

Muhammad Abduh's Role in *al-Waqā'i' al-Misriyyah* an Official Egyptian Gazette

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Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas peranan Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) dalam kariernya sebagai ketua editorial akhbar *al-Waqā'i' al-Misriyyah* (الوقائع المصرية) sejak tahun 1880. Sepak terjangnya dalam ranah kewartawanan ini penting dalam konteks kebangkitan akhbar Mesir khususnya *al-Mu'ayyad* dan *al-Waqā'i' al-Misriyyah* sebagai surat khabar rasmi pemerintah bagi mengembangkan cita pemodenan dan mempengaruhi pandangan umum di Mesir. Ia memberi kesan yang penting yang memungkinkannya memainkan peranan dalam mengembangkan harkat bahasa, meningkatkan kekuatan pengaruh akhbar dan kewartawanan dan menggerakkan kesedaran umum tentang percaturan politik dan budaya yang intens dalam perkembangan semangat nasionalisme dan kesedaran sosial di Mesir. Penulisan dan rencana politiknya merangkumi tempoh pentadbiran Riyad Pasha, pentadbiran Sharif dan zaman pergolakan. Artikel ini menyorot ide-ide yang dilontarkannya tentang pembaharuan sosial dan spiritual, serta persoalan-persoalan pendidikan, agama dan sosio-budaya yang bersangkutan. Metode kajian adalah berasaskan kaedah dokumentasi dan pembukuan. Data-data kajian ditinjau secara deskriptif, analitik dan komparatif. Kesimpulan kajian mendapati perkembangan yang dinamik dan produktif di masa kepemimpinan Abduh menerajui akhbar *al-Waqā'i' al-Misriyyah* yang berhasil mengangkat persoalan masyarakat dan menarik kesedaran tentang ihwal mutakhir dalam dunia politik dan akhbar serta mempertahankan kepentingan etika dan nilai kewartawanan.

Kata kunci: *al-Waqā'i' al-Misriyyah*, Mesir, Muhammad Abduh, akhbar

Abstract

The article discusses the role of Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) in his illustrious career as leading editor of *al-Waqā'i' al-Misriyyah* (الوقائع المصرية) [Egyptian Events] an official Egyptian gazette. It brings profound impact in the field of journalism in the context of rising popularity of *al-Waqā'i' al-Misriyyah* during his editorship (1880-1882), that established its reputation as leading Egyptian newspapers highlighting unprecedented socio-cultural and religious reform undertaken by the establishment, in the midst of phenomenal and competitive growth of independent press. His writing was instrumental in developing national consciousness toward modernization program and influencing public opinion in Egypt. It allowed for better development of formidable national spirit and awakening their higher ideal and convention in language, literature and culture as well as mobilizing social awareness of intense political and cultural dynamics. His career span the period of Riyad Pasha and Sharif's administration and subsequent political unrest. The research is based on qualitative and documentation technique. It reviewed accumulated data by way of descriptive, analytical, historical and comparative method. The finding shows that *al-Waqā'i' al-Misriyyah* has assumed unprecedented influence and success during the editorship of Abduh through his dynamic and productive articles and rigorous daily basis of production of the newspaper that help to raise public issues and concern and attract awareness of global political situation as well as defending the significance value, norms and ethics of journalism.

Keywords: *al-Waqā'i' al-Misriyyah*, Egypt, Muhammad Abduh, press

A. INTRODUCTION

The article examines the significant ideas and role of Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) in leading the highly reputed newspaper *al-Waqā'i' al-Misriyyah* (الوقائع المصرية) [Egyptian Events] as its chief editor in 1880. His stimulating activity and involvement in the newspaper had brought meaningful influence and connection in a wide-ranging intellectual networks and activism forthcoming from his impressive career as leading activist and journalist of the modern intellectual movement of late 19th century Egypt. With the mediation of newspaper as his medium, it meant to be a vehicle that allowed him to articulate his social, political and literary views, in interpreting

and understanding the ever expanding political, cultural and ethico-moral values of the universal world, and developing his global religious ideas and reformist tradition. According to Ammeke Kateman, “Abduh formulated his ideas in the newspapers of Cairo...responding to domestic politics, engaged with Islamic tradition, reflected his friendships and animosities – in addition to the ways they participated in global developments.”¹

His creative and meaningful approach of interpretation has enabled the formation of global and broadly local network of audiences and followers, which fascinated by the progressive movement of reforms he led to uphold the imperative of moral orders², expanding the well-being and welfare of the people, expressing dynamic force of political, religious, cultural, artistic and social ideas and consciousness.

The social context and progressive nature of journalism in Egypt also enabled the spread of his rational and pluralistic ideas (*jama'ī*) to flourish. The projection of these global and radical ideas was developed through his influence and writing in local newspapers that profoundly impacted the entire make up of socio-cultural and national fabric, in awakening their spirit toward freedom and reform while simultaneously brought into consciousness of secular onslaught in the midst of the revolutionary upheaval in Egypt.

Since his school days, Abduh had developed an interest in writings and scholarship by contributing his work in local magazines and newspapers, such interest and activity which never faded until the end of his life. The momentous experiences and exposure he gained had greatly help to widen his horizon of evolving religious views and concerns, a theme which attracted much discussion among young generation of Muslim community in the Islamic world.

In the process of modern advancement and progress of Egyptian land, the part played by newspaper and journalism were far more important than most of the western countries, which reflected an interesting fact that most of the pioneers of modern religious movement and reformism started their career as writer and journalist in newspaper, such as Mustafa Kamil (1874-1908), Sa'ad Zaghlul (1859-1927), Ahmad Mahir (d. 1945), Taha Husayn (1889-1973), 'Abbas Mahmoud al-'Aqqad (1889-1964), Muhammad Husayn Haykal (1888-1956) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). Abduh's technical achievement in journalism alone is enough to remembered him as one of the precursors of modern journalism in Egypt in colonial era.

One of the most important period of his journalistic career is when he was officially became the chief editor of the Egyptian Government Gazette, “*al-Waqā'ī' al-Misrīyyah* (October 1880-September 1882).³ In spite of the newspaper being the official tongue and channel of the government, he showed his own independent voice and exclusive views, in bringing out the reality of socio-cultural and economic conditions of the people. This is especially highlighted in his critics of the establishment, and his defend of the right of the oppressed, the leftist group and opposition, the fate of the workers, activists, and their representative, meant to safeguard the liberal democratic principle and the freedom of expression.

His writings expressed a significant pattern of balance and justifiable viewpoints, of fair reporting in casting social aspirations, inculcating social empathies and current matters of concerns, while

¹ Kateman, Ammeke, *Muhammad Abduh and His Interlocutors: Conceptualizing Religion in a Globalizing World* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2019), 3.

² Amin, Osman. “Muhammad ‘Abduh the Reformer”. *The Muslim World*, Vol. 36, Iss 2 (April, 1946), 153.

³ Al-Sawi, Ahmad Husayn, “Muhammad ‘Abduh and Al-Waqā'ī' al-Misrīyyah” (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, McGill University, 1954), 2.

upholding progressive and rational policies and values. This has significantly made way for improvement of governmental bureaucratic functions besides influencing public opinion on the ways issues and policies being highlighted to raise public awareness of its rationale and consequently finding practical solutions to the problems.

Toward this objective, the present paper aims to comprehensively discuss the immense role of Muhammad Abduh as editor-in-chief of Egyptian State Gazette, “*al-Waqā’i’ al-Misriyyah* (1880-1882) in his effort to enhance the standard of journalism in Egyptian national context.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previously much focuses were generally paid to the ideal of reform inaugurated by Muhammad Abduh as well as his liberal philosophies and ideas of the integration of reason and religion, with few studies devoted to his career and writing in *al-Waqā’i’ al-Misriyyah*. Among these were kitab *Tārīkh al-Ustādh al-Imām al-Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh* (historical biography of Muhammad Abduh) compiled by his chief disciple, Muhammad Rashid Rida,⁴ in three volumes. This relatively classic reference became our main source that provided the original tools and materials for this study. Rida had recorded an extensive biography of Muhammad Abduh and his illustrious career, compiling his major articles and writings (second volume, 1908), as well as poems and eulogies composed at the time of his death (third volume, 1909). The first volume presents a complete biography of his life and work and his unpublished articles which were reissued in *Tārīkh*.

Another classic source on the life of Muhammad Abduh was produced by C.C. Adams⁵ in his book *Islam and Modernism in Egypt: A Study of the Modern Reform Movement Inaugurated by Muhammad Abduh* that extensively described his distinguished career as Muslim theologian and reformer, early life and background, intellectual and philosophical work, and influential impact and involvement in journalism which he fulfills at the request of the Egyptian government. The University of McGill’s Master of Art’s thesis by Ahmad Husayn Sawi⁶ entitled “Muhammad ‘Abduh and Al-Waqā’i’ al-Misriyyah” particularly provides an informed and detailed study of Abduh’s journalistic career as leading editor of the Egyptian official gazette *Al-Waqā’i’ al-Misriyyah*.

It provides an important background of his practice in journalism and his writings in various Egyptian newspapers that became a classic in this field. Sawi referred to mainly original sources and reviews in the printed pages of *Al-Waqā’i’ al-Misriyyah*, held in the archives of the National Library of Cairo, which included materials not published by Rashid Rida as well as local news making headlines during the outbreak of ‘Urabi revolution.

Sawi also referred to the writings of Dr. Ibrahim ‘Abduh⁷ on the rising social and intellectual development of Egypt in the later part of 19th century which explained the functions of various machinery and organs of broadcasting and printing machines in Egypt, and the consequential thriving of *Al-Waqā’i’ al-Misriyyah*, with visible power in the shaping of journalistic field and political *adab* that became the platform and outlet for Abduh’s writings on the emerging socio-

⁴ Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Tārīkh al-Ustādh al-Imām al-Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh* (Kaherah: Matbaah al-Manar 1931), vol. 1.

⁵ C.C. Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt: A Study of the Modern Reform Movement Inaugurated by Muhammad Abduh* (Cairo: The American University of Cairo, 1933).

⁶ Sawi, *op. cit.*, 1954.

⁷ Ibrahim ‘Abduh, *Tārīkh al-Tibā’ah wa al-Sahāfah fī Misr Khilāl al-Hamlah al-Faransīyah* (Kaherah: t.tp., 1949), jil. 3.

historical, economic and bureaucratic issues.⁸

Thus the present article aims to briefly examines the historical background of Abduh's productive career in journalism and his significant works in *Al-Waqa'i' al-Misriyyah*. This involves the wide-ranging influence of his intellectual ideas and impressions on the newspaper which has brought significant and momentous change in the entire standard and philosophies of the ethos of production and worldview, having significant repercussion especially in the context of intellectual development and transformation of indigenous Egyptian nations, in furthering their consciousness of political *adab* and identify the relationship of universal ethics and conceptual substance of nationhood.

C. METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature, using documentative and bibliographic technique. It analyzes qualitatively and quantitatively the historical archives of the past serials of *Al-Waqa'i' al-Misriyyah* especially leading articles and writings of Muhammad Abduh. Other relevant data were obtained from certain primary and secondary sources including books, magazines, manuscripts, thesis, articles, and periodicals such as *al-Mu'ayyad* and *al-'Urwa al-Wuthqa*. These were analyzed in a descriptive, analytical, historical and comparative manner based on empirical and scientific basis to make an accurate and coherence finding from the interplay of its theoretical arguments and environmental factors and premises.

D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The portrayal of Muhammad 'Abduh as journalist and its influence in the shaping of political consciousness and the enriching of *adab* in Egyptian context was succinctly encapsulated by William Ryle-Hodges⁹ in his article on Muhammad 'Abduh's notion of political *adab*, and the virtue of modern citizenship in late 19th century Khedival Egypt, in which he addresses the significance dynamics of his newspaper writings and its interaction with largely enlightened ground of universally modern context of religious sphere and politically embedded traditional ethics and its cultural-moral and philosophical significance: "Muhammad 'Abduh's engagement with Islamic ethical traditions was shaped by his practice in addressing the broad social and political questions of his context (which has) to do with nation-building and political journalism. As a bureaucrat and state publicist, he took pre-modern Islamic ethical concepts into the emerging discursive field of the modern state and the public sphere in Egypt."

Hodges argued that since assuming his role as Director of Publications for the Khedival state and editor of the official newspaper between 1880-1882, 'Abduh had practically articulated the modern civic notion of *adab*, a vision which was comprehensively embedded in public sphere and people's lives, animating their "souls", which implied "wide breath of knowledge, good taste, and the virtues." This ethical notion he conceived was contextually enshrined in his holistic approach to nation building, underlying his respond to local modernizing practice. The inception of this ideas forthcoming, from "a series of newspaper articles that 'Abduh wrote for the state newspaper, *Al-Waqa'i' al-Misriyyah*" show how he conceived this *adab* as the answer to the emerging problem of freedom, in the context of allowing free speech in public sphere and the power of public opinion

⁸ Ryle-Hodges, William, "Muhammad 'Abduh's Politics of Adab: Knowledge, Journalism and Policing Public Sociability in 19th Century Egypt," (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge, 2020), 1.

⁹ Ryle-Hodges, William, "Muhammad 'Abduh's Notion of Political *Adab*: Ethics as a Virtue of Modern Citizenship in Late 19th Century Khedival Egypt," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies (JAIS)* 21 (2021): 340.

to shape governance.”¹⁰

In historical terms, ‘Abduh’s early exposure to the world of journalism initially begin with his meeting with his celebrated mentor Jamal al-Din al-Afghani in Egypt who introduced him to the nuance and practice of journalism. This relation has drawn him into the unique experience of higher philosophical and intellectual inquiry and horizon and its conceptual and metaphysical underpinning. Deeply influenced by al-Afghani’s penetrating insight and progressive outlook, which brought him into complex religious, philosophical and cultural impression that influenced his intellectual formation,¹¹ ‘Abduh was drawn into the classic of Western tradition and philosophy. His intellectual life was moulded by the impact of rational and empirical enquiry which later realized in his struggle in the intense political scene and intrigue. This was also reflected in his mystical and philosophical writings that reveal the profound appeal of moral and ethical imperatives as well as his reflection on the influence of colonial expansion and imperialism in Egypt. This was in line with his function and involvement in the controversial newspaper propaganda in order to uphold the widely-held aspiration of Egyptian people for self-determination and safeguard their national heritage and interest, which culminated in the organized mass uprising mobilized by ‘Urabi Pasha to remove the corrupt regime of powerful ruling elite.

According to Masato Iizuka¹² in his analysis of ‘Abduh’s struggle in the period of ‘Urabi Pasha revolt, his movement was aimed to uphold the *shari’ah*, which he took part in the wake of the resignation of the Cabinet of Riyad Pasha in September 1881. Before that, he was editor-in-chief of the Egyptian official gazette, *Al-Waqa’i’ al-Misriyyah* unquestionably supporting the move of reactionary Government. This changing of attitude was due to his recognition for the existing effort in the creation of representative parliament, as inquired from his articles published in the periodicals *Al-Waqa’i’ al-Misriyyah* entitled “*Ikhtilaf al-qawanin bi-ikhtilaf ahwal al-umam*” (laws should change in accordance with the conditions of nations)¹³ and “*al-shura wa’l-qanun*” (the parliament and the law) which espoused for the national programs of reform and unified convention of law as well as the contextual application of shariah.

‘Abduh took up his career in the periodical *Al-Waqa’i’ al-Misriyyah* in October 1880 until September 1882. In addition to writing articles and reports in headlines, he also run in ex-officio as Head of the Press Bureau, responsible for monitoring and filtering foreign news in Turkish and Arabic, and commit his best effort to raise its standard in terms of style and content. In this capacity, it is amazing and unprecedented to see this profound and magnanimous role he assumed as described by Muhammad Rashid Rida in his accounts in his *Tārīkh*, of an extraordinary look in this double function of:

“a turbaned Azhari participating in the affairs of a Government whose activities were far removed from the world of scholars and men of religion, looking out from a window of his editorial office onto the Ministries and Law-Courts and Services of the Government, reforming the literary style of their servants and directing them to improve their work; then looking from another window onto the Egyptian nation, rectifying its morals and reforming

¹⁰ Ryle-Hodges, William, “Muhammad ‘Abduh’s Notion of Political *Adab*: Ethics as a Virtue of Modern Citizenship in Late 19th Century Khedival Egypt,” *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies (JAIS)* 21 (2021): 340.

¹¹ Scharbrodt, Oliver. *Muhammad ‘Abduh: Modern Islam and the Culture of Ambiguity* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 1.

¹² Masato Iizuka. “Muhammad ‘Abduh in the Period of ‘Urabi Movement: A Struggle for the Application of the Shari’ah”. *Bulletin of the Society for Near Eastern Studies in Japan*, Vol. 33, Iss. 2 (1990): 20.

¹³ Kurzman, Charles (ed.), *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940: A Sourcebook* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2002): 50.

its corrupted customs...; then looking from a third window onto the Arabic press, teaching it a refined editorial style and training it to write the truth.”¹⁴

In view of his position as leading editor of *al-Waqā'i al-Misriyyah* was parallel with nationalist movement led by 'Urabi Pasha, and as everyone involved in public affairs in no way can be separated from political activities, 'Abduh came to the scene in the centre stage, in which he played an immensely significant role.

Since 19th century, Egypt has undisputedly become the epicentre of Arabic thought and culture, and its Arabic newspapers have made huge impact on the cultural, literature, social and political development throughout the Arab world. The first Arab newspaper, under the autocratic rule of Muhammad 'Ali, certainly was *al-Waqā'i al-Misriyyah* which was established as a state organs, which was also the first newspaper in the Arab region as a whole under direct Ottoman rule. After that period, many competing independent newspapers emerged in Egypt, in a relatively free environment, compared to the Ottoman provinces which allowed no such liberty in publishing.

Al-Waqā'i al-Misriyyah arguably was the first Arab newspaper in the world. Founded by Muhammad 'Ali in 1828, it remained the only periodicals in Egypt which lasted for forty years, serving as historical recorder and training school for authors and guiding aid for oriental readers. This was made possible by the instrumental role of printing machine which was introduced by Napoleon Bonaparte earlier as a tool of propaganda in the wake of his sacking and occupying of Egypt in 1798. After a period of stagnation, wherein it was markedly overcome by the growing popularity of other rival independent newspapers, *al-Waqā'i* gained a new breath and reaching the peak of its fame and prosperity under the skilled leadership of Muhammad 'Abduh. After that, in the changing political context and atmosphere, it return to its ertswile position as a common official newspaper.

Muhammad 'Abduh was the successor to Rifa'ah Rafi' al-Tahtawi (1801-73), who firstly led the periodicals in 1841 under the direction of Muhammad 'Ali, whose legacy was continued by Muhammad 'Abduh forty years later. In the hands of 'Abduh, *Al-Waqā'i* reached its highest achievement of transformation, starting to published on daily basis with renewed interest and influence, connecting to global audience and foreign networking, with higher level and standard rarely imagined in history. With his sustained and pioneering effort, it has left lasting force of intellectual imprint in it.

Al-Waqā'i was revived by Khedive Ismail (r. 1863-79) after its stagnated and underdeveloped era of 'Abbas I (d. 1854) and Sa'id (d. 1863). Less than a month after 'Abduh's appointment, Bulaq's printing house has been summoned to continue its publishing which was previously banned by the regime. Under the reign of Ismail, *al-Waqā'i* emerged as one the most authoritative and reputed newspaper, far surpassed its previous condition. In less than two years under his leadership, 'Abduh had brought the periodicals into unprecedented reform of editorial practice with hightened level of professionalisms and values while maintaining its elite standard as official state's mouthpiece, which served as vehicle and intermediary for people's aspiration and interest and espoused strong and impressive values and ideal of freedom and justice that widely influence social and religious practice in that turbulent period.

¹⁴ Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Tārīkh al-Ustādh al-Imām al-Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh* (Kaherah: Matbaah al-Manar 1931), vol. I, 139; Sawi, *op.cit.*, 2.

E. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the undisputed role of Muhammad ‘Abduh as leading editor of “*al-Waqā’i‘ al-Misrīyyah*” has brought dynamic progress to its editorial standards and organization as exemplified by his fair reporting and justifiably balance approach in adhering to the highest ethical and religious values and standard and the convention of legal code and social responsibility. This was also reflected in term of his editorial skill forthcoming in the significance practice and conduct of journalism in *al-Waqā’i‘* which largely help to raise its standard and reclaim its rightful position as leading periodicals in the rising context of nationwide movement to proclaim and reasserting its cultural, literature and art reflowering. In this spirit, he mediates the interest of state apparatus and the people to highlight compelling issues of broad interest with modern appeal and outlook in order to establish its rationale and tentative solution.

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