



EGYPT-FRANCE: CONSOLIDATING AN INTER-PARLIAMENTARY RELATIONSHIP

Report on the France-Egypt inter-parliamentary group's trip to Aswan and Cairo

8 to 14 February 2020

From 8 to 14 February, in response to the invitation from the Egyptian Parliament's Egyptian-French Parliamentary Friendship Association, chaired by Dr Ayman About Ella, a delegation of the France-Egypt Friendship Group, led by its President Ms Catherine Morin-Desailly, and comprising Mr Jean-Michel Houllégatte and Mr Hugues Saury, members of the Group, visited Cairo and went to Aswan to see the famous Nile dam. This mission followed the visit to France, in June 2019, of a delegation from the Egyptian Friendship Association, which was hosted jointly by the Senate Group and the National Assembly Friendship Group, chaired by Mr Philippe Folliot.



Audience with President Al-Sissi in the presence of the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Mr Ali Abdel Aal and the Minister Counsellor from the French Embassy

Marked by several top-level meetings, including one with President Abdel Fattah Al-Sissi, an audience with the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Mr Ali Abdel Aal, and talks with several ministers, the mission addressed a range of issues:

- **Egypt's resilience** in a context marked by the demonstrations of 2018 and September 2019 triggered by sharp price increases and economic reforms;

- **the setting up of the Egyptian Senate** and scaling up of inter-parliamentary exchanges;

- **the drivers for boosting France's presence in Egypt** in the economic field, tourism and culture, following the agreements signed at the beginning of 2019 during the French President's visit to Egypt.

I. – Fragile political stability in the face of multiple challenges

After the re-election of President Al-Sissi in April 2018 and the constitutional referendum extending the presidential term from 4 to 6 years, which has enabled him to prolong his term of office until 2030, Egypt's aim is to achieve political stability in the medium term. As President Al-Sissi has emphasised, this visibility has enabled the country to embark upon some far-reaching reforms, in particular to address the security, economic and demographic challenges it faces, but also to make some progress on the social front.

A – The security challenge

The first challenge is that of **terrorism**. Egypt applies a firm policy in this area, in particular with regard to the Muslim Brotherhood, which is considered a threat to the country's stability.

For Egyptians, security and civil concord also require better government communication and regulation of the media. This is precisely the role of the new Ministry of Information created in December 2019, as **Minister of Information Mr Ousama Haykal** explained at his meeting with the delegation. In his words, *"It is also a question of ensuring better control of social media, which put out a lot of fake news that is liable to destabilise the population and public order."* The minister explained that he hoped for greater cooperation with France on satellite transmission to block the Muslim Brotherhood's channels and unauthorised broadcasting of copyrighted content.

During a **visit to the premises of the Al Youm Al Sabea daily newspaper**, the discussion with the editor focused mainly on the role of the press and how it should help to stimulate democratic debate; the current financial difficulties of the press, heavily impacted by the harmful effects of the GAFAs, which monetise content created by others and monopolise advertising revenues; and the need to develop media education to enable better detection of fake news.

Addressing the issue of **security on the African continent** more widely, President Sissi announced his intention to organise an African Union conference on the fight against terrorism, considering that the fight should not be abandoned, especially in the Mediterranean and the Sahel region.

Concerning **Libya and the security of the Mediterranean**, the President emphasised the Franco-Egyptian consensus on regional security. To avoid Libya becoming a "rear support base for terrorism", he argued in favour of supporting the national army, which has sole responsibility for security, as he fears the growing influence of armed militias. A fervent advocate of a political solution with the organisation of free elections, he expressed his regret that the European withdrawal had opened the way for greater Russian involvement. He also expressed his concern about the growing and ambiguous role being played by Turkey and invited the Europeans to show greater firmness with President Erdogan, whether within the European Union or NATO. The main goal is to prevent the influx of several million refugees into Europe.

Addressing **Egypt's relations with Ethiopia**, the Egyptian President expressed his concern that they had deteriorated as a result of the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, whose filling poses an existential threat to Egypt. He said that he feared this question might turn into a "crisis", with the potential to destabilise the region. Ethiopia's refusal to sign the agreement drawn up with the help of the United States at the beginning of the year could in fact mean that there are grounds for such fears. Referring to the conference on hydro-diplomacy held at the French Senate, Ms Morin-Desailly reiterated the importance of keeping the dialogue going between the protagonists in order to avoid matters escalating.

B – The economic challenge

1. Courageous measures already showing some early results

Although heavily indebted with a deficit exceeding 12% in 2016 and a national debt of the order of 103% of GDP, Egypt embarked upon a programme of reforms, with the

backing of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), with the aim of achieving a growth rate of 5.5% and a budget deficit under 5% in 2018-2019, while bringing debt down to about 85% of GDP.

Among the measures taken, the complete liberalisation of the exchange rate regime of the Egyptian pound, combined with a significant devaluation, has partly resolved the liquidity problem in the banking sector. In addition, with the law reforming public services, the introduction of VAT and the dismantling of the energy subsidy system (increases in electricity and fuel prices), the fiscal position has been consolidated. To spur growth, economic diversification, exports and investments, steps have been taken to improve the business climate. Finally, the government has launched a series of major infrastructure projects, the most emblematic being the doubling of the Suez Canal, the development of the Suez Canal Economic Zone and the construction of a new administrative capital.

2. Developing tourism

To boost tourism, the Egyptian authorities are setting great store by the Grand Egyptian Museum at the foot of the Pyramids of Giza. With the new airport nearby, it is expected to become a major tourist destination, eventually welcoming 7 million visitors a year. Its inauguration is due to take place in autumn 2020 and promises to be a "global event".



The Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) in Giza

Thanks to the guarantees provided on security, tourism figures are improving (+ 250% in 4 years), almost reaching the visitor numbers seen in 2010. But there is still a lot of room for progress. According to Mr Khaled Elenany, Minister of Antiquities and Tourism, who met with the delegation, recent archaeological discoveries are contributing to renewed interest from tourists, who are beginning to come back to Egypt.

On this subject, Egyptian MPs expressed surprise at the limited number of French tourists coming to Egypt after the success of the Tutankhamun exhibition in Paris (1.4 million visitors), and once again called for the map on the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs website to be revised, as it is deemed too dissuasive.

C - The demographic and social challenge

Every year, the Egyptian population grows by 2.5 million inhabitants, which represents a huge challenge in terms of housing, public health and education, as President Sissi stressed. As well as the need to introduce effective population control policies, the Head of State emphasised the necessity of combating poverty, poor housing and illiteracy.

President Sissi has therefore announced a **plan to build 150,000 homes** intended in particular for the estimated 5 million refugees taken in by Egypt in the last few years.

The increase in the population also represents a real challenge in terms of **public health**, whether it be the question of developing hospital capacity, which has been under considerable strain with the Coronavirus, the availability of healthcare services or the coverage of their cost. To improve access to healthcare, President Sissi has stated that he intends to continue rolling out a universal health insurance system, which is due to be extended to six governorates in 2020. During its visit to Aswan, the delegation visited famous Egyptian cardiologist Professor Magdi Yacoub's Aswan Heart Centre, which treats patients of all ages suffering from heart conditions free of charge. His Foundation is preparing to build a similar establishment in Cairo to meet the growing needs.

Youth training is also a Presidential priority. As well as the education reform planned in 2020, the President confirmed the creation of an "Egyptian ENA" (national school of administration) and his desire to make it easier for young people and women to access key posts (quotas).

To reduce poverty, 13.5 million Egyptians will receive monthly income support (Takaful and Karama programmes).

II. – What are the drivers to boost France's presence in Egypt?

During President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Egypt at the beginning of 2019, numerous cooperation agreements were signed, opening the way for the strengthening of France's presence in Egypt.

A – Boosting the French economic presence

At a lunch organised at the Residence, the delegation was able to talk with representatives of French companies operating in Egypt, Agence Française de Développement (AFD), Business France and the Embassy's economic department.

Following the Egyptian Commercial and Industrial Day in Paris (10 February), the

representatives of the companies highlighted the opportunities on the Egyptian market: demographic growth offering interesting perspectives in the food industry, equipment, construction and infrastructure; attractive labour costs, with a skilled workforce; progressive development of the private sector; vitality of entrepreneurship, etc.

Several business leaders did raise a few difficulties, however, mentioning high labour turnover, sometimes inadequate financial information and a certain opacity in the awarding of contracts. Another issue raised by Ms Régine Prato, consular advisor, was the (excessively short) duration of the work visas granted to French people investing in Egypt. Ms Morin-Desailly passed on this request to President al-Sissi and was assured that the length of these visas could be extended from 1 year to 3 or 5 years.

B – Developing cooperation in education and culture

In culture and education, the delegation noted a dynamic and much-appreciated French presence, in particular during the group's visit to the French Institute for Eastern Archaeology (IFAEO) and the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies (IDEO), which are both references in their fields in Egypt.

During its visit to Saint Vincent de Paul School, a girls' school with 850 pupils drawn from the outskirts of Cairo, in particular the rag-picking quarter of Mokattam, the delegation was able to get an idea of the appeal and dynamism of this school supported by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Egyptian MPs in the Friendship Association practically all speak French, reiterated their attachment to the teaching of the French language, and expressed their hope that the approval and accreditation of French-language schools can be facilitated to increase the educational offer in Egypt. For his part, President Al-Sissi requested that more bursaries be granted so that young Egyptians can go to France to study, and undertook to strengthen French teaching so that they arrive in our country with a good level in the language. He also called for the construction of several French universities in Egypt.

In the cultural field, the discussion with the Minister of Culture, Ms Ines Abdel Daiem, enabled the delegation to take note of the successful outcome of the France-Egypt Cultural Year and to recognise the vitality of Franco-Egyptian cultural exchanges. Identified as a priority country by the Institut Français, Egypt has been paid particular attention by France, with new cooperation schemes possible, in particular with the Egyptian museums. On this subject, the President of the

Friendship Association mentioned France's considerable expertise in the field of museology, emphasising the quality of the bid submitted by the Musée du Louvre-led French consortium (which unfortunately was not selected) for the co-management of the Grand Egyptian Museum with an Egyptian partner.

With the aim of extending Egypt's cultural reach, the Minister of Tourism expressed the wish that Yann Arthus-Bertrand's documentary film, "L'Égypte vue du Ciel" be shown in Berlin, during the ITB international tourism fair.

III. – The new Egyptian Senate: new perspectives for inter-parliamentary cooperation

A - The new Egyptian Senate

The Egyptian Senate had not been restored since its disappearance in 2011 and was abolished by the Constitution of 2014. Its effective creation may happen in November 2020, as the delegation were informed by the representatives of the main parliamentary political groups it met. Its powers would only be advisory, and so in no way comparable to those of the French Senate, which contributes to the preparation of laws and oversees the action of the government. Consulted on any draft constitutional or organic legislation, it would be the guarantor of political and social democracy. According to the information given to the delegation, one third of its 300 members are expected to be appointed by the President of the Republic as experts, whilst the remaining two thirds would be elected, half by the uninominal system in the governorates (three or four members for each governorate) and the other half by the closed list system.

The meeting with the Governor of Aswan, General Ashraf Attia Abdel-Bari, appointed in November 2019, provided an opportunity to

ask him about his perception of the role of the future Senate. In actual fact, there are very few ties between the Senate and the local authorities. The governorates are still decentralised authorities and deal directly with the ministries.

B - Towards the creation of a Franco-Egyptian Inter-parliamentary Forum

This visit provided an opportunity to strengthen the ties with the friendship group. At a working meeting, the issues of heritage and its preservation (funding, restoration, sustainable tourism), urban architecture and the challenges it poses, the environment and tourism were all addressed.



The delegation with the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the members of the Egyptian Friendship Association

*
* *

During the talks with the Speaker of the House of Representatives Ali Abdel Aal, Ms Morin-Desailly repeated the wish of the Speaker of the French Senate, Gérard Larcher, to boost parliamentary relations between France and Egypt. The setting up of the Egyptian Senate could be an ideal opportunity to make **the creation of a Franco - Egyptian Parliamentary Forum** between the French and Egyptian chambers a reality.

Members of the delegation		
		
<p>Ms Catherine MORIN-DESAILLY President of the Friendship Group Senator for Seine-Maritime (Centrist Union)</p>	<p>Mr Jean-Michel HOULLEGATTE Member of the Friendship Group Senator for Manche (Socialist and Republican)</p>	<p>Mr Hugues SAURY Member of the Friendship Group Senator for Loiret (Les Républicains)</p>
<p>Composition of the Friendship Group: http://www.senat.fr/groupe-interparlementaire-amitie/ami_617.html</p>		