



Brussels, 11 September 2013
130911/04

S P E E C H

by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton to the European Parliament on the situation in Egypt

"Thank you very much Mr President,

Honourable members, the last time that I was in this chamber before the summer break, I was on my way to Egypt and I've been to Egypt three times since we last met. This summer has been a summer of contacts and discussion with many countries but most of all, with many people within Egypt.

I went then as I've been ever since to urge them to go forward towards a democratic future that those who stood up in Tahrir square, and sometimes died in Tahrir square, stood up and said they wanted, stood up and said they believed was the right future for their country.

I went on that visit when I left this house to see Mohammed Morsi, then in his Presidential Palace, and I told him that I believe that he and his country were running out of time.

It was obvious that the failure to deliver political and economic change to the people of Egypt had led to the prospect of huge demonstrations and civil unrest. My meetings with civil society on that occasion showed how far their alienation was from the government. Not one organisation said anything remotely positive about the situation that they found.

Now, honourable members, you know that we had been working for many many months to support a political solution that would have seen real progress. Progress to be inclusive with

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the then opposition and to listen to the people. A process that would have helped ensure a more democratic and more prosperous Egypt.

So I left on that occasion with a real, deep sense of foreboding. It seemed to me that there was a President who believed that it was enough to be elected, but not someone who understood that democracy demanded much much more than that.

I've been very fortunate in our Special Representative, Bernardino Leon, who's built strong ties with all sides of Egyptian political life. And I pay tribute to him for the many many weeks he spent in Egypt on my behalf. That meant that when I went back with my director Christian Berger, we had real access to all of those who were trying to promote a democratic future. To all the key political forces within Egypt.

But Honourable members, I want to be absolutely clear that it is our principles that have guided us in our discussions in Egypt. We don't take sides in terms of the choices that people make but we are clear:

We believe in a constitution that will support democracy

We believe in the Rule of Law

We believe in Justice

And we believe in Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms

And those are the messages we have given consistently to Egypt over the last two years. In the 11 visits I've made, in the many many more visits that our special representative has made, our colleagues in the Member States have made, that you have made, so many others have made. These are fundamental principles upon which the country needs to go forward.

So when we saw the dramatic changes, I went back to Egypt to press these points to those who then had taken power. To General Al Sisi, to President Mansour, to then Vice President El Baradei, and to Foreign Minister Fahmy.

I talked about the need for inclusivity, and the danger, the real danger of excluding parts of society, the need to release political prisoners. I met with the Tamarrod young people, the movement who had collected over 20 million signatures, and who had been fundamentally part of the growing concern that so many people wanted to express. And of course, I saw the Freedom and Justice party on that occasion.

Honourable Members, I was called back to Egypt by international stakeholders, including the USA and most importantly the Egyptians - not to mediate - but to spend time talking with all to find the elements of an agreement.

We, they, feared clashes could happen as the Brotherhood occupied the squares, and hardliners wanted to move against the squares - partly out of fear of the build-up of weapons - not proved.

There was also growing concern about terrorism in Sinai.

My role - let me be clear - was not a mediator. We worked through the elements of a plan; building confidence; ensuring inclusivity; strengthening and deepening our value-based approach.

And we gave those elements - they remain valid - they will support the future of an inclusive Egypt.

In that capacity I saw leaders again, and also saw the Salafist Nour party, 6th April movement and Mohammed Morsi . We worked through all the different elements in detail and told everyone what we thought was required. Bernardino went to the squares and talked to people there too.

We worked closely with all those in the region with an interest. One manifestation of this was the visit led by our EUSR Bernardino Leon to the prison to see Al Shattar, with deputy secretary of state Burns, and the foreign ministers of Qatar and UAE.

Honourable Members, the growing level of violence and the polarisation of Egyptian people was alarming. I could feel the antipathy to the brotherhood and I could see the growing numbers of people on the streets , the growing worries of religious groups - the Christian community who later saw many churches destroyed.

In August I convened the foreign affairs council in the wake of terrible violence - condemned by me on behalf of the EU - and our growing worries for the future of the country. Member states have suspended their licences for equipment that could be used for internal repression and are reviewing their security cooperation including arms exports.

I want to say something about funding. We don't provide budget support. We do support socio economic projects for the people, especially the most vulnerable, in health, school feeding programmes, poor neighbourhoods and programmes for women. I proposed to member states that we should continue with these programmes - we must continue to support the people. And I hope that I will have support in this house to continue to do that.

Honourable Members, we did not fail in the actions that we took. We did what we came to do. We remain in touch with the Egyptian authorities and politicians on all sides, on a regular basis. We don't take sides - we work to try and help to achieve the best for the people.

We continue to stand by the people of Egypt who overwhelmingly want a return to democracy and a strong and peaceful future.

As I have indicated to Egypt, I am ready to go back to Egypt soon to offer our support and our help, not our interference. This is, without question, Honourable Members, a great country, and a strong partner for the European Union. We want this country to succeed. We want to support it to do so. But to do so with the principles and values that we hold."