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Democratic values and cosy relationships in North Africa

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The EU has done little in the past to further democracy in North Africa, writes Anna Khakee of Madrid-based think-tank FRIDE in an exclusive commentary for EurActiv. If Europe wants to avoid future embarrassment, it has to give up the close ties some of its politicians have had with the North African elite, she argues.

The following commentary was sent exclusively to EurActiv by Anna Khakee, associate researcher at Madrid-based think-tank FRIDE.

"Change is difficult. Since Ben Ali's ousting, Tunisia's interim government has been trying to move towards stability. Although the state of emergency remains, the curfew in place since the beginning of the Jasmine Revolution has now been lifted. This is a positive sign in what will be a long and difficult transformation.

Tunisians managed on their own to depose a man who for nearly 24 years used all means, including the most profound disrespect for civil liberties and basic human rights, to stay in power. But if the country – and others in the region that have or may well follow suit – is to become a fully-fledged democracy, European backing must be forthcoming, united and committed, something which is far from assured.

During the Ben Ali regime, the European Union did very little to help bring about democracy in the country. And European governments remained at best passive vis-à-vis autocratic rule over the decades. Embarrassed, the EU is now trying to mend fences: it has decided to freeze Ben Ali and [his wife Leila] Trabelsi's assets, it has offered electoral support and other types of assistance – the EU's diplomacy chief Catherine Ashton pledged an additional 17 million euros in emergency assistance during her 14 February visit to the country – and has committed to giving Tunisia an 'advanced status' as soon as a democratically-elected government is in place.

The EU's goal of supporting democracy and human rights has, in any event, taken a beating. How then can a repetition of this less-than-glorious series of EU inactions leading up to the Jasmine Revolution be avoided in the future?

What happened in the case of EU policies towards Tunisia was, in essence, that northern and central European states, presumably due to a lack of strong conviction and interest, let the elites of a few member states define the EU's stance towards Tunisia. Particularly, France and Italy have taken the lead, countries whose foreign policies are among the most apprehensive when it comes to professing democratic values internationally.

Of course, the spectre of an Islamist takeover has been a clear concern in a jittery Europe, even vis-à-vis moderate Tunisia. Migration is another main European worry, echoed today in Italy as thousands of Tunisians have recently landed on Lampedusa's shores. But perhaps most important are the cosy political, economic and personal ties linking the elites on the southern and northern shores of the Mediterranean.

France and Italy are Tunisia's main trading partners. In particular, French firms are very well implanted in the country and several companies reportedly had close links to the Ben Ali-Trabelsi business empires.

Beyond economics, many European politicians have for [a] long [time] enjoyed close personal ties with Tunisian elites. The French foreign minister famously spent her Christmas holidays in Tunisia, benefitting from the largesse of a well-connected Tunisian businessman, and it was recently announced that a top French lawyer who has defended public figures such as Dominique de Villepin and Loïk Le Floch-Prigent has accepted to defend Imed Trabelsi in Tunisia.

If the EU continues to let such ties and interests determine its policies, European goals of supporting democracy and basic human rights in its neighbourhood may be compromised once more. A repeat is particularly likely in Morocco, where a peaceful Facebook-organised protest is scheduled to take place on Sunday to call for political reform.

The configuration of European interests in Morocco very much resembles that of Tunisia. France, together with Spain, is Morocco's main trading partner and most big French companies in all economic sectors are present in Morocco. Total, Suez, Renault, Bouygues, EADS, BNP Paribas and Axa are some of the most well-known.

Their position is at times quite comfortable: for example, the much-criticised deal between the Moroccan authorities and Alstom for the construction of a fast train (TGV) link between Casablanca and Tangiers was reportedly reached after very limited competition.

Political ties between France and Morocco are also close and personal. According to the French press, President Nicolas Sarkozy and his wife spent their 2010 Christmas holidays in an 'undisclosed' location in Morocco. In 2009, the couple reportedly stayed at Jnane Lekbir, one of the Moroccan king's residences near Marrakech. At the end of last year, an impressive list of French politicians from left to right was also to be found under the Moroccan sun, including two presidential hopefuls, Ségolène Royal and Dominique Strauss-Kahn.

Such cosy, post-colonial links are not in Europe's best interest and such ties should not get the legitimacy that joint EU actions confer. This is perhaps particularly true in Morocco where – as opposed to oil-rich and less pro-European Algeria and Libya – the EU could avoid another foreign policy misstep and make a real difference.

Up until now Morocco has been fairly calm, but given that it suffers from many of the same ills as Tunisia (blatant inequalities, corruption and greed at the highest levels, and a glut of unemployed youth, including unemployed graduates), that calm may not last. Morocco has been a much more open place than Tunisia, but it is far from being a democracy.

If the EU does not wish to stay consistently 'behind the curve', Europe must seriously work towards a true democratic transition in Morocco, even if it means that Mr Sarkozy will have to spend Christmas elsewhere next time around."