

EUROPEAN WORKING GROUP ON EGYPT

An Open Letter on Egypt's Parliamentary elections

To European leaders and officials:

The Egyptian government's announcement of a timetable for parliamentary elections this autumn is a welcome, if long overdue development. The EU should recognise the elections as a step forward for Egypt, but should at the same time resist any temptation to endorse them as representing significant progress towards a representative and inclusive democracy or accountable government. Instead, any European response should reiterate the need for scaling back the intense repression and divisive rhetoric deployed by the current Egyptian government. Should the EU send an election observation or expert mission, it should also ensure that European standards for such missions are adhered to, and that it comments not only on the technical conduct of the polls, but also on the broader environment in which they are being held.

The upcoming parliamentary elections, scheduled to take place over two rounds on 18-19 October and 22-23 November, offer an opportunity to kick-start a much-needed normalization of Egypt's political life, but they are not enough in themselves to reach this goal. In setting dates for new elections, Egypt is fulfilling one part of the political roadmap it set out – with international backing – in July 2013 after the ouster of President Mohammed Morsi. Unfortunately, other key components that are crucial to the country's long-term well-being have been abandoned. Elements such as the pursuit of political reconciliation and transitional justice are still missing, and to date, President Abdelfattah al-Sisi has eschewed these commitments.

The return of an elected parliament should end the extraordinary powers of the presidency, which President Sisi (and his predecessor, interim president Adly Mansour) used to pass numerous laws by decree in the absence of a legislative chamber. Under Egypt's 2014 constitution, the new parliament has the potential to be a check on the powers of the executive and judicial branches of government. Among its first tasks will be to review the raft of laws passed by presidents Mansour and Sisi – including those constraining the right to protest, creating draconian new definitions of terrorism, curtailing the right to due process and making it more difficult to hold security forces accountable for abuses. These have been widely criticised by Egyptian civil society organisations, activists, political parties, and even some civilian state institutions. The EU should echo their concern and encourage the new parliament to amend these laws in particular, and call for amnesty or release for prisoners held or sentenced under them.

Given today's political environment, however, there is reason to be concerned as to whether the new parliament will live up to its democratic potential. The laws governing the elections were rejected by most of the major political parties that were elected in the previous 2012 parliament, and appear stacked to create a fragmented legislature in which a large number of seats will be controlled by loyalists of the president. Political parties of all stripes have faced intimidation by both the security services and the media. Press freedom is severely constrained, and many critical journalists and political activists have been jailed. Freedom of association has also been curtailed, raising doubts on whether opposition political campaigning will be tolerated.

European leaders, even as they engage with Egypt's government on a multitude of pressing issues, should stop short of accepting the extraordinary curtailing of political rights since July 2013 as a “near normal”. In order to cooperate with the Egyptian government on issues of mutual interest it is not

necessary to give credence to the Egyptian authorities' rhetoric of democratisation. Doing so would debase the value of European political endorsement. Nor should the EU uncritically accept the threat of terrorism as an excuse: as serious and urgent as this threat is, the fierceness of the repression exercised by the Egyptian authorities is itself an incubator for violent radicalism. The way forward for Egypt does not lie only in holding pro-forma elections, but requires deeper steps by Egyptian authorities to reverse the extreme polarisation of the last two years.

Sincerely,

The European Working Group on Egypt*

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*The EWGE has been endorsed by the following prominent Europeans***

- **Emma Bonino**, *former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Italy*
- **Gunilla Carlsson**, *former Minister for International Development Cooperation, Sweden*
- **Jean-Marie Guéhenno**, *President and CEO, International Crisis Group; former Under Secretary General for UN Peacekeeping Operations*
- **Marietje Schaake**, *Member of the European Parliament*

**This letter reflects the views of the individual signatories; institutional affiliations are listed for the purpose of identification only. The launch statement of the EWGE is available [here](#).*

*** The list excludes members who, given the nature of their work, have requested confidentiality.*