Transitions in Europe's Southern Neighbourhood

Among High Hopes and Rising Worries

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Abstract

Popular protests that swept across the Maghreb and Mashreq region forced the European Union to rethink its involvement in the Southern Mediterranean. Although the future of North Africa is mostly in the hands of its nations themselves, the Arab Spring created an outstanding opportunity for a new role of the European Union as an agent of change. An appropriate response could facilitate the transition process leading to the creation of pluralistic democratic orders. The aim of the present paper is to examine the challenges and opportunities faced by democratic transitions and civil society actors in the MENA region and to assess the European Union's influence on the transitions in the Southern Mediterranean through an analysis of the policy and programming tools available and their eventual application.

Key words: The European Union, Arab Spring, transition, democratization, Southern Mediterranean

Introduction

When the Tunisian fruit- seller, Mohamed Bouazizi committed his dramatic act in Tunis on December 17 2010 no one in Europe expected that he would set ablaze much of the MENA region. Popular protests that followed across the Maghreb and Mashreq region stirred and revolutionised the EU's relationship with its Mediterranean neighbours. The Arab Revolutions created an outstanding opportunity for a new role of the European Union in the Mediterranean Region. A number of hitherto accepted myths related to the Arab world – especially those suggesting that democracy and human rights were perhaps not universally shared values and that economic development has priority over political change – have been finally abandoned challenging some deeply rooted assumption of European foreign policy. The EU progressively exploited an ever growing assortment of tools, ranging from military interventions to humanitarian assistance, from targeted sanctions to managing migration, as well as a reconsideration of policy choices in its attempts to properly respond to the events. The developments in North Africa forced the European Union to deeply review the European Neighbourhood Policy in which it pledges to support democracy-building, promote inclusive growth and develop civil society partnerships in the region. However, whether this review will also include the specificity and the nature of the Arab communities and their approach to democracy, human rights and civil society is another matter. An appropriate response of the European Union could facilitate the creation of strong civil societies based on pluralistic and democratic values and healthy political systems. However, in a region still shaken by revolutionary aftershocks this could prove to be no easy task. The present paper examines the opportunities and challenges that lie before the European Union in its role as a facilitator of the transitions in the Southern Mediterranean through assessing its responses and the policy and programming tools at its disposal, considering the issues at stake in democratic transitions in the Maghreb and Mashreq socio-political reality as well as the role of civil society actors in the process. For that purpose one will examine the evolution of EU's policies towards the MENA region as well as the current policy responses to Arab Spring and the transitions in progress.

The Euro- Mediterranean: an evolving relationship

First attempts at putting the Euro- Mediterranean relationship into a policy framework date back to the immediate post-colonial period of the sixties of the 20th century. It is then that the European Communities (EC) decided to craft the scope of commonalities that would identify the entire region. However, it was not until the early 1970s that a tangible idea of the Global Mediterranean Policy (GMP) came to life to address the web of relationships that Members States held with Southern Mediterranean Countries and classify them as belonging to a single region. Within the framework of the GMP, the EC negotiated a new generation of agreements based on the same core provisions (Bicchi 2004). It was then that the region was identified as a single group in European nomenclature becoming a political category rather than just a mere geographical term. It was the birth of a new approach of Western Europe towards North Africa and the Middle East seen as a roughly homogenous entity with whom the EC was bound by legal international agreements.

The GMP was first and foremost a commercial agreement aimed at advancing trade between the Community and its southern partners and it served its purpose very well. This initial framework proved to allow for an increase in exports of industrial goods to the EC markets from 1979 onwards. In terms of manufactured products the overall share of total Mediterranean exports doubled between 1979 and 1994 (Cieslik and Hagemejer 2009). However, the expectations of the EC were definitely more ambitious than just trade development. It was hoped that, through commercial advancement, state interventionism will decrease in partner countries fostering transparency and creation of new centres of power willing to participate in the decision- making processes in the region (Calleya 2005). Although such expectations seem very correct from a European point of view, they seemed to ignore the very leader-centric governance model of Arabic countries and the strong susceptibility of Arab societies to the notion of strong and centralized leadership (Daweesha 1990). Needless to note, the local leaders did not seem as interested in promoting the development of popular participation in setting the political and social agendas in their back- yards as the leaders on the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea expected. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that despite considerable effort and investment, both in human and capital, the only significant shift in the Euro- Mediterranean relationship was noted in the economic relations. Any additional effect on the power and leadership structure and the transparency thereof, the population's welfare or social participation in the Southern Mediterranean was, to say the least, inconsistent.

A new shift in the relationship was expected in mid- 1990s with the launch of the Barcelona Process or the "Euro- Mediterranean Partnership" (EMP) in November 1995 by 15 EU Member States and 14 countries in the Southern Mediterranean Region. The process was aimed at reinforcing the existent ties based on the GMP through three programs: "the Political and Security Dialogue", "Economic and Financial Partnership" and "Social, Cultural and Human Partnership". In the official declaration, the European Union stressed that the initiation of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership represented a new dimension of the relationship and emphasized the need of overall coordination of the challenges which both sides of the Mediterranean Sea have to deal with. [1] However, although the agreement was in fact a novelty in the Euro- Mediterranean rapport, and a rather brave initiative that allowed for a perspective of the Mediterranean region as a shared geopolitical, strategic and economic space, its fluidity and eurocentric orientation caused reality to again fail to meet expectations expressed in political declarations (Pardo and Zemer 2005).

In an attempt to respond to the new challenges faced by the relationship in view of the shortcomings of the Barcelona Process and the imminent 2004 enlargement, a new tool was put at the disposal of European partners. The European Neighbourhood Policy was launched in 2002, supplemented by the adoption of the EU Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East (the "Strategic Partnership") and later reformulated into the Union for the Mediterranean (Lanon 2008). A new order in the relationship of the European Union with its neighbours was inevitable in view of the inclusion of ten new Member States and a shift in the external border of the Community. The paradoxical aim of the new policy was to take advantage of the successes of the enlargement, while finding an alternative to it. The ENP offered "everything but institutions", conditioning the offer on the execution of specific and negotiated political, social, economic and institutional reforms. By emphasizing bilateralism and differentiation, the ENP's southern dimension was to emphasise eradication of security threats through the development of democracy and reinforcement of human rights in the dialogues with individual partner countries, much like the neglected chapters of the preceding policy (Tocci and Cassarino 2011). However, similarly to the EMP also the southern dimension of the ENP proved to be based very much on Euro- centric assumptions, greatly based on the experiences of Eastern European countries. Although democratization received greater attention in the policy, the focus remained top-down, ignoring the specificity of the notion of democracy and reform in the southern Mediterranean, and concentrating rather on tackling security- related issues rather than encouraging and supporting transformation (Tocci and Cassarino 2011).

The European Union was not ready for the events that were to develop in Tunisia and later spread across the region. The policies that have been in place thus far were unable to provide European leaders with efficient tools that

would allow them to respond to the crises in the area and then manage relationships with the grass-root revolutionary movements. The Euro- centric assumptions completely ignored the specific nature of democracy and personal freedoms in Arab countries. A simple transplantation of the experiences of Eastern Europe to North Africa was and remains inadequate and impossible. The nature of the revolutionary movements in Europe differed significantly from what was experienced by the Middle East. Opposition forces in the European eastern neighbourhood were mainly liberal and pro- Western, therefore their goals were easily understood by European institutional actors allowing for strong support. Applying the same logic to the Middle East resulted in supporting the few and unorganized liberal groups. Financial support to civil society actors was therefore often granted to government- supporting organizations. An example of such situation was support granted for the Moroccan *Initiative Nationale du Dévéloppement Humain* (INDH), a programme supposedly aimed at encouraging human and social development in Morocco's poorest areas, which in fact acted as a means for the monarchy to control NGOs (Darbouche and Colombo 2011). Therefore, in 2011, when a wave of revolutions swept across the region, there was no concept of how to support democracy building in the newly established reality.

Springtime democracy

In December 2010 North African societies turned into turmoil when a wave of revolutions hit the region. Streets of Tunis, Cairo, Benghazi and Damascus quickly filled with young people voicing their dissatisfaction vis a vis the ruling elites. Most of the regimes crumbled quickly, turning out to be much less resilient than initially assumed. The outcome of the wave of revolutions that swept across the region forced the European Union to rethink its approach towards supporting democracy building in its southern neighbourhood and consider a shift in policies aimed at developing and reinforcing civil society and its actors. A seemingly new paradigm was to be born in the relationship.

The EU's response to the Arab Spring was voiced on March 8th 2011 with the launch of the *Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the Southern Mediterranean*. As part of the instrument the Community declared to promote a negotiated settlement of the conflict and to demonstrate the importance of Europe's role in the Arab Spring and the Middle East Peace Process announcing to place promotion of democracy and human rights in the centre of the agenda. The policy emphasises democratic transformation and institution-building, targeted people-to-people contact and urban and rural economic development through improvement in educational and health systems. Further areas include fundamental freedoms, constitutional reform, reform of the judiciary and supporting transparency. The underlying logic of the partnership is "positive conditionality": the more Arab governments are committed to reform, the more support they will receive. Furthermore, the communication announcing the partnership specifies explicitly that "support will be reallocated or refocused for those who stall or retrench on agreed reform plans". [2] Although the plan of refocusing support is a new approach and most probably will allow the EU to better allocate its support in North Africa, the policy in itself does not introduce anything new to the Euro- Mediterranean relationship. It still uses the same underlying logic and jargon as the ENP, such as "positive conditionality". The main weakness of this approach is the assumption that new Arab governments will be willing to follow an externally imposed path of reform and that the rewards will outweigh negative consequences of non- compliance. Past experience suggest that the ENP was not a sufficient tool for promoting democracy- building and civil rights in the region, and that past leaders were uninterested in following reform recommendations coming in from Europe.

The grass- root nature of the Arab revolutions undoubtedly created much more space for Civil Society Organisations. In response to that, the European Union launched a "Civil Society Neighbourhood Facility" whose aim is to reinforce "*the advocacy capacity of civil society organizations and [increase] their ability to monitor reform and participate effectively in policy dialogues.*"[3] Although much needed, it risks being another "top- down" institution in the set of EU policies directed towards its neighbourhood. The Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND) together with European NGO's stress that the new instrument should build on lessons learned from the ENP and that "*its structure should be established in full participation and consultation with CSOs from the region, rather than providing them a structure designed merely by the EU, not necessarily reflecting their own concerns and priorities.*"[4] It is therefore crucial that the new policy is not simply another Euro- centric tool imposing a foreign framework for action over civil society actors in the MENA region. Otherwise, it will do little to facilitate democratic reform.

European Union initiatives towards the Middle East and North Africa remain crucial for the development of civil societies and democracy in the region. After old regimes were ousted the post-revolutionary countries experienced what seemed thus far impossible, free and fair elections with high participation rates and only minor irregularities (Murphy 2012). Particularly benefitting from these changes were the Islamist movements, suppressed under previous leaders. To some extent, these forces follow a reasonable rhetoric and recognize the need to respect international commitments and civil rights, as well as openness to the West. However, there are riding worries, following the constitutional debate in Egypt and the assassination of Murder of Chokri Belaid, leader of the

oppositionist Unified Democratic Nationalist party in Tunisia that the transitions are not on the right track and that after Arab Spring the world will see an Arab Winter. Overthrowing a regime is much easier than building a functioning democracy and a stable society to replace it (Wiarda 2012). Therefore, the engagement of the Community in the North African transformations will have great impact on the entire Southern Mediterranean. Catherine Ashton noted herself that "the future of the Arab Spring depends on Tunisia and Egypt becoming success stories".[5] However, we can only speak of success stories if we learn from our past experiences and this is what the European Union seems to ignore. In response to the Arab Spring developments, the European Union failed to propose a new strategy for the reinforcement of democracy and facilitating the transitions in place in Tunisia and Egypt, only repeating what was already being said when old regimes were in place.

Conclusion

The recent social unrest across the Maghreb and Mashreq has rid the region of authoritarian regimes that had been in place for decades. Although hopes are high that repressive dictatorships will be replaced by democracies with strong civil society, the nature of regimes to eventually emerge from the turmoil remains uncertain. The future of North African transitions lies mostly in the hands of the popular belief in systemic change and Europe has a key role to play in supporting that process. However, the outcomes of its policies towards the southern Mediterranean are disputable. The post- colonial history of European engagement in democracy building in the Southern Mediterranean suggests that the current role of the EU in supporting and facilitating transitions is again at the risk of being marginalised. Numerous policy tools have been launched throughout the years to reinvent and facilitate the Euro-Mediterranean relationship. However, most of them failed to address the nature of civil society actors and popular political engagement in the region. The European Union failed to respond adequately to the developments in North Africa as it had no appropriate policy at its disposal. If there was ever a moment to reconsider European strategy targeted towards the southern neighbourhood the opportunity that the Arab Spring brought could not be greater. However, if this opportunity to influence the landscape of freedom in the MENA region is to be used well, the European Union must learn from its past experiences and reconsider if its role as an external actor in the region has been sufficient.

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