



**Middle
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June 23, 2017

Dr. Maher Musbah, President
Suez University
Cairo-Suez Road
Suez, Egypt
via fax: 20-62-366-9914

Dr. Khaled Abd el Gaffar, Minister of Higher Education
Ministry of Higher Education
101 Kasr al-Aini St.
Cairo, Egypt
via fax: 20-2-2794-1005

Dear Minister Abd el Gaffar and President Musbah,

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our deep concern about the suspension from teaching of Dr. Mona Prince, a professor of English literature at Suez University. In a letter to Dr. Prince dated 8 March, Dr. Mohammed Mazen Galal, the head of the English department, alleges among other charges that her lectures engage students without any reason in “details which spark controversy.” Dr. Prince says these charges stem from an assignment in which she asked students to compare images of God and Satan in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* with those in Neguib Mahfouz’s *Awlad Haritna* (*Children of Gebelawi* in English) and Amal Donqol’s poem “The Last Days of Spartacus;” if true, this would amount to a violation of Dr. Prince’s academic freedom and a form of censorship. We find Dr. Prince’s allegation particularly plausible in light of the fact that Dr. Galal’s letter refers to previous incidents in which Dr. Prince was penalized for “inciting argument and problems in the university.” In fact, we wrote to you on 7 May 2013 to protest the informal suspension of Dr. Prince on another occasion for what the university deemed “inappropriate” discussions in her classroom.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, MESA publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 3,000 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

Dr. Prince is a professor of literature in the Department of English at Suez University and the author of several novels, including *Three Suitcases for Departure*, and the non-fiction book *Revolution Is My Name: An Egyptian Woman’s Diary from 18 Days In Tahrir*. At the beginning of the Spring 2017 semester, Dr. Prince was teaching two courses – “Literary Texts” for first-year students and “Novel and Prose” for third year students. According to a letter dated 21 February 2017 to Dr. Prince from Dr. Galal, the English department faculty decided on 13 February to have another teacher, Dr. Mohammed Abd el Wehab, replace Dr. Prince in the classroom for the first six weeks of the semester, with Dr. Prince returning to teaching for the remaining six weeks. During her suspension from teaching, Dr. Prince was to undertake administrative duties, including translating the department handbook. Six weeks later, however, Dr. Prince was not permitted to return to the classroom;

the department had decided that Dr. Abd el Wehab would continue teaching Dr. Prince's students until the end of the semester.

In a letter dated 8 March 2017, Dr. Galal informed Dr. Prince of the reasons for her suspension. The department's allegations fall into two categories: non-performance of basic faculty duties, and bringing "controversial" issues into the classroom. The letter alleges, for example, that Dr. Prince came to campus only two days a week, that she was not present for office hours, that her students do not perform as well as students in other sections, and that she submitted her grades late. Dr. Prince disputes some of these allegations. She deserves an unbiased investigation of these claims.

We write to express our concern about the claim that Dr. Prince should be removed from the classroom for engaging in classroom discussions which spark controversy. Dr. Galal's 8 March letter, alleging that "in her lectures she diverges from the assigned materials by engaging for no reason in details which incite controversy" also mentions that she has a "previous history of inciting argument and problems inside the university in past years, for which she was penalized." A letter dated 30 April to Dr. Prince from legal investigator Dr. Hisham Mohammed al-Badri similarly notes that she has been accused of not sticking to the assigned material in her courses. Furthermore, on 4 April Dr. Mona Edward, Dean of the College of Literature, noted on the widely-viewed *Al-Ashira Mas'aan* TV program that Dr. Prince "diverges from the academic context in her lectures." When host Wa'el Ebrashi asked Dr. Edward what this meant, she said that Dr. Prince "speaks about outside issues which are not productive. She might talk about religion or politics and cause confusion for the students."

Dr. Prince alleges that the charges against her stem from an assignment she gave students in her "History of English Literature" course on 3 November 2016. She asked students to compare the portrayals of God and Satan in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* with those by Neguib Mahfouz in his famous novel *Awlad Haritna* and Amal Donqol in his poem "The Last Days of Spartacus." The Swedish Academy, upon awarding the 1988 Nobel Prize in Literature to Mahfouz, described *Awlad Haritna* as "a 'spiritual history of mankind,' (in which) the great figures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam - although recognizable - appear in disguise." The novel was serialized in the *al-Ahram* newspaper in 1959, and incited sufficient controversy that it was not published in Egypt until 2006 and is said to have been the cause of the unsuccessful assassination attempt on Mahfouz by an Islamist activist in 1994. Amal Donqol's "Spartacus' Last Words" similarly deals with God and Satan, as Spartacus, about to be hanged for his rebellion against the Roman Empire, says in the poem's opening lines: "Glory to Satan, god of the winds. Who said no to the face of those who said 'yes.'"

Dr. Prince has been accused of "inappropriate" discussions on religion and other topics in class before. We wrote to you on 7 May 2013 to protest her suspension from teaching without pay, ostensibly in response to student complaints about a discussion of sectarian tensions in Egypt and about sexual harassment. At that time she was told that she would be investigated for "contempt of religion" or "insulting Islam." As we wrote then, "according to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights



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and the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, university officials' first response to the student's accusations was to advise Dr. Prince not to come to campus because they could not guarantee her personal safety. Shortly afterward, according to press sources, Dr. Prince's department brought a fresh charge against her—which she denies—to the effect that she regularly skips her lectures. We are very skeptical of these allegations, given the timing."

We encourage you not to violate Dr. Prince's academic freedom by penalizing her for offering innovative assignments and encouraging open discussion in her classroom. We further request that any investigation into allegations that she fails to perform her basic faculty responsibilities, such as timely grading of exams, be conducted in a fair and unbiased manner consistent with university procedures and regulations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B. Baron', followed by a horizontal line.

Beth Baron
MESA President
Professor, City University of New York

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amy W. Newhall'.

Amy W. Newhall
MESA Executive Director

cc:

The Honorable Yasser Reda, Ambassador of Egypt to the United States