

Views ...

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Kawkab al-Sharq, 31 March 1933

1 These are the views that were raised in the Senate last Monday concerning education, and I think there is no harm in leaving the Prime Minister to ponder the negotiations and dream of the treaty, and in leaving the Minister of Public Works in his own right, and of Finance by deputy, to strain out the drop of lemon the squeezers have managed to extract, that he may present it to the American company to help it with the preliminary study for building the dam in Abyssinia, whether before or after the Sudan dam is finished; and in leaving the minister of tradition to make his rounds with his traditions through the province of Monufia, in displays of pomp and grandeur of which the least that can be said is that they hardly agree with tradition; and in leaving the Minister of the Interior to savor whatever sweetness of triumph he finds, now that the leader and his companion have been seized, and to prepare for another seizure, should the leader prepare for another journey.

2 There is no harm in leaving the ministers to their labors and their hopes, and pausing instead over these views that were raised in the Senate some days ago concerning education. I should like you to trust that my speaking to you of these views aims at nothing but plain observation, whose gravity you will see for yourself. I do not wish to change anything that has been, for there is no way to such a change so long as the Prime Minister holds in his feeble hand the halter of government, as they say when they liken government to camels, and the reins of government, as they say when they liken government to horses.

3 I do not wish to change anything, because I am unable to change anything, and the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate alike have proven unable to change anything. So let the camel-driver keep his camels, and the horseman his horses; this year's education policy has gone forward, as it went forward before, exactly as the Prime Minister and the minister of tradition wish. I only wish to draw attention to a weighty observation: that the policy the Prime Minister drew up — or that was drawn up for him — has not merely failed by comparison with the nation that opposes and disputes with him alone, but has failed by comparison with his own partisans and supporters, who make up the two chambers.

4 For the Prime Minister's policy rests on compelling the Egyptian nation to a fixed and limited measure of hope for progress, which it must not exceed when it hopes for progress, because the Prime Minister, or those who whisper to him, think ill of the competence of this poor, limited nation, and of its capacity to aspire to a broad, far-reaching progress.

5 They judged that our old constitution had driven us into a broad democracy, and so they narrowed it in the new constitution; they judged that our intellectual awakening had driven us to widen education, and so they narrowed this education too, and they pursued this policy of narrowing in everything. They wanted — and still want — the nation to be convinced of its own incapacity and deficiency, so that it would limit its hopes and bring its ideals down within easy reach. But the nation has refused them this, and continues to aspire to a broad democracy, a broad education, a broad freedom, and full independence, and continues to furnish them, every day, with proof that their efforts have come to nothing and borne no fruit.

6 As for the partisans and supporters, they are the ones who show themselves following this new policy, and ready to defend it with whatever power and resource they possess or do not possess, with strength and effort, with resourcefulness and fine endeavor.

7 And in truth, the Senate's sitting last Monday evening gives a picture not without a certain beauty of this readiness the ministry's partisans display, to support its policy by every means possible and impossible.

8 This picture is a beautiful one, and a comic one too. The members took up matters of education in all their variety, having no choice but to take them up, since they were being asked about the state budget and required to approve it. Some of them understand matters of education well; others understand everything well except matters of education. Those who understand education properly spoke, and proved to be like other people — their hopes did not grow, their ideals were not lowered, but circumstance compelled them to go along with the men of limited hopes and nearby ideals. As for those who understand everything except education, among whom, it appears, is the minister of tradition, they spoke, and spoke at length, but you will find nothing behind what they said.

9 It is strange that both sides agree on a harmless sort of comedy: they speak of the "genius" who is exempted from fees in primary schools,

and it occurs to none of them to ask himself, or anyone else, how this word can be applied to a child who is just entering school, with no prior acquaintance with learning at all. They differ, delightfully, over a point of language: is it better to say that the level of education has declined, or that it has sunk? And what, pray, might be the difference between sinking and declining?

10 But these are things that, if they raise a laugh or a smile, carry no weight, and one should not demand of the Senate a precision of expression that the Ministry of Education itself cannot achieve. What truly calls for thought is the Senate's views on the direction of education policy.

11 We have seen some members go so far in their extremism as to demand that free education be made universal across every branch of education, carrying this extremism to a point that even the most extreme democracy in Europe has not reached, indeed to a point socialism itself strives for without attaining. His arguments on this score deserve attention: they are, at the very least, socialist or extremely democratic arguments.

12 To him, all Egyptians are equal in their need for education and their right to it; no distinction ought to be drawn among them between rich and poor, and the state must spend on its poor and take from its rich whatever it can take as the price of education.

13 You may believe me when I say that Léon Blum, the leader of socialism in the French Chamber of Deputies, could say no more than this. And I do not disagree with that sheikh: justice requires that rich and poor be made equal in education, and religion itself calls for this equality, since it is the Islamic government's duty to take from the rich to give back to the poor. How I wish the Senate had heard the Grand Sheikh's opinion on this question; but, as you know, he was not present, being occupied with his address before His Majesty the King.

14 Alongside this extremism of democracy, you find another extremism of aristocracy, unsatisfied that matters in education should merely remain as they are, but wanting the government to spend nothing whatsoever on higher education, so that every student pays exactly what his education costs. Medicine, for instance, costs two hundred pounds, and so the student must pay that sum or turn away from medicine. His argument is that there are more physicians than are needed — although some deputies, only two days ago, called for the founding of a school for

barber-surgeons who look after health in the villages, on the grounds that there are fewer physicians than are needed. This aristocratic extremism is excusable, however, for it fears revolution from the spread of learning. And you know that the present order was set up for no other purpose than to bar Egypt from the path of revolution.

15 And another sheikh fears no revolution from higher education, but fears one from compulsory education, warning Egypt of imminent danger if she does not abandon this compulsory education, since it is a path to socialism and communism, so that illiteracy would be better than it. This sheikh takes a view of the Egyptians that is not without merit, and that the Egyptians might do well to consider. He wants their bodies looked after, not their minds; he wants bilharzia and hookworm kept from them, and clean, pure water brought to them; he wants them looked after the way a herdsman looks after the livestock he owns. And what do you make of a man who looks after his livestock by teaching it to write, to reckon, and to recite the Quran, and all that goes with that? Is it not better for the rulers that the people remain ignorant, sound of body, producing without benefiting, just as it is better for the herdsman that his animal remain an animal — sound and vigorous in body all the same, producing without benefiting?

16 The discussions multiply and the talk continues over these views, which, if they show anything, show that the Senate holds extreme opinions of exactly the kind the present order was set up to turn back from Egypt and the Egyptians. How, then, should Egypt not take pride in a Senate that holds the most extreme political views on education policy? And how should Sidqi Pasha not rejoice at this dazzling result he has arrived at — he who wanted Egypt to have a moderate, reasonable parliament, only to find himself with a parliament in which socialist doctrines are set forth without reserve or caution?

17 But you might say: what effect have these socialist views, so long as no one has paid them any mind or taken any notice of them, and so long as the government has carried out its education policy exactly as it wished?

18 That is true, but extreme political views are never acted upon the moment they appear; they need a long time before they become a principle of government. Let us, then, record the appearance of socialism in the Senate, and congratulate the Prime Minister on this great triumph. For what triumph could be greater than to make war on democracy and,

in doing so, create socialism?

19 This valuable discussion was then crowned by a speech from the minister of tradition — and what a speech it was! Invention upon invention, persuasion upon persuasion, and a contest, what a contest, of figures and numbers. The minister of tradition issues a challenge and asks: who can prove to him, with numbers, that university students in Europe are the equal of secondary-school students?

20 The minister of tradition forgets only one thing: that no one has ever claimed such an equality. What has been said, and will be said — and here I take up the challenge against the minister of tradition myself — is that there is no university funded by the state that is not compelled to admit everyone who applies to it bearing the certificate that entitles him to enroll, if numbers are what is wanted.

21 Does the minister of tradition know that the students of the University of Paris — one of eighteen universities — outnumber the students of our own university more than tenfold?

22 Does the minister of tradition know that any university on the European continent charges its students no more than a quarter of what our university charges its students? Does he know that the Egyptian student who pays thirty pounds at the Faculty of Arts or Sciences would pay no more than two pounds in France? Does the minister of tradition know how to reckon, so that he might weigh two pounds against thirty? And does he know how to draw a conclusion, so that he might then tell us whether our government is working to form classes in Egypt or to achieve equality — whether it is taking education toward democracy or toward aristocracy?

23 But the minister of tradition will not answer, because he cannot answer. It is enough for him that his undersecretary remind him that the premises and the laboratories cannot admit students without limit, and that a student costs the state several times what it charges him in fees. Once the undersecretary has said this much to the minister, the minister has won everything, and Egypt must submit, and her sons must pay thirty pounds where others pay two.

24 Let the minister of tradition be honest with me: he spoke in the Senate on Monday, and of all who spoke, he was the least versed in matters of education.