

Impact of Events in Egypt on the EU: Can any lessons be learnt from the Arab Spring?

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2011 was a truly historical turning point – it was a year which fundamentally changed the European Union's (EU) previous assumption about the Middle East and North African (MENA) region – that the fall of Arab autocrats was not imminent and that the dictators of the region would remain the partners to cooperate with in the near future. The Arab Spring events in Tunisia, Egypt, and beyond since December 2010 have successfully challenged the institutional order. Egypt is now embarking on a long and uncertain journey towards a more democratic future. But questions remain regarding the role of the EU towards nascent democracies.

The EU's response to the dramatic events in Egypt has been rather weak and belated, showing that in a fast-moving environment the Union has difficulty reacting in the way required of a serious global player. The first tangible action the EU took didn't come until the 21 March 2011 (Council Regulation (EU) No 270/2011) when the Council decided to freeze the assets of Mubarak, his immediate family and close associates. Initially, Egyptians were keen to take the transition process forward on their own, with as little external assistance as possible (for instance, they refused EU offers to send an election observation mission). However, reality struck and new demands have been made, directed in particular at the EU and the IMF, along with the US and regional actors like Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

The indicative budget from the EU European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) 2011–2013 for Egypt shows that the EU has agreed to devote a meagre €449 million for the most populous country in the Middle East (82,999,393). Whether this assistance is rightly tailored is another question. The Egyptian parliament's greatest challenge is that the newly empowered public expects results – not rhetoric. Just as the Egyptian people themselves ousted a three decade dictator, they will themselves have to build a new country on the legacy Mubarak left behind.

The EU must recognise this shift and make a collective response to the demands of Egypt's newly elected leaders, who face great expectations from the Egyptian people living, as they are, through an ailing economy and delayed reforms. The ballots in Egypt's parliamentary election reflect a vote of confidence for the parties/independents perceived as best able to deliver on the public's priorities: economic development, employment, stability. The EU will be well advised to focus its efforts on support for economic development and to shift from democracy promotion to state building. Egyptians must feel the economic dividends of their revolution soon, and they must develop trust in the state in order to avoid anarchy and chaos.

Areas where the EU could fruitfully contribute include women's rights, laws regarding Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and police force reform. These are areas which need a total overhaul and which must be rebuilt on modern principles, especially in terms of rule of law, respect for basic rights and freedoms.

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On Wednesday February 1, 2012 the University of Birmingham, together with members of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, organised a Public Hearing on a very timely topic: One Year Reflection on The Uprising in Egypt: Assumptions and Challenges in EU Democracy Promotion Efforts. The event was sponsored by Dr Michelle Pace (POLISIS)'s ESRC project on Paradoxes and Contradictions in EU Democracy Promotion Efforts in the Middle East, 2008–2012

The panel consisted of Hugues Mingarelli, Managing Director for the Middle East and Southern Neighbourhood, European External Action Service (as keynote speaker), Dr Franziska Brantner, MEP (Greens/EFA), Ana Gomes, MEP (S&D) and Sir Graham Watson, MEP (ALDE), Dr. Badr Abdelatty, Deputy Chief of Mission, Egypt embassy, Brussels, Professor Mark Webber and Dr Michelle Pace from Birmingham University.

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