

Egypt-EU Relations: Where Is Democracy?

Omayma Abdel-Latif

In January 2008, the European Parliament issued a 25-item resolution condemning the status of human rights in Egypt. The move infuriated the Egyptian government, whose officials went on a crusade condemning the resolution as “an unacceptable intervention in Egypt’s internal affairs by a foreign institution of which Egypt is not a member.” Javier Solana, the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, had to act firmly to contain the storm by observing that “the European Parliament’s resolutions do not necessarily reflect the position of European politicians.”

The incident reflected one of the most complicated paradoxes governing EU-Egyptian relations. For while the EU presents itself as a democracy and promoter of reform to the countries south of the Mediterranean region, such contradictions in EU rhetoric regarding issues of promoting democracy raise questions about whether or not the EU was genuinely interested in pursuing this goal to the very end.

The Basis of the Relations

Egypt’s relations with the EU are legally based on the 2004 Association Agreement, and cooperation is led by a roadmap called the Action Plan. The relations are based on mutual commitment: Egypt commits to relatively specific economic and political reform, and the EU commits to financial assistance and support.

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) is the primary framework guiding Euro-Mediterranean relations and encompassing components and programmes dealing with democracy, while the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) clearly addresses reform issues.

The European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), which is the financial arm of the ENP, allocated a total budget of 558 million euros for Egypt within its three year programme. This programme emphasised that the first priority should be “Supporting Egypt’s Reforms in the Areas of Democracy, Human Rights and Justice”. 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." But the democracy element in such an agreement is only mentioned in the context of a mutual political dialogue between Egypt and the EU. "Dialogue" is, therefore, the tool for democracy promotion and should take place at both bilateral and regional levels. But there is an inherent problem: the lack of any articulation of the mechanisms that were going to be adopted to achieve democratic reforms.

Security over Democracy

But one of the major shortcomings of the EU discourse on democracy promotion is the lack of any identification of priorities when it comes to promoting political reform in Egypt. The perception of the majority of Egyptian political forces and democracy promotion groups is that the EU favours short-term stability provided by authoritarian regimes at the expense of engaging in long-term promotion of democratisation. The dominant perception is also that the EU turns a blind eye to crucial issues such as free elections, torture of political prisoners and false imprisonments while it reduces the whole notion of human rights to just homosexuality. It is an argument which the Egyptian government itself invokes – at times – when it suits it and whenever the EU raises the issue of human rights abuses in Egypt in order to create public feelings against EU intervention and to cover up for the real issues of human rights abuses, fair and free elections and so on.

This, in a way, explains the dominant view of the EU as there is a gap between rhetoric and actions pertaining to such crucial issues. What many pro-democracy forces in Egypt are convinced about is that everything boils down to democracy and its promotion in their country and that Egypt-EU relations would be better served if EU rhetoric matched its action on that level. They argue that the difficulties in setting up business, the lack of transparency and the spread of corruption are problems emanating precisely from the lack of democracy in the country.

But in its relations with Egypt, the EU truly faces two challenges. First, it has to deal with an elected government. This, however, is exactly what the pro-democracy forces in Egypt do not believe applies to the Egyptian government. It lacks the sufficient popular legitimacy that grants it the status of being a true representative of the aspirations and interests of the Egyptian people. Rather, it is being perceived as only reflecting the interests of a ruling elite and political and business class that has been in power for the past thirty years. This also undermines the standing of the EU in the eyes of the majority of Egyptians. In a recent commissioned poll of top decision-makers, when asked "What do you think of the EU?" 90% refused to participate and the 10% that replied showed, generally speaking, an enormous amount of ignorance. When there is some element of thought about the EU, it is usually negative. In surveys about Egypt's relations with others, the EU does not come at the top of the list, perhaps because Egyptians do not see that they are benefiting from relations. So one of the biggest obstacles facing the EU in Egypt is, put simply, that people do not feel it and it is not close to them. Moreover, the EU should extend its dialogue and consultation to the grassroots level and not confine it to policymakers, especially in the case of Egypt where policymakers are not necessarily elected by the people and therefore do not reflect the popular will.

The second challenge facing the EU in pursuing its relations with Egypt is that such relations have been solely defined by two features: the Egyptian government's need for unconditional financial assistance and the EU's security concerns, which range from religious extremism to illegal migration. While these concerns and fears might appear legitimate and grounded, it should be understood that putting security before the promotion of democracy is not the solution. Sometimes such authoritarian regimes play on such fears and concerns and often magnify them in order to seek more financial assistance or to put pressure on the EU to turn a blind eye on issues of promotion of democracy or human rights abuses. "It is as if they are telling the Europeans, if you want your security, let's continue with our business as usual of muzzling political opponents they portray as religious extremists to justify their oppression," said one Egyptian analyst.

In a 2008/2009 evaluation the Commission said that with regard to the development of cooperation in terms of Egypt's implementation of commitments, there was good progress in economic reforms and liberalisation but that political reform had been disappointing.

But the EU policy should be held responsible for this result. The EU offers 120 million euros a year as an incentive for political reform. In a step which promised a European focus on issues of promoting democracy, in 1996 the EU set up MEDA, which is a democracy programme. But MEDA funds are mostly directed towards economic, trade and educational reform rather than political reform and democracy building. Thus, the range of work undertaken by the EU in the field of democratisation and political reform has been very narrow.

One lesson which the EU should learn is that the best investment it can make in Egypt is to accelerate democratic reforms and to synergise its discourse with regards to political reform and democracy building issues. The other important factor is to insist upon the Egyptian government involving pro-democracy forces and civil society representatives in the shaping of relations, thus ensuring a popular consensus over these relations and a constructive debate about the EU's important role and assistance both in Egypt and the region.