

Political Reform and Euro-Mediterranean Relations

Keys

Richard Youngs

Fundación para las relaciones Exteriores y el Diálogo Exterior (FRIDE), Madrid

Med. 2009

58

The year 2008 was a troubled one for all aspects of political reform in the Arab countries of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Democratic reform was nowhere to be seen and, in certain cases, the political arena was stifled even further. On one hand, the European Union avoided exerting any type of pressure or making any significant efforts to rekindle the flame of the drive to reform. On the other, the Union for the Mediterranean played a pivotal role in downplaying the importance of the political dimension of the EU's relations with the southern and eastern Mediterranean in 2008.

Political trends in 2008 were disappointing in most southern Mediterranean countries. Egypt saw heightened restrictions on political rights. In Algeria, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika further centralised power and prepared to begin an unconstitutional third term. In Syria, Libya and Tunisia, few political forums emerged. Setbacks even occurred in the reform dynamics of the region's most reform-minded countries. Following the September 2007 elections, the Moroccan regime strengthened its hold on power over the next year. The country's modernisation process did not lead to greater democratisation. Although several human rights provisions were strengthened, the palace and *makhzen* (governing elite) remained the gatekeepers of the reform process. The regime adopted a more confrontational stance toward the Justice and Development Party (PJD, from the French), the moderate Islamist opposition party. Similarly, whilst certain civil liberties improved in Jordan, restrictions on parliamentary powers, political parties, the courts and NGOs increased. The electoral law passed to benefit the regime was not reformed, the government grew less accepting of the Muslim

Brotherhood opposition and Jordan increasingly seemed to be a 'security state'. Overall, political and civil rights in the southern Mediterranean did not improve, but rather deteriorated over the year.

Formally speaking, certain European commitments to democracy support were strengthened in 2008. The first set of update reports on the European Neighbourhood Policy, released by the Commission in April 2008, was critical of democratic progress in all countries and identified this aspect as an area requiring higher-priority efforts in future. Morocco and the EU held talks on democracy issues within the framework of strengthened political dialogue and a subcommittee on human rights, democracy and governance. Likewise, the EU also focused on more systematic reform issues in Jordan via a subcommittee on human rights. Moreover, through the development assistance strategy paper drafted for the country by the EU for the 2007-2013 period, the Commission undertook to increase its support for the full array of Jordanian commitments to reform.

In practice, however, European efforts to support democratic reform in the southern Mediterranean were received even more warily in 2008 than before. Only 4% of the funds from the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) were allocated to democracy and human rights in Morocco for the 2008-2013 period. In Jordan, the EU has shifted its aid toward economic and poverty-alleviation goals, cutting back on projects for public administration reform, although it has undertaken to increase the percentage of ENPI funds allocated to political reform in general in the country. Individual Member States have responded better than the Commission in terms of providing timely support for civil society organisations in Jordan, although the budgets for these projects are still quite modest.

In 2008, the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) generally provided support

for only a small handful of projects in each country. In each case, only a few member state governments offered non-negligible sums for democracy and human rights assistance, usually preferring to address these projects through the Commission. Moreover, the overall trend was toward increasing the share of aid allocated to direct budget support (i.e., flowing directly to government coffers) rather than making substantial investments in democracy support. A particularly small share of overall aid was provided for democracy and human rights goals within Spanish and French bilateral official development assistance (ODA) in Morocco. The United Kingdom continues to provide mostly security cooperation in Jordan.

The use of conditionality, whether negative (sanctions) or positive (incentives), has become negligible. In 2008, overall funding for Morocco rose sharply. Like the Ukraine, Morocco was rewarded with 28 million euros from the Commission's governance facility and the country began to negotiate an 'advanced status' agreement with the EU. France, Germany, Italy and Spain offered Morocco substantial increases in aid at the bilateral level. However, whilst the Moroccan regime improved certain outcomes relating to human rights and governance, it made no such improvements with regard to the overall democratic process. How to split the governance facility between Morocco and the Ukraine was negotiated by Member States as an old-fashioned division of East-South resources, without taking into account objective and meaningful democratic criteria in the different partner countries. The EU sought strategic reasons to reward the most reform-minded of the Arab states (most of which are not reformist at all). Consequently, Morocco received more funds from the governance facility than the Ukraine, even though the latter has made substantially more progress with regard to democratic quality. Spain, France and Italy strove to regain control of the facility in order to stop the Commission from continuing to divert funds from southern Mediterranean countries with 'poor democracy scores'.

Additionally, other increases in the aid allocated to the Middle East wound up in decidedly non-reformist countries, such as Syria, Egypt and Tunisia. European criticism of the repressive post-2005 campaign undertaken by the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, against figures from the opposition and the Muslim Brotherhood was notoriously feeble, and cooperation with Egypt continued uninterrupted, with the notable exception of Denmark, which shut down its aid programme. The Commission substantially boost-

ed aid to Jordan and provided a debt-relief package to cover the impact of the Iraq invasion just as the Jordanian government was backtracking on several reforms intended to increase political freedom and good governance.

Cooperation on counter-terrorism issues was increased between European and Middle Eastern security and intelligence services

One of the main new developments in 2008 was the progress made by the EU on its quest for a new partnership with Libya, despite the fact that this country continues to have one of the world's most hermetic political systems. France and Spain signed a series of bilateral agreements with different North African governments on energy, security cooperation and business ties.

In 2008, the concept of partnership was underscored, such that partner governments became responsible for assessing their own progress on political reform under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Cooperation on counter-terrorism issues was increased between European and Middle Eastern security and intelligence services. In fact, this dimension of the policy was strengthened more immediately and specifically than the policies targeting the underlying political causes of terrorism and instability, despite the fact that instability is often cited as Europe's priority issue. As for policy toward Iran, Syria and Libya, priority was indisputably given to containing the development of weapons of mass destruction. Pressure for political reform was abandoned in favour of progress on what is considered to be the more urgent objective of securing formal guarantees regarding these weapons. In late 2008, a new effort was launched by the EU to maintain active relations with Syria, as it was believed that Damascus could play an important role as a mediator with Iran.

In the southern Mediterranean, the EU made progress on exporting certain parts of its *acquis* concerning governance, as it has in the thirteen years that have passed since the founding of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. In more reform-minded countries, such as Jordan, work continued on strengthening the rule of law, whilst the Jordanian regime blocked a large

portion of the support provided by the EU for civil society, the media and electoral reform. Attention was focused on supporting administrative reform and regulatory harmonisation, even in certain 'prickly' cases, such as Syria. In Lebanon, a programme for the transfer of governance standards with a reasonably broad scope was being run, even as the country experienced difficulties throughout the year.

In the southern Mediterranean, increasing attention was paid to cultural cooperation as a means for generating momentum for reform. The cultural dimension is one aspect of European policy that has been strengthened, above all in recent years. 'Reform' projects increasingly seek to take a two-fold approach, consisting of 'de-radicalisation' within Europe and bridge building with the Arab world. This was the aim of the German government's Special Group for Dialogue with the Islamic World, the British government's Fund for Relations with the Islamic World, the latest Middle Eastern initiatives undertaken by Sweden and Denmark and the Alliance of Civilisations headed up by Spain. In countries like Jordan, Syria and Egypt, programmes on conflict mediation and cultural awareness-raising have been enhanced, whilst progress on governance reform has been lacklustre at best.

In the southern Mediterranean, increasing attention was paid to cultural cooperation as a means for generating momentum for reform

Another main focus of European initiatives in the Middle East in 2008 was social development and economic liberalisation. Specifically, policy toward Syria and Libya included stepped-up efforts to support economic reform. Part of this renewed attention takes the form of exporting internal market standards; however, an increasingly large share of the strategy is devoted to more general capacity building. In most of the neighbouring states, one of the fastest-growing areas of support is that for small- and medium-sized enterprises. Civil servants tend to argue that traditional capacity building in this sector helps players who might one day become independent power centres. They moreover claim that one of the fastest-growing areas of funding that offers possibilities to

disseminate democratic standards is that of educational ties. These have been intensified, for example, through increased financing for the Euro-Mediterranean Youth Programme.

In short, European efforts to foster democracy and good governance in Arab states include a wide range of activities with varying political impacts, which, according to policy-makers, involve a soft or indirect use of the governance method of creating networks to promote political change. In 2008, it became even clearer that this soft approach has been applied in a relatively unthreatening way for autocratic regimes. Even in Morocco, theoretically the poster child for reform, closer examination shows that most of the 'reform' projects carried out under the heading of support for EU-style modernisation of regulations and governance actually consist of funding for equipment, new computers and buildings and the exchange of experiences on how to make decision-taking more efficient, although not necessarily more responsible. At a more political level, one noteworthy project from 2007 provided support for the first electoral commission of Moroccan NGOs, offering training on election monitoring and the submission of reports. However, this did not lead to a more critical stance toward the outcome of election rigging in 2008. Likewise, in Jordan, the programmes conducted under the heading of support for legal reforms to increase judicial independence were actually limited to financing the government's own strategy to simplify judicial processes and improve the system's capacity to handle the volume of cases. In Syria, the EU's administrative reform projects have contributed even more clearly to increasing the state's capacity without promoting a simultaneous increase in accountability. And in Libya, the support for governance that has been provided for some time now has done little to encourage the country's different factions to create a more balanced confessional political system. Throughout the Middle East, ever-growing projects on border control, migration and drug enforcement have been presented as 'promotion of democracy', a tenuous connection in most cases.

In the southern Mediterranean, the lack of accession prospects continued to weaken the EU's negotiating position. The EU has sought a 'depressurising' liberalisation of Middle Eastern regimes that would contribute to stabilising the governments, rather than the type of short-term systematic political change that might usher Islamic parties into power. Middle Eastern governments that have resisted democratic standards

have continued to benefit from several aspects of European cooperation. The pre-eminence of 'de-radicalisation' goals can be seen in the importance given to relatively soft cultural, educational and economic initiatives.

The Jordanian monarchy received support as a moderator and mediator in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (the opposition Islamic Action Front opposes the peace treaty with Israel and has close ties to Hamas in Palestine), as well as on counter-terrorism and 'de-radicalisation' policies. The Moroccan government is viewed as a stabilising ally in the region and a partner in the fight against terrorism. Both factors became more evident in 2008, with the worsening of the Arab-Israeli conflict at the end of the year. The Palestinians continue to reject the EU's approach to relations in the Mediterranean and reform-related issues, as they believe that they lessen pressure on Israel. Policy-makers prioritised the goal of stemming illegal immigration from and through Morocco, considering it more important than democracy support, although invariably without a clear notion of why a less authoritarian system would run contrary to this goal.

Given the structure of the national policies of the Arab states, strategic reasons for concern have caused the EU to promote 'political reform with exceptions'. States such as Morocco, Algeria and Jordan have received aid for the government-controlled incorporation of moderate Islamist parties that are friendly toward the regime. In all of these areas, it is difficult to find genuinely liberalising intentions behind the reforms undertaken by the Arab elites. Taking a generous view, one might say that the EU has been too lenient in granting these regimes the benefit of the doubt. For example, the EU has been ambiguous toward the moderate Islamist PJD in Morocco. When the authoritarian Moroccan regime manipulated the elections of September 2007 to prevent the PJD from occupying the position many thought it would hold in the government, the EU did not offer any support for the party's democratic rights, which were increasingly weakened over the course of 2008. Nor has it questioned the role of the palace, the influence of the shadowy *makhzen* or the basic balance of powers in Morocco.

With the Union for the Mediterranean, the EU is once again shifting toward a more traditional form of inter-

national relations, one much more strongly grounded in political cooperation, and away from the supposedly 'new' approach of 'shaping the political environment'. The Union for the Mediterranean will also bring more flexibility, as there is a core group of southern states that head up projects. The vacuum left by the waning influence of the United States in the Mediterranean over 2008 was not filled by a strengthening of the role of Europe, but rather by an increase in the influence of Arab players themselves within regional diplomacy. This was one of the most pronounced trends of 2008 and has major implications for the political dimensions of Euro-Mediterranean relations.

In 2008, diplomats spoke of 'tempering ambitions' in the sphere of Arab reform. One exhaustive study conducted in Morocco in 2008 concluded that Moroccan reformers (in the administration, parliament, judiciary and civil society) believe that pressure from the EU in favour of reform was too weak rather than too strong, that demand had surpassed supply (Khakee, 2008). To date, no influence has been exerted on Morocco in the negotiations for its advanced status agreement. The new Union for the Mediterranean, created last year by French initiative, is marginalising political issues. Southern countries already feel that they hold a stronger stake in the Union for the Mediterranean. All Arab leaders were present at its creation in Paris, whilst they had boycotted the tenth anniversary of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in 2005. This is largely due to the fact that the new initiative excludes all mention of democracy and human rights.

By late 2008, the political dimensions of Euro-Mediterranean relations increasingly seemed to have taken a back seat to the economic crisis, security concerns and the renewed violence in Gaza. In sum, over 2008, progress on the political reform facet of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership was quite disappointing.

References

- KHAKKEE, Anna. *Pragmatism Rather than Backlash: Moroccan Perceptions of Western Democracy Promotion*, EuroMeSCo Paper 73, November 2008.