

Speech by
President

Zine El Abidine Ben Ali
on the launching
of the referendum campaign

Tunis, May 12, 2002

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

Fellow-Citizens,
of all generations, at home and abroad,

We meet today, in a renewed appointment with history, to serve Tunisia and its glory, to enhance its prestige among nations; we meet in readiness for the referendum on a new reform. We give the starting signal for the referendum campaign; we prepare the future and better prospects for our rising generations through a constitutional reform that continues our country's reform movement started in the middle of the nineteenth century.

We are consecrating values and constants that are underpinnings of Tunisian civilization, values and constants that are characteristic features of our national identity, the values of openness, moderation, and tolerance. Prevalent in Carthage when it was at the apex of its glory; disseminated by Kairouan in the western provinces of the Arab and Muslim world when it was at the height of its splendor, these are values in which we believe and to which we are committed, as evidenced in the Declaration of Change we made the day we undertook to rescue the nation. These are values we have consolidated at every stage of the continuing construction effort we are exerting with our people, whose underpinnings we derive from Tunisia's glorious past, from our people's determination and ambition, and from the prospects of the radiant future we seek, the future of an advanced country and a developed nation.

Two weeks from now, our people will take part in the referendum and will say its word in the constitutional reform we initiated, and which the Chamber of Deputies adopted a few weeks ago. The people will say its word in the future of the country's political system and take a final stance on options that open broader prospects of development and prosperity before our country, a final stance on an initiative that crowns a series of major reforms while announcing many reforms to come. Change is a never-ending process because it is a fact of life, the life of those peoples and nations that make history, peoples that lay foundations and make additions from one generation to the next. We have placed our trust in our people's intelligence and capabilities, we have wagered upon its awareness and its determination to address difficulties and meet challenges.

We have placed our trust in all this because we believe that Tunisia is for Tunisians, that its glory can only be achieved by Tunisians, and that its prestige and loftiness depend upon the prestige and loftiness of its sons and daughters.

Tunisia, to whom we are exclusively loyal, as we are faithful to its martyrs, to the struggle of its leaders and freedom-fighters, and to the sacrifices of all those who added a contribution, however small, to the great national edifice we are building.

Loyalty to Tunisia is a sacred, enduring, and immutable principle we enshrined in the country's Constitution, because we love this nation and wish to consecrate the noblest of all bonds with its sons and daughters.

Loyalty to Tunisia is a lofty value, naturally enshrined in legislation of the highest level, in the country's Constitution, as a reference for legislation and a source for all our political orientations and options. It is only natural, then, that patriotism, loyalty to the nation, and the duty to protect it should be above every other duty.

We believe in the universal dimension of lofty high human ideals, we believe that globalization brings peoples closer to each other and consecrates communication between them. However, we do not want our identity to be undermined, our culture to be eroded, or our national interests to be threatened. Today, more than ever before, the disappearance of traditional borders confirms that the duty of loyalty to the nation is above every other duty; it also confirms the need to work hard and to spare no effort for our country to remain a beacon of civilization, illuminating its environment, contributing to mankind's progression towards a better future, and effectively supporting all efforts to achieve understanding and cooperation between nations, as well as peace and stability worldwide.

Fellow-Citizens,

The will of the people is above every other will. That is why we have organized a referendum on our proposed reform of the Constitution. Although the current Constitution provides that such bills may be examined by the Chamber of Deputies, in accordance with current regulations, we have insisted that the final decision should rest with the people.

The referendum we are about to organize for the first time in our country's history is the highest form of democratic practice. It is a manifestation of the advancement and maturity of peoples.

We have always relied on, and placed our confidence in, the maturity of Tunisian men and women. That confidence was not misplaced. Today, by voting for the new constitutional reform, our people will, once more, opt for the course of modernity, the course of a modern state, of a developed political system that paves the way for increased advancement at the dawn of a new century.

We are establishing the Republic of tomorrow, and laying the foundations of an increasingly progressive political system to be carried on by the generations that will take up the duty after us. The Republic of tomorrow embodies our faithfulness to the martyrs of 9 April 1938, to the principles underlying the reform and liberation movement, to the spirit enshrined by the founders in the country's 1959 Constitution, chiefly the late leader Habib Bourguiba, the first President of the Republic, and also faithfulness to the new hope breathed in by the Change in the republic, thus reinstating its institutions in the position they deserve.

The Republic of tomorrow reinforces the system of referential values underlying the republican system, chiefly human rights and solidarity; it also reinforces its representative institutions by enhancing the organizational structure of the legislative branch of government by introducing a second chamber, the Chamber of Councilors.

The Republic of tomorrow consecrates pluralism by providing for a two-round presidential election system and reinforces the neutrality of the Constitutional Council and the independence of its members, while expanding its mandate to cover the monitoring of elections and referendums.

The Republic of tomorrow is a new stage in a continuing reform drive, paving the way for a better future without severing ties with the past.

Fellow-Citizens,

Human rights are a crucial principle and a major value which we have insisted on enshrining in the constitutional reform to be submitted to our people, for the country's Constitution to reflect the noble references underlying our political system, and to give concrete expression to our civilizational project and to our people's development and

conscious adherence to the highest values ever produced by mankind.

These are values we have enshrined and asserted in the Constitution as irrevocable values. Thus, we have confirmed our vision, based on an interconnection between civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights and on the fact that they complement rather than compete with each other. In this we reject all forms of discrimination and all arguments for using double standards. As much as we reject particularism as a pretext to exonerate oneself of such universal values and principles, we reject the utilization of the same principles and values as a way to wipe out the cultural and civilizational characteristics of people.

Fellow-Citizens,

The new Chamber of Councilors broadens the people's representation in the legislative branch of government and consecrates the principle of participation as a foundation of democratic practice. At the same time, it helps keep abreast of developments taking place in the regions in all fields and helps interact with a civil society that has been thriving throughout the years of the Change. It develops the legislative branch of government in terms of structure and forms of representation; it reinforces the values of the republic while consolidating its institutions; and it grants a high status to the nation's proactive elites and talents.

This Chamber will be a forum for professional organizations through the workers, employers, and farmers that constitute its membership. These are organizations with myriads of skills and with a deeply-rooted militant tradition.

For the first time in Tunisia's history, this is a further consecration of social democracy at the legislative level. It

reflects our consideration and regard for all workers, businessmen, and farmers whose participation in the referendum will be a historical opportunity to contribute to the construction of tomorrow's Tunisia. Their great organizations -- the Tunisia General Labor Union, the Tunisian Union for Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts, and the Tunisian Union for Agriculture and Fisheries along with the prestigious National Union of Tunisian Women have supported this major reform of the Constitution.

With the Chamber of Councilors, we shall also recognize those national figures that served Tunisia in the past and may still contribute usefully with wisdom and experience; and we shall involve the nation's highly competent men and women who may not be lucky in the legislative elections.

We are striving to raise Tunisia to the level of advanced nations. This reform is a step on that road. We have made it possible for political parties to say their word and to express their views by taking part in the referendum campaign to be conducted during the next two weeks.

We rely on participating political parties that supported this historical reform, based on their belief in the role they play in preparing a better future for Tunisia. We rely on them all, chiefly the Constitutional Democratic Rally, the party of Change, whom we entrusted with our civilizational project; we rely on the enthusiasm of its activists, men and women, and on their pledge to deepen the awareness of all sections of our society of this important reform, to understand its objectives, and to fully comprehend all its dimensions and meanings.

Throughout the past few weeks, we have sensed a great interest for this reform and this important historic event; we have sensed a deep interest among Tunisian men and women, both as individuals and as communities, among elites and

competences and among all component parts of civil society who forcefully expressed their commitment to pursuing the course of Change and reform and their attachment to the values of the republic.

You are no doubt aware that the respect and prestige enjoyed by our country will focus attention on it during the campaign and on the day of the referendum which will be followed with interest. We have insisted on providing for all appropriate conditions for this event in all its dimensions to live up to Tunisia's fame and to give a shining image of the advancement of its people and a living evidence that democratic practice is now a feature of the daily behavior of Tunisians in their deeply-rooted traditions.

On the day of the referendum the rightful owner of decision, the people, will decide.

Intent upon making the referendum a success and on providing for transparency and abidance by the law in every aspect and at all stages, during the campaign, on the day of the polls, and during the vote count and the proclamation of results, and as we had announced when we first submitted the projected amendment to the Chamber of Deputies, we have authorized all citizens on electoral lists to withdraw their cards from municipalities or "imadas", as the case may be, starting from early April last. We have also given instructions to municipalities and "imadas" to start delivering elector cards starting from early May inst. It should be remembered that electors may still claim their cards on the day of the polls from the municipality or "imada" in which they are registered.

We have also granted financial assistance to political parties taking part in the referendum campaign, which they will be able to conduct through radio and television.

Based on our determination to provide the best conditions for monitoring these polls, the committee entrusted by the Electoral Code with conducting this task will be represented by two delegates in each electoral district, selected among the corps of magistrates and Administrative Court judges.

We have also made every effort for Tunisian expatriates to take part in this referendum and express their views in this major historic event. No Tunisian man or woman shall be prevented from contributing to the shaping of their country's future, wherever they are. They are, as we have always maintained, close to the nation's heart.

I hereby reiterate my call to all those wishing to cover all the stages of this event as foreign observers or journalists, to gain first-hand experience of the progress achieved by our country in the areas of democratic practice and abidance by its rules.

Fellow-Citizens,

With this referendum, the people exerts its founding authority and consecrates the sovereign nature of its decision.

We have always placed our trust in the people and in their keen awareness and maturity.

We place our trust in Tunisia's youth, as a symbol of hope and an embodiment of the future. We expect them to live up to this hope and to take part in shaping a better future for their country.

We place our trust in Tunisian women who, during the era of the Change, perfected their rights and rose up to the position they deserve in public life on entirely equal terms with men. We are confident that they will make this referendum a success, and that they will spell out their will and their attachment to the course of progress and modernity now taken by our country.

We place our trust in all workers, whether intellectual or manual, in farmers, industrialists, tradesmen, and businessmen in all aspects of investment and production and expect all proactive elites to live up to this appointment with the future.

We place our trust in Tunisia's intellectuals, artists, and all national elites and expect them to be at the forefront of the forces of reform and construction.

We call on each and everyone, all Tunisian men and women, within our borders and abroad, those for whom we have worked, still work, and will work in the future, to honor our pledge, we call on them to fulfill this sacred electoral duty, a duty that implements the will of the people.

Fellow-Citizens,

On this road we will march, a road of work and reform, a road to promote the present and lay the foundations of the future. We are perfectly determined and our confidence in the people is unshakeable. We plan and we accomplish; we preserve our gains and address challenges, prompted by our love for Tunisia, a nation for whom we work hard and spare no effort to add glory to its glory.

"I seek only to reform as much as I can, and my success is with none but Allah. In Him I have put my trust and to Him I turn." [Koran]

Thank you for your attention.