

Dr. Taha Hussein Bey's Speech: At the Celebration of Compulsory-School Teachers Honoring the Minister of Education

Al-Masri, 9 May 1943.

My Lord, you of exalted rank ...

Your Excellencies the Ministers ...

Gentlemen ...

Perhaps this gathering is the truest description of this ministry of yours, established as it is, of this system of yours in which Egypt has rejoiced for more than a year now — for it is a gathering of compulsory-school teachers, who teach the common classes of the people, held in the halls of the University, which prepares for Egypt the elite of thinkers among her sons. And the meaning of this is that if this gathering depicts anything at all, it depicts your highest ideal, it depicts this equality in which Egyptians differ not at all, whatever their standing, whatever their rank.

And I beg your leave, O you of exalted rank, and I beg the leave of your fellow ministers, and I beg the leave of these gentlemen of compulsory education, to offer some portrait of your ministry; and perhaps this occasion is fitting for me to draw this true portrait that forms itself in my mind of you and your companions from a noble hadith of the Prophet; for the Messenger of God, peace be upon him, said to the Muslims one day: "Shall I not tell you who is dearest to me and nearest to me in station on the Day of Resurrection? Those of best character, those of gentle and approachable manner, who are themselves sociable and draw others to sociability. And shall I not tell you who is most hateful to me and furthest from me in station on the Day of Resurrection? The garrulous and the pompously verbose." (Applause). And you and your companions, O you of exalted rank, are among the people of the best character, among those of gentle and approachable manner, among those who are sociable and who draw others to sociability.

You and your companions serve the people without reproaching them for it; you give the people your very souls, your efforts, your minds,

and whatever you possess, without placing yourselves above the people, and without imagining that you are conferring upon the people some favour — rather you believe that the people have a right over you, which you are discharging, for you are their servants, no more and no less. (Applause). And you are of gentle and approachable manner — for I heard, O you of exalted rank, a little while ago the spokesman of the compulsory-school teachers say that this gathering is historic, being the first gathering at which the Head of Government has attended a celebration of the compulsory-school teachers; for you reach out to the people, and you reach out to the people because you believe it is the people's right upon you that you should reach out to them.

And you and your companions, O you of exalted rank, are among those who are sociable and who draw others to sociability; no Egyptian disowns you, and you disown no Egyptian, and you are, in the hearts of all Egyptians, trustees over the highest ideals of the Egyptians, and all Egyptians are, in your hearts, rightful owners of whatever effort, strength, and sincerity you possess.

And permit me, O you of exalted rank, to portray this ministry of yours, and this era of yours, and your parliament too, with some further portrait; and permit me to borrow this second portrait from a noble saying of the noble Prophet, for the Messenger of God, peace be upon him, said to the Ansar in a hadith that has come down to us: "You are many at the moment of alarm, and few at the moment of gain." And you and your companions are swift to Egypt's rescue whenever Egypt needs rescue, and you and your companions are many whenever Egypt needs someone to defend her, to protect her, and to secure for her the standing that befits her. And you and your companions are the most abstemious of people toward spoils, and you and your companions are the purest of people in hand, the most unsullied of people in heart, the cleanest of people in conscience, the most virtuous of people in soul, the most elevated of people in nature, and the furthest of people from whatever is unbecoming to the noble among men. (Applause and cheering).

Then permit me, after that, to address these gentlemen of compulsory education with some words I should like them to hear, and should like them to take graciously to heart, and should like them to take graciously and broadcast among themselves, and broadcast in their villages and in their towns, in their provinces and in the milieus in which they live — for it is a word about learning, and a word about learning in this advanced democratic era in which we now live. (Continuous

cheering).

What chiefly distinguishes your colleague, the Minister of Education, is that he holds a conviction that has mingled with his very soul and run in his veins with his own blood: that all Egyptians are possessed of the absolute right to be educated, to be honoured, and to have the poverty of ignorance driven back from their minds, and the material poverty that comes of misery and sickness driven back from their bodies. He holds this conviction in pure sincerity, and were it not that you are the head of the government in which he serves, he would not have been able to find for this conviction any outlet in practical life, nor would he then have been able to be a minister handling the affairs he handles.

He believes in the right of all Egyptians not to be turned back from education, and he has worked, with your aid, toward what he has achieved — he has worked to ensure that no Egyptian is turned back from education, whatever branch of this education it may be. When the University grew too small, he founded another university; when the secondary schools grew too small, he added classes to them, and added schools to them; when the primary schools grew too small, he added classes to them and founded schools as well.

Then he saw that poverty stands as a most violent obstacle between many Egyptians and education, especially in these trying days, and so he turned to you and found in you the best of refuges, and lo, the doors of education are opened, and lo, the poor enter the schools and universities without being turned back for poverty, whatever the circumstances of the budget, and whatever other circumstances may be. And lo, the proportion of free places increases, and increases, and increases, until, straitened by the demand for yet more free places, he obtained from the Council of Ministers a decree that no student should be turned back from examination for failing to pay the fees.

And your colleague the Minister of Education wants the pupils to actually benefit from the learning imparted to them, and so he concerns himself with their health wherever he finds a way to do so, and finds in his colleague the Minister of Health what enables him in this concern; then he turns to you and to Parliament, seeking your aid in feeding the poor, and in driving back from the children of the compulsory schools the affliction of ignorance and the affliction of hunger — and lo, Parliament binds the State to feeding the pupils in the primary schools, allocating for this, last year, one hundred thousand pounds, then allocating for it this

year three hundred thousand; and lo, Najib al-Hilali fed one hundred and fifty thousand of the children of the compulsory schools last year, and will feed half a million of them next year. (Continuous applause).

And your colleague the Minister of Education shares with you a feeling in which you are quite markedly distinguished — namely, that you love Egypt not as an ordinary man loves his homeland, yet at the same time you hate selfish exclusivity, and you love for the Eastern world and for the Arab world what you love for Egypt. For you do not wish Egypt to be isolated, nor do you wish Egypt to be self-seeking; rather you wish all the peoples of the East to be Egypt's partners at this vast banquet of learning that the Minister of Education is laying out. (Applause and cheering).

And for this reason, no sooner had Najib al-Hilali taken charge of the Ministry of Education in this government of yours than Egyptian professors by the dozen began setting out from their own country to the lands of the East, to teach there. And it has become an established policy among us at the Ministry of Education that no request from an Easterner should be refused, whatever it may be, if it serves learning, and that no request from an Eastern government should be refused, whatever it may be, if it serves the spread of culture — for we are a people who love learning, and love it not for ourselves alone, but love it for all people; and here we are, not content with spreading our culture and Arab-Islamic culture in the Arab East alone, but sending envoys of Egyptian culture to the land of Abyssinia, and for the first time in the history of modern Egypt an Egyptian school is founded in the land of Abyssinia, spreading Egyptian culture in a foreign language in a land that does not speak Arabic — for no reason except that you are the furthest of people from miserliness with material things, and with moral things as well, and for no reason except that your government simply does not comprehend that a man should live for himself alone, but rather that a man lives for his homeland, and the homeland lives for the whole of humanity.

And your colleague the Minister of Education, O you of exalted rank, conceives of Egypt's standing and dignity in a manner best described as one that suits our feeling for Egyptian dignity, and suits our pride in this dignity, and suits these highest ideals to which we aspire — namely, that our dear Egypt should be like any other independent nation in the world. And for this reason it has not been enough for him to spread Egyptian culture in the Arab East, nor to found a secondary school in the Sudan, nor to send those who found a school in Abyssinia, but he wishes to

spread Egyptian culture in the land of the English themselves, and lo, he will not accept that the British should have their institute in Egypt until the Egyptians have their own Egyptian-Arab institute in London. Thus does Najib understand, and thus do your fellow ministers understand, Egyptian dignity and Egyptian independence — in the very manner in which you yourself understand Egypt's dignity, her pride, and her independence, and in the manner in which independent Egypt cannot live at all unless she understands herself accordingly. (Applause and continuous cheering).

Then allow me to portray you, and to portray your ministers, and to portray this democratic era of yours, with one final portrait. You called for independence as Saad called for it before you, and you struggled for independence, and you won independence and returned with it, generous and ample — but when you returned with it, you returned with it written merely on paper; then you left power, and independence remained written on paper, and hands began to snatch at it, diminishing it at the edges, now from the right, now from the left, because it was an independence written only on paper. But when you came, and your fellow ministers came with you, and your parliament came with you, you made independence into an established reality, a substance to be touched, seen, and felt — touched by every man, and seen by every man.

And nothing proves this better than your conduct in the months of June, July, and August last, and nothing proves this better than your conduct when the enemy was near the gates of the Delta, and when no one could lay a hand on Egypt's interests to harm them, and when the enemy withdrew from Egypt and the dangers were turned back from her, and Egypt emerged from this crisis generous and ample. The whole world bears witness that she was no less dignified, no less proud, and no less capable of bearing hardship than any other country, be it in the East or in the West. All of this, my lord the President, Egypt owes to you, and to your fellow ministers, and to your supporters among the members of Parliament; she owes it to this democratic era in which you rejoice, and in which we hope you will long continue to rejoice.

So if these compulsory-school teachers celebrate you and your colleague and your fellow ministers, be assured that they do not celebrate you because they wish to flatter you — for the matter between you and the people is not a matter of flattery, but a matter of love, affection, and sincerity. (Applause and cheering). And why should they flatter you, or flatter your colleague the Minister of Education? You two

have rendered to them some of their rights — I do not say all of their rights — and they did not honour you before the rendering of these rights, but honoured you only after you had rendered these rights to them, and after the pay-scale had been reformed to some degree, and after the savings fund had been established; they do not, then, celebrate you two out of flattery, but celebrate you two out of love, and celebrate you two out of gratitude as well.

Your fellow ministers, and the Wafd's parliament, have rendered to the compulsory-school teachers what you have rendered of their rights; so permit me to say to your exalted rank, and to your colleague the Minister of Education, and to your fellow ministers, and to those members of Parliament present: what you have rendered to them is good, but what remains owed to them upon your necks is still very great indeed — for no reason, O you of exalted rank, except that you wish — and we wish along with you — that the sons of Egypt should always be men of dignity, and Egyptians will never be men of dignity unless those who teach them and raise them are themselves honoured. And it is this very feeling that moved you to render what you have rendered of this right, and I am confident it will move you to render what remains of this right. (Applause).

And the proof of this is that you have not singled out the compulsory-school teachers alone for your favour, but have embraced all men of education together; so this era will not pass, O you of exalted rank, before every teacher in Egypt — whatever branch he teaches in — feels that your democratic government has recognized that he has a right, and that this right of his must be rendered to him. And this right is that he should be a man of dignity, and that he should be enabled to bear the burdens of life as a man of dignity ought to bear the burdens of life.

Do you wish, finally, O you of exalted rank, that I should tell you why your ministry, and why your era, finds no ease from certain hearts? As for myself, I am able to tell you this plainly, without ambiguity, and I claim that no one will be able to deny what I am about to tell you: your ministry brings no ease — it brings, first of all, no ease to yourself, for it is toil upon toil; but it also brings no ease to certain other people, for whom it is not in their interest that the people should feel their own existence, nor their own rights, nor their own dignity, since their interest lies rather in the people being exploited as land is exploited, and as livestock is exploited. And you and your ministry make the people feel that they have a right, that they have a dignity, and that there is no difference between

the people and anyone else, whoever he may be.

And for this reason your ministry has been a toil to certain hearts, a source of sleeplessness to certain people, a hindrance to many who would otherwise rest easy — for you prepare for them a great torment on the day every Egyptian feels it is his right to live free and dignified, with no difference between this rich man or that, between this powerful man or that, but rather that all Egyptians, as the Constitution says, are equal before the law. Do you wish to know the difference between you and those who do not love you? The difference is very simple: you took the Constitution as earnest truth, while others took the Constitution as a jest.

My Lord, you of exalted rank —

These gentlemen of compulsory education did not come to this place to listen to me; they came to this place to thank you and to thank your colleague, and to honour you both — and I have quite forced my own way in among the speakers, for the word of truth must be spoken, and must be spoken whatever the circumstances; and I have now spoken this word. So permit me to salute you, and to salute your colleagues, among whom is my friend Najib al-Hilali, and then permit me to leave this place, for it seems to me that these gentlemen wish to hear a little more from you yourself and from your colleague. (Various cheers and sustained vigorous applause).