

Geographical Overview | EU's Mediterranean Countries

Taking Stock: Political and Social Crisis in Mediterranean Europe From Tahrir to Sol: The Unexpected Mediterranean Convergence

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Democracy is on trial. On both sides of the Mediterranean, the political, social, and economic legitimacy of governments and their decisions is increasingly being called into question. In the post-Arab Spring countries of North Africa, gains made by the popular uprisings of 2011 are being threatened by spoilers in the form of institutional captures, non-inclusive transition processes, and regressions in the field of human rights. In the southern European countries, two key elements of the social pact, liberal democracy and the Welfare State, are being threatened both by technocratic or populist takeovers and by the austerity measures imposed from Brussels.

In this article we argue that this breakdown in political systems results in an unexpected Mediterranean convergence and points to the opening of a serious democracy deficit. Contrary to the traditional notion of the democracy deficit suffered by EU institutions, this broader definition threatens to encompass a new range of actors, institutions and even Member States. The popular protests and horizontal activism of citizens on both shores of the Mediterranean are a clear reaction to this democracy deficit. For those who consider the two shores distinct – if not incompatible – entities, this unexpected convergence might seem

puzzling. But for those who would like to see more cooperation and even a certain *rapprochement* between them, this new scenario presents an opportunity for dialogue which should not be missed. Rather than finger-pointing or lecturing each other, as has been the tendency in the past, a more humble northern shore and a more self-confident southern shore would find greater political openings for a dialogue of cooperation.

Mare Nostrum, After All

The term “*mare nostrum*” has been given a new lease of life. Shedding the Roman imperial connotations and the Italian fascist usage made of the term, the democracy deficit and economic crisis present on both sides of the Mediterranean is increasingly binding states and peoples together.

The overly positive outlook from both shores at the turn of the century was misleading. Up north, the launch of the Euro in 1999-2002 ushered in a phase of prosperity, political stability and economic convergence. Down south, the end of the civil war in Algeria, the accession of Mohammed VI in Morocco and the reintegration of Gaddafi into the international community following his agreement to give up chemical weapons and settle the PanAm / Lockerbie case, augured a decade of relative stability and growth. On the regional front, governments on both shores were pulled together by the effects of 9/11: the securitisation of bilateral agendas around issues of counter-terrorism, human trafficking and organised crime allowed both parties to sideline democracy and human rights concerns and concentrate on the issues perceived to be more pressing.

We know now that behind this apparent stability, a large number of disequilibria were piling up. On the northern shore, economies were inundated by cheap money resulting from the launching of the euro, which meant that when the financial crisis struck in 2008, countries were massively indebted and were easily pushed out of the financial markets. Meanwhile, in the south, corruption and economic disparity were feeding social frustrations, which ultimately burst in Tunisia and triggered previously unseen uprisings across the Arab world.

Fast-forward to 2012-2013 and we witness another convergence between both shores, this time in terms of social and political turmoil. Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal are suffering severe economic hardships while, at the same time, their national politics appear mired in a crisis of legitimacy due to the social cost of these adjustments. Since the outset of the crisis, no government of the region has survived a popular election. Disaffection with democracy has risen and Euro-scepticism has spread. Trust in the EU has plummeted across the continent. Both southern debtors and northern creditors feel like they are victims (Leonard, Torreblanca 2013).

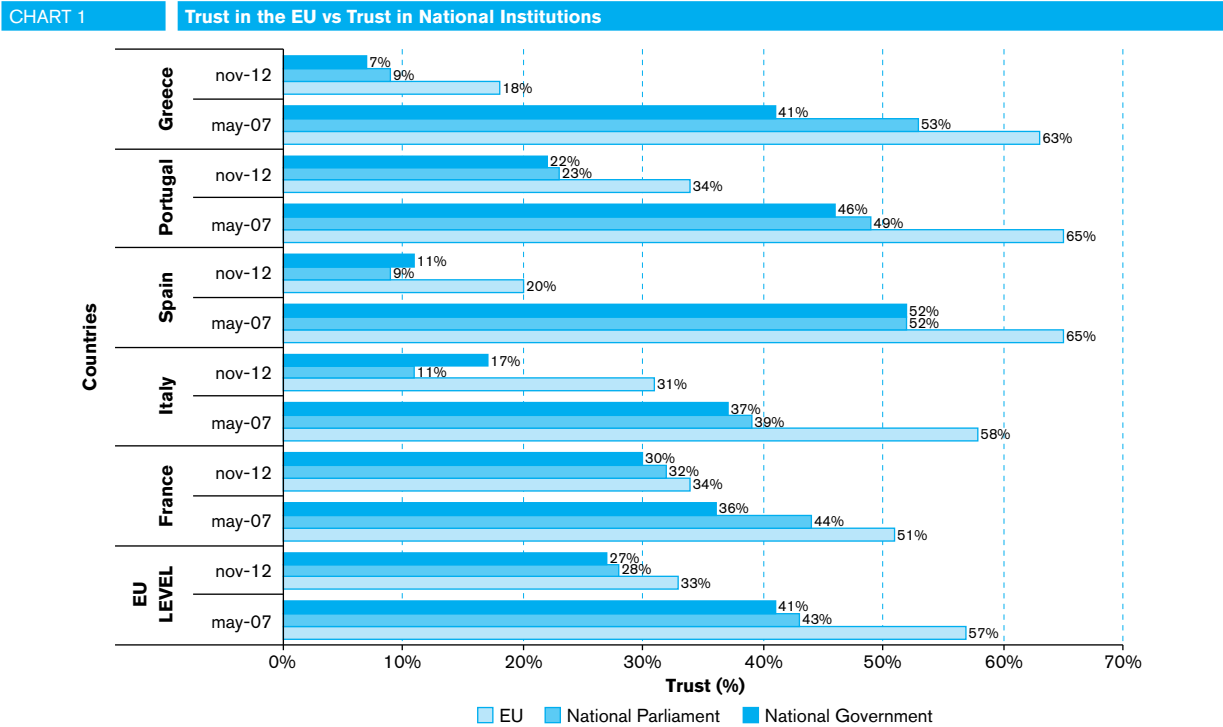
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At the same time, in the post-revolution countries of northern Africa, democracy is struggling to emerge victorious, trapped between those who resist change or want to introduce mere Lampedusian reforms (let us change everything so everything remains the same) and those who want to use democracy to impose a new social and political model on the rest of the population. Along both shores, citizens are struggling to find the right vehicles to articulate their demands, whether civil-society based (new social movements across MENA and southern Europe) or through traditional channels (new political parties such as the '5-Star Movement' in Italy, or 'Syriza' in Greece).

Two years on from the uprising of the Arab Spring, the *indignados* movement in Spain, and the *Occupy* camps that sprung up in hundreds of cities across the globe, the anger and dissatisfaction amongst the youth remains palpable. In some cases this frustration and disenchantment with the political system has led to violent protests, in other cases it has contributed to a reverse 'brain drain' and a new emigration drive from southern to northern European countries. Needs across both shores have converged into equally dramatic and pressing demands: growth and jobs, health and education, and political reform. From Tahrir Square in Cairo to Puerta del Sol in Madrid, the most important thing about the mass demonstrations and popular slogans is not what they said in isolation but what they expressed cumulatively: the marches across Europe in support of the Arab uprisings, the common demands between Arab and European activists, and indeed, the often disappointing response of national authorities to these demands which in turn fuelled further discontent. This sort of horizontal activism, based largely on social networks, increasingly characterises an interconnected youth and a global protest movement which, according to some, is here to stay (Mason, 2012).

Europe: in Danger of Losing Its Citizens

If governments continue to fail to respond to popular demands and austerity measures from Brussels-on-high continue to bite, is Europe in danger of losing its own citizens (Torreblanca, 2013)? The latest Eurobarometer figures evince what election results have been hinting at: hit by the crisis, Europeans have lost their confidence in the EU. To an increasing number of citizens in southern European countries, the EU looks like the IMF did in Latin America: a golden strait-jacket that is limiting the space for national politics and emptying their national democracies of content. On the one hand, although these austerity policies may be succeeding in bringing deficits back under control (though not in reducing debt; in fact they are increasing it), they are producing neither jobs nor growth, and so are failing to generate support from the general public. Furthermore, forcing governments to systematically violate their election promises and to push through the same policies regardless of their political leaning also undermines the



Source: Eurobarometer no. 78 (Autumn 2012) & Eurobarometer no. 67 (Spring 2007). Author's own elaboration.

legitimacy of national political institutions. As witnessed in countries that have been bailed out, political systems are wearing out (as in Spain and Portugal) or breaking down (as in Greece and Italy). Meanwhile, on the other hand, the dominant mood in creditor countries, not exactly awash in economic growth themselves, is that the southern Member States represent a burden, eating up scarce resources and impinging on chances of progress for the northern Member States.

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Either way, citizens are witnessing a new type of democracy deficit. Traditionally used to refer to the lack of democratic accountability and legitimacy of Brus-

sels-based institutions compared to the national governments of the EU's Member States, the term democratic deficit can now also be applied to EU Member States' institutions. In some cases, governments are starting to rule by decree, staying away from parliaments and media as much as possible; in other cases parliaments are seeing their functions reduced to mere rubber-stamping as key decisions dealing with central issues such as taxation, welfare, labour markets and pensions are removed from their fold. Incumbents who dared to consult their *demos*, like Papandreou in Greece, or who sought to evade the pressure of the Troika, like Berlusconi in Italy, were shown the door and replaced by technocrats tasked with fiscal consolidation and structural reforms. To the eyes of citizens, governments may come and go, but their politics remain the same, and rarely do they correspond to election pledges. It seems that some States are already on trial: Portugal, Greece, and Cyprus; others await their fate: Spain, Italy, maybe even France. As more legislative powers are transferred from national governments to branches of the executive and legislative at an EU level, national politicians find it harder to justify austerity measures at home and interventionist actions from 'on-high.'

Critics may turn the argument on its head and claim that compared to an international organisation like the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank or the United Nations, the EU has a democratic surplus. Yet while decision making is arguably more transparent, the people who make these decisions remain unelected and the institutions they head largely unaccountable to the European citizenry. Not to mention the criticism heaped on the EU's foreign Policy Chief, Catherine Ashton, recently referred to as a "European functionary with accidental powers and no strategic leverage" (Mousavuzadeh 2013). Having saved the euro – or at least having given it some breathing space – the EU must seek to beef up the political legitimacy of its institutions in the lead up to the 2014 elections. With largely distrustful and disaffected populations, this is as important at Brussels level as it is at Member State level.

North Africa: In Danger of Losing the Revolutions

The Arab countries of North Africa, for their part, have suffered not only a democratic deficit but rather a freedom deficit.¹ Much ink has been spilled about this in the past under the authoritarian rule of the "Benavie," the "King of Kings," and "the Pharaoh." And the newly elected incumbents have yet to steer a clear course away from these perils. The toxic political atmosphere in Egypt and Tunisia, for instance, is endangering prospects of achieving broad political and social consensus over economic reforms, social justice, and other key legitimating elements of transitions to democracy.

Since the uprisings of 2011, the Middle East's election calendar has been unusually crowded. Egypt held its first free and fair presidential elections which saw Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party voted into power. Libyans and Tunisians elected a constitutional assembly. At the time of writing, Tunisian politicians had just reached an agreement on the division of powers between President and Parliament, ending a months-

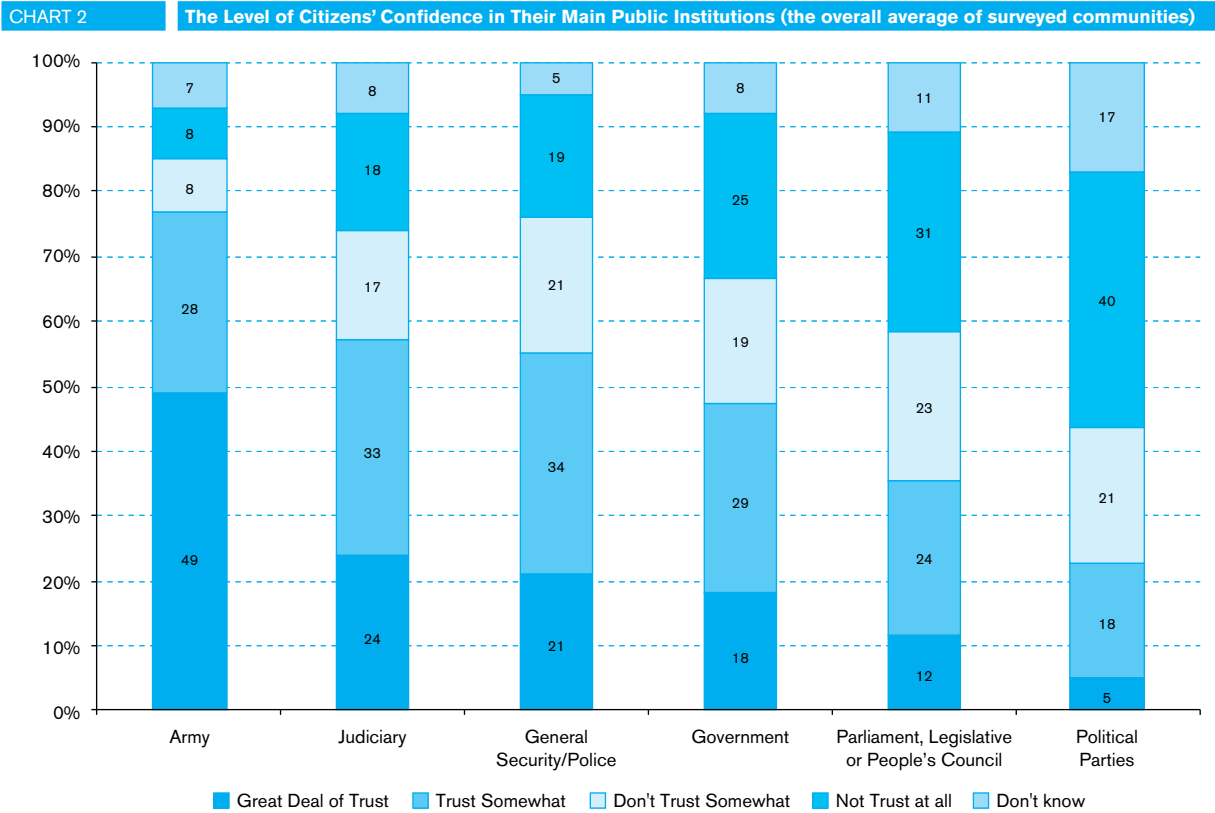
old stalemate that had blocked progress on drafting the new constitution.

Yet the worrying backlash against political pluralism in some post-Arab Spring countries causes us to qualify this initial optimism. The protestor may have made it onto the cover of *Time*, but it is debatable whether any of the protests have actually achieved their aims. This is not to say that toppling dictators is an everyday occurrence, but rather that the gains of a revolution must be safeguarded by institutional mechanisms and reflected in evolving cultural norms. Instead they seem to be subject to multiple spoilers in the form of overly centralised government control, the capture of state institutions by Islamist parties, the marginalisation of women and religious minorities from national decision-making bodies, and opposition movements unable to present a united front. The Arab Opinion Index report for 2011, amended to include results from questions on both the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, shows that citizens across the Arab world are far from satisfied with the gains made by the uprisings (see Chart 2).

When the revolutions of 2011 began, horizontal participation was one of the most salient features. Yet in Egypt, once politics was reduced to a battle between the Muslim Brotherhood-led Parliament and the remnants of the SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces), the weakness of Egyptian democratic and secular politics was exposed. Even after two years of riots, crises, scandals and crackdowns, Egypt has produced no large liberal or leftist party that has been able to articulate a policy beyond the "anti-Morsi" and "anti-MB" consensus. Horizontalism has faded as domestic squabbles have taken centre stage and traditional top-down leadership has returned in the process of creating the National Salvation Front.

The social and political tensions in Egypt are aggravated by its economic situation. The plunge in tourism, drop in both local and foreign investment, slowing of net exports and drastic decrease of foreign currency reserves do not seem to be reason enough for the government to accept conditions on a \$4.8 billion IMF loan still on hold since its initial approval

¹ First coined by a group of Arab scholars for the UNDP Arab Human Development Report in 2002, a freedom deficit exists when there is "a substantial lag between Arab countries and other regions in terms of participatory government," where "freedom" is thus synonymous with "democracy." For more see UNDP, "Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations", (available at www.arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdr/ahdr2002e.pdf)



Source: Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies. Full report available at <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/5083cf8e-38f8-4e4a-8bc5-fc91660608b0#1>

last November. It is fair to say that Egypt is caught in a Catch-22: it needs cash to prevent instability in the face of unemployment and economic collapse, but it can't get the cash without signing up to reforms that would themselves cause more short term instability.² In this context citizens are increasingly frustrated with President Morsi and his apparent failure to make true on election promises.³

In Tunisia, the recent assassination of opposition leader Chokri Belaïd highlighted the increased polarisation of Tunisian political society. His assassination followed a spate of violence by Islamists against symbols of the country's secular elite. The governing coalition's leader and head of Tunisia's largest Islamist party, Rachid Ghannouchi, has denied Ennahda's involvement in the organised violence. The fragile

social consensus in the Arab world's traditionally most secular country is wobbling dangerously.

An equally worrying recession is being witnessed in the countries of North Africa in terms of women's rights. Women who took part in the uprisings have been sidelined from political settlements and constitutional processes in Egypt and Libya. In Libya, women have seen the reinstatement of polygamy; in Egypt, women have lost more than 50 seats in Parliament, with just nine female deputies left.⁴ In Tunisia a draft version of the rights and liberties section of the new constitution has defined the role of women within society as "complementary to men within the family and as an associate of men in the development of the country." This represents a regression from the language of the 1956 constitution which

² For more on Egypt's Catch-22, see Farah HALIME, "Egypt, the IMF, and European economic assistance," *ECFR Policy Memo*, April 2013 (available at http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR76_egypt_imf_MEMO_AW.pdf)

³ For an excellent overview of domestic policy issues during the President's first 100 days in office, see the "Morsi Meter," available at www.morsimeter.com/en

⁴ Article 3 of the Constitution was recently amended to read: "each party list must include one female candidate." This represents a backsliding compared to Mubarak's rule where the law compelled political parties to include female candidates in the first half of their candidate lists. For more see Gamal ESSAM EL-DIN, "Egypt's Shura Council approves new House of Representatives law," *Ahram Online*, 11 April 2013.

held women as equal to men. It is essential that rights groups, civil society actors, and a broad range of elected officials across northern African States consolidate the gains of their revolutions before further regressions occur.

Conclusion

On both shores economies are stunted and political and social tensions are increasing. The momentum of the popular protest movements seems to be on the decline. But the real changes desired by those who protest are still only achievable by those prepared to wield hierarchical power and organise themselves around political parties, an element rejected by many of those calling for change. This is in fact a striking commonality along both shores: while society wakes up and reconstructs its civic institutions and social movements, its contempt for traditional party politics and representative democracy prevents it from being effectively able to introduce any substantial change. This can lead two ways: to the increase of alienation and frustration resulting in episodic outbursts of street turmoil, or to a new social pact in which a gradual bottom-up takeover results in reform efforts by political institutions desperate to counter their weak legitimacy. In the meantime, the way populations express their domestic grievances will continue to overlap; the mass protests of the North African capitals mirrored in southern European capitals, and the strikes, sit-ins and 'escraches' of European States spreading to post-Arab Spring countries where the ability of the demos to hold their governments to account is increasing. Whilst drawing too many

parallels may be a dangerous exercise, drawing too few could be even more so.

The EU must recognise that it has been presented with a second chance to get its Southern Neighbourhood policy 'right.' Having humbly issued a *mea culpa* for its support to Arab autocrats, it should now seek to back up its rhetoric with actions to the same tune. This will require greater interaction and coordination between the traditionally distinct arms of foreign policy of its Member States: the development community, the defence community, and the diplomatic community. A more humble north and a more confident south, buoyed by EU support for short-term job creation and inclusive transition processes, may just prevent the Mediterranean convergence from being so 'unexpected.' Otherwise, with the EU aiming for "deep democracy" in its southern Neighbourhood, it risks overlooking its own democracy deficit at home.

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