



Contraditório think-tank

Briefing

Europe's cup of jasmine tea? | Pedro Teles Ferreira

Arab young people believe they can have better lives in their own countries. Tunisians and Egyptians decided that writing their own History is not a monopoly of heads of State. Young men and women have been and still are on the streets calling for democracy, freedom and for employment.

Tunisians and Egyptians did not show any sort of religious divisions or objectives. Pure civic protests, remembering the world that democracy and welfare is a matter of human dignity. Europe and the United States are pushing for democratic reforms and smooth transitions, which is indeed the biggest challenge for Tunisia, Egypt and, eventually, to other Arab Countries in the future.

As Chris Patten, former EU External Relations Commissioner once said, developing democracy is not like “make instant coffee”. Thus, the EU is in good position for supporting long term political and

economic reforms, strengthening democracies and pluralism, respect for human rights, and increasing welfare of the populations in southern Mediterranean Countries.

Is it all about money? Being the world major aid donor helps, but it is not enough. Diplomacy matters. Europe needs to be more efficient in supporting democracy and economic development in the region, including between Arab countries. Beside development aid programmes, several measures can intensify confidence and stability in Mediterranean Countries, for instance, allowing better access to the European market (exporting agriculture products).

Moreover, consistent diplomacy from the EU would allow better results in terms of development assistance. Increasing contact with different political, social and economic actors, including parliaments and political



parties, unions, universities, and NGO's, is likely to be reinforced by European diplomats, private companies, media, academics and civil society. This will allow a truly comprehensive approach.

More than a neighbour and moderate country, Egypt has been a key partner in the Middle East process, critical to preserve Europe's energetic security and international trade with Asia (through the Suez Canal). Other countries in the region have been also playing an important role supplying European countries with oil and gas.

As recently underlined by the Director of the EU Institute for Security Studies - Álvaro de Vasconcelos -, potentially explosive social situation is not just specific to Tunisia but a common characteristic of most if not all Arab southern Mediterranean Countries.

Energy security, illegal immigration, human rights, political and religious extremism have been matters of great concern to Europe in the Mediterranean region, which is understandable. Cooperation mechanisms like the Barcelona Process, the Union for the Mediterranean and the EU Neighbourhood Policy did not avoid this strong call for political and economic changes in southern Mediterranean Countries.

The European Parliament is normally very conscious regarding political reforms and respect for human rights. In the case of Egypt, one resolution (January 2008) called for further developments regarding human rights, the independence of the judiciary, the end of all forms of torture and harassment, the detention of media professionals, human rights defenders and activists, and to lift the "state of emergence".

Preserving the ownership of democratic and economic reforms is critical for long term stability and development in the Mediterranean. It is crucial to understand how these societies have changed and are changing. That is why European diplomacy matters.

The world financial crises, unemployment and high prices of food are problems that concern all countries, as recognized by the World Economic Forum, in Davos. Sustainable and balanced growths, inclusive development in democratic societies are some of the goals recently pointed out by the leaders of Indonesia and India, respectively.

Crises and ruptures offer opportunities. What recent events have shown is that Tunisians and Egyptians (among others in Arab world)



are willing to drive their countries towards democracy and pluralism, transparent economic governance, and employment. The EU has a good chance of showing that Common Foreign and Security Policy is more than a new telephone number given by the Lisbon Treaty.

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