

At the Ministry of Education: On Girls' Schools

al-Siyasa, 27 December 1923

I am not addressing girls' education itself today, but rather a question that, while not part of it, touches its very essence: it is said that the Ministry of Education has resolved to dismiss the foreign women who administer certain girls' schools, and to appoint Egyptian women in their place to run these schools; and it appears this matter has already moved beyond mere resolve, and is on the verge of being carried out and becoming an accomplished fact. It is only right, then, that we give it some thought, and speak to the Minister of Education about what we think, before the Ministry commits itself to carrying it out, and so does harm to these schools and to the education taking place within them.

We know full well this will anger some people; we offer them our apologies in advance, and believe that, if they think it through a little, they will not be angry after all — indeed, we believe that if they think it through, they will share our view and encourage us in it; for practical benefit stands above sentiment, particularly in matters of education.

It is a good thing for the foreigner to yield his place to the Egyptian in every post of government, of whatever kind — but on condition that the Egyptian succeeding him be more capable than he was, or at the very least equally capable; for a post, in itself, is not a national end, and ought not to be treated as a national end, but is rather a means toward achieving the general national good. And if it is a means toward achieving that good, then no one should be placed in it except one fit to achieve that good, capable of bearing its burdens. It is plain that where an Egyptian and a foreigner are equally capable, right, fairness, and the general benefit alike all demand that the post go to the Egyptian rather than the foreigner — there is no dispute in that, and no need for discussion of it. But what would you say of a foreigner dismissed from his post — whether because he himself wished to be dismissed, or because the government wished to dismiss him — only to be replaced by an Egyptian less capable than he was, and less able to bear the burdens of that post? There may well be, in placing an Egyptian in a foreigner's stead, a satisfaction of that general sentiment which wants our own affairs to remain in our own hands — a sentiment that is, in itself, entirely legitimate, and which the public feels most keenly. But satisfying this

sentiment ought never to be an end in itself; it must instead be approached with the greatest possible caution, and regarded, as we have said, purely as a means toward achieving the general good. Government, and its posts, were not created, before anything else, to be reserved for the Egyptian rather than the foreigner, or for the foreigner rather than the Egyptian; they were created to manage the affairs of the state and its interests. If Egyptians are capable of that management, then they have the best claim of anyone to government and its posts; if not, then they are duty-bound to call upon capable foreigners, whoever they may be. There is no real affront to national sentiment in a foreigner occupying an Egyptian's place; the true affront lies in the general business of the state being spoiled — spoiled, above all, under the supervision of certain Egyptians who possess no great abundance of competence. This is the true affront — indeed, it is worse than an affront, for it involves, on the one hand, the loss of the public good, and, on the other, furnishes our opponents with proof of how poorly we grasp these matters. A sincere patriot does not demand that every Egyptian take the place of every foreigner in managing the affairs of state, education included; he demands only that the Egyptian take the foreigner's place wherever he is fit for that place, and where the Egyptian is not yet fit for it, the sincere patriot calls upon the foreigner, and insists upon calling on the foreigner, until Egyptians attain their own share of competence. We believe these principles to be perfectly clear, and we believe all Egyptians appreciate them, and want them taken as the basis on which posts are entrusted to Egyptians and non-Egyptians alike.

Let us, then, turn to ourselves, and ask what share of competence Egyptian women actually have for running and overseeing girls' schools, and let us demand of the Ministry of Education that it not rush to put an Egyptian woman in one of these schools in place of a foreign one, merely to satisfy the general sentiment we have described, without first weighing the actual benefit carefully and correctly, and without first establishing, only after long inquiry and great patience, that the Egyptian women nominated to take the foreign women's place possess enough good character, and enough administrative, scholarly, and pedagogical competence, to make them genuinely fit for the posts about to be entrusted to them. Yes — we demand of the Ministry of Education that it think this through, and think it through carefully. The Ministry of Education knows that girls' education, and the oversight of girls' schools, in Egypt is among the most delicate of matters, and one of the most in need of deliberation, patience, and careful selection. If good character is

a fundamental condition for working in any post whatsoever, it is the most important of the fundamental conditions for working in posts connected to education — in girls' education in particular, and in the oversight of girls' schools most particularly of all. Say the same of administrative, scholarly, and pedagogical competence. Is it truly so easy, then, for the Ministry of Education to find women who satisfy these conditions fully enough to be entrusted with overseeing girls' schools? We hope it may be easy; but we fear it may not be as easy as the Ministry of Education supposes. Nor is this fear of ours excessive: we know that girls' education in Egypt is not of high quality or refinement — indeed, it has never, on any single day, been of a quality and refinement sufficient to produce women genuinely capable of overseeing girls' schools, and of resolving the delicate questions of upbringing and instruction that arise within them.

Girls' education in Egypt has never, on any single day, been good or refined, and we want it to become good and refined in the near future. It will not make that goal easier to reach if we appoint, to run girls' schools, women who lack experience or fall short in competence. We believe Egypt can well accept, and accept gladly, the oversight of capable foreign women over girls' schools, until it succeeds in reforming this branch of education, and in bringing its schools to the point of producing women who can rival those foreign women trained at Europe's own universities.

Yes, Egypt can accept this gladly — indeed, it is far easier for her to accept it than to fall into the delusion of appearances, which makes it seem to us that our affairs are already in our own hands, only for it soon to prove, to ourselves and to others, that we coveted what we could not properly manage, and that we took independent charge of our own affairs without succeeding in managing them well.

It is therefore fair, we think, to ask the Minister of Education not to be hasty in a matter such as this. If he can see no alternative to wanting Egyptian women to take sole charge of educational affairs, then let him prepare the necessary means for it, and let him hasten to prepare those means, and let him begin, from this very moment, reforming what we have of girls' education — particularly in the teacher-training schools — and supplying what this education still lacks. If he does this, he will genuinely be paving the way for Egyptian women to take charge of educational affairs — paving that way by improving character, broadening horizons, and strengthening professional competence. All of these, as we have already said, are conditions necessary for running girls'

schools — and, in our view, they are conditions we still lack, even now.