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NEW POLITICAL APPROACHES TO DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

by Roberto Aliboni

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This June the MENA region and the issue of democracy will be at the forefront of the international stage. Indeed, the issue is on the G8 agenda, under the heading of the US Greater Middle East Initiative, as well as on that of the European Council. The latter is expected to approve the final drafts of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Strategic Partnership for the Mediterranean and the Middle East. While the geographic scope of US and EU initiatives may differ, the focus is the same where the promotion of democracy is concerned.

EU initiatives are supported by stronger 'know-how' than those of the United States thanks to a long-standing experience with the Barcelona Process. Because of this experience, the Europeans were ready to criticize GMEI. The second draft of the latter policy has largely taken criticisms and suggestions into account.
Sadly, however, transatlantic and intra-European divisions arising from the current political context (the crisis in Iraq), are a stumbling block for the implementation of an Atlantic or European overall strategy, be it extend to the GME or limited to the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, these initiatives contain significant proposals and insights about how to promote democracy and should be regarded today as an opportunity to improve policies.

EuroMeSCo looked into the issue of democracy, human rights and the rule of law with its first ever Report. Quite recently, its Working Group on Common Ground delivered a more specific Report on democracy. A third Report on democracy promotion strategies will be available at the end of June. I would like to draw a number of points from these recent reports and thereby contribute to the ongoing discussion.

The key Arab (and Muslim) perception that dominates the political reform issue is that the West is intrusive. Different actors fear intrusion for different reasons: governments fear it because it can affect their survival; nationalist and religious extremists see it as the tool of Western imperialism and neo-colonialism; liberals, religious or otherwise, fear that Western policies may hinder their attempts to build their own brand of democracy, or otherwise strongly limit their options. It has to be stressed that this shared perception makes pro-Western and anti-Western Arab parties objectively collude. In particular, governments employ the 'home grown democracy' argument in a largely instrumental way. This argument again plays a significant role in the statement on reform issued in Tunis by the Arab League on 22-23 May.

External actors therefore face two key challenges in their democratising endeavour: (a) reducing, if not eliminating, perceptions of intrusion through policy changes, and (b) end the objective collusion between moderates seeking authenticity and governments wanting only to survive and consolidate themselves. The first challenge means that new policies have to be found and old ones refined to make them better tailored to carry out their work. The second means deeply revising our perceptions and taking some bold

political decisions. While the first issue regards policies, the second requires a revision of overall political approaches.

Broadly speaking, the tool-kit of policies available today (inclusion, partnership, conditionality, common institutions, and so on) is not in itself inadequate, although they could be improved. What is hindering greater success is the overall political framework within which they are implemented. It is for this reason that I focus on broad political approaches rather than policies in this paper.

The first challenge here is that ongoing violent conflicts have to be stopped. While efforts to put an end to the Iraqi crisis are being made and will hopefully succeed, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems to be out of control. The situation in Palestine has deteriorated terribly and the Quartet has been weakened. We cannot be sure whether this conflict can be managed still, and how. It remains, however, the key to containing and even rolling back the sense of intrusion that the crisis continues to spread all over the region, independently of views about political reform. Thus an absolutely necessary condition for promoting democracy is a fair solution to ongoing conflicts.

While the need for this kind of political approach is not new, our understanding of whom to speak with as 'partners' needs radical revision.[1] Our interlocutors should not be exclusively the Arab governments and, therefore, dialogue should be extended to include complementary partners within Arab civil societies. When it comes to civil societies, however, we know that these societies are weak (the liberals within them) and may even respond to freedom by killing democracy (the fundamentalists). This state of affairs puts us face to face with a matter of principle and a matter of fact.

The latter is that, more often than not, we entertain imprecise and even erroneous views about the balance of power in individual Arab countries. What we are afraid of – and this makes us prisoners of stability while insistently calling for change – is that Islamic republics could replace familiar authoritarian regimes. By contrast, we cannot rule out that current governments could be replaced by moderates, or by governments formed by liberals and religious liberals.

Iraq shows that our knowledge is very limited, not only because of poor intelligence, but also because Iraqi history is largely ignored and most analyses are based on a black-and-white vision of systemic opposition between Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds. Things are more complex than that and we think that ayatollah Sistani's request for free elections had to be met. Maybe not immediately, but met nonetheless so as to allow Iraqis to set up their own national government.

In conclusion, we should improve our knowledge and cease to fear religious solutions. We must oppose extremist religious regimes but we have no interest in preventing moderate religious regimes from emerging. If they are Islamic but democratic, these regimes will be able to distinguish between modernity and religion, cooperation and conflict. Within the framework of moderate and democratic Islamic regimes, there can

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[1] Tamara Cofman Wittes, *The New U.S. Proposal for a Greater Middle East Initiative. An Evaluation*, Middle Eat Memo N. 2, May 10, 2004 (in the web site of the Saban Center, The Brookings Institution).

be gradual change in the role of women, human rights, democracy and the rule of law, as happened in Southern Europe after the Second World War. Our unarticulated and simplistic vision of Islam is paralysing our political strategies.

As a matter of principle, both Europe and the United States – without dealing in double standards – should stick to a less ideological notion of democracy. We know that democracy includes two tiers of freedoms: the freedom of citizens to be free from harm and insecurity and their freedom to make choices of any kind once that first tier of freedoms is assured. In democracy there is a constitutional core that is intended to make citizens choose freely. The 'freedom for' core of democracy is exportable and cannot be renounced. What is left, however, is not up to us. Thus, we can require Iraq to employ democratic means and institutions (have a free press, elections, guarantees of a free vote to citizens, and so forth), but we cannot prevent it from choosing the *shariah* as the primary legal reference.

While policies to promote democracy remain open to improvement, the key issue is the overall approach to democracy with respect to Arab and, more broadly speaking, non-Western countries. A non-ideological approach is badly needed. This approach will allow open relations between these countries and Europe to develop .This openness will itself bring about change and will allow sensible policies to help promoting pluralism and democracy.