

Why is the EU lenient on Arab democracy?

By Michael Meyer-Resende

26 February 2008

Following Ukraine's parliamentary elections last year, the European Union praised the polls as being "mostly in line with international commitments." But the EU also registered concerns over low-quality voter lists and underlined "the need to further strengthen the electoral and constitutional process in order to consolidate the democratic process."

Three weeks before the elections, Brussels had "saluted" the Moroccan government and its people for holding "successful and transparent elections, in particular through the establishment of a new legal framework." No concerns were raised, which suggested that the EU perceived Morocco to be more democratic than Ukraine. But is it?

Morocco has made some progress in democratization, but is ruled by a king whose executive branch of power dominates political life, while in Ukraine all layers of political power are contested through elections. Morocco's voter lists are at least as faulty as Ukraine's. And while some 60 percent of voters went to the polls in Ukraine, three out of four Moroccans stayed away. So why does the EU paint such a rosy picture of elections in Morocco?

One answer is, of course, *realpolitik*. Morocco is, after all, a stable country in an unstable region, more liberal than most Arab states and a reliable international partner, reducing any European urge to push too hard for democratization. But then again, news of pro-European forces regaining ground in Ukrainian politics should have been equally welcome in Brussels. So *realpolitik* cannot be the only explanation.

When the EU deals with its southern neighbors, it often lacks detailed information and clear analysis of the situation. After all, Brussels praised Morocco's "new electoral framework," which was already in use during the 2002 elections. The only significant difference was the re-districting of some constituency boundaries, which, if anything, increased the already high inequality of votes in favor of conservative rural districts. Knowledge of such simple facts is often the result of expert analysis and reporting. In Eastern Europe these facts are usually picked up by election observation missions of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) or the Council of Europe - staple suppliers of expert analysis to which the EU regularly refers. In contrast, southern EU neighbors like Morocco evade such scrutiny, because no international expert organizations are at work in that part of the world.

But it is such detailed analysis that makes democracy promotion effective, because it increases the onus on governments that want to benefit from democratic legitimacy. Calling for free and fair elections is nice, but breaking this down into concrete steps is essential to measuring progress effectively. In order to send more fine-tuned messages to its southern neighbors, the EU needs partner organizations. While there are recurring discussions about whether some kind of OSCE mechanism could be launched around the Mediterranean, the chances for such an initiative to succeed in promoting democracy are low. The OSCE became effective when, in the 1990s, its participating states agreed on detailed commitments to democracy. However, there is no such consensus on human rights and democratic values between the EU and Arab governments.

Short of new institutional arrangements, there are other ways for the EU to become more focused when promoting democratization among its Arab partners. First of all, Brussels should dismiss the rhetoric of cultural relativism: All southern neighbors have ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, a legally binding United Nations document that contains the fundamental ingredients of a functioning democracy. Opinion polls show that Arabs support these values.

Secondly, the EU could make better use of reports by NGOs to assess and address democracy deficits in more detail. In Morocco the EU financed the Collectif Associatif to observe the parliamentary elections, but it ignored their findings, which were not all positive.

Finally, the most important difference between Europe's eastern and southern neighborhood is the role of political Islam in the Arab world. The EU needs to define a position on how to engage with Islamist parties. Currently its response to the rise of political Islam is ambiguous: Turkey's EU membership is being negotiated with a government led by the Islamist Justice and Development Party, but in Arab states Islamist parties are more often seen as threats, with few efforts to distinguish between moderates and extremists. Democracy promotion cannot be effective if there is no strategy for dealing with parties that are often the most powerful forces in Arab political oppositions.

Michael Meyer-Resende is the coordinator of Democracy Reporting International, a Berlin-based group that promotes the development of democracy (www.democracy-reporting.org). This commentary was written for **THE DAILY STAR**.