The impact of external actors on the distribution of power in the Middle East: the case of Egypt

VINCENT DURAC

School of Politics and International Relations, University College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

Abstract: Both formally and rhetorically, the policy position of the United States and the European Union is to support movement towards democratic political change in the Middle East. This article examines the democracy-promotion policies of both actors in relation to Egypt, with particular reference to the political changes that have taken place in that country since 2005. It concludes that, far from promoting democratic change in Egypt, Western policies have the apparently paradoxical, and unintended, effect of supporting the entrenchment of an authoritarian political order, and offers an analysis of how and why this is so.

Introduction

In recent years there has been debate but no consensus as to the impact of external promotion of democracy and political reform on the internal politics of target states. The literature is divided into at least two camps: those who actively support the notion and assume the efficacy of democracy promotion from without, and those who are skeptical of its effectiveness or the possibility of measuring any asserted impact.

Writers such as McFaul refer to an emerging ‘norm’ of democracy promotion support for which is now global. Not only does democracy have ‘near-universal appeal’ but democracy promotion as a foreign policy goal ‘has become increasingly acceptable throughout most of the international community’ (2004-5, p.148). McFaul acknowledges that Western democracies have a mixed record of exporting various forms of democracy. However, the legitimacy of external actors promoting democracy has ‘grown in the last two decades as the idea that people have a right to democracy has gained support’. He is unequivocal on the effectiveness of democracy promotion. External actors provide material support and technical assistance to a range of institutions and actors and, by supporting NGOS committed to democratic norms, foreign donors help ‘change the
balance of power within domestic politics in favour of democrats (McFaul, 2004-5, p.156). Gershman and Allen repeat McFaul’s argument concerning democracy promotion as an international norm and are clear to the point of evangelistic regarding the capacity of external support for democracy to promote change. According to the authors, the existence of democratic oppositions, in receipt of financial and technical assistance from democratic countries made possible the accession to power of those oppositions in Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine between 1998 and 2004 (2006, p.37)\(^i\).

Other commentators, however, do not share this largely unquestioning faith in the capacity of external democracy promotion to effect political change. A number of writers have commented on methodological and other difficulties in evaluating ‘democracy assistance. Crawford suggests that some of these include the inappropriateness of conventional methodologies for evaluating the impact of development assistance in the context of complex political dynamics, as well as the dangers of donor-led enquiry into the efficacy of donor programmes (Crawford, 2003, p.95) Similar methodological issues to do with evaluating the impact of democracy promotion are raised by Green and Kohl. They point to a number of obstacles to conducting quality research on the effectiveness of aid and, especially, ‘democracy and governance’ assistance. These range from problems of demonstrating causality, the availability or quality of data, the definition of ‘case’, and the possibility of bias in country selection. They conclude on the absence of a credible body of research analyzing the impact of democracy assistance and suggest that this is due in part to:

\[
\text{a fundamental difference in orientation between the retrospective approach of academics (interest in what was) and the prospective approach of donor agencies (concerned with what could be) (2007, p.163)\(^ii\).}
\]

Ethier also examines the question of the effectiveness of democracy promotion. She surveys the effectiveness of conditionality versus incentives in democracy promotion and arrives at clear but strictly delimited conclusions. She argues that democracy promotion influences the course of democratization when based on conditionality, but, even then, only in the context of EU conditionality, where the stake or reward is
accession to the union. Perhaps, more significantly, her overall conclusion is that ‘democratization is a domestic affair par excellence’ (2003: 116-117).

Scepticism regarding the effectiveness of foreign aid for democracy is reinforced by the findings of a study of the impact of aid on democratization in ‘a large sample of recipient nations over the 1975-2000’ which came to the stark conclusion that ‘no evidence is found that aid promotes democracy’ (Knack, 2004, p.251). However, while there may be no scholarly consensus regarding the contribution that external promotion of democracy can make to political reform, nonetheless, in relation to Egypt, as elsewhere in the Middle East, major international actors in the form of the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) express themselves to be committed to these ends. This paper examines the impact of current Western policies, specifically those of the European Union and the United States, seeking to promote political change in Egypt, on the overall distribution of political power in that country. It is argued that these policies are fatally undermined by the incoherence and inconsistency that is their primary characteristic. Furthermore, such is the scale of inconsistency between the asserted aim of supporting political change and that of maintaining a stable and friendly Egypt, that current policies have the paradoxical effect of strengthening, rather than challenging the position of a regime that is deeply undemocratic, and which has limited regard for the human rights of its citizens.

**The Egyptian Context**

Until recently, the political system in Egypt was characterized as authoritarian or semi-authoritarian. The country, in the mode of much of the post-colonial Arab world, was dominated by a single ruling party which in turn was dominated by the person of the President of the Republic. In the case of contemporary Egypt, this is Husni Mubarak, who succeeded to the office in 1981 when Anwar al-Sadat was assassinated by radical Islamists. Mubarak’s first decade in office saw some tentative reform of the political sphere in Egypt. However, the 1990s witnessed what Eberhard Kienle described as the ‘deliberalization of Egypt’, a decade which saw a reversal of the earlier political liberalization which had opened up the political system in the first decade of Mubarak’s
rule (Kienle, 1998, pp.219-235). Parliamentary elections, held under conditions of widespread fraud and electoral abuse, reversed the pattern of increased representation for opposition forces, as the dominant position of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) was entrenched. The activities of opposition parties were circumscribed, and new restrictions were placed on the country’s professional syndicates. Curbs on press freedoms and the activities of NGOs were introduced, and greater reliance was placed on the use of military courts to try civilians. The state of emergency, which was introduced in 1981 after the death of Sadat, was continued in force. The change of direction was prompted by a number of factors. Firstly, there was a marked increase in radical Islamist violence over this period. Secondly, the government grew alarmed at the success of the mainstream Islamic movement in spreading its activities and securing popular support for its platform. Thirdly, deliberalization operated as a function of continuing economic reform as the government attempted to juggle the demands of its economic policy with the need to maintain control of those sectors of society whose interests were threatened by reform.

During this period, the dominant role of the NDP was reasserted, accompanied by a clampdown on Islamist and other opposition political activity and a host of restrictions on the exercise of other basic freedoms. For example, while the activities of the press have always been strictly delimited in Egypt, the 1990s saw the most far-reaching attempts to restrict press freedom. Press Law 93 of 1995, which was introduced without prior consultation or debate, contained draconian legislation which imposed heavy sentences on crimes such as the printing of ‘mendacious information’, ‘false rumours’ or ‘defamations’. Whereas previously these offences were punishable by modest fines, they now carried prison sentences of up to 5 years, and the payment of extremely high fines. Within a year of its enactment 99 journalists, many of them from the ‘official press’ had been interrogated, charged, and in some cases sentenced by the courts. In the face of this, the Press Syndicate mounted a campaign against the legislation which was supported by a number of international organizations. After a year of protests the measures were abrogated, ‘the only measure of political deliberalization that has been abolished’ (Kienle, 1998, p.223). But, despite the abrogation of the 1995 law, the regime maintains a battery of legislation that restricts press freedom. The 1970s and early 1980s saw the
introduction of ‘Special Laws’ which introduced new restrictions on journalists and writers. Journalistic crimes include anything that causes ‘hate of the ruling authorities’, ‘gives offence to the power structure, the army, or Parliament’, or that can be construed as ‘disturbing propaganda’ (Index on Censorship, 1994, pp.143-4). In the late 1990s an increase in governmental attacks on the media has led to the jailing of journalists on an unprecedented scale, as well as the temporary and permanent banning of newspapers.

In 1993, the government responded to the electoral successes of the Islamic trend in the syndicates with a new law to regulate professional associations, largely designed to restrict the Islamist influence. Under the new rules, syndicate election results are void unless 50 percent of all members vote in the first round, or 33 percent in a subsequent round. Such a requirement has never been a feature of, and has never been achieved in, elections for the People’s Assembly or for the presidency (Abdalla, 1993, p.29).

However, regime controls on freedom of organization were not limited to the syndicates. The much-criticized Law 32 of 1964 which governed all aspects of organized civil activity in Egypt was replaced by a new law, introduced in 1999, which made registration with the Ministry of Social Affairs compulsory for all NGOs and specified areas in which they could not operate. These included political party and trade union activity, and activities that threaten national unity or disrupt public order. In June 2002, Law 84 was passed by parliament. It gave the ministry of social affairs the right to refuse to license an organization or to ‘influence the composition of the board’ or ‘dissolve the organization outright’ should it deem it to be a threat to the state’ (Stacher, 2004, p.217).

This period also marked an increase in resort to Egypt’s military courts to try civilian cases. Under Article 6.2 of the Law on the Military Judiciary of 1966, the President has the right to refer to military courts any crime which is punishable under the penal code or any other law. The judges in these courts are serving army officers appointed by the Minister for Defence and defendants appearing before them are deprived of basic rights under the Egyptian constitution. Originally, these courts were introduced to deal with alleged Islamist violence, however, their remit now includes civilians who politically oppose the government.

Throughout all of this, political life in Egypt was characterized by the consistent ineffectiveness of those political parties tolerated by the regime and the ongoing
repression of Islamist opposition of all shades. Kassem describes the ‘multiparty arena’ in Egypt as ‘a fragile and weak entity’ (2004, p.81). Opposition parties are:

autocratically run, easily fragmented, and incorporated into the co-option and patronage networks of Mubarak’s Egypt (Stacher, 2004, p.232).

While the legal political opposition suffers from a variety of ills which limit its effectiveness and popular reach, the Muslim Brotherhood provides meaningful and popular opposition to the regime but remains proscribed and subject to perpetual harassment.

The common thread which links the themes of NDP dominance of the electoral process, the fragility of the multi-party system and the consistent attempts by the regime to delimit and control the exercise of those rights, is the central position of the executive, and, especially, the Presidency, in the Egyptian political arena. Mubarak inherited a strong Presidential system of government, which he has shown little inclination to alter in any significant way. The executive, and, effectively, the Presidency dominate not only the other branches of government, but most other aspects of political life in Egypt.

Egypt is a Presidential state. Owing to political culture and local traditions, the president is the dominant political and government authority in Egypt (Ayubi, 1990, p.3)

The president can propose, veto and promulgate legislation. He can issue decrees when parliament is not in session that have the force of law. Writing in 1991, Ayubi notes that in addition to his favourite title of ‘Elder of the Egyptian Family’, Mubarak held the following posts: President of the Republic, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, Higher Chief of the Police Forces, Higher Chief of the Judiciary, Head of the N.D.P., and Commissioner on all military and economic matters and accords touching on national security. All executive authority is vested in the President who appoints the cabinet and is the chief policy-maker in matters of security, diplomacy and the economy (1991, p.227). The dominance of the office of the President in the Egyptian political system led Kassem
to write of the institutionalization of ‘personal authoritarian rule’ in Egypt. The establishment and survival of personal authoritarian rule is, she argues, dependent on:

the absence of autonomous political institutions and groupings that can challenge a ruler’s personal monopoly on power (2004, pp.167-8).

Brownlee caustically observed that the only freedom that has expanded in Egypt over the past two decades has been:

the freedom of the presidency from the informal constraints that earlier limited its authority (2002, p.6).

Later, he added:

Mubarak has subdued Egypt’s Islamists, leftists, and human rights community to the point where little domestic impetus for reform remains (2002, p.11).

Small wonder then that the Economist Democracy Index identifies Egypt as an authoritarian state ranked 117 out of 167 – other categories included full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes (Kekic 2007) - or that Levitsky and Way should characterize the state as a case of a façade electoral regime – one in which electoral institutions exist but yield no meaningful contestation for power (2002, p.54).

**A Cairo Spring?**

Despite all of this, it has been the perception of some observers that Egypt has, of late, undergone something of a political transformation in the course of which serious political reform has been, or is being contemplated, not least in response to the urgings of external actors.
Between May and July 2005, the Egyptian Parliament passed a number of important pieces of legislation relating to political participation. These included a constitutional amendment calling for direct popular election of the president and establishing an electoral commission, as well as new laws establishing an electoral commission for parliamentary elections, and reform of procedures for forming political parties. The law reforming the procedure for election to the presidency was seen by many observers as the most significant change. For the first time, opposition political parties could, under certain circumstances, put a candidate on the ballot paper (Dunne, 2006; El-Amrani, 2005). A number of reform initiatives preceded these changes. In 2003, the state security courts, which had been used to prosecute national security cases, including political and religious offenses, as well as some related to terrorism, were abolished. In the same year, the National Council for Human Rights was established to foster human rights awareness and to examine pertinent legislation to ensure Egypt’s compliance with international standards (Stacher, 2005).

All of this occurred in the context of, and in response to, what appeared to be a remarkable resurgence in political opposition in Egypt. From early 2005 onwards, there was a proliferation of movements calling for political reform, many of which emerged in opposition to the possibility of Mubarak extending his grip on the presidency for a fifth successive term, and fear of a subsequent handover of power to his son Gamal. However, while reform movements seemed to emerge quite suddenly, many had their roots in demonstrations organized in response to regional issues, such as Israel/Palestine, and Iraq, which then became critical of the Egyptian regime and its policies.

Amongst these movements, the most prominent was Kifaya (‘Enough’). Others included the National Rally for Democratic Transformation, Journalists for Change, Doctors for Change, Intellectuals for Change, Writers for Change, Youth for Change, the Association of Egyptian Mothers and the Movement of White Ribbons (El-Din Shahin, 2005).

The events of 2005 aroused considerable optimism in the eyes both of participants and observers. However, it quickly became apparent that not much of substance had changed in Egypt’s political system during the course of this short-lived ‘Arab Spring’. The parliamentary elections in November and December 2005 produced some surprising
results. While the NDP retained more a large majority of seats, more than half of its candidates were defeated – that majority was ultimately dependent on the return to the fold of party members who failed to be selected as official candidates but ran anyway as ‘independent’ candidates (with considerable success in many cases). The secular opposition parties were decimated, losing most of their seats. The big winners were the Islamist opposition. Candidates associated with the Muslim Brotherhood secured 88 seats in parliament, well beyond their own and most other observers’ expectations. Equally surprising was the fact that the first round of voting in the elections was marked by considerably less violence and obstruction by the security forces than previously (El-Amrani, 2005). However, when it became apparent that the Brotherhood was enjoying substantial first round successes, the situation changed. The second round of voting saw massive interference by security forces, and, by the third round, there was selective closing of polling stations altogether. Eight people were reportedly killed during the third round of voting and by the end of balloting, according to the organization’s Supreme Guide, 1,300 members of the Muslim Brotherhood had been detained. This was followed by ongoing repression of other elements of the opposition, secular opposition, political bloggers, even members of the judiciary (McCarthy, 2005).

In the first multi-candidate presidential election, held in September 2005, under the newly-reformed system, Mubarak won a comfortable victory, taking 89% of the vote against 8% for his nearest rival, Ayman Nour of the Ghad (Tomorrow) Party, which had been legally recognised in 2004. In November 2005, Nour lost his parliamentary seat to a candidate from the NDP. In December of the same year, he was jailed for five years on his conviction for forging signatures to register the party – a charge that was widely believed to have been trumped up by the regime to discredit the only candidate to make a serious challenge to Mubarak’s grip on the Presidency.

Yet, despite the very clear reversals of the limited openings that took place in the Spring of 2005, the response of the major international supporters of the Egyptian regime, the United States and the European Union, was remarkably mild, notwithstanding their oft-repeated expressions of support for political reform and democracy in Egypt.
The Role of External Actors in Promoting Political Reform in Egypt

The European Union and Egypt

Europe’s commitment to political reform in Egypt must be located within the broader context of its approach to North Africa more generally, central to which is the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) which was inaugurated in Barcelona in 1995. At Barcelona, the then 15 member states of the EU together with 12 Mediterranean Partner Countries (MPCs) committed themselves, through the Barcelona Declaration, to the task of transforming the Mediterranean into a region of ‘peace, stability and prosperity’ (Junemann, 2004, p.5). To this end, the EMP adopted a model that combines establishing bilateral association agreements between the EU and individual MPCs with various forms of cooperation on political, economic and cultural levels. The EMP, in turn, emerged out of a process, unfolding from the end of the Cold War onwards, in the context of which the EU sought to develop a set of policies for dealing with the developing world which would have democracy and human rights concerns at their core.

EU practice with regard to democracy promotion in the Mediterranean has focused on support for civil society, economic liberalization and ‘good governance’ in the belief that this will contribute to, and sustain, bottom up pressures in favour of political reform (Gillespie and Youngs, 2002, p.12). However, Youngs has pointed out that the EU’s financial and political commitment to this area is much weaker than that of the United States. He notes, for instance, that, in 2002, the EU gave over twenty times more money for the preservation of historical sites in the Middle East than for democracy building (Youngs, 2004).

The bases of EU relations with Egypt are set out in the EU-Egypt Association Agreement which came into force in June 2004. This agreement emphasizes the importance of the principles of the UN Charter, in particular the observance of human rights, democratic principles and economic freedom, the need to strengthen the political stability and economic development of the region by encouraging regional cooperation and the need to open a regular political dialogue in bilateral and international contexts on issues of common interest. At the political level, emphasis is placed on peace, security,
and regional cooperation to contribute to the stability and prosperity of the region, and to promote understanding and tolerance.

Under the terms of the Euro-Med Partnership with Egypt, EU documents cite its willingness to support and build on national efforts undertaken for actions aiming at increasing governance in the broad sense, and focusing on areas such as human rights and civil society; promoting freedom of association aiming, for example, at increasing the capacity of NGOs; protection of the rights of children and youth; strengthening women’s rights and women’s public participation; and supporting the rule of law and the administration of justice. The National Indicative Programme for Egypt speaks of all of this ‘based on mutual agreement with the Government of Egypt’. Elsewhere, the European Commission’s Country Strategy Paper for Egypt describe the country in somewhat benign, if not optimistic, terms as:

…a relatively stable multiparty democracy although a strong presidency and well-entrenched government party dominate politics. Human and civil rights are guaranteed by the constitution and the rule of law is upheld by an increasingly independent judiciary but very arbitrary ‘emergency powers’ are still in force and have been used to restrain the activities of democracy and human rights activists.

The extent to which the EU’s approach to political reform in Egypt is regime-led is visible in recent statements made by Benita Ferrero-Waldner, European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy. Noting the need for political and social reform to accompany economic reforms, she stressed that ‘political reform is a particularly complex and sensitive matter, but the EU is a loyal partner’ (European Commission, 2006). Addressing the Egyptian Foreign Relations Council and the Egyptian European Council, the Commissioner then re-stated the EU’s commitment to Egypt and its support for ‘your reform process’ (European Commission, 2006).

Both the tone and the level of Europe’s engagement with Egypt makes it less than surprising that the response to the setbacks to civil liberties that followed the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2005 was, at best, lukewarm. Britain, as
holder of the Presidency of the EU, issued a terse statement expressing ‘concern’ conviction and jailing of Ayman Nour in December 2005. Otherwise, the statement noted that the verdict sent ‘negative signals about democratic political reform in Egypt’ and express the hope that any appeal would be ‘looked at fairly by Egyptian courts’ (UK Presidency of the EU, 2005). In relation to the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, there was little by way of official response by Europe. The language of the statement by the European Union that followed the second meeting of the EU-Egypt Association Council issued in June 2006, is largely positive. The EU ‘looks forward to an openness of the Egyptian Government to dialogue on human rights and democracy issues’. It welcomes the reports of the National Council for Human Rights. Causes for concern are noted – the harsh treatment of peaceful demonstrators in Cairo as well as disciplinary action taken against two judges who criticized the conduct of the 2005 Parliamentary elections. In February of 2007, Benita Ferrero-Waldner announced €558 million in EU assistance to Egypt, stating that supporting ‘Egypt’s own political reform agenda’ was a key feature of the new reform package (European Commission, 2007).

The United States and Egypt
The original basis of relations between Egypt and the United States in modern times has been the ‘peace process’ with Israel. Since the Camp David Accords of 1978 and the signing of a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel the following year, Egypt was a major strategic ally of the United States in its dealings with the Israeli-Palestinian issue and in the region generally. Moreover, while Egypt opposed the 2003 invasion of Iraq, US forces and materials nonetheless passed through the Suez Canal on the way to the war front, to the dismay of many in the country (Khalil, 2003). In recognition of its vital role, Egypt receives $1.3 billion annually from the US, on average, in security assistance alone.

Despite the authoritarian nature of the regime, Egypt, in the words of USAID, has long been an important US ally, and is a strong ‘moderating force’ in the Middle East (USAID, 2005). Both countries share strategic interests that include the achievement of stability and peace in the region.
‘…US national interests in Egypt hinge upon a strong bilateral relationship with Egypt to form an effective partnership to combat terrorism, resolve regional conflicts, advance peace, ensure domestic and regional security, and accelerate growth’ (USAID, 2005).

The priorities of US policy vis-à-vis Egypt were set out in 1997 by then Ambassador, Edward S. Walker. Walker discussed six facets of the relationship. These were, in order: the peace process; security; stability; fundamentalism; economic growth and partnership; and, lastly, democracy. In terms of the peace process, he acknowledged that the ‘irreplaceable and irrevocable step’ that the Camp David Accords represented would not have survived ‘if the peace process had depended on Egyptian public opinion’ (Walker, 1997, p.148). Walker identified US security assistance to Egypt primarily in terms of enabling Egypt to ‘stand up to the enemies of the peace process’ but also noted a broader ‘strategic dimension’ to the relationship since the end of the Cold War (Walker, 1997, p.149). He acknowledged the need for the US to help build and strengthen the institutions necessary for democracy to thrive,

‘so that as the economy moves towards the free market, the society moves towards a more pluralistic decision making process extremely skeptical of the democratic credentials’ (Walker, 1997, p.160).

But, he stressed the need to do so ‘with sensitivity to Egypt’s problems’ (Walker, 1997, p.161). Some of his caution with regard to political reform may stem from the analysis of ‘fundamentalism’ that he offered, one which is highly skeptical of any claim to democratic credentials on the part of the Muslim Brotherhood, citing its opposition to ‘virtually every US interest, value and policy’ (Walker, 1997, p.156).

In May 2006, the current US Ambassador to Egypt, Francis Ricciardone delivered a speech in which he offered an assessment of US-Egyptian relations, based on ‘Peace, Democracy and Prosperity’ (Ricciardone, 2006) Once more, the pivotal role of Egypt in relation to Israel was highlighted. On the question of democracy, the Ambassador stressed support for the programme of political reform laid out by the President, the
Prime Minister and the NDP. Writing in the aftermath of the elections of 2005, the subsequent crackdown on Islamist opposition and the jailing of Ayman Nour, Ricciardone commended the ‘historic legislative and constitutional agenda for political reform’ that had been presented by President Mubarak (2006). He added that Americans ‘do not confuse change with chaos’.

‘We do not see chaos as “creative”. We do support bold but well-managed, wisely led, purposeful change. That is progress.’ (Ricciardone, 2006).

The pivotal strategic role played by Egypt in the region means that both the EU and the US have opted for a bottom-up and gradualist approach to political reform. This ‘non-political’ form of democracy promotion, as Brouwer characterizes it, focuses on creating new, and reinforcing existing structures and practices which are considered pillars of established democracies, for example, institutions (parliament and the judiciary), civil society organizations, and civic education (Brouwer, 2000). For instance, the USAID budget for ‘Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance in Egypt proposed to spend $37 million in 2004 and $30 million in 2005 on support for independent human rights organizations, legal aid services for women, support for university education with a focus on comparative law, participation in local development, and improving the administration of justice and the rule of law (USAID, 2005). These overlap almost exactly with the express concerns of EU policy.

Unlike the European Union, the US did, in a number of ways, express concern that some of the actions of the Egyptian regime represented setbacks to the common commitment to political reform and respect for human rights. In February 2005, US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, dropped plans to visit Egypt, in apparent displeasure at the regime’s treatment of Ayman Nour (Kessler, 2005). When she did visit in June of the same year, Rice called for engagement with civil society and for free and fair elections (US Department of State, 2005). This was followed by a visit in October 2006, in the course of which Rice called for Egypt to be a leader in Middle Eastern progress on the path to democracy (US Department of State, 2006). In January 2006, the US cancelled scheduled talks on a free trade agreement with Egypt in what was reported
as a protest against the harsh treatment of Nour. A spokesman for the State Department also cited concerns regarding ‘the recent elections’ (Brinkley, 2006). However, this apparently robust position was not sustained. The US maintained its historically high levels of aid to Egypt throughout this period and by 2007 a different tone was discernible in policy statements. On a visit to Cairo in January 2007, the Secretary of State, spoke not of democracy but of her appreciation of Egypt’s support for the US in the region. Stability, not democracy, was the key to policy (Slackman, 2007a). One commentator suggested that there was a tacit understanding whereby:

Washington criticizes Egypt’s human rights failings, Egypt takes umbrage at the “interference” in domestic affairs and little changes (Slackman, 2007b).

The failure of both the EU and the US to respond in any substantial way to the entrenchment of the authoritarian order in Egypt since the two elections of 2005 expresses deep-seated problems and inconsistencies in Western policies on democracy promotion and political reform in the region more generally.

Problems and Inconsistencies With Western Policy

The European Union

EU policy in relations to democracy and human rights in the Middle East and North Africa has been criticized on many levels. These include lack of coherence and lack of agreement within its key institutions and also between member states (Olsen, 2000, p.143). Youngs has argued that the problem of lack of inter-institutional co-operation in this are such that:

‘Nobody in Brussels or national capitals was aware of the extent of the EU’s overall democracy assistance effort’ (Youngs, 2001).
Furthermore, it has been pointed out that the EU has few policy instruments to deal with states not scheduled to become members (Kopstein, 2006, p.92; Gillespie and Youngs, 2002, p.199). Whereas the potential future reward of EU membership has proved to be a highly effective bargaining tool for the EU in negotiations with accession states, this clearly has no application to those states which have no prospect of membership even in the long-term. Partly because of the limited repertoire of tools available to the EU to compel compliance on the part of others, a great deal of attention focused on the introduction of political conditionality into its dealings with developing countries in the 1990s. Standard democracy and human rights clauses were to be included in all new contractual agreements with third countries, specifically providing for the suspension of provisions under the agreement where democratic principles were not upheld (Youngs, 2001, p.18). However, while the novelty of this innovation was much observed upon, the EU has subsequently shown a marked reluctance to invoke these clauses in relation to any of the countries of North Africa and the Middle East, despite clear breaches.

Sanctions and strategies of isolation were reserved for what were considered to be seriously 'rogue' states threatening security and regional stability, such as Libya, Iraq, the Former Republic of Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and North Korea (Youngs, 2001, p.18).

In fact, conditionality was ‘oriented overwhelmingly to economic, not political, criteria’. Generous aid awards were made available to countries, including Egypt, which pursued economic reforms despite poor records on democracy (Youngs, 2001, p.37). The most obvious explanation for this is that the EU’s commitment to democracy and human rights is trumped by its pursuit of other priorities. As Kopstein observes, the primary concerns of the European Mediterranean Partnership are economic reform, trade harmonization, migration, energy, security and counter-terrorism (2006, p.92). However, stabilizing migration and securing borders are objectives which may have little to do with democracy promotion, since their successful pursuit requires the co-operation of stable, friendly regimes, regardless of their character; regimes which, in the circumstances of
contemporary North Africa, are likely to be antagonized by thoroughgoing external support for democracy promotion and domestic political reform.

The result is that an analysis of EU policies reveals that a discrepancy between declared aims and what happens in practice (Pace et al, 2004, p.84).

‘This is most visible in EU human rights policy, which resembles a stabilization of existing undemocratic regimes in the region. This perception emerges mainly from the fact that human rights have fallen victim to the trade-off between securing them and achieving the other EU “priorities”’… (Pace et al, 2004, p.83).

US policies on democracy promotion in North Africa and the Middle East have also met with considerable criticism. Firstly, the credibility of the US as a promoter of democratic political change in the region has frequently been called into question. The widespread perception throughout the Muslim world that the US is one-sided in its approach to the Palestine-Israel question, the invasion of Iraq, and the subsequent traumatic experiences of that country under what many Arabs clearly regard as occupation by foreign forces, and, in particular, the maltreatment of Arab and Muslim prisoners in American controlled detention centres in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo are some of the issues which limit the credibility of the US as an agent of desirable political reform in the Middle East. The Tunisian human rights activist, Moncef Marzouki, has written of the ‘the total lack of credibility of the US policy to promote democracy in the Arab world’, suggesting rather that ‘US policy as a whole greatly facilitates the growth of extremist Islamist forces’ (quoted in Achcar, 2004)\textsuperscript{viii}.

A second crucial difficulty concerns what one commentator described as the assumption that, given democratic conditions:

the citizens of the Arab world will bring to power parliamentary majorities or presidents that will please the West (Kopstein, 2006, p. 89).
The reality is that such an assumption represents wishful thinking. F. Gregory Gause puts the same point more bluntly:

the advent of democracy [in the Arab world] seems likely to produce new Islamist governments that would be much less willing to cooperate with the United States than are the current authoritarian rulers (Gause, 2005).

It is clear that the policies of both the EU and the US regarding democracy and political reform in the Middle East are beset by inconsistency. Increasingly, some observers detect a desire on the part of both actors to withdraw from policy positions of overt support for such change in recognition of the difficulties that this would bring. Youngs has pointed out that the EU’s ‘nascent philosophy of ‘democracy-as-security’ is already being diluted’, adducing in support the near non-existent reaction of the EU to some very recent setbacks for Arab democracy – not merely Egypt’s unfree elections of 2005 and the subsequent crackdown on opposition figures, but also new restrictions on the media, professional associations, civil society organizations and others in Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia and Syria (Youngs, 2006)

In similar fashion, Jennifer Windsor has outlined the ways in which

‘even longtime allies and enthusiasts of democracy promotion are having second thoughts about the Bush administration’s specific methods as well as the value and premises of the enterprise overall’ (Windsor, 2006, p.21).

Implications For The Distribution Of Political Power In Egypt

The incoherence and inconsistency which characterize Western policies, regarding the promotion of democratic political change in the Middle East, has particularly telling consequences for the distribution of political power in Egypt.
A number of serious difficulties attach to bottom-up gradualist approaches to democracy promotion. Such approaches effectively give to governments a veto over what areas donors may and may not support. In doing so, external funders implicitly and explicitly lend support to authoritarian governments. In the case of Egypt, the limits of external support for democracy promotion were illustrated clearly in the aftermath of the September 2001 attacks when Islamists were arrested in large numbers, in many cases without any indication of what charges, if any, were to be brought against them. Human rights organizations, which had relied on external patrons for protection in the past, protested at the arrests, but found little support from their international donors (Grunert, 2004, pp.144-5).

The gradualist approach adopted by external actors also allows the Egyptian regime to ‘co-opt’ the discourse and practice of democracy promotion. Carapico has observed on how Arab governments adopted the rhetorical and symbolic trappings of democracy in the 1990s by openly welcoming expert consultations, hosting international conferences, inviting foreign monitors, signing international conventions and adopting the language of human rights. She cites the creation of GO-NGOs (government organized non-governmental organizations), as part of this set of practices (Carapico, 2002, pp.391-2).

But paradoxically, external promotion of democracy also allows the regime to play the role of defender of national sovereignty in setting limits to ‘foreign’ intervention in domestic affairs. The sudden appearance of the Greater Middle East Initiative (as the BMENA Initiative was originally known) caused anger, as well as ‘a generally dismissive response’ in ruling circles in Egypt. Foreign Minister, Ahmad Maher stated ‘reform must come from within the Arab world’ (Essam El-Din, 2004a) while President Mubarak was quoted as responding:

‘we hear about these initiatives as if the region and its states did not exist, as if they had no sovereignty over their land’ (Essam El-Din, 2004b).

Thus, the question of foreign support for human rights organizations in Egypt has become politicized for a number of different reasons. The case of Saad Eddin Ibrahim,
who was arrested in 2000 and subsequently jailed for seven years on charges of ‘accepting international funding without government permission in addition to ‘tarnishing Egypt’s reputation abroad’, sent a clear message to civil society activists that the regime was willing to play this card even in relation to one of the most high civil society activists, both nationally and internationally.

Kassem also points out the disparity between the governmental views on the role of NGOs in comparison to the view of human rights organizations and Western governments, as was illustrated in debates on the short-lived Law 153 of 1999 which sought to regulate the NGO sector in Egypt. The law was criticized by domestic activists and by international actors as restrictive of the right to freedom of association while a US State Dept spokesperson condemned the measure. However, the measures were justified by the Egyptian government as ‘necessary to prevent the establishment of organizations with hidden agendas using funding from abroad’ (2004, pp.120-1).

However, as Pratt points out, this is not merely a question of funding from outside, it is linked to a deeper perception of human rights and related activism as ‘Western’ and linked to continued Western domination of the region (2007, p.148). Human rights groups have been engaged in ‘debates over their ‘authenticity’. Pratt cites the discussions that took place within the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights concerning foreign funding in the 1990s. While some argued pragmatically that the organization could not continue to function effectively without foreign financial support, critics claimed that receiving foreign funding ‘would lead the Egyptian human rights movement to be dependent on the West at the expense of building a domestic democratic movement’ (2007, p.149).

These concerns facilitate manipulation by the regime of debates on human rights and the role of foreign support for civil society efforts in this context. Abdelrahman describes what she terms the ‘nationalisation of the human rights debate in Egypt’ whereby the state has been able to convince large segments of the population that it has the right to protect itself and the nation from the ‘malicious work’ of local human rights organizations dependent on foreign funding (Abdelrahman, 2007, pp.288-90).

Fear of being tainted with an externally promoted reform agenda also has the effect of forcing opposition forces in Egypt to qualify their position with respect to
political change in the country. Kifaya activists seek to make explicit that their commitment to reform is independent of any US plans for the country or the region. One leading figure, Abdel Halim Qandeel, an editor at the Al Arabi newspaper is quoted:

“We want a transformation against America and all its projects in the region (quoted in Murphy, 2005).

One of the most counter-productive effect of bottom-up democracy promotion approaches is that they render problematic the activities of domestic activists working for political reform and respect for human rights. Even where foreign funding for explicitly political projects does exist, it raises significant doubts and suspicions, not merely at elite level. Carapico raises the ‘ethical implications’ for researchers of Western funding for projects critical of Arab governments, particularly when foreign patrons are unwilling to support such research when it comes under government attack (2002, p.395). Grunert found that when faced with this dilemma many Egyptian human rights activists expressed their intention to leave their organizations, while others opted for the alternative of developing ‘less politicized programmes’ (2004, p.145). The consequence of this is that:

local pro-reform voices are being undermined by a lack of support from outside powers. In many Arab states, the judiciary, civil society, media and new reformist ‘movements’ have spoken out against political repression with little support from the EU (Youngs, 2006).

Finally, support for gradualist, bottom-up approaches in Egypt has meant that support for civil society has almost always excluded Islamist organizations. While some human rights organizations cooperated with liberal Islamic-oriented organizations

the established NGOs did little to intensify such co-operation as they did not regard it as compatible with donor interest and were unwilling to endanger the flow of foreign income (Grunert, 2004, p.146).
The main reason for this was that for donors, co-operation with Islamic institutions was always considered complicated because of the government’s resistance and of the risk of being accused of supporting radical Islamists.

Furthermore, while policymakers in Europe have called for engagement with ‘moderate Islamists’ for several years, EU officials are reluctant to initiate contact because of the political sensitivities involved (Youngs, 2006). And, while external actors have been reasonably quick to condemn Arab governments for the maltreatment or imprisonment of secular opposition figures such as Saad Eddin Ibrahim or Ayman Nour, this contrasts starkly with the virtual silence which has greeted the imprisonment of thousands of purported Islamist sympathizers.

However, as Gillespie and Whitehead have pointed out, and as the results of the 2005 parliamentary elections in Egypt, flawed as they were, make clear, Western democracy promotion efforts that rely on support for familiar but unrepresentative actors will ultimately prove fruitless:

‘Islamists will not just go away because Europe ignores them’ (2002).

Nonetheless, there is no possibility of Western policy promoting the political participation of more representative Islamist forces while the current approach to democracy promotion in Egypt prevails.

Conclusion

The clear conclusion from a study of the relationship between the major Western actors and Egypt is that, despite the rhetorical espousal of political change along democratic lines, for as long as the objectives of democracy, human rights and political reform are subordinate to other priorities, for example, securing co-operation on ‘counter-terrorism’, the ‘peace process’, migration, energy supplies etc, no such political transformation is likely to ensue. Indeed, it is questionable whether the EU or the United States sincerely desires such an outcome. As Calabrese puts it:
The US administration has no more stomach than the Europeans for precipitating political change in Egypt or Saudi Arabia (2005, p.61).

This conclusion is reinforced by analysis of the reaction by both actors to the triumph of Hamas in the 2005 elections in Palestine. Indeed, it becomes clear that the cautious approach shared by the EU and US in the context of democracy-promotion in Egypt has the paradoxical effect of strengthening the position of the regime, which, as valued ally, is placed in a dominant position in terms of setting the parameters for such interventions, while the position of local pro-reform activists is undermined by its asserted association with an externally imposed programme for change. Finally, in the context of recent developments in the region (the ascendancy of Islamist actors in Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon, as well as Egypt), there now exists a strong likelihood of withdrawal from the current and contradictory position of timid support for political change to one of even greater caution. What is left then is more of the same: rhetorical support for democracy and human rights, political reform, and funding for projects which may or may not contribute incrementally to these ends on the long run, but which, in the meantime, will do nothing to alter the current distribution of power in Egypt.
For a similar and largely uncritical account of the potential of external democracy promotion efforts, see Windsor, J (2006), ‘Advancing the Freedom Agenda: Time for a Recalibration?’, The Washington Quarterly, 29 (3) pp.21-34


According to Youngs, ‘EU democracy projects tend to shy away from controversial areas, preferring to take refuge in generic priorities – such as NGOs, women’s rights and human rights legislation, rather than tackling the specific challenges of political reform facing each Arab country’, Y o u n g s, R (2006), ‘Europe’s Flawed Approach to Arab Democracy’, Centre for European Reform, [Online], available at http://www.cer.org.uk/pdf/essay_youngs_arab_democracy.pdf.


Abdelrahman cites an article published in Al—Gomhoria, a semi-official daily newspaper, which accuses foreign funded organizations of ‘creating divisions in society along sectarian lines’, having become a polite tool of imperialism, p.289.

References


