

Evening Talk

Exertion!!...

Wasted effort — that is what the ministries and parliaments expend in drafting laws, examining them, scrutinizing them in ministers' offices, in ministerial committees, then in councils of legal experts, then in the Council of Ministers and the legislative chambers — so long as respect for these laws, and adherence to what they prescribe, is neither assured nor even desired.

A reasonable person does not act idly. He acts because he wishes to achieve something, to reach an end.

But if laws are drafted and enacted for no reason other than being drafted and enacted, then this is a form of futility that I cannot understand: how rational people choose it and how they allow themselves to be drawn into it.

And the matter does not stop at this absurd waste. Laws that are enacted but not respected lead to something far more dangerous — something that corrodes the relationship between the governed and their government.

For nothing is more harmful to that relationship, nothing more destructive to the bond between ministries and peoples, than the moment nations come to believe that governments trifle with them, mock their institutions, pass laws only to disregard them, and set rules only to break them.

We would like to know: Why was the University Law amended?
Why did the ministry and the parliament expend all that time and effort if the law was not meant, first and foremost, to be applied — to govern the affairs of the University, according to its terms?

We once criticized changes to the old law, seeing in them a destruction of the University's independence, an erasure of its liberty, and an assault upon its academic identity.

We reproached the government, loudly and sharply.

We reproached the parliament for approving the amendment.

We reproached the academics for remaining silent.

But now it appears that we were gravely mistaken.

The new law does not satisfy the minister's appetite for tampering with the University.

Evidently, it must be changed again.

For this law, too, limits — even slightly — the minister's power over the University. It constrains him to positions he would rather not occupy. So he did not change the law properly, nor did the parliament succeed when it approved the change. Indeed, parliament should have demanded *more*, so that the minister's authority might be expanded further still.

As for the academics, they erred in keeping silent: the law does not humiliate them nearly as much as they are willing to be humiliated; it does not diminish their freedom nearly as much as they are prepared to tolerate. Events now prove this beyond doubt.

The proof lies in that odd, faintly comic story of the election of the Dean of the Faculty of Science.

Under the old law, the minister had the right to choose the dean from among the senior professors, after consulting the faculty councils. Their opinion did not bind him; the faculty might nominate Zayd and he could choose 'Amr instead.

Yet no minister ever exercised this prerogative; they always appointed the candidate chosen by the faculty. Not one deviated.

But when the current Minister of Tradition sought to amend the University's regulations, he imagined that modifying the dean-selection process would extend his authority.

So he granted faculty councils the right to nominate three senior professors, from whom he would choose one — and only one.

The new procedure was applied in Medicine, Law, and Arts.

Each nominated three candidates; the minister selected the dean from among them.

Then came the turn of the Faculty of Science.

The faculty met, voted secretly, and eliminated the former English dean from consideration.

The three nominees were all Egyptians.

The academics anticipated the minister's displeasure — but they did not imagine he would be unable to bear the result, or that he would violate the very law he himself had drafted, defended in parliament, and proclaimed as the guardian of the University's independence and dignity.

But that is exactly what happened.

The minister found the result intolerable.

The story goes that he instructed the Acting Rector to persuade the three Egyptian nominees to withdraw, so the election could be repeated and the former English dean reintroduced as a candidate.

The Acting Rector accepted this task — a task wholly consistent with neither the law nor the dignity of the University — and attempted to carry it out. He met the nominees, argued and pleaded with them, but failed.

It is said that the minister then summoned them himself, debated with them heatedly, resorted at last to threats — speaking of transfers and dismissals. I do not know how the conversation ended, but one thing is certain: the first election was cancelled. A second took place, and it conveniently placed the English professor among the nominees.

No sooner were the results delivered than the minister appointed him dean of the Faculty of Science, entrusting the affairs of the faculty to him for three years beginning yesterday.

This story offers many lessons.

It shows how the law drafted by the minister was violated, barely a month after its enactment — and for one reason only: to please the English, or to avoid their displeasure.

Here lies irrefutable proof that our government is wholly independent — so independent that it cannot bear to anger the English, nor can it act without their satisfaction.

Is this not the same government whose president once delivered that “historic” reply to MacDonald?

Another lesson: the Acting Rector accepted the minister’s demand, and thus asked Egyptian professors to step aside for their English colleague.

This is, undeniably, a shining example of the University’s devotion to its own independence, its defense of its dignity, and its respect for its own laws!

Another lesson still: the Egyptian professors proved no more attached to the University’s independence or to national dignity than the Acting Rector or the minister himself.

They agreed to violate the law.

They agreed to step aside for the Englishman.

They accepted the re-election.

And the first nominee agreed to serve as the English professor’s assistant once he became dean.

And yet Egyptians are accused of bigotry, of resenting foreigners, of seeking to monopolize advantages!

One final lesson — perhaps the most bitter:

Egyptians will achieve nothing, will reach nothing, so long as their ministers regard them as they do — and so long as they themselves accept such a view of who they are.

So long as the most educated among them — the academics — allow themselves to be shaped like soft dough in the hands of those who wield power, there will be no progress, no dignity, and no independence.

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn
Kawkab al-Sharq, 1 June 1933