

SOME POLITICAL EFFECTS OF BRITISH EDUCATIONAL POLICY IN EGYPT

KAREN L. KONING

Many studies on Egypt of the late 19th and 20th century¹ reflect the central role of education and the educated in promoting political change. Among the most important developments during the British period in Egypt, 1882-1921, were the beginnings of political party activity and the rise of a nationalist movement. The aim of this article is to examine British educational policy as a contribution to this particular political environment.

BACKGROUND

In order to analyse British responsibility for the results of Education, it is necessary to determine circumstances existing in Egypt in 1882. The embarrassing financial situation loomed large in excusing the meagre expenditures devoted to the advancement of learning. In addition to minimal monetary allocations, education suffered from what Cromer labelled the "idiosyncracies of Pashadom". He condemned the "ignorance and prejudice" of the pashas which made for inconsistent, unimaginative policies and he deplored the frequent turnover of school directors² which resulted in no less than 29 men serving as Minister of Public Instruction in 29 years, each of whom sought to reverse the actions of his predecessor, to the "upset and demoralisation of the schools."³

A third factor in the educational situation was the commanding presence of al-Azhar (actually the entire religious school system from Azhar to the *kuttabs* or mosque schools) standing distinctly alongside the Westernizing modernizing government school structure erected by Muhammad Ali.⁴ These two main streams, one stagnantly religious, one ineffectually pseudo-European, as well as the foreign (usually missionary) and indigenous private schools, produced a situation of educational and cultural ambiguity.⁵

Let us look in some detail at the problem of the multiple school system and some of its ramifications.

THE SYSTEM

The separation of religious and governmental schools first carried out by Muhammad Ali previewed developments under the British when there came to be students in religious, government, indigenous and foreign private schools, as well as a group of students being educated abroad, all in increasing numbers.

The acquisition of a diploma had become a stepping stone into the

socio-politico-economic system;⁶ consequently, the demand for education grew. When government schools proved physically (and educationally) inadequate, indigenous private schools mushroomed. These soon earned such labels as "the worst evil"⁷ and "one of the most disastrous results. . . ."⁸ Since there was little or no control over these institutions, fees were as low as entry requirements and the standard of education and discipline.⁹

The following table indicates the disparity among types of schools: (From a 10-year report on Secondary Schools exams).

Part I

Government: Schools, 314 pass out of 849.

Government inspected private schools, 309 pass out of 2,020.

Other private schools, 264 pass out of 1,824.¹⁰

For those families with sufficient interest, awareness and economic capability, therefore, the best recourse for training their children was the foreign school system, especially the French.¹¹ Here, where better teaching and discipline prevailed, the students were affected by the schools' complete autonomy and anti-British mentality.¹² If the further step of study abroad was taken, then potential European influence became even more significant. The British presence did realize some gains at this level through a shift to English schools and into the humanities.¹³

Lastly, al-Azhar shares in the school system defaults. Its permeating role in moulding the minds of Egyptians is indisputable.¹⁴ Functioning as the prestigious religious education centre of the Muslim world, its traditional curriculum and teaching methods ambivalently affected thinking and political processes in a country it had served appropriately in the past, but which was contending now with the forces of change.

CURRICULUM

A closer examination of curriculum emphases and the aim and medium of instruction will help in understanding consequent political effects. The memorization method of learning, functional for the traditional Islamic sciences, invaded all stages of education¹⁵ and was strengthened and extended under inflexible British handling of student training geared to final exam results.¹⁶ The lower schools, bound to this emphasis on memory, suffered further from the favouritism shown to the secondary schools which occurred despite Cromer's stated policy to encourage sound elementary education¹⁷ and the fact that the *fallahin*, who enjoyed educational opportunities usually terminating before the secondary level, contributed the bulk of educational revenue.¹⁸

The restrictions of a memorization teaching method and a secondary school focus were reinforced by the almost singular educational aim, that of entering government service. Muhammad Ali introduced the system,¹⁹ the British perpetuated it,²⁰ and the Egyptians accepted it without demanding more than that it provide fulfilment of an economic goal for them. What occurred

was the movement of students from "factories of religious mendicants" to "factories of Government officials".²¹ There is some evidence that, aside from oiling the bureaucratic machinery, low standards aimed at turning out dependent petty civil servants and providing a minimum standard of education for the "masses". This was a deliberate attempt to prevent the rise of a nationalist intelligentsia or a public responsive to nationalist ideas, thus serving to maintain British rule.²²

Still another British contribution to the inadequacy of instruction and learning was the use of the English language at the post-primary level. Again, the result of students' trying to cope with advanced subjects under foreign teachers in a foreign language was the memorization of notes and texts.

Since contact with English outside school was non-existent, the commuting students never had the opportunity to comprehend the nature and substance of the materials given them in class.²³ The British insistence upon English, due in part to competition with the French tongue lingering from pre-occupation days, relaxed somewhat after the 1904 Anglo-French Entente and in response to Egyptian agitation for Arabic instruction.²⁴ The upsurge of Arabic created new problems, however, in the shape of a dearth of qualified instructors and satisfactory teaching materials in the "modern" fields of study which had been introduced.^{25*}

GROWING BRITISH AWARENESS

British acknowledgement of the political results of their school system educated, al-Azhar's religious isolation and nationalist fomentation and the operation focuses mainly on the gaps created between the masses and the enlightened ideas about independence acquired by the students who found their way abroad. Cromer, e.g., saw a rise of political demagoguery which could be countered only by educating the masses to be able to dismiss the "hair-brained" schemes of half educated political charlatans.²⁶ Azhar's position outside the control of the British and its concern with maintaining itself against the modernizing threat posed to it, led to its resentment of and aggressiveness towards the West and its functioning as a centre for anti-British agitation.²⁷ The blame for "subversive" ideas brought back from abroad is laid upon the age of the students which made them "dangerously accessible" to the worst alien influences.²⁸

THE GAPS

Societal-wide effects of producing a duality, or multiplicity, of cultures through variant educational systems have been pervasive and long-standing

* (Sections on *The British Staff*, detailing their unimpressive teaching qualifications and their condescending attitudes toward Egyptian staff and students alike; and *Personalities*, concentrating on Douglas Dunlop, Adviser to the Minister of Education for eight years, and Saad Zaghlul, the first Minister of Public Instruction and later a nationalist leader, have been omitted for reasons of space)

in Egypt. For the period under discussion, the most significant political effects came from creating a small "modern" educated group (which saw itself as the advance guard of the Egyptian nation²⁹ and indeed became a social and economic elite as well³⁰) divorced from their heritage enough to make use of ideas absorbed from European thinkers but not so much that they could not (at this time at least) co-operate with the religiously educated to act on their aspirations for independence.³¹ In fact, the divisions perpetrated by education helped to encourage various groups to unite behind the one obvious common grievance: the presence of an oppressive foreign power.³²

At the same time that the educated from many fields stepped into politics,³³ the spreading cognizance of the value of education (the most ignorant and poorest of the *fdilahin* wanted to send their sons to school in hopes of obtaining government employ) made the people more susceptible to the leadership of those who enjoyed the benefits of higher learning.

New ideas gaining ground may have come from abroad, from students educated out of Egypt or through the growing mass media, but their popularity derived largely from the ambiguous climate which British educational policy was producing (i.e. an emphasis on education unbalanced by lack of discipline and any standard of thought and behaviour). The incompetence which prevailed in the private schools and the indifference characteristic of the state schools was bound to create a restless and insubordinate constituency ripe for exploitation by political propagandists.³⁴ Education, by being at the same time controlled yet badly neglected by the state, had become confused with the state and thus with politics.³⁵

UNEMPLOYMENT

Frustration which found its outlet in politicization was magnified by curriculum policy results, viz. unemployment and sterile thinking processes.

The British had heightened the desire for education by dangling the reward of state service; young men were lured away from the countryside and other job possibilities of a manual nature. When the market for their aspirations became slimmer or they failed to pass their exams, they found themselves rootless in both their old and new surroundings.³⁶ Their education had awakened ambitions in them, had imbued them with some notion of personal and national independence (without encouraging independent thinking) and their subsequent dissatisfaction with their purposelessness was directed naturally against the government which had raised their hopes and then let them down.³⁷

MODES OF THOUGHT

Although the uniform centralization and rote learning method of the curriculum acted to subdue independence and originality, the concomitant lack of initiative coupled with a history of captivity with rhetoric made

the students an obvious target for emotionally inspiring national figures.³⁸ They found no inspiration in the school room *per se*, but the educational process prompted them to be inspired by political issues. Following Mustafa Kamal, the students increasingly became incensed about the political enslavement of their country, and the first object of their disdain became the "intruding" and "usurping" school masters.³⁹ The very innocuousness of the teachers which helped initiate the political consciousness of the students turned back upon the teachers in that they could not handle the students' attacking them as bad parts of a corrupt system.

Whether in the moral terms of British officials, the religious terms of the traditional Egyptians, the political terms of the modernizing Egyptians or the intellectual terms of later analysts, the consensus was that a school system without a sound, consistent foundation helps to produce and politicize a confused, vulnerable community.⁴⁰ Hence, the transitional strains plaguing the Egyptian polity since Muhammad Ali (or the arrival of Bonaparte) were heightened by contradictory or inconsistent values bred through multiple educational systems, all of which themselves were out of touch in some way with the realities of the existing situation.⁴¹

AN ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATION

It seems only just to add to this indictment of British policy some reference to the political effects of alien education in transitional societies. Now that specific results have been extrapolated from specific policy, the point must be made that the introduction of a "modern" educational system in a society oppressed in any way most probably will produce political repercussions. When only the students are politicized, a strong government can manage or isolate any consequences; but when circumstances permit various elements of society to be affected and when the government is foreign or weak in some other way, the students (broadly speaking) may become the managers.

CONCLUSIONS

The British were aware, and afraid, that they were propagating an awakening⁴² of new knowledge and ambitions and a spirit of independence which could be satisfied only by the recipients' sharing in government and administration,⁴³ but they misunderstood the precise development of these processes and the means of channelling them.⁴⁴

Education is credited with being the most important instrument for readjusting the modern/traditional dichotomy, but it must at the same time bear responsibility for aggravating societal tensions at certain stages which result from the decline of traditional influence, if an adequate substitute is not supplied.⁴⁵ The necessity of national education is accepted,⁴⁶ for escape from international demands and pressures is not possible, but when modernizing methods and ideals encroach not so gradually and

from a clear and present foreign force and heritage, the first result is likely to be an anti-foreign nationalist politicization.⁴⁷

Egypt exemplified this process. Democratic seepages from the British mentality were accumulated in an abstract, memorized form,⁴⁸ allowing their easy exploitation by nationalist ideologies. The ideologies themselves were the product of an education which had tantalized them with ideas of freedom and participation, then left them unemployed. They had become an elite which valued achievement, but found no outlet for their achievement.⁴⁹ So in their educated leisure they revolted and found a ready audience for their revolt.

FOOTNOTES

1. Cf. e.g. Safran's *In Search of Political Community*; Ahmed's *Intellectual Origins of Egyptian Nationalism*; Hourani's *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*; or the biographical *Education of Salama Musa*.
2. Earl of Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, Vol. II, 1908, pp. 528-9.
3. Humphrey Bowman, *Middle-East Window*, 1942, pp. 48.
4. Alfred Milner, *England in Egypt*, 1894, p. 370. Milner says the Muhammad Ali schools were devoted to quantity at the expense of quality as regards subject matter—typical of a “lower civilization trying to adopt the results of a higher without understanding it.”
5. Bowman, pp. 46-7.
6. Cromer, in trying to limit school enrolment and job applicants, made diplomas mandatory for entering a higher level school and the civil service, actually increasing discontent when there still proved to be a surplus of graduates for higher level schools and the employment market.
7. Sir Valentine Chirol, *The Egyptian Problem*, 1921, p. 225.
8. Lord Lloyd, *Egypt Since Cromer*, Volume 1, 1933, p. 164.
9. Chirol, p. 125; Lloyd, p. 104.
10. Chirol, p. 228.
11. Robert Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule in Egypt*, 1966, p. 333.
12. Chirol, p. 226; Lloyd, p. 166.
13. Nadav Safran, *Egypt in Search of Political Community*, 1961, p. 55. Previously 80% had studied in France, 96% in technical fields; now 75% went to Britain and 65% took up humanities and social sciences. Tignor, p. 338, quotes the 1910 Gorst Report that the majority of students in Europe were pursuing maths and science courses, but he also cites another scholar, p. 339, who said 2/3 were studying humanities.
14. Chirol, p. 233.
15. This became more true when the British tried to develop the primary schools by wedding the *kuttabs* to the government secondary schools. John Marlowe, *A History of Modern Egypt and Anglo-Egyptian Relations*, 1958.
16. P. G. Elgood, *Egypt and the Army*, 1924, p. 217.
17. Cromer, p. 534.
18. Chirol, p. 222. Marlowe, p. 189, states somewhat differently that too many were receiving no education at all, too many were going from primary to secondary schools; and only the rich could go on with the higher or technical education.
19. Chirol, p. 237.
20. Lloyd, p. 168, attributes the government service concern of the British to the

- influence of Macaulay who drew upon the Indian colonial experience to give advice.
21. Lloyd, p. 166; Tignor, p. 323, says that by 1900 all but 177 of 729 primary school graduates since 1889 had elected to work for the state.
 22. Tignor, p. 320; George Young, *Egypt*, 1927, p. 166; Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid *Egypt and Cromer*, 1968, pp. 176-7. For a scathing attack on the Cromer/Dunlop means and ends (the production of "dumb" teachers and students, e.g.), see 'Umar Dusuqi, *Fi al-Adab al-Hadith*, 1967, pp. 22-4.
 23. Bowman, p. 62.
 24. Chirol, p. 228.
 25. Furthermore, a quarrel seems to have arisen between the British and the Egyptians over colloquial vs. classical Arabic. See Dusuqi, Chapter I.
 26. Cromer, p. 534.
 27. Chirol, pp. 239 and 241.
 28. Chirol, p. 226.
 29. Young, p. 182.
 30. Safran, p. 126.
 31. Jamal Muhammad Ahmad, *The Intellectual Origins of Egyptian Nationalism*, 1960, p. 57. He says that from the national university and the Shari'ah schools emerged a group of young men who met in groups to discuss nationalism, education, etc., some of them later to be famous....
 32. Elgood, p. 8; Lutfi al-Sayyid, p. 193; Tignor, p. 387.
 33. Safran, p. 128.
 34. James Coleman, *Education and Political Development*, 1965, p. 173.
 35. Ahmed, p. 103; Young, p. 182, assigns cause and effect rather differently by saying that systematic exclusion of the nation from political education makes the education system political.
 36. Chirol, p. 227; Marlowe, p. 190.
 37. Marlowe, p. 202, asserts that it became an economic necessity for the student to blackmail the government through political agitation for employment. (The literatures on the unemployed intelligentsia is vast).
 38. Elgood, p. 22. Marlowe, p. 190, sees the illiterate masses following a parallel course. They were apathetic but responsive to organized agitation.
 39. Elgood, p. 217.
 40. See Ahmed, p. 101, and Safran, p. 207, in addition to previous British sources.
 41. Lutfi al-Sayyid, p. 139, sums up the result: a group of disoriented youngsters who found their raison d'être in the nationalist movement.
 42. Cromer, 530.
 43. W. E. P. Newman, *Great Britain in Egypt*, 1938, p. 164; Elgood, p. 8; Tignor, p. 386.
 44. Tignor, p. 348, says Cromer's policies had just the effect he was trying to avoid: the creation of disoriented intellectuals.
 45. Safran, pp. 206-7.
 46. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 1962, p. 158.
 47. Safran, p. 208.
 48. Safran, p. 148.
 49. Coleman, p. 26.

