

## Supporting the Arab Awakening

Article by Catherine Ashton\*

Reactions in Europe to the Arab Awakening have veered too wildly between optimism and pessimism. As the initial euphoria gives way to the inevitable doubts, we need to stay the course and reaffirm our commitment to the emerging democracies.

Our starting point should be that democracy — everywhere — can be awkward: thrilling, inspiring and liberating, but also messy, turbulent and unpredictable. Short-term upsets are inevitable. But history, not least the history of our own continent, tells us that once deep democracy sets down roots, with the rule of law, human rights, gender equality, impartial administration, free speech and private investment, as well as honest elections, countries prosper and seek to live in peace with those around them.

That is why I am an optimist. And what has happened in the past 12 months is truly remarkable. We have witnessed free and fair elections in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco. Some have fretted over the Islamist successes at the ballot box. Others are asking for time in order to observe how this new political situation will unfold.

In Tunisia, Ennahda has entered into a coalition government with the secular political forces. In Morocco, an important chapter of “cohabitation” has been opened between the king and the prime minister from the Party of Justice and Development. A recent Gallup poll shows that while most Egyptians affirm the importance of Islam in their lives, they want religious leaders to be limited to an advisory role to the government authorities.

In Egypt, the first democratically elected Parliament in 60 years has had its first historic session. Of course, building real and deep democracy demands sustained effort and commitment. Egyptian civil society must be allowed to play its crucial role as a pillar of democracy and it is important that the state of emergency be lifted completely and the transfer to civilian rule takes place as early as possible.

I also hope Libya will build a democracy that will benefit all Libyans. We are fully engaged. Together with the United Nations, the European Union is organizing a workshop with our Libyan partners to speed up our support. Our concern is not confined to North Africa. The newly discovered rights apply whether you are from Syria, Yemen, or for that matter from Jordan, Bahrain and the other Arab monarchies. And with rights come responsibilities. That is why we look to the Libyan authorities to leave no stone unturned in investigating recent allegations of torture.

I have heard skepticism about whether “we” can trust these new political groups, who inspire themselves from various strands of Islamism. Some are worried and argue that it is not in the interest of Europe to support and assist the Arab Awakening. I disagree. We have a moral duty as well as a practical need to help our neighbors secure democracy and prosperity. We are not “spectators.” We have committed ourselves to engage, work and discuss with all the governments, parliaments and organizations with whom we share our commitment to democracy.

So let me address the issue of trust directly. It goes both ways.

A question the Islamists often raise is whether “they” can trust us? I think there is an acute need for getting beyond this mutual suspicion and for getting to know each other better. Lumping all Islamists into one and the same category is misleading and unhelpful.

We realise the need for more first-hand knowledge. Each political party and movement has to be understood and appreciated according to its own merits, just as they need to be judged by their concrete actions and deeds. These are political movements that are learning and changing before our eyes and we have taken note. They are eager to learn and government responsibility and public office will now give them the opportunity to translate their commitments into concrete laws and policies. The more we do to understand them, and help them to understand us, the better.

That is why we need mutual trust as the basis for the engagement with the new political leadership. This can only be done through direct dialogue. We will show humility in front of this huge task.

I am delighted that the prime minister of Tunisia, Hamadi Jebali, has accepted our invitation and chosen Brussels for his first official visit abroad. This visit this week is as symbolic as it is important. It shows the new government wants a close relationship with the E.U.

With Tunisia, we held a successful joint task force in September to inject direction and joint ownership into our support for the transition. We were able to bring together the international community, E.U. institutions, multilateral financial institutions, and crucially, private sector companies with one objective: backing the transition and making sure that together we become a catalyst for quicker and more effective assistance.

Now, one year after the Tunisian people decided to take the future in their own hands, the visit of Prime Minister Jebali shows that the E.U. and Tunisia want to work together to respond to the hopes of all Tunisians.

Elections are an important part of democracy. But building deep democracy is about much more. It is about the next election, about defining the ground rules and then sticking to them. It is about delivering on one’s promises, and it is about drafting constitutions that are inclusive and protect citizens’ rights, particularly with regard to women. Governing is also about providing jobs, and about being pragmatic in the face of the many social and economic challenges.

Pulling together in broad coalitions is a promising start. The journey will not be easy. But the E.U. is committed to staying the course: navigating the bumps along the way and quietly helping the demonstrators who toppled tyrants to live their dream.

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