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The EU and Egypt: Repeating Past Mistakes?

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By agreeing to monitor the May 2014 presidential election in Egypt, the EU is going back to its old policy of exchanging democracy for authoritarian stability, but risks losing both. The EU needs instead to define a long-term strategy for Egypt, a country which is likely to face a long period of instability.

EU policies toward the countries of the southern Mediterranean went through several phases in the past two decades, with varying degrees of emphasis on issues such as democratic reform, migration management and the fight against terrorism. The excesses of the current military regime, however, make it clear that the EU needs to develop a policy that is compatible with its values and with its long-term interest in seeing a democratic and developed neighbourhood around its borders. This should involve implementation of the relevant clauses of its Neighbourhood Policy for promoting political reform, returning to a policy of defending human rights, empowering civil society and supporting inclusive dialogue among all political currents in Egypt.

During the Mubarak years, European Union policy towards Egypt involved a cooperative relationship with the regime at the political level, together with support for certain NGOs, particularly in the field of human rights, through programs directed by the European Commission. The policy was enshrined within the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), of which Egypt had been a founding member. The EMP had been created in 1995, in the aftermath of the Oslo agreements, bringing together the EU and the countries of the southern and eastern Mediterranean within a new cooperative political and economic relationship. At its founding conference, the participants signed the Barcelona Declaration which included the objective of developing “the rule of law and democracy in their political systems”. Unfortunately, this objective was rapidly forgotten as concern with stability, rather than reform, became the guiding principle of the partnership, mainly because of the fear of political Islam, which was perceived as the most likely alternative to the authoritarian regimes of the South Mediterranean region, including Egypt.

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In 2004 the European Commission launched its Neighbourhood Policy, which, in conjunction with the EMP, allowed for a greater degree of differentiation and positive discrimination between different countries and attempted to promote support for political reforms. It was, however, strongly criticized by the Egyptian government which felt threatened by its internal opposition. This was one of the explanations for the leading role played by the Mubarak government in fuelling the 2005-06 Danish cartoon crisis.¹

Subsequently, under the leadership of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, criticism from the Egyptian government and other authoritarian leaders in the EMP brought about the dismantling of the Partnership, the remnants of which were absorbed into a new “Union for the Mediterranean” in 2008, with its initial summit co-chaired by President Sarkozy and Egypt’s President Hosni Mubarak. The democratic goals of the Barcelona Declaration were considered in Nicolas Sarkozy’s circles as “idealistic” in the face of the danger of political Islam. Priority was given, instead, to fighting terrorism, controlling migration and to the strategic importance of relations with Egypt in the context of the endless Middle East peace process, where the EU, now a member of the Quartet, wanted to be accepted as a partner by Israel.

The Egyptian revolution in 2011 was welcomed with enthusiasm by the European public but came as a surprise to the EU itself and to its member states, which were forced to reconsider their policy positions and deal with new political actors quite unfamiliar to them. This was recognised by the President of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso, who declared in Cairo in July 2011, that “In the past many people have traded democracy for stability”.

The EU also revised its policies towards the Mediterranean by revisiting its Neighbourhood Policy, reinforcing conditionality by introducing the principles of “more for more”. The fact that the new conditions imposed on the transition countries were stricter than those previously offered to their authoritarian predecessors was challenged by the transition states themselves, especially since the financial package which accompanied them was to be implemented only years later, through the EU’s multiannual financial framework for the period from 2014 to 2020.

Nonetheless, Egypt’s parliamentary elections in 2011-2012, together with the 2012 presidential election which was won by Mohamed Morsi, convinced Europeans that they had to work with new authorities in Cairo. Some member-states, more open to engagement with political Islam, took part in a constructive dialogue with President Morsi and his Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). The EU received President Morsi in Brussels in 2012 and German Chancellor Angela Merkel welcomed him later to Berlin. Other member states engaged in direct cooperation with FJP, trying to contribute to its modernisation and democratisation. This was the case with a number of Nordic states and non-EU members, such as Norway and Switzerland. During this period, the EU tried to build bridges between the Brotherhood and Egypt’s liberal opposition, recognising the extreme polarisation in Egypt as a major danger to the transition process. According to an EU official engaged in these efforts the Brotherhood

¹ See Álvaro Vasconcelos et al, ‘Getting it right: Inclusion within Diversity: Lessons of the “Cartoon Crises” and Beyond’ EuroMeSCo 2006.

was not at all receptive to the need for a compromise with the opposition, convinced as they were of their electoral legitimacy.

The EU's desire to develop relations with the new leadership was manifest in the creation of an EU-Egypt Task Force following President Morsi's visit to Brussels. The Task Force brought together officials, financial institutions and businesses in Cairo in November 2012, where a financial package was announced: €5 billion, mostly composed of loans, with only €50 million in grants. This package was in addition to the €449 million already dedicated to Egypt through the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument for 2011-2013 but all of this was considered to be too little by the Egyptian side. In any case, most of the loans did not materialise because of a lack of trust in Egyptian banks and because some of the loans were subject to endorsement through an IMF arrangement that never happened, for the IMF was demanding austerity measures in a period of transition and recession.

At the same time, however, the Muslim Brotherhood's victories and the good electoral showing by Salafis raised fears in Europe, once again, of the growing power of political Islam. It was possible to hear in EU circles the suggestion, privately voiced of course, that the best solution for Egypt was a military regime which could prevent the takeover of the Egyptian state by the Muslim Brotherhood and thereby ensure stability. It is not a surprise, therefore, that the military coup of June 2013 was not condemned as such by the EU, which speedily recognised the new administration and expressed hope that it "would be fully inclusive".

It should be noted, in this connection, that the EU High Representative, Catherine Ashton, went to see President Morsi in prison and tried, without success, to mediate between the military and the Brotherhood. Other than this high profile initiative, however, the EU stance in the face of the military coup and the brutal repression that followed has been mixed. The EU condemned human rights violations, including the Rabaa massacre, but has also expressed the desire to go back to the relations that it had had with Egypt before the revolution and has accepted the one-sided transition road map announced by the military.

This explains, no doubt, why the EU decided to monitor the 2014 presidential elections. However, it is a decision that may be seen as providing a veneer of democratic legitimacy to the authoritarian regime of General al-Sisi. The elections cannot be free and fair, however, when opposition parties are not allowed to compete and many of their members, including those from liberal non-Islamist organisations such as the 6 April movement, are in prison. Indeed, this attitude on the part of Europe is in complete contradiction with the positions it took in similar situations elsewhere, such as in Belarus.

Furthermore, why would the EU try so hard to normalise relations with a military dictatorship in its southern neighbourhood? On one hand, there is the old fear of political Islam, but there is also the conviction that there is a window of opportunity for the EU to become more influential in what has been the key country of the Middle East.

The problem is, nevertheless, that even if the EU is the main trading partner of Egypt, the EU itself is not a key political actor across the Middle East. The region where the EU can exert influence in the Mediterranean is the Maghreb, but EU support for the military in Egypt is not

well perceived by the citizens of those Maghreb countries where (with the exception, for now, of Algeria) they have become an essential component of political life.

It appears as if relations with Egypt are returning to the old days of exchanging democracy for stability. Yet, the EU may lose both, along with the credibility for its role in supporting democratic reform in the Maghreb, just as it did at the start of 2006 when it refused to accept the electoral victory of Hamas in the Occupied Territories. Indeed, if the EU does not adopt a coherent approach to Egypt, the value of its policies of conditionality and coherence in the Maghreb may be threatened.

There is another course of action which the EU could adopt in Egypt that is more compatible with its values and with its long-term interests in a democratic and developed neighbourhood around its borders.

This would encourage a genuinely national dialogue in which all political currents could participate. The EU needs to understand that a president elected while so many opposition leaders are in jail will not have the legitimacy necessary to assure stability and, at the end of the day, to overcome the serious political, security, social and economic challenges facing Egypt.

The EU, in short, needs to support an inclusive policy among all Egyptian political forces and, above all, demand the liberation of the almost 20 000 political prisoners from all corners of the political arena. It needs to return to a policy of defending human rights and empowering civil society, to whose most of the financial support it offers should be directed.

To do this, the EU does not need to cut off its relations with the new Egyptian power centre created by the army-backed coup but it does need to implement the relevant clauses of the Neighbourhood Policy and of the 2004 EU-Egypt association agreement. This would imply, of course, delaying negotiations for the deep and comprehensive trade agreement announced in 2011, until there is improvement in the human rights situation and a more inclusive policy in operation across Egyptian society.

The EU must support the reform of the Egyptian judiciary system, which today is a pillar of the repressive system, and refuse any kind of military or other assistance that could be used to repress the citizenry.

Transition to democracy is a lengthy and complex process. However, the democratic aspirations of Egyptians did not disappear with the al-Sisi coup. With inclusive policies and with the right support, Egyptian democracy has a real possibility of success, as the experience of Egypt's neighbour, Tunisia, has shown.