

Evening Talk

Intercession...

The petitioners, on this occasion, are the university professors; the one to whom the intercession is addressed is the Minister of Traditions; and the instrument of intercession is the University Council. I do not know whether this means the full University Council or a reduced version thereof. What I do know is that a group of university teachers are appealing—through the Council, in whole or in part—to the Minister of Traditions, asking him to lift from them a burden whose weight they feel painfully in their consciences. They would gladly be rid of it if they could; yet they are, in all likelihood, compelled to bear it should no relief come.

They say that the new regulations of the university exclude assistant professors from the councils of the faculties and from the University Council as well, and allow them to remain in the faculty councils only on the condition that they teach a subject which has no full professor. In that case, they would stand in the place of chair-holding professors, occupying their seats in the council, until such time as a professor is appointed. When that happens, the assistant professor is removed—thanked or unthanked—and the new professor takes his seat.

They say that this regulation was to be applied in one of the faculties, and that the faculty council—mostly Egyptian and composed almost entirely of assistant professors—was thus placed in a difficult position: for the foreign professors occupying the endowed chairs had reached the end of their contracts and were unwilling to renew them. The council, therefore, would consist of only three professors: one Egyptian and two foreigners.

So the university reflected, deliberated, and sought to interpret the law with some latitude. It found in the Department of Legal Affairs an interpretation that permitted such latitude. It became clear that most of these assistant professors were in fact teaching subjects normally assigned to full professors. Therefore, they could retain their seats in the faculty council—though the University Council itself would remain forbidden to them.

Yet this interpretation, which included all assistant professors of the faculty, excluded two—only two. These two were sent back to the rank the new regulations assigned them: to the level of teachers who teach, but neither deliberate nor are consulted in the affairs of the faculty. Their colleagues felt the sting of this exclusion—more, perhaps, than the two excluded themselves. They thought, they reflected, and in the end resolved to appeal to the University Council, hoping it might intercede with the Minister and persuade him to use his legal authority to allow the two professors to remain where they had been, and to spare them—and their colleagues—the indignity of a separation that neither accords with the dignity of learning nor with the spirit of equality that ought to prevail among colleagues in both rights and responsibilities.

They say the matter will be placed before the University Council; and it is to be hoped that the Council will see as the faculty committee saw. It is also to be hoped that the President of the University will not consider this a breach of tradition or a departure from proper order or a violation of any venerable principle. And that he will graciously grant what the professors seek.

We have already observed that this amendment to university regulations is far from serving the interests or the dignity of the university, or the dignity which Egyptians owe themselves in their own land. The overwhelming majority of assistant professors are Egyptians. Those who drafted the earlier regulations deliberately made assistant professors members of the faculty councils, allowed them to represent their faculties on the University Council, and enabled them to act as deans' deputies. Two motives moved them to this.

First: the Egyptian knows the needs of his country in matters of education, and the administrative habits of his country, far better than the foreigner who stays only briefly before returning to his university abroad. Both the educational and administrative welfare of the university therefore required that assistant professors sit in faculty councils and in the University Council, so that they might oversee university affairs and enlighten their foreign colleagues regarding the specifically Egyptian matters they needed to understand—while at the same time absorbing beneficial academic traditions from those colleagues. Experience proved that the drafters of the earlier regulations were entirely right. Without these assistant professors the university would not have taken even a single step forward.

And what would you think of a group of foreign professors, unfamiliar with Egypt, ignorant of its affairs, unversed in its language, and unable to grasp its intricate administrative systems—brought suddenly from Europe and told at once to run the university, and take charge of its teaching, its administration, and its finances? These professors initially threw themselves into administrative and financial matters. The university's director protested, the Minister of Education protested, and affairs were plunged into confusion. Relations between faculty and administration deteriorated, and this deterioration grew until contracts were cancelled and deans dismissed—events I need not recount in detail again.

The second motive behind the earlier regulations was this: the university is Egyptian, and Egypt seeks independence. Independence requires that Egyptians actually participate in managing their own affairs. Egyptian dignity, therefore, required that Egyptians take a strong and active part in directing all aspects of university life. And again experience proved that the university gained nothing but good from Egyptian participation. Indeed, if the university has truly risen in recent years, and acquired a genuine academic personality, and advanced significantly in the Egyptianization of higher education, then that is due largely—and in many faculties solely—to these assistant professors.

How then did today's leaders allow themselves to repay them with ingratitude?

We know that the Faculty of Medicine complained that its council had grown unwieldy due to the large number of assistant professors, and that its dean, His Excellency Dr. 'Alī Pasha Ibrāhīm, sought earnestly to reduce their number—but failed, because the earlier regulations did not permit such an interpretation, and because the university refused to allow such a modification.

Should we now understand that the desire of the Faculty of Medicine to lighten its council from assistant professors is what led to their removal from all faculty councils?

We also know that some foreign professors were annoyed by their Egyptian colleagues—indeed, some complained openly. Are we then to understand that the irritation of foreigners toward Egyptians is among the reasons assistant professors were excluded from the councils?

The majority of these assistant professors, in the modern sense, are Egyptian—Egyptian in their concern for the dignity of Egypt and the pride of Egypt; Egyptian in their dislike of any undue extension of foreign control; Egyptian in their democratic instinct, which rejects anything that restricts democratic life within the university. For all these reasons they often took positions displeasing to foreigners and to the leaders of today. Are we to understand that these independent and democratic tendencies contributed to the exclusion of assistant professors?

It seems that all these reasons together prompted the Minister of Traditions to amend the university law in this way—curbing the Egyptian hand in university affairs, extending the hand of government on one side and the hand of foreigners on the other, imposing upon a group of Egypt's young scholars a measure of humiliation that they in no way deserve, for their entire lives qualify them to stand with dignity. And now a faculty finds itself appealing through the University Council to have two of its finest members restored to their place. The other faculties will undoubtedly wish they could do likewise.

I am fully confident that experience will prove—without the slightest doubt—that this amendment was an extravagant mistake, and the university will be forced to insist that the law be restored to what it had been. But who can guarantee that experience will be allowed to run its course long enough to reveal the flaw? The entire new university system depends on the survival of the present ministry. And what is this ministry but a summer cloud?

How much better it would have been for the professors to spare themselves this needless intercession.

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn
Kawkab al-Sharq, 27 May 1933