

THE ARAB SPRING, THE EU AND THE TENSION OF OPPOSITES

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Introduction

The Arab Spring has dramatically ended long-held ideas of Arab exceptionalism. One after the other, countries of the region burst in popular protests against their autocratic rulers calling for democratic change, shaking domestic structures and reshaping the regional order. The political process which followed, although still ongoing, sobered the hopes of some for an Arab Spring. With a weakly contested rise of Islamist forces in many countries of the “Spring”, the reinstating of military figures in some and political turmoil in others, expectations became mixed and dispositions less clear.

The current wave of events seems thus to have ended the notion of Arab “immunity” to democratic influences, but with no clear indication of the direction of changes in the region. Varying from a steady – although not uncontested – march towards democracy in the “cradle” of the Spring in Tunisia, to a thorny and uncertain transition in Egypt, to even bleaker scenarios in Syria, Libya and Yemen.

Recent developments, namely in light of the first round of presidential elections in Egypt, show the ferments of a possible setback in democratic change in one of the main countries of the Spring. The runoff between a military figure and former Mubarak confidant and a Muslim Brotherhood (MB) candidate promises an intriguing trade-off between reinstating some kind of liberalized autocracy, or the take-over of the regime by the MB who constitute a majority in the legislature. This dichotomy in one of the most influential countries of the Spring puts to the test the EU's principled approach and commitment to human rights and democracy, and would indeed have significant ramifications for the future of the EMP as a space, an idea and architecture.

At this point, the acceptance of the Euromed as a framework for regional cooperation and its impetus for sustained reform seems to endure. This endurance is, however, toned down by the limitations that this framework has exhibited in the past and the challenges it is bound to encounter in the future in order to maintain its space, redefine its character and galvanize its momentum.

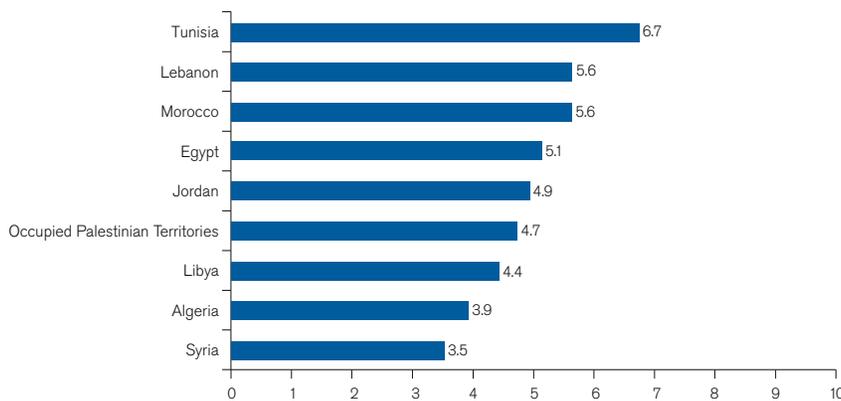
An Uncertain “Spring”?

The dubiousness of the future of the Euromed framework and its ability to promote democratic consolidation is embedded in the uncertainty of democratic transition in the region. In most countries of the “Spring”, the prospects for democratization are facing serious challenges; socioeconomic hardships, the dominant role of the military, the reconsolidation of previous elite networks and alliances, not to mention political violence and the prospects for a civil war in some of the transition countries. Thus, different contexts in individual countries make it very misleading to generalize or to ignore the diversity of structural domestic conditions characterizing transition.

At the moment, the state of transition exhibits all kinds of turbulence associated with transition from certain authoritarian rule to an “uncertain something else” (O’Donnell and Schmitter, 1986). Uncertainty about the progress of democracy varies from high optimism in the case of Tunisia to bleak opportunities in the case of Syria and to ambivalence in the case of Egypt (prospects for the country took a plunge with the outcome of the first round of presidential elections, with a runoff between a military general and a Muslim Brotherhood candidate).

Graph 1: Assessing the prospects of sustainable democracy in the following countries

(average on a scale of 0-10, where 0 stands for very improbable and 10 for very probable)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey

In response to this uncertain terrain, the EU has trodden carefully, giving mixed signals with little impact. EU Communications convey a positive though reluctant approach towards democratization in the region. In two Communications adopted following the popular uprisings, the EU called for “building deep democracy” and sustainable development that puts the people’s aspirations into perspective.¹ However, the instruments developed to prioritize democracy in the EMP/ENP, namely through the “more for more” principle, are a mere mutation of the ENP’s “differentiated approach”, a policy that has had a meager record in promoting or inducing reform.² In essence, the EU’s reaction to the Arab Spring has so far lacked a “clear-cut strategy” and opted to “play safe”,³ thus failing to put the EU’s normative plight behind democracy as a value, preferring to navigate as developments unfold.

This cautious stance towards political changes in transition countries is understandable given the fluid situation and the primacy of domestic factors and limited external leverage in shaping the future of transition. However, a clearer positioning in terms of the principled commitment to democracy in the region is both needed and still missing.

The message conveyed across the Mediterranean is thus that European partners remain ambivalent about democratic processes in the region, lest they result in a predominance of political Islam.⁴ Hence, “more for more” could serve as a flexible approach that allows for policies “à la carte”. It maintains the EU’s interest in political reform in the region, but in a “detached” and cautious manner, which allows the partnership to be a matter of fair weather, rather than a matter of principle!

1. http://eeas.europa.eu/euromed/docs/com2011_200_en.pdf

2. “A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood. A Review of European Neighbourhood Policy”, http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/com_11_303_en.pdf

3. Pol Morillas, “The EU and the Arab Spring One Year After: A View from the North”, EuroMeSCo, Brief No. 39, 19th April 2012.

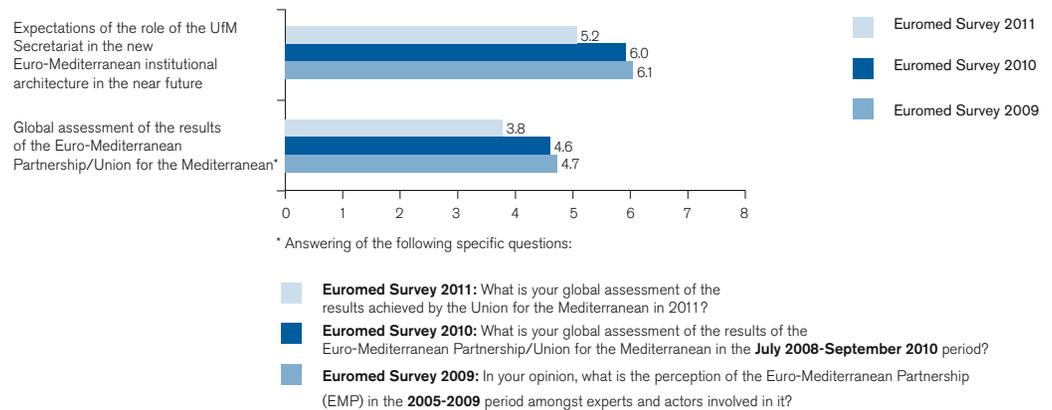
4. For a detailed account of the rise of Islamists and the fear of Islamist-led foreign policies: Kristina Kausch, “Islamist-led policies: what implications?”, FRIDE, 27th March 2012.

A Euromed Potential Viewed as “Possible” and Graded as “Pass”

It is strikingly evident that in every aspect, and by experts across the Mediterranean, assessment of the progress of the EU's Mediterranean policies and its potential in promoting democracy is generally rated on a scale from 0 to 10 very close to 5; a “positioning” which connotes enduring survival of the EMP as a space and idea fraught with caution! This perception, which precedes the onset of revolutionary change in the region, lives on only with slightly higher optimism regarding the future role of the EMP/ENP as a catalyst for democracy and political reform, and a more modest global assessment of the EMP as a regional modality.

Graph 2: Assessment of the results achieved by the EMP/UfM

(average on a scale of 0-10, where 0 stands for highly inadequate and 10 for highly adequate)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey

A persisting pattern remains that respondents from non-EU European countries and Mashreq MPCs are the most enthusiastic about the future of the EMP and its reform spillover.

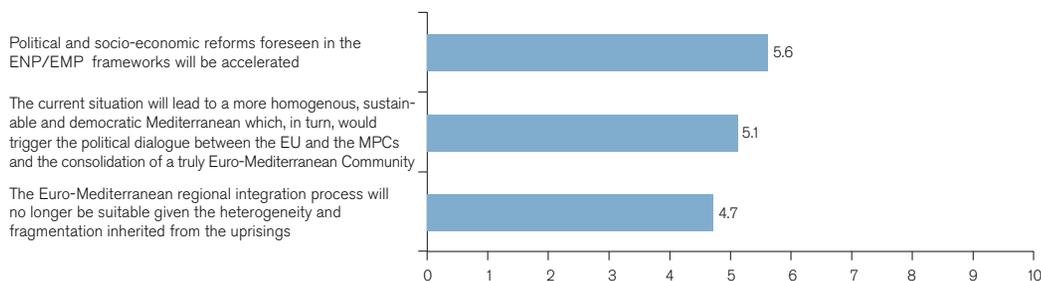
The future potential of EMP/ENP instruments in bringing about democracy is sobered in light of the legacy of the EU in democracy promotion in the region and perceived tensions between the EU's principled and pragmatic approaches in this regard. Although a pro-reform outlook resonates throughout the Barcelona Declaration, achievements that could be attributed to the EMP in the field of reform are quite modest compared to the initial expectations. Engagements with the region have never provided enough linkage to foster or induce change, or sustainable leverage to push for it.⁵

Underneath the cautious optimism about the future of the EMP, nuanced expectations are held towards its potential as a catalyst for democracy promotion compared to its potential influence in brokering peace or bringing harmony across the region. This is reflected in a diminished prospect for the EMP to bring peace or “harmony”, compared to the possibilities of promoting democracy.

5. Hanaa Ebeid, “The EU and the Arab Spring One Year After: A View from the South”, EuroMeSco, Brief No. 38, 18th April 2012.

Graph 3: Degree of probability attributed to the following long-term scenarios regarding the potential impact of the uprisings on Euro-Mediterranean relations

(average on a scale of 0-10)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey

Players and Cards in a Fluid Situation

Transformations of domestic structures in Arab states and societies are resonating into a “new” regional architecture, which in turn might reconfigure the EMP/ENP, especially through the rise of competing roles of regional or international powers.

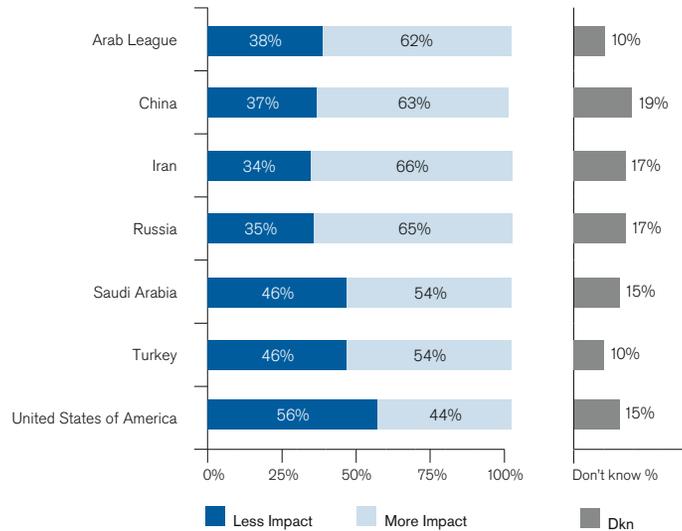
New elites and public have expressed interest in diversifying foreign relations, independent ties and consolidated engagement with Arab and Islamic countries. However, a dramatic change in foreign policy based on identity politics is unlikely. Intensifying ties with regional circles through seeking closer political and economic ties with Turkey, for instance, or ameliorating prior animosities with Iran (although so far neither Tunisia nor Egypt have shown any signs of rapprochement) could be expected. However, an overhaul of foreign policy inclinations is unlikely.

Manifest changes are most notable in bringing public opinion back into foreign policy decision-making. A heightened sense of dignity and increased call for independence are central to the “new” regional and international relations. A coherent set of policies regarding specific regional or international actors is still amiss in almost all countries of the Spring. However, signs of shifting foreign policy patterns point to new tendencies in the relations among regional actors (revolutionary vs. conservative) as well as between the Arab and non-Arab regional actors (Turkey and Iran).

The future of the Euromed framework is thus hinging upon changes in the patterns of alliances in the region. The contending outlook is that the EU is expected to sustain its space in the region. Compared to international players, the EU's influence comes second to that of the US, while surpassing Russia and China. Regionally, however, the rising role of “competing” regional actors is seen as surpassing that of the EU, where experts across the Mediterranean saw Saudi Arabia and Turkey in a better position to impact on changes in the region.

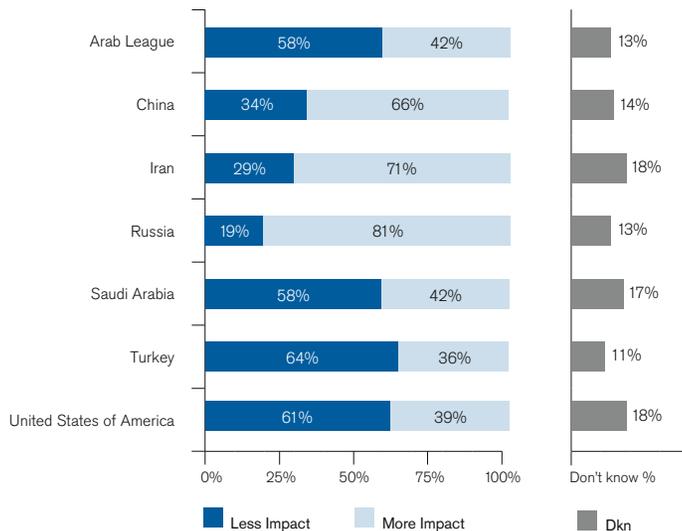
A strange irony in this regard is that Mediterranean countries expect more of the EMP than EU partners expect or think the framework is able to provide. This is reflected in MPC experts' views which attribute a greater role to the EU compared to other regional powers, while experts from the EU are more modest about the EU's role and assign more weight to the regional actors (Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Arab League).

Graph 4: Assessing the EU's future role in the Mediterranean Partner Countries compared to other external and regional actors. Will the EU have more or less impact on regional developments compared to: (MPC respondents)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey

Graph 5: Assessing the EU's future role in the Mediterranean Partner Countries compared to other external and regional actors. Will the EU have more or less impact on regional developments compared to: (EU respondents)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey

The EU comes as the second most influential, a state of affairs which is hardly the result of the Arab Spring. The current perceptions connote that the US remains the global hegemon, and possesses more influence than the EU. The role of the US in the region is not entirely separable from that of the EU. Over the past two decades, a generally positive view of the EU has been held compared to rising anti-Americanism. However, when the EU or its member states on any account “failed” to act as a counter hegemon disappointment prevailed! The general perception being that the EU is more just but less powerful or willing than the US.⁶

6. Hanaa Ebeid, “L’Europa vista dal mondo arabo: un’indagine sulle percezioni”, in *Hub globale, trincea o pantano? Il futuro del Mediterraneo e il ruolo dell’Europa*, Rapporto 2010 sull’integrazione europea della Fondazione Istituto Gramsci e del CeSPI, Rome, 2010.

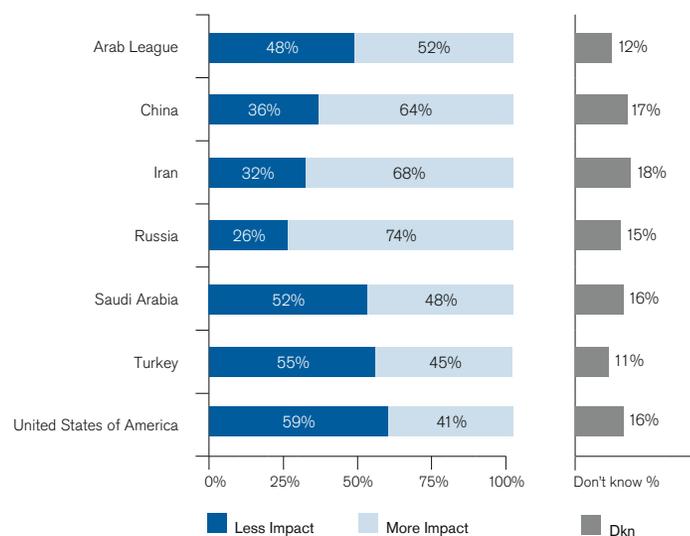
The secondary importance assigned to the role of China and Russia is embedded in the post-revolutionary context. However, this trend could be reversed in the case of significant setbacks in any of the countries of the Spring.

On the regional level, many intervening variables could consolidate or hinder the rising role of regional actors. Indeed, the power of Saudi Arabia to influence developments in the countries of the Spring is enhanced by Saudi financial leverage. The need for funds to ameliorate socio-economic crises gives direct leverage to regional and international powers that would be most willing to help while the EU is busy putting its own house in order and is short on credit. The perception of a rising influence of Saudi Arabia is directly related to its ability to provide relief funds on the one hand, but may also be related to its influence in aborting protests in Bahrain, and offering to forge closer links between the GCC and other regional monarchies.

It is noteworthy, however, that Saudi Arabia, the UAE and most Gulf countries have been unwilling to provide unconditional or generous support to countries of the Spring. Weariness with the influence of the MB and a possible revolutionary spillover made Gulf countries most reluctant to provide funds in the form of economic relief to post-revolutionary Egypt.

Moreover, Saudi influence is not unchallenged since the sense of dignity in the countries of the Spring did translate at times into antagonism towards regional conservative powers, which was manifest in the brief Egyptian-Saudi hang-up following the detention in Saudi Arabia of an Egyptian lawyer-activist. The resulting demonstrations and protests on the Egyptian side, and abrupt calling of the Ambassador on the Saudi side, reflect the tacit conservative-revolutionary fault-line in the region.

Graph 6: Assessing the EU’s future role in the Mediterranean Partner Countries compared to other external and regional actors. Will the EU have more or less impact on regional developments compared to:



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey

Hence, the emerging pattern of coalitions in the region and whether it comes at the expense of Arab-EU relations is not a foregone conclusion, and is much more complex than the allusions to new-found dignity and pan-Arab and pan-Muslim solidarity.

Rising influence of some regional actors has to do not only with the power of money and identity, but with the “effectiveness” or “efficiency” of these regional powers’ reaction to the popular uprisings, and alliances are forming with both economic as well as political rationales.

This is most notably the case for Turkey, whose quick adaptation and “answer” to the Spring positioned the country for a better future role. The Turkish promise of “help” and vow “to split our bread with Egyptians” following the rejection of an IMF loan is witness to the intervening role of responsive policies compared to deterministic convictions about the influence of identity politics.⁷

Israel Stands Alone

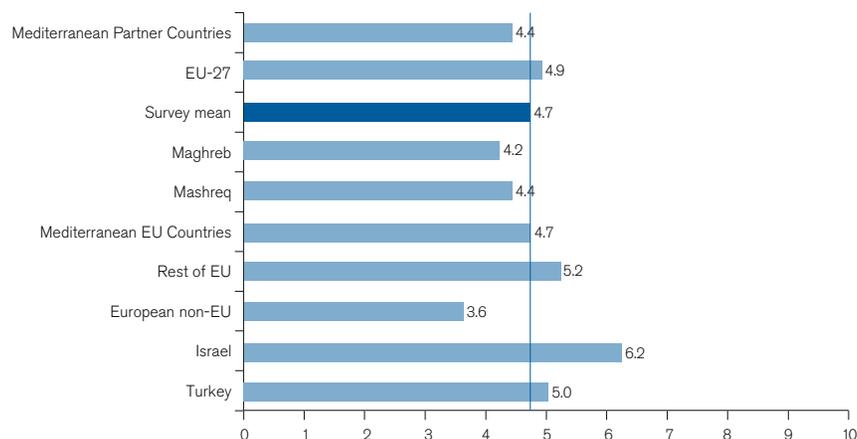
Within the general discourse of cautious hope in the region, Israel’s position and outlook regarding the Arab Spring is distinct, and reflects a heightened sense of isolation. In every aspect, the Survey shows Israeli perceptions standing in contrast to those expressed across the Mediterranean, conveying a dimmer outlook, sometimes being the only one to fall under the average grade of 5+ which experts across the board expressed.

Regarding the potential of the current revolutionary wave in producing political and socio-economic reforms foreseen by or compatible with those called for by the EMP/ENP, Israeli expectations are the most pessimistic, compared to cautious hopes across the Mediterranean and higher euphoria in countries of the Mashreq.

Israeli expectations regarding the future of the EMP/ENP are indeed the worst. In allusion to “fragmentation inherited from the uprisings” Israeli respondents are the first to render the future of regional integration in the Euromed framework unlikely or more difficult, EU member states and Turkey being cautiously hopeful, MPCs more optimistic and European non-EU the most forward-looking.

Graph 7: The Euro-Mediterranean regional integration process will no longer be suitable given the heterogeneity and fragmentation inherited from the uprisings

(average on a scale of 0-10, when 0 stands for no probability and 10 for very high probability)



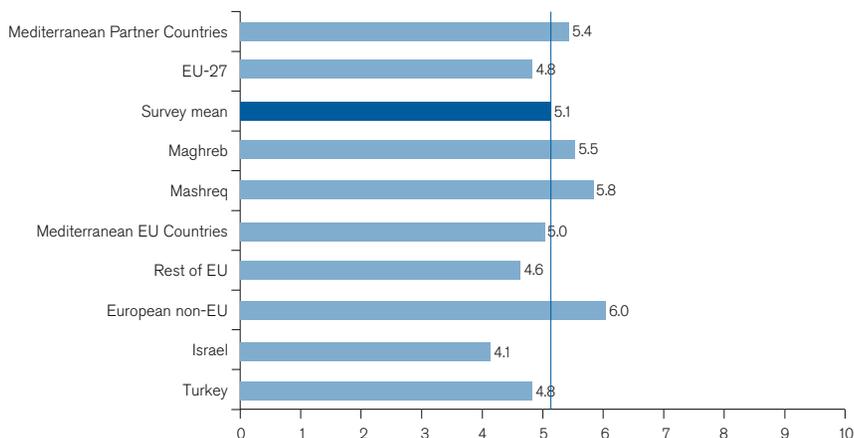
Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey

Similarly, regarding the potential of a more “homogenous” democratic Mediterranean, an allusion to the possibility of forging peace and stability, Israeli expectations remain the lowest.

7. Statement by the Turkish Ambassador to Cairo, 20th May 2012.

Graph 8: The current situation will lead to a more homogenous, sustainable and democratic Mediterranean which, in turn, would trigger the political dialogue between the EU and the MPCs and the consolidation of a truly Euro-Mediterranean Community

(average on a scale of 0-10, when 0 stands for no probability and 10 for very high probability)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 3rd Euromed Survey

Moreover, Israel stands out as the only MPC country with a majority of respondents giving Iran a stronger role in the region compared to the EU. The Israeli disposition thus seems predominantly one of perceived danger, with diminished prospects of a “democratic dividend” in the region!

Conclusion

The Arab Spring calls into question the legacy of the EU's leniency towards the region's autocrats, as well as the depth of future EU commitment towards democracy given the current rise of Islamists. Outpacing the EU's “reformist” approach towards democratization, popular uprisings have swept the old arrangements and brought into power new elites and a heightened public sense of dignity, thus bringing the prospects for democracy closer while shattering conventional modes of interaction across the Mediterranean.

The EU's answer to these changes has so far been reactionary, cautious and ad hoc. Yet what has to materialize is an EU “normative” approach towards democratization in the region, including possible strategies towards relapses and setbacks, and a clear position towards the democratic process regardless of its consequences.

If the EU seeks to shape the structure of political opportunity in order to encourage, sustain or induce democratization in the region, far deeper changes need to be introduced on the strategic, instrumental and discourse levels. Foremost, the tension incurred by the possible rise of Islamists needs to be thought out and resolved and a clear message of siding with the people, not their previous or possible future autocrats, has to be formulated.

Developments in Egypt might constitute a counter-punch to the Spring and will definitely test the EMP/ENP principled approach and commitment to human rights and democracy.