

Arab Intellectuals and Honesty

Arab intellectuals that I dealt with or known since the days of my study in Cairo have disappointed me. Though they praise democracy and talk about the need for it, and sometimes harshly criticize dictatorial Arab regimes, no one ever acted as a democrat while chairing a committee or managing an institution. Each intellectual adopted a position very similar to that of most Arab dictators, forbidding free speech and acting as if he knows everything and needs no advice from anyone.

Several years ago, the Arab Thought Forum held its annual conference in Amman, and while we were on a short break outside the conference room, a colleague said, we had only one item left on the agenda: the election of a new Board of Trustees. Dr. Abdelaziz Hijazi, then Vice President of the Arab Thought Forum, and former Prime Minister of Egypt, replied: "What elections; the list is in my pocket? The most important Arab think tank that advocates democracy and publishes books on issues of concern to most Arabs, has failed to practice democracy in word and action.

When Dr. Hijazi passed the list of names selected to be the new board members, it was immediately seconded. However, some members asked for opening the nomination process, but Dr. Hijazi who chaired that meeting strongly rejected the request, sounding angry as if he was insulted. While everyone retreated, I did not back down, I said that we are obligated to elect members of the board. Though I failed to get Dr. Hijazi to honor our right to vote on each member by name, I succeeded in getting him to read the names and vote on them as a single list. About two-thirds voted for the list, the rest abstained, and only one person objected, my hand was the only one that was raised in objection to the process and in support for democracy. Before the session ended, I noticed that two of the young women who had worked at the forum since its inception were crying. I was surprised, so I approached one of them and asked her why she was crying to find out that my position was the reason. The woman innocently said that my position reflects lack of confidence in them, adding that they worked several weeks to choose the new Board of Trustees; they did not understand that a council chosen by a minority falsifies the will of the majority. But that the culture of the land and the institution.

Criticizing an unlawful process angered a former prime minister and made him feel humiliated, and the staff that worked for him saw criticism as an expression of distrust. After the meeting was over, we went for lunch; and there I found myself sitting by chance at one table with colleagues Dr. Hassan Al Ibrahim, former President of Kuwait University and Mr. Mohsen al-Aini, a former Prime Minister of Yemen and Vice-President of the Forum. As we spoke about what had happened during the meeting, I addressed my colleagues, saying: Your acceptance of the outcome of today's process means that you have voluntarily waived your right to criticize any Arab regime because of its undemocratic practices. Hassan al-Ibrahim replied, "This is a big talk, but Mohsen al-Aini was quick to say: Mohamed is right. Neither Hassan nor Mohsen resigned from his post, both remained members of the Board of Trustees and vice-presidents of the Forum. Yes, their words may defend democracy, but their actions always betray it and confiscate the will of others.

About 20 years ago, I was invited by an old friend for dinner; and there I found that Dr. Abdul Aziz Al-Douri was also invited. Both the host and Dr. Douri were professors at the Jordanian University. Dr. Al-Douri is a renowned Arab historian whom I first met in the 1970s in Kuwait when he visited Kuwait University as a guest scholar. While we were chatting about history, the "Rewriting of Arab History" project, which I proposed while teaching at Kuwait University, was mentioned, Dr. Al-Douri asked me what happened to the project. Here I explained to him my new theory of history which and I was about to publish in my book "The Making of History". Dr. Al-Douri liked the theory very much and said that it was based on science and logic, and then added, "But I can't accept it." I looked at him and then said, I know you won't accept it even though you admit it's scientific and logical. He looked at me with astonishment and said, "How did you know?" I replied, if you accept it, it means that you admit that the theories that you have been teaching for decades are wrong. The man didn't deny it, he said you are right. This is how we sacrifice scientific truth and logic in order to cover up our old information and false theories.

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