

GOOD NEIGHBOURS

Negotiations over expanding Tunisia's integration into the European Union are raising questions about the efficacy of Brussels' soft power mechanisms in promoting political reform in the Southern Mediterranean

BY PETER GUEST

Speaking in a cool room off the courtyard of Tunisia's palatial house of deputies, Agrebi Saïda and Dr Emna Ben Arab, both members of parliament, are keen advocates of their country's progress. Their obvious pride in the social and economic advances that have been made inevitably bubbles over into overt frustration as they contemplate the international perception of Tunisia and the demands for change coming from Europe.


"We were the first country to sign the Barcelona Process [on Mediterranean integration]. The government was hopeful when we signed this. Of course, there are lots of benefits to this agreement, but not to the extent that we expected," Ms Ben Arab says. "There are lots of conditions, talking about democracy, human rights, as a condition for economic partnership. Of course democracy is an irreversible choice in this country, human rights is on the top of our agenda, but we are doing this at our own pace. You cannot expect a country such as ours, with the neighbours it has, with the culture it has, to be overnight a Western-style democracy. This is unrealistic.

"It is unfair to compare this country - whether in terms of growth or in terms of democracy and human rights - to Europe, to America. We should be compared to Arab countries, we should be compared to Africa," she says.

There is one area in particular that Ms Saïda is keen to stress. "Until now America and Great Britain - their women work like men, but they don't have the same salary." Tunisia, she says, has

legislated to ensure equal pay for equal work since the 1960s.

Female empowerment has been, in development parlance, "mainstreamed" into Tunisia's plans since independence. The country's Personal Status Code enshrines the rights of women and their equality, and their political representation is on a par with much of Southern Europe - approaching 28 percent in parliament and 35 percent in municipal government. When compared to either its African or Arab peers, Tunisia has performed well across the majority of human development indicators, particularly those relating to education, maternal health, child mortality and women's rights. The 2010 African Economic Outlook report produced by the OECD, Uneca and the African Development Bank says that the country has already achieved Millennium Development Goals one to four and seven, and is on track to meet goal five - maternal health - by 2015. Of all the MDGs, only in its attempts to tackle HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases - goal six - is Tunisia currently off target.

Under the current president, Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali, who began his fifth mandate in October, Tunisia's economic growth has been solid and relatively equitable. It has opened its industries for international competition to a large extent, attracting foreign direct investment into its technology and manufacturing industries. It has begun to industrialise, even in remote areas, through the creation of investment zones across the country, creating jobs outside of the four sprawling urban centres that form Grand Tunis. It is advanced 





in its implementation of a free trade agreement with the EU.

Tunisia is top in its region on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index and scores close to Italy, on the European side of the Mediterranean. It has few significant internal security concerns, unlike its neighbour Algeria. The country even has a thriving community of NGOs and civil society groups - including one run by Ms Saida herself. Those NGOs fall under specific legislation, but Ms Saida dismisses the notion that this puts them at a disadvantage. Instead, she says, it focuses them on working for development, rather than performing the role of antagonist against the government that is still popular amongst international activists. This is a controversial stance, but one she is clearly passionate about. Perceived misrepresentation by international media and advocacy groups is a much-repeated theme.

"In Tunisia NGOs are part of the democratic process that was initiated 20 years ago. They are part of this process. They are not above the law, as some people think," Ms Ben Arab adds.

In July, an Amnesty International report concluded that rights groups in Tunisia face systematic harassment. Legal registration of such groups, the report suggests, should not be interpreted as a commitment from the government to improve the human rights environment.

Social security is among the strongest in the region. The education system is free from primary to higher and the enrolment rate in higher education is pushing 45 percent. Despite all this, as Ms Saida says, "There is always this 'but'."

That "but" is political reform - the EU has expressed muted concern over the state of political pluralism and human rights. Major political groups within the union, including the Party of European Socialists, a relatively influential association of leftist parties from member states, have said that Tunisia's current political environment - which PES claims silences critics of the government - should preclude it from achieving advanced status. Opponents of the government say that they are harassed and that political censorship is routine. Mr Ben Ali's supporters deny this, although sometimes without much conviction.

Ms Saida has had a long and distinguished career in Tunisian civil society, as well as in the African Union and United Nations. She is quick to list the areas where Tunisia has been lauded for its development in international forums. Why, she asks, do the voices of the critics of its political system take precedence?

"What are the human rights?" she asks, increasingly agitated. "It's for all humans, men, women, children, the handicapped, elderly and all themes of development - education, health, vocational training, employment, all of those. Political is one of them, but it's not only political, and if you have a political problem, you have to solve it within your party." The space given in Europe to voices critical of Mr Ben Ali's regime is a source of great frustration for her, as it slows the integration process.

"This is not what we signed in Barcelona 15 years ago. We signed to develop, to move ahead, to contribute, to share for the benefit of the region."

This debate has become more audible. Earlier

65%

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this year Tunisia and the EU opened discussions over expanding their relationship. Under the EU's five year old European Neighbourhood Policy, the Tunisian government has agreed a series of targets with Brussels relating to economic, social and political reform, which the EU supports with financial and human resources.

Since the spring, the two parties have been in discussions to step this engagement up to *statut avancé* - an enhanced version of the neighbourhood policy that will deepen an existing free trade agreement and increase political and economic integration. To make this happen, Tunisia must agree on a shopping list of commitments, to which the EU will then commit further resources to achieve. Morocco is the first country in the Southern Mediterranean to achieve the advanced status.

Despite the ongoing debt crises in Europe, such integration remains attractive. Close to 65 percent of Tunisia's exports are to the EU and the union remains its major source of foreign direct investment. The aeronautical industry, textiles and technology are all major beneficiaries of existing agreements, and a deeper relationship - particularly one which relaxes visa requirements and facilitates the movement of employees - would be of huge benefit.

This should, in theory, be the "carrot" that the EU dangles in order to export and promote its value system in its neighbours. This has been a qualified success in the former Soviet Union, although, as most observers note, in Eastern Europe there was an additional potential upside - membership. That option is not on the table for countries in the Maghreb, which could undermine the ENP's ability to foster lasting reform. Some analysts, such as [Kristina Kausch at the Spanish think tank Fride](#), go further, and say that not only is the tool failing, but the EU is losing interest in the political reform aspect of its partnerships.

"What you have in Tunisia is a huge gap between the economic and social development and the political development on the other hand. In the first two cases Tunisia is called a model by the EU, but then it doesn't mention the third area any more," she says. Tunisia, as the most economically stable country in the region, presents much-needed growth for European companies and, with a



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PHOTOS: AFP/GETTY IMAGES AND BLOOMBERG

TOP LEFT: Tunisian Foreign Affairs Minister Kamel Morjane
MAIN: the European Commission headquarters in Brussels

slowdown in the north, economic pragmatism seems to have won out.

"There is hardly any concrete cooperation in terms of democracy and human rights beyond cooperation to enhance efficiency of the judiciary – something very apolitical," Ms Kausch adds. "There is no reason to assume that in an upgrade such things would be introduced."

The strategic significance of North Africa to the EU, in terms of investment, but perhaps more importantly in energy – both renewable and traditional – inevitably skews the relationship. Even so, says Susi Dennison at the European Council on Foreign Relations, the ENP could still be used for its original purpose – as long as Brussels makes a point of injecting clarity into its discussions.

"I think, in theory, these are strategies that could potentially pay off in terms of promotion of political reform, but in practice it doesn't seem as though much thought is being given in advance to what the priorities are and how to go about achieving them," Ms Dennison says.

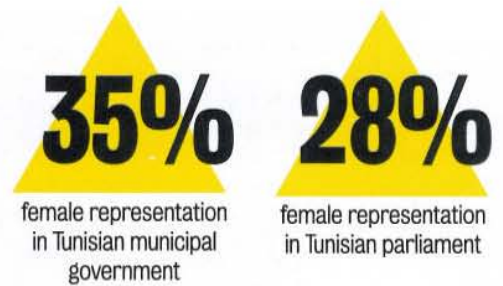
The countries of the Southern Mediterranean are diversifying their international relationships and investor bases and Europe, she notes, "no longer holds all the cards." In this environment, the EU needs to be careful not to let pragmatism in one

place undermine the entirety of its policy.

"It's quite important within these strategic relationships the EU message is relatively easy to follow," she says. "Inevitably one country watches another, and if you see Tunisia developing along these lines and flouting the political reform aspects of the agreement, then if you're sitting in Egypt you're going to think 'well, that's fine for us too.' And there's a kind of gradual dilution process that the EU has to be careful of."

Relationships with the European Union are rarely anything but complex. Despite an attempt, with the passing of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, to rationalise the various arms of Brussels' tangled external relations, the development, trade, energy and security portfolios all have overlapping – and sometimes competing – priorities. "If you're kind of coming at it from an academic perspective it's difficult, but if you're at the receiving end of these relationships it's seriously problematic that you've got different voices prioritising different things from different parts of the EU architecture," Ms Dennison says.

The effective stalling of the Union for the Mediterranean – the successor to the Barcelona Process – and the increasingly apolitical nature of the multilateral mechanisms, including the dialogue with



the African Union, mean that the ENP is the principal soft power tool available for the EU to push its political reform agenda.

Sources at the European Commission acknowledge that, while the ENP has exceeded expectations in promoting economic reforms and pushing investment, political reform in the Southern Mediterranean has been "haphazard". To the suggestions that the policy, and the *statut avancé*, are ineffective in promoting such reforms, the Commission counters that Morocco has demonstrably improved in key areas. The sources also insist that the dialogue between Brussels and Tunisia on political freedom has been maintained for years, and will continue as a meaningful part of the relationship, albeit with an understanding that changing the political culture of the region will take time.

On the Tunisian side, the government is talking progress. "We made a very substantial offer [on reform], but not because the Europeans want that, but because the Tunisian people want that," says minister for international cooperation and development Mohamed Jouini. "For a still young country like Tunisia, we need to learn from our partners through cooperation, through strong relations like we do have with many European countries. This is true for the political area, true for the economic area, true for all areas. That's why our offer in this discussion with the European Union regarding the *statut avancé* is very comprehensive, includes all aspects of life for any individual – politically, socially, economically, culturally, environmentally."

Mr Jouini is confident that the EU will accept Tunisia's proposals, but, he says, the government is committed to reform regardless. "To be frank, we will do what we are offering with Europe or without Europe," he explains. "It is in the interests of our people. Some of the measures we would have done anyway, unilaterally, whether we will accede to this status or not. It is a result of the development of Tunisians for the past 50 years. It is very important that we keep this movement towards more progress for our country and our people."

This is unlikely to convince activists in Europe. The notion, too, that the EU can play a long game and wait for reform to take root is concerning some observers. With ageing autocrats the norm across the Maghreb, there is a growing urgency behind putting in place the mechanisms to allow democratic successions.

The EU has in the past emphasised the importance of civil rights and democracy, not just because of a moral imperative, but as a cornerstone of security policy. How much weight these are given in the next few rounds of negotiations – and with future partners – could demonstrate how "strategic" these elements really are to Brussels.