

## **GLOVES OFF, HANDS ON**

### **Democracy in the Mediterranean faces tough times**

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Only a few years back, observers enthusiastically announced an ‘Arab awakening’ that would finally bring democracy to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Today, these voices have largely ceased, and for good reason. A few years into the ‘Arab reform’ movement, in several countries boundaries have been pushed and a number of advances have been achieved in some relatively tame areas. The overall authoritarian power setting, however, has remained entirely untouched. Moreover, ruling elites have made good use of their time and have stepped up efforts to limit public space for those who dare to challenge their rule and interests. Both internal demands for democracy and international efforts to support these seem to have lost much of their clout. The prospects for real change in the region, it appears, are bleaker than ever since the end of the Cold War.

How could this happen? And more importantly, what can be done for pro-democracy movements to re-gain momentum?

#### New powers, old allies

Over the last decade, a series of international developments have been shaping the context in which MENA democratisation is to take place, creating an environment clearly less favourable to in-depth political reform processes.

Changing geopolitics has strengthened authoritarianism worldwide. The wishful assumption from the immediate post-Cold-War era that liberal democracy was to establish itself as a universally accepted norm appears now a chimera in the face of the rising stars of authoritarian powers. The backlash against democracy promotion has gone hand in hand with a global process of authoritarian learning. MENA ruling elites in particular have been extremely apt in developing smarter forms of governance, and succeeded in reproducing successful containment practices from abroad.

With Europe’s difficulties in dealing with a volatile Russia, and the continued fragility of main oil exporting countries in the Middle East, the race for energy has become fiercer. North Africa’s growing importance as an alternative energy supplier and transit area has been detrimental to its democracy and human rights agenda.

With international multipolarity gaining ground, the Middle Eastern power balance has been subject to significant shifts. Regional leaders such as Saudi Arabia or Iran, and non-democratic global actors such as China and Russia are forcefully emerging, and their political, economic and cultural influence in the region is increasingly felt.

On the one hand, these rising authoritarian players constitute attractive alternative partners to MENA governments to advance their interests, and decrease Western weight and leverage in the region. For example, Russia’s increasing engagement to enhance hydrocarbon trade with Libya and Algeria have not only further limited

Western leverage over these countries, but also led many in Europe to worry Russia may seek to take over the Southern dimension of hydrocarbons trade as well in order to maintain European energy dependence on the Kremlin. Trade and investment involving external authoritarian actors whose offers come without reform demands or other normative strings attached are on the rise, putting European conditionality-based policies in a difficult negotiating position ('If you don't want the deal, we will do it with Russia').

On the other hand, rising regional actors' cultural influence is also increasingly noted, with some political implications. Notably, the influence of Saudi and other Gulf investors in North Africa has at times come with the condition or suggestion of more conservative Islamic practices (e.g. editorial lines in media outlets), thus further supporting the trend towards greater religious conservatism in MENA societies.

Recent years have also seen the rising threat of nuclear proliferation and an intensification of the potential for open conflict in practically all of the region's crisis hotspots. The ever more numerous imminent collective security challenges in the MENA strengthen the position of the old guard of authoritarian rulers. At the same time, they draw European attention and priority-setting away from normative foreign policy goals.

More recently, the breakdown of the international financial system has compounded the sense that a general crisis now afflicts liberalism, in both its economic and political guises. In Europe, the economic crisis has reinforced inward-looking policy perspectives and bilateral deal-making, strengthened protectionism, and largely de-coupled foreign trade deals from any conditionality rationale.

All these developments have been weakening the cause of democracy in three main ways. One, they strengthen the position of incumbent authoritarian rulers. Two, they directly or indirectly reduce the space for manoeuvre for local democracy activists. And three, they weaken EU and US commitment actively to support in-depth democratic change in the region against their more immediate (and supposedly contrasting) interests. Whether we like it or not, for the time being, democracy promotion in the Arab World has passed its peak.

### Tough times ahead

Following a period of adaptation to internal and external pressures, Arab rulers have taken their gloves off again. Local democracy activists in the MENA are facing tough times.

As regimes have developed smarter methods of containing local demands for in-depth political reform, pro-democracy movements are struggling to counter their regimes' well-engineered efforts. While massive violent clampdowns belong (largely) to the past, regimes have found other ways of ensuring their continued rule and defending their and their cronies' interests.

Human rights and civil liberties such as freedom of expression and the media, freedom of association and assembly empower local dissent by allowing pro-democracy groups to develop, network and gain influence. It is precisely these 'empowering freedoms' which, after a period of liberalisation, are now systematically being curtailed again in most of the MENA. Undemocratic constitutions, loopholes in legislation, dysfunctional judiciaries, overpowering secret services, and police forces acting with impunity all help to domesticate meaningful dissent before it can seriously threaten the status quo.

At the same time, garnering external support from EU and US policy-makers – sometimes life-support – is getting more difficult. Western governments have largely returned to their old paradigm of stability-oriented realism. Security concerns are all-dominant. For Western politicians, democracy is out of fashion; for diplomats, it can even be a career-killer. With the Bush administration's Iraqi adventure, the concept of US 'democracy promotion' has become discredited. EU efforts are little better off since the Union's clumsy reaction to the 2006 Hamas election victory, and the subsequent Gaza siege have largely stripped EU democracy rhetoric of its credibility.

Egypt, though a focal point of vibrant political activism in the region, is in a tense stalemate awaiting Mubarak's succession. Free-riding on its regional role, the Mubarak regime has little protest to fear from outside if it manages to engineer a dynastic succession.

Libya, having only recently re-emerged on the world stage after decades of isolation, does not even bother to pretend aspirations for democratic reform. Propped up by vast energy reserves and its position as a major transit country for immigrants heading towards the EU from all over Africa, Western leverage vis-à-vis the last-standing old-style dictatorship is close to zero.

Tunisia is the most overlooked dictatorship in the Arab world, notorious for its Orwellian surveillance state. Also in a tense pre-succession setting, the Ben Ali regime is just embarking on a major effort to cut local human rights activists off from their foreign ties – a lifeline which provides often their last protection against clampdowns. The prospect of an 'advanced status' with the EU has been a direct trigger for this policy.

Algeria's president Bouteflika, recently promoted to president-for-life by constitutional amendment, is having trouble to pay off public approval as hydrocarbon revenues are going down. Over social unrest over corruption and the lack of public services looms the question mark of succession, nurtured by Bouteflika's ill health and increasing power struggles among the elite.

Morocco, often hailed as the island of progressive liberalism in the region, has seen press freedom curbed significantly over the last few years, with several key opposition outlets being shut down. The first country to achieve 'advanced status'

with the EU, the Moroccan regime has successfully created for itself the deceptive image of an avant-garde of Arab progressive reformism.

### Keep the ball rolling

This rather bleak image seems to suggest that all efforts to foster in-depth democratic reform in the MENA are doomed to fail and that MENA democracy is a lost cause – this is far from the truth. A number of developments provide potential windows of opportunity for local activists and their external supporters to advance the cause of democratisation even under the present challenging conditions.

The new realities of the post-financial crisis political economy, while in many ways detrimental to the cause of democracy, also offer some opportunities. The formerly soaring oil prices, which propped up some authoritarian governments in the region, have dropped sharply, thus potentially easing the assertiveness of these regimes to some degree, and increasing domestic and international actors leverage for pressure. The various economic consequences of the crisis (including decreased EU exports and investments) have sharpened socio-economic conditions in the poorer MENA countries and have contributed to massive riots across the region, putting pressure on regimes by demanding better service provision and accountability. The increasing mobilisation of labour movements (e.g. in Egypt) have also been reinforced by the crisis. As government revenues are decreasing and MENA economies have to tighten the belt, especially non-oil-producing governments are increasingly struggling to pay off discontented citizens whom they previously managed to sedate with heavily subsidised food and basic services. As public pressure on cash-strapped MENA governments mounts, foreign governments' leverage potentially increases as economic incentives such as aid, investment and economic integration become more attractive. As mentioned above, this effect may be counterbalanced to the degree that MENA governments are able to strike deals with other investors whose offers come without any normative strings attached. However, the EU is still by far the MENA's most important trade partner, and the outlook of comprehensive economic integration with the EU, if wisely negotiated, remains an offer of a scope and attractiveness unequalled by anything emerging external actors have yet to offer.

The upcoming wave of republican presidential successions in Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria provides a key opportunity for popular movements to gain momentum and achieve qualitative shifts in their domestic political landscape. The accumulated power shift among rulers in the region also provides a momentum for the West to forge new alliances on time. Western risk aversion is understandable: the wave of successions bears a considerable risk for de-stabilisation and further conflict in an already overwhelmingly troublesome region key to many EU and US interests. But teaming up with incumbent dictators to ensure continuity at all cost, as current practice suggests, is not a solution more likely to produce long-term stability than its alternatives. The EU's incoherent reaction to the Hamas' 2006 electoral victory provided clear evidence that the Union lacks concepts for alternative power scenarios in the Middle East that transcend its traditional alliances with secular

authoritarian rulers. The upcoming wave of successions, which will bring a new generation of leaders to the fore, will make the old-guard alliances model redundant.

The degree to which local democracy activists can take advantage of these and other small and big windows of opportunity will greatly depend on the space they are granted freely to develop their activities, express and disseminate their views, gather followers, mobilise the masses and gain external support for their cause. Where dissent is prevented from becoming articulate, public and organised, it must fail. Regimes are well aware of this and over the last few years have intensified their efforts systematically to curtail the 'empowering freedoms' of association, assembly and expression.

#### What the EU can do

Due to the resistance from most of its MENA counterparts, the EU has increasingly retreated from supporting in-depth political reform and has focused instead on 'soft' areas such as women's and children's rights and social development. The argument often used by officials is that the EU should focus on areas where it is most likely to achieve an impact. This is reasonable, but neglects the EU's self-ascribed commitment and mandate to foster an in-depth, more holistic democratic reform process. While advances in women's and children's rights are valuable in themselves, they are often used by both sides as false evidence that political reform is in process. Activists on the ground voice strong concerns both over the depoliticisation of EU democracy assistance in the MENA, and of these policies' disconnection from other areas of EU external action.

Another argument often heard is that a focus on governance and the rule of law in inter-governmental co-operation will help build up institutions that will eventually foster democratisation. Yet, EU assistance in the Mediterranean has largely been focusing on the technical side of governance, fostering efficiency and 'modernisation', rather than democratic accountability and the rule of law. As a stand-alone policy, this is likely to be counter-productive, as it strengthens the capacity of authoritarian regimes without challenging the qualitative grounds on which they build their authoritarian practices. Policies that serve as a fig leaf for reluctant EU policy-makers are not likely meaningfully to help local democracy. On the contrary, they are likely to stabilise incumbent governments – but maybe that is the idea?

Current EU policies in the MENA are not fostering a systematic and in-depth process of democratic reform, but a piecemeal approach to superficial political liberalisation. Evidence suggests that EU and MENA governments' current goals actually match: achieving a minimum-level of democratisation and comprehensive modernisation in order to ensure political stability, foster trade, limit migration and avoid Islamist rule by any means. If this impression is to be reversed, the EU must embark on a fundamental re-thinking of its policies in the Mediterranean.

### Three recommendations for EU policy

Backup rights defenders, and not only a few famous individuals, but all. Local efforts to foster political reform, and external attempts to support these, are getting more challenging. Supporting local democracy movements by helping to safeguard 'empowering freedoms' such as freedom of expression, association and assembly in law and practice must be at the core of external democracy assistance efforts. This includes that in an incentive-based policy framework such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), countries that close the space for political dissent must remain excluded from diplomatic upgrades.

Improve alignment with member states' policies, and other strands of EU external action. Without systematic diplomatic backup from European capitals, democracy programmes are not worth a penny. On the ground, EU external action in most of the region is increasingly void of the normative goals proclaimed in EU foreign policy documents. Human rights activists from Morocco to Syria complain over the Janus-headed nature of EU policy-making. In the new External Action Service, the EU must therefore take special care to renew member states' solid commitment to the goal of fostering democracy as a leading foreign policy principle, and streamline this commitment across all areas of EU external action.

Forge alternative alliances. For good or bad, the days of the old league of MENA dictators will soon be over. Now is the time for EU leaders to re-think their short-sighted stability-oriented partnership with ageing MENA dictators, and seek new alliances. As part of this re-think, the EU should focus on how better to reconcile democracy/human rights with security objectives, how to involve non-secular actors, and how to make better use of the incentives at hand.