

On Political Education

Al-Musawwar, 22 November 1946.

1 I do not know to what extent this generation of educated Egyptians, and of those Egyptians who deliberate the affairs of government among themselves, and who likewise deliberate the affairs of parliamentary representation among themselves, can be satisfied with itself and with its performance of the very first duty it was bound to take up: the political education of the people. How much we speak of Egyptian democracy! How much we say that the nation is the source of all authority! And how little we have done, and how little we do, on one hand to realize this Egyptian democracy, and on the other to teach the people to exercise their constitutional power directly and to achieve their sovereignty over themselves and their homeland!

2 And when we speak to one another, and when we write in criticism of democratic life in Egypt, we believe we are probing the matter deeply when we declare that democracy cannot be properly realized unless illiteracy is combated, education is spread, the people are made cultured, and they come to know what duties are theirs and what rights belong to them.

3 Then we observe, after that, that education has not spread as it ought, that the great mass of the people remains illiterate and ignorant, and that Egyptian democracy therefore remains — I will not say in its youth, but in its very infancy! Then the friends of democracy among us proceed with their observations, insisting on the struggle against ignorance and the education of the people, so that democracy may become a living reality in Egypt. And those whose tongues profess democracy while their hearts think otherwise seize upon this opportunity to declare that it is only right that we postpone democratic life in Egypt until we have properly prepared the people for it.

4 And if this postponement is not possible, then let us at least feel no embarrassment in handling democracy loosely, nor in the integrity of the procedures it requires, and let us not insist too strictly on proper regard for the constitution or on precision in its implementation; for all these are things we ought not to demand except once we are certain that the people truly cherish them, prefer them above all else, and will defend them by whatever means defense allows!

5 I have no doubt that the spread of education is one of the most proper and most powerful means of realizing a sound democracy, and of preparing the people to exercise their political rights as they ought to be exercised.

6 Nor do I doubt that it is a duty of Egyptians — indeed, one of the gravest duties incumbent upon them — to exert the fiercest effort to educate and cultivate the people in the shortest possible time, and in the best possible manner.

7 But neither do I doubt that education alone is not the sound means of realizing democracy and carrying it into the hearts of the people and through their very veins; rather, I believe there are other means, no less effective than education in shaping the people, and perhaps even more powerful in their effect and graver in their import — because they are not bound up with theoretical life, but with the practical, daily life that people take up morning and evening.

8 You do not teach a child to eat, drink, crawl, walk, and speak by way of reading, writing, and arithmetic, nor by way of grammar, geography, and history; rather, his instincts drive him toward these forms of activity. And education completes the work of instinct, for it guides it and corrects it: spurring it on when it falls short, and bringing it back to moderation when it runs wild or goes to excess.

9 And it is among the greatest absurdities to deliver a theoretical lesson to a child in his first or second year of life, teaching him how to stand upright on his own two feet, and how to walk on those two feet! And it is most likely that the boy learns from actual practical life things that cannot possibly be measured against what is learned in school or in the village Qur'an-school.

10 If, then, we assume that Egyptian democracy still remains in its infancy, it may well be our duty to raise it as a child is raised — relying first upon practical life, and only afterward upon theoretical lessons.

11 And this practical life is something entirely at odds with what we have grown accustomed to since democratic life first came to be known among us. We believe, for instance, that we are training the people in modern political life when we call upon them to vote from time to time, and when we call upon them to attend the sessions of Parliament, and publish for them in the newspapers whatever debate unfolds in those sessions. All of this may well be useful — indeed, it is useful without any

doubt — but there are other things closer to real benefit, nearer to genuine usefulness, and more inclusive of the whole body of the people. For not all Egyptians are able to attend the sessions of Parliament, or to read what is published about them, and their trip to the ballot box once every five years, as the constitution requires, or once every two years, as Egyptian custom has preferred since the constitution was promulgated — this is not sufficient to teach the people how to exercise their constitutional authority. Rather, the proper path to that — the path we have scarcely thought of, or taken seriously, or connected to our democratic life — is that there should be, in every Egyptian village and in every Egyptian town, a standing school in which the people of that village or town learn how to exercise these rights and duties!

12 And the reader need not be alarmed, nor the Minister of Education take fright; for this school is the easiest of things, and there is nothing in it to frighten anyone — but it has the power to achieve the political education of the people in the best and most complete manner...

13 It is good that every Egyptian who has reached political maturity should enjoy his national rights, voting for deputies and senators, and standing himself as a candidate for deputy or senator; but there are other councils closer to the people, nearer to their daily life, and more directly bound up with their immediate individual interests — these are the councils that oversee the affairs of the village and the affairs of the town in continuous, daily supervision, convening in regular session throughout every season of the year; and the people, in electing them, learn how elections are conducted and for what purpose they are conducted, and the people, in watching over them, learn how public opinion is to supervise the servants of public opinion, and to what extent a representative of the people may enjoy the people's trust, and to what extent these representatives may feel that they are not masters of the people commanding its obedience, but servants of the people obeying its command and carrying out its will — so that if they fall short in any of this, they lose its trust, and are either dismissed from its service, or its service is withdrawn from them!

14 It suffices for the reader to picture the people of a small village electing, every year or every two years, their own council, which manages their affairs under their own eyes, never escaping their close scrutiny within this narrow compass — the compass of the village — nor ever escaping their criticism when they gather to talk at the end of the day or sit together at the start of the evening... It suffices for the reader

to picture this, to gauge its effect upon the political education of the villagers, upon teaching them the meaning of right and duty, the meaning of representing the people, the meaning of the people electing their deputies and overseeing those deputies, and the meaning of deputies overseeing the conduct of government... There is no doubt that the village's elected members will keep watch over the conduct of the village headman, who will be elected just as they themselves are elected, and will serve as a link between the village and the general administrative authority.

15 And it is beyond question that we have squandered time whose worth cannot possibly be reckoned; for had the law establishing this system been issued together with the constitution, or issued the moment the Egyptian Parliament first convened, and had it been implemented from that time onward, the Egyptian people could, within twenty years, have come to taste political right and political duty, and to know the true worth of democracy as well as that worth can possibly be known, and could thereafter have exercised their highest authority in electing Parliament and overseeing Parliament — indeed, in guiding Parliament, just as happens in civilized countries... But we built our democratic life upon no foundation at all; we built the top floor of the house first, leaving it suspended in the air, at the mercy of the slightest wind!

16 Those who ask after the source of this misfortune that unsettles Egyptian life, that bars it from stability, and that turns its parliamentary life into something resembling mere trifling, need not trouble themselves with much inquiry. For the source of this misfortune lies very close at hand: it is that we have never planted the tree of true democracy in every village of Egypt and in every town of Egypt... Had we done so twenty years ago, our condition today would be altogether different, and it would have been very difficult indeed for Egypt to be exposed to this political turmoil, driven by passions and cravings, to which it is now exposed!

17 Had we done this twenty years ago, every Egyptian citizen would know, clearly, directly, and tangibly, that he has a right which must be rendered to him, and a duty which he must render in turn; and that the public affairs undertaken by Parliament are but the sum total of the private affairs undertaken by the village councils; and that the right of the people over Parliament and over the ministers is like the right of the villagers over the village council and over the headman.

18 Speak to me after that, if you wish, of the dissolution of the Chamber of Deputies; for the dissolution of the Chamber would no longer carry these grave consequences we now witness — consequences that shift the affairs of the people suddenly from the farthest south to the farthest north, or from the farthest east to the farthest west, and that allow governments to manufacture parliamentary assemblies as one manufactures different dishes of food!

19 Had we established this basic democratic system in the towns and villages, the dissolution of the Chamber of Deputies would have become, as our esteemed teacher Lutfi al-Sayyid Pasha would say, a tool without any real object; for the people, if they trusted the dissolved chamber, would re-elect it, and would accept no forgery or falsification, and if they did not trust that chamber, they would elect another — and the people's referendum would then be truly sound, truly suited to their actual will.

20 The French proverb says: better a late deed than none at all. And we have already squandered more than twenty years — is there, then, any way to make up for what has passed, to begin the road from where it ought to begin, and to legislate the law that makes village councils a basic institution of Egyptian democracy, and that makes the people's authority and sovereignty a living reality, rather than mere words carried off on the wind?!