

Independence

Kawkab al-Sharq, 17 March 1933

It is not political independence that I mean — the conversation about political independence is inexhaustible, and we are engaged in it every day until that independence is actually realised and the affairs of Egypt truly become Egypt's own...

What I mean is the independence of the university. This appears to be a concept not properly understood — either because many people are newcomers to universities and know virtually nothing about them, or because a faction of people is given to deceiving and misleading the public, presenting the matter in a form that bears no resemblance to the reality one sees in every country with a sound university system. Or, if you prefer, say that both of these causes together explain why people do not understand university independence as it ought to be understood.

And these people are far more numerous than you might think. They do not stop at newspaper readers and the educated class who are capable of discussing public affairs — they extend beyond them to those whom circumstances have placed in charge of the legislative authority in this country. For it became apparent from the modest debate that arose about the university in the House of Representatives that the legislators' knowledge of university affairs and university systems is no sounder, no broader, and no deeper than that of the general public.

It became apparent that our representatives themselves fall into two categories: one that knows nothing about the university and cannot know anything about it, because its members' lives, upbringing, and level of culture do not permit them to know anything of consequence about it; and another that may know, or be capable of knowing, something about the university, but has been compelled by politics to conceal its knowledge and present it in a particular guise to its fellow representatives.

The question of the university in Egypt today is, like other questions, political before it is scholarly. It is not approached from the standpoint of knowledge as such, but from the standpoint of the political interests of those who oversee affairs in our country in these days. And since the question is political, the matter is plain and clear, admitting of no confusion and no obscurity.

You know that there are two doctrines contending for power in Egypt: one, the doctrine of those who govern the people for the people; the other, the doctrine of those who govern the people for themselves — above all else, after all else, and before all else. And you know that those who wish the people to be governed for the people are now far from power, and that

those who govern the people for themselves are the ones to whom the conduct of government has been entrusted. It is natural, therefore, that they should look at every matter from the standpoint of whether it suits their political doctrine or does not suit it.

When they look at university independence from this angle, they do not hesitate to conclude that any independence left to the university is a danger to them — it clips their wings, trims their claws, and curtails their authority to a greater or lesser degree. The university's share of independence must therefore be restricted by every available means. This is what the government did when it amended the university law enacted by the former parliament, and this is what the House of Representatives did when it approved this amendment two or three days ago, just as the minister had wished.

The strangest thing about this amendment is that the parliamentary committee in the House of Representatives studied it, drew up a report on it which it submitted to the chamber, and in doing so either deceived itself or was deceived by the Ministry's representative before it regarding the university system in Europe. The result was that it deceived the House of Representatives itself. The most likely explanation is that many members of the chamber did not read the report. Why did they not read it? Because they trust the committee and know it will not deceive them or deceive itself; they trust the minister and know he will ask of them only what ought to be asked, say to them only what ought to be said, and do only what leads to the realisation of the policy to which we must submit in these days — the policy of the privileged, infallible few monopolising the rights of the ignorant, heedless many, who were created for obedience and not for governance.

The committee claimed in its report — or it was claimed to it by the representative of the Ministry of Education — that if European universities enjoy a great degree of independence that our universities do not enjoy, it is because these universities are wealthy, governments do not fund them and they do not draw their finances from state budgets, so governments should have no hold over them. This is unfortunately untrue, except in England.

There is no doubt, for example, that French universities are funded by the state; they may receive endowments, but these endowments are nothing compared to what the state spends on them annually. When they have achieved their great independence, they derive it from customs and traditions, and from governments' understanding of the genuine need of scholarship for independence and of the elevation of universities above partisan whims and appetites.

Whatever the case, the committee gave the House of Representatives to understand that because the government funds the university it must control it. Neither the committee nor the chamber thought that the government also funds the judiciary, and yet cannot enact a law

enabling it to control it. The government does not spend on the university or on the judiciary from its own private funds, for the government has no private funds — it spends on the university and the judiciary from the nation's funds, and the nation alone has the right to control everything.

From this strange conception arose the fact that the government fashioned for the university a cunning, rank, and heavy constraint that the House of Representatives either failed to notice or noticed and disregarded, and whose like will not be found in any country on earth. With it in place, the university will not deserve to be called a university, nor to be a national Egyptian university, nor to discharge its scholarly trust as it ought to be discharged. This constraint is the University Council as constituted by the new law and as the new law distributes jurisdiction and authority within it.

Under the law enacted by the parliament, the great majority of the University Council consisted of university members. Each faculty had three representatives: the dean and two members freely elected by the faculty council without restriction. The number of university members on the council was thus twelve, to whom the director was added — himself a university member, or at any rate one who should be. The university thus held two-thirds of the council's membership, and this council adjudicated all the university's affairs, with nothing to overturn its rulings in many matters, and the minister having the right of objection in some, but in no case having the right to adjudicate unilaterally any matter of university affairs.

Now, the number of university members on the council has not changed in appearance — but in reality it has undergone a dangerous change. The deputy dean has become a member of the council by virtue of his office, and the minister has taken for himself the right to appoint the deputy, who has thus become directly subordinate to the minister and a council member by appointment rather than election. The other member who represents the faculty alongside the dean and deputy on the council must now be a full professor with a chair, and is taken onto the council by seniority — he too, therefore, is in effect an appointed member.

This means that university professors have been deprived of, or severely restricted in, their right to elect the University Council — just as the majority of the people have been restricted in electing representatives. The political idea that presided over the amendment of the university law is that elections are a dangerous weapon that must not be placed in Egyptians' hands except by calculation and under close surveillance — because Egyptians, whether scholars or ordinary citizens, are children who have not yet reached the age of majority, and the government must therefore stand toward them in the position of guardian.

The matter did not stop at the composition of the council relative to university members; it extended to the council's jurisdiction and its conduct of university affairs — and here lies the seat of the monstrous political danger that will strip the university of all scholarly value if this law takes effect.

For this council divides into two councils: one a restricted university council, the other an absolute governmental council. The first is the council I described above; it adjudicates specific educational matters such as curricula and examination systems, and its rulings are subject to the minister's authority. But when the serious matters arise — those in which the university needs freedom and independence — the second council comes into play. It consists of officials and officials alone: seven chosen by the government, to whom are added the university director appointed by the government, and the faculty deans appointed by the minister, who are remunerated for performing the dean's duties.

As for the faculty deputies appointed by the minister but not remunerated for their deputyship, and the other members who reach the council by virtue of their chairs — these are excluded from the council when matters of gravity are placed before it. In this way the government ensures that affairs in this council proceed as it wishes.

And what are the affairs without which the university has no existence? They are: the university budget, the disposal of university funds, and the appointment, transfer, promotion, and discipline of professors and lecturers. Do you see now that real power in the university has been vested in this governmental council?

The government alone decides the university budget, and the government is the one that selects, transfers, promotes, or disciplines the professor. The professor is subject in his entire university life to the government's authority — nothing guarantees him academic freedom, nothing protects him from the government's severity and heavy hand. If despite all this he manages to be free in opinion or in scholarly research, then woe to him from the government's power and the government's discipline.

In this manner the composition of the University Council was amended and the jurisdiction of the University Council was amended. You will perhaps agree with me that the most obvious thing in this amendment is nothing other than the government's monopolisation of authority. There is nothing surprising in this as long as the governing principle of Egyptian politics today is that the government governs the people for itself and not for the people — its authority is not a popular instrument directed toward the service of the public interest, but a governmental instrument directed toward enabling the government to control everything.

Do you now understand the secret of this conspiracy that has been plotted against the university since the system of governance in Egypt changed? The university was too spacious for Egypt, just as the constitution was too spacious for Egypt — and the constitution has been narrowed, so let the university system be narrowed.

Those who smile when they mention the Minister of Customs — because they know he is a good-hearted, simple-minded man whose understanding may not penetrate to this deep policy — would do well to reflect that the most good-hearted of people, the simplest in thought, and the least penetrating in insight may be capable of serving as an instrument of policy that is dangerous to democratic systems and to the freedom of peoples, if the clever man is found who steers him and steers him well, and guides him and guides him well toward what he wants.

And this clever man has been found — the one who found the constitution too generous and narrowed it, who found the university too generous and narrowed its system, who steered the Minister of Customs well toward what he wanted, so that the university has become, as you see, something whose name is used for announcements and the spreading of propaganda, but which is utterly incapable of discharging its scholarly trust as universities discharge it.

Yes, the clever man has been found who guided the Minister of Customs so well. And who can doubt the cleverness of the Prime Minister? And who appoints the Prime Minister?