

# Education Policy: To That Critical Professor (II)

*al-Siyasa, 24 August 1924*

I had meant to devote this piece to a set of reflections that occurred to me during this trip of mine. But I have been spending part of my time reading the Egyptian newspapers that reach me here. It is a genuine pleasure to read these Egyptian papers in the atmosphere I am living in now, where I hear not a single word of Arabic except from my own companion, where I do not feel what an Egyptian in Egypt feels — that shared sense, that shared sentiment and opinion he holds in common with his fellow countrymen — where I feel, in many respects, an utter isolation, and where I hear the French around me discussing their various affairs, gently at times and fiercely at others: gently, when they discuss literature, learning, art, or something close to these; fiercely, when they discuss politics. And the French discuss politics a great deal these days, for their political situation invites it: parties that had governed have suffered electoral defeat, and parties that had been in opposition have won electoral victory, and now conduct the business of government — yesterday's rulers are today's opposition, and yesterday's opposition are today's rulers. It is a genuine pleasure to hear these people debate one another, but I shall tell you of this in some other piece.

I said I read the Arabic papers that reach me from Egypt, and among what I read, I came across a piece of news that led me to think, and so I thought it through; and it compelled me to write, and so I am writing now.

I read that the Egyptian Parliament has approved the Ministry of Education's abolition of its own Supreme Council, and the establishment of a technical committee in its place. I read the decree issued establishing this committee and setting out its organization, and I read pieces in *al-Siyasa* whose writer examined and criticized this whole matter.

In truth, this piece of news did not, in itself, surprise me, for I had known it was coming ever since the Zaghlulist government leapt into the seats of power! Indeed, no sooner had the Prime Minister formed his cabinet, announced his programme, and received the congratulations of well-wishers, than I met a friend — one of those sincere Zaghlulists

whose pure Zaghulism does not prevent him from keeping his loyalties with non-Zaghulists as well. This friend of mine held a position of some standing at the Ministry of Education, and so we spoke of the Ministry of Education.

I learned from this conversation that the Zaghulist government detested the whole system of education — or, more precisely, detested the system Zaki Pasha Abu al-Saud had begun to establish at the Ministry of Education — and that it wanted to undo this system entirely, cancelling whatever had already been completed of it, and abandoning whatever remained unfinished. Zaki Pasha Abu al-Saud had directed education policy toward two valuable ends: first, he established the Technical Bureau; second, he recognized the independence of higher education — or recognized higher education's own right to independence — and had begun preparing the means for it, and paving the way toward it. The Zaghulist government thus had no choice, it seemed, but to undo this system, and replace it with another.

It began with this Technical Bureau, paralyzing it, stripping it of all authority, until its own members could find no real work for themselves at the Ministry; all the Technical Bureau's functions were then transferred to the Ministry's Undersecretary and Secretary-General. The Zaghulist government then set about ridding itself of education's independence altogether, pursuing various means to that end: first, it drew a thick curtain over the University project, evading every question raised about it in Parliament. And the sole reason behind all of this was that the University project called for the complete independence of higher education, and the Zaghulist Ministry of Education simply could not conceive of education having any independence at all; it wanted, instead, everything to be subjected to it completely — no distinction made between education and any other branch of state affairs, and no distinction made between higher education and any other kind of education.

The reader may recall that strange remark the Prime Minister himself made in the Chamber of Deputies when the University was mentioned — that he did not understand what a university was, nor did he understand what benefit a university could have for the nation... The reader may recall, too, that we wrote a piece on that very remark, offering an interpretation of it that we believe leaves no room for doubt; we repeat it now, as a reminder and a clarification: that the Zaghulist government dislikes the University, and drags its feet in establishing it,

for no other reason than that a university, by its very nature, is independent in matters of education, just as a court of law is, by its very nature, independent in matters of justice. And any ministry constituted and risen to power the way the Zaghlulist government rose to power will, by its very nature, turn away from these independent bodies that refuse to submit entirely to governmental authority. But Zaki Pasha Abu al-Saud had, by then, already made real progress in securing higher education's independence: he had established administrative councils for the higher-education schools, granting them an internal independence very nearly complete, and had issued laws to that effect — laws that would either have to be repealed outright, or else circumvented by some other means. The Zaghlulist Ministry of Education thus had no choice but to rid itself of this internal independence Zaki Pasha Abu al-Saud had granted to the higher-education schools. And how did it rid itself of this independence? The matter is simple enough — it is enough to read the decree establishing the technical committee that succeeded the Supreme Council to understand exactly how the Zaghlulist government put an end to education's independence.

For under this decree, every decision made by these administrative councils of the higher-education schools must be submitted to this technical committee, which then gives its opinion on it. And this technical committee is itself not independent at all — its every opinion and decision is entirely subject to the Minister's will. The Supreme Council's decisions, then, are subject to the technical committee, and the technical committee's decisions are subject to the Minister. The Minister, then, is everything — not merely in administrative matters, or financial matters, or matters of that sort that touch education's system only at a distance, but in the very system of education itself, indeed in the very substance of education. And so this parliamentary Minister — who is, by the constitution and by the very nature of parliamentary life, subject to political circumstance and its vicissitudes, who rises to office today only to leave it tomorrow — this Minister, who cannot even guarantee his own survival in office, holds sway over education policy in all its branches. If the Minister happens to be a man of real judgment in matters of education, and lays down some policy, and sets about implementing it, only to be struck down by parliamentary misfortune and forced from office, there is nothing to guarantee that his successor will carry that policy forward. It is far more likely that this successor will simply cancel whatever the previous Minister had established — just as His Excellency Sa'id Pasha once cancelled what His Excellency Zaki Pasha Abu al-Saud

had established.

We must be fair, restore matters to their proper standing, and speak the truth — but with gentleness and courtesy. And we owe this gentleness and courtesy to the late Atef Pasha Barakat. Everyone knows that Atef Pasha Barakat was the head and the heart of the Ministry of Education; through him the Ministry felt, through him the Ministry thought, and to him all the Ministry's affairs ultimately led. His Excellency Sa'id Pasha, for his part, occupied the same position with respect to this ministry that any other constitutional minister occupies: he believed in Atef Pasha Barakat's competence and technical ability, and so entrusted him with all technical matters, while representing his own ministry before the Council of Ministers and in Parliament only in a political capacity — no more, no less.

The man who actually brought about this change at the Ministry of Education, then, was in truth Atef Pasha Barakat himself, even though the one formally responsible for it was His Excellency Sa'id Pasha. He was a man distinguished by strength and resolve — or something even beyond resolve — and he held real power and control; if he took charge of something, everything connected to it had to pass through him. He was a man made for administration, and we do him no wrong, perhaps, in saying he was not, by nature, made for education itself. He genuinely wanted to take charge of the Ministry of Education, and prepared whatever means he could toward that end — but God's mercy claimed him before he could achieve, in this oversight, all that he had wanted. He left his successors at the Ministry of Education a very heavy burden, one we believe they may not manage to carry, and one we suspect they may not even wish to carry. The Ministry of Education thus finds itself caught between two paths: either it continues along the policy Atef Pasha Barakat, God rest his soul, laid down — in which case it needs another Atef Pasha Barakat, and even should it find one, it will still fail to derive any real good from this policy, for it is a bad policy, gravely dangerous to education. We can make sense of centralization in many things — in administrative matters, and in matters beyond these. But we maintain that making sense of it in education is impossible; for education is a pure art, or rather a set of different arts, that cannot possibly be gathered together in a single man, nor in a single body — they must instead be overseen by different specialists, specialists granted a substantial measure of independence, sufficient to guarantee them success in what they set out to do. Or else the Ministry of Education must abandon the

centralized policy that once dominated educational affairs under the English, and which it now wants to dominate educational affairs under the Zaghlulist government.

The Ministry of Education must, then, undo what Atef Pasha Barakat had established, and ask Parliament to repeal what it had ratified regarding the technical committee, and lay down a new education policy — the very same policy Zaki Pasha Abu al-Saud had already been steering the Ministry of Education toward. And should the Ministry of Education do this, one could speak endlessly of the time lost, and of these confused, self-contradicting decisions, each undoing the last. But we suspect the Ministry of Education will not, in fact, take this road — even though real good may lie in taking it — for the Ministry will find something distasteful in acknowledging so great an error, and in undoing today what it ratified only yesterday.

There is one principle that stands as the ideal in matters of education, though it remains very far removed from actual reality — a principle the advanced nations of Europe have not themselves embraced even yet, so it would only be reasonable that Egypt fail to grasp it. This principle holds that education, like the judiciary, should be wholly independent of politics, untouched by its vicissitudes, unmolested by its misfortunes. And I assure you that education has an even greater claim to independence than the judiciary does. Why is the judiciary made independent? So that individuals' rights may be kept safe from political passions. Individuals' rights... but education does not concern itself merely with individuals' rights; it concerns the whole life of nations — their present life and their future life alike, their every circumstance, their every hope. If a judge deserves independence so that people may buy and sell in security and peace, should a teacher not equally deserve independence, so that the nation itself might live, grow, and advance, safe from those political appetites that produce nothing in education but harm? ... I have before me a living example with which to close this piece: the matter of secondary education in France.

Last year, Poincaré's government issued — and a parliamentary majority approved — a system for this education requiring the teaching of Latin and Greek in secondary schools for both boys and girls, and the Ministry of Education began implementing this system this past October. Then came the electoral defeat that struck down Poincaré and his party, and the victory of the Socialists and their allies — men who detest Latin and Greek, and prefer what is called "modern education." No sooner had

the new Socialist Chamber of Deputies convened than its education committee decided to abolish the very system the previous ministry had put in place, and which the previous chamber had approved. Nor will this chamber's authority last: power is bound to return, sooner or later, to Poincaré's party, and when it does, the Chamber of Deputies will decide to abolish this new system in turn, and return once more to Latin and Greek. And the subject of this whole absurd game is not a thousand or several thousand civil servants, as it is in Egypt — the subject of this absurd game is the entire rising generation of the French nation itself. Can we, then, learn from this? And can we manage to be the first to place education above politics — or at the very least, apart from it?