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# Press Release

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**SPEECH BY THE HON ANGELO FARRUGIA, SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES DURING THE CONFERENCE OF SPEAKERS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION PARLIAMENTS – CYPRUS – SUNDAY 21<sup>ST</sup> APRIL 2013**

Mr President  
Excellencies  
Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me start by thanking our kind hosts, the House of Representatives of Cyprus, for organizing this prestigious event that has just been launched, and in particular, my colleague Yiannakis Omirou, for giving me the opportunity to address you at this first session of the Conference of Speakers of European Union Parliaments, being held on this charming island of the Mediterranean. It is indeed a privilege as much as a happy occasion to be working alongside you during these two days in what is in effect my very first official commitment abroad since being elected Speaker of the House of Representatives of Malta, just over fifteen days ago.

Excellencies  
Dear colleagues

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), which we are all members of, strikingly defines democracy as a *'universally recognized ideal and goal that seeks to preserve and promote the dignity and fundamental rights of the individual, to achieve social justice and to build sustainable development. Democracy is also a mode of government that is founded on the right of everyone to take part in the management of public affairs. It is premised on equality between men and women and on their full participation in society.'*

Ladies and Gentlemen

Rightly had the twentieth century Nobel Prize laureate T S Eliot written:

*"What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from."*

History repeats itself with astonishing consistency. Since time immemorial, systems of bad governance have spawned disgruntled citizens at all levels of society. Some societies astutely went through the motions of silent rebellion; others rose vehemently against their oppressors. Some achieved, others failed. Successive decades and centuries have witnessed first hand the

innumerable adversities released from the fabled box that an inquisitive Pandora had at one time opened.

Looking closely around us, we observe:

- The collapse of failed states
- Internecine conflicts and civil strife
- The trampling over of fundamental human rights
- The discomfiting ill-treatment of women
- The scourge of human trafficking and the tragic outflows of irregular migration, compounding problems for transit and destination countries
- The increasing economic and social disparity between North and South
- An ever-vociferous incompatibility between religious traditions and secular statehood
- Meaningless democracy, injustice, the absence of the rule of law and the lack of freedom of expression
- The rising spectre of terrorist activities
- The worrying proliferation of all types of weapons
- Atrocious environmental degradation

Are we here talking about some popular documentary on the *'History Channel'*? Far from it, dear listeners.

Early in 2011, history took a dramatic turn in the Mediterranean. The course of events across the Middle East and North African (MENA) region, when the gunpowder keg that was the Arab Spring blew up in the world's face, created a conflagration that blazed voraciously throughout North Africa and the Middle East. The flames of those violent events carried with them, around and afar, the desperate cry for freedom and democracy, which had been kept bridled by affected populations for decades. In the aftermath to those acrimonious happenings, the geopolitical landscape of the Mediterranean became significantly changed.

The Southern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries do not represent a homogenous group. They are intrinsically disparate internally as much as they are diverse from each other. To a limited extent, they also differ sub-regionally. The driving forces that fuelled the Arab Spring were not exclusively the demands for political freedom: popular frustration with soaring unemployment, with economic stagnation and poverty, with rampant corruption and authoritarian elites dangerously accelerated the revolution's impetus.

In all honesty, have the popular uprisings raked away for good the age-old concerns in these countries?

The task confronting any interested observer is indeed daunting:

- parliaments, the executive and the judiciary that need to be strengthened, in some instances established anew;
- effective, accountable and democratic institutions that must be set up and maintained;
- good governance and the rule of law that have to be introduced and applied;
- civil society organizations, free trade unions and NGOs that have to be promoted and advocated;

- pluralistic and independent media and the freedom of expression that need to be instilled and nurtured;
- security forces that have to be democratically controlled and overseen;
- human rights that must be modernized and moderated.

What is even more disturbing is that this list is without any visible end.

Very few foresaw that the region would erupt the way it did two years ago, leading us to think that inter-regional dialogue was acutely missing, and that crossed relationships existed between the Mediterranean (North Africa and the Middle East) on the one hand, and Europe and the rest of the world on the other. A healthy, consistent and genuine dialogue was absent on various levels: political, economic and commercial, parliamentary, multilateral, at the grassroots and among members of civil society.

Though apparently herculean, the exercise that awaits us is yet doable, provided that we embark on our mission with a rigid determination to improve and to reform.

At the conclusion of the EU-League of Arab States' Foreign Ministerial Meeting held in Malta in February 2008, Ministers had reaffirmed their commitment to peace and to the respect of democratic principles, human rights and fundamental freedoms, in a spirit of dialogue *'guided by the principle of mutual respect.'*

Moreover, the Council's conclusions on Democracy Support in the EU's External Relations, adopted in its meeting of the 17 November 2009, had underlined, amongst other points that:

- *“Political dialogue is an important way in which to further development objectives and other external relations objectives. In the framework of the political dialogue, respect for democratic governance, human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law should be regularly assessed with a view to forming a shared understanding and identifying supporting measures. This dialogue has an important preventive dimension and aims to ensure that these principles are upheld.*
- *A holistic approach on governance entails mainstreaming of human rights and fundamental freedoms, democratic governance and rule of law to all policy sectors, amongst others, by implementing the EU guidelines for human rights dialogues, and by including human rights, democracy and the rule of law in discussions with third countries, in programming discussions and in country strategy papers.”*

Distinguished colleagues

Let me pause to recall what Akshat Rathi, an organic chemist, wrote in a scientific magazine last month:

*“Some time in humanity's past, a small group of Homo Sapiens migrated out of Africa before spreading out to every possible corner of the Earth. All the women of that group carried DNA inherited from just one woman, commonly known as the mitochondrial Eve, whose DNA was [in turn] inherited by all humans alive today.”*

Solidarity with our compatriots is thus an obligation that goes well beyond mere expressions of compassion. It should be also acknowledged with a genealogical mindset rather than from just a geological perspective.

Aspirations for fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law transcend cultural differences, whereas genetics still bind us together as human beings. We are obliged to offer our Mediterranean partners something more tangible than just aspirations.

Peace, security and stability in Europe and in the Mediterranean are intrinsically and inextricably interlinked. Democracy in the Arab world is also a cardinal factor for peace and security for the region, for Europe and thereby for the entire world. The Middle East Peace Process is a good example of the multi-layered road to democracy that needs to be sought by the countries involved for their own people.

The road to reconciliation requires strong goodwill and a firm commitment by all actors in the conflict. The implosion of Syria, against a mangled backdrop of a fragile Iraq, an ever-belligerent Iran and an ever-enigmatic Afghanistan form an impressive array of problematic issues clustered in the same regional space. Economies which are based on social and ecological market-economy principles in the region certainly need to be propelled forward by regional cooperation.

#### Excellencies

Let us not rashly drop down our guard, however, as we try to embark on tasks meaning to introduce democratic values. Quoting from an article titled *“Arab democracy and the return of the Mediterranean world”* by Robert D Kaplan in *The Washington Post* of 27 February 2011:

*“With the toppling of autocratic regimes ... some have euphorically announced the arrival of democracy in the Middle East. But something more subtle may develop. The regimes that emerge may call themselves democracies, and the world may go along with the lie, but the test of a system is how the power relationships work behind the scenes.”*

And this is exactly what we should be vigilant for. In our energetic efforts to prop up democratic transitions in these countries that elicit our aid, as we harp on the need for a greater realization that *‘more for more’* is the name of the game, we might, as Kaplan so eloquently put it, be obliviously ushering in the spectre of situations that are as tempestuously irrational and displeasing to us as much as they are to the populations in those countries.

The UN Secretary General himself, in delivering his message on the occasion of the International Day of democracy on 15 September 2011, had ominously warned us all that *“democracy cannot be exported or imposed from abroad: it must be generated by the will of the people and nurtured by a strong and active civil society.”*

In spite of the fact that all countries in the Mediterranean and the Middle East are members of the United Nations, violations of human rights remain fairly common in the region. In particular, the position of women in public, political and family life in these countries remains worrisome. Although there is a process of rewriting constitutions, public comments on the future position of women is not encouraging in some countries in the area.

Moreover, we still face the continuous problem of illegal or irregular migration to our shores that brings with it several ancillary problems, including international protection of stateless persons. The EU Dublin III proposal thankfully provides for the adoption of a regulation to address such cases.

In the 5 + 5 Malta Summit on 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> October 2012, the Heads of State and of Government of the Member States of the Arab Maghreb Union and of the Western European Mediterranean countries expressed their commitment to engage in relations, processes and projects to build regional, inter-regional and intra-regional confidence.

- We should establish and maintain a pre-emptive dialogue, in a multi-disciplinary framework, to secure a wider understanding and a deeper sense of trust in this inter-regional context. Incidentally, I remember personally emphasizing, during a UN Conference on crime prevention held in Cairo in 1995, the possibility of a regional neighbourhood watch in the Mediterranean.
- Democratic reform cannot simply be penned. It must filter downwards, upwards and sideways.
- The people should never feel that they had substituted one dictator by another. The choice of a leader should not happen through foreign intervention, as democracies are of modular construction and never do they suddenly appear at the wave of a magic wand.
- We should stay away from trying to be invasive with pre-fabricated *prêt-à-porter* models of democracy which might not necessarily suit the countries of North Africa and the Middle East. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, and there is no blue print for successful democratic transition processes.

Dear Colleagues  
Ladies and Gentlemen

Challenges can be converted into opportunities. The Mediterranean Sea is capable of proving itself once more that it can yet serve as a bridge between its northern and southern shores. It can become a place for peaceful and harmonious cohabitation, where different cultures and religions thrive and relish in their glorious pasts. The Mediterranean Sea can once again be the waterway that connects us rather than that which separates us in our common heritage and shared values.

The role that parliaments can play in assisting in the democratic transition processes can never be accentuated enough. Democratic parliaments reflect democratic societies. In the ‘parliamentary hexagon’, parliaments are vested with supreme powers to, amongst others, influence foreign policy and international relations, at times called the ‘power of negotiation and mediation’. This is parliamentary diplomacy veritably at its best.

The First Summit of Speakers of the parliaments of the Union for the Mediterranean, convening in Marseilles on 7 April 2013 – this conference incidentally took place on the morrow of my nomination as Speaker, making it physically impossible for me to participate in, to my deep regret – categorically declared that “*representative democracies with strong parliaments are best placed to*

*respond to political and economic challenges ...”* The Final Declaration of that Summit called on the national parliaments of the EU Member States and the European Parliament *“to make support for the parliaments of countries in transition a priority, in order to lay the foundations for robust and effective parliamentary democracy in the southern and eastern Mediterranean countries.”*

Democracy means nothing to most people if there is no food, no safety and no jobs to go round. The road to sound democratic principles is paved with an enthusiasm to educate, to train, to populate universities with students, young and old. Knowledge is power. It is the sustaining life-line for socio-economic, political and sustainable development of any country. Everybody agrees with that famous maxim which goes: *‘Give me the child, and I will mould the man.’*

The European Commission for Democracy through Law (popularly known as the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe) has 58 full members, including Algeria, Israel, Morocco and Tunisia. It boasts a pool of advisory and expert services which, in the view of the European Association of Former Members of Parliament of the Member States of the Council of Europe, as it met in Malta last November, *“should be given an official mandate as an offer to all the countries in the region, in order to support the drafting or revising of constitutions, constitutions that uphold universal human rights, the rule of law and principles of good governance.”*

As a Working Group on assistance to Parliaments of new and emerging democracies had held during a Conference of this same assembly in Copenhagen, going as far back as 2006, *‘parliaments are the primary bearers of the highest democratic values, and underpin civil and political freedoms’*, and furthermore that *‘cooperation between parliaments at different levels of development is therefore a fundamental means of encouraging democracy.’*

Regional parliamentary fora, such as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean (PA-UfM), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM) and the 5 + 5 Dialogue, have a crucial role to play. Parliamentarians in these groupings congregate not just to discuss issues of common interest, but, more importantly, to conceive and launch initiatives that make a difference to the lives of people, **in practice**.

Sitting parliamentarians champion the implantation of the proposals and the adequate financial funding of programmes and instruments favouring the transition to democracy. However, former parliamentarians may also take part in operations intended to establish collaboration between Europe and the Arab world in a revived spirit of genuine dialogue. This rich pool of accomplished former MPs is a permanent forum that can be tapped into and utilized effectively. With more time on their hands, politicians who have retired from active parliamentary life may be recycled back into the system where their knowledge and experience may be put to good use to support the work being done by standing MPs.

Democratic capacity building in northern Africa may be enhanced through a programme of cooperation between national parliaments of the neighbouring states of the EU and by the European Parliament, in an exercise aimed at placing it at the service of those interested in setting up their own democratic and parliamentary structures.

Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki, addressing the European Parliament last February, stated that there is no turning back for Tunisia, now that the country is on the path of democracy and the rule of law. He added – and I willingly support him in this – that Tunisia wants to rely on Europe, particularly as this is the first time that the ideas and interests of both sides are converging.

In this regard, an interesting proposal was put forward by my predecessor in the Chair in Malta, during his official visit to Tunisia last year. Tunisian electoral commission officials and representative politicians were invited to train at how we run general elections in Malta. The training programme was intended to expose participants to the practicalities of the electoral process, laying particular emphasis on procedures against fraud and abuse, the fair regulation of broadcasting and political advertising during the electoral campaign, the freedom to campaign and policing and the maintenance of good order throughout.

Excellencies  
Ladies and Gentlemen

All is not lost. Curious Pandora had indeed opened up the beautiful container given to her by Zeus. However, as the myth goes, not all of the box's contents escaped irretrievably into space. One item – Elpis, a personification of the Spirit of Hope – remained inside. As the Greek poet Hesiod describes in his *Works and Days*:

*“Only Hope was left within her unbreakable house,  
she remained under the lip of the jar  
and did not fly away. Before [she could], Pandora replaced the lid of the jar.”*

I therefore end my presentation on this positive note. I strongly believe that there is still light at the end of the tunnel. It is up to all of us to come together, to be together and to work together to achieve those realistic goals that make possible our world and our region to be a better home for us all.

Thank you for your kind attention.