

At the Ministry of Education: Speed and Slowness

al-Siyasa, 31 December 1923

People are unanimous that there is life after death at the Ministry of Education — or, at the very least, movement after stillness — but they disagree about this movement itself: some see it as moving so fast that its speed keeps it from doing anything well or thoroughly, while others see it as moving so slowly that this slowness may keep it from reaching some of what it wants to achieve.

Nor is it any wonder that people are unanimous in seeing the Ministry of Education as alive and in motion these days; we do not recall people ever hearing of the Ministry of Education, or speaking of it, or making it a subject of discussion and debate, the way they hear of it, speak of it, discuss it, and debate it in these very days. Every single day some new development appears at the Ministry; every single day people speak of some new scheme of the Minister's — until these developments and schemes have touched every one of the Ministry's educational branches, and have found a loud echo among the public at large, on the one hand, and among officials, teachers, and students, on the other.

Everyone, then, is talking about the Ministry of Education — about what it is doing, and about what it wants to do. It is no wonder that people are unanimous in seeing life and motion in this Ministry, and no wonder that people disagree over whether this motion is fast or slow. The truth is that this motion is at once very fast and very slow — and this is why we write today.

We want to draw the Ministry's attention to this: that it would do well to economize on this speed, and it would do well to hasten past this slowness; for just as the rider who exhausts his mount neither covers the ground nor spares the animal's back, so too the man standing still makes no progress, and the man who merely dwells in place gets nowhere. It is right that the Ministry should press forward — but with patience and deliberation, with insight and sound judgment. It satisfies neither us nor the Minister of Education for the Ministry to run, or to gallop headlong, passing over things swiftly without taking them fully in, surveying them only in passing without mastering them through genuine study and understanding. Nor does it satisfy us, or the Minister of Education, for

talk and debate about this Ministry to multiply without that talk and debate resting on anything genuinely useful, genuinely beneficial, anything lasting that does not change or vanish the moment the Minister changes, or the cabinet resigns. None of this satisfies us, nor does it satisfy the Minister.

What we actually want — and what we believe the Minister wants too — is something other than this motion people speak of, motion we fear will produce nothing of real value. We want the foundations of reform laid down in this Ministry, foundations solid enough to bear whatever will be built upon them tomorrow. If we examine what the Ministry of Education actually needs by way of reform, we find it to be a great deal — a very great deal, far more than a single minister could accomplish in a year, or several years, let alone a month or several months. There is not a single branch of our education that is not closer to ruin than to soundness, and the same holds of the administrative branches connected to these educational ones. We have shown more than once that there is nothing surprising in this; we could hardly have expected anything else from the English.

The various avenues of reform open to the Ministry of Education, then, are many and varied, and it is only natural that an energetic, sincere minister should look upon all of them and try to set about reforming every one of them. But it is equally natural that, if he does so, wanting to reform everything at once, he may well end up reforming nothing at all. This is why we have proposed more than once to the Minister of Education that he devote himself to a specific set of questions, mastering them thoroughly through study and scrutiny, and then through reform and reorganization; and if he succeeds in doing good in these particular matters, he will have rendered his country the greatest service any Minister of Education has rendered it to date, will have paved for his own ministry the path of progress, and will have sketched out, for his successors, a genuine plan of reform.

We proposed to the Minister of Education a set of questions, some of which he has attended to; it appears he has not found the time to attend to some of the others, though it appears he wishes to, and merely wants first to clear what currently occupies him. And yet these matters the Minister has not yet publicly addressed may well be of greater consequence, and carry a far deeper effect on education and its reform, than all the other matters presently occupying the Ministry.

The proverb says: you cannot harvest grapes from thorns; I do not mean that the whole Ministry of Education is thorns, but I do mean that if the Ministry of Education truly wants to bring education to a good end, it is duty-bound, before anything else, to establish the systems, and to form the administrative departments, capable of reforming education and genuinely bringing it to a good end. This is why we cannot understand why the Ministry has not, in fact, thought about aligning its own administration with the reform it intends. Why has it not thought, for instance, of establishing the various independent educational departments we proposed it establish, genuinely overseen by specialists? Why has it not thought, for instance, of establishing a genuinely effective department for secondary education, staffed by technical men who have properly studied this branch of education, tested both its good and its bad, and are able, after study and experience, to advise from real knowledge and act with real insight? Say the same of the rest of the educational departments that already exist, or that ought to exist, at the Ministry of Education.

But secondary education concerns us in particular today; our own secondary education cannot be described as anything less than a disgrace to Egypt — unsuited to her needs, unsuited to her dignity, unsuited to the intelligence of her sons and their readiness for learning, and, further, unsuited to a country wishing to organize higher education, and actually setting about establishing a university on the model of Europe's great universities.

Yes, our secondary education is a disgrace to Egypt, and I apologize to the Minister of Education and his assistants for using so harsh a word; I am compelled to use it. They were not the ones who devised this system of education — the English devised it. If secondary education is a disgrace, the sin of it lies with those who devised it; but if we ourselves fail to hasten to reform it, we may come to share the English's own sin in this disgrace.

Our secondary education is a disgrace, and I have no wish to go into the details of it; it is enough to note that we have hundreds, indeed thousands, of holders of our own secondary certificate who are entirely ignorant of how they breathe, or how they digest what they eat and drink, who are entirely ignorant, moreover, of how to think or how to memorize properly, and who are, indeed, utterly incapable of holding a conversation with a pupil fresh out of a European primary school. Do not think there is any exaggeration in this; rest assured it falls short of the

truth — far short of it. It is enough to speak with French or English boys just finishing their primary schooling and beginning secondary school to see, in their readiness, their quickness of mind, their capacity for understanding, and their familiarity with a great many things, something that puts to shame our own young Egyptian men — men who have completed their secondary education and gone on to higher education, to specialize in pedagogy, or law, or medicine, or engineering.

I do not know whether they find, in higher education, what they failed to find in secondary education; I do not know whether the higher-education schools teach anything of physiology, for instance, so that students might learn how they breathe and how they digest — but I do know it is a real evil for anything properly taught in the primary and secondary schools to be pushed off onto the higher-education schools instead. We are, at present, working to organize an intermediate level of education for the University, and it is deeply painful to observe, at every turn, the various forms of weakness and corruption in secondary education, which itself needs reforming, alongside a reform of intermediate education, which threatens to leave that intermediate level very far indeed from anything befitting a university. I fear our intermediate education may turn out to be nothing more than an extra section of our secondary education — and so, far from being, as they say, "a step forward" for education.

Yes, "our secondary education is a disgrace" — and how could it not be, when I once asked a young man about to sit the secondary certificate examination where Athens was located, and he assured me it was in Sicily? Say nothing of history, and Egyptian history in particular; say nothing of the Arabic language and its literature; say nothing of foreign languages and their literatures; say nothing of the various sciences — for all our secondary schools have to show for all of this is a handful of words the memory retains, without ever reaching the mind to develop it, or the heart to bring it to life.

Our secondary schools are workshops in which students are drilled to memorize a certain set of lessons for a set period of time; once that period passes, they forget what they had memorized, and nothing remains of it but vanity, for they believe they have learned, and so risen above and surpassed others, and go about carrying themselves like advanced, accomplished scholars. They are, then, simply vain about themselves, deceived about themselves — no more, no less. If you truly wished to test them — to test their minds, their hearts, their practical

faculties — you would find nothing there at all... Ask the headmasters and professors of the higher-education schools, ask the heads of government bureaus, ask the fathers, ask the friends: you will find we have not deceived you, nor exaggerated in describing the poor state of secondary education — if anything, we have fallen far short of doing it justice.

How, then, can we go on tolerating this state of affairs? How can we concern ourselves with founding secondary schools, expanding their reach, multiplying their pupils, and varying their examinations, without first concerning ourselves with reforming these very schools? Which is better: to have few secondary schools, whose results are valuable, useful, and fitting to our dignity, or to have many schools whose results are poor and disgraceful? Which is better: to have a thousand pupils who have completed their secondary studies with their minds opened to life, understanding it and properly grasping it, their characters improved, their hearts made gentler, prepared to meet whatever good and evil life holds, and to handle whatever in it is easy or difficult — or to have many thousands of holders of the secondary certificate, whose only real accomplishment is to be vain about themselves, deceived about themselves, knowing nothing of their own affairs, and knowing nothing of the life around them?

Do you see now how the Ministry of Education is at once too fast and too slow? Too fast, when it pours out all the effort and strength it has to multiply the number of secondary schools, expand their reach, and crowd hundreds and thousands of pupils into them; too slow, when it fails, even now, to concern itself with inviting European specialists to assist it and advise it in reforming this secondary education, so that our secondary schools might finally become genuine institutes for cultivating faculties and minds, rather than instruments for deforming and corrupting them.

The Ministry of Education can be excused for its haste; people wanting an education are many, and it cannot simply close the doors of the schools in their faces, nor stand helplessly bound before the many families wishing to save their sons from ignorance. It is thus compelled to open schools, expand their reach, admit hundreds of pupils into them, and is compelled, too, to give people what it has to give. The Minister of Education holds no magic wand capable of touching the schools and instantly turning corruption into soundness, decline into progress. But the Ministry of Education cannot be excused for its slowness; there are many things we could understand more easily than we can understand whatever reasons keep the Ministry of Education from genuinely setting

about, today, or tomorrow, or the day after at the very latest, the reform of secondary education, and the summoning of specialists capable of carrying out that reform.

We cannot understand these reasons: the Ministry of Education is itself convinced that secondary education is corrupted; the Minister of Education is himself convinced of the need to set about reforming secondary education; and this reform need not, in itself, cost the government more than it can currently bear, since at least a year will pass in inquiry and deliberation before any implementation requiring real expenditure even begins — giving the government all the time it needs to arrange the necessary funds. Let the Minister of Education, then, set about reforming secondary education, and let him follow this same course in reforming the various other branches of education. The meaning of this is plain and clear: if the Minister of Education genuinely wishes to reform his own ministry, he must establish within it independent departments, overseen by Egyptians, but advised, within them, by specialists from Europe.