

In the Ministry of Education — Guidance and Folly

by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

It is said that the soundness of the body depends on the soundness of the head that governs it; if the head is diseased, the body must decay, and if the head falters, the whole frame is thrown into disorder.

This saying has been repeated so often that it has become proverbial.

It is also said that the health of schools depends on the health of the Ministry of Education that administers them. If the ministry is corrupt, it is no wonder that the schools are too; and if the ministry is confused, there is nothing strange in the confusion of education itself. That, too, has been repeated until it has come to be accepted as common wisdom — a truth no longer open to question or debate.

But what is the *soundness* of the Ministry of Education? What does this phrase really mean? In fact, it can mean many things — and, unfortunately, the ministry has missed them all. This ministry is in desperate need of reform, of various and fundamental kinds of reform, without which neither the schools nor education itself can improve.

It appears that we, the people, wish for such reform; and it appears that the ministry knows we wish for it. But what it does **not** seem to perceive is the link between reforming itself and reforming education. That is the first and most obvious kind of decay from which this poor institution suffers.

Only those who understand reform and feel its necessity are capable of carrying it out. If the ministry neither understands nor feels the need for it, then it is powerless to achieve it, no matter how much effort it expends.

Let us look, then, at the ministry's actions in these past weeks, for they show more clearly than any argument that it neither grasps the meaning of reform nor senses our need for it.

A few days ago, the newspapers published a list of appointments and transfers within the ministry. These decisions were not made at random; they reflect a certain policy or theory adopted by those in authority. The Minister of Education bears formal responsibility for this policy — although, like other ministers, he likely relies on his technical advisers. He is responsible in name, but in truth the real responsibility lies with those advisers and consultants themselves.

What is this theory, then?

On what principle was it based?

If one examines the new appointments and transfers, it becomes plain that they were made without the slightest regard for the welfare of education, the interests of teachers and pupils, or the good of the nation. These interests were not merely ignored — they were *sacrificed*. Had they been even slightly taken into account, the posts would have been filled by competent people capable of performing them well, managing them wisely, and serving the cause of learning.

Yet as we read the list of names and the positions assigned to them, we find no connection at all — neither distant nor close, weak nor strong — between the appointee and the task entrusted to him.

The only rule that seems to have governed these decisions is the will of those who control affairs in the ministry.

Let me be clear: I do not question the personal competence of those appointed or transferred. On the contrary, I defend it, and I regret that their talents should be wasted on work for which they were not trained. These men are among Egypt's most capable servants, but some malicious, secret idea has placed each of them where he can neither advance nor retreat.

Take, for example, 'Alī Ḥāfīz Bey, now appointed Inspector of Primary Education. He has never had any experience in that field; his entire career has been spent on matters wholly unrelated to it.

'Awad Bey Ibrāhīm, made Assistant Inspector of Primary Education, is no better qualified than his superior.

Mr. Robb has been made Inspector of Elementary Education, though he has never dealt with elementary schooling since coming to Egypt.

And Mr. Samson has been placed over Secondary Education, though he has never worked in that sphere — he has inspected schools in Sudan and once directed the Higher Teachers' College in Cairo.

I have no doubt these men are intelligent and able enough to *learn* their new professions — given time.

But it will take them a long while, and that means a period of hesitation, confusion, and disorder — disorder in administration, disorder in the schools themselves. The time lost in this process of learning will be time wasted for education and for Egypt.

I must ask, then:

What does the ministry seek when it assigns a post to someone?

Does it wish the post to benefit from the person who occupies it — or the person to benefit from the post he receives?

If the first, then it is the ministry's duty to appoint those capable of discharging its responsibilities.

If the second, it is sheer folly — the worst kind of waste and mischief. The ministry exists not to *train* senior officials in new trades, but to entrust each post to the one most fit to bear its burdens.

And such men exist. The ministry has simply passed them over — for reasons we may or may not know, but which are not our concern here.

There are within the ministry men who have long experience in primary education, who have administered it admirably; others who have mastered the management of secondary and elementary schooling. Yet the ministry has ignored them, and misapplied their abilities in places where they will be of no use for years to come.

This was not done without purpose. Every ministry in Egypt has its secrets — and the secret of this one is plain enough.

The Ministry of Education clings fiercely to the principle of **centralization**, to the concentration of power in a single hand.

It is one of the most jealous of all ministries in this regard.

If competent men were placed at the head of primary, elementary, and secondary education, each would soon learn to manage his domain independently — and that would endanger the supremacy of the center.

So the ministry prefers to appoint men ignorant of their posts. Lacking experience, they must turn constantly to the central authority for instruction and permission in every small and great

matter. Thus the hand of that authority extends over every corner of the ministry and every branch of education.

This theory of centralization may seem logical and even efficient in theory — but when applied to the Ministry of Education, it is perilous in the extreme.

It **kills competence**, though Egypt's interest lies in strengthening it.

It **enslaves supervisors**, though education thrives only when they are free.

It **rests on the power of one man**, though Egypt's independence and constitution require the power of the collective and the spirit of democracy.

Worst of all, it teaches teachers themselves to submit, to obey blindly, to cease thinking. And when that happens, character decays, initiative dies, and teachers become mere instruments rather than living minds. Could there be any greater calamity for Egypt, for her sons, and for her future?

Such are the effects of the centralizing doctrine within the Ministry of Education.

Yet there is another principle — darker still — that rules there.

I hesitate even to name it, for I would not sully the ministry of learning by associating it with such a word.

But I shall let you infer its name from its consequences.

In Egypt there are secondary schools with capable Egyptian assistant principals who have managed them with distinction.

Common sense would dictate promoting these men to headmaster positions, and promoting headmasters of primary schools to become assistant principals in the secondary schools — so that, after experience and training, they might themselves rise to the top.

That would be fair, reasonable, and in the interest of teachers, students, and education as a whole.

But reason and the Ministry of Education rarely walk hand in hand.

Instead, principals of primary schools have been promoted to direct secondary schools — though they have no experience whatever in that field.

The result is what one might expect: confusion, inefficiency, and harm to the very substance of education itself.

Does the Minister of Education see in this any wisdom?

Does he see in it any benefit to the nation?

Does he not feel, as we do, that if there is any ministry that must jealously guard both time and talent, that must use ability justly and efficiently, that must make professional merit its sole standard in appointments and transfers — it is this one:

the ministry entrusted with **educating Egypt and shaping her future**?

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

al-Siyāsa, July 17, 1923