

BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE

The Revolutions in the Arab World and the European Union: Challenges and Expectations *

The popular uprisings in the Arab world took everybody by surprise. For more than 15 years the European Union had invested in economic cooperation and in democratisation processes in the Arab countries in the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the European Neighbourhood Policy and since 2008 the Union for the Mediterranean. It was a moderate success; dramatic changes were neither expected nor sincerely wished for out of fear that they may cause instability and chaos in the region. In the light of the recent events EU's policy towards its southern neighbours is facing a barrage of criticism. According to its critics in the Arab world and Europe alike, the EU has lost its credibility by applying double standards when dealing with the corrupt and authoritarian regimes in the region and for not speaking out in support of the protesters fast and clear enough. In its recent proposal for a Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity, the Commission suggests an incentive-based approach and the (re)introduction of positive conditionality. In other words: those countries which go faster and further with their reforms can count on greater EU support. Is this proposal a serious rethink of EU policy or is it just a 're-packaging of existing EU policies' as critics argue?

In what sense can one speak of a paradigm shift in Euro-Arab relations? Most of all because the Arab revolution marks the end of the 'Arab exception'. The idea that Islam and democracy are not incompatible has dominated Western politics for too long. Now we have seen in Tunisia and in Egypt how Arab populations have overthrown their authoritarian regimes and how they are fighting for freedom and dignity. We don't know yet whether this is really the Fourth Wave of democratisation, but the dynamic of the movement points in that direction.

So far the EU as well as Western politics has considered the authoritarian regimes in the Arab world as a guarantee against a larger propagation of Islamism and terrorism. This explains but does not excuse the fact that the EU has cooperated with these regimes for too long. It is true that the EU has invested in numerous democratisation programmes during the last 15 years with different instruments and policy frameworks, that of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the Neighbourhood Policy, but today neither the EU nor its Member States can pretend that the actual events are a direct result of the European democratisation policy. The merit goes to the courageous population. The Tunisian revolution has become a model for numerous other societies in the region, however we should not forget about the fact

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that the possibilities of intervention in domestic affairs by another state provided by international law are limited and the objective of the European Neighbourhood Policy was exactly to avoid an interventionist or moralist policy. The EU tried to do what was possible between the internal restrictions (by diluting positions by the EU Member States) on the one side and external restriction (by international law) on the other side. However, numerous attempts to advance a political dialogue and to push forward political reforms have failed which proves that the EU has still a difficult time in positioning itself as an international actor.

In the meantime the European Union has explained its solidarity to the Arab societies but in the beginning the importance and extent of these events had been underestimated. The hesitance and fragmented European reaction are also related to the institutional structures of the EU that still render a common external voice impossible in spite of the Lisbon Treaty. Different scenarios are advanced now by observers regarding the outgoing of the actual transition processes: Islamic revolution, democratisation following the Turkish example, a return to another autocracy, a counter-revolution or even a military coup. The fear of an Islamic revolution seems to be a bit exaggerated, however we can see that the Islamic movement tries to appropriate some of the current revolutions or at least to profit from them, e.g. in Tunisia.

Paradigm shift also roots in the fact that the Arabic revolution has contributed to the decline of Jihadism. In spite of his assassination, the positive image of Bin Laden in Arab public opinion has lost power. During the uprisings one could observe that the heroes were Che Guevara, Nasser and Bourguiba, but certainly not Bin Laden. Before, the existence of authoritarian regimes somehow seemed to justify the actions committed by Al Qaida, but once democratisation emerges there is no more need for Jihad. While some radical groups will certainly continue to fight, the ideological movement has lost its sense and its reason of existence. The hope is that the current movement will succeed in starting a democratic regime

What will be the future of the Neighbourhood Policy in the light of the Tunisian revolution? The reform process of the ENP had already started before the Arab revolution but now given the changed situation in the southern neighbour countries the EU needs to reflect its policy towards the Arab world in a more profound and long-term manner. Although for the moment no one can predict the outcome of the process. For a country like Tunisia the relations with the EU are central. The EU is the first commercial partner with 75% of the exports and 64% of the imports; numerous jobs depend on European investments and European tourists. Since 2010 the negotiations about the new action plan and about the advanced status have started and were rather advanced when the revolution happened.

When the High Representative Catherine Ashton came to Tunisia in February she promised additional funds for the transition process and urged for the finalisation of the negotiations on the advanced status, however insisting on the fact that it can only be final with a legitimate and democratically elected government. The elections of the constitutional assembly are planned for the 24th July but might be postponed.

In March Catherine Ashton has proposed a Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity. This project is in fact most of all a reminder of the objectives and

principles of the Neighbourhood Policy like shared values and positive conditionality and parts of the former Barcelona process i.e. the rediscovery of the civil society. The same is more or less true for the document which followed in May on the renovated Neighbourhood Policy. This first draft of a renovated Neighbourhood Policy or Partnership, or whatever it will be called in the end, does not take into account that also in the domain of migration we can't leave out a paradigm shift, in the sense that Europe has made an amalgam between immigration and Islamic terrorism for too long and it is necessary to push forward a common European immigration policy adapted to the realities of the 21st century. In the past European support programmes have contributed to human development, infrastructure and modernisation, in Tunisia and many other countries of the region. But the possibilities of all the European effort could not be fully exploited as explained.

Today the situation has changed; however, the Tunisian population is impatient. People want to see concrete results now and there is a gap between the real engagement of the EU and the perception in Tunisian society. In fact there is an economic situation in Tunisia that is really difficult now, tourism has had a regression of 30%, and there is only enough money to pay the public service employees as of July 2011. From the EU perspective Tunisia is only one small Mediterranean state amongst others, but as the claims for democracy started in Tunisia, the EU could give some new orientations for the future of the Euro-Mediterranean relation. With the Neighbourhood Policy the EU acts on a bilateral level in a specific manner adapted to the country in question. At the same time the EU needs to think in a regional logic and that is necessary to revive multilateral cooperation in the Mediterranean tool. Europe could give a new orientation on its immigration policy and could show more humanity at the borders. The EU could increase the emergency help for the refugees at the Libyan boarder and also to Tunisian migrants coming to Europe. Europe could support free elections in Tunisia and Egypt and is already doing so, it could show more support by the presence of European enterprises. In Tunisia 300 000 jobs are in danger in the tourism sector. The opening of EU markets for more and different products from Tunisia and Egypt would be crucial. Finally, the EU should send clear messages to the democratic forces and offer more financial and material support. European policy in North Africa needs to be innovative and has to find a balance between non-interference, clear political positions, consequent control and solidarity. The EU has the chance to help that the democratic processes in the southern neighbourhood can succeed.

A realistic and pragmatic relationship

However, how much can Europe really influence the process? In the past we saw European governments and institutions, frustrated with not impacting the situation before, not being able to way on the authoritarian governments to bring about some changes in their behaviours towards societies. One should also remain modest about how much can be achieved from a European perspective. Still there is a lot that can be done. First of all, we are now living with a new background to the relationship with the region. For those countries that have moved into a democratic process, Egypt and Tunisia, this new background brings a whole set of different considerations to the relationship which has so far not really been operated, this shift in the approach, in the rationale is still something to happen.

The issue used to be that Europe dealt with dictators who were shy on human rights! But now this page is turned. The populations in Tunisia and Egypt have achieved revolutions and now look to a realistic and pragmatic relationship with Europe. Now Europe has to listen carefully to what comes from the region. The first requirement is that it is the Arab people who set the agenda; the EU should not tell them whether the support should be economic, political or aimed at civil society. It is the Arab population which should be able to tell what their agenda is and what sort of help they expect for the development of their own agenda.

Secondly, there is much irritation about the fact that the EU (and the international community) spends too much money and effort and influence on supporting human rights and democracy, precisely because the governments in place now believe they are the result of a democratic revolution and that they represent something that is legitimate. This is not an area where the thing they need most to succeed is money. The big challenges are three areas. One is economic growth, financial and economic support is needed. The Arab countries need markets to be open for their goods. Economic growth is their first and foremost important goal. Thirdly, they need help and active engagement in recovering assets from those who have put their national resources into bank accounts in Europe. This would represent a huge contribution from Europeans.

Tunisians for example have estimated that the assets outside the country represent one year of the national budget. That could be recovered. As Europeans are in a crisis situation and are not able to contribute that much money and try to find ways to be creative in the use of funds in order to maximise their impact: asset recovery is a key area to cover. Unfortunately, the UK for example –after the revolution succeeded in Egypt, after the fall of the Mubarak regime– introduced a new rule into its immigration law which allows for people who deposit five million pounds into a bank account to accelerate the process of receiving British citizenship, if you deposit ten million it is reduced to two years instead of three. So most of the assets of the Egyptian elite were taken out of the country and deposited in British banks, and this is where the biggest community of Egyptians who fled the country are now based. That is just one disappointing example.

Then there is the issue of partnership: cooperation needs to find a new rationale. That rationale is not noticeable when you see how in many ways the language remains the same. Especially words like conditionality, even if you call it positive conditionality. It is not conditionality that should really rule this relationship anymore. If we acknowledge that these countries have undergone a democratic change, they will be checked and controlled and held accountable by their own citizens. They need help and if they do not achieve what needs to be achieved it is because the challenges are too big. Another thing is the mobility of people which is a crucial need for the region. We should stop calling it immigration and talking about how many visas each year people are (not) going to get. Free circulation of people is crucial for the development of the south. People now feel they want to have access to some extra training, adequate education in order to be able to return to their countries because there is enthusiasm to work in the countries back home. It is important to really open the debate about this rather sensitive topic.

The question is what to do with the countries that have not yet transitioned and are in great difficulties like Libya and Syria. We need a differentiated approach which goes beyond sanctions which are very important and can remain symbolic, something in between military intervention and sanctions. Other instruments are now needed; they require good knowledge of the country and of what is going on there and about the strategy that is used by the existing regime in order to counter it. A different strategy and different language has to be found in order to avoid being accused of interventionism as has happened in the case of Libya. A problematic situation has occurred in which the revolution is no longer a democratic revolution but people are waiting for a war between NATO and the Gaddafi regime favouring an attitude where people are turning their backs on democratic demands.

Incompetent, conflicted and reluctant

The revolutions in the various Arabic countries are very different, so are the outcomes. In Tunisia we are witnessing a more positive outcome, a lot of competition, many parties developing. There is talk of 50% quotas for women to be introduced; there is a lot of dynamism.

In Egypt we are looking at positive developments but also uncertainties. Tensions are growing and nobody knows who is behind them. In Yemen we simply do not know outcome because the different sides do not come to an agreement. There is an involvement from the Gulf States especially Saudi Arabia that tries to change the situation. There is special attention from the EU for the signing of the agreement and there are more parties now that try to influence the politics in Yemen. We have the situation in Bahrain and in Saudi Arabia we very recently heard about a woman who is arrested for trying to drive her car, which is not a new debate. The role of women in this revolution has been crucial. In Oman today they blocked access to the public sectors and to all social media, because the regime fears that hearing about the revolutions will create more protest.

How is the EU reacting to all of these developments: incompetent, conflicted and reluctant. The European Union cannot even be blamed for this. As a foreign policy actor it is not united; there are many Member States, their interests are conflicting.

There is the risk of a paradigm shift in the sense that the EU will talk less about democracy. In fact the EU is not talking about democracy; it is shying away from democracy promotion. The same is true for human rights issues. Things have changed during the last 15 years. The problem is that the EU has not defined what it means by democracy. The EU *should* focus on human rights and democracy! Benchmarking needs to be implemented. More benchmarking is needed, especially on human rights, women rights and rule of law. In Saudi Arabia e.g. people are detained without charging them, there are no proper trials, no judges, no jury and this is a violation of human rights.

What are the expectancies in the Arab countries? Generally, they have high hopes of the EU. They have more hopes of the EU than of the US. The problem is the EU may not meet them, so disappointment will fall very soon. Civil society needs more support e.g. by sanctioning Syria and Libya, but what about the Gulf region? Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman and all of those strategic allies? How do you balance being a

strategic ally for these countries but at the same time supporting human rights and democracy?

So what should the EU do? The EU is an actor on an institutional level and on a civil society level. In February Catherine Ashton said: “We should offer help but not to dictate outcomes or impose solutions. As international community we will accompany the transformation if our help is welcome. But the future lies firmly in the hands of the Tunisian and Egyptian people.”¹

Europe could support elections, monitoring and give the money for setting up the infrastructure necessary for elections, maybe impose quotas as was done in the Palestinian territories. Democracies need public management and the EU could provide the necessary training.

The real work is at civil society level: funding, supporting and allowing space for the groups that really suffer and don't have space in their own country, inviting them to come over and share their knowledge, talking to them, understanding them, training them.

Good in the long haul

Where do we go next? It is very important to set that context before we dig into the question what the outside world can do if anything. It is true: there are home-grown new actors; it's thanks to their courage and not EU policy that we are in a situation like that. At the same time it's very important to stress that in our dialogues we see that these different actors including faith-based actors are very keen to make sure that the revolution is not confiscated or hijacked by unfriendly forces be it from the outside but also from the inside, not by one party, not by one religion. It's people's power, but how do we then get beyond? It has been a fallacy to compare the Arab revolutions with Eastern Europe. Maybe one should rather look at Sub-Saharan Africa for comparison.

How do we then get people power into some kind of staying power? It's interesting and important to ask ourselves, as this was a political protest against the authoritarian regimes, but was it a way for democracy? We still need to see that. We need to look at how this heroic civil society be transformed into something else or the momentum will be lost. We also need to not be naive. We know that there are counter-revolution forces, even though we don't speak that loudly of it. One of the key issues that need to be tackled is the economic difficulties these countries have. Egypt is practically grinding to a halt. What is at stake right now is the organisation of a new political life combining forces with new actors, be it secular or faith-based. The EU should not have a blind angle when it comes to faith-based actors. We need to look a bit at ourselves and prepare our public opinions and political masters for not just observing elections because democracy is not just elections, it's also recognising and working for those who may not be as secular as we, and there is still a lot of work which needs to be done.

In Egypt, the new constitution is set up. Article two was heavily debated about the role of religion in Egypt. That debate was used to whip up a sentiment. There is also a

¹ http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/119459.pdf

rise of sectarian violence in Egypt. We don't know who are behind that, is there a big discrediting of other political actors or is there really a problem?

As these revolutions were home-grown and peaceful without the usual set of anti-western slogans, one of the things we find striking is the systematic distrust and suspicion about our ulterior motives. We need to be very careful about who calls whom what. Europe has to be modest about its expectations; it's a question of not running in there and forcing your agenda. There are some serious problems to solve. The EU will be tested whether we can sit on our hands and refrain from running in, picking out winners, and choosing who the good are and who the bad guys are. This has not gone too well in the past. Whereas the question often has been: is Egypt ready for democracy, the question is now are we ready for a democratic Egypt or how do we make ourselves ready for that?

The EU is easy to hate and misunderstand, but it is important to specify who you mean by EU. We have the EU institution (Ashton) in this field, we have the Member State and we the civil society – those who have contact. In the immediate aftermath of the events in the Arab world, the EU had a very mixed report. Now we need to give each other a bit of a break, it's very difficult to find the right balance, when do you go ahead when do you stay behind. How do we read the picture, and also the other side: what do they see as being too slow? It is not an easy test for Brussels. Brussels is not good at short term reactions.

Where Brussels is good at though is the long haul and the EU has through its different instruments proven its colours in institution building including electoral support systems. One should not become too focused on the elections; it's the whole underlying structure that needs to be built up. But it is the people in Tunisia and Egypt who have to call on the EU to tell what they need. There is a problem with double standards and we will need to address that. We need to seize the moment the Muslim Brotherhood is giving us and they may be easier for us to crack than Hamas. The way the elections are being prepared, who can run for president and who cannot: we have to really watch and try to absorb this. We need to change our mind-set just like the actors in these countries. The transition of the Barcelona process into the Union Mediterranean has not been particularly helpful. The EU needs to move beyond being interested in these countries solely thorough counter-terrorism where it had an appalling record of mixing up Islamist and terrorist and the peace process.

Conditionalities

It is understandable that people who have overthrown their governments do not want lessons or conditionality. However, conditionalities would have been one way to restrict what has happened in Uganda during the last 25 years. And as far as democracy promotion: is concerned: it took over a hundred years for the French revolution to stabilise its system. It is not about giving lessons, but we should welcome measures like training people in how to organise parties.

We must leave it to the Tunisians etc to define their ways of democracy, but once you have a normal country with rule of law you need conditionality. The EU should never have stopped using that principle when giving money to their own Member States.

Also, it could be quite useful for countries like Egypt to have some conditionality to ensure in case authoritarians come back, the EU is not going to treat a new regime like the democratising government. It could be a guarantee for the transitional government.

Security sector reform

Security sector reform is a major issue. We need civil society. It's not about money it is about institution building. In Egypt you have people saying the United States is trying to harm us when they sent a small team of advisers to help with security sector reform. Suspicions arise, it's the people's revolution and people claim back their sovereignty and want to be in control of the processes. In Egypt and Tunisia, they say we don't need your experts. They need a lot of technical support of course, but let's not ignore those areas where they are very sensitive, because that will mean a more helpful and productive relationship.

Democracy and human rights

As far as democracy and human rights are concerned, the EU stopped referring to democracy promotion in 2004 and started looking at political promotion instead. There is no such thing as a perfect democracy; we in Europe have a problem with democracy. We all have to look after our minorities, but the *mea culpa* has to stop at some point.

It is a good thing that Europe did not bring about these revolutions – it is good that they are home-grown. And the EU continues to rely on the people to do the change and build a connection between secular and Islamist in these countries. The EU shouldn't storm in there and it should be modest about what it can achieve, but there is some money at disposal if Europe is called upon.

There are many organisations such as the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung that could also be helpful, for example in the Gulf region which will face a water shortage crisis. Yemen is going to be the first and then Qatar and Bahrain. This is a concern for people who are not going to have drinking water any more. The other thing is the economic problems which are the underlying causes of this revolution. What the EU could do is economic development in the region free trade could be opened right now and free movement. We are talking about double standards in the EU, but there they are also present in the Arab world. We have to respect the Arab cultures, but the Arab world has also to respect both its own and European culture. There are atheist Arabs and liberal Arabs who are squashed between dictatorship and religious forces. Arabs have lived under regimes where everything was faith-based and this has caused a lot of damage. The solution to this is to have the right legal instruments and public policies to manage the issue of diversity in society. It is a governance issue, not mainly about tolerance, but about how governments are going to set up rules and end the prejudice that has been caused by authoritarian regimes. Maybe it would be a good idea to have an Arab human rights agency to address these issues, to develop a regional Charta or code.