



## **Arab views on democratic citizenship – and on EU support**

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## INTRODUCTION

Much has been said about the EU's general response to the Arab spring. And much has been written about regimes' resistance to the far-reaching reform demanded by protestors across the Arab world. We have been engaged in a project ([www.euspring.com](http://www.euspring.com)) exploring one very specific dimension of these political trends and social debates: the question of how citizens in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) understand the concept of democratic citizen-ship.

Within our project, our local affiliated research organizations ran throughout 2014 a series of focus groups in Morocco, Egypt and Tunisia with a range of civic stakeholders. The aim of these meetings was to explore how citizens in the three countries understand democratic citizenship and how they view EU efforts to support political reform.

Under the rubric of its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) review, the EU has promised to adjust its policies better to listen to citizens in the neighbourhood. There is broad agreement that the EU needs to make greater effort to fit its support around the priorities identified by local civil society organizations. This in turn raises a broader question of what Arab reformers themselves understand by democratic citizenship. Our project sheds light on the nature of these 'local' views – on the issue of democratic citizenship and on the kind of support that Arab reformers seek from the EU and member states.

## REMAINS OF SPRING

While the Arab spring has not resulted in a democratic wave across the MENA region, it has opened up public discussion and generated new debates about citizenship. Despite the failure or atrophy of many reform projects (our purpose here is not a general explanation for this), the burst of civic energy in 2011 and 2012 appears to have left a legacy: the possibility for citizens to engage more openly in public debates about their conceptions of democracy and citizenship and what kind of rights they aspire to.

Political developments in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt have been very different. Yet all three countries have experienced extremely lively and complex debates about democracy, citizenship and how to enshrine a new set of rights in their constitutions. The paradox is that events since 2011 have proven Arab states to be weak, but also that citizens believe their rights vis a vis the state to be insufficiently robust.

Tunisia's political life and society have been divided by deep differences between secularism and Islam. Yet Tunisia's different parties and social actors were able to reach compromises to underpin agreement over a new constitution. They ensured that the constitutional process was inclusive and participatory, as different understandings of citizenship and rights were argued out in pluralistic fashion.

The new 2014 constitution represents a huge step forward for Tunisian society. Political rights are fully embraced and codified; socio-economic rights are recognised; and women's rights are probably the most advanced in the Arab world. There are ambiguities in the text especially regarding the relationship between individual freedoms and religion, on the one hand, and the role of the state in safeguarding Islam, on the other hand. These ambiguities reflect the difficulties of reaching compromises between secular and religious forces.

On socio-economic rights in particular, Tunisia's constitution does not clearly define the role of the state in guaranteeing socio-economic rights through welfare provisions, labour laws, private and public property. The constitution leaves the boundaries between constitutional rights and policy choices somewhat blurred. Minority rights are not fully protected. While individual freedoms are enshrined, including the right to belief, religious and ethnic minorities are not recognised as a group.

Egypt's journey through revolution, Muslim Brotherhood rule and back to a military regime is well known. In this back and forth process, debates over rights and citizenship have been prominent. The Muslim Brotherhood government produced a draft constitution that in some respects was a step backward in terms of political rights and freedoms. After the army ejected president Mohamed Morsi from power, an appointed assembly led a new constitutional process. There was little or no consultation with other political forces and no involvement of external advisors. The resulting constitution gives stronger protection to some personal rights than the Muslim Brotherhood's document; but politically it has legitimized a much less democratic form of politics.

Morocco has not advanced towards democracy but its new constitution of March 2011 does offer enhanced protection for some personal rights. Moroccan civil society now focuses on 'effective citizenship' – the implementation in practice of the rights enshrined in the constitution. Civil society in Morocco has pressed for stronger personal rights. However, of the three countries considered here, Moroccan civil society is probably the least confrontational towards the state. Many Moroccans seem to understand citizenship to be about state and society working together (even where the state is not fully democratic) rather than primarily or only being about holding the state in check.

## ARAB VIEWS OF SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

In Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt the EU and several member states have undertaken numerous initiatives to mediate in constitutional reform discussions; sponsor forums examining Islamic concepts of rights; and generate inclusive civil society channels of influence. The EU has occasionally exerted pressure against restrictive rights provisions, as it did in the early stages of Tunisia's constitutional process. The EU Delegation in Tunis also offered technical advice on the constitutional process. In Egypt, the EU appeared to extol the virtues of some rights-protecting articles in the army's constitution, despite the overall drift away from democracy. Yet most of the Union's projects related in some way to liberal democratic rights have ground to a halt in Egypt, including those on women's rights and freedom of expression and association. Of course, it is well known that the EU has struggled to pushback against Egypt's return to autocracy and has long been reluctant critically to push the Moroccan palace into a more far-reaching political opening.

We have previously assessed the EU's general response to the Arab spring. What interests us in this current article is how local actors in the three countries relate their own debates specifically over democratic citizenship to EU policies.

Civil society and political party representatives generally acknowledge that the EU has tried to foment open debate about democratic citizenship. However, in our focus groups they also brought out criticisms of EU policies and argued strongly that the Union urgently needs to develop its efforts in a number of crucial directions:

Citizens in the three countries tend to associate citizenship and rights with new forms of politics that revolve around individuals rather than pre-existing institutional channels. So, for example, they

seek outside support to organize campaigns under which citizens are able to present legislative proposals directly to be included in the parliamentary agenda. Civic leaders see such campaigns as being especially important to circumvent dysfunctional and self-serving political parties. Parties have disengaged from social movements; and youth has disengaged from political party activity. In Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt social actors believe that European donors have not yet registered the scale of this change.

There is a shared concern that political participation needs re-energizing. Participation increased after 2011 but citizens' groups have since become disillusioned – especially in Egypt, and in Morocco more than Tunisia. Western debates tend to imply the region's politics is all about the divide between Islamists and secularists. But our groups insisted the breach is more between citizens and entrenched elites, and is thus not entirely dissimilar to the driving force in European politics today.

The 2011 uprisings were about participatory politics, but many feel that this focus was hijacked by debates over very formalistic notions of rights. The MB sought to align itself with the deep state and as part of a counter-revolutionary project; this dried up the focus on civic rights and participation. Analysts talked of the rise of illiberal democracy: political competition with weak rights protection. However, Egypt today has negligible democracy, but a constitution with more liberal rights provisions than the previous constitution. Citizens still want basic political rights to be protected. Yet the prevailing attitude now is apathy and distrust in any political alternative. A so-called 'silent majority' waits patiently in Egypt; its expectations in terms of active citizenship have evolved but the practical ability to put these into practice is now more limited even than under Hosni Mubarak.

In Egypt and Morocco our groups expressed some unease over the EU's provision of advice and advisors in constitutional processes that legitimise incumbent regimes. This outside advice tends to focus on very legalistic rights provisions that do not resonate with every day political norms. The drafters of new constitutions can often be rather undemocratic insiders - and outside consultants fail to capture the real political dynamics beyond whatever formal provisions are included in a new constitution. Formal rights under the current constitutions in Egypt and Morocco may have taken some steps forward, but in practice authoritarianism is now more firmly embedded in both countries.

The EU needs to work more on media freedom and its role in fostering democratic citizenship. Especially in Morocco and Egypt the rights of journalists have contracted dramatically; the situation under the current government in Tunisia also gives rise to some concerns. This has implications for the way in which external actors carry out media training. As media freedoms have tightened, external actors cannot simply offer generic training courses and then claim they are effectively promoting the right to freedom of information.

Re-engaging with Islamists in Egypt and making sure Islamists are not incrementally pushed aside in Morocco and Tunisia. In Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood is undergoing considerable internal change, with a turnover in personnel and a restructuring of decision-making processes. Islamists have not moved back to violence but rather a kind of passive resistance – there is more talk of

withdrawal, non-participation, and various forms of boycott against the current political system. Salafist groups are losing supporters due to their accommodation with the regime. This is a pivotal moment for exerting influence over the future direction of Islamist parties in the three countries.

External actors like the EU can help through a focus on tolerance initiatives. Participants in our focus groups felt that tolerance initiatives were needed to accompany any advance in democratic rights; without tolerance those rights are likely to widen societal divisions. Democratic rights and citizenship needs to be framed more in terms of mutual tolerance. There is growing use of hate speech from all parts of the political spectrum – counteracting this should be more of a priority within EU support. One of the main challenges is how to limit hate speech without restricting freedom of speech; this is where the region desperately needs help and ideas. A key finding of our project is that advances in formal citizenship rights cannot be divorced from the deeper cultural norms that affect the way these rights are exercised.

State-society linkages are vital. Many members of prominent social movements in the three countries admit that their error was not to seek pro-reform allies within state institutions on the grounds that all such bodies were intrinsically part of regimes. They acknowledge that they often adopted overly confrontational tactics and scared many with relatively liberal views back into the arms of regime defenders. Unwittingly, the same mobilizations that pushed for democracy worked against liberal notions of rights.

Discrimination in rights is a product of a broader absence of pluralism as a social norm. People press for the principles of freedom (of expression, association etc) when their own interests are threatened but not as general principles desirable also to protect opposing viewpoints. Minority rights – for example, for Jewish and Amazigh communities – are not well understood. Women’s rights have improved but still need to go beyond legal changes to practical improvements on the ground, especially in rural areas. To reiterate: cultural change is needed in parallel to formal constitutional change.

The relationship between state and religion - and the degree of state interference in matters of faith - remains ambiguous in the three countries. The debates that occurred during the respective constitutional processes showed that this relationship will be of defining importance for the deepening of democratic rights. However, the three countries’ varied reform processes have all failed so far to produce clear definitions of the boundaries between state responsibility and individual rights. External actors may have provided support for initiatives on a select number of particular rights, but have not got to grips with this core uncertainty.

European donors do not do enough to get projects promoting liberal rights out into the countryside. In Tunisia and Egypt Islamist support is highest in the countryside, where there are often no other candidates reaching out to citizens. It is in these areas that there continues to be most ambivalence over the concept of liberal, personal rights provisions and least support for notions of active democratic citizenship. In Morocco the countryside vote prizes notables tied to the king’s party. In all cases EU aid continues to be concentrated on national capitals and urban cities, with insufficient presence in rural areas. Despite all the potential of the Arab spring and despite the recognition on

part of EU officials of their insufficient outreach in the countryside, local actors feel that donors have not responded by augmenting the geographical spread of their projects.

## CONCLUSIONS: THE EU'S ROLE

In Tunisia the EU has been a factor in supporting the country's transformation so far. Over-all, it has maintained a commitment towards the country's transition reflected in continuing its policies and upholding consistent political positions. In the field, the EU Delegation has provided technical assistance and expertise on constitutional reform, linked up with civil society representatives, and selected Tunisia as one of the pilot countries for its democracy support projects. In Egypt EU policy as a whole has gone full circle, reverting eventually to pre-Arab Spring positions. Despite a number of high-level initiatives, in Egypt the EU did not manage to gain traction with any post-Mubarak government, nor was it able to sustain the initial support it gave to civil society groups and movements after the revolution. In Morocco, the EU has sought to be a partner in the regime-led process of modest change, with less of a bottom-up focus on citizen initiatives than in Tunisia or Egypt.

EU institutions clearly have much knowhow and wherewithal to help processes of democratic change – but our project reveals how much more needs to be done to tailor these to local specificities. Domestic and international circumstances were more favourable to nuancing EU engagement in Tunisia, but the experience there shows that there are options for more targeted initiatives on the ground, relevant to local discussions and needs. The EU needs to focus far more on building policies in the field and connecting with local dynamics to support democracy change.

This requires greater involvement of EU Delegations not just in implementing projects, but also in shaping the ways and means in which the EU makes itself relevant in local debates. The EU also needs to become more flexible in its understanding of democratic citizenship and better engage with local perceptions on this bedrock of political change. Finally, fine-tuning and dovetailing local engagement with diplomacy and broader policy choices re-mains a challenge: the EU as a whole needs to invest more seriously in learning through its experiences locally and in shaping its broader foreign policy goals more coherently.