Ministry of Education

The Tampering with Knowledge, Schooling, and Teachers

We write about reforming education and reorganizing the Ministry of Education because we still hope for some immediate good to come of what we write. Yet we have now lost that hope. We are convinced that the world itself could shift and crumble around the Ministry of Education without the ministry feeling or caring in the least.

The Minister of Education, to be fair, is too occupied these days with the weighty events and the misfortunes that befall Egypt daily. He is absorbed not in the ministry, but in cabinet affairs — compensations, indemnities, decrees, and the endless matters of politics. He is preoccupied with politics, not education.

I do not say this out of invention or malice. I recall speaking to the Minister one day. When I pressed him about supervising the private schools, he agreed that it was indeed important and that he intended to deal with it — "but," he added, "the ministry is now too busy with other matters." I remember that, at that time, I was not alert enough to the implications of his words. I asked him: "And what concern has the Ministry of Education with things in Egypt that have nothing to do with education?"

He replied — politely, mockingly, and with a touch of irritation: "I imagine that the Minister of Education has something to do with the Cabinet!"

Indeed, he was right: the Minister is a member of the Cabinet, and the Cabinet itself is too occupied with other things — things that cannot possibly help the cause of education, for they divert the state's resources elsewhere. The Minister was right, but he was wrong too. For the Ministry of Education is not confined to the person of the Minister. Within it are specialists, advisers, and administrators whose sole duty is education. They are not meant to concern themselves with general politics or to turn away from their work.

In truth, these men of the ministry are not neglecting education — they think about it and work for it. But the machinery of the ministry turns in the wrong direction: one hears the noise of its millstones, but sees no flour. Yes, they work for education, but not rightly. They are trapped in a single habit of mind and method, unable to go beyond it — bound to an educational policy once set by Dunlop. However much the world changes, however much Egypt's independence and constitution require that education rest upon freedom and democracy rather than colonialism and autocracy, they cannot or will not alter course.

Thus the Minister is distracted, and his officials are incapable of understanding education as it must now be understood. We therefore despair of any immediate good when we call for reform. Yet we still hope for much from Parliament.

Soon Parliament will have before it all the affairs of the Ministry — the great and the small. It will recognize the vast gulf between this ministry and the nation's aspirations, between its

conduct and the future the people desire. Then it will think of reforming the ministry, of bringing it into harmony with the life of a free and democratic nation. Our hope in Parliament is what keeps us writing, what compels us to persist.

It is a national duty for every Egyptian to express what he perceives as the defects of education and of this ministry's organization, so as to prepare public opinion for the reform that must come — soon or late. In an earlier article, we showed how the ministry's obsession with *centralization* has ruined much and wasted many talents that ought to have been preserved. It has entrusted secondary-school teachers with primary education while neglecting the primary teachers entirely. It has put education in the hands of men unconnected with it, and has placed the management of secondary schools under those who know nothing of them — against the interests of individuals, the nation, and learning itself.

We said all this before. It appears that many within the ministry, who have no power or influence, feel exactly as we do and suffer from what we denounce. But they dare not speak, for the ministry's surveillance is severe. Spies are set upon them; every path is blocked. One of my teacher friends once asked me to stop criticizing the Ministry of Education — if I truly wished our friendship to survive. He feared the consequences of being known to associate with me. I was deeply attached to this friend and sincerely wished him well. Yet I am more deeply attached to education itself, and care more for its benefit than for his comfort or safety. So I shall go on writing, and may God protect my friends the teachers.

This centralization has produced other evils even worse than those I mentioned before. The ministry, it seems, resolved to reform education at all levels — which is admirable in itself. Education needs reform, and the ministry should lead that effort. But it has taken the wrong road. You would not ask a blacksmith to bake bread, nor a baker to forge iron: each trade has its craft and its expertise. This needs no lengthy argument — yet it is ignored in the ministry. Or perhaps it is understood, but disregarded, for it contradicts the principle of centralization on which the ministry rests.

If you truly wish to reform education, you must form committees of *specialists*. The first specialists are, of course, the teachers — those who have taught, who have endured its sweetness and its bitterness, who know its strengths and weaknesses. The ministry has indeed formed committees for educational reform — but what do you think of committees that are almost entirely devoid of teachers? They consist of inspectors and officials, most of whom have scarcely taught at all, and some not once in their lives.

How, then, are such committees to reform education, when their knowledge of it is merely theoretical — drawn from books and reports, not from classrooms, pupils, and experience? Education can be reformed only by those who understand it in practice, through long trial and familiarity.

But the ministry cannot bring itself to consult teachers — for to do so would be to raise their standing and acknowledge their worth. It refuses to do either. It regards them as mere labourers, bound to work because work is their duty, not their calling — men who must neither think, nor create, nor advise. If they dare to think or advise, they are deemed insubordinate — guilty of encroaching upon the central authority, which must be approached only with praise, admiration, and flattery!

There are, in the Ministry of Education, things that would make one laugh. It has broken even its own rule: it did include one teacher in a reform committee — but in what way? A committee was formed to design the curricula for Dār al-ʿUlūm. Was its teacher drawn from Dār al-ʿUlūm — someone who knows its students, their minds, and their abilities? Not at all. The ministry chose a teacher from the Higher Normal School! A man who understands secondary students perhaps, but who knows nothing of the Azhar graduates who enter Dār al-ʿUlūm. Can you explain such absurdity?

I see only two explanations. The first — and the one I prefer, for I still wish to think well of the ministry — is that it acts without thought or system, leaving everything to chance. The second is less innocent: petty motives, rivalries, the desire to sow discord among teachers. Perhaps this was not deliberate — but it has happened nonetheless.

Why then do the professors of Dār al-ʿUlūm remain silent while others decide their affairs, when among them are capable, experienced men who could advise wisely?

I spoke not long ago with the Minister of Education, who assured me that he was determined to include specialists in the reform of education. He even asked me to name some competent people outside the ministry whom he might enlist. I applauded this enlightened statement. But when I looked at what was done, I found that no foreigners were invited, no Egyptians outside the ministry were invited, not even the teachers themselves were consulted. Worse still, when a committee was formed for Dār al-ʿUlūm that combined ministry officials, school teachers, and outsiders, it was dissolved and replaced by another — "better composed," as they said — one including no one from outside the ministry (for "the minister's laundry must be washed within the ministry") and no teacher from the school itself (for its professors must behave like obedient soldiers, to obey orders without being consulted).

Read this, think about it, and tell me what good can come of such conduct — of a ministry that persists obstinately in this path despite every warning and every counsel. Can such a ministry ever lead education toward good?

Tell me, then, was I not right, at the beginning of this article, to say that I have lost all hope of any immediate good when I write in criticism of this ministry? But the matter does not end here. It goes farther — toward something even worse. For I must still speak, another time, of the *value of the teacher* in this ministry.

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn
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