

ECFR Roundtable, February 2011 Paris :

“Democracy and Human Rights in North Africa and Europe’s Response”.

This roundtable was convened to discuss the EU’s response to the events in Tunisia and Egypt and whether it could now develop a more constructive and effective approach to supporting human rights and democracy in the region.

Egypt

Egyptian colleagues were very clear that there is no trust at all in the new appointments that President Mubarak made at the beginning of February 2011, in what he is trying to set up as a transitional government. Many leading business figures have reportedly said no to joining the government, as no-one expects it to last. There was a very strong sense that he is a spent political force, whatever scenario emerges from the protests.

Participants offered a range of recommendations for the EU to provide effective support in Egypt, starting with a strong signal that a genuinely transitional government needs to be put in place in order to ensure stability over the coming weeks and months. The EU has a strong diplomatic corps in Egypt and good contacts at right up to senior level in the army. Embassies should be doing much more now to exercise these contacts. There is also a strong role for embassies in reporting on police abuses to get the message out of the country that access to internet is extremely sporadic; banks are running out of money; food is running out in the shop, prices are rising, and the situation is unsustainable.

On the diplomatic front, speakers felt it was also critical to encourage Israel to take a stronger line against Mubarak, recognising that he will not be part of any stability that might emerge after these mass protests.

A strong importance was placed on accurate reporting on the composition of the demonstrations, and a proper understanding of the role of the Muslim Brotherhood. They are not leading or co-ordinating the demonstrations, nor are they even the most visible group. This is a broad-based social movement, including all parts of society – intellectuals, women, football fans, those who are struggling to make ends meet financially. This last group is likely to grow as of the 1st February, as payday will have passed and salaries will not be received because of the banking paralysis.

The EU should also offer technical and political support for the development of a robust constitution, and reform of electoral laws. Currently there is no basis for free and fair elections to take place in the country, regardless of who oversees the transition.

Finally, participants underlined that all EU support needs to be as visible as possible and as soon as possible. The sense of solidarity from the wider international community is crucial to Egyptians out on the street and in Tahrir Square.

Tunisia

Even for those working closely on Tunisia, no one believed that change was going to come as suddenly as it did in the Jasmine Revolution. Everyone expected something much more gradual. Participants felt that the unifying idea that brought things to a head was the concept of dignity, which linked concern about poverty, corruption, and the need for political reform. There has been a fundamental change in the way that Tunisian people are willing to be addressed, both by their governments, and in international relations.

Though a number of immediate triggers can be identified, including greater information on corruption within the Ben Ali regime via Wikileaks; Mohammed Bouazizi's death, the tipping point which turned agitation into revolution seems to have been police attacks on protestors, which some participants felt linked back to this question of an attack on people's dignity.

Two longer term trends can be identified which made it possible for local a social organisation around discrete issues to turn into a mass movement: firstly, the development of public space, on the internet (particularly the meteoric rise of Facebook, from 2008 to 2010) and the development of local social organisations: local lawyers groups, trade unions, mosques, and community groups in the quarters of Tunis have been critical in turning dissatisfaction into general protest. However the social movement's diversity is also its potential weakness going forward. It will be a challenge to sustain a social movement that is so broad, and to prevent it dissipating around different priorities for reform, and the development of a political system.

A number of suggestions were offered for the EU in supporting this process of transition. EU assistance has to be sought, and is likely to be, but it should exercise caution in its engagement with the transitional government. If questions such as whether negotiations should be restarted on Tunisia's Advanced Status within the European Neighbourhood Policy too soon, then the EU risks simply endorsing the transitional government before it has proved its commitment to reform. A better starting point would be to work with civil society (at both governmental level and through civil society exchange) in Tunisia to help the various political forces organise into an effective lobby to push for lasting reform of the institutions.

Looking forward to the promised elections in 6- 12 months, as with Egypt, there is an important role for the EU to play in technical assistance rewriting the electoral code, and supporting the process of electoral scrutiny throughout the process.

The wider region

The extent to which democracy is able to take a hold in either Tunisia or Egypt will clearly play a key role in determining the implications of the wider region, but Europe should draw some general lessons from recent events. They should reinforce Europe's confidence that values such as human rights and democracy are shared in the Arab world, and that a reassessment is needed of how they can be advanced in parallel with stability and economic liberalisation, rather than being seen as being in competition, or as needing to come only after the other goals have been achieved. An important part of this will be about working at a number of levels – talking to governments, but also capacity building and intellectual engagement with civil society and institutions to hold regimes accountable, and speaking out on abuses.