

Note on Egypt ahead of Forthcoming EU Foreign Affairs Council

5th February 2014

- Despite approval of the constitution, and the forthcoming elections, **the EU should not act as if Egypt is progressing towards meaningful democracy.**
- **There has been a steady closing of political space**, with the branding of the Muslim Brotherhood as terrorists without any proof, prosecution of people merely for non-violent speech or affiliation, clampdown on right to protest and freedom of the press, widespread detention without trial, selective use of criminal prosecution and absence of due process and failure to account for use of lethal force. The Muslim Brotherhood is shut out of the political sphere and faces a systematic campaign aimed at destroying it as an organisation.
- Against this background it would be **wrong to give the impression** that the constitution and elections represent **progress towards political openness**. Rather, the crackdown is being extended.
- There is every reason to think that the **security-driven agenda** of the Egyptian authorities **is likely to be self-defeating**. Closing off political space to Islamists will drive some of the more radical elements towards **more extremist paths**.
- Equally it **cannot be assumed that the current popularity of Sisi will last**, especially if his leadership fails to deliver prosperity and stability.
- If the **EU** hoped to preserve its channels of influence with Egyptian authorities through **downplaying its criticism**, this **is not bringing results**. On all questions where the EU might have hoped to influence Egyptian authorities towards moderation, they have instead followed the most extreme path. The forces within the Egyptian governing coalition that we might have hoped to strengthen have instead become steadily more marginal.
- It is clear now that Egyptian authorities' repressive approach is not just a temporary post-takeover position but that they are trying to entrench it as the basis for the next phase of Egypt's politics. Sisi's almost certain ascent to the presidency confirms this. This makes it **essential that the EU now establishes greater critical distance** rather than buying into the position that the government is presenting.

- The EU has not issued Egypt conclusions from a Foreign Affairs Council since August 2013 and it is therefore right that it should use these conclusions to make a statement about Egypt's political direction.
- The EU needs to speak clearly about what is happening in Egypt. It has a clear interest in distinguishing between current developments and the kind of genuine reform that will be necessary for long-term development and long-term stability in Egypt. The **EU needs to position itself with credibility** for when things (again) change in the country, and to show that its rhetoric about supporting democracy in its neighbourhood has some value.
- **Anything less** will render the positions that the EU has adopted since 2011 meaningless, and will have negative consequences for the EU's position across the neighbourhood, including **devaluing European engagement with transitions that are progressing, as in Tunisia.**
- While the EU clearly has an interest in pursuing cooperation with Egyptian authorities, and in helping meet the needs of its people, this need not entail turning a blind eye to political developments in the country or appearing to endorse a repressive political system as a move towards democracy. The FAC conclusions should reiterate the importance of Egypt for the EU and Europe's desire for a strong relationship, but also state clearly the EU's concerns about Egypt's political direction in terms of meeting the aspirations that were expressed in the 2011 uprising.
- In order not to send mixed messages, it would be **better not to use these conclusions to announce any acceleration of development cooperation with Egypt.**

Anthony Dworkin

*Senior Policy Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme
European Council on Foreign Relations*