

## After Tunisia, Egypt: the roar of democracy

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Has the popular uprising in Tunisia sparked a wave of democratic revolution that will conquer Egypt and eventually sweep away the undemocratic 'Arab exception'? After southern Europe in the 1970s, Latin America in the late 1980s and central and eastern Europe in the 1990s, it seems that the turn of the Mediterranean has come. It is in Europe's vital interest that democracy should at long last take root in the region.

The ousting of Ben Ali's autocratic regime signalled the collapse of a model of 'stability', based on an undistinguishable blend of authoritarianism and state-sponsored corruption, whose alleged social achievements were attributed to a dubious 'economic miracle', which was unashamedly praised by European leaders. The surge of anger and revolt in Egypt, whatever its final outcome, has signalled the beginning of the end of the era of authoritarian nationalist Arab regimes.

Contrary to Tunisia, the military are a pillar of the regime. It is unlikely however that the huge Egyptian army, largely made up of conscripts, can be expected to engage in a massive wave of violent repression. There is no precedent for this in Egypt.

Even if Hosni Mubarak manages to ride out the unprecedented wave of anger and protest for the meagre remainder of his term in office, the ruling NDP regime will not survive for long. Its legitimacy has been irreparably shaken. The appointment of Omar Suleiman as vice-president (and heir-apparent) indicates that the army has accepted that Mubarak must leave sooner or later. One thing is now certain: Mubarak will not be able to add another term to his 30-year long tenure, nor will he be able to bequeath the presidency to the son who had long been groomed to succeed him. The regime's international legitimacy is equally in a shambles.

The United States, Egypt's main ally, stopping short of siding with the rebellious secular 'street', is holding Mubarak or whoever takes his place to the President's televised promise of a 'better democracy' and demanding swift action to meet the people's legitimate demands. That the post-Mubarak era is already being contemplated is signalled by the announcement that the \$1.5 billion (largely military) US aid to Egypt is 'under review' and will be withheld in the event of unacceptable levels of repression, as well as by the emphasis put by the White House on its willingness to work with the Egyptian government *and* the Egyptian people in addressing their grievances.

The US – and Europe – seem keen on a 'bottom-down' process rather than upheaval leading to sudden collapse. But a protracted and incremental process of small steps towards economic and then political reform in Egypt, in the sequence contemplated by the European Union's 'neighbourhood policy' that was largely snubbed by the Egyptian government, is no longer an option. The Egyptian regime is now past reforming, and must give way to a new democratic republic, with a new constitution. Ideally, this should come about in a similar manner to democratic transitions in Latin America at the close of the 1980s, when authoritarian, army-backed rulers yielded to

popular demands for radical, democratic regime change. Resorting to hiring gangs of thugs to carry out widespread intimidation and eventually blame violence on a largely peaceful protest that is drawing hundreds of thousands of ordinary Egyptians out on the streets is not, however, a good omen.

The outcome of political transition is by definition uncertain in any country. This is no less true for Egypt, where the pressure of popular revolt that has swamped the regular and state police and shows no sign of abating may yet be momentarily strangled by a military clampdown in spite of international calls for restraint.

Unlike what they did in Tunisia, where support to the people's demands for dignity and justice were only pledged after the president had fled, Europeans and Americans should now seek to step up the pressure on those in charge in Egypt – primarily the military at this stage – to start making good on promises of a 'better democracy'. This will lack credibility under Mubarak, whose refusal to stand down is a recipe for chaos. It is necessary that the international community:

- Clearly state that they want for the Mediterranean 'the same thing it wants for itself': a fully-fledged democracy.
- Appeal to Hosni Mubarak to step down and make way for a military-backed but not military-led 'broad-based' transitional government.
- Demand an immediate end to the regime-sponsored intimidation, looting and violence that is seriously compromising Egyptians' security.
- Call for an end to the state of emergency, granting amnesty to political prisoners and the immediate release of all those held without charge.
- Offer emergency assistance should the food supply or other essential services be severely disrupted.

There are many conditions in Egypt for democratic transformation to succeed: a vibrant and organised civil society, a largely free press, and well-respected opposition figures as well as a variety of battered but resilient political parties of different persuasions.

Fear of the Muslim Brotherhood, so far only marginally involved in an uprising it has not initiated and has no hope of controlling, cannot serve as an excuse to try to save a failing regime. The tragic consequences of eleventh-hour attempts to save the Shah should not be forgotten. Democratic transition should force the Brotherhood to participate alongside other parties in a political arena that is kept separate from the religious sphere. Furthermore there is no reason to believe (contrary to the regime's insistence) that they would emerge as the victorious political force, far from it. Concerns are also voiced in many quarters as to the future of Egypt's foreign policy, especially with regard to Israel. But there is no indication that a non-authoritarian regime in Egypt would call the peace treaty into question. A definite end to the Gaza blockade (which the EU has officially demanded) and a shift in the attitude towards Hamas in the sense of a more serious attempt at forging Palestinian unity along the lines of NATO-member Turkey's position are more likely to be expected.

For Europe, the best option is to support the present mass movement that is calling for regime change and which is drawing together a wide variety of activists from civil society organisations (largely of secular persuasion), all kinds of younger professionals, and parliamentary candidates from the opposition parties who were denied a fair chance of running for a seat in parliament, among many, many others. This movement's demands are being articulated by Mohammed ElBaradei.

The tripartite Merkel-Sarkozy-Cameron declaration calling for a 'broad-based government' and 'free and fair elections' in Egypt stands out in stark contrast to the embarrassed silence with which they greeted Tunisia's democratic uprising before belatedly articulating support for it. It is still too soon, however, to conclude that Europeans have finally overcome their fear of democracy in the Arab world and will not be tempted, should the crisis drag on and/or a full military takeover occur, to accept milder forms of 'liberal authoritarianism'. This would be a grave mistake. If the popular demands for democracy are not met, this will lead to deeper crisis that will only prolong the people's suffering and the ruling regimes' agony and furthermore pave the way for extreme alternatives to take hold. Europe must be as supportive of democracy in the neighbouring south as it is within Europe itself. This means today supporting the democratic struggle of the Egyptian people, but also actively supporting the transition in Tunisia, whose 'courageous people' and their demands must not be forgotten as all eyes are set on Egypt. When tides are turning, people will remember who stood by them in solidarity and who did not. Just as it did during the Orange Revolution in 2004, Europe needs to show that it stands by democracy, not merely issue calls for stability.

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