

Democracy Is Nothing but Knowledge and Learning

When I speak of democracy, I understand by it two essential conditions without which the life of nations and individuals cannot be sound. The first is the people's aspiration to know themselves — to discover their own strength so as to increase and use it, and to recognize their weaknesses so as to guard against and overcome them. The second is the clarity of a people's conscience before itself, so that it may perceive its longings, its aspirations, its thirst for truth, and its need for the perfection it must strive to attain.

Without these two conditions, I cannot comprehend democracy, nor do I believe democracy itself can truly comprehend its own essence otherwise. For democracy means that a nation understands its aspirations; it is the means by which a people perceives its need for truth, justice, and the higher ideals. In this sense, democracy is nothing but knowledge and learning.

If this is true — and I believe it is — then the bond between the university and democracy is like that between mind and body, or between a guiding intellect and the material it directs. Upon this foundation, democracy enables a people to know its needs — for justice, for truth, for aspiration — and I do not think any nation can perceive these if it remains in ignorance. Hence, I do not exaggerate when I say: democracy abhors nothing as it abhors ignorance, and it loves nothing as it loves knowledge and learning.

God did not endow Egypt only with fertile soil, but also with a fertile spirit. The Egyptian soul, like the Egyptian land, is balanced, straight, and fertile — receptive to all forms of knowledge and culture, transforming them into benefits for itself and for others. Many are the plants and trees that were brought to Egypt and flourished; many are the ideas, reflections, and kinds of knowledge that came to Egypt, took root, and enriched both the country and the world.

Ancient Greece brought its civilization to Egypt, and it grew here and served humanity as a whole. The Islamic civilization of the Middle Ages did the same. In modern times, European civilization took root in Egypt and continues to thrive, becoming once more a source of benefit to all humanity. Thus, the Egyptian soul — like its soil and its air — is fertile, generous, and ever-renewing.

In this new era in which we live, a new tree has been planted in Egypt: the tree of democracy. It scarcely arrived before it began to bear fruit — the awakening of the people's conscience, and the recognition of an urgent need for continuous learning. The progress, expansion, and deepening of education in Egypt are inseparable from the arrival of democracy. Each time Egypt has felt the pulse of a true and pure democratic life, it has also felt an irresistible desire to learn — endlessly.

In the past two years, as democracy has returned to its natural course, the conscience of the nation has been illuminated anew. The people have recognized their hunger for learning and have pressed their government to expand education — not with restraint, but with boldness and breadth. And I wish I could say: without limit. For only when education becomes universal and free at all levels — primary, secondary, and higher — will our democracy be fully alive.

There are always disputes between democracy and democratic governments. Governments must plan and deliberate, bound by caution and balance; but democracy, which runs in the blood of the people, demands without measure. Reason calculates, but the nature of life always demands more. If reason reaches one conclusion today, the nature of things will press beyond it tomorrow. So too will our democracy compel us — not merely to expand education, but to expand it greatly. What once seemed excessive will soon appear insufficient.

Some say university education should remain limited, for it is a kind of luxury the people should not pursue too eagerly. They argue that if the populace becomes highly educated, it may desire what it should not desire, think what it should not think, or aspire to what it cannot have. But this view is dangerous to democracy itself. If education is a good, equality demands that all share in it; if it is an evil, equality still requires that all bear it alike. Surely, education — especially higher education — is a good, and one essential to the nation's welfare.

Has Egypt exhausted its industrial, commercial, or agricultural potential? Certainly not. Has it even reached a moderate level of development? Again, no. Our material life, with all its needs and ambitions, requires thought and effort — and how can there be thought without minds trained to think? That is the role of higher education, and nothing else can replace it.

Primary or secondary education cannot organize or guide themselves without those who have attained higher learning. It is not enough to wish for progress; one must understand what progress requires. Those who call for limits on education are in truth asking that the nation live without a head, without a mind.

The university, then, is not a cloister where monks isolate themselves in pure contemplation. It is a living environment in which students learn to think clearly, flexibly, and comprehensively — prepared to confront all the challenges that life, theoretical and practical, will present. A university that serves only abstract knowledge has no place in a democracy. But a university that refines both intellect and life, enabling its students to benefit themselves, their families, and their nation — that is the university democracy needs and cannot live without.

Democracy rests on justice. And one of the most profound expressions of that justice is the principle introduced by the Minister of Education: equality of opportunity. It gives to each individual all that can rightly be given, and it must not be confined to one form of education or one sphere of life. It has already reached primary education, and it will extend to secondary, then to higher

education, and beyond — to every field of life. Equality of opportunity will soon become synonymous with what people today call social justice.

Our democratic life must therefore be founded on two pillars: equality of opportunity and social justice. The balance between them — between the individual's aspiration to a life of fulfillment and the collective desire for stability, peace, and shared progress — cannot be achieved except through thoughtful intelligence and guiding intellect. And these are embodied in the highest ranks of education, in the universities and centers of learning.

There are those who believe higher education should be reserved for a few, since not all can attain it. But what defines who is capable? If wealth decides, democracy is destroyed. If power decides, democracy is destroyed again. Only one principle remains: equality of opportunity — the capacity and readiness of the individual. No Egyptian should be excluded from higher education because of circumstance; only those without aptitude should turn aside. Democracy demands that every door of learning be opened to all who are able to walk through.

And let higher education not be confined to theory alone — for Egypt's needs are practical as well as intellectual. It is a sign of health that our democracy now builds schools based on the nation's real needs, recognizing the true worth of education and the dignity of those who pursue it. May this principle grow in strength, until our people not only learn, but learn greatly, and learn well — with free and excellent higher education for all.

June 9, 1944 – *Al-Wafd al-Miṣrī*