

European Union Democracy Promotion: The Case of Bahrain

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BENJAMIN LEDWON, JAN 5 2013

Descriptions of the European Union's foreign policy often focus on its normative power as a promoter of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights. While the EU has achieved remarkable successes in promoting democracy in its immediate neighbourhood, it will be argued that the EU's normative foreign policy has enjoyed less success within a wider global context. Using the example of Bahrain, with particular focus on the protests from 2011, it will be demonstrated that the EU's normative power in promoting democracy has limitations. The first section conceptualises the EU's status as a normative power with particular emphasis on democracy promotion. Following a discussion of the political situation in Bahrain after the 2011 protests, the EU's response will be criticised as insufficient, failing in its normative aspirations. The essay proceeds to identify the difficulties of democracy promotion in Bahrain, given the country's internal sectarian division which is complicated by external power competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Furthermore, Bahrain's status as a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is presented as an obstacle for democracy promotion, based on the GCC's fundamental rejection of democratic reform in combination with the EU's dependency on the GCC. Lastly, the essay criticizes the absence of a unified European policy framework to promote democracy in the Gulf region, before concluding that, in the light of these challenges, it is highly unlikely that the EU will be able to successfully promote democratic reform in Bahrain.

Europe as a 'normative power' and its Failures in Bahrain

"Developing and consolidating democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights" are key aims of the European Union's foreign policy, as stated in the Treaty of Maastricht.[1] The European Union actively promotes what it considers as good governance, driven by a conviction that democracy is essential for establishing peaceful international relations and prosperity. The European Security Strategy highlights this, stating that the "quality of international society depends on the quality of governments that are its foundations".[2] According to Youngs and Cofman-Wittes the EU favours a "long-term, gradual and comprehensive" strategy in fostering the mentioned values.[3] Hence, rather than pursuing short-term policies based on narrow notions of power, the EU seeks to adopt a normative approach to foreign policy through the active promotion of principles such as democratic governance, the rule of law and human rights.

The Government of Bahrain fails to meet said criteria of good governance as defined by the European Union. Shaikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, who acceded the throne in 1999, initially introduced measures to democratise the previously hereditary emirate. The National Action Charter, which was endorsed in a public referendum from 2001, pronounced the country a constitutional monarchy and promised the reconstitution of a bicameral parliament. The government failed, however, to bring about meaningful democratising reforms. Far from being a democracy, Bahrain's political system is dominated by the King who enjoys unrestricted power over all three branches of government. The right to freedom of association, although made explicit in the country's constitution, is restricted in practice since "the formation of political parties is not allowed".[4] Likewise, freedom of expression is limited in Bahrain. After the protests from 2011, for instance, the government increased Internet censorship and blocked online traffic, leading to a "drop of 20% of internet use".[5]

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The protests in Bahrain from 2011 accentuated deep-rooted problems of Bahrain's political system: firstly, the country's division into a Sunni governing elite and an under-represented Shia majority has resulted in far-reaching frustration among Shia population. Secondly, the government lacks popular support and legitimacy and is consequently forced to rely upon a repressive state apparatus. The government's response to the 2011 protests exemplifies this – thirty five people died as a result of police or military violence, while 600 citizens were arrested.[6] Reports of systematic torture further entrenches the government's poor human right record.

The European Union failed to address the undemocratic nature of the Bahraini political system and did not react sufficiently to state violence during the Arab Spring. The EU neither strongly condemned the actions of the Bahraini governments, nor implemented specific actions to support pro-democracy activists. The former is epitomised by Catherine Ashton's failure to address the situation openly in a meeting with senior officials of the Saudi government on April 18, 2011, only one month after the Saudis aided the Bahraini government in a brutal crackdown on protesters.[7] The EU's lack of political action is exemplified by the EU's failure to even mention Bahrain in policy documents, such as 'A new response to a changing neighbourhood', published in the wake of the Arab Spring. Contradicting its self-appointed role as a normative actor in world affairs, the European Union has "simply turned a blind eye to human rights violations" and the undemocratic nature of the Bahraini state.[8]

Bahrain as a Proxy of Saudi-Iranian Conflict

The perception of the European Union as a normative power neglects the reality of EU's foreign policy grounding in a "complex relationship between democracy, security and development".[9] In the case of Bahrain, for instance, internal sectarian divisions complicate the promotion of democracy significantly. While a majority of Bahrain's population are Shia Muslims, the country is governed predominantly and disproportionately by a Sunni elite, leaving the Shia majority unrepresented and marginalised from the decision-making process. Such imbalance is worsened by the overrepresentation of Sunni Muslims in state institutions such as the police and the military. The Bahraini government actively attempts to change the religious balance in the country by naturalizing Sunni Muslims from other countries providing them with high-level positions in the police and military. A highly fragile society and political system has been born of Shia-Sunni distrust in Bahrain, where Sunnis control the means of repression over the opposition, complicating any peaceful democratic transition.

The sectarian conflict is worsened by regional competition between majority-Sunni Saudi Arabia and majority-Shia Iran, further complicating democracy promotion. Bahrain has been significantly affected by external intervention both historically and today. Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary Iran has often threatened the fragile balance of religious groups, having attempted to instigate coups in Bahrain in 1981 and 1996. The prospect of increased Iranian influence presents a primary security concern for Saudi Arabia, resulting in a policy which Salman Shaikh labels the "21st century equivalent of the Brezhnev doctrine: no revolution tolerated in a bordering kingdom".[10] The Saudis identified the protests from 2011 as an Iranian attempt to get a stranglehold upon Bahrain. The perceived Iranian intervention was countered aggressively by Saudi security forces, which executed a violent crackdown on the opposition. The hard-line stand of the Bahraini government and its Saudi allies has resulted in even deeper division between Sunni and Shia, serving to further impede the chances for democratisation.

Bahrain's position as a proxy conflict within this regional power struggle hinders the European Union's ability to engage in effective democracy promotion. The EU faces a dilemma – it can elect to support protesters and risk antagonizing Saudi Arabia, or it can opt to limit its intervention to occasional verbal criticism so as to appease Riyadh. Given the strategic and economic importance of Saudi Arabia, the European Union has chosen the latter. Rather than acting as a normative power, the EU is following a realist approach seeking to maintain the balance of power and stable alliances. The EU's close links to Saudi Arabia in addition to the sensitivity of the Saudis towards a power-shift suggests an immediate EU involvement in democracy promotion in Bahrain is unlikely.

EU – GCC relations as a Major Obstacle in Democracy Promotion

The European Union has strong economic and strategic relations with states of the GCC, further limiting its ability to

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promote democracy in Bahrain. The Gulf region presents an attractive market for exports. The trade in goods has sharply increased from €57.1 billion in 2009 to €72.2 billion in 2010. The GCC region is Europe's fifth largest export market which is remarkable considering that the region consists of a mere 42.5 million inhabitants.[11] Moreover, European countries are increasingly dependent on investment from the Gulf region as exemplified by Qatar's increased investment in the European market.

Strategic concerns are important in EU – GCC relations. Saudi Arabia is the closest Western ally in a strategically crucial region. Furthermore, Bahrain is a key stoppingpoint for the UK's Royal Navy on their way to Afghanistan. In addition, the Gulf States possess vast oil reserves with the six GCC countries containing about 40 per cent of all global reserves, upon which EU member states depend heavily. Thus, the EU's approach to the region is clearly grounded in security and economic self-interest.

GCC governments are highly suspicious about public demands for democratic reform, either reverting to violent oppression as in Bahrain, or paying off the opposition as in the case of Qatar, where the Emir granted 60 to 120 per cent pay rise to civil servants.[12] The scepticism towards reform is further exemplified by the GCC cancellation of an accession offer to Morocco after King Mohammed VI agreed to constitutional referendum in March 2011. The EU's engagement in democracy promotion in Bahrain would most likely result in serious frictions in their relations with GCC states. Hence, the EU's strategic, financial and economic dependency of the EU on GCC states results in limited ability to engage in democracy promotion. Casserino argues that the EU has a clear "hierarchy of priorities" in which economic and strategic concerns trump democracy promotion. This certainly appears to be the case in the EU's relations with the Gulf region, and Bahrain in particular.[13]

The Lack of a European Policy Framework

The EU's democracy promotion efforts in the Middle East and North Africa are remarkably inconsistent, ranging from committed institutionalised engagement with the Southern Mediterranean to the complete neglect of GCC states. The European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) engages with Southern Mediterranean countries by "supporting democratic transition and promoting human rights" with an annual operational budget of €1.6 billion. The Gulf region falls under the remit of the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), which has an annual operating budget of 1.4 billion.[14] The programme, however, applies solely to Iran, Iraq and Yemen which are, in the context of the DCI, considered to be Gulf nations. While the European Union has been successful as "a regional democracy promoter", using the prospect of accession and specific policy frameworks such as the ENP as effective democracy promotion tools, Bahrain is not incorporated in a specific European policy framework which could be used to pressure it into democratisation. Hence, the EU's means to promote democracy are very limited which decreases the EU's ability to promote democracy in Bahrain.

In addition to the lack of a European policy framework, individual European member states have directly undermined the protesters' plight for democracy by concluding arms deals with the Saudi and Bahraini governments in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. On June, 27th 2011 the German Federal Security Council sanctioned the sale of 270 Leopard 2 tanks to Saudi Arabia, despite the previous engagement of Saudi tanks in neighbouring Bahrain to crush demonstrations.[15] Similarly, the UK issued an export license to Bahrain for "training hand grenades" worth £70,000 followed by more profitable licenses for "body armour, gun silencers and weapons sights".[16] These examples further highlight that European governments are more concerned with securing lucrative deals with wealthy regional governments in order to boost their domestic economy rather than committing to democracy promotion in the region. Instead of developing a unified policy framework, EU member states engage in competition with each other for profitable contracts in turn directly contradicting the EU's normative foreign policy principles.

Conclusion

The conceptualisation of the European Union as a normative power in international relations, suggesting that the EU is committed to the promotion of democracy regardless internal and external realities, requires a more nuanced analysis, which is provided by the example of Bahrain. Considering the unlimited power of the king, restricted

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freedom of association and expression in addition to the government's poor human right record, highlighted particularly by the Arab Spring, there is a clear need for democracy promotion in Bahrain. Rather than acting as a normative power, however, the EU has acted in a realist manner. The vital security importance attributed to Bahrain by Saudi Arabia, particularly in countering a pro-Shia Iranian influence, hinders the EU's capacity to intervene to promote democratic governance. The EU's economic, financial and strategic dependence on the GCC states discourages them from exerting pressure upon those governments to democratise. Lastly, the EU as "primarily a regional hegemon" has effective democracy programmes for its immediate neighbourhood, but significantly less influence in the broader Middle East.[17] Moreover, individual European governments are even undermining democracy movements by selling arms to repressive regimes in the region. Hence, the case of Bahrain exemplifies what Peters labels a fundamental "gap between rhetoric and action" in the EU's democracy promotion efforts. The challenges, examined in this essay, provide a grim outlook for the future of EU democracy promotion in Bahrain.[18]

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