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Moving Egypt back to the democratic path

OpEd By:

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Even in a country as turbulent as Egypt is today, some traditions transcend the sharpest divisions and provide brief periods of calm. Last week, on my drive into Cairo we saw very few cars. The city's legendary traffic jams had disappeared. It was just after dusk. People were at home with their families, breaking the daily fast during Ramadan. For a few precious hours, rival groups were putting their differences on hold.

The challenge for Egypt is to make the respite from turmoil permanent. To say I found a country that is divided is to state the obvious. The point is that the nature and depth of divisions stand in the way of progress. Democracy requires a shared understanding of how national decisions should be taken, some degree of mutual respect between those competing for power, and a willingness of the majority on any issue to respect the rights of minorities. In today's Egypt these will take time to build. The European Union wants to help this happen. A stable, democratic Egypt is vital not just for its 84 million people, but for the Middle East and the wider world, including Europe. I encountered deep mistrust between different groups. For some, the recent change is a popular rising, for others a coup.

To explore how to move forward I met the main actors on all sides: leaders of the interim government, young people from the Tamarod movement, representatives from the Freedom and Justice Party, Muslim Brotherhood and civil society. We discussed the prospect of elections taking place in the next few months, and the role the EU can play in helping to monitor and observe these elections.

How, then, can Egypt return to democracy? Here are six steps that the European Union stands ready to support.

1. Egypt needs an inclusive political process. People need to feel that they are full participants in that great country's future. Every significant group must be included. Urban liberals deserve their say as much as those who wish to combine Islamic traditions with democratic principles; men and women must share in the responsibility of civic government.
2. But it also requires building trust, reaching out to each other, and above all understanding each other.

3. The country needs a constitution equipped with the checks and balances to ensure respect for the rights of all Egyptian citizens. It needs full civilian rule.
4. The violence of the past three weeks must end. Political controversy cannot be resolved by force; too many lives have already been lost in the quest for democracy. The accounts of sexual violence during the demonstrations are especially appalling.
5. Arbitrary arrests and other forms of harassment must end. They have no place in a democratic society. Detainees, including Dr Morsi and his close associates, to be released, and criminal cases reviewed swiftly and in a transparent manner. Likewise, a free media is vital. Journalists should not be penalised as a consequence of their professional work, and broadcast media should operate unhindered by harassment or arbitrary closure.
6. Free elections within the next few months should be held within the framework of those principles. Timing is crucial. Substantial progress is needed on the first five steps for elections to produce not just winning candidates but the basis of a stable, democratic future.

The EU is willing to help Egypt take these steps; but the decisions must be owned by the Egyptian people and not by any outsiders. President Mansour and I agreed last week that a living constitution needs more than the right words. Deep democracy also needs national reconciliation and the right institutions, independent and respected, that can defend human rights and the rule of law.

Progress is not just vital; it is also urgent and I am encouraged by the timetable presented by the interim President.

A democratic culture and independent institutions will struggle to take root in an economic crisis. Today, tourists are scared away; foreign investors are holding back. Last year, we established the EU-Egypt Task Force to mobilise the international community, the private sector and civil society to support Egypt's economy. For this work to make real impact, and help to unleash the huge potential of the country and its people, Egypt must return rapidly to democracy.

Political and economic progress are inseparable, and are the answer to the loud call during the revolution in January 2011 for dignity, social justice and a decent life. A call that is still resounding throughout Egypt.

The EU is a long-term partner and friend of Egypt. In every discussion I held last week I confirmed that our support and friendship will continue. I was encouraged that every single group I met, whatever their other differences, welcomed that commitment. However, it is for the Egyptians themselves to take the democratic transition forward. They, not us, must own their future.

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