

Evening Talk

Tyranny...

When the Minister of Education tyrannizes over the University, it becomes permissible for a group of deputies to tyrannize over elementary education. And when the Minister humiliates university men, it becomes permissible for some deputies to humiliate the teachers of primary schools. For God has made people unequal: some are favored above others, raised in degrees one over another. Let the Minister have higher education and its people; let the shaykhs take secondary education and its people; and leave what lies beneath to the deputies. Or, if you prefer, reverse the whole scheme: place the highest level of education at the bottom and give it to the deputies, and raise the lowest to the top and give it to the Minister. In these days everything has become confused; everything has been thrown into disorder. The distinction between knowledge and ignorance has nearly vanished; the differences between educational levels and branches have almost disappeared. Those who do not know how to teach—and cannot even taste the meaning of teaching—now pass judgment on education and pronounce upon its affairs what they understand, and what they do not.

And why not? What better proof of “progress” could there be than the collapse of distinctions, the confusion of affairs, the advancement of the unqualified and the retreat of the competent, the ignorant lecturing on learning while the learned remain silent before ignorance? Weakness is called strength, and strength is counted as weakness; honor becomes humiliation, humiliation becomes honor; and people accept all this—and demand more of it—until this entire inverted order settles into place, and it is proclaimed to the ends of the earth that Egypt has attained a degree of progress no other nation has reached, and has won a freedom no other land enjoys.

Yet the undeniable truth is that education—of all types and levels—is now undergoing in Egypt an ordeal perhaps more severe than that suffered by any other public service. Each day the public reads of what the University and its faculty endure: endless changes, alterations, distortions, and revisions; humiliations inflicted upon Egyptians; deference shown to foreign desires; violations of a law only weeks old. And every day we read that secondary education too has been plunged into this fire of constant change and turmoil. Its curricula are now being reviewed—cutting pieces off here, extending pieces there. Only God knows what will come of this “study” now absorbing the Minister of Traditions and his circle.

As for primary education, its situation is strange indeed: its surface is tempting, captivating; its substance calls forth sorrow and pity. We hear that compulsory education will soon be imposed in this country—fulfilling an old popular demand, responding to the provisions of the former constitution and the new one, and reflecting the unanimous will of all parties, learned and unlearned alike. This appears, outwardly, to be a welcome development. But like other public services, it is not being guided by pure public interest, nor by the common good that ought never to be tainted by partisanship. Those who read the speeches delivered in Parliament cannot help sensing that something is being concealed, though it stands out plainly enough.

What is this ugly campaign that some deputies have launched against the teachers of primary education — a campaign waged without patience, without thought, without fairness or moderation, without regard for truth or justice? What is this attack they unleashed, and which

the Minister of Education met with silence — failing to soften its sharpness, failing to restrain its excess, failing even to remind the attackers of balance and right conduct?

What have these teachers done to deserve such hostility from these deputies, or such abandonment from a Minister who leaves them as fuel for this fire? Is it not strange that a minister's first duty is to gather his employees, defend them, shield them with all the strength available — yet the Minister of Education does not protect his staff, does not shield them from deputies who defame them, accuse them falsely, and attribute to them actions which, if true, would not only condemn the teachers, but the Ministry itself, which keeps them in their posts and entrusts them with the upbringing and formation of children?

One deputy describes these teachers as “drunkards,” “idle,” “vagrant,” “useless,” men who adopt modern dress merely to pursue pleasure and fall into corruption. One of two things must be true: either the deputy is telling the truth— in which case why does the Ministry keep such men, entrust them with children, allow them to mold young minds and characters? Does the Ministry wish a whole generation of children to grow up in vice, corruption, frivolity, and indulgence in sin?

Or—and this is what we believe—the deputy is not telling the truth. These men are no different from other Egyptians: there are always exceptions, but the majority are upright. Why then does the Ministry remain silent while they are insulted and slandered in a manner that demeans not only the teachers but the dignity of the Ministry itself and the dignity of Egypt?

Imagine foreign readers encountering this deputy's speech, noting the Minister's silence and acceptance. They would be forced to believe him. They would conclude that Egypt entrusts its children to an army of corrupt, idle, wandering men. Would the Minister of Education be pleased to see such a disgraceful accusation spread about Egypt—that she prepares for the future a generation built on vice, unemployment, and the abandonment of all good?

We know that the Ministry and its supporters pursue political aims through primary education. But they could have pursued these aims without violating the dignity of others, without harming reputations, without spreading shameful accusations about Egyptians or tarnishing the country's image. They wish to extend al-Azhar's influence and place Azhari graduates throughout the land, entrusting them alone with primary education. Let them try if they can — but with calm, moderation, and without attacking the honor of others.

And if one asks: Why does the Minister of Traditions and certain deputies favor Azhari graduates over other Egyptians for primary teaching? The answer is simple: they believe these young men will be more inclined to support a particular political program they desire. But they are mistaken, as they so often are. Azhari youth are Egyptians like all other Egyptians: they love their country, desire genuine freedom and true democracy, and will not be like the old shaykhs — obedient to every policy, followers of every party. Egyptian youth have outgrown this weakness entirely.

How amusing, then, is this insistence by deputies that primary teachers must be Azhari graduates of a certain age, wearing a specific traditional dress — that the “turban” be imposed, and anyone who wears the tarbush be excluded! If our deputies are so passionately attached to our ancient national attire, why do they not impose it upon themselves? Why not require it of ministers? Of all officials? If the tarbush is sinful, then remove it from every

head; if it is not, then permit it on all. Egyptian heads are not so unequal that some should be crowned with turbans while others wear tarbushes. And it would indeed be a curious — even delightful — sight to see our deputies, senators, and ministers assembled, all crowned with those white headpieces that embody the glory of antiquity. Let one of the deputies propose a law forbidding parliamentary office and public service to anyone not wearing a turban.

As for their opinions on the salaries of primary teachers, they are pristine and flawless: the generous among them would grant the teacher two pounds a month; the “moderate” and the “prudent” would limit him to one pound and a half. Thus the young Egyptian exhausts himself striving to attain this position, then exerts himself further in carrying out its duties, enduring effort and hardship — for a wage of two pounds, or one pound and a half.

Meanwhile the household servant, who never trained for his work, may earn as much — or more — without bearing a fraction of the teacher’s burden. He is not asked about the future of the nation, the upbringing of its children, the strengthening of national unity, or the cultivation of morals. Yet he earns more.

This alone shows the true value that deputies place upon primary education. They do not appreciate it; they do not care for it as an end in itself. They merely wish to say they have “approved” compulsory education, and to prepare advocates for a specific political agenda. If they truly valued primary education, they would know that only a dignified teacher can raise a dignified child; that a hungry, deprived teacher will be tempted to sacrifice self-respect in order to survive by any means.

Had the deputies desired genuinely to support primary education, they would have taken the trouble to study its condition in other advanced countries. They would have discovered nations that do not despise primary teachers, but regard them as pillars of national life, foundations of its strength, and therefore surround them with care, protection, and a decent livelihood. In France, for example, the primary teacher is paid a salary exceeding that of most middle-ranking civil servants; he is housed at the expense of the village, town, or state; he participates fully in public life.

If the Egyptian teacher cannot yet hope for what his French colleague receives—because primary schooling is newly instituted in our country—the least the state can do is honor him, protect his dignity, and provide him the means of a decent existence.

But how can the primary teacher expect dignity when even those in higher education suffer what they suffer?

Teachers must take comfort, then—primary and otherwise. They are, like all Egyptians, undergoing a trial. It may be long, hard, painful to the spirit, wounding to dignity — but it will, sooner or later, pass.

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn
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