say this after reading the many speeches and commentaries recently broadcast about education in Egypt. It is untrue to say that education is wholly good, needing no reform and leaving no room for discontent. Were that the case, Egypt would have no need for a Ministry of Education at all, nor for the work of those employed in it.

But it is equally false to say that education is sheer evil, deserving only condemnation and destruction. If that were so, Egypt could not have lived and progressed as it has on the basis of this very system. Yet Egypt has lived, advanced, and moved far forward: she is better in this century than she was in the last; better after the Second World War and the Declaration of Independence than she was before them.

Were the system utterly corrupt, the first duty of the Revolution would be to halt it altogether — to close every school, institute, and university until a new system could be created on firm foundations, built upon clear plans and goals in harmony with the Revolution's ideals.

But the Ministry of Education greeted the new school year as it always has — opening schools and universities, welcoming old pupils and students back, admitting thousands of new ones, and proceeding on its way, striving to reform what could be reformed and to preserve what must endure. Total evil, after all, finds no place in the minds of those entrusted with the welfare of the people.

In truth, education, like every Egyptian institution, contains both good and evil — things in need of reform, and things that should be maintained until something better can replace them.

Ask any minister in government whether he is entirely satisfied with his ministry or the services it oversees, and you will find him far from it. Yet he neither complains nor infects others with gloom. He faces his work with sincerity and patience, advising the people, serving the nation, persisting in reform, removing obstacles, hopeful in what can be achieved and patient with what resists solution.

It serves no good for pupils to read in the newspapers that they learn nothing from their teachers, that their schooling wastes their time, effort, and health, and that the state wastes millions on their useless education — then to go to bed and wake to read the same again. Such talk can only corrupt their

confidence in their schools, destroy their trust in their teachers, and sap their faith in themselves — without benefiting anyone.

These pupils must go to school, listen to their teachers, and study their lessons. It is far better that they do so with contentment, hope, and resolve befitting youth, than that they be filled with cynicism and despair.

Nor is it right that teachers, who spend their days and nights preparing lessons and correcting papers for modest salaries that hardly sustain them, should have to read morning and evening that they labor in vain, that their efforts are futile, and that education itself is worthless. Were engineers and doctors to hear such talk about their professions as often as educators do, Egypt would be engulfed in a cloud of dark pessimism that harms much and helps little.

It is the duty of ministers, officials, reformers, and opinion leaders to strike the right balance between contentment — which stirs hope and drives effort — and discontent — which inspires reform and a love of progress.

There is no clearer example than our own ministers, who after the Revolution work as those before it did: administering the affairs of the people, striving that today be better than yesterday and tomorrow better than today.

There is no doubt our schools are overcrowded, and that this weakens the benefit students gain. Yet which is better — crowded schools that give at least some learning, or empty “model” schools preserved in perfection while the people wait, perhaps long, for new ones to be built?

This year, the Ministry of Education admitted even more pupils than last year. How can this be reconciled with the claim that the schools are overcrowded and that teaching is ineffective? Would it have been better to turn pupils away until new schools were built?

The Prime Minister, to his credit, ordered that no pupil or student be refused admission, knowing that a little knowledge is better than ignorance, and that even a faint glimmer of light is better than total darkness in which a man stretches out his hand and cannot see it.

The Prime Minister and his colleagues — the Minister of Education included — were wise indeed to let the educational system continue, not barring students from learning, and then to take the admirable step, only days ago, of establishing a new foundation for school construction on a greatly expanded scale. This, truly, is the only solution to Egypt’s educational problem: to multiply schools and bring them closer to the people — so that every village may have its primary school, every town its secondary school, and every district its technical institute.

That has long been my call, and it remains my call today — and will remain so as long as I can raise my voice. Praise be to God that the Revolution has now heard it, and created this foundation that will relieve the pressure on overcrowded schools and allow every Egyptian family to educate its sons and daughters without hardship.

The universities are in the same condition as the schools — too few for what is needed, overcrowded, unable to give students the benefit they deserve or to let professors give them proper attention. The remedy is the same: lessen the crowding, build more universities first of all.

Three universities for a country like Egypt is an anomaly — unworthy of a nation that aspires to be advanced, free, and civilized, and to recover the greatness it once knew.

I will not hide my deep dismay at the Minister of Education's recent statement that our university colleges are "secondary schools of the worst kind." That is an extravagant injustice. There may indeed be faults — some serious ones — but they are not secondary schools, nor are they bad. They are true universities, teaching genuine science and scholarship, and perhaps teaching it better than many foreign institutions. Like everything else in Egypt, they need reform — and will always need it — for perfection is unattainable, forever receding as we pursue it.

Before me lie many books produced by these very colleges the minister disparaged — fine, well-crafted works that reflect a genuine love of research and excellence, no less than those published by scholars abroad. These books are not written only by senior professors but by younger ones as well.

It is not the fault of university scholars that ministers of education do not read their books, do not follow their work, and do not examine their research. If they did, they would know that Egypt's universities have not wasted their time since their foundation.

Once again: our universities are in need — and will always be in need — of reform. They have no right to be complacent; for only those accustomed to sloth and stagnation are satisfied with themselves. But those who seek progress, growth, and excellence are always partly discontented — driven by dissatisfaction toward change and uplift, and sustained by a measure of confidence that allows them to work, persevere, and produce.

I therefore earnestly hope that the Revolution will take for the universities a step like the one it has taken for public education — preparing to establish one, two, or even three new universities when the time is right. That alone will bring the reform our universities so ardently desire.

For there is no grievance they suffer more deeply than overcrowding and congestion. Let us ease that burden, give them trust and goodwill, and then await from them the creation of a new Egypt.

Ṭāhā Husayn
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