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Renegotiating Partnership Priorities within the European Neighbourhood Policy: the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Democracy in Algeria and Egypt

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Abstract

EU's Partnership Priorities for Algeria and Egypt were adopted in 2017 and had to be re-negotiated in 2020. However, no news has been shared so far on a possible extension, nor over the timeline of their renegotiation. This brief argues that such Partnership Priorities should be re-negotiated to incorporate the challenges that COVID-19 has brought upon Algeria and Egypt in relation to democracy and human rights.

Introduction

Within the context of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the partner countries adopt programmatic documents

which represent the backbone of their relation with the European Union (EU). These documents can take the form of either bilateral Action Plans (AP) or Partnership Priorities (PP).¹ The content of these documents focuses on the specific policy areas that are considered central for the positive evolution of the partnership.

In the Southern dimensions of the ENP, all partner countries (with the exclusion of Libya and Syria) adopt either Action Plans or PPs. So far, those who negotiated and adopted PPs are Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan. However, most of these PPs expired in 2020. Negotiations were planned for 2020, a year which was shook by the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 outbreak disrupted the renegotiations of the PPs for which the European institutions had already started preparing in 2019. No news has been

¹ European Parliament (2021), Southern Partners.

shared up until now on a possible extension of such Priorities, nor over the timeline of their renegotiation.² This brief argues that PPs, as the backbone of the relation between the EU and its Mediterranean partners, should be renegotiated as soon as possible, also taking into consideration the recent challenges that COVID-19 has brought upon the Southern neighbourhood. Through the case studies of Egypt and Algeria, this brief argues that coronavirus-related challenges do not only concern health and economic aspects, but also the increasing threat to human rights and the protection of the rule of law and freedoms. The indirect impact of the pandemic on the structures of the democratic state should therefore be reflected in the renegotiations of the PPs with the two partner countries, in line with the communication on a New Agenda for the Mediterranean and in line with the new Action Plan.

COVID-19's impact on democracy: a call for a renewed focus on democracy in EU-Mediterranean Partnership?

In the case of Algeria, the PPs were adopted in 2017 and focus mainly on four tenets: good governance and fundamental rights; socio-economic growth and trade; energy, environment and climate change; migration and mobility. In the case of Egypt, the PPs were adopted within the context of the EU-Egypt Association Council in 2017. They focus on stability, good governance, economic modernisation and sustainable energy, social development and protection and improving the stability of the democratic state. In the case of Egypt, the language on human rights was rather mitigated due to the diverging interests of Member States and the preference to maintain a pragmatic orientation in EU-Egypt relations. The differences in the content

and structures of PPs in the two case studies reflect the differentiation approach adopted by the revised ENP. This tailor-made approach has significantly evolved since 2017, the year when the PPs were last adopted for Egypt and Algeria. However, the year 2020, during which the renegotiation of such PPs was foreseen, has been characterised by both the emergence of new challenges and the deterioration of existing ones, brought forward by the coronavirus pandemic.

COVID-19 has underlined fragilities not only within the health and economic systems, but also in relation to the respect of human rights and democracy. We can expect that the pandemic, in fact, will have structural and long-lasting consequences stretching beyond the challenging phase of the sanitary emergency.³ Such challenges should be understood and reintegrated with a different level of prioritisation, within the framework of the PPs. The latter are in fact the programmatic basis around which the cooperation is structured. The new PPs will also need to reflect the new financial framework structures, with the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI) being replaced by the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI).

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The COVID-19 pandemic has stressed political and institutional risks associated with the limitation of freedoms in the name of health concerns.⁴ In the case of Egypt, President el-Sisi approved the amendment to the 1958 emergency law, providing himself and the

² European Parliament, op. cit.

³ European Commission (2021), EU response to the Coronavirus Pandemic in the Southern Neighbourhood.

⁴ Tamburini, F. (2021): "The COVID-19 Outbreak in North Africa: A Legal Analysis", *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, p. 3.

security services with extraordinary powers, related to the emergency situation.⁵ However, only five out of the eighteen amendments bore some connection to the sanitary emergency.⁶ The emergency has underlined the already and ever-more present danger of the fragility of el-Sisi's state apparatus. Differently from Egypt, Algeria did not implement ad-hoc legislation on COVID-19 to further repress fundamental freedoms. However, the harsh repression of opposition voices and media, which has been ongoing since the 2019 February protests, has continued through the usual control tools.⁷

The further crackdown on civil society implemented against the context of the pandemic pushes us to reflect on the importance of prioritising democracy and stability in EU's relation with the Southern Mediterranean. If we look at the cases of Egypt and Algeria, the situation concerning human rights and democracy has significantly deteriorated since 2017, when PPs were last negotiated and adopted. The EU needs, therefore, also in light of the fragilities underlined by the coronavirus pandemic, to redefine its priorities and partnership objectives against a new, more complex economic and political context. In particular, by focusing more on human rights and democracy promotion and by renewing and expanding such commitment in programmatic documents such as the PPs, the EU will positively contribute to an improved partnership of equals with Algeria and Egypt.

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⁵ Canali, S. (2020): Emergenza sanitaria: quali conseguenze sul deficit democratico nel vicinato Sud?, *Agenda Treccani*.

Conclusion

The Partnership Priorities represent the fundamental structure of the cooperation between the EU and its Southern neighbours. They display and elaborate on the main challenges and policy objectives which the EU follows against its Mediterranean partners. In this sense, the 2017-2020 Partnership Priorities negotiated with Egypt and Algeria reflect the EU's strong focus on challenges relating to good governance, democracy and human rights - alongside other issues, such as economic growth, sustainability and energy. However, this brief argues that the current situation on these fundamental issues has negatively evolved since 2017, and institutional and political fragilities have been exacerbated by the breakout of the coronavirus pandemic. The drift towards authoritarianism, the brutal repression of fundamental freedoms and crackdown on civil society should be a major concern for the EU and should be more deeply and significantly reflected in the renewed Partnership Priorities. The increased focus on good governance would reflect the dangers and fragilities that the coronavirus pandemic has further uncovered in this area. An obstacle to such an ambitious update and to the deepening of language on human rights might be represented by Member States who are mostly oriented to a pragmatic approach with Egypt, responding mainly to concerns such as energy security, migration and counter-terrorism cooperation.

Keeping this concept of principled pragmatism in mind, such an extended focus on democracy and good governance in the next generation of Partnership Priorities should not, however, undermine the pragmatic approach that the EU has adopted towards its Southern partners. Hence, reinforcing the focus on good governance, democracy and human rights

⁶ Human Rights Watch (2020): "Egypt: Covid-19 Cover for New Repressive Powers".

⁷ Tamburini, F. (2021): op. cit., p. 7.

should not entail undermining other dimensions to the Partnership, such as energy security, sustainability, migration, that have remained central in the EU's and the Member States' agendas in the past four years and should also be reflected accordingly in the renewed Partnership Priorities.

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