Educational Policy: To That Critical Professor (1)

al-Siyasa, 2 September 1923

Does education, among us, actually have a policy? That is something we used to hope for, and believed ourselves not mistaken in hoping for, back when the Ministry of Education, at this very time last year, was following a clear and definite course showing that those overseeing it understood education, gauged the country's need for its reform, and were trying to bring about whatever measure of that reform lay within their power — back when Zaki Pasha Abu al-Saud was establishing the Technical Bureau, preparing for the founding of a school of antiquities, laying the groundwork for the establishment of the Royal University, and giving thought to a whole further set of reform projects at the Ministry of Education.

At this very time last year, we believed that Egypt had an educational policy, or that Egypt would at least eventually arrive at one. We believed, and repeated, that the Egyptian Parliament, not yet then in existence, would help shape this educational policy, and would stamp it with a national character once it convened; and we recall that an official who once held great authority over this Ministry reproached us one day, because we had said, and insisted on saying, that Parliament would tear down this ancient structure upon which education at the Ministry of Education had been built.

Yes, we hoped fervently that a real character would emerge in education, and that we would arrive at an educational policy suited to our needs and our hopes. But God willed to give the lie to our expectation in this matter, as He willed to give the lie to our expectation in other matters besides: Egypt did not win herself an educational policy, the Egyptian Parliament left no visible mark on education, and this constitutional life, this constitutional government now in place, has had no effect on the Ministry of Education beyond what we witnessed, and go on witnessing: the erasure of Zaki Pasha Abu al-Saud's achievements, and the return of educational affairs to the very corruption and disorder they were in under the English.

We would be entirely mistaken to say that Egypt never had an educational policy at any point; in truth, Egypt has had two quite

different educational policies, sharply opposed to one another: one national in its aims and its methods — the policy of the Egyptian princes who preceded the Occupation — and the other a foreign policy, harmful to our national life, aiming at nothing but the spread of ignorance on the one hand and the corruption of educated minds on the other: the English policy established by Dunlop, drawing on the authority of Lord Cromer. It could only follow, then, that the first result of independence should be the erasure of this English policy at the Ministry of Education, and a return to the old national policy — one that relied on combating illiteracy on the one hand, and on producing a class of educated men, richly grounded in higher education, to oversee public affairs on the other; a policy which, had it not been for the Occupation, would undoubtedly have culminated in the elimination of illiteracy, the establishment of proper education in Egypt, and the placing of Egyptians' own public affairs into Egyptian hands. It could only follow that the first result of independence should be a return to the educational policy of Muhammad Ali and Isma'il.

However much the defenders of the present government may argue, and whatever the supporters of the ruling parliamentary majority may say, they will never be able to deny that this outcome we had hoped for did indeed begin to take shape, little by little, after the declaration of independence. Tharwat Pasha's government resumed thinking about returning to that policy, and indeed did return to it, and set about carrying it out: government scholarship missions to Europe and America multiplied considerably under this government. Yahya Pasha Ibrahim's government followed suit, and Egypt sent abroad, to Europe, a not inconsiderable number of government-funded students, specializing in various branches of science and art. From this, the difference between the educational policy of an independent country and that of a country ruled by a foreign power became plain.

We believe, further — and we hold that the government's own supporters cannot deny this — that Tharwat Pasha's government had made serious preparations to establish a good number, or rather hundreds, of primary schools, aimed at combating illiteracy, so that by the time Parliament convened and legislated for universal primary education, the ground would already have been well prepared for it. We believe that Tharwat Pasha's government had already secured the necessary funds to establish these hundreds of primary schools — but Tharwat's government resigned, and Nasim's government came in its place, and these schools simply fell dormant, forgotten by the Ministry of

Education, and forgotten by the budget as well. Yahya Pasha's government, however, did not neglect the policy of scholarship missions, and continued it in the tradition of Tharwat's government, while giving primary education only the faintest attention — faint, but attention nonetheless. It formed a committee to study a plan for primary education, and Zaki Pasha Abu al-Saud reorganized the makeup of this committee — but Yahya Pasha's government fell, and God alone knows what became of this committee.

There was, moreover, real effort put forward by Yahya Pasha Ibrahim's government — or rather, put forward by Zaki Pasha Abu al-Saud, somewhat against the wishes of Yahya Pasha Ibrahim's government — toward realizing this independent educational policy: the effort expended toward increasing the number of educated people, in preparation for the schools that would inevitably need to be built. The Secondary Teachers' College was established; night sections were established at the Higher Teachers' College — and all of this shows that these two governments, both accused of wrongdoing and charged with negligence, could stand before any fair-minded parliament with real, valuable work in the advancement of education in hand. So what, then, has this constitutional government, resting on the people's authority, the people's love, and parliamentary support, actually accomplished? Nothing at all — or rather, say that it has erased rather than established, torn down without any thought of building up; or say that it has turned away from this national policy — not, we hasten to say, toward the English policy, since we are too careful of fairness for that — but rather toward a purely individual policy, aiming at one thing only: that a single, particular individual should enjoy absolute authority over the Ministry of Education, someone who had, inevitably, to seize control of this Ministry, because the Saadist policy required exactly this.

Had this constitutional government stopped there — merely undoing what its predecessors had established, wishing simply to enjoy absolute central authority — we would call it a bad policy, but a temporary one, bound to vanish the moment this government fell from power, tomorrow or the day after. But the government went well beyond all this, into something far worse, laying the groundwork for a truly bad educational policy, through two particular measures. The first: abolishing the Supreme Council of Education and creating this Technical Committee in the manner it was created. We shall not go into the direct consequences of this act here, having already addressed them elsewhere; we merely

note that the government rushed this measure through with strange haste, and managed to have Parliament ratify it exactly as it wished — proving to us, in doing so, something we had hoped was not true: that the Egyptian Parliament is not distinguished, much to our regret, either by any real competence in understanding education, or by any real insistence on holding some authority over educational affairs. Had the Egyptian Parliament possessed real competence in education, had it possessed any real authority over education, the Supreme Council would never have been done away with, this committee would never have been created, and this great folly would never have been inflicted upon the Ministry of Education with such astonishing speed, at a time when Parliament might well have occupied itself with other, more pressing matters instead.

We say this is a harmful effect of the government's own conduct in educational policy, because it drives us to despair of Parliament's competence in understanding education — and so, who, then, will oversee education? The Ministry of Education alone. And we know the Ministry of Education's competence well enough; we have already seen its effects on education to this day. The second measure: the Ministry of Education has shown — with the Prime Minister's agreement, and the parliamentary majority's endorsement — a real aversion to higher education, and a real reluctance to organize and advance it. And the effect of this is not confined merely to higher education remaining as degraded in Egypt as it is now; there is another effect too, uglier and far more harmful still: that oversight of education, of every kind, will remain, for a long time to come, confined to the men of education already at the Ministry, and to the graduates of the schools that presently exist — that is, educational affairs will remain in the hands of people who lack the genuine competence to understand education properly at all.

There is a theory which those concerned with public affairs in Egypt appear never to have given any thought to at all; indeed, they appear to act in direct opposition to it, while claiming that in doing so they are realizing democracy and serving its principles — and I mean, in this matter, the Prime Minister in particular. The Prime Minister and his supporters, naturally, favour primary education over higher education, and favour spreading and universalizing this primary education over organizing the University and establishing higher-education faculties within it. Their argument in this is much the same, on its face, as that of the socialists and the extremists among Europe's parties of the left: that

primary education serves the common people directly, while higher and secondary education benefit only certain classes — those able to afford the cost of such education.

And so, they conclude, the common masses must be favoured over the elite; primary education must take precedence over higher education; the primary school must be built before the university. Such is the thinking of today's leading men in Egypt; and should you argue against them, they will point you to France and other countries, and to the modern schools of thought that have arisen favouring primary and technical education over higher education. This is not the place to examine the merits of these modern schools of thought; but we do want today's leading men in Egypt to attend to something they fail to attend to — we want them to attend to the fact that we can only imitate the French and the Americans on the day we can genuinely say we resemble the French and the Americans; that is, on the day we possess, in higher and secondary education, something comparable to what France and America already enjoy.

On that day, we could say that we already had enough higher and secondary education for our needs, and that the right course would then be to attend to these poor, working classes, who cannot afford to spend their youth on study and scholarly specialization. But as things stand, being as far as any people could be from possessing even a tenth of a tenth of what France enjoys in higher and secondary education, it is far better for us not to liken ourselves to France just yet. We have nothing comparable to what France has in the way of education: French universities number close to twenty, and there is not a single French region without a state-supervised secondary school.

And we are not even counting the private schools, nor the independent schools, higher or secondary. As things stand, we do not yet have a single university, and many of our provinces lack secondary schools entirely. The theory held by those overseeing affairs in Egypt is, then, mistaken, and will remain mistaken for many years to come. There is another matter, too, we should like our parliamentary majority to attend to: that higher education alone is truly capable of guaranteeing the spread of primary education and of establishing a sound policy for it — for spreading primary education does not simply mean universalizing reading, writing, and arithmetic; the task is far more complex and far more difficult than that. It requires minds capable of properly assessing the Egyptian environment, its psychology, its needs, and its hopes, and of

harmonizing all of this with the primary education one wishes to spread throughout the country.

It is not easy for just anyone to properly assess such matters; only those who have taken a rich share of higher education, and who, thanks to that education, are able to understand communities and gauge their various needs and diverse hopes, are truly capable of conceiving of primary education and spreading it properly. The foundation of education in Egypt, then, is not primary education at all — the foundation of the entire Egyptian renaissance is higher education. A truly wise educational policy is one built, first of all, on establishing the University, and on enlisting foreign specialists to undertake the spread of primary education in the meantime, so that once the University has been properly established, and higher education has begun to bear its useful fruit, Egyptians themselves will be able to take genuine charge of educational affairs.

Those who wish to serve democracy in Egypt do it no genuine service by favouring primary education over higher education; a democracy built on primary education alone rests on a shaky foundation, incapable of withstanding hardship or standing firm against the perils to which political systems are exposed. Should our democracy come to rest on primary education, relying on the fair treatment of the barely-educated, it will very swiftly turn into one of two things: either chaos, or the rule of a single, arbitrary despot. We assure our parliamentary majority that it will do the greatest possible service to its country, to constitutional life, and to liberty itself, if it begins its parliamentary work next year not with the organization of primary education, but with the organization of higher education. And we implore it, should it do so, to rely in this not on itself, nor on the Ministry of Education, but on specialists among Europe's own scholars.