



IPRIS Viewpoints

MARCH 2011

Political turbulence in the MENA region: change we can trust in?

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Winston Churchill once said “there is nothing wrong with change, if it is in the right direction”. If Churchill were still alive, he certainly would be following the events taking place in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with great interest, bearing in mind that it is quite obvious, at this point, that nothing will remain the same in the region. Yet Churchill himself would certainly emphasize that it is still unclear if the winds of political change that are spreading like a virus in the MENA region are blowing in the right direction. In other words, successful transitions to democracy, as well as the rise of pro-Western governments – the two outcomes highly desired by the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) – are not the inevitable output of the ongoing wave of political change in the region.

Instead of standing idly by while this inevitable trend of change moves forward, the EU and the US should actively contribute to mould the events in order to safeguard their interests. The last outcome that the EU and the US would like to see arising is a region infested with failed states, drug and weapons trafficking, illegal immigration, and terrorist groups. Moreover, the fact that the MENA region is a major source of oil and gas reinforces the need for a proactive strategy even further. Therefore, if one bears in mind that this is a region of the highest strategic importance, then

it becomes obvious that the events taking place are the greatest challenge posed so far to the EU and the US since the end of the Cold War. The task at hand is to decrease the ongoing political uncertainty and to guarantee that stable democratic states and pro-Western regimes will be the final output. As a consequence, the EU and the US will have to devise a strategy to support ongoing regime changes and subsequent transitions to democracy. If they do not do so, the EU and the US might not only be confronted with an arc of instability across the MENA region, but also with hostile regimes near its borders.

In order to prevent such a scenario, rather than developing new grand strategies, the EU and the US must adopt an efficient approach, fully oriented towards supporting the transition and consolidation of democracy in the MENA region. In other words, the EU and the US must support the establishment of democracy in the Middle East and North Africa as the “only game in town”.¹ The careful consideration of past experiences of this sort could prove in this case, quite useful.

¹ A democratic regime is consolidated when it “becomes the only game in town, when no one can imagine acting outside the democratic institutions, when all the losers want to do is to try again within the same institutions under which they have just lost”. See Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and market: Political and economic reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 26.



Indeed, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the EU and the US actively supported democratic reformers, based on the belief that democracies do not fight each other. In his State of the Union address in 1994, former US President Bill Clinton was quite clear: “the best strategy to ensure our security and to build durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere. Democracies don’t attack each other. They make better trading partners and partners in diplomacy”. Former European Commissioner for External Relations Chris Patten subscribed the same views: “free societies tend not to fight one another or to be bad neighbors”. Last but not the least, the democratic peace theory was also present in the European Security Strategy published in 2003, when it stated that “the best protection for our security is a world of well-governed democratic states”.

In this context, Churchill again proves to be extremely pertinent, for he once declared that “democracy is the worst form of government except for all those others that have been tried”. Truth be told, democracy is nowhere near a perfect form of government, but so far is the less imperfect one. As a consequence, democratic regimes in the MENA region are not only inevitable, but also welcome, even if in-between there are risks. Indeed, transitions to democracy “can be chaotic. [They] can cause short-term instability. Even worse – and we have seen it before – the transition can backslide into just another authoritarian regime”.² Yet, the fact is that “the status quo is simply not sustainable”.³ Therefore, the transition to democracy must be inclusive, and sometimes it will imply Islamic

participation: “the plain fact is that Arab Countries will not achieve democracy without Islamist participation, and possibly some period of Islamist leadership in Governance. The challenge for these civil societies will be to constrain a democratically elected, Islamist-led government with effective constitutional checks and balances, so that Islamists, once elected, cannot barricade themselves in power”.⁴

The political approach ahead is crystal clear: the EU and the US must promote and support the establishment of robust systems of checks and balances, i.e. mechanisms of horizontal accountability,⁵ as well as an array of measures that promote free and fair elections, inclusive suffrage, safeguard the right to run for office, freedom of expression, alternative sources of information and associational autonomy.⁶ Any hesitation on their part to do so will only lead to an unpredictable outcome and, most importantly, to change we cannot trust in.

2 Hillary Clinton, “Secretary Clinton’s Remarks at Munich Security Conference” (US Department of State, 5 February 2011).

3 Idem.

4 Larry Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies Throughout the World* (Times Books, 2008), pp. 286-287.

5 “The existence of state agencies that are legally enabled and empowered, and factually willing and able, to take actions that span from routine oversight to criminal sanctions or impeachment in relation to actions or omissions by other agents or agencies of the state that may be qualified as unlawful”. See Guillermo O’Donnell, “Horizontal Accountability”, in Andreas Schedler, Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (eds.), *The Self-Restraining State: Power and Accountability in New Democracies* (Lynne Rienner, 1999), p. 38.

6 See Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (Yale University Press, 1989), p. 233.

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