



Federal Foreign Office

Political Islam and Democracy



Muslims at prayer

© dpa / picture alliance



In an opinion article, Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle addresses the role of Islamic political parties in the changes underway in North Africa and the Arab world.

In an article published in the 13 January issue of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle addresses the role of Islamic political parties in the changes underway in North Africa and the Arab world.

The Arab Spring faces three dangers. The first of these is restoration – that is, a resurgence of the forces of the old autocratic regimes. Secondly, economic failure could stoke social tensions and spark new unrest. Thirdly, democratic change could be undermined by radical, fundamentalist Islamist movements.

We need to support processes of transition in North Africa and the Arab world – politically and economically. Through investment, educational partnerships and more open markets, we can do a great deal to improve people's economic prospects and give them more opportunities in life.

Politically, we should push to anchor democratic institutions and processes in these societies and to increase participation and plurality. In doing so, how are we to approach political groups whose political agenda is based on the values and morals of Islam? In places where elections have been or will be held, the majority of voters favour parties with Islamic leanings. How are we to greet the presence of Islam in politics?

It is important for us to take a sober and unbiased view. Political Islam is not the same thing as radical Islamism. An Islamic orientation does not in itself mean that a group has retrograde, anti modern, anti democratic or anti freedom views.

We need to learn to look carefully and to differentiate. Of course, there are also some fundamentalist, truly "Islamist" groups which have entered the political fray, and we have no prospect of successful dialogue with these groups. But what we have tended to see so far in Tunisia and Morocco, for example, are victories for more moderate Islamic parties.

We especially need to seek dialogue with these moderate forces about the relationships between state and society, politics and religion. After all, parties inspired by Islamic values and national traditions currently stand the best chance for long-term development into parties with a broad electoral base in the region. We must respect the wish of parties in North African countries to shape their politics with Islamic values, just as it is self evident in Europe that many parties feel a commitment to Christian values and base their political beliefs on them.

The decisive issue for us has to be the attitude of Islamic political parties towards democracy. Are these Islamic democratic parties, in the sense in which the European political spectrum naturally includes Christian democratic parties? I am confident that an Islamic orientation can be linked with democratic convictions, that Islam can be compatible with democracy.

The transition countries of North Africa can offer concrete evidence of this. Many representatives of moderate Islamic groups in North Africa are already looking to developments in Turkey, where the JDP – despite all the criticisms that could be made of it – offers an example of a party bound to both Islamic roots and democratic principles which is currently the country's leading political force.

We need to take a closer look at the platforms of the Islamic parties, and above all we need to measure them by their actions. The key thing is a commitment to democracy and the rule of law, to a pluralistic society and religious tolerance as well as to the preservation of both domestic and external peace. These are the six criteria that we are applying, the six commitments we are calling for. Whoever adheres to them can count on our support.

In Tunisia, the Ennahda Party won a majority in the recent Constituent Assembly elections. Representatives of Ennahda describe the party as seeking to reconcile tradition and Islamic identity with the challenges of modern societies; they also, however, invoke democracy and plurality

as the political framework for their actions. After the elections, Ennahda entered into a coalition with secular parties. These are encouraging signs along the path towards a political landscape with a prominent place for Islamic democratic parties. We should do our part to encourage positive developments by offering dialogue and support for a sustainable transformation to a plural and democratic society.

One thing is clear: the break with the autocratic past cannot be completed overnight. It demands patience and stamina on both sides of the Mediterranean. The Arab Spring has set in motion fundamental political changes and profound societal shifts. The toppling of autocrats and dictators in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt has completed the initial phase of revolutionary change. But the far longer phase of political, societal and economic reconstruction has only just begun.

There is an opportunity for moderate Islamic forces to permanently establish themselves in the form of Islamic democratic parties. It is very much in our interest for Islamic democratic parties to become established as a role model. That is why we should do everything we can to support this approach.

© 1995-2012 Federal Foreign Office