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The Shaping of Anti-Democratic Discourses and What to Do About It

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CONTENTS

The Shaping of Anti-Democratic Discourses and What to Do About It

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Introduction

Democracy and human rights featured prominently in Euro-Mediterranean relations starting with the 1995 Euro-Mediterranean Conference in Barcelona and until the eruption of Arab revolutions. The uprisings, some of which failed to achieve their goals, marked a shift in those relations and raised some doubts about whether democracy remains a priority for Europe's relations with the Southern Mediterranean. The securitisation of the European Union (EU)'s approach towards its Southern Neighbourhood mirrored a securitisation of the domestic discourse in Southern Mediterranean countries themselves, which put on the back burner other important issues such as state reform and socioeconomic development. This paper examines, first, the context in which the securitisation trend has gained ground in a number of countries and, second, provides a detailed analysis of the shaping of anti-democratic discourses in some specific countries.

Prioritising Security in a Volatile Regional Context

The Arab region witnessed the total collapse of the nation-state in several countries such as Iraq, Libya, Yemen and partially Syria. Meanwhile, the state in Egypt and Tunisia was faced with serious challenges, particularly manifested in terrorist attacks. Both cases led to the rise of the same discourse that prioritised the security of the state. This is demonstrated in the case of Egypt, where such discourse focused on conspiracies that allegedly aimed at undermining the state. According to this discourse, the collapse of the nation-state in the Arab region started with the United States (US) invasion of Iraq, which means that external powers, particularly Western ones, are constantly conspiring to destabilise the region. The debate about the reform of state institutions, similar to that of Eastern European countries during their democratic transitions, started declining, and reformist voices that emerged following the January 2011 revolution were silenced as the war on terrorism became the utmost priority. Issues like reforming security institutions and the judiciary or the future of civilian-military relations were, therefore, pushed to the margin under the pretext that the security of the state was at stake. However, postponing the reform of state institutions because of political or economic challenges does not, in fact, protect the state. All countries where the state collapsed were ruled by autocratic regimes, Gaddafi's Libya being the most obvious example, and did not enjoy any form of political pluralism, even if formally allowed, as was the case of Mubarak's Egypt before the revolution. The emergence of the discourse that turned the protection of the state into an aim in itself rather than a means for protecting the interests of the people that this state is supposed to serve was shaped in a specific context where a number of countries of the region, including Egypt, faced acute terrorist threats.

The War on Terrorism: Stability over Reform

The war on terrorism in Arab countries has taken a different form in recent years since it now goes beyond targeting extremist groups whose recruitment and mobilisation capabilities primarily stem from banking on ideological drives (ElShobaki, 2018). Unlike earlier jihadist groups whose terrorist operations were backed by ideological arguments, new groups rarely justify their operations ideologically and, when they do, ideology comes later to legitimise an operation that had already been carried out rather than being the main drive behind it. In addition, violent organisations are, for the first time, able to control entire cities, as was the case in Syria and Iraq. They are also a major party to the conflict in Libya and Yemen and continue to threaten Egypt and Tunisia besides carrying out a number of attacks in several European countries. Such substantial transformation rendered the war on terrorism a priority for both the Northern and Southern Mediterranean as well as the entire world.

In Egypt, the war on terrorism is clearly justified, as Sinai witnessed the rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) ally Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (ABM), a group that carried out numerous attacks on security forces. Sinai has long been a fertile ground for extremist groups to grow and operate, partly due to the government's neglect in developing the region and its inability to fully police the area's rugged terrain. The insurgency not only has security consequences but economic ones as well. Tourism, a key source of foreign currency earnings, has been affected as visitors are deterred by fears of terrorism and instability. International governments have issued warnings advising citizens to reconsider travel to Egypt, particularly North Sinai, which directly affects tourist arrivals. The number of tourists coming to Egypt's pristine beaches and archaeological sites stood at 9.3 million in 2015, compared with more than 14.7 million in 2010. Tourism's contribution to GDP has dropped more than half from 7.7% in 2010 to 3.2% in 2016 (European Parliament Think Tank, 2018, p. 24).

The war on terrorism in the Southern Mediterranean involved a postponement of all issues relative to democracy and human rights under the pretext that none is feasible in a country threatened by terrorist organisations. According to official discourses in countries of the region, no other demand should overshadow the urgency of countering terrorist organisations that aim to undermine state institutions. Citizens were called upon to unite in supporting the state and the military in the absence of any entity that can evaluate the performance of either, which obliterated efforts for a sound security sector reform and a civilian oversight of military institutions.

War on terrorism is indeed legitimate and it undoubtedly requires a set of exceptional measures that could include issuing an anti-terror law or declaring a state of emergency. However, anti-terror measures should not interfere with political and economic development, given that the efficacy of such measures is not only contingent upon a set of security processes but also involves addressing political, economic and social conditions that give rise to extremism and violence in the first place. The dominance of the official discourse kept civil society entities and legislative institutions unable to hold the state accountable for faulty policies in dealing with terrorism. In fact, such entities are constantly accused of treason and of taking part in the conspiracy against the state, a discourse that also enjoys considerable popular support.

The drastic change in the power and influence of extremist groups supports the argument that security-based approaches alone are never capable of uprooting terrorism. They may, in fact, contribute to empowering terrorist groups even if initial

results indicate otherwise. Back in the 1970s, the major threat posed by jihadist groups was their organisational structure and recruitment strategies and, most importantly, the ideology on which they were founded. That is why countering those groups implied targeting their ideological foundations, which necessitated including official religious institutions, such as al-Azhar, in the initiative to disband those groups and establishing a dialogue with senior jihadist members both inside and outside prison. This eventually resulted in the renowned ideological revisions issued in 1997 by al-Gamaa al-Islamiya to renounce violence.

Fighting al-Qaeda, currently represented by the Nusra Front and ISIS, is undoubtedly challenging, yet not as challenging as fighting the incubating environment that allowed extremist ideologies to thrive in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and, to a lesser extent, Tunisia and Egypt, particularly the Sinai Peninsula. The incubating environment in Syria, Iraq and Sinai played a major role in the recruitment process. A considerable number of youths who joined ISIS did not subscribe to their ideologies, neither did they pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. For youths in Sinai, joining ISIS and similar groups is motivated by a desire for retaliation against an oppressive state that marginalises them and imposes restrictions on their daily lives. Deteriorating economic conditions, which are also linked to state policies, tempt them to take the money offered by extremist groups in return for taking part in their operations or providing them with logistical support. Political and sectarian marginalisation in Iraq, for instance, played a major role in encouraging youths to join terrorist groups.

Examining the conditions of that incubating environment and looking into the means of addressing them is indispensable for countering terrorism. However, this approach goes hand in hand with the introduction of political reforms and development projects, which is not the case in most countries involved in the war on terrorism, whether because they cannot carry out such changes or are not willing to.

It is worth highlighting that the discourse that prioritises state security not only dominates the Southern Mediterranean but also extends to other powers, the Trump Administration being the most flagrant example. This also played a role in the decline of any attempts at examining the real causes of violence and extremism and overshadowed the argument that fighting terrorism is not possible as long as state oppressive policies result in environments where sentiments of hatred and revenge thrive. Therefore, the war on terrorism in the Southern Mediterranean became confined to military and security solutions in the absence of any initiatives that try to handle the problem from a social, economic or political perspective.

The Post-Arab Spring's Bumpy Road and Failures

The past few years witnessed a growing debate over the crisis of representative democracy. Failure to achieve substantial development and economic progress on the domestic level was attributed in many countries to the struggle for power among politicians. China was consistently cited as an example of an economic power that managed to compete with the world's biggest democracies such as the US, hence providing evidence that growth and development are not necessarily contingent upon democracy.

This rhetoric started spreading in Egypt and other countries in the Southern Mediterranean, particularly in the aftermath of the January 2011 revolution. Social uprisings were seen by many parties inside Egypt and across the region as a source of instability and chaos and as an indication of the people's failure to establish democracy. Egypt represented a key example of how political trajectories are often adapted in response to national, regional and international dynamics and forces. In Egypt, multiple stakeholders, inside and outside the country, with differing agendas, attempted to assert their power (Zambakari & Kang, 2016, p. 1-2).

After the January 2011 revolution succeeded in toppling then President Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's road towards democratic transition was rather bumpy: it started with the coming to power of the Muslim Brotherhood and was concluded with the presidency of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. The revolution started as an initiative launched by a small group of youths who took to the streets of Cairo on 25 January 2011. The protests grew to reach their peak on 28 January, also known as "Friday of Fury", and spread to different Egyptian cities. Prominent opposition figures took part in the protests, the most renowned of whom was Mohamed al-Baradei.

The millions of Egyptians who demanded the ouster of Mubarak, which took place on 11 February, did not provide a post-revolutionary vision that would have determined the possible alternatives at the time. In fact, the Egyptian revolution was one of a kind for it neither took the revolutionary path through revoking the 1971 constitution and drafting a new one nor opted for reforming that constitution, even if temporarily, for the post-revolution regime. Instead, the post-Mubarak era, which included parliamentary and presidential elections, technically started without a constitution. The majority of Egyptians voted in favour of amending the 1971 constitution, yet the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), then the de facto ruler, did not act upon the result and opted instead for suspending the 1971 constitution and replacing it with the so-called "constitutional declaration". This meant that the party that won the elections, in this case the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom and

Justice Party, became in charge of drafting a new constitution. This, however, was rejected by other political parties, which accused the Brotherhood of drafting a constitution for its followers and not for all the Egyptian people.

This was not devoid of truth since the Muslim Brotherhood did draft a constitution that served its interests and included a number of articles that paved the way for the creation of a religious state. All other political factions were against this constitution. The Muslim Brotherhood also worked on staying in power for good and kept excluding members of other political parties while appointing more of its members in official positions.

In addition there was the problem of building political pacts. Even when quarrels about procedures, prerogatives and mandates were somewhat patched, President Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood's senior leadership missed the opportunity to bring in the non-Islamist opposition. Morsi too often dismissed any type of policy disagreement or political opposition as either a violation of the "will of the Egyptian people" or an attempt by old regime sympathisers to derail the revolution. But, in fact, building broad political consensus was hardly a top priority for the Islamists, even though they are not the only ones to blame. The secular, liberal and nationalist opposition parties were likewise partisan, confrontational and unable to come to terms with the Islamists' democratic victory (Magharoui, 2014). This was unlike what happened in Tunisia, where the Troika alliance, led by the Islamist al-Nahda Party, gave in to popular pressure and responded to protests against their attempts at monopolising power through choosing an impartial technocratic government.

On 30 June 2013, Egypt witnessed another massive uprising and the Muslim Brotherhood-backed President Mohamed Morsi was ousted after the military interfered on 3 July of the same year. As the Muslim Brotherhood rule came to an end, a new chapter of Egyptian politics began. The coming to power of Egypt's strongman Abdel Fattah al-Sisi was facilitated by a number of factors. The dominance of the revolutionary rhetoric, which was lauded by the West, was mistakenly considered to represent the general sentiment of the Egyptian people and was expected to last. However, a few months after the revolution, a large segment of the Egyptian population started rejecting that rhetoric as they yearned for a return to normalcy. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood was also seen as proof of the failure of the revolution.

Failure to set a legal and constitutional framework for the post-revolutionary phase coupled with the coming to power of the Muslim Brotherhood, which presented itself as a religious group rather than a political party, resulted in the emergence of a popular

trend that supported the intervention of the military represented by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Other political actors in Egypt did not have the credibility to go against this trend, as most non-Islamist Egyptian parties had little to offer by way of a viable democratic alternative to the military regime or the Islamists. Many scholars think that these non-Islamist parties are often autocratic, illiberal and collaborate with both the old and the current military regime. They suggest that these parties do not consider that support required for democratic norms should surpass their opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood (Zambakari & Kang, 2016). According to these scholars, this "makes them poor stewards of liberalism and weak challengers to Sisi's policies" (Zambakari & Kang, 2016).

As soon as Abdel Fattah al-Sisi became the president of Egypt, the main characteristics of his regime started unfolding. Sisi based his legitimacy on the failure of the political vision emerging from the January 2011 revolution, the economic decline that accompanied frequent protests and political unrest, and the policies of the Muslim Brotherhood. Sisi's regime, therefore, based its success on the failure of Egyptian political factions, both civilian parties and the Muslim Brotherhood, in providing an adequate political alternative. The post-30 June regime acquired legitimacy by promoting the argument that democracy is not a priority since it did not succeed in toppling the Muslim Brotherhood but instead dragged the country into a civil strife, and that when the people were given the chance to choose they voted for the Islamists.

While the majority of Egyptians believed there was no alternative to the intervention of the army to topple the Muslim Brotherhood, a few factions argued that the army should not be involved and that popular pressure should continue until Morsi agreed to hold early presidential elections. However, neither the people nor political forces managed to propose the proper mechanisms to end the Brotherhood's rule democratically. This failure was to a large extent attributed to the nature of this movement, which was not an Islamist political party, as was the case in Tunisia or Morocco, but rather a religious group that operated for the most part clandestinely and planned to stay in power for good. In this context, reaching a compromise between the Brotherhood and the people was almost impossible.

It is important to note that the main driver of the military intervention was the massive demonstrations of 30 June and the consensus among political factions over the necessity of toppling the Muslim Brotherhood. In fact, the 3 July statement in which Sisi announced the deposal of Mohamed Morsi was made in the presence of prominent figures of the civilian political scene and representatives of official religious institutions.

The weakness of political parties and civil groups facilitated the consolidation of security entities and the takeover by executive powers of different segments of the Egyptian political scene, including the parliament and the media. Different political factions that took part in ousting the Muslim Brotherhood were, therefore, totally excluded from the post-30 June order.

Again with the combined context of the war on terrorism and post-Arab Spring developments whereby people and political parties were seen to have failed in handling the transition after the revolution, the discourse about Egyptians not being prepared for democracy gained momentum.

The Rise of Anti-Democratic Rhetoric in the Southern Mediterranean

The rhetoric that Egyptians are not ready for democracy, that political factions are unfit for rule and that state institutions need to be protected as a matter of priority was used to justify the need to postpone the democratic transition associated with chaos and instability. The anti-democratic rhetoric in the Southern Mediterranean, especially in Egypt, was fuelled by multiple sources and actors.

The Official Discourse: A Democracy Put on Hold

First, the official political discourse of the post-30 June regime consistently used the argument that Egyptians are not ready for democracy and that democracy is a waste of time, as opposed to other more important priorities such as economic development, education, health services and countering terrorism. Following coordinated attacks that resulted in 33 military casualties in Sinai in October 2014, the Egyptian president instructed the media to "highlight dangers faced by the nation and complained about the press focusing on negatives", prompting the chief editors of 17 public and private newspapers to "vow to stop publishing content criticizing the performance of state institutions" (Albedaiah, 2016).

The interview Sisi gave to *Jeune Afrique* magazine in February 2016 constitutes the ideal manifestation of that rhetoric. "Democracy will be achieved in 20 to 25 years, a relatively short time to reach a fully-fledged democracy," he said. "We need to improve education, eliminate poverty and corruption, and adopt human rights values in accordance with the specificity of our society" (Albedaiah. 2016).

Democracy was depicted as an ideal and populist demand rather than one that can tangibly be demonstrated. What really mattered, according to Egypt's authorities, was the need to maintain stability. In this context, in the Youth Conference held in Sharm al-Sheikh in November 2017, Sisi stated that fighting terrorism and drafting laws to that end is the foundation for establishing a democracy and maintaining a civil state (Soutalomma, 2017). In another context, he said, "it's still premature to start practicing democracy in its full sense, not yet the right time to be critical and decide who leaves and who stays. I am not saying democracy doesn't exist, but all I am saying is we are going through a critical phase so we need to protect Egypt and maintain societal harmony. The future of nations and the lives of people are not determined by words. We need to learn what a state is, what a state means" (El Watan News, 2018).

The Egyptian authorities' dismissal of values of democracy and freedom of speech was part and parcel of a grand narrative that amplified existential threats to the Egyptian

population. Not only that, but often a connection was made between seeking to expand the margins of democratic practices on the one hand and weakening Egypt's domestic front and its efforts to counter terrorism on the other. Egypt's 2011 popular uprising was also depicted as one that paved the way for terrorism to grow and reach new levels. In the inauguration of the Story of a Nation conference, Sisi said: "You need to know that any move is bound to wreak havoc in the country, which undermines the Egyptian state. This is what happened in 2011 and with all due respect to the revolution it did give rise to extremely difficult challenges and we'll be paying a dear price for years to come" (Al Bawabh News, 2018). This kind of rhetoric was meant to pre-emptively co-opt people's demands for change, even in its mildest forms. It capitalised on the collective fears of lacking basic social security and safety amongst the Egyptian population. In a meeting with editors-in-chief of official and independent newspapers, the Egyptian president addressed that by saying: "One journalist says freedom of expression is a priority, but what happens to tourism if Egyptians keep protesting every day? Millions of people would starve if tourism is affected and this will happen in case of instability, which is caused by protests. So, for Egypt's best interest we need to make sure this does not happen. You cannot have idealistic demands at such difficult times. We have to strike a balance between freedom and national security. Our priority is protecting the homeland because if we don't we might have none" (Sada Al Balad TV, 2014).

Democracy was also presented as a factor that jeopardises tourism, a main asset in Egypt's troubled economy. In a press conference he held with French President Emmanuel Macron in October 2017, Sisi responded to a question about human rights in Egypt. "What about the rights of the dead and the injured and their families?" he said in reference to police or army officers targeted in terrorist operations. "What about the rights of three million Egyptians who work in the tourism industry and are harmed by terrorism? This is a country of 100 million people who need to make a living and live in peace. How is this possible? Human rights are not only political. Why don't you ask me about the right to good education? We don't have good education. What about the right to good healthcare? We don't have good healthcare. What about the right to a good job? We don't have good jobs. Why don't you ask me about the awareness we need to raise among Egyptians in order to make the country stable?" Sisi then added: "We are not like Europe with its civilisation and its intellectual and cultural progress. We are in a totally different place" (Ten TV, 2017).

In sum, the discourse of the Egyptian president is articulated around two main pillars. The first is that Egypt is not prepared at the moment for democratic transition and that priority should be given to economic progress, development and fighting

terrorism. The second is that Egypt went through existential challenges in the aftermath of the January 2011 revolution that threatened to undermine the state and wreak havoc, which is why protecting this state should be the main objective. Such an official discourse naturally gave rise to an expansive anti-democratic rhetoric that was particularly relayed by other stakeholders, including the media and members of the parliament.

Media: Blaming the People

"Democracy is of no value if economic progress is not made on the ground and if development is not achieved," said a prominent pro-regime journalist in January 2014. "Democracy is not an aim in itself. If you don't go to work, if education and healthcare deteriorate, and if unemployment rates keep rising, then to hell with democracy!" (Al Hayah TV, 2014). Another journalist confirmed a statement said earlier by Mubarak-era Vice-President Omar Suleiman about the people not being ready for democracy (Al Assema TV, 2016a).

Egyptians were blamed for the deterioration in economic and security conditions that authorities were allegedly striving to fix. At times, democracy was framed as a tool that undermines the interests of the population and its representatives in Egyptian institutions. Moreover, calls for democratic change were vilified and presented as opposed to public interest. In September 2016, for example, a journalist replied to anti-regime tweets: "To hell with freedom and democracy! What do freedom and democracy mean for you? Disrespecting the country, the president, the people, the military, or the police?" (Al Assema TV, 2016b).

The same journalist said in the talk show he hosts: "The state was undermined when it was subjected to a media invasion, an invasion that involved different sources of funding… You can't play the same game now and bring back those days when 90% of TV anchors chose a bunch of traitors for correspondents in order to fabricate stories and only air what serves their agendas. The country was undermined when media outlets were given absolute freedom" (Al Assema TV, 2018).

In another episode of his show, he stated that "the Sisi you are opposing now is that same one you begged to become your president. I just want you to imagine ISIS around the corner and you having to turn your own daughter in to his highness Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Then think if you prefer living with no honour or dignity to putting

up with prices of meat or electricity. You are, indeed, a shameless people!" (1st News Today, 2018).

At times, Egyptians were addressed using a demeaning tone. They were told by pro-regime hardliners that they lack the essential understanding of what democracy means. This further served the idea that they needed proper "guidance" from more knowledgeable "father figures" who better understood what the needs and interests of the nation were. Several journalists argued that Egyptians know nothing about democracy. One of them affirmed: "You've been trying to teach people about democracy for three years and most of them don't want to learn." This journalist added that even Gandhi lost hope a while before his death as he realised that people are not willing to coexist peacefully, and compared democracy in Egypt to driving a car without learning how to drive (Moataz Abd Al-Fattah, 2014). A pro-regime political science professor talked about the difference between military and civilian rule: "So, people want a civilian state and complain of having been ruled by the military for long? Well, the military is the most efficient entity in Egypt at the moment. What would have happened had Mohamed al-Baradei or Abdel Moneim Abul Fotouh come to power? They would've been left with one of two options: either rule in the same way Egypt is ruled now or let the country slip into chaos." The first option, he added, was one of the many ways that protected Egypt from turning into another Syria or Iraq (Elfagr, 2016).

In one of the talk shows, the same professor said Egyptians are ready for democracy as individuals but political factions are not (ON Live, 2018a). He added that there is a general tendency among political factions not to take part in the current political scene, but political debates on social networking websites demonstrate that this is not the case for the general public. He also stated that democratic transition was obstructed because political factions could not reach a framework through which they can all coexist, and noted that no democracy is possible without people to practise it. According to him, the president cannot work alone and if factions and parties posing as democratic do not cooperate, democratic transition will always be stunted. He, therefore, held political factions accountable for lack of democracy (ON Live, 2018b).

The role of the media was often stressed in the battle against calls for expanding democratic parameters. Media institutions, state-owned or private, were called upon to spearhead the battle against those who were allegedly aimed at inciting public discord through their emphasis on the need for democratic reform. Media involvement was central in the aim to impact public discourse and to sideline anti-regime rhetoric, whether radical or moderate, and this was demonstrated on multiple occasions.

"There's no time for this. We don't need freedom of expression. We need to know who's with Egypt and who's against it," said one of the best known pro-regime journalists in June 2015 in reference to calls for setting regulations that protect press freedom and lift restrictions on media outlets. "To hell with freedom of expression. This is a critical time when all media outlets should support the state. It's either you work at media outlets that defend the state or you are a traitor who has no place among us. Those who work for treacherous media outlets need to be prosecuted" (El Balad News, 2015). In another episode of his show, the same anchor accused Egyptians who staged protests on 25 April 2016 of undermining the state and harming the tourism industry. "Isn't it enough you already tried to destroy the country?" he said, accusing protestors of belonging to terrorist groups (El Balad News, 2016).

In February 2018, he asked Egyptians to report anyone who calls for boycotting presidential elections on social media or even at the workplace since, according to him, this does not fall under freedom of expression (El Balad News, 2018b). In an earlier episode, he responded to objections to the electoral process by equating the opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood. He claimed both aim to wreak havoc in Egypt and accused members of both of receiving foreign funding to destabilise national security (El Balad News, 2018a).

In short, the rhetoric that pervaded media outlets, both state-owned and private, focused on the drawbacks of democracy because it obstructs economic development and had led to disastrous results when it brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power.

Representatives of the People versus the People

The parliament constituted an important arena for countering anti-regime narratives (or narratives critical of the regime) as well. A Member of Parliament (MP) said in December 2017 that the Egyptian people are "undemocratic" and are not used to democratic procedures because they have not practised democracy since 1952. She added that objections voiced by opposition figures inside or outside the parliament constitute a form of dictatorship in disguise since those members of the opposition do not accept points of view that are not in line with theirs (BBC News, 2017).

The current parliament also decided to stop broadcasting its sessions and referred to this decision as extremely crucial for times when pressing issues are tackled or

when arguments in any of the sessions get out of hand (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2016a). In the session held on 21 August 2016, the parliament speaker said: "Media outlets and social networking websites should not be allowed to control the House of Representatives." He added that MPs check social media first and then decide accordingly to file one complaint or another, hence defeating the purpose of the parliament and undermining its role. "This is the fourth generation war, where rumours are used to undermine institutions. There is, in fact, a book in the parliament's library about this" (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2016c).

The House of Representatives did on many occasions slam the press and MPs accused media outlets of attempting to "tarnish the parliament's image and undermining the state" as well as "spreading lies." They also called for filing complaints against several journalists and media outlets. According to the head of the Human Rights Committee at the House of Representatives, "there are continuous attempts by journalists to undermine the state through the legislature and some journalists are funded by businessmen and speak on behalf of the people." Action needs to be taken, he said, and MPs have to file complaints to that end: "Freedom is about responsibility and everyone who studied law knows that freedom is not absolute" (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2016d).

The House of Representatives held a session on the 14 May 2019 to discuss issuing a law to fight "information technology crimes".[1] MPs demanded that users of social networking websites must be 18 years or older and that they have to be identified through their national IDs. They also claimed that the law should deal with websites that criticise the state, and justified invasion of privacy in order to protect national security. "We have to have our own Egyptian Facebook like China," said one MP, while another argued that "deterring users of social media is necessary, especially those of them who use those networks to undermine the state and serve terrorist agendas" (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2018b). The Deputy Director of the Municipal Administration Committee at the parliament said that the law to counter information technology crimes is a message to "traitors" and a confirmation of "the state's determination to eliminate terrorists" (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2018b).

Civilian Leaders Rejecting Democracy

In addition to the parliament's role in undermining public debate regarding calls for democratic change, civilian leaders were also referred to as regime supplements to relay similar messages. In April 2016, the director of the Egyptian Psychiatric

1 The law was not approved by the time this paper was written.

Association argued that "the Egyptian people are not acquainted with democracy" and added that "giving freedom to the ignorant is like giving weapons to the insane." He stated that Egyptians should be provided with good education before discussing democracy. According to him, the military is an extremely strict institution based on respect for seniors and that is why remarkable progress can be seen on the ground (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2016b).

In an interview, the dean of the School of Islamic Studies at the Sohag branch of al-Azhar University responded to a question about extending the president's term to six years: "Yes, I totally support this. In fact, I demand that the president's term be for life. We don't want any hassle and we don't want to waste time and money, so since we chose a president that we trust, there's no point in replacing him after a few years" (Youm7, 2017).

Meanwhile, the director of the National Press Authority, which is in charge of regulating state-owned media outlets, supported a statement issued by the prosecutor general about monitoring media outlets and social networking websites in the light of the conspiracies to which the state is exposed at the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood, the media and human rights organisations. "The prosecutor general's statement constitutes a major step towards dedicating the law to the protection of the state from malicious rumours and media campaigns. No country in the world allows itself to be infiltrated in any way." He argued that the statement will put an end to all lies fabricated about Egypt, especially by human rights organisations such as Human Right Watch, which according to him depend on information provided by the Muslim Brotherhood. He noted that many entities do not want the Egyptian democratic model to work and that Western powers had tried to stimulate "creative chaos" into Egypt with catastrophic consequences (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2018a).

Conclusion

The rise of anti-democratic discourses in the Southern Neighbourhood, which has taken place in a specific security (war on terrorism) and political (post-Arab Spring) context, should be a matter of concern on both sides of the Mediterranean. It is important to recognise that it is precisely under authoritarian regimes that terrorism strives, Gaddafi's 42-year old rule being the most obvious example. This type of regimes needs to be confronted with the rule of law and with policies that seek to eliminate the different forms of oppression that may eventually lead to the escalation of violence. Failure to prevent the Syrian regime's atrocities, for example, led to the emergence of more violent alternatives, such as ISIS and other extremist groups, which in turn resulted in the prevalence of chaos across the region and the growing influx of refugees.

Anti-democratic and securitisation discourses in the Southern Neighbourhood have arguably blossomed in the shadow of a certain complacency on the northern side of the Mediterranean and in the West in general, where similar discourses have also gained traction. It is precisely the combination of rising far-right parties in Europe and entrenched authoritarianism in the Southern Mediterranean that is worrying. On both sides, the prioritisation of security has led to a remarkable decline on the attention given to other issues that have been an integral part of Euro-Mediterranean relations; namely, democracy and human rights.

A solid rule of law and democratic foundations in Europe is there to regulate the situation and alleviate the harm associated with the rise of far-right parties and ideology. Europe will remain useful as long as it continues to advocate for the independence of the judiciary, the impartiality of the military and freedom of expression. Advocating for the rule of law in the Southern Mediterranean and supporting the only successful model of democratic transition in the region – Tunisia – is necessary to oppose the trend of the concentration of power in the hands of a limited group of rulers, which ultimately ends in the fall of these regimes, as recent history shows.

Political regimes in the Southern Mediterranean have generally been undemocratic, yet in varying degrees. Some operate under liberal autocracies with relative institutional efficiency, such as Morocco and Egypt during the Mubarak era. These regimes have not led to chaos in the region; while others that are fully dominated by totalitarian regimes, such as Gaddafi's Libya and al-Assad's Syria, have dragged their countries and the region into an endless cycle of terrorism and bloodshed, forcing thousands of people to flee their countries and cross the Mediterranean, which in turn has contributed to the rise of the far right in Europe.

The enhancement of the rule of law in the Southern Mediterranean should not be linked to financial aid, investment, or support for one political faction or another. Europe should support such transformation and assist its neighbours in regulating the public sphere while Southern Mediterranean countries need to abide by the existing legal framework and rules; and make sure they are applied transparently. The rule of law constitutes the pillar for any potential reform and regulation of the public sphere. It is only then that injustice, lack of transparency, and mismanagement can be seriously addressed.

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EuroMeSCo

Founded in 1996 and comprising 104 institutes from 29 European and South Mediterranean countries, EuroMeSCo (the Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission) is the main network of research centres on politics and security in the Mediterranean, striving at building a community of research institutes and think tanks committed to strengthening Euro-Mediterranean relations.

The objectives of the network are to foster influential quality analysis and reflection on Euro-Mediterranean politics and policies; to serve as a platform for dialogue between the members of the network and key stakeholders to discuss the key trends and challenges on the region´s agenda; to increase the impact of think tanks and research institutes and to actively contribute to policy-making through dissemination of research outputs of the network to experts and national, European and international institutions linked to Euro-Mediterranean relations.

The EuroMeSCo work plan includes a research programme with five publication lines (Joint Policy Studies, Papers, Briefs, Spot-Ons and reports), as well as numerous activities, including annual conferences, seminars, workshops, presentations, formal and informal meetings with policy makers on the key political and security dynamics. It also includes communication and dissemination related activities (website, newsletter and targeted institutional dissemination) to raise awareness and promote the work of the network and to stimulate debate on Euro-Mediterranean affairs.

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