Speech by FM Erato Kozakou-Marcoullis on behalf of High Representative Catherine Ashton on the situation in Egypt

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Honourable Members,

We all follow with increasing concern the domestic political situation in Egypt. Last week saw violent clashes during demonstrations leading to several deaths and many hundreds injured. The situation between President Morsi’s supporters and the main opposition, the National Salvation Front, is seemingly blocked. Further protests are called for by both camps. And one question you cannot help asking yourself – what about Egypt’s democratic transition?

On Monday, we discussed the situation in Egypt in the Foreign Affairs Council. Ministers agreed that we need to see a de-escalation of the situation and an all-inclusive dialogue to find a solution based on consensus and joint ownership. And evidently Egypt needs a strong Constitution that represents ALL Egyptians.

Honourable Members,

Allow me first to recapitulate some of the events that having led to this deeply divisive political crisis.

On 22 November, President Morsi issued a Constitutional Declaration whereby he, among other things, put the Presidency beyond judicial control. On 30 November, a draft Constitution was adopted by the Islamist dominated Constituent Assembly and presented to the President. A public referendum on the Constitution was called for on 15 December. Demonstrations followed by both camps, initially peaceful but regrettably turning violent last week. Last Thursday, President Morsi addressed the nation calling for talks, however not budging on the Constitutional Declaration and keeping the set date for the referendum.

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1 Check against delivery.
The National Salvation Front, i.e. the main opposition bloc consisting of liberal and secular parties, including i.a. former presidential contenders Amr Moussa and Mohamed El-Baradei refused to take part in the talks since none of their requests were complied with, i.e. to rescind the constitutional declaration, cancel the constitutional referendum and create a new Constituent Assembly.

On Saturday and following the planned dialogue that convened some 60 political figures, however not the National Salvation Front, President Morsi nullified the initial Constitutional Declaration but thereafter he issued a new one including keeping date for the referendum. As we speak new demonstrations are called for by both pro-Morsi supporters as well as the opposition. But the situation is calmer in the streets. The national Salvation Front has announced it will participate in the constitutional referendum and campaign for a no vote. This lends a new level of legitimacy to the vote.

On the economic front, Egypt decided to freeze for the moment the IMF loan for a month. This is not a final decision and we will need to see how the situation unfolds.

Honourable Members,

All along, HR/VP Ashton, as well as the EUSR Leon, and the EU Delegation in Cairo have been in constant touch with the main political protagonists, not least Foreign Minister Amr, passing on messages on the need for de-escalation and conciliatory moves. This has been judged the preferred course of action given the degree of polarisation, controversy between the parties and also the sensitivity on both sides about outside interference. As you will know, last Wednesday, HR/VP Ashton also conveyed in a public statement the importance of Egypt continuing its democratic transition and called for inclusive dialogue.

Honorable Members,

Going back to my initial question on Egypt's democratic transition.

Democracy building is not a 'quick fix'. Many of you have witnessed this process recently in your own countries. You know that building deep and sustainable democracy is a long process which requires hard work, commitment, stamina - as well as patience - domestically and internationally. Sometimes actions and measures will be taken that, in hindsight, are not particularly well considered. As one of the colleagues in the Foreign Affairs Council stated Monday: Transition was always messy and entailed divisive decisions at times. It is important however to take account of opposition demands.

I think this statement summarises the situation in Egypt very well and it is now up to the leadership together with the opposition to truly engage in an inclusive dialogue to find a consensual solution that has joint ownership – also to restore confidence regarding Egypt’s commitment to democratic transition. And, again I repeat, it is of utmost importance that Egypt gets a Constitution that represents all Egyptians, and ensures human rights for all, independently of faith, gender or any other consideration. People lost their lives on Tahrir Square and elsewhere in their legitimate request for their political and socio-economic rights – let us never forget that!

Honorable Members,

Egypt is currently facing an extremely delicate situation but they have to find a solution themselves. Egypt belongs to the Egyptians and we should and can not impose a solution. What we can do now is to show that the EU supports the people of Egypt through the democratic transition and continue our call for inclusive dialogue for a solution based on consensus. And evidently, banning any violence! The EU also needs to convey firmly and clearly our expectations for a democratic transition recalling the successful EU-Egypt Task Force of 13-14 November, where some of you did actively take part, that established a new momentum in EU-EGY relations based on ‘respect for social justice, socio-economic development, rule of law, human rights and good governance’.

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