

May 7, 2009 Thursday

## The Arab ostrich

**BYLINE:** RAJA KAMAL TOM G. PALMER**SECTION:** COMMENTARY; Pg. 6**LENGTH:** 848 words

CHCAGO

RECENTLY, a Saudi judge shocked many Saudis and global public opinion by upholding a marriage between an 8-year-old girl and a 47-year-old man. That ruling brought to public awareness an appalling practice that has for too long been hidden from view and shielded from open discussion and criticism.

The case was not unique. Another highly publicized recent case in Yemen featured a 10-year-old girl who sought a divorce after being forced by her parents to marry a 30-year-old man, who took advantage of his power to rape and otherwise abuse her. It is disgraceful that such blatantly coerced marriages are allowed to take place at all. Yet those familiar with educational systems in the Arab world are not surprised.

Shameful traditional systems of education that suppress critical thinking make it possible for such backward practices to continue, shielded beyond a local, narrow, and unexamined view of religion. Rulings like that in Saudi Arabia are the outcomes of that failing educational system. Some Arab societies have failed miserably to produce well-prepared generations capable of catching up with most corners of the world. The Saudi religious curriculum, which couples rote memorization of texts with uncritical acceptance of tribal practices, keeps the country backward. It does not prepare students to cope with modernity, nor to be productive participants in an increasingly global economy.

Despite the flood of billions and billions in oil money to public education, Saudi students consistently score among the worst in math and science. The greatest culprit is the suppression of critical thinking, coupled with limited and weak exposure to math and science. An impressive investment in the infrastructure of higher education has not yielded positive returns. It is as if the state had purchased the most advanced computer hardware, but neglected to secure any software to run it.

Most Arab educational systems fail to prepare graduates for productive lives. Each year thousands of students graduate from universities with degrees in Sharia (Islamic law) or Arabic literature. The vast majority of them will be unemployed, underemployed or employed in the bloated government sector, which will further contribute to already bloated and inefficient government. Thinking for oneself a precondition of both entrepreneurship and of democratic participation is suppressed. It is little wonder that judges condemn innocent young girls to such fates.

Saudi Arabia and other Arab states should look at the policies of the United States and India that transformed education and made it a major force in achieving economic growth.

Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz of Harvard University have shown that economic returns on investments in education are enormous; college graduates in market-driven educational systems earn substantial returns on the investments of money and time involved. The willingness of Americans to invest in human capital, not merely for the elites but also for the masses, fueled American prosperity. The key, however, was not merely the quantity of investment, but the critical thinking it made possible. In contrast, Saudi Arabia lavishes money on free public education, with the goal of perpetuating a religious orthodoxy that is, in any case, taught by ill-prepared teachers. A better term for the rote memorization involved is not education, but indoctrination.

India's investment in education has lifted hundreds of millions from abject poverty through impressive

India's investment in education has lifted hundreds of millions from abject poverty through impressive real economic growth. The late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi once said, Education is a liberating force, and in our age it is also a democratizing force, cutting across the barriers of caste and class, smoothing out inequalities imposed by birth and other circumstances. That liberating force has not been merely state-funded, as James Tooley of Newcastle University has demonstrated in his field research and his recent book *A Beautiful Tree*. The poor invest heavily from their meager resources to secure education for their children. One result of such education, oriented to skill and critical thought, has been the growth of high-tech industries in India, a prospect undreamed of only a few years ago.

The task facing many Arab countries is acknowledging the priority of education over mere schooling. The answer isn't just spending more money. Alchemy didn't fail because of a lack of investments in alchemy academies. A curriculum centered on memorization of dogma should be reformed to allow critical thought, a key ingredient in escaping backwardness. That's as true of judicial backwardness as it is of economic backwardness. Thorough educational reform involving not merely money but orientation to the market and critical thinking can produce judicious judges. Memorization will merely perpetuate backwardness.

Raja Kamal is senior associate dean at the Harris School for Public Policy Studies at the University of Chicago. Tom G. Palmer is a senior fellow at the **Cato Institute** and vice president for international programs at the Atlas Economic Research Foundation.