

EUROPE IN TUNISIA: A STANDBY ACTOR OR THE MAIN CHARACTER?

When the citizens of Tunisia took to the streets to demand democratic reforms in their country, its neighbour to the north, the European Union, was criticised for its inaction and silence. Rather than indecision, the European giant was muted because of its own internal challenges in forming consistent policies among Member States and EU institutions alike.

The EU is a hybrid – existing somewhere between a state and an international organisation. It sometimes initiates policy. But at other times it acts as a façade for the policies of some of its 27 Member States. Contending that Member States need to unanimously approve any foreign policy initiative, it is easy to see why EU foreign policy comes down to its lowest common denominator when disagreements arise, or why in fact it takes longer to react than any of its constituents. Negotiations and bargaining are the necessary prelude to any agreement, and can sometimes be long and cumbersome.

Still, we expect the EU to be the first to speak, even as some Member States themselves struggle to formulate a coherent position. In some respects, many expect the EU to act as some sort of societal thermometer that paves the way for government changes elsewhere – albeit not promoting, but only supporting, its own values. The EU, in this view, should be a principled actor that can correct for the behaviour of Member States as well as being courageous enough to defend the rights of the weak in the face of despicable autocratic regimes. On the other hand, save the Union if it dares to speak for its sovereign Member States! While policy coordination is certainly admirable, it can only be so if agreed to by all.

Discord among Member States has been slowing down the EU's response to the civic eruptions in Tunisia, Egypt and across North Africa. Several Member States reacted resolutely to the Egyptian



Tunisian Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi, right, talks with European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton in Tunis

uprisings before the Council of Ministers had even met, but only hours after a milder statement from the EU. Consequently, those accusing the EU of having supported autocratic regimes in the name of stability and the status quo are becoming louder and shriller. These voices reflect the general understanding that commercial and security interests are undermining the values the EU allegedly stands for, i.e. respect for human rights, democracy and rule of law.

The fact that the Union for the Mediterranean – a French initiative that would initially only include Mediterranean countries – ended up becoming the EU's policy towards its southern neighbourhood supports this vision. It begs the question of the EU's – and all 27 Member States' – responsibility in avoiding putting more pressure on partner countries' human rights and rule of law records. The Union for the Mediterranean was clearly meant to facilitate regional cooperation in the areas of business, security, transportation, energy and environment. And democracy and respect for human rights, therefore, was relegated to a second order priority.

Member States' consent to the Union for the Mediterranean was partially enabled by the promise that the keenest of Member States would support a parallel policy towards the eastern

* Kimana Zulueta-Fülscher is a Visiting Fellow at the EU Institute for Security Studies and a fellow at the CTR at SAIS.

neighbourhood – the Eastern Partnership. It basically ratified the presence of spheres of influence within the European Union, masking Member States' national interests with an EU-sealed policy.

On the other hand, we must not forget the European Union's own responsibility. Its relation to Tunisia – as to most neighbouring states – was determined by a legally-binding treaty in the form of an Association Agreement signed as early as 1995. Additionally, the European Commission, in the frame of the European Neighbourhood Policy, signed an individual action plan with Tunisia in 2004. Both these documents stressed the importance of respect for human rights and democratic principles, and the necessity of regular political dialogues leading to far-reaching reforms in all possible fields.

In 2005, the Commission asked EuroMeSCo – a European Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) confidence-building instrument and research institute – to write a report that was to build upon the idea of a Euro-Mediterranean Community of Democratic States, the so-called Barcelona Plus. The report's open-mindedness regarding engagement with Islamist political parties, however, was not appreciated by all Member States, some of which openly rejected it.

Concrete strategies and instrument implementation, albeit proposed by the Commission, need the agreement of all European Member States, and of the Parliament as well. The role of the EEAS, and of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs, is to look for consensus among Member States and give the Union a single voice. The risk for the EEAS is to adopt the identity of a deal-breaker – instead of a deal-maker – delineating its role along the lines of prudence and taking into account the interests of the relevant stakeholders. The alternative is to push some Member States out of their comfort zone, to avoid inaction and invisibility. Either strategy carries its own set of burdens.

As it seems, the EU has chosen the first strategy – for the time being. The world had to wait until the EU's Foreign Affairs' Council meeting on 31 January to give a coordinated response to events along its neighbourhood to the south. It could not do this before, because consultation and agreement among the European Union's Member States was called for. And some of these Member States have national interests at stake as well as varying levels of conviction on how or when to support democratic movements.

France, Italy and Spain have long pursued a policy of appeasement and engagement with the Maghreb countries. The European Union followed suit, because the policy represented the lowest common denominator upon which all its Member States would agree. Generally, some EU countries feared that a poorly managed transition to democracy in North Africa could lead to regional instability. According to this perspective, instability could cause a heightened risk of terrorism, increased immigration flows, and commercial disruptions that would directly affect them. These factors led some EU Member States to support, at least rhetorically, regimes that were gradually losing legitimacy with their own populations.

In the case of Tunisia, however, according to official OCED/DAC data, Spain and France have been among the biggest donors to the budget line corresponding to democracy assistance – “governance and civil society.” They donated US\$6 million and US\$5 million, respectively, over the last decade. While this amount of financial assistance may not appear significant compared to that received by other North African countries, it is over three times as large as that donated by Germany, Sweden and the United States in that period.

Yet, the manner in which Spain and France execute those donations in support of democracy responds to a strategy for democratisation that is not always shared by all Member States. Spain and France lean towards funding democracy efforts in agreement with the respective government, rather than supporting independent NGOs or human rights groups that may oppose the ruling regime. Coordination and division of labour in development policies, dictated by the Paris Declaration, gives these donors an additional argument to focus on a few priority areas, likely avoiding controversy. Their strategy calls for funding the strengthening of institutions that might benefit population and government alike in the short and medium term, e.g. the judicial system, women's and children's rights, and, more broadly, public sector financial management. But its effectiveness for change in the long run can only be hoped for. As for any other strategy, success remains a gamble.

On the other hand, the European Commission, working under the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Action Plans agreed with individual countries, has always been clear about the democratic shortcomings of countries like Tunisia. However, the Commission concentrated in only cautiously pursuing democratisation,

especially after the government banned in 2004 programs of the only European instrument exclusively supporting democracy and human rights groups – the EIDHR. When the European Neighborhood Policy Instrument (ENPI) took over MEDA, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Instrument (1995-2006), it acknowledged the difficulties derived from implementing third-generation projects (democracy, human rights, rule of law and good governance), and limited its activities to economic governance, improved employability and sustainable development. Conditionality clauses, therefore, continued to be ignored. Six years later, the Tunisian government passed a new criminal law that bans Tunisian NGOs from receiving foreign funds. However, the EU's reaction was deadened – aside from formal statements and non-binding parliamentary resolutions, to condemn and counteract these actions.

In hindsight, the dissonance exhibited between the policymaking apparatuses of the EU and those of its Member States might have inadvertently achieved their goals. Had the EU, or any other external influence, played a more active role in supporting grassroots organisations or independent NGOs, their association with foreign powers could have readily tarred them with illegitimacy. It would have been easy for the Tunisian government to put the blame on foreign

actors and money, as was the case in the “colour revolutions”. But this was not the case in Tunisia. And now, almost surprisingly, the populace there blames foreign powers – especially France, but also the EU – for allegedly supporting oppressive regimes instead of democracy.

However, as the momentous events keep developing across North Africa and the Middle East, donors are still in time to rectify and reassess their previously-held positions. In fact, they are called to do so. This is the occasion for a unique EU voice to arise, and for some Member States to lower their profiles and add their support to the former.

Additionally, of course, we need a strong EU leadership, ready to take the lead and actively push Member States toward targeted consensus. Supporting grassroots civil society movements seems sensible, as well as enhancing institutional assistance that will enable a well-functioning democracy in the medium and long term. Stagnation is not an option. We need more action, not less.

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the EUISS