The Challenge of Democracy in North AfricaThe European Union and Democracy Promotion: The Case of North Africa

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A European senior official was recently asked to assess the progress made by some North African countries towards democracy; he estimated that Tunisia was moving backwards, Algeria turning in circle and Morocco undecided about the direction to take. Although this evaluation is not flattering, some would still contest it as overly optimistic because it implies that the countries in question have taken the path towards democracy when in reality they have yet to leave the authoritarian road or even show an inclination to do so. In this respect North Africa is similar to the rest of the Arab world: there is a widely held opinion that the "wave of democracy" that swept much of Africa and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s missed the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

This chapter evaluates the prospects of democratisation in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. It is divided into three sections: the first deals with the immediate post-independence period and argues that conditions in the three countries were favourable to the adoption of a democratic system of government but independence leaders and movements failed to take advantage of the offered opportunity. The second section deals with the 1980s, a period during which North Africa faced major economic difficulties and social unrest that threatened to disintegrate the social fabric and political systems of the region. Reforms were adopted in an attempt to deal with the crisis but they proved to be inappropriate and insufficient. As a result the crisis widened and deepened, putting the region on a dangerous slope towards not only social and economic but also political disintegration. The process is most visible in Algeria but, it is argued in the third section, it is at a dangerously advanced stage in its neighbouring countries, albeit in a less visible manner. The consequence is that democracy in the region has never been as remote as it is today. Nevertheless, it is suggested in the last section that its future prospects are not totally dim provided that urgent steps are taken to allow its emergence. In particular, attitudes towards Islamism have to change … fundamentally: the movement may well be a threat to democracy but this is not a sufficient reason to give preference to current regimes who are a clear and present obstacle to democracy. Therefore, the appropriate policy should not be to maintain the regimes as the preferred or only method to avoid the potential threat of the Fundamentalists but to ensure that all forms of authoritarian rule are effectively blocked and that no party or movement has a monopoly over the political field or overwhelming arguments to prevail over other contenders for political leadership. It will be argued that the European Union (EU) played a role in the emergence and continuation of the first policy and that it should play an equally decisive role in bringing about the second.

1. The Early Independence Period: Missed Opportunities

The nationalist movements that fought French colonial rule in North Africa used the same basic argument to demand independence: the right to self-determination and self-rule. They claimed that democratic principles and practices recognised and respected in France applied equally well to North Africans. However, as soon as independence was achieved all those ideas were set aside. The new discourse was that there were more urgent and vital tasks to be undertaken: building the state, achieving economic development, supplying social services to the population, etc.

The nation had to devote all its energies to those sacred goals. Issues such as tenure of public office, methods for choosing leaders and representatives, or accountability of public servants were declared irrelevant and unworthy of debate.

In the general euphoria that prevailed after independence public opinion had no difficulties accepting such ideas. In Morocco and Tunisia especially a figure did emerge as the leader of the independence movement and then became the head of the new state. The majority of the population considered the transition as natural and would have approved or confirmed Mohamed V and Habib Bourguiba in their respective positions regardless of the method of consultation. In Algeria Ahmed Ben Bella's popularity was perhaps less extensive.

However, in no country did the leaders enjoy the same widespread support within their respective nationalist movements. Obviously, the struggle for independence was not carried out by a single person or group, but in the end recognition was not given to all participants, awards were not obtained by all who expected them and the jackpot – supreme power – did not necessarily go to the candidate that other leaders would have chosen. Nationalist groups or factions may have agreed on the final objective – independence – but they did not have a common vision concerning the nature, institutions, policies or leadership of the future state. At some point a dominant view a dominant view and figure did emerge and minorities either rallied the majority, went into active opposition, stood aside biding their time or left the game altogether either by choice or under duress.

In any event this would have been an ideal opportunity for the winners to lay the foundations of a democratic state. Once in power the new heads of states had a sizeable political capital that could have lasted for years. The aura they had and the popular support they enjoyed at the time were sufficient to guarantee success in any political contest. Had they organised such a contest they could have used its inevitable outcome to consolidate their legitimacy and, perhaps, discredit their opponents.

However, it quickly became apparent that the prime concern of the liberators went much further than mere politics. They found that it was only natural that they be awarded the highest office in the land as a sign of gratitude for their struggle and sacrifices. But they considered that their mission did not end with the ousting of the coloniser; it had to extend to the eradication of poverty, ignorance and other signs of underdevelopment. They knew how to achieve independence and that made them the most qualified to carry out the new task – a task so staggering that it could not be bound by any time limit and so vital that it could not submitted to crassly political bickering.

In Morocco Mohamed V, the "Revolutionary King," emerged as the most prominent figure of the nationalist movement. Political parties, including the largest on *Istiqlal*, did not have a mass following and their leaders drew support mostly from the elite. There was a large degree of political freedom but the parties used it mostly for waging attacks against each other. In 1959 *Istiqlal* even ended up splitting into two parties. This may have led the King to conclude that it would be futile, perhaps dangerous, to involve such ineffective forces in government. In 1960 he decided to fill himself the position of Prime Minister, thereby getting the monarchy directly involved in partisan politics. The King was no longer content to reign, he wanted to rule. Although the decision was the result of the inability of political parties to govern rather than a gambit by the palace to institute an absolutist monarchy, it did open the way to an increased involvement of the monarch into day-to-day politics.

When Hassan II came to power in 1961 he maintained this course. Members of his first government were chosen more on the basis of loyalty than political affiliation or ability. His first task was to draft a constitution (approved by referendum in 1962) which set up a "constitutional, social, democratic" monarchy but which, in effect,

concentrated most powers and prerogatives in the hands of the king. From then on Morocco settled into the familiar pattern of authoritarian rule and political freedoms, modest as they were, gave way to repression of any form of opposition or protest. In the meantime social and economic problems were left unattended, leading to sporadic riots, attempts on the King's life and a generalised instability.

In Tunisia the nationalist leader Habib Bourguiba, who gave himself the title of "*al-mujahid al-akbar*" (Supreme Combatant), had a much simpler situation to deal with. His party, the *Néo-destour*, was the only organised political movement in the country and enjoyed a wide popular support. Shortly before independence Salah Ben Youssef, who was Secretary-general of the party, briefly challenged Bourguiba's leadership but his attempt failed and he was forced to flee the country (after independence he tried to organise an armed rebellion but it also failed and he was later assassinated in Germany, probably on Bourguiba's order). As a result, when the French left in 1956 neither Bourguiba nor his party had to contend with any competition. The mostly ineffective Bey (King) was quickly and easily deposed and the monarchy abolished. Bourguiba was designated acting president of the new republic while a constitution was being drafted. When the latter was promulgated in 1959 presidential and legislative elections were held in which Bourguiba and his party ran unopposed. For nearly three decades both held a tight grip on power. None of his policies, domestic or foreign, could be discussed or criticised no matter how erratic or ineffective they may have been.

Until the mid-1970s there were few fundamental or widespread causes of discontent. Despite uncertainties created by the government's hesitation between liberalism and socialism the economy appeared to be moving ahead. Public enterprises and the administration were recruiting most job seekers; housing, education and health services were readily available and poverty was declining. With time Bourguiba became convinced – and expected everyone to recognise – that every success was attributable to his genius and that no further progress would be possible without his enlightened guidance. Even within his party, which had been renamed Socialist Constitutional Party (*Parti socialiste destourien* orPSD), the freedom of expression and that the leadership enjoyed for a time in internal debates gave way to an insipid enumeration of Bourguiba's achievements and exceptional qualities, creating disenchantment among a growing number of the party's leaders. Every major event related to the President's life – his birthday, his deportation by the French, his return from exile, his ascendance to power – became public holidays and occasions for lengthy festivities during which he would listen with visible enjoyment to people glorifying him in songs, poems or any other form.

Throughout this period Bourguiba had ample opportunities to set Tunisia on a course towards democracy. He could have allowed freedom of expression, the separation of powers, an independent judiciary, freedom of association and the separation of state and party without seriously threatening his own position or powers. The only drawback was that he would have had to recognise that he was not indispensable and set a time for his departure to open the way to others to take over. Unable or unwilling to do so, he preferred instead to saddle the country with a president for life and thus deprived it of learning under his guidance and moderating influence how to transfer power in an orderly and peaceful manner. Worse yet, the scramble for power grew in intensity as Bourguiba grew older, and the country was left adrift.

When the President's health started deteriorating anyone who had any grudge against him or his regime came forth. Seeing plots and counterplots everywhere, insiders and outsiders used every available means to consolidate positions and eliminate opponents. Demonstrations degenerating into riots became commonplace, especially on campuses, forcing the government at one point to close universities for an entire year. By 1980 the crisis was so deep that no one could foresee how or

when it would be resolved.

Algeria's situation was quite different from that of its two neighbours. For one thing independence was achieved by soldiers rather than diplomats, so when the war was over there were few politicians (and their standing was lower than that of military men), one political party (the *Front de libération nationale* or FLN) and one institution, the provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (*Gouvernement provisoire de la République algérienne*, GPRA) to run the country. The FLN and the GPRA, both formed in 1958, were made up of members of the National Liberation Army (*Armée de liberation nationale*, ALN) which in effect was the only national structure sufficiently well organised to be able to fill the vacuum left after the precipitous departure of the French when the independence agreement was announced. Furthermore, no one in the ALN emerged as an intellectual leader or a theoretician of the revolution; hence no vision or blueprint was prepared for the post-independence period.

When negotiations with France were concluded and a date for independence formally set, the Algerian high command met in Libya to form a government. Immediately divisions appeared between factions of the ALN as well as between these and the GPRA. In fact actual fighting opposed army factions when everyone returned to Algiers to take office. Ultimately Ahmed Ben Bella prevailed thanks to the decisive support of Chief of Staff Houari Boumédiène. The FLN then proceeded to choose a slate of candidates for a future parliament. Elections were held in September 1962 and the new Assembly chose Ben Bella as head of government. Within a year the latter managed to become head of the FLN, have a constitution adopted setting up a presidential regime and get himself elected President of the Republic.

The ruling elite and the army in particular (which by then was called the National Popular Army, *Armée nationale populaire* or ANP instead of ALN) interpreted these moves as attempts by Ben Bella to increase his powers at the expense of his allies. This led to a confrontation between the President and Boumédiène, his Defence minister and erstwhile supporter. Ultimately Boumédiène won and Ben Bella was overthrown in June 1965. The two-year old constitution was suspended and all powers were vested in a twenty-one member Council of Revolution.

During the subsequent twelve years politics in Algeria came to a standstill. Political institutions, including the FLN, were put on the sideline. It was decreed that all energies were to be devoted to economic development. Almost immediately a strategy of heavy industrialisation financed by state capital was launched. That decision and others adopted in the late 1960s and in the 1970s were to have long-lasting effects on the country. Even without the benefit of hindsight one could argue – and in fact many did argue at the time – that all those decisions were ill-advised and should have been at least submitted to public debate before adoption.

By the mid-1970s and despite a major rise in the country's GDP following the 1973 oil price increase, Algeria was still confronted with high unemployment, housing shortages and other social and economic problems. In 1976 public participation in political life did make a comeback when the population was asked to approve a National Charter and a new constitution. A large and quite open debate did take place, followed by an overwhelming approval of both documents, although neither of them called for democratic principles or practices. In fact and by virtue of the new constitution Boumédiène ran unopposed for President and so did all FLN candidates to the National Popular Assembly.

In sum neither the Moroccan monarchy, nor the Tunisian secular modernising regime, nor the Algerian revolutionary junta showed much interest in creating democratic systems of government in their newly independent states. In all three cases conditions were conducive to such a development or at least were not totally

opposed to it, and the leadership had enough power, prestige and influence to ensure the success of such an endeavour. But in the end these early leaders allowed their ambitions and personal interests to prevail over their civic duties. As a result they may come to be remembered more as failed nation builders than as successful national liberators.

2. The 1980s: A Time of Procrastination

By 1980 an entire new generation was coming of age in North Africa. Large segment were literate, informed, politically sophisticated and articulate. They had never lived under colonial rule and to them the national liberation movement was just another chapter in their history books to be memorised for exams, Bourguiba an ailing and somewhat senile dictator, Ben Bella a dissident in exile, Boumédiène the protector of a predatory class and Hassan II a king to be respected as Commander of the Faithful but feared as commander of the secret police.

In each country the population considered that it had a tacit contract with the rulers whereby the latter would be left to rule unhampered as long as they guaranteed a minimum standard of living for the former. By and large politics and politicians were scorned, ridiculed, envied, courted or, most often feared and avoided. A vivid illustration of popular passivity towards politics is the Tunisian popular notion of *khubzist* or follower of the "bread party." However, passivity gave way to activism when the contract was broken.

During that period the world was grappling with a serious recession. The economies of the industrialised countries slowed down? Sluggish demand in Europe, the United States and Japan for raw materials, energy products and manufactured goods had a direct impact on the economies of Arab states in general and North Africa in particular. More than ¾ of North Africa's trade was with Europe. Most of Algeria's revenue was generated by oil and gas exports. Consequently, any contraction in European markets or oil prices would have severe repercussions on North Africa.

Another major developments of the period were the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War followed by uprisings in Eastern Europe that led to the overthrow of authoritarian regimes that had been in power for decades; the discredit of Socialism as a form of social and economic organisation and the growing notoriety of Islamic Fundamentalism perceived in the West as a source of violence and instability.

The convergence of these factors created havoc in North Africa. High rates of demographic growth cancelled or even outstripped those of economic growth, except in Tunisia which had introduced early on a vigorous and effective family planning programme. Previous decisions that could not be easily reversed such as export-led growth, import-substitution activities and heavy industrialisation, started to show their full impact. As a result of declining public revenues subsidies for staple products and expenditure on social services had to be curtailed.

By the mid-1980s both Tunisia and Morocco had to call on the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for help. Structural adjustment programmes (SAP) were put into place with the standard injunctions to cut budget deficits and public spending, liberalise trade, prices and wages, etc. The social effects of those measures, although predictable, were ignored.

Popular reaction to the widening and deepening crisis was inevitable, but because it lacked channels for an orderly expression it took violent forms. This forced governments to modify or even abandon some decisions but by and large violent

means were used to repress grievances and demands for a re-evaluation of economic policy. The 1988 Algerian uprising was the most dramatic illustration of that trend. In Tunisia riots broke out in 1984 and instability continued until 1987. Also in 1984 violent demonstrations took place in 48 towns and villages in southern Morocco and the intervention of the army and the police left 25 people dead and 114 wounded, according to official figures

However, hopeful signs began to appear here and there. In Tunisia Bourguiba was deposed in 1987 in a bloodless 'medical' coup carried out by his Prime Minister Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. The new president promised not only to resolve economic problems but also to achieve national reconciliation and establish a democratic government. In Algeria a new constitution adopted in February 1989 and a law on political associations promulgated a few months later instituted a free press and led to the formation of some twenty political parties. Only Morocco seemed to lag behind. A few days after the 1984 riots were crushed Hassan II went on television to announce that the violence had been fomented by traitors supported by Communist, Zionist and Khumainist organisations. He further warned that minors caught demonstrating would be punished as adults and that their parents would be held responsible for their acts. Finally, he advised Moroccans in other parts of the country who might be tempted to join the protest movement to remember what he did as crown prince when people took to the streets in 1958-59.

By the end of the decade rulers and ruled appeared to have reached, if not a tentative peace agreement, at least a tenuous truce. Although none of the fundamental problems had been resolved a new discourse was being heard, particularly in Tunisia and Algeria, and most people were willing to wait in the hope that positive developments would take place. But from the very beginning of the 1990s that hope was shattered to pieces.

3. The 1990s: Racing Towards Disintegration

Events taking place in North Africa at the onset of the decade appeared ominous: riots followed by repression; police harassment, illegal detention and disappearance of dissidents; cancelled or rigged elections and similar events multiplied. It was evident that the second-generation rulers of North Africa were not any more interested in or committed to democracy than their predecessors.

It was at that juncture that "political Islam" became a hotly discussed issue. In Algeria, following the adoption of a new constitution in 1989, the country's main Islamic party, the Islamic Salvation Front (*Front islamique du salut*, FIS) was legalised. It took part in the 1991 legislative elections and it was clear from the first round that FIS was going to repeat its performance in the 1990 local and regional elections and score a major victory. So without waiting for the second round the army cancelled the elections and took over power on the grounds that a FIS victory would have jeopardised national security.

Do Islamic (or Islamist or Fundamentalist) groups represent a threat; who is threatened; what is the nature of the threat; is the presumed threat a sufficient reason for preventing those groups from participating in politics: Such questions have scarcely been raised when those groups became active in North Africa in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, many of them had been created with the encouragement – if not at the behest – of governments as a counterweight to liberal or radical movements that sought to form opposition parties. But when the political arena was wiped clean of any organised opposition or dissidence, and as social and economic conditions worsened, the Fundamentalists stepped in to fulfil two main functions: to identify and denounce those responsible for the people's hardships and to provide immediate and concrete help to alleviate those hardships. Their success on both

accounts was easy – and logical: The ruling regimes did not have many qualities that would have endeared them to the citizens. Day-to-day living was worsening and no relief was in sight. Avenues for expressing needs or grievances, much less for influencing events, were unavailable. In addition, the Fundamentalists spoke of values that a Muslim understands and upholds – justice, honesty, solidarity, morality – in a language that the common man understands. Most importantly, the Islamists dealt with concrete problems such as hunger, poverty and illness and they provided food, medical care and money – not just words. It is therefore not surprising that the Fundamentalists should have a large and, as time went by, growing appeal or that they should at some point decide to use to seek political power.

This is what the FIS did in Algeria; but when it became clear that its predictable and predicted victory was going to materialise, the game was cancelled at half-time and the army confiscated the ball. This intervention in the electoral process has precipitated Algeria in a crisis from which it does not appear ready to emerge. But it was welcomed with relief in Europe as well as Algeria's two immediate neighbours. In fact, Hassan II and Ben Ali, who were neither consulted nor informed beforehand about Algerian President Chédli Benjedid's decision to legalise the FIS, were concerned that a FIS victory would lead to a resurgence of Islamist movements in Morocco and Tunisia. Consequently, not only did they consider the Algerian army's move as appropriate, but they also took precautions to prevent their own Fundamentalists from following on the FIS's steps.

It is clear that the crisis has brought pain and anguish to the Algerian people. What is less clear is whether there any lessons to be learned from it especially by other North African countries and by Europe. In particular, one has to ask if North Africa – and the rest of the Arab world – are condemned to choose between democracy and Fundamentalism; whether the choice can be made without precipitating social disintegration; whether both alternatives are bound to result in such a disintegration; and lastly whether the EU can or should provide any help to find answers to these questions.

4. The Challenge of Democracy in North Africa

The following conclusions may be drawn from the preceding discussion:

1. The nationalist leaders and movements who put an end to colonial rule could have built the new independent states on democratic foundations. There were no social, economic or political obstacles that would have prevented the successful implementation of such a choice. At earlier periods other societies that were not more advanced than those of North Africa at that time had successfully established democratic governments. Furthermore, democracy would not have prevented North Africa's leaders from exercising power and would have even consolidated the legitimacy of their leadership.
2. In each country many commendable policies were adopted and positive results achieved but the regimes, while claiming credit for successes, were neither willing to adjust to the logical consequences of successful policies nor to assume responsibility for those that failed. Thus, they wanted recognition for having improved educational levels, health conditions and living standards but they would not accept that citizens whose utilitarian needs have been satisfied should want to participate in public life or demand

the right to hold leaders accountable for their acts. Policies that presented potential negative consequences were not submitted to public debate and those that did prove harmful could not be criticised or denounced. Had the leaders invited or encouraged public participation in the political process, they would have spared their countries the consequences of ill-advised decisions and would have set up the ways and means for avoiding similar errors in the future through a peaceful and structured political dialogue.

3. As problems increase in number and intensity it became increasingly difficult to hide or deny their existence. But paradoxically this made the leaders more adamant in their claim that these were not problems but mere "challenges" imposed by external factors (globalisation being the current favourite culprit), more entrenched in their belief that only they can meet such challenges and protect the nation's welfare and integrity, and more intransigent towards critics and dissidents.
4. Having come to the conclusion that the regimes were neither interested in nor capable of resolving urgent problems, people endured their suffering in forced silence while staying on the lookout for the slightest opportunity when they could collectively express their discontent. The Fundamentalists used skilfully this situation to their advantage. Having legitimate venues (mosques), legitimate reasons for gathering crowds (praying, preaching) and legitimate issues to raise (religious values that happen to apply to politics), the imams turned politicians could denounce all wrongdoers and call on all God-fearing men to wage a jihad to set up God's kingdom on earth.
5. Such a message left no one indifferent but two reactions are of interest here. The first is that of government in power. They all accused the Fundamentalists of mixing religion with politics and denied them any right to pose as the exclusive or most competent defenders of Islam and Muslim values. They then declared them subversives and even heretics! This reaction is understandable and perhaps not farfetched. But then they went from there to argue that all critics could only have Fundamentalist tendencies and that all those who challenge power-holders or seek to exercise power are equally subversive – an attitude which is not understandable and quite farfetched.

   The second reaction is that of the West, including the EU. Initially, the reaction tended to be hysteric, although the large number of spectacular terrorist acts carried out by Arab and Islamist groups may have explained – if not justified – official and popular attitudes towards Islam at that time. But even when it appeared that all Muslims were not Fundamentalists or potential terrorists and that not all Fundamentalists were bent on violence and confrontation, this did not have much effect on initial Western perceptions. In particular, the EU continued to equate Fundamentalism with terrorism and to consider both as threats to its security. Moreover, it gave credence to North Africa's regimes who played on this fear and claimed that that any move in the direction of democracy was bound to the Fundamentalists in power (look at Algeria, said they) and create instability in the region. This attitude, however, has been revised, as will be

discussed below.

In sum, democracy has not existed in North Africa, although it could have; nor does is exist now, notwithstanding all claims to the contrary, nor is there any inherent reason for it not to exist in the future. Without going into a lengthy dissertation on the nature of democracy, it will suffice to consider as democratic any polity in which citizens delegate authority to individuals who freely and fairly chosen on a periodic and regular basis and who are held responsible for their actions and decisions while in office. Democracy does not guarantee good or efficient government nor does it always yield desirable results. But this does not justify its rejection or the cancellation of its results, because the main merit of democracy is that it leaves the way open to different choices or corrective actions the next time around.

Democracy requires adherence to some values such as belief in the virtues of dialogue, tolerance for different opinions, accepting criticism, and abiding by majority decisions however adverse they may be. Such values may have to be acquired through practice but the learning process has to start sometime and it has to postulate that everyone is capable of undertaking it.

But if democracy is desirable and possible in North Africa, its emergence will take time and effort (hopefully no blood, unavoidably a lot of sweat and, most likely some tears). The prospects of democracy will be all the brighter that the following obstacles are downsized or eliminated:

The first and perhaps most formidable obstacle is represented by each of the regimes currently in power in North Africa. In Morocco the monarch wants to rule and to reign and considers himself untouchable in both capacities. The country does have some features of a democratic system such as a parliament and a number of political parties but ultimate power is in the hands of the King. Most acts depend on his initiative and goodwill, including those that are defining characteristics of a democracy such as respect of laws and human rights. In this respect the regime in Morocco (and elsewhere) commit various abuses but reject any condemnation for such acts. However, when they decide to suspend such practices they present that as an act of magnanimity and goodness to be admired and applauded. Similarly, regimes have now and then proposed "national charters" or "pacts of good behaviour" designed to regulate relations between rulers and civil society and which stipulate, among other things, that the signers shall abide by the law of the and that lawbreakers shall be sanctioned – as if such matters were subject to a negotiated agreement.

In Algeria the army continues to be the main political player and to hold ultimate power. Currently, there are speculations that it is preparing to depose President Boutaflika after having engineered his election to office. Interestingly, Algeria has been the country with the least pretence of democratic government and was considered the least likely to democratise. Yet it became the first – and so far the only – country in the region to carry out a genuinely democratic experiment. But the experiment came to an abrupt end because its first outcome was deemed unacceptable. The ensuing crisis is not likely to be resolved unless that outcome is validated or the experiment is repeated in its original format, i.e. with the participation of FIS. But this can happen only if the army withdraws from politics.

The second major obstacle to democratisation is the attitude of citizens towards politics. At present citizens are barred from any meaningful participation in the political process and are afraid to petition for the right to such a participation. As a result, most people have withdrawn from active citizenship to become passive subjects of whoever happens to rule. Anomy, which is considered as a threat to the survival of democracy, must also be considered as a threat to its emergence. However, misery, despair and pent-up resentment may at any time take people out of their apathy and into the streets to "kick the rascals out" and replace them by whoever seems most likely to bring about effective change. To prevent such a dangerous development people have to be offered alternative ways of achieving the desired end. At present most opposition parties in North Africa are unable to offer alternatives because their very existence depends upon the goodwill of the regimes and as a result, they have little

credibility and would attract little support in future elections. In this respect, Fundamentalist groups have skilfully exploited their illegality to acquire credibility and legitimacy and those who support them do so as a way of defying the regimes and anyone directly or indirectly connected to those regimes. One can even go so far as to argue that the Fundamentalists do not even need to destroy democracy once they had used it to come to power: it they can just manage to prevent the economic and social situation from further deterioration they can realistically expect to be re-elected again and again because voters will be inclined not only to give them time to undo the consequences of decades of mismanagement but especially to block the return of faces and groups associated with bad old days. Resentment does not fade easily and some wounds do not heal rapidly; and even if people do not turn vindictiveness into vendettas and if they can resist the desire of making the oppressor taste his own medicine, they will still do everything to prevent a return to a hated past.

A factor that may become the third obstacle to democratisation in North Africa is the EU's inability to devise an effective, coherent and consistent policy towards the region. At present popular attitudes towards the West (the EU being perceived as a mere underling within the group) are negative and not improving. The reasons for this are too numerous and sufficiently known to allow or warrant their discussion here but some of them, which are particularly prominent in North Africa and apply specifically to the EU, need to be mentioned.

The EU has come to consider the Mediterranean as an important region that deserves a specific and long-term policy. Therefore, it launched an initiative that eventually led to the adoption in 1995 of the Barcelona Declaration which set a number of objectives to be achieved in common by the EU and twelve partners from the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean. The overall aim of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) is to turn the Mediterranean into an area of peace, stability and shared prosperity and where some fundamental principles – such as non-interference in internal affairs, the rule of law, respect of human rights, democracy – would prevail. The Barcelona Declaration also envisages the creation of a Euromed free trade zone by virtue of partnership agreements concluded between the EU and each of the Mediterranean non-EU countries (MNCs). Morocco and Tunisia are already parties to such agreements.

So far little progress has been made towards the objectives defined in Barcelona, and the process towards achieving them – the Barcelona Process – is being reviewed in the hope that it can be re-launched or reinvigorated. Ironically, but not surprisingly, the process has created – at least in Morocco and Tunisia – a consensus among governments and populations who are now questioning it, although for entirely different reasons.

Governments saw the EMP as something that could bring material and political benefits at little cost. Economic such as privatisation, trade liberalisation and other adjustments measures have been presented as required by the EMP but they were implemented in such a way that most of their benefits went to a small elite and all of their costs borne by the rest of the population. At the same time, implementation brought rewards from the EU in the form of funds and political support, if nothing else. None of this was very objectionable, but when the EU started alluding to other EPM measures that had been neglected, such as democratic rule and respect of human rights, governments bristled.

The public, on the other hand, had to endure the negative effects of the free trade agreements (unemployment, higher prices …) but saw no compensation coming in the form of progress towards the positive objectives of the EPM, particularly in the areas of democratisation and human rights.

As a result, the EPM and its initiator the EU came under attack from both sides. On the one hand, governments have given a *fin de non recevoir* to EU suggestions that greater attention be paid to the political 'basket' of the Barcelona Declaration. The breakdown of the Middle East peace process in late 2000 provided a convenient reason for postponing further discussion of the issue. What will happen when or if the question comes up again? If the EU stands by its recently-adopted resolve, many MNCs will threaten to withdraw from the Barcelona Declaration (which is not legally binding anyway) and, in the case of Morocco and

Tunisia, to even rescind the Partnership Agreements.

On the other hand, societies – particularly segments that are not officially considered as "civil" – will grow restless as economic difficulties increase and political expectations remain unmet. Already, they widely believe that the EPM is a thinly disguised form of imperialism designed to exploit and dominate the Arabs, and that the EU will do nothing to destabilise regimes needed to carry out its plan. Past behaviour and declarations by EU members and organs are seen did little to contradict such perceptions. As for the EU's recently proclaimed intent to take a more proactive approach in favour of democratisation, it runs the risk of being greeted with some degree of cynicism and seen as an effort to placate legitimate aspirations for genuine democracy.

The EU will find itself in a quandary, if it is not already. If it leans too heavily on current regimes, it will alienate them without necessarily achieving the desired goal of democratisation and it may lose the EPM as a forum in which it can exert further pressure on them. On the other hand, if its opts for gradualism and patient persuasion, it will be accused by public opinion of temporising in order to allow regimes to tighten their grip on their societies. It cannot even consider a policy of 'the steel hand in a velvet glove' because the regimes will focus on the hand and try to avoid it while public opinion will see only the glove and denounce its softness. To further complicate the situation, the Fundamentalists stand to profit most from any solution adopted to resolve this dilemma: if democracy is instituted and elections are held, they are likely to be voted in power. If not, they can put the blame on the regimes and their foreign patrons and wait for the mobs to carry them to power.

Devising a suitable policy is most difficult, especially that time is of the essence. Nevertheless, the situation may still be salvaged provided that that the EU's resolve does not dissolve. What will be needed is a series of measures that would bring quick, tangible and widespread results to increasingly skeptic populations. Whatever the measures adopted, they should seek to compensate the negative effects of liberalisation, amend and complement clauses of the Partnership Agreements that have created social and economic difficulties, and create hope for a better life in the not-too distant future. Furthermore, the EU should clearly indicate its firm intention to invite any interested groups and individuals to participate in the identification, implementation and follow-up of those measures and ask governments to refrain from any attempts to prevent, discourage, manipulate or sanctions such participation.

If successful, such a strategy would yield several benefits. It will make people feel that they are no longer limited to a choice between forced obedience or violent protest. It will give them confidence in their ability to influence events relating to their welfare. It will encourage them to take initiatives and make decisions as well as reassure them that their actions would be judged strictly on the basis of merit. And they will see experience firsthand the virtues – and the difficulties – of discussion, negotiation and compromise.

However, the strategy is not likely to open the way to democratic rule if it is not accompanied by a qualitative change in the way the EU and its members deal with uncooperative and unresponsive governments. Until now the EU has been much too lenient towards regimes that are clearly authoritarian. Its failure to condemn the cancellation of the 1991 elections in Algeria has particularly damaged its image and may ultimately lead to the failure of its current efforts in favour of democracy. EU commitment to democracy is seen as opportunistic, insincere, inconsistent and wavering. European countries may intervene collectively or individually when a prominent opposition figure is persecuted in North Africa but remain silent and inactive regarding less famous victims of detention, torture, harassment and other violations of human rights. Not only are such acts continuing unabated but their perpetrators are received in European capitals with honours and respect.

The EU will have to be more circumspect in its dealings with North African politicians. If it chooses not to reprehend them openly, it should at least not to condone their crimes. In any case, it may be no longer sufficient to rely on discreet diplomacy. What goes on behind the scene will have no impact on public opinion. The EU will be expected to speak its conscious

louder and with greater conviction.

Conclusion

All three North African countries missed early opportunities to establish democratic systems of government that would have made them by now mature, stable democracies. Over the years, they have adopted institutions and processes usually associated with democracy but they have failed to make them operational. If one were to evaluate the North African political systems on the basis their current constitutions, one would find them quite acceptable and perhaps superior to those of some Western countries. But few elements of those constitutions are actually applied or respected.

The challenge of democracy is in effect the challenge of a speedy and effective implementation of existing constitutions. North Africans must meet that challenge by themselves but the odds against them have to be improved. In this respect the EU could play a useful role not so much by assisting democratic forces as by making the playing field level and ensuring that it does not unwittingly aid and abet antidemocratic forces.

In the short run the prospects of democracy in North Africa are not encouraging. Indeed, Tunisia is moving backwards; in Morocco the new king has seemed to be liberalising the regime but he appears to have second thoughts. In both countries the Fundamentalists are keeping a low profile but are by no means out of the picture. As for Algeria, it is caught between the army which wants does not want to loosen its iron grip on power and the Islamists who want to reclaim what was taken away from them by force.

If fair elections were held now anywhere in North Africa, the Islamists are likely to obtain good scores, if not outright victories. But this should not become an argument for postponing the democratic process or an excuse for nipping it at the bud. That will only condemn the countries to greater repression at the hands of frightened regimes or uncompromising Fundamentalists. A better approach would be to give people fewer reasons to opt for radical solutions and convincing arguments that better alternatives are available and forthcoming.