

The EU and the Arab world: living up to the EU's normative expectations

Written by Francesco Cavatorta

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FRANCESCO CAVATORTA, FEB 17 2011

The external relations of the European Union with the Arab countries of the southern bank of the Mediterranean, institutionalised initially through the Barcelona process, then the ENP and today the Union for the Mediterranean, are predicated on the twin pillars of political stability and economic integration into a liberal free trade area. On the one hand, political stability meant supporting authoritarian political structures in the Arab world in order to prevent the rise of political radicalism, namely Islamism. There is little doubt that the Barcelona process was a reaction to the Algerian events of the late 1980s and early 1990 when the opening up of the political system saw the emergence of an Islamist movement with foreign policy views aimed at challenging the international status quo (Cavatorta, 2009). The Islamist challenge through the ballot box initially and then through armed struggle and terrorism was met and won by the Algerian military with the support of the international community and the Algerian democratic experiment ended in civil war. The support for authoritarianism in the region as bulwark against perceived extremism however was meant to be conditional on the progressive adoption of democratic reforms that would slowly transform Arab countries into more democratic polities. These reforms were to be introduced slowly in order not to upset the entire political system and create a vacuum that would be filled by what many European policy-makers consider extremist movements that would act as spoilers in the international arena. On the other hand, market reforms, undertaken with the supervision and technical assistance of the European Union, would create economic growth and opportunities for both Arab businesses and citizens. According to the modernisation theory that the EU implicitly espouses, these positive economic outcomes would have beneficial effects on the political system, as emboldened by economic growth a rising middle-class would make democratic demands on the regime. The latter in turn would accede to such demands, as core constituencies supporting would realise that the adoption democracy would deliver economic goods and further reduce radicalism.

This approach to the southern bank of the Mediterranean has been heavily criticised in the academic community (Youngs, 2003) and it is now evident that it is both a policy and a moral failure. Embracing authoritarianism in the region has delivered a very precarious type of stability and has further undermined the credibility of the Union's commitment to democracy and human rights in large parts of the Arab world. The political structures across the Middle East and North Africa have evolved through the interaction with the EU and other international pressures leading to a number of democratic institutions such as regular elections being adopted, but they have also been completely hollowed out by regimes that know full well that the Union was and still is unable to conceive of a regional stability that would see them departed. What we witnessed in the Arab world was an upgrading of authoritarianism (Heydemann, 2007) that was satisfactory to both the US and the EU (Durac, 2009). Pushing for modernisation through the adoption of market reforms brought aggregate growth for most Arab countries, but unfair trading practices and the hijacking of reforms on the part of elites close to the various regimes meant that there were no trickledown effects (Dilmann, 2002). In fact what we have seen in the Arab world over the course of the last two decades is the rise of networks of economic patronage that accentuated the differences in the distribution of wealth (Heydemann, 2004). For some (Nasr, 2010) there is an Arab middle class that has grown and taken advantage of the possibilities that globalisation and economic integration has brought about, but this might be true only in small Gulf states. The uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt are rooted in economic desperation as they are in political dissatisfaction.

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The European Union has purposefully supported regimes with very little legitimacy, has not built solid links with genuinely popular opposition movements and forced drastic economic changes that might have been necessary, but that, when implemented by largely corrupt and illegitimate elites, proved to drive large sectors of the Arab population, particularly in the Maghreb, into further relative poverty. It is not therefore a surprise that the recent events in Tunisia and Egypt have destabilised the manner in which the European Union deals with its Arab neighbours. While it should be acknowledged that changes in Egypt and Tunisia today resemble more military coups than revolutions, there is no doubt that the EU has been on the wrong side of history and cannot claim to have had any positive role in such changes. Popular revolts, however they might end, indicate a profound malaise in society and the EU has to take some responsibility for creating such malaise through its pandering to authoritarian regimes and policy choices. The credibility of the European Union has been undermined not only because it pursued policies that partly led to such uprisings, but also because sticking to relations with discredited regimes and co-opted or ideologically marginal actors prevented the EU from having a clearer knowledge of what was occurring at the societal level. The Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, no matter how they might conclude, pose a dilemma for the European Union and of how it conceives its role in the Mediterranean region.

There are a number of lessons that can be learnt from these events and one mistake that must be avoided from the EU's perspective. First of all, the EU must live up to its normative foundations when interacting with other states. This does not mean adopting an overly confrontational attitude towards unpalatable regimes. Countries that are authoritarian and problematic must be engaged through diplomacy and commercial relations in order to be changed. Engagement however should not mean deference and a more targeted use of negative conditionality should occur when necessary to point out that the EU will engage with everyone, but will not accept abuses of human rights or stalling on political reforms if relations are to continue. The Arab partners on the southern bank have received significant aid over time and the EU never managed to trigger conditionality clauses despite evidence that abuses were being committed and binding steps of political reforms were not being taken. There has been a tendency within the EU to operate as a realist actor (Hyde-Price, 2006) in its external relations and this attitude should be abandoned.

Secondly, the EU should want to revise the concept of stability it espouses and make sure that its long-term beliefs match short-term policies. The EU believes that peace and stability can only exist if all countries have broadly similar systems of government based on accountability and popular-democratic legitimacy. In the Mediterranean area however the EU has behaved contrary to such beliefs, implementing policies that strengthened authoritarian rule for fear of what democracy might bring. Admittedly this support for authoritarian elites was meant to be conditional on progress towards democracy so as to reconcile it with the long-term objectives and beliefs of the EU, but it was clear from the very beginning that Arab regimes would not be pushed. This dissonance should be ended even if the price to pay in terms of interests in the short-run might be high in some policy areas. Dealing with governments legitimated by popular rule might be even more difficult in fact, but longer-term relations between democracies can become far less volatile and more constructive.

Finally, the idea of pushing for a free trade area where benefits are not widely shared will continue to increase the very inequalities that are partly at the root of the recent uprisings. Just as the EU struggles internally with the issues of unemployment, underemployment and the absence of opportunities for many university graduates, Arab countries struggle with the same but on a much larger scale. The policies of economic integration undertaken over the last two decades might be the only feasible ones and they might guarantee economic growth, but they have been implemented unequally (for instance agriculture has not been fully liberalised) and unfairly (European businesses are much stronger and therefore become predatory in markets where local industries are weak). This is no longer sustainable.

In all of this there is an opportunity for the European Union to redeem itself and initiate a genuine partnership with Arab countries, calling for meaningful democracy everywhere and following the call through with new policy instruments. It would be a great mistake if the EU, gripped by the anxiety of who might win free and fair elections in countries on the southern bank, were to repeat its stance as in Algeria in 1992 and Palestine in 2006. It is the army in both Tunisia and Egypt that will most likely decide the future direction of the country and it would be unforgivable if the EU betrayed its constitutive norms of democracy and human rights by encouraging soft dictatorships to materialise in order to achieve an illegitimate type of regional stability that would in the future prove once again

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extremely unstable.

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