



The EU's Role in Political Reform and Democracy Building in the Southern Mediterranean Region: An Egyptian Perspective

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Abstract

Throughout its discourse, the European Union (EU) places great emphasis on concepts such as reform, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. This paper examines the relationship between the EU's intentions in advocating for reform and democracy in the countries south of the Mediterranean, and the perceptions in these countries of those intentions. The paper examines whether there is consistency or a gap between intentions and perceptions. It assesses the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), as the primary framework guiding Euro-Mediterranean relations and encompassing components and programmes dealing with democracy, as well as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) dealing explicitly with reform issues. The paper does not aim to provide a thorough assessment of both policies, but rather to shed light on the different trends and perceptions of such policies, using Egypt as a case study.

Summary of Recommendations

The EU needs to work to synergize its political discourse with respect to political reform and democracy building issues. The EU must work on identifying its priorities and to decide what is most important: long-term democratization processes that might be accompanied by some political disorder or short-term stability accompanied by authoritarian systems. The absence of a unified and common Euro-Mediterranean definition of democracy should be clearly understood and taken into account by EU policymakers when designing their policies and discourse towards the Mediterranean. The ongoing dialogue and consultations within the joint institutional frameworks as well as recognition of Mediterranean partners' contexts and value systems could help to identify common ground between the parties.

Moreover, the EU should extend its dialogue and consultation to the grassroots level and not confine it to policymakers. The ENP Action Plan process can be considered a good exercise for this dialogue but only at the level of policymakers. The EU needs to think of innovative and attractive carrots for the Mediterranean region – especially with respect to market opening and the free movement of labour.

Despite the fact that the EU's policies might seem well defined to the EU member states, they need to be more effectively communicated and explained to the citizens of partner countries. Some still confuse the EMP and the ENP. In this regard, the role of EU delegations in partner countries is crucial in terms of creating the necessary awareness of the EU's policies, their rationale and their benefits.

1. Introduction

Throughout its discourse, the European Union (EU) places great emphasis on concepts such as reform, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. There is an explicit intention to promote such values in the countries of the EU's 'neighbourhood'. These intentions are targeted at two types of beneficiaries: eastern European countries, on the one hand, and southern Mediterranean countries, on the other.

In the southern Mediterranean countries, the rationale was entirely different. The main drivers have been the EU's perception of the Mediterranean region as a source of fundamentalism, as well as its belief that democracy and political reform are the best means of attaining both stability and security in this region.

In eastern European countries, the EU's rationale has been to encourage efforts to introduce and maintain the values required in order to be eligible for membership of the EU. To this end, the EU's efforts were manifested in an ambitious pre-accession policy for those countries that were given the 'carrot' of full membership. This was arguably a win-win situation.

In the southern Mediterranean countries, the rationale was entirely different. The main drivers have been the EU's perception of the Mediterranean region as a source of fundamentalism, as well as its belief that democracy and political reform are the best means of attaining both stability and security in this region.

Moreover, democracy is thought to help such countries to generate economic growth that will eventually ease the pressure for illegal migration.

In the second case, the carrot of EU membership does not exist. In light of this fact, the EU has, over the past two decades, designed a portfolio of reform and democracy promotion policies. These policies can be regarded as a kind of compensation for the lack of the membership carrot. They have been designed to provide the necessary incentives and rewards for the southern Mediterranean countries to proceed on the suggested path of reform and a democratic track.

Some argue that the relationship between both parties has favoured the EU's foreign policy and security ends at the expense of its Mediterranean counterparts. Others believe that although the relationship might address the EU's fears and concerns in the Mediterranean region, the incentives offered have been a true catalyst for reform and democratic transformation in this region.

The famous saying that 'facts are facts but perception is reality' provides the rationale for this paper. It examines the relationship between the EU's intentions in advocating for reform and democracy in the countries south of the Mediterranean, and the perceptions in these countries of those intentions. The paper examines whether there is consistency or a gap between intentions and perceptions.

For this purpose, investigation and analysis are confined to those EU policies that deal explicitly with the issue of reform as a broader concept, and democracy promotion as a main component of the reform concept. The paper assesses the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), as the primary framework guiding Euro-Mediterranean relations and encompassing components and programmes dealing with democracy, as well as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The latter, through its Action Plans, has set out a detailed framework of procedures, timeframes and potential incentives – jointly agreed between the EU and partner countries – on how countries can achieve and maintain reform. The paper does not aim to provide a thorough assessment of the EMP and the ENP, but rather to shed light on the different trends and perceptions of such policies, using Egypt as a case study.

The paper presents an overview of the main challenges that could confront the EU in promoting democracy in the Arab world, and lists a number of suggestions, recommendations and policy options – from the perspective of an Egyptian scholar – that could be considered by EU policymakers for effective future interventions in the region.

2. Defining Democracy

Despite the fact that there have been extensive efforts to conceptualize the notion of democracy, the same concept has different implications across the literature as well as across nations. Moreover, the term has often been defined in relation to the specific context to which it applies. It is therefore possible to observe many versions and models of democracy. Against this background, this paper chooses to depart from a *liberal* definition of democracy that asserts notions such as contestation by political actors, multiparty systems, free elections, judicial independence and citizen participation. Moreover, this definition incorporates a rights aspect that encourages the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The rationale behind choosing this definition in its liberal form is that the implications of the term are also obvious in and can be clearly extracted from ENP Action Plans; the most recent policy tackling political reform and democracy promotion in the region. Although the Action Plans are tailor made, their overall framework and outline are similar. In each Action Plan there is a special section on ‘Democracy and the Rule of law’. Under this section, a number of subcomponents are identified and jointly agreed by the EU and the partner country during the negotiating process. These subcomponents include: participation in political life, an enhanced role for civil society, encouraging decentralization measures, guaranteeing judicial independence, and promoting human rights, fundamental freedoms and respect for the rule of law. It becomes obvious that these subcomponents constitute a procedural definition of democracy in its liberal manner and, accordingly, it is this definition of democracy that this paper departs from.

3. The EU’s Rationale for Democracy Promotion in the Southern Mediterranean Region

The EU portrays itself as a promoter of reform and democracy to the countries south of the Mediterranean and particularly the Arab states. Two factors are behind this fact; the first is the EU’s attempt to offer a more attractive democracy promotion model

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The second factor is the EU’s security dilemma. For the EU, the area of the south of the Mediterranean has always constituted a source of conflict and tension. The EU fears

Islamic fundamentalism as well as illegal migration from the south. It also recognizes two main drivers for security threats: a downturn in the economic situation and a slowing of economic development; and the prevalence of authoritarian regimes in such countries. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 were a major turning point for the EU in terms of reformulating its position towards its southern neighbours – and security and democracy became increasingly intertwined. Additionally, there has been a shared belief within the EU that democracy promotion in the southern region can materialize through a ‘spill over effect’ or by contagion. The spillover effect can easily happen when popular uprisings – calling for reform and democratization – begin to challenge existing regimes.

4. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership: Insights into the Democracy Promotion Component

The EMP and the Barcelona Process were the final outputs of the Barcelona Conference, which convened in 1995. Although the EU’s commitment to the countries of the southern Mediterranean is not a recent phenomenon, the EMP is considered to be the cornerstone of Euro-Mediterranean relations. For the partnership to enter into effect, Association Agreements are signed by the signatories of the Barcelona Declaration. These agreements are regarded as the legal basis governing the relationship between the EU and the partner country.

Egypt’s Association Agreement was signed in 2001 and entered into force in 2004. Under the ‘political dialogue’ section of the agreement, article 4 stipulates that ‘the political dialogue shall cover all subjects of common interest and in particular peace, security, democracy and regional development’. The democracy component in the agreement is only mentioned in the context of a mutual political dialogue between Egypt and the EU. ‘Dialogue’ is, thus, the tool used by the EU for democracy promotion

in the context of the EMP, and is meant to take place at the bilateral and the regional levels. Despite this fact, the dialogue tool was not complemented by any identified measures outlining how democracy should be attained. Moreover, the notion of democracy was referred to with a number of other competing notions such as peace, security and regional development. This is a shortcoming in the EU discourse within the framework of the EMP. Although the positive side of the picture is that it does not constitute conditionality on the partner country, it shows reluctance in the European discourse to discuss the genuine achievement of democracy.

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The EU launched the MEDA Democracy Programme in 1996. The programme is the EU's intended instrument for promoting the rule of law, human rights and democracy within the framework of the EMP. It is also one of the components of the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), which is intended to support human rights, democracy and conflict prevention in third countries.

Spending on democracy assistance, within the EMP, is very minor in comparison to other sectors. MEDA funds are mostly directed towards economic, trade and education reform rather than political reform and democracy building. Thus, the range of work undertaken by the EU in the field of democratization and political reform has been very narrow.

In addition to the analyses of funding allocations on democracy within the EMP, an overall assessment of the partnership – with respect to democracy promotion – is also crucial. The partnership incorporates three dimensions or baskets of objectives. One of these is concerned with creating a political and security partnership with partner Mediterranean countries. After more than a decade of implementation of the partnership, there have been a number of serious attempts to assess its progress. Although, this is not the aim of this paper, some conclusions and lessons learned should be drawn from the partnership, because the same drawbacks might hinder other attempts by the EU at democracy promotion in the region.

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Although the partnership achieved considerable progress in the economic, trade and cultural spheres, progress in the political and security spheres has been very limited. This analysis is shared by many experts on both the European side and the Mediterranean side. The most significant factors that hindered progress were:

- The partnership – when initiated and launched – was entirely a European initiative. Mediterranean countries have been recipients of the initiative rather than partners.
- The unresolved Arab-Israeli conflict has been a major obstacle to achieving solid cooperation in the region.
- Security objectives of the partnership were not achieved due to its inability to maintain a region free of weapons of mass destruction.
- The democracy component of the partnership was undermined in relation with other components. Efforts to promote democracy were confined to maintaining channels of dialogue on the issue without specifying concrete measures for putting democratic practices into action.
- The Association Agreements of the partnership include a human rights' clause which stipulates a commitment to democratic reform, and respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law. Theoretically, Mediterranean partners have been obliged to endorse and abide by this clause; while in practice serious human rights' abuses have been committed without any suspension of agreements or withholding of aid by the EU.

For these reasons – as well as others – the EU realized that it must consider the shortcomings of the partnership, especially with respect to its political aspect.

The enlargement policy adopted by the EU meant that new neighbours appeared in its proximity, to both the east and the south. In the south, in order to prevent the appearance of new dividing lines while creating a ring of friends, the EU decided to design a neighbourhood policy towards its new neighbours.

5. The European Neighbourhood Policy: An Upgraded Policy for Democracy Promotion

The enlargement policy adopted by the EU meant that new neighbours appeared in its proximity, to both the east and the south. In the south, in order to prevent the appearance of new dividing lines while creating a ring of friends, the EU decided to design a neighbourhood policy towards its new neighbours. The primary critique of this policy is that it was targeting two different kinds of beneficiaries with different

historical, cultural and political contexts. Tailored Action Plans were introduced to prevent the ENP from becoming a ‘one size fits all’ policy.

The EU-Egypt Action Plan defines the priority areas agreed by both parties to achieve a comprehensive set of reform measures in the political, economic and trade spheres. It also identifies suggested timeframes for attaining these goals.

On analysing the European discourse in the context of the ENP, it is clear that the notion of democracy was upgraded in comparison with the EMP. While the EMP placed the notion under ‘political dialogue’, which could be considered a soft option, the ENP upgraded the discourse and went beyond ‘dialogue’ to explicitly place it in the framework of ‘political dialogue and reform’. Analysing the different perceptions of the ENP and its Action Plan, taking the Egyptian viewpoint as a case study, it is possible to identify two trends:

The Opposition Trend

This trend has a number of criticisms of the ENP and its Action Plan. Many of the advocates of this trend represent the grassroots and civil society activists. Their arguments are summarized below:

- The ENP is regarded as an ‘elitist policy’, in other words, the Action Plan was negotiated and drafted by an official elite. Many civil society representatives were eager to take part in and express their views during the joint negotiation process, which lasted over 18 months. They argue that the main problem was the lack of debate in society over the policy and its Action Plan. Thus it is not surprising to find that a considerable number of Egyptians are still confused between the Association Agreement of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership and the Action Plan of the European Neighbourhood policy.
- The EU-Egypt Action Plan was signed just three years after the joint Association Agreement entered into force, which did not allow for a critical assessment to be made of progress under the latter.
- The Action Plan is accused of being too generic. Some described it as vague because it does not specify what incentives will be offered by the EU for which reforms.

- The progress reports that are intended to report annual progress made with the implementation of the Action Plan are drafted unilaterally by the European Commission after a long process of consultation, but these progress reports are not negotiated jointly with partner countries in the same way as the Action Plan was negotiated. This has implications for negative conditionality.
- The European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) which is the financial instrument for the ENP, allocated a total budget of EUR 558 million for Egypt within its three years national indicative program. This program emphasized that the first priority should be “Supporting Egypt’s Reforms in the Areas of Democracy, Human Rights and Justice”. To achieve this priority, three programs were designed with a budget of EUR 40 million out of the total budget allocated for Egypt constituting only 7% of the overall EUR558 million. This percentage questions the real willingness of the EU to achieve real progress in terms of political reform and democracy building.

The Supportive Trend

This trend favours the ENP. Many of the advocates of this trend are public officials. They believe that the policy and its Action Plan demonstrate the co-ownership principle between both parties, and that they offer many tools and incentives that support reform. Their main arguments are summarized below:

- The Action Plan was negotiated jointly by the EU and Egypt. Therefore, unlike most previous policies, its articles and provisions were not decided by the northern partner alone.
- The policy offers an innovative set of incentives and rewards that should be used by partner countries. Although they are not really carrots, they include institutional capacity building instruments such as long term or short term technical assistance missions, twinning programmes and others. These instruments allow Egyptian public organizations exposure to European best practice and standards, providing opportunities for institutional upgrading as well as increasing efficiency and effectiveness.
- The joint Action Plan is a detailed executive plan for reform that relies entirely on national and home-grown priorities. In the Egyptian case, it relies on three basic documents: the presidential platform of 2005, the cabinet statement of 2006 and the five-year plan of the Egyptian Government for 2002–2007. In this regard, negative conditionality does not exist.

After presenting the two opponent trends, some remarks could be drawn as follows:

- Although the ENP was originally launched by the EU, the Action Plans have been negotiated jointly with the partner countries. In the Egyptian case, negotiations took over 18 months, and were not an easy game but ‘a pull and push game’.
- As is mentioned above, the EU realized the drawbacks that existed in the EMP with respect to its discourse on democracy promotion. The ENP has come with an upgraded discourse on the issue. Moreover, the Action Plan outlines specific measures for achieving political reform and democratic transformation. The policy

and its Action Plans are not legally binding. Partner countries are not obliged to commit themselves to any of the provisions in the Action Plan. The EU is exercising conditionality, but in its positive meaning. The incentives provided by the EU in this policy can be effective catalysts for attaining reform.

6. The EU as a Democracy Promoter: Bridging the Gap between Intentions and Perceptions

After presenting an overview of the different perceptions of the EMP and the ENP, it is possible to identify the main challenges and to make recommendations that might help to bridge the gap between the EU's intentions and perceptions of these intentions in the Mediterranean, including Egypt, on democracy building and democracy promotion. These are set out below.

The EU member states differ greatly in their dealing with the issues of the southern Mediterranean countries. Members such as France, Italy or Spain enjoy close relations with their Mediterranean counterparts. In light of their security and trade interests, these countries would be more reluctant to pressure the Mediterranean countries for real reform. The case is entirely different with member states such as Germany, which is much more concerned with the countries of Eastern Europe .

The Need for a Synergized Political Discourse

The European discourse on issues of political reform and democracy reveals a whole set of divergent preferences and paradoxes. These are manifested at the level of the member states and at the supranational level. The EU member states differ greatly in their dealing with the issues of the southern Mediterranean countries. Members such as France, Italy or Spain enjoy close relations with their Mediterranean counterparts. In light of their security and trade interests, these countries would be more reluctant to pressure the Mediterranean countries for real reform. The case is entirely different with member states such as Germany, which is much more concerned with the countries of Eastern Europe.

At the supranational level, the undeclared competition between the European Commission, the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament, concerning issues that fall within the jurisdiction of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, affects democracy promotion in the countries south of the Mediterranean. In the Egyptian context, the resolution of the European Parliament of January 2008, condemning the human rights situation in Egypt, contradicted announcements by EU officials. A significant observation made by many EU officials, including Javier Solana, the Higher Commissioner for Common Foreign and Security Policy, is that the European Parliament's resolutions do not necessarily reflect the position of European politicians.

Such contradictions in the EU's discourse on issues related to democracy and reform question the willingness of the EU to act as a democracy promoter in the Mediterranean region as well as its effectiveness. In light of this paradox, the EU needs to work to synergize its political discourse with respect to political reform and democracy building issues.

Security versus Democracy Promotion: The Need to Prioritize Interests

One of the main challenges that impede the EU in its role as a democracy promoter is the extent to which it is willing to support democratic transformation in the southern

Mediterranean countries and its readiness to bear the expected costs that will undoubtedly result. This can be described as the security-democracy dilemma.

The literature on democratic transformation shows that a democratization process is usually accompanied by short to medium term political disorder. Although, at the theoretical level, the EU realizes this fact, at the practical level a contradiction becomes evident. The EU fears the costs that may eventually result from democratic transformation. This can happen through a takeover by radical Islamists, or even a civil war in a worst case scenario. The Algerian experience in 1992 constitutes a nightmare for the Europeans and similar outcomes elsewhere are still possible. Some argue that the EU might prefer to support authoritarian regimes – even as a hidden agenda – rather than face uncontrolled transition periods or the destabilizing effects.

The EU must work on identifying its priorities. EU institutions and member states need to decide what is most important: long-term democratization processes that might be accompanied by some political disorder or short-term stability accompanied by authoritarian systems.

The Absence of a Common Euro-Mediterranean Definition of Democracy: The Need for Common Ground

Democracy is a broad concept with no agreed upon common definition. The same concept may have different connotations in different contexts, and may even have different connotations in the same society. Moreover, the notion is often interchanged with others, such as political reform, good governance, the rule of law and human rights.

The EU's understanding of democracy is equated with its Western version. This means that the EU tries to promote Western-style democracy. Mediterranean countries believe that democracy is not a 'one size fits all' model. Instead, they believe that democracy should be home-grown and should fulfil the aspirations of citizens. The absence of a unified and common Euro-Mediterranean definition of democracy should be clearly understood and taken into account by EU policymakers when designing their policies and discourse towards the Mediterranean. The ongoing dialogue and consultations within the joint institutional frameworks as well as recognition of Mediterranean partners' contexts and values systems could help to identify common ground between the parties. Moreover, the EU should extend its dialogue and consultation to the grassroots level and not to confine it to policymakers. The ENP Action Plan process can be considered a good exercise for this dialogue but only at the level of policymakers. Engagement of civil society and the grassroots is thus indispensable.

The Need for More Carrots in EU Policies towards the Southern Mediterranean Countries

In comparison with enlargement and the pre-accession policy, the EU's performance in its foreign policy context is very mixed. The distinction between enlargement and

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foreign policy or between the internal and the external is thus crucial. The enlargement rationale justifies and legalizes the role played by the EU as a democracy promoter. This is because the carrot of membership is offered to eastern European candidate countries on the condition that they fulfil a portfolio of reform measures that includes democratic transformation. On the other hand, EU foreign policy has an entirely different rationale. The EU prefers to describe its external policy as a common foreign and security policy.

Thus, the basic motive is security interests on the EU's side.

It could be argued that the incentives incorporated into each of the EU's policies towards the Mediterranean have been exaggerated because they do not constitute real carrots for the countries to the south of the Mediterranean. They have been described as 'less than membership and more than ordinary partnership incentives'. The major drawback is that the EU's policies, in the context of either the EMP or the ENP, have offered neither full access to the single market nor the free movement of labour to the Mediterranean countries. Although the EU's policies oblige the EU to liberalize

its markets for its Mediterranean neighbours, this is usually impeded by numerous restrictions. As for the free movement of labour, facts and regulation reveal that most EU member states favour tightening up rather than liberalizing their immigration systems. The EU needs to think of innovative and attractive carrots for the Mediterranean region – especially with respect to market opening and the free movement of labour.

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The Need for Compatible Funding Allocations

One of the controversial issues for the Mediterranean countries is the EU's spending priorities. EU funding reveals a bias towards some issues, especially illegal immigration, terrorism and education. In other words, the spending pattern of the EU reflects the EU's interests. Political reform and democratic transformation allocations do not seem to be at the top of the EU funding list. This issue is crucial since it

affects the EU's credibility and image as a democracy promoter in the region.

Confused Perceptions of the EU's Policies on Political Reform and Democracy: The Need for a Visibility Strategy

Many of the EU's policies towards the Mediterranean are perceived as confusing by a considerable number of beneficiaries in the Mediterranean basin. Despite the fact that these policies might be well defined by the European side, they need to be more effectively communicated and explained to the citizens of partner countries. Some still confuse the EMP and the ENP. In this regard, the role of EU delegations in partner countries is crucial in terms of creating the necessary awareness of the EU's policies, their rationale and their benefits. This can help partner countries to use the benefits and incentives of the policy effectively. At the same time, it will support the EU in attaining the objectives and aims of these policies.

7. Perspectives on Euro-Mediterranean Relations in Democracy Building and Consolidation: 'A Dream Scenario'

After providing an insight into the current status of the EU in its endeavours as a democracy promoter in the region, some perspectives on and suggested future aspirations can be provided for an improved Euro-Mediterranean relationship in the areas of democracy building and consolidation. These aspirations are directed to both the EU and the countries of the southern Mediterranean. In 10 to 15 years, policymakers should aspire to the following:

- A Euro-Mediterranean region in which cooperation policies and initiatives are channelled not only from north to south, but also from south to north.
- A region where southern Mediterranean countries can have their own initiatives that can create added value and attain win-win positions for both parties.
- A region where cooperation policies and strategies are jointly and regularly assessed, and where concrete achievements in the political and socio-economic spheres are attained.
- A region where dialogue is nurtured and encouraged not only at the policy level, but also, more importantly, at the grassroots level.
- A region where the EU is playing a lead role in resolving long-standing conflicts.
- A region where the democracy promotion advocated by the EU is perceived as a moral value, and a locally owned process rather than an 'exported good'.
- A region where the Mediterranean countries can use, integrate and reinvent relevant EU best practice in their local contexts rather than merely perceiving these practices as signs of external interference.
- A region where such countries can act in a proactive manner and rely on active diplomacy with their EU counterparts through bilateral and regional windows of opportunity and also through regular coordination with the EU's rotating presidency.

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