

DEMOCRACIES IN THE MAKING: EGYPT AT THE CENTRE OF ARAB TRANSITIONS

Report of the Workshop

3rd and 4th June, Hotel Marriott Cairo, Egypt

The workshop “Democracies in the Making: Egypt at the Centre of Arab Transitions” focused on the analysis of the current phase of the democratic transition in Egypt, dominated by a high level of polarisation. It was organised by EuroMeSCo, the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) and the Al Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies (ACPSS), with the support of the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID). This was the last of a series of four workshops organised in the framework of a programme to strengthen the capacities of think tanks and research institutes in Mediterranean countries, mainly in light of the current democratisation processes and regional transformations.

Session 1:

The Egyptian Path Towards Democracy: Progress and Setbacks

In this first session, panellists analysed the challenges and obstacles facing Egypt during its democratisation process and how to overcome them. Experts, researchers and policy makers started the session by stating that Egypt cannot be considered a success story in terms of the democratisation process.

The main causes of this failure were attributed to the fragmentation and polarisation of society, involving fields such the government, military, media, judiciary and opposition. The Egyptian political landscape is confronted to a division not only between political parties but also between these parties and the rest of the population. The lack of dialogue between the authority and the opposition also prevents the state from fulfilling its mission to guarantee the minimum living standards of citizens. The poorest (representing 40% of the Egyptian population) and the youngest (the under-18s, who make up 60% of the population) are not enabled to be part of the current decision-making processes.

The results of these dynamics are two-fold: fragile and mismanaged institutions and the risk of fragmentation of the Egyptian society. This is why panellists agreed that the country needs speedy and comprehensive reforms, mainly regarding public institutions. It is essential to create social equality and impartiality through inclusive policies in order to achieve democracy in terms of values and not only mechanisms.

Panellists concluded that to improve the current situation, it is important to rebuild local strengths and empower the citizens, also by giving more visibility to women. Social equality and creating opportunities are the only way to prevent economic exclusion, thereby supporting and legitimising a political system. A common consensus among the different components of society is needed to build the economic and social structures of the country, generating inclusive reforms.

Session 2

A Transformed Region: The Arab Spring and Geopolitical Shifts in the Southern Mediterranean

This roundtable focused on the regional dimension and geopolitical implications of the Arab Spring. The experts compared the ongoing process in southern Mediterranean countries to the experience of the democratic transitions in Eastern Europe.

After the fall of the Berlin wall, Eastern European countries reoriented their external policies to become closer to Europe, while regime change generated deep geopolitical implications and altered the balance of power in the region. However, many countries in the Southern Mediterranean region –Egypt included- do not have a strong interest towards Europe. Since these countries cannot become member states (in opposition to Eastern European countries), the EU does not have enough leverage to shape developments on the ground.

In terms of the geo-economic situation, experts stated the undeniable presence of uncertainty in the region. Between 2006 and 2008, Egypt experienced the highest economic growth among the countries of the region and was also the most diversified economy. If Egypt creates the right environment again, its economy could grow by taking advantage of its natural resources and overcoming regional problems such as water shortage or food insecurity.

In regard to the Israel-Palestinian issue, panellists concluded that what happened in the region has brought hope for the Palestinian population and also forced Israel to reconsider how it relates to Arab countries, particularly Egypt. The reorientation of the external policies of regional powers, including Israel but also Iran or Turkey, will have long-lasting implications for the region. Experts agreed that the geopolitical implications of the Egyptian revolution are still unfolding and that the shape of the new geopolitical landscape will take time to consolidate.

Session 3

How Does the EU Support Democratic Reforms?

This roundtable was dedicated to the role of the EU in the region. According to several participants, the EU can be seen as a “role model” and be considered as a potential booster of the processes of transition to democracy. The EU can not only provide financial assistance but also facilitate mobility of people and access to its markets. Panellists agreed that there is an unexploited potential for closer ties between the EU and the MENA countries.

Since the start of the revolution, it is possible to enumerate three main phases of EU's action toward the region. The first was characterised by hesitation, followed on by the publication of Joint Communications showing support for democratic processes and civil society. Finally, in the current phase, the EU finds it difficult to be a major actor since it is facing internal economic and political crises.

The roundtable emphasised the existence of a thin line between support and intrusion of external powers. It is a delicate barrier in which the EU can easily be criticised if too much or too little is done, as well as if it promotes the wrong policies. In response, some suggested that external support has to focus on specific issues. Experts enumerated a list of topics in which the EU could contribute to support the democratisation process:

- 1) Creating a stable functional, consensual legal framework in a different number of areas, not only the constitution or rule of law. The EU can be of great help in the Egyptian democratisation process if it helps to lay the foundations of a new political order.
- 2) Promoting an independent, professional and efficient judiciary. The EU has long experience in working with third countries in the judiciary field. In Egypt, it could help in the process of transitional justice and dealing with the legacy of the old regime.
- 3) Fostering inclusive opportunity-based regional economies. The EU strongly believes that regional integration creates opportunities. In spite of its economic troubles, the EU is experienced in creating economic governance institutions and has the best social protection and cohesion models.
- 4) Creating a free, plural, professional and independent media, allowing greater transparency, access and dissemination of information.
- 5) Establishing civilian control over the security sector. Egypt is a good example of the need for security sector reform. EU member states can provide relevant expertise, in particular those having experienced democratic transitions in recent times.

Session 4

The Role of Civil Society: How Can Think Tanks and Research Institutes Uphold Progress Towards Democracy?

The last roundtable discussed the role of think tanks in a polarised and fragmented society. Through the debate, two main currents of thought came to light. According to some experts, think tanks and research institutes should embody the role of informing society and enabling the generation of ideas. On the other hand, some argued that think tanks should be politically critical and act in order to improve the decision-making process, for example by mobilising the public to exert pressure on the political regime.

The second part of the debate focused on the situation of think tanks in Egypt. Researchers acknowledged that the main problem is the lack of communication channels. When think tanks and research institutes carry out policy analysis and make recommendations, the information either cannot reach civil society or takes too long.

Egyptian think tanks are also facing another set of particular challenges. First, the legal framework: they work under extreme vague laws, sometimes under NGO laws or as consultancy companies. Secondly, the financial issue: think tanks do not have access to foreign funding and national fundraising is often confronted to subtle and implicit boundaries. Third, they are facing basic functioning challenges, meaning that some think tanks do not even have access to basic working resources. Finally, there is the generational challenge, as think tanks and research institutes are dominated by middle-aged researchers and are not capable of integrating younger generations.

The participants suggested creating an Egyptian representative body of think tanks. Such a consortium would be able to set up a mutual and complementary agenda for political research, having a wider impact in society, and would be more

difficult to influence politically. In addition, panellists also highlighted the importance of revitalising think tank networks, particularly because they are a useful tool for producing interconnected political analyses, discussions and joint research. The empowerment of think tanks and research institutes in the region was considered an essential component of strong and vibrant civil societies.