

At the Ministry of Education: Right Guidance and Error

al-Siyasa, 17 July 1923

It has been claimed that the soundness of the body depends on the soundness of the head that governs it: when the head is corrupted, the body is corrupted; when the head falls into disorder, the body's affairs fall into disorder too. This has been claimed, and said, and said again, until it became a commonplace maxim, a saying repeated endlessly. It has likewise been claimed that the soundness of the schools depends on the soundness of the Ministry of Education that runs and oversees them: when the Ministry of Education is corrupted, the corruption of the schools is no longer a strange thing; when the Ministry of Education falls into disorder, there is no longer any wonder to be found when education itself falls into disorder. This too has been claimed, and said, and said again, until it became a commonplace maxim, a saying repeated endlessly — one which we are now obliged to accept without discussion or dispute.

The soundness of the schools and of education, then, depends on the soundness of the Ministry of Education. But what is meant by the soundness of the Ministry of Education? What does this term actually signify? In truth, it signifies many things — and, unfortunately, these very things have eluded the Ministry of Education; for this Ministry stands in urgent need of reform, of several different kinds of reform, without which we cannot hope for sound schools or sound education.

It appears that we want this, and it appears that the Ministry of Education senses that we want it; but it does not sense the connection between the soundness of the Ministry itself and the soundness of the schools — and this is the first kind of corruption we observe in this unfortunate Ministry.

Only one who understands reform and feels the need for it is capable of achieving it; and if the Ministry of Education neither understands this reform nor feels any need for it, then it is simply incapable of it, and will never arrive at it, however much effort it expends, however much hardship it endures. We now wish to demonstrate, from the Ministry of Education's own recent conduct, that it does not understand reform, does not gauge our need for it, and does not follow the path that would actually lead us toward it.

We wish to demonstrate this from the Ministry of Education's own conduct in these recent days. Some days ago I read, in the newspapers, of appointments and transfers — as they call them — that had taken place at the Ministry of Education, and these did not happen for no reason: some opinion, some theory, must have guided those in charge at the Ministry when they decided whom to appoint and whom to transfer, and the Minister of Education alone bears formal responsibility for this opinion, for this theory. Though the Minister of Education, like any other minister, relies in such matters on his advisers and technical assistants within the Ministry — he is officially responsible, but those truly responsible are these very assistants and advisers. So what is this opinion? What is this theory? What are the principles those overseeing education have followed in the transfers and appointments they have made? I can say plainly that the interests of education, the benefit of professors and students, and the benefit of Egypt as a whole, were not taken as the basis for these transfers or appointments — indeed, that benefit was set aside quite openly.

Yes! Neither the interest of education, nor that of teachers, nor that of students, was given any regard in the transfers and appointments made at the Ministry of Education. Had even the slightest regard been given to this interest, the posts would have gone to the most capable — to those able to fill them, to run them, and to serve learning and education well within them.

But when we read the names of those appointed and transferred, and read their new posts, and compare the one against the other, we find no connection whatsoever — no connection short or long, no connection weak or strong, no technical expertise at play at all. We find one thing only: the will of those in charge of the matter at the Ministry of Education.

We want those transferred and appointed to understand that we are not accusing them of any personal incompetence, nor detracting from it in any way — we are, rather, defending it, and jealously guarding it against being wasted on something other than what it was made for. These men, transferred and appointed, are among the finest Egyptians capable of serving Egypt well; but some hidden, devilish idea has placed each one of them in a spot where he can neither move forward nor back. We shall now explain to you the secret of this hidden, devilish idea.

His Honour Ali Hafiz Bey was made Inspector of Primary Education, though His Honour Ali Hafiz Bey has neither little nor much experience in the affairs of primary education, having spent his entire public career occupied with matters quite other than primary education. His Honour Awad Ibrahim Bey was made Assistant Inspector of Primary Education, and is no better provided than his colleague with experience in primary education or in the practice of overseeing it. Mr. Robb was made Inspector of Elementary Education, and Mr. Robb has occupied himself with nothing whatsoever connected to elementary education since his arrival in Egypt. Mr. Simpson was made Inspector of Secondary Education, and Mr. Simpson has had nothing to do with secondary education since he first came out to the Nile Valley — he inspected education in the Sudan instead, and ran the Higher Teachers' College in Egypt.

I do not doubt for a moment that all of these gentlemen are capable enough to succeed, God willing, in learning the professions the Ministry of Education has charged them with; but they will only learn these professions, God willing, after some length of time, longer or shorter, after trial and error, after hesitation, after administrative disorder that will in turn produce disorder in the affairs of the schools and of education itself — after the schools, education, and Egypt as a whole have lost, to this period of trial, time that ought never to have been lost at all.

Here I ask myself: what does the Ministry of Education actually want, when it entrusts one of its posts to a particular person? Does it want the post to benefit from the person who occupies it, or does it want the person to benefit from the post entrusted to him? If the former, then it is only right that the Ministry of Education should fill its posts with those capable of managing them; if the latter, then this is pure harm, since it is a waste of time and a trifling with the public benefit. It is not the Ministry of Education's job to teach its men how to run primary, secondary, or elementary education — its bureau is not, first and foremost, a training school for senior officials. What is required of the Ministry of Education is that it place, in every post, the person most capable of bearing its burdens and managing its affairs.

And such people exist; the Ministry of Education has turned away from them for some reason we either do not know, or do know but shall not mention — nor does it concern us to mention it.

There are men at the Ministry of Education with real experience in primary education, who have run it and served it well in oversight for many long years; there are men at the Ministry of Education with real experience in elementary and secondary education, who have studied and tested both with distinction. But the Ministry of Education has turned away from these very men toward others, placing its own varied competencies exactly where they can neither help nor avail, except after some length of time, longer or shorter.

The Ministry of Education has not done this for nothing: every ministry of the Egyptian government has its own secret. And the secret of the Ministry of Education is plain and obvious, hidden from no one — yet it serves neither education nor the public interest. The Ministry of Education is among the ministries most zealously attached to the principle of centralization, to gathering all authority into a single hand; among the ministries most insistent that its various departments remain distinct and multiple, and yet, in spite of this multiplicity, remain harmonized and unified under a single head, run by a single hand. For if primary education were placed in the hands of one who understood primary education, elementary education in the hands of one skilled in running elementary education, and secondary education in the hands of one who mastered oversight of secondary education, centralization itself, and the authority of the one man at the top, would be placed in grave danger.

These capable men would very nearly have gained full, or near-full, independence over their own departments — and that would be a great evil. For the Ministry of Education wants centralization, and its path to centralization lies in entrusting its senior posts to those who know nothing about them; for once such men have taken up these posts, bewilderment overtakes them in their own affairs, and they find themselves compelled, at every moment, to turn back to the central authority in matters both small and great. And so the hand of this central authority remains extended over every corner of the Ministry, over every discipline of administration, and over every branch of education.

The theory is, in itself, a reasonable and productive one — but it becomes extremely dangerous when taken as a founding principle at the Ministry of Education. Extremely dangerous, because it kills off scholarly competence, when Egypt's own interest lies in strengthening such competence, not killing it. Extremely dangerous, because it degrades those overseeing education, when Egypt's interest — and education's own

interest — lies in those overseers being free men. Extremely dangerous, because it establishes education in Egypt upon the authority of a single man, when Egypt's interest — especially in this era of independence and constitutional government — lies in education resting upon the authority of the community and of democracy. And extremely dangerous, finally, because it makes every teacher feel himself subject to the authority and the arbitrary rule of one man. How quickly morals decay under such conditions! How quickly individual character is erased! How quickly teachers become mere tools to be wielded, rather than thinking minds! And this alone is harm enough, for Egypt, for Egypt's children, and for Egypt's future.

Such, then, is the theory of centralization and its effects at the Ministry of Education — a theory which may, as I have said, be reasonable enough, and open to inquiry and debate. But there is another theory at work within the Ministry of Education, and I am reluctant to name it, wishing to hold the Ministry of Learning and Education above having such a theory attributed to it. I shall not name it, then, and shall leave it to you to understand it and to name it yourself, once I have shown you a little of its effects in the transfers and appointments made in these recent days.

Egypt has secondary schools, and these secondary schools have Egyptian deputy headmasters who have worked in them, tested themselves in them, and administered them well; it would have been reasonable to entrust the headmastership of these very schools to them, and to promote elementary-school headmasters to the deputy headmastership of secondary schools, so that, once they had served some years in that deputy role, tested it, and handled it well, they might then be promoted to the headmastership of secondary schools. This is what is reasonable, and suited to the interest of professors, students, headmasters, deputies, and education in general. But what is reasonable is one thing, and the Ministry of Education is quite another: there are secondary schools whose headmastership has been given to elementary-school headmasters with no experience or proven service whatsoever in secondary education.

Whatever is said about this promotion is said; but I am not concerned with what is said — I am concerned with the technical principles themselves, and these are the same throughout the Ministry's bureau and throughout the Ministry's schools alike. They revolve around a single point: placing competent people exactly where they cannot help

or avail, except after trial, study, and some length of time, longer or shorter — and the result of this is plain to see: disorder and corruption in the administration, and education itself exposed to every kind of folly and every kind of danger.

Does the Minister of Education see any right guidance in this?! Does he see any benefit in it?! Does he not feel, as we feel, that if there is one ministry in Egypt duty-bound to guard its time and its strength jealously, to invest its competent people justly and fairly, and to make sound technical judgement its only basis for transfers and appointments — it is this very Ministry?

We say: if there is any ministry in Egypt fit to bear all of this responsibility, it is the Ministry of Education, to which the upbringing of Egypt and the shaping of Egypt's future have been entrusted.