

Europe and the Arab Revolution: a missed opportunity?

Jean-Pierre FILIU

The Union for the Mediterranean (UPM) was, on the one hand, the result of a compromise between the desire to preserve the achievements of the Euro-Mediterranean process launched in Barcelona in 1995 and a three-fold calculation on the part of Nicolas Sarkozy on the other. For the French President this meant a project-based depoliticization of the Euro-Mediterranean process, thereby uncoupling the Euro-Israeli relationship from the Israeli-Arab Peace Process and offsetting Turkey, whose European integration has been delayed indefinitely.

This initiative led to the UPM's inaugural summit on 13th July 2008 with the participation, amongst others, of Bachar al-Assad, and the formalisation of the Sarkozy-Mubarak co-presidency. The "civil society" chapter in the Euro-Mediterranean process, which had already been undermined by the Arab governments and their GONGOs¹, were only of incantatory value. The French President was able to make successive declarations about the "freedom progressing in Tunisia"² or about "excellent relations in all respects" with Egypt³, three months before elections that were marked by massive fraud and six months before the fall of Mubarak.

Libyan Division

The democratic uprising experienced by the Arab world since the winter of 2010-11 has flown in the face of all of these positions. There has indeed been an Arab revolution, not because every country has experienced revolutionary turmoil, but because of the dynamics behind the regional protest movements against all of the regimes in office. These regimes can choose the path to reform, which has to be far reaching and substantial. Or, as Libya and Syria have tragically proven, the despot can unleash

1. *Governmental NGOs*, an oxymoron meaning associations created artificially by the governments in question to quash the real representatives of civil society.

2. Tunis, 29th April 2008.

3. Palais de l'Elysée, 30th August 2010.

his repressive violence against initially peaceful protest, which has been forced to militarise.

After the overthrow of Presidents Ben Ali and Mubarak, Javier Solana said he was “frustrated at the European Union’s response.” The former chief of European diplomacy believed “that we might not have done more, but we should have nurtured a better dialogue and a stronger empathy.”⁴ For his part President Sarkozy learnt his lesson and resolutely sided with the Libyan revolution, whose National Transition Council (NTC) was recognized by France as early as March 2011. Paris and London played a key role in the adoption of the UN Security Council resolution 1973, a prelude to NATO’s intervention to save Benghazi from re-capture by the despot.

Beyond the fate of the Libyan revolution, the NATO operation helped prevent the destabilisation of post-Ben Ali Tunisia and post-Mubarak Egypt by Gaddafi, who would have been all the more vindictive had he been re-instated. But NATO’s campaign, which ended in October 2011 with the death of the dictator, divided Europe instead of uniting it: Germany refused to join the Franco-British coalition, whilst in 2003 it was the joint opposition of Paris and Berlin against the American invasion of Iraq that antagonized London and the other “like-minded” capitals. This time it was Libya that separated Western, Southern and Northern Europe, committed albeit symbolically to NATO’s operation, from a reticent and even hostile Central and Eastern Europe.

It was only in November 2011 that Catherine Ashton officially inaugurated the European Union’s representation in the Libyan capital. Europe’s commitment remained modest in a country which, admittedly, had always stood apart from the Euro-Mediterranean initiative. Apart from the 80 million € in humanitarian aid given during the conflict, 30 million € were affected to emergency programmes. The election of a “National Congress” in July 2012 that took over from the soon to be dissolved NTC was welcomed as a “significant turning point” for the “future democratic development of Libya”⁵.

Renewed Partnerships

The formula “Arab Spring” ended up reducing an historical, long lasting groundswell, to a seasonal variation. Since the first free elections in the autumn of 2011 led to the victory of Ennahda in Tunisia, to that of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, not much more is required for it to be declared an “Islamic Autumn”. After a brief moment of self-criticism this has justified the implementation of past policies, with a relative change of contacts in relatively stable administrations in the Southern Mediterranean.

Of course Catherine Ashton and Stefan Füle announced in March 2011 the launch of a “Partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity in the Southern Mediterranean.” The three pillars of this were “*the democratic transformation and strengthening of the institutions*”; “*enhanced partnership with the populations*”; “*sustainable, inclusive economic growth and development*”⁶. Aside the “democratic transformation”, all of the terms employed here are part of a proven Euro-Mediterranean register. The idea of positive conditionality can be summarised by the bureaucratic expression “more for more” that is supposed to reward progress rather than sanction shortfalls.

The design of specific instruments to address this revolutionary situation has been ruled out. At best the idea of moving towards an “advanced status” as part of the

4. *El Pais*, 19th February 2011.

5. Conclusions of the Council on Libya, 23rd July 2012.

6. Joint Communication by the European and the High Representative, Brussels, 8th March 2011.

association agreements according to the status model already in application with Morocco and Jordan has been suggested. Therefore it is simply a question of adapting the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) to the new situation, without assimilating this group of Mediterranean countries with those in Eastern Europe. This was the goal of a European Commission Communication released in May 2011 on “a new strategy regarding a changing world.”⁷

Contrary to this title the “new strategy” is hard to find in this document. At best we can read about the promotion of a commitment to “increased aid to partners who are trying to achieve *deep and sustainable democracy*”:

- free, regular elections
- freedom of association, expression and assembly
- the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary
- the fight against corruption
- the democratic supervision of the armed and security forces.

The listing of these criteria indirectly highlights the extent of the active or passive blindness which marked cooperation in the past. The European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), which has been provided with 5.7 billion € for the period 2011-2013 is due to be supplemented with an additional 1.2 billion €. The ENPI involves 16 countries, including Israel and seven in Eastern Europe. Even though one third of this “supplement” is supposed to be allocated to the Arab countries⁸, only 200 to 300 million additional € will be shared out amongst the eight partners in question. Within this group of countries, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco and Jordan are privileged, unlike Algeria, Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories.

The fact that Morocco and Jordan are included alongside revolutionary Tunisia and Egypt is supposed to encourage the Arab leaders along the path of reform. But as much as the Constitution approved by referendum in Morocco in July 2011 is an undeniable yet incomplete step forward, Jordan is delaying the implementation of even limited reform. The European Union has not ruled out “a radical re-orientation” of the envelopes it has allocated to Egypt and Tunisia, but without making any significant increase. In all events there is nothing comparable, on the part of Europe, to the exceptional effort that was made after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In July Bernardino Leon, the second in command in Spanish diplomacy, was appointed as “the European Union’s Special Representative for the countries in the Southern Mediterranean”. During the same month, in Cairo, Catherine Ashton announced the launch of the SPRING programme (*Support for Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth*), provided with 350 million €, of which 65 were given in 2011 and 285 in 2012. 40% of this allocation was granted to democratic reform and 60% to sustainable development.

It was not until September 2011 that the EU-Tunisia Task Force allocated 100 million additional euros to the young democracy (80 for the most impoverished regions and 20 for competitiveness assistance). The European Union was visible thanks to its electoral observation mission during the vote on 23rd October 2011 for the Constituent Assembly. Under the management of Michael Gahler, MEP (EPP, DE), ten experts and around 100 observers attended the first free elections in Tunisia.

7. Joint Communication by the European and the High Representative, Brussels, 25th May 2011.

8. Richard Youngs, “Funding Arab reform?”, German Marshall Fund, Policy Brief, August 2012, p.2.

From one crisis to another

It is far from certain that Europe has learned all of the lessons from the mistakes it made in Tunisia and Egypt as far as relations with civil society are concerned. The GONGOs – the pseudo pro-regime NGOs continue to reap in a major share of the funds allocated to associations. There is a prevailing feeling that European leaders, both political and administrative, have upgraded their contacts to the level they should have reached before the democratic uprising, without taking into account the new union, cultural and revolutionary players.

European decision makers have reduced the problem of their political opening to that of their dialogue with the Islamists. Dialogue like this, which had been necessary for a long time, does not use up all of the opportunities made available by the opening of the partisan, militant camp in the Arab world. There is also a danger of going from one extreme to another and of behaving with the Islamist parties in government in the same way as with the presidential parties of the fallen regimes.

Arab societies are extremely diverse and lively. No overview, no dominating prism can perceive the complexity of this. It would be better to take one's time and provide oneself with the means to build a sustainable relationship with environments, regions, and sensitivities, which to date have remained beyond the reach of the European vision, because it is from there that future elites will emerge.

The need to cast off comfortable blinkers is particularly evident in Syria. The internal resistance which has maintained its civilian nature much longer than in Libya is frequently caricatured as being "Islamist", "radical" or "sectarian" whilst direct contacts with it are rare and haphazard. The European Union effectively leads in terms of its sanctions against Bashar al-Assad⁹, but it has not taken the step which was decisive in the Libyan revolution, of fully recognizing the organised opposition. The acknowledgement of the Syrian National Council, just after it was formed in October 2011 would however have been the best obstacle to the centrifugal trend of an opposition marked by decades of exile and repression.

Finally although "*settling the Israeli-Arab conflict is a strategic priority for Europe*"¹⁰, one has to admit that this "strategic priority" has led to very little practical effect. It would be wrong to pretend, as Brussels does that a process "*to build the Palestinian State*" is underway¹¹: of the 460 million euros paid out in 2011, which by far makes the European Union the biggest creditor in the West Bank or on the Gaza Strip, only 35 million have gone to institutional aid and 22 to the development of infrastructures¹².

Most of this aid, which is significant, is affected to financing the UNRWA (the UN agency specialised in aid to the Palestinians) and the Palestinian Authority (whose agents in Gaza are banned from working for the local administration of the Hamas). This assistance helps towards perpetuating the status quo, notably the division between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, rather than taking it towards a sustainable solution of two States living in peace.

9. Aside the embargo on weapons and oil together with economic and financial sanctions, 53 companies and administrations have had their assets frozen likewise 155 members of the regime (who are also banned from having a visa).

10. http://eeas.europa.eu/mepp/index_fr.htm

11. *Ibid.*

12. http://eeas.europa.eu/occupied_palestinian_territory/ec_assistance/eu_aid_to_palest_2011_en.pdf

It would be an understatement to say that the democratic uprising in the Southern Mediterranean has not been met with a response worthy of this historic upheaval. Europe, which is bogged down in its own financial crisis, has not succeeded in providing the means that would have enabled it to contribute concretely to this area of “shared democracy and prosperity” as it pretends to want in the Mediterranean. The precedent, which was enlightening however, of the transitions in Spain, Portugal and Greece was not considered seriously in this collective reflexion.

Beyond the budgetary constraints, it is the political vision which is at fault however. In regard to the Palestinian or Syrian issue, a more courageous position would undoubtedly use up less of the disputed payments. The weak consensus in dealing with crises in a “humanitarian” rather than “political” way which call rather more for strong policy, is not only costly in the short term, it also delays the settlement of problems that are worsened by this denial of responsibility.

It would have been good at least to have a European discourse that was worthy of the issue at stake. Only François Hollande has clearly spoken of “*political and social revolutions in the Arab world*”¹³. He has advocated a “*Mediterranean of Projects*” where “*concerns over security must always go together with the need for dignity*” and that it is up to France “*to encourage this movement boldly but vigilantly.*” He has repeated that keeping Bachar al-Assad in power is not only “*unbearable for the world’s conscience*” but “*unacceptable for the stability of the region.*”¹⁴

The Arab Revolution has only just entered its third year. It is not too late for Europe and the Europeans to take the full measure of it.

13. Letter from François Hollande to Jean-Marie Guéhenno, 13th July 2012.

14. Speech by François Hollande at the Ambassadors Conference, 27th August 2012.