

Štefan Füle

European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood
Policy

Address to the Plenary Session on the situation in Tunisia

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

European Parliament

Strasbourg, 17 January 2010

Mr President, Honourable Members,

The recent popular uprising in Tunisia is unprecedented in the modern history of the country. On 17 December a young university graduate set himself on fire out of sheer desperation, after police seized the fruits and vegetables that he was selling for a living. Less than a month later, nationwide protests have brought about the definitive departure of President Ben Ali.

The European Union has condemned the violence of the repression during the last days of the regime. As I speak, the security situation remains precarious. Looting and violence are still reported. Tunisia remains in a very delicate phase although a new government has just been announced.

However, despite the uncertainty, the message of the Tunisian people is loud and clear: Tunisia wants to be a stable democracy, in full respect of fundamental rights and freedoms. It wants free and fair, inclusive elections. They want to write a new page in their history. And we want to support them in this endeavour.

The respect of the Constitution and the steps taken as we speak to bring together a national solidarity government go in the right direction. Of course this is only a start. The EU has never ceased to remind Tunisia of its international obligations in the field of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Ever since the start of my term, ever since my hearing before this House in fact, I have repeated that enhanced status clearly meant enhanced commitments in all areas of our relationship, including fundamental freedoms and human rights. I have stressed in all my meeting with the Tunisian authorities on behalf of the European Commission that they had to deliver on their democratic and human rights commitments. At the very first session of negotiation on the Action Plan for “statut avancé”, I insisted in particular that any use of new Article 61 bis of the Penal Code would be seen by us as incompatible with “statut avancé” and with our shared values. And by the way, if there were still sceptics on both sides who thought that these values were only shared in theory, they should listen again and again to the voice of the Tunisian street over the last days and weeks. What was this if not a solemn demand for democracy and for more economic justice?

As Cathy Ashton and I stated this morning, the EU stands ready to support a truly inclusive electoral process with appropriate guarantees. We hope its modalities can be announced as soon as possible once the national unity government has been shaped and starts its work. We are ready to provide immediate assistance to prepare and organise the electoral process, as well as lasting support to a genuine democratic transition. We are also working on a broader package to assist, as soon as the situation stabilises, with, among others, economic development, closer attention to the social problems faced by Tunisia’s youth, or consolidating the rule of law and the judiciary. And we will of course continue consulting closely with this House and with our Member States on this process.

Mister President, Honourable Members,

The European Neighbourhood Policy is based on essential values shared by the EU and its partners: democracy, human rights, an open market economy, in order to build together a shared area of democracy, stability and prosperity. The European Commission has always stressed that these values were an essential component of our neighbourhood policy, both towards our Southern and our Eastern neighbours.

With its strong middle class, high level of education, closeness to Europe and overall moderation, Tunisia is well placed to take the leap towards democracy that people have now asked for with such force and courage. And I think everybody should agree that the EU also has a strong interest in a democratic, prosperous and stable Tunisia.

We have a long-standing and robust relationship with Tunisia, intense links among our peoples and our business communities. It is the High Representative/ Vice

President's ambition and mine that we can now strengthen our bilateral relations based on new commitments by our partner on governance, respect of the rule of law and fundamental freedoms, as well as economic and social reforms. We will do our utmost to help the Tunisian people to turn its aspirations into reality.