

## Primary Education at the Ministry of Education

### “Hadith al-Yawm”

By Ṭāhā Ḥusayn  
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We should give thanks. The Ministry of Education has at last begun to feel that it owes some attention—however slight—to the criticism of critics and the advice of advisers. You may recall that only days ago we wrote critically about the method the Ministry adopted in forming its committees for educational reform. We examined that method from several angles: we criticized, first, the absence of teachers—those best qualified to understand education and to judge how it may be improved; and second, the Ministry’s tendency to monopolize such committees with its own officials, when the public interest clearly requires the participation not only of capable figures from within the Ministry, but also from other government departments and from among Egyptians and foreigners alike who are genuinely concerned with education.

We are therefore pleased to learn that the Ministry has published—or promised to publish—a decree establishing a committee to examine the universalization of primary education, or to review the draft project already prepared for that purpose. Having read the names of its members, we may note with some satisfaction that this committee is not confined to officials of the Ministry of Education alone. It includes officials from other ministries, as well as two individuals outside government service: one a university professor, the other a lawyer. This is a small step, but it is at least a step away from monopoly. It should also be said that this step is not entirely new. The committee formed in 1917 to study the expansion of primary education was likewise not limited to Ministry officials; it included administrators and others drawn from outside the Ministry. The step, then, is modest and not unprecedented—but that does not prevent us from valuing it and acknowledging that it contains some measure of good.

Yet it does not contain all the good that is required. For this committee, though composed largely of intelligent and capable individuals who are well able to understand education and deliberate upon it, nonetheless suffers from serious deficiencies and invites criticism on several grounds.

Foremost among these is the complete absence of teachers. The committee contains only one academic, Professor Dr. ‘Alī al-‘Anān of the Egyptian University. For all his competence, and for all the Ministry’s good judgment in selecting him, he represents higher education on the one hand and private education on the other. He is not a teacher in a primary school, nor in a teachers’ college. In forming this committee, the Ministry has effectively set aside all its own teachers—those working in primary education at every level, as well as those teaching at the elementary, secondary, and higher stages—as though they were incapable of pointing

to what is good or of contributing usefully to the design of a productive and effective system for universal primary education.

We do not doubt the competence of most of the officials who have been selected. Yet we are equally certain that teachers who engage daily in the work of education—who experience its sweetness and its bitterness, and who know from lived reality its shortcomings and its need for reform—are better suited than others to contribute meaningfully to such a committee. There was therefore no justification for excluding them from this important task.

We need not speculate about the reasonable or unreasonable motives that led the Ministry to bypass teachers. What matters is that the composition of this committee is not irrevocable. It is both possible—and indeed necessary—for the Ministry to reconsider it and to include a number of teachers. This would benefit the project itself; it would restore a right to those entitled to it, and offer teachers at least moral recognition, if material justice remains out of reach. Moreover, within the Ministry there are individuals who have devoted serious, practical effort to primary education and have demonstrated both competence and distinction. We shall not name them, for the Ministry knows them well—and knows equally well that overlooking them does not serve the interests of primary education. It is incumbent upon the Ministry not to neglect such talents, but to include them in the committee's work.

There is another matter as well. In seeking to involve individuals from outside the ranks of professional educators, the Ministry has at times chosen wisely, and at other times poorly. It has included in this technical committee persons who scarcely know how education is sustained, and who should not be consulted on questions of such specialized and delicate technical importance.

This recalls an episode at al-Azhar during the early days of its reform, after the departure of Imam Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abduh, when responsibility for teaching dictation was once assigned to a blind shaykh who had never read or written. The Ministry of Education has done something similar by appointing to a technical committee for educational reform individuals whose only connection to education is that they themselves can read and write. Literacy is one thing; reforming education is quite another.

There are still further points to which the Ministry's attention should be drawn. Independence does not require monopoly; it requires determined work for the public good, guided by sound judgment. There is no doubt that foreigners can be highly competent in understanding education and in offering valuable counsel on its reform. Yet the Ministry has not drawn upon such expertise, save for the inclusion of Mr. Robb, one of its own officials, and an English inspector from a department concerned with buildings. We would have preferred the Ministry to seek the counsel of foreign educators engaged in private education within Egypt. The French, Italians, English, and Americans all maintain educational missions—religious and secular—operating at various levels. There is no question that those directing these missions possess expertise which, if it does not benefit the project, will

certainly do it no harm. Indeed, we are confident it would be of great benefit, for these individuals possess experience of education both in their own countries and in ours—experience regrettably unavailable to most Egyptian educators.

In short, we propose that the Ministry of Education reconsider the composition of this committee: first, by including teachers; second, by incorporating the capable individuals within the Ministry who have been unjustly overlooked; third, by exercising greater care in selecting non-educators; and fourth, by including a number of foreign specialists engaged in education in Egypt. Should it do so, it would come closer to serving the public good.

Whether the Ministry heeds us or not, we nonetheless welcome the formation of this committee. We shall study the primary education project it has been tasked with examining, and we shall publish our views on it. We are confident that the committee itself will value the criticism of critics more than the Ministry has done.