



**International workshop on
European support for democracy and human rights in North Africa**

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Workshop report, European Support for Human Rights and Democracy in North Africa.

National and regional trends on human rights and democracy in North Africa present a complex picture. There was a basic consensus that trends on political reform were strongly negative, but many participants also highlighted social developments that undermined any simple picture of stagnation or backsliding.

On the negative side, participants emphasized that recent years had seen a consolidation of authoritarianism across the region. In the years after the end of the Cold War, there had been a possible moment of political opening. The geopolitical considerations that led to Western support for authoritarian regimes had disappeared, and there were economic problems in some North African states, as evidenced by the bread riots in several countries, which in every case led to greater openness. But since then there has been a significant closing of political space. Authoritarian governments have become more sophisticated in learning how to defuse pressures for political reform and have learnt from each other. They understand more about the processes of democracy support and have created new counter-techniques. Regimes have benefited from Western concern with the threat of Islamist terrorism and a more general suspicion of Islamic political parties to deflect external pressure for greater democratisation.

While participants stressed that the countries of North Africa were at very different stages of development (and Algeria and Libya are different because of the energy resources they have at their disposal) the assertion of authoritarian control is evident across the region. In Tunisia there was much more space for independent media and opposition parties 10-15 years ago; now the regime has imposed a tight muzzle on dissenting voices. Control of the media in Tunisia is almost total. In Morocco, a series of years of plentiful rainfall and good crops, combined with a high level of remittances from overseas (up to 9-10% of GDP) which tend to be directed particularly to families in need, have taken the edge off social protest. On issues like press freedom Morocco has gone downhill in the last few years. In Libya there is no space for civil society, which Qaddafi has described as a meaningless concept. In Algeria the space for civil society appears to be shrinking. And Mubarak in Egypt has consolidated political control in several ways, including removing judicial supervision of elections in 2007 and handing control to an election commission which is not independent of the regime.

At the same time, several participants argued that societies in these countries were developing in significant ways. Although reforms introduced in recent years have focused on “soft” non-political issues like the rights of women and children, they had nevertheless had a positive impact on social development. In some countries, like Morocco, they have led to a relatively developed civil society. In Tunisia, despite the crackdown on social freedom, there is an emerging middle class. Our condemnation of regimes’ attempt to maintain authoritarian control should not blind us to the constructive steps they

are taking. There is an important difference between the model of development in some of these societies – where greater social freedoms were a response to genuine social pressure and could not be reversed – and the model seen in the Persian Gulf where reforms are undertaken solely to comply with outside demands and could easily be withdrawn if the regimes wished.

Data that looks at the development in a longer time-frame (from 1972-2007) shows that there has been a reduction in authoritarian control everywhere except in Libya. The democracy narrative retains its appeal within these societies. There is a clear public opinion trend in favour of such principles as the rule of law, political competition, and the rotation of power. In Egypt, the social costs of human rights abuses have risen: the outcry over the apparent death by police beating of a young man earlier this year means it would be impossible for authorities to respond the same way again. In Algeria the narrative of national liberation and the support the regime drew from it have been exhausted. There are significant parts of society across North Africa that want to move forward, but it is difficult for them to see a way to do this while the regimes control all the resources. The danger is that ambitious young people with marketable skills will choose to pursue their careers abroad, depriving internal reform movements of their strongest potential leaders.

These conflicting trends call for a more nuanced analysis of these societies for the development of European policy. There is currently not enough understanding of North African countries among European governments. We need to understand the different constituencies that exist within these societies and what they get out of current political arrangements; some participants argued that we should resist the tendency to see a simple dichotomy of “bad” regimes and “good” opposition movements. It may be that regimes benefit from representing a stable point that forestalls the greatest fears of different social groups: progressive forces might prefer a fully democratic system, but tolerate the status quo because at least they have social freedoms that would not exist under Islamic rule; while Islamic/conservative groups would prefer an overtly religious system of government, but at least they have a regime that pays lip service to Islam and avoids the risk of an Ataturk-style secularism. In Morocco, if there was some kind of constitutional deal between these different groups, it would be difficult for the regime to resist the pressure for further reform.

It would be helpful to understand more about the dynamics within the regimes and between regimes and the opposition. For instance, in the case of Egypt, there is too little research devoted to the nature of the state and its institutions. What is the political economy of the governing elite? Who is delivering what, and to whom? How does this impact on the political development of the country? What is happening to the middle class? We should also recognize the weaknesses of the state in many North African countries. Egypt is in many ways an ineffective or even semi-failed state that cannot provide basic services to its population: electricity and water cuts are a serious problem.

A better understanding of these societies would give Europe a clearer indication of how it can use its engagement with North Africa to support democracy and human rights. Some participants argued that the concept of “leverage” was unhelpful as it implied that the European Union was trying to force change onto an unwilling society and that this would tend to provoke resistance; the notion of “influence” might be more helpful. It is particularly difficult for those countries that have a past colonial

role in North Africa to exert direct pressure on regimes in the region because of the political sensitivities involved. However civil society groups within North Africa see a tendency on the part of Europe to understate its influence. Because of their own ineffectiveness, the poorer countries in the region are reliant on external support and the EU (along with the United States) remains the most important source. Falling gas prices during the economic crisis may reduce the autonomy of energy exporting countries. Member states with colonial pasts can use common EU positions to defuse some of the sensitivities that would be involved in bilateral criticism—though it is also the case that deeper relationships based on historical ties (for example France’s relationship with Algeria) can give countries particular influence at key moments such as transitions of power.

Given the extent of European involvement in North Africa, if the EU does not say anything about regressive steps on human rights and democracy this will appear as an endorsement of the regime. The EU can appear toothless and this leads authoritarian regimes to treat it with disdain, according to some participants; it was said that problems tend to be resolved through the intervention of Washington rather than Europe. In 2007, the United States criticised the changes to the electoral laws in Egypt while the European Union said nothing. European support for governance reforms has had a limited impact; it has not led to the development of a stronger rule of law but has been diverted by regimes into support for administrative development. If anything, more efficient administrative machinery has allowed the state to reinforce its control, rather than leading to a broader distribution of power within society.

The advanced status awarded to Morocco was seen as a source of pride for the regime, and was widely noticed across the region; if the EU did not follow through by requiring genuine progress, this would set a bad example for other countries. One point to focus on might be whether Morocco was implementing the recommendations of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission, including its provisions on constitutional reform. Some activists also complained that the EU was happy to make continued funding of economic projects in North African countries dependent on the completion of earlier stages, but did not take the same tough approach on political projects. The EU could deepen its contact with local civil society, using their input to sharpen reporting about North African regimes’ compliance with human rights commitments.

The security issue remains paramount in North Africa. For European governments, security concerns essentially define their relationship with North African countries. In the longer term, it is debatable whether European interests are being served by the present authoritarian regimes; regimes are interested in preserving their own power rather than in developing genuinely stable states. Many suicide bombers have come from Morocco and both Algeria and Egypt appear fragile. But in the short term these regimes do help relieve the pressure on Europe and are seen as effective partners. Because the state and the regime are so associated, it is not clear how to weaken the regimes’ hold without also weakening the state. Internally, North African use security threats to justify authoritarian rule. These are all in varying ways “security states” and it is essential for Europe to think about how it can reduce the use of the “security pretext” as a block on political development.

In trying to use its influence more effectively, Europe should look for entry points when it can have an impact. These should be issues that are already being raised in the domestic setting and which don’t

involve huge trade-offs; in the case of Egypt, possible entry points could involve issues that would not involve Mubarak putting the survival of his regime at stake. These could include: building on the momentum created by the outcry against police brutality; pushing for international monitoring of upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections which even the Muslim Brotherhood is calling for; the increasing use of new technology and finding ways to support this; and the growing political mobilisation against corruption, which is leading to the emergence of a new cross-party dynamic. Some participants argued that the EU should be prepared to take more risks: for instance the EU could put pressure on Mubarak by agreeing to meet with Mohammed Badia of the Muslim Brotherhood. Others said that in Egypt the EU should push for a genuinely independent internal process of electoral oversight.

The rule of law and the independence of the judiciary were seen as important priorities that the EU should concentrate on. The rule of law is important for the real development of economic enterprise. In the longer term, Europe could also work to strengthen legislatures, helping to promote the idea of political representation and an independent check on the executive. However this should not be done by extending contacts with existing parliaments in the region, since they lack credibility: the EU should be careful not to reinforce illegitimate institutions when it costs nothing to bypass them. Independent media are also an important group to support, though we need to find ways of doing this that do not involve direct funding, which may appear to compromise their independence. In general, the EU's objective should be to build up elements of an independent state that is not identical with the regime. Some participants pointed out that this would require greater dialogue with groups like the business classes who are part of existing elites, and that this had to be handled carefully because it could appear to compromise the EU's principles. Since the EU as an institution is naturally disposed to engage with the executive branch in partner countries, other European groups including civil society organizations should also play a part in introducing new ideas into these societies.

The importance of Turkey as a democratic role model in the region should be given more attention. In Turkey a balance of interest between religious/conservative and progressive forces has produced a relatively stable outcome. The attitude that Europe takes toward the Islamic government in Turkey is noticed in North Africa. There should be more thought about how to use the Turkish example in a positive way.

Looking forward, there are likely to be transitions soon in several North African countries because of the biological fact that leaders are elderly. The EU should prepare for these events by developing scenarios for the transfer of power – these could also provide entry points for locking in reform. Finally, some participants referred to the positive example of the 5+5 process linking southern European and Maghreb countries, meeting behind closed doors to discuss an agenda of mutual agreement: the EU should continue to experiment with “variable geometry” and explore different forms of interaction.