

Official visit by President Béji Caïd Essebsi

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Mr President of the Republic of Tunisia,
Madam Vice-President and High Representative,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear colleagues,

It is our great honour to welcome to the European Parliament today the President of the Republic of Tunisia, Mr Béji Caïd Essebsi.

Let me say how much it means to me, Mr President, to be standing next to you again, one year after our last meeting in Tunis. I should also like to thank you once again for the warm welcome you gave me in your beautiful country.

You are here, Mr President, among friends and partners; among people who are committed to a democratic future for Tunisia.

Since that long night, in January 2011, during which the destiny of the Tunisian people shifted decisively towards freedom and dignity, your fellow citizens have never ceased to earn our admiration and our profound respect.

Over the past five years, your country has made exceptional progress towards democracy. The road was a difficult one, and the way ahead was sometimes uncertain, darkened, alas, by political assassinations and craven acts of terrorism.

But each of these tests served only to strengthen the determination of the Tunisian people. Holding their heads high, and choosing compromise over division, civil society and parliamentarians have made common cause in safeguarding the ideals which had guided their revolution.

Today, your country stands as a model of pluralism and tolerance; a country in which the rule of law, individual freedoms and equality are guaranteed in the constitution.

At a time when populists are inciting fear and rejection, Tunisia is sending us this powerful message: 'Yes, democracy is possible in the Muslim world.'

Mr President,
Dear colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

During my official visit to Tunis and Sousse, I saw for myself the scale of the economic, social and security challenges which Tunisian democracy faces on a day-to-day basis.

Nevertheless, I returned firmly convinced that, despite all these problems, your country has great riches. I am referring to its people, young, well educated, creative and determined to work to bring about a prosperous future for Tunisia.

Together they constitute a great asset on which you can draw in carrying out the major structural reforms which are now expected. These reforms will give ordinary Tunisians, local investors and foreign partners fresh confidence.

Tunisia is not travelling this road alone.

For proof of this we need look no further than the international conference on investment which was held at the start of this week in Tunis. We will be watching closely to ensure that the undertakings given are honoured.

The European Union and its Member States are standing side by side with you as well. For the last 40 years we have been forging links which have made Europe your number one trading partner. And we are proud of this.

But now we have decided to go further. We have given a political undertaking to build a privileged partnership with you. We have done so because we believe it is time to translate our strategic, unshakeable relationship into sustainable, tangible and wide-ranging action.

It is no longer just a matter of solidarity. What we are doing is setting out a shared vision for the future.

Mr President,

At our last meeting you told me that when your country gained its independence its main priorities were education and literacy.

Today your priority, you told me, 'is to reform our labour market in order to provide jobs for our young people, most of whom are trained and very highly qualified'.

You are right. We see the same trends in our countries.

Young people on both shores of the Mediterranean have never been so well trained.

They share the same aspirations: they want to learn, travel, contribute to society, live decent lives and fulfil themselves through their studies and their work.

We have a historic responsibility to meet their legitimate expectations.

This is the best investment we can make in the well-being and cohesion of society as a whole.

In that connection, I applaud the new initiative entitled 'A European Union-Tunisia Youth Area', which demonstrates our determination to support the development of the talents of young Tunisians, by providing resources and guaranteeing mobility.

Mr President,

Together we can combat those who preach murderous ideologies and seek to recruit our young people into a life of violence and terrorism.

Together we can thwart the sinister plans hatched by extremists of all stripes.

Together we can show that universal values are understood in the same way in Tunisia and in Europe.

In that connection, I should like to applaud the 'Tunis Declaration against terrorism and for tolerance and solidarity with peoples, cultures and religions', which you initiated.

Rest assured, Mr President, that our commitment to Tunisia, to ordinary Tunisians, and young Tunisians in particular, and the country's authorities is as strong as ever.

Thank you once again for honouring us with your presence.

For further information:

europarl.president.press@europarl.europa.eu

Giacomo Fassina

Spokesman

+32 498 98 33 10