

Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Venizelos' intervention at the European Parliament Plenary on the situation in Egypt

Mr President, Honourable Members,

Three years have passed since the Egyptian people from all walks of life rose against a repressive regime calling for freedom, human dignity, social justice and a better economy. Throughout that period Europe has been standing by the Egyptian people with the aim to support political inclusiveness and democratic transition. And we will remain committed in our support to the Egyptian people

A large number of individuals have lost their lives in the struggle for a democratic society and a better future for their children and families. Many more have suffered injuries. The 25 January 2014 should have been a day of celebration for democracy-building and a day of remembrance of these brave people.

It is therefore with great concern that we have followed the violent events and again loss of life, before and during the recent constitutional referendum, and on the occasion of the third anniversary of the Egyptian revolution. The HRVP has condemned in the clearest possible terms all acts of violence, disproportionate use of force as well as terrorist attacks.

The ratification of the new Constitution by the referendum on 14 and 15 January is a positive development as long as it allows the swift and full implementation of the road map.

The lack of a truly representative drafting process and the lack of political space for dissenting opinion is extremely worrying, and so is the challenging environment for freedoms of assembly and of political expression.

The European message is clear: without full respect for human rights the road map will lead nowhere.

The new Constitutional Charter is an improvement, notably the human rights chapter including freedom of expression, assembly and women's rights. It is crucial that all existing and future legislation fully complies with the Constitution and with international standards, with respect for international rules and human rights

The Constitution should also be applied in a way that ensures full civilian control over all branches of government, without non-democratic interventions, and civilians should be tried in civilian courts at all times.

The EU followed the referendum and, while we were not in the position to verify alleged irregularities, the assessment is that these do not appear to have fundamentally affected the final outcome.

We welcome the announcement of elections.

The EU has been invited to observe the upcoming elections sending full-fledged Election Observation Missions, headed by one of the Members of this House. We will have the capacity and instruments to assess whether conditions are conducive to inclusive,

transparent and credible elections allowing a level playing field for the election campaigns, and to assess also the conduct of these elections.

It is clear that, for the future stability of Egypt, these elections should lead to a democratically elected President and a fair representation of the political views in the future parliament.

The EU calls on the authorities to ensure the defendants' rights to a fair and timely trial based on clear charges and proper and independent investigations, as well as the right of access and contact to lawyers and family members.

The EU is also particularly concerned about the deteriorating economic situation and the negative impact on the less favoured categories of the population. Today, about half of the population live in real poverty and the most vulnerable of them are children.

In that context the EU will continue its support in improving the social and economic conditions to ensure stability, investment and progress towards social justice, as well as the carrying out of fundamental economic reform measures.

Building a deep and sustainable democracy is a long and sometimes very bumpy road. Democracy-building requires hard work, commitment and compromise from all political sides, because the ultimate goal is the creation of democratic, transparent and accountable institutions that protect all citizens of Egypt and their fundamental rights. Egypt is a key country with regard to all the major problems of the Near and Middle East and of the Eastern Mediterranean, and Europe's interest is great.

Thank you!

Reply

Thank you Madam President. The statements of the honourable MEPs expressed, I think, the whole spectrum of the views that exist in the EU regarding the Egyptian issue. The EU's stance – the institutional, official stance, as expressed by High Representative Ashton – is a stance of principles; a clear and careful stance that at the same time is aimed at being effective. That is, at maintaining the potential for exerting real pressure towards the completion of this difficult process of transition towards the restoration of democracy and the rule of law.

The situation remains critical and fragile. We cannot have political dissenters and journalists held in prison. The EU is very concerned and always says this with emphasis, regarding the unacceptable detention of political dissenters and journalists. We cannot have limits on freedom of speech or on the right to assemble and demonstrate peacefully.

I also note the references that were made to the need to protect women. I made a particular note of everything that was said regarding the situation in Sinai. Personally, I must say that I have a particular interest, as the Greek Foreign Minister, in Sinai, because there is an historic Byzantine monastery there – the Monastery of Saint Catherine – that is an enclave of the region and a treasure of global cultural heritage.

Of course, very significant steps have been achieved. The ratification of the new and improved constitution, which provides for respect of fundamental rights, will enable Egypt to make a fresh start. This is what we want, this is what we are pursuing, this is what we hope for. Egypt must not miss this very important opportunity.

The cycle of violence must stop, as must actions that lead to violence. So provocations must be avoided. Hate rhetoric must be avoided. Political statements that indiscriminately stigmatize political groups as terrorists must stop. And there also has to be a conscious and systematic effort towards the participation of all political forces in this political process, in a reconciliatory and inclusive political process. Otherwise, we cannot achieve our goal.

No political party, no political force, can govern alone in Egypt, with only its own vision for society. There needs to be pluralism, synthesis of views, coexistence. Polarization dangerously destabilizes the situation, with extremely negative consequences for the economy. I visited Cairo relatively recently, and I talked not only to my colleague, whom I have met with several times since then, but I also talked to the Egyptian Prime Minister, especially about economic issues.

For over a year now, the EU, and High Representative Ashton in particular, as well as the special representatives, Messrs. Leon and Lambrinidis, of course, who will be visiting Cairo in a few days, have been involved in efforts to achieve the participation of all the political forces in this process; this unifying process. Of course, when you constantly have phenomena of violence, terrorist attacks, when lives are lost, the atmosphere is heavy, and it is difficult for one to take the necessary steps.

The intention of the High Representative, whom I have the honor of representing, is – with the support of the Council and the European Parliament – to maintain the dialogue with all the political forces in Egypt, so as to support all the credible and necessary initiatives that lead to the normalization of the situation, to the full restoration of democracy and the rule of law, and of course reconciliation. I think this will have beneficial results for the stability of Egypt.

Because examples were mentioned of other Arab countries, other countries in the wider region of North Africa, I want to point out that the truth is that, historically, Egypt, because of its size, does not usually copy other models, but functions itself as a model for the developments in the wider region. We have to bear this very seriously in mind. Because we have to realize and bear in mind, in the Organs of the European Union, the special weight that the situation in Egypt has historically, politically, militarily, socially and symbolically.

So I think that our debate was open, sincere, representative of the views that exist in European societies, and useful for the steps we have to take as the Council, headed by the High Representative.

Thank you.