

The Mediterranean and the Middle East on 2007

While 2006, overshadowed by the violent power struggle between Hamas and the Fatah in Palestine, the war between Israel and Hezbollah and a further destabilisation of Iraq, has been a rather difficult year for the Southern Mediterranean and the Middle East, 2007 does not promise to be very much better. Except for some noteworthy and partly even wide-ranging reforms in Morocco, the region between Tétouan in the West and Tartus in the East is still more than likely to be characterised by authoritarian rule, bad governance and thus human rights violations.

At least in parts of the Southern Mediterranean there are somewhat promising signs that civil society is finally awakening and demanding greater political participation in every sector of public life. At the forefront of this tendency are Islamist movements that do not only ride on a great deal of public support due to their provision of public goods in the welfare sector, but that also offer very alternative political development paths underpinned by the Sharia.

While until recently, and highly influenced by the bloody civil war in Algeria, Western societies have tended to outcast and stigmatise these movements without even having analysed their ideologies and, more importantly, their actions on the ground, 2006 was marked by a gradual rethinking and Western international actors, such as the EU and the US, have gradually started to approach non-violent political Islamists in order to identify potential common ground.

As it is obvious that, at least for the time being, these movements represent the only alternative to the class of (aging) authoritarian rulers, it is imperative for any external actor that aims at supporting the emerging civil society in the Southern Mediterranean and the Middle East to no longer ignore them and to build up sustainable channels of communication and, finally filter the truly democratic ones from the non-democratic movements. Such a development however, takes time as confidence-building is a gradual and rather long process.

Undoubtedly, authoritarian regimes will sooner or later have to adjust their strategies of dealing with this growing domestic opposition as they cannot afford to just standby and watch them grow bigger and become more popular both domestically and internationally. Yet, hitherto their strategies were either characterised by co-optation and controlled inclusion into the political arena, such as in Morocco or Jordan, or by repression, such as in Tunisia, Syria or Saudi-Arabia.

Given the current regimes tight grip to power and as long as they continue to be considered by the West as reliable and willing partners in the fight against terrorism, it is very likely that these strategies will persist throughout 2007 and that Southern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern societies continue to be betrayed by their leaders.

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