

**Address by President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali,
before the Extraordinary Session of the Chamber of Deputies**

Le Bardo, February 27th, 2002

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

Mr. Speaker,
Honorable Deputies,

I take the opportunity of this extraordinary session to extend to you my sincere greetings and my deep consideration for the important role played by the representatives of the people within this august assembly, as a fundamental underpinning of our republican system, to serve the national interest and to contribute in attaining the ambitions of Tunisian men and women for progress and prosperity.

From this rostrum, I would like to address our valorous and glorious people, a people that has made great sacrifices to attain sovereignty and independence, a people whose martyrs have fallen to achieve liberty and to build a Tunisian parliament, consecrating its determination and giving concrete substance to its options...

I extend to our people expressions of loyalty to our martyrs, to generations of freedom-fighters, and to our predecessors: militants, leaders, and reformists.

I extend to our people expressions of loyalty to Tunisia... fidelity to Tunisia alone... love to every particle of its generous soil... attachment to its banner... a banner which, we hope, will flutter high in the air, whatever the sacrifices needed.

This is a day rife with meanings and symbols, a day in which we renew our pledge to the constant values of our course towards Change... to the options we have chosen for Tunisia... the options which our people has chosen for itself... as they spring from its ambitions and are consonant with its determination.

We are building the foundations of a new era in the course of the Change... opening broad horizons for the Tunisia of tomorrow... and paving the way for a qualitative leap in our political system.

Mr. Speaker,
Honorable Deputies,

We are committed to constantly enhancing political life in our country... reinforcing the underpinnings of the Republic... strengthening the foundations of the rule of law... protecting liberties and human rights, promoting them and disseminating their culture...

This is what we have endeavored to translate into fact ever since the dawn of the Change; this is what we shall, in the future, endeavor to propel, step after step.

Since the Change we have initiated a series of gradual reforms, intent as we are on ensuring them against the hazards of setbacks... We have used such reforms to keep abreast of advancements in society... of changes in the structure of the national economy... and of developments on the international scene.

Our inspiration in this lies in our deeply-rooted reform references... in the fertile spirit of the sons of Tunisia, a nation with many a leading thinker throughout its long history... We have relied on our people's intelligence and ambitions... Therefore, many a consultation was organized regarding the nation's major concerns, allowing the various national forces -- political parties, organizations, elites, experts, and all other sections of society -- an opportunity to express their views and participate in the constant building of the nation.

Our belief in the values of the Republic and in the principles of democracy is firm and unshakeable... In its light we have placed our initiative... It was our starting point when we abolished life-long presidency and automatic succession; we have broadened the scope of the referendum; we have set up and developed a Constitutional Council; we have enshrined political parties in the Constitution... we have consecrated pluralism and rooted it in the country's daily practice.

All this was achieved in accordance with the rule of law and in compliance with the precepts of civilized interaction. Hence, democracy is today a tangible fact in our country... pluralism is thriving thanks to the rich nation-wide debate, to the diverse ideological outlooks and orientations in the various institutions and bodies... starting with municipal councils, through regional councils and the various consultative bodies, and up to your august assembly...

All this was achieved in stages... without any disruption. All observers will agree today that Tunisia is stable, developed, and secure...

We have persisted in this course, reinforcing it with a number of initiatives, including the funding of political parties, the reinforcement of legal guarantees... developing associative life, and amending the Press Code... Hardly a sector of public life was spared by radical reforms... because we are building the foundations of a comprehensive civilizational project... we are preparing the future of our young and future generations.

Mr. Speaker,
Honorable Deputies,

Change and reform are an ever-renewed endeavor... The writing of history is a never-ending process... On the fourteenth anniversary of the Change, we had declared our intention to submit a fundamental constitutional reform bill, in a drive to hoist the Tunisian experience to higher levels and to develop our political system.

We have striven for the project, which was examined by the Cabinet and submitted to your august assembly, to be a comprehensive set of amendments, covering most sections of the Constitution and nearly half its articles.

This is both a radical reform and a new stage... paving the way for further stages... a reform that has deepened the spirit of democracy and pluralism in constructing the Republic, reinforcing its institutions... improving the representation within such institutions of sections

of society and regions, and broadening their involvement in public life... and also consecrating pluralism with regard to the candidacy to the highest responsibility in the state by adopting the two-round ballot system for presidential elections.

We will strive to devise appropriate measures to consecrate pluralism with regard to the candidacy to the next presidential elections by initiating a constitutional bill to this effect.

This reform stems from our belief in the importance of protecting freedoms and human rights... as well as from our conviction of the crucial role they play in promoting political, social, economic, and cultural life... human rights as a set of comprehensive, universal, and complementary values... freedoms and the dignity of the individual with their various dimensions, including the inviolability of personal data and communications... whose protection we have raised to the level of a constitutional provision.

In this reform bill, we have enshrined solidarity and mutual assistance as human values... social interaction... a cultural and civilizational concept... the secret of our people's cohesion, a security against the hazards of exclusion and marginalization... The bill consecrates everybody's right for the basic foundations of a decent life... By translating this value into fact and reviving it in people's minds we have scored many a success and were able to ward off the ghost of poverty, and to address situations endured by many Tunisian men and women in remote and destitute areas.

By further consecrating fidelity to Tunisia as a value and a commitment, the bill consolidates the underpinnings of our identity and the holiness of our belonging to this nation in an age of globalization, to raise the duty of protecting and defending its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity over every other duty.

We want this reform to enhance the legislative branch by setting up a "Chamber of Advisors" to discharge its duty in addition to the Chamber of Deputies... thus giving the country's various regions and sections of society the opportunity to take part, to enhance political life, deepen democratic practice, and consecrate pluralism... while ensuring the efficiency of legislative activity, providing for its smooth running to discharge its role in the best way possible.

This complements the development provided for in the bill with regard to the relation between the Government and the Chamber of Deputies... by enshrining periodic dialogue between them in the Constitution, through sessions devoted to oral and written questions, to sectoral issues and to current affairs.

Based on our pledge to continue our promotion of the Constitutional Council, the first institution we established at the dawn of the Change, and developed on a gradual basis until it was enshrined in the Constitution, its decisions now obligatory to all public authorities, we have included in the reform bill a considerable broadening of the council's mandates, to include the monitoring of presidential and legislative elections, as well as referendums. The bill also reinforces assurances as to the neutrality and independence of the council's members.

This is a crucial reform, paving the way, as we said previously, for tomorrow's republic. As part of its constitutional duties, your august assembly will have an opportunity to deepen this

project as well as its various dimensions and goals; **we have requested the Prime Minister to give you the details of this project.**

As previously announced in my statement on Wednesday 13 February inst., I have decided to submit this project to a general popular referendum; this is an opportunity to reiterate our firm belief that the will of the people is above every other will... and that it is our reference in defining our major options.

To give substance to this principle, we hereby announce our decision to call electors to a general popular referendum as soon as the project is approved by your august assembly. This is the first time a referendum is organized in our country; this is both a national and a historic event requiring all due attention and raising the people's awareness as to the nobleness of discharging their electoral right at this historical juncture. Political parties also have an important part to play in this matter.

To provide this project with the best chances of success and with the underpinnings of transparency and democratic practice, throughout its various stages, from the moment when the campaign is launched to the ballot proper, through the vote count and the proclamation of results, we hereby announce a number of decisions. **The first is to allow every citizen on the electoral roll to withdraw his electoral card from the municipality or the "imada", as the case may be, as of early April. We also authorize the distribution of electoral cards by municipalities and "imada"'s starting from 1 May... It should be recalled that electors can withdraw their cards on the day of the ballot from the municipality or "imada" in which they are registered.**

Providing for an easier participation of political parties to the referendum campaign and for their discharge in compliance with provisions in the Electoral Code, we have decided to allocate financial support to all parties taking part in these elections; the amount of such allocations will be determined by decree. In addition, they will have an opportunity to conduct their campaign through radio and television channels.

Concerning the monitoring of the ballot, the committee provided for under the Electoral Code will appoint representatives in all districts, among magistrates or members of the administrative court.

We hereby announce that there will be an opportunity for observers and journalists from brotherly and friendly nations to attend and to have first-hand knowledge during this referendum of the progress achieved by our country in the practice of electoral rights and in compliance with the rules and ethics of transparency and probity.

Given that Tunisian expatriates are for ever close to the nation's heart, and an integral part of our people, taking part in national life and consulted about major issues and options, we will strive to provide them with all opportunities and resources required to cast their votes and express their views during this referendum.

Mr. Speaker,
Honorable Deputies,

Looking forward to this important political event should not prevent us from continuing our efforts to impel the nation ever forward in all fields. You are no doubt aware of the prevailing

critical international situation and its importance, particularly following the events of 11 September and their painful impact.

Claiming innocent lives, such terrorist attacks have revealed the dangers of terrorism, the intricate organization of its bands, and the dissemination of its supporters, using religion for their own purposes, whereas our noble religion is innocent of their deeds. Such acts have also shown the judiciousness of the Tunisian approach, its sound methodology in addressing the social, economic, cultural, and educational causes of extremism and terrorism and in standing in the face of terrorist acts and organizations within the framework of the country's legislation and civilizational values.

Whereas we share the deep pain felt by the friendly American people on the day of the attack, and reiterate our sympathy and support, we are also aware of the impact such events have left on the international scene, by bringing to the fore the ghost of the clash between religions and civilizations, reviving the hazards of disruption between the major components of mankind, thus creating an extremely critical and difficult international economic situation, deeply affecting many sectors such as tourism, air travel, and others.

During your discussions on the state budget for this year, you have no doubt perceived our resolve to take the factors behind this new situation into consideration, in a drive to keep inflation in check and to control the factors that could disturb the country's economic balance. We have given the highest priority in the government's action to monitoring the international situation, the performance of each individual sector, as well as the effort to restore a growth rate that is appropriate with the goals defined for the tenth plan. **You are no doubt aware that, due to these economic factors, made even worse by a fourth successive year of drought, our country is going through exceptional circumstances that should always be kept in mind. The economic and social partners should take this into consideration; they should work hard and place the nation's high interest above every consideration; they should also continue their contribution in supporting our peaceful course towards the future...**

We are confident in their deep awareness of the ominous challenges involved in working together to address them... for our emerging nation to lead the race towards increased dignity and progress. There is no room today for laggards and spectators. The future is for those who work and produce, for those who do research and innovate in a spirit of competition.

Honorable Deputies,

We monitor with deep concern the dangerous and deteriorating situation in the Palestinian territories, due to Israel's repeated aggression against the brotherly Palestinian people, its violation of the integrity of its territory, using sophisticated weaponry, cordoning off whole areas under its authority, imposing a tyrannical embargo on its leadership, chiefly the great militant, President Yasser Arafat.

As we reiterate our solidarity with the brotherly Palestinian people in its struggle to regain all its legitimate rights and our support to its legitimate, brave, and irreplaceable leadership, we totally condemn such Israeli aggression and call on all active parties in the international community to bring this dangerous and continued aggression to an immediate end... to ensure the protection of the Palestinian people, its leadership, and legitimate institutions. The region as a whole has no option other than peace... a just and comprehensive peace... within

international legitimacy, in compliance with agreements and conventions... returning to the negotiation table, foregoing the use of force and aggression.

While our country is exerting every effort to close Arab ranks in addressing such critical regional circumstances, we are also intent on impelling and revitalizing the course of our Arab Maghreb, as a strategic option consecrating the ambitions of our peoples, as an irreplaceable grouping for our nations in addressing the requirements of globalization.

We are optimistic, in view of the sincere determination we have sensed in our brothers the leaders of the Maghreb countries, during our discussions and visits, the last being my own visit to Algeria, that we will be able to transcend the difficulties hampering the construction of the Maghreb Union and further impel the dynamics recently witnessed by the Union's structures and institutions.

Honorable Deputies,

Again, please accept our greetings and consideration. We renew our pledge to the people to work hard. With God's help we will enter this new stage with determination and confidence... with a sincere and serious purpose... to serve Tunisia, its dignity and inviolability.

"Say: 'Do as you will, Allah will behold your actions and so will His Apostle and the faithful'"
(The Koran).

Thank you for your attention.