



**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the conference "Tunisia's transformation –
Cooperating with the neighbours: Europe, North Africa and
the GCC"
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I should like to start by expressing my gratitude: to you, Prime Minister, for honouring me and all of us here today with your presence, and of course to the Bertelsmann Foundation and all its cooperation partners who have organised this interesting and important conference. Today you are discussing many questions which are very close to my heart as well. How can democracy emerge from dictatorships or despotic regimes? How do people learn to deal with freedom once they have it? Can there ever be a viable reconciliation between those who were once ruled and persecuted and those who once ruled and enjoyed privilege?

I am aware that there are many differences between a European state, one part of which shook off Communist rule, and a Maghreb state which forced a despotic ruler to flee. But despite the differences – cultural, economic or political – of which I am well aware, it seems to me that some of the problems inherent in systemic change are comparable. That is why I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak to you here today.

Firstly, however, I would like to say how moved I was by the television images of the Tunisians who poured onto the streets immediately after the attack in the Bardo Museum. Whilst they lit candles in memory of the victims, they made their feelings decisively plain: We will not allow ourselves to be intimidated! We who wrested our freedom from an authoritarian leader just a few years ago will do our utmost to defend it against fanatics and enemies of democracy.

This attitude filled me with respect. And it confirmed me once more in my belief that freedom is a fundamental human need. Anyone

who cannot breathe freely, think freely, live freely will wither at the very core of his being. That is why people will always long for freedom, no matter where in the world they live. Those who trust in this longing will be able to shake off their fear. So what I saw on my television screen was Tunisians without fear, citizens who believe in a future in freedom and who believe in democracy in their Republic. I saw a strong civil society which responded to the threat not with resignation, but with action to further its goals and its ideals.

For what the people of Tunisia have dared to do over the past few years and for what they have achieved, I wish to express to them my profound respect, indeed my admiration. I must say that part of this is the joy of someone who himself once had to fight for his freedom. No one could have imagined on 17 December 2010 that the self-immolation of a vegetable seller would bring an authoritarian system to its knees. And certainly no one imagined that the mass protests in your country would become the starting-signal for awakening and revolt across an entire region. High-handed, corrupt autocrats were toppled and the cronyism which had reigned for decades was swept aside. To that extent the so-called Arab Spring was and is the start of a new era, because it reminded us – including “the West” – that in the long term despotic regimes are neither stable nor adaptable. Despotic regimes collapse when enough courageous people are no longer content to be subservient.

We all know that unfortunately the initial revolt led to comprehensive reform in only a very few countries. Often the protests were violently quashed, or the regime’s subjects quieted with a few concessions. In other countries, the civil war is still ongoing or indeed has escalated; some countries have become the arena for a military struggle with foreign powers for regional dominance. Tunisia has not only retained full sovereignty: having thrown off the shackles of despotism, it has further succeeded in managing the transition to democracy, with no escalation of violence. Moreover, it has seen two changes of government in free elections – again, with no violence.

Without a doubt, Tunisia has thus become an example for freedom-loving people throughout the region. My sincere congratulations on this! Just as it did in 1956 on gaining independence from French colonial rule, Tunisia is once again relying on negotiations between former enemies. This produces coalitions which often remain fragile, and compromises which may often remain unsatisfactory, but up till now such efforts have borne fruit. While hatred and violence are increasing in the countries round about, Tunisia is defending its independence and its democracy. And for so many people from the Arab region, particularly Libya, Tunisia has become a haven, a place of temporary refuge. Thus Tunisia has become the anchor of hope for freedom-loving people from an entire region.

Prime Minister, we in Germany have observed your country's journey with great respect and admiration. The way in which Tunisia has thus far managed to maintain understanding between religious and secular groups is a sign of considerable political maturity and a strong sense of political responsibility.

Aware of your responsibility for your country, you have drawn up a constitution which unites that which many believed impossible to unite, and for that very reason you have won the support of the majority. Islam is the state religion, but the constitution guarantees freedom of religion and belief, as well as the right not to hold any belief at all, something other Arab states do not do. There is equality between women and men. Indeed there has been here for a long time now. For the first time in the Arab world, there are equal numbers of male and female candidates on electoral lists. This, however, is new and sets an example for many countries.

So the political foundations for a democratic future are in place. Now the priority must be to make democracy work across the board: from the executive to the legislature to the judiciary, from the capital to the outlying regions, in the minds of politicians and in the minds of the people. It takes a while to fundamentally change institutions. But it also takes a while for the majority of a population to be able to respect the law. This is the task facing you now, whereby we always have to bear in mind that sometimes it takes longer to change mentalities than it does to change institutions.

What the reforms in Tunisia show us is this: in an open society, no-one needs to oppress religious people and rob them of their right to religious belief. But, equally, religious people do not need to use violence to force people of other beliefs or no belief at all to accept standards rooted in pre-democracy tradition. The vast majority of Tunisians want an Islamic society, not a terrorist dictatorship.

However, the reforms in Tunisia also show us that a strong civil society is needed as a check and corrective when the citizens feel they are not being well served by government measures. At the same time, democracy needs stable, functioning state structures. It needs the authority of government, the police force and the judiciary to ensure security, enforce the law and prevent or tackle corruption.

When I think of another time and another country, the eastern part of Germany in 1989, and compare the situation there with that in Tunisia – compare transformation with transformation, in other words – it becomes clear to me just how much more difficult the situation here was and is. In the former German Democratic Republic we could rely on the solidarity of the West Germans, who provided us with economic, political and personnel support for restructuring. Furthermore, in the east of Germany we were able to take over a political system which had already proved itself in West Germany. For

many people in the former GDR, the peaceful revolution brought new job opportunities and new prospects; others saw their standard of living fall, although this was at least partly offset by welfare benefits. And agreement was quickly reached that there should be a critical reckoning with the deposed regime of injustice. After the initial tendencies after the end of the Second World War to suppress the memories of the crimes of the National Socialists, you see, we had learnt something: silence does not create peace in society. Rather, silence foments distrust and conflict and drives the next generation to protest.

Sometimes it seems to me that it can be even harder to shape freedom than to attain it. Especially if politics, economics and security are so tightly interwoven and if all areas are to be reformed at once – as is the case just now in Tunisia. It really is a Herculean task. Where does one start? What are the priorities? We know from experience that support for democracy dwindles if it does not give the people an adequate livelihood in the long term. But as long as security is not guaranteed, companies will be reluctant to invest and tourists will think twice about booking. However, people without work and without a future are often susceptible to extremist ideologies. That is why safeguarding political freedom in the long term means opening up areas for economic activity which allow people to build a prosperous future for themselves through their own hard graft and determination. And here Tunisia, with its well-educated and highly-skilled people, truly has huge opportunities. This will set in motion an economic dynamism which creates employment and income for many.

Tunisia is facing up to this task, and it starts off on a good footing. It has, as I have said, skilled workers, and it has an industrial base and a relatively efficient infrastructure. Many German companies have realised this, particularly those who have been manufacturing here for decades. Today I was able to see for myself a great corporate success story in Siliana. At the same time, though, the companies bemoan the lack of legal certainty, excessive red tape and – again and again – corruption, just like in many other parts of the world.

We know at first hand how hard it is to rein in rampant bureaucracy. Yet it is a fight worth fighting, because it releases energies, energies which benefit everyone involved in economic life. Tunisia also has – and my first impression is that this is one of your country's particular advantages – strong trade unions and business associations. One of the fundamental reasons for the success of the social market economy in Germany is the reliable social partnership between businesses and the trade unions. And it is of course important that a similar tradition be established and promoted here in Tunisian society. Within the framework of the National Dialogue, the trade union umbrella organisation UGTT (Tunisian General Labour Union) and the business association UTICA (Tunisian Union for Industry, Commerce

and Handicrafts) have already played a key role in the peaceful transition to democracy. I believe this has created a strong joint foundation from which to work in a spirit of partnership with the Government to modernise the Tunisian economy, for investment and adequate profits, for jobs and good wages, and not least for sustainable tax revenue. Of course, this requires a legal framework.

I am pleased that German companies, too, found new confidence in the wake of the revolution, continuing to manufacture here and employing 50,000 Tunisians. And I wish even more German and other foreign investors would see the advantages Tunisia offers and thus further strengthen Tunisia as a business location. Tunisia has great potential. Making the best and widest possible use of this potential will be one of the main tasks for your new Government. I have been told that many people are ready to ensure the lasting success of the revolution by consolidating democracy and strengthening the economy. I wish the Government the courage to undertake both the major and minor reforms needed for the quick upturn that will give the people of Tunisia new hope. May Tunisia strengthen its citizens' confidence in the new democracy. There can be no better advertisement for the liberal order.

This morning I visited the "citizens' office" in Siliana, a one-stop shop bringing together all the town's services. People can come along there, sit as equals across the desk from officials, and learn in an entirely new way that, as citizens, they have just the same rights as the officials who work there. To my mind, this was a wonderful illustration of how to simplify bureaucracy and make it more accessible for the people without a huge outlay. The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit supports this and other projects concerned with the implementation of democracy at local level. They remind me of how we in the former Communist towns and municipalities first had to learn anew how democracy works: How do we legitimise the exercise of power locally? How does citizen-friendly communal administration function? What solutions suit us when it comes to road and traffic planning, or communal waste management or the energy sector? All problems and issues that have to be organised anew. How can the citizens be involved in planning in their communities? Back then we learnt that it may be helpful to take a look at other people's experiences, even if it is clear that many things will have to be adapted and modified to suit the situation at hand.

Germany is offering Tunisia many types of support in this important phase of its development, via the aforementioned Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, the political foundations, private foundations, the Goethe-Institut and the German Academic Exchange Service, to name but a few. It can be just as helpful to receive direct assistance from abroad, whether funding or personnel. The German Government, as well as several European and

other international organisations, have made available long-term funding in Tunisia to this end. When it comes down to it, though – and you know this far better than I – this support cannot be anything more than help for self-help. Tunisia is confronting a major, perhaps crucial, test as it seeks to consolidate democracy and the economy.

One of the paradoxes inherent in the concept of democracy is that it gives wings also to those forces which seek to hack away at its foundations. There are mosques – both in Germany and in Tunisia – where voices preaching hatred are frequently heard. There are substantial numbers of young people – both in Germany and in Tunisia – who fall under the persuasive influence of extremists or even embark on a war they misunderstand as a holy war. Some of them return not because they are disillusioned, but in order to import terrorism into their home countries. The attacks in Paris and Tunis showed that, on either side of the Mediterranean, we are confronted by the same enemy. No country in Africa, no country in the Middle East – but, equally, no country in Europe – is truly safe from terrorist attacks by radical Islamists.

And yet, a democracy must be capable of defending itself. When, for the first time ever, people from many countries of the world gathered on Arab soil to demonstrate against international terror networks, it was an important signal. People from Tunisia, France, Italy and Germany along with EU delegates stood hand in hand in Tunis. Yes, we have come to realise that it is in the national interest of France, Italy and Germany if Tunisia steps up its efforts against the terrorists and introduces more effective controls along its borders. We are also aware that we can find answers to international terrorism only if we act together, within the framework of the rule of law and with respect for civil and human rights. I am pleased that, in addition to the existing cooperation between the police forces of Germany and Tunisia, new projects are planned to build effective structures in the police force and National Guard.

And there is something else that international cooperation should focus on more: we should offer those who see radical Islamism as a promise of salvation another, better perspective for the future. We must counter terrorist propaganda with democratic education. The struggle for people's minds is not merely a task for individual states. It is the task of all who are committed to democracy and to universal human rights. De radicalisation is an important element of security.

Last century, Europe experienced no less than two totalitarian systems which claimed that the end justified the means, that the murder of millions was legitimised by the promise of a glorious future. It is, however, an illusion to believe that eternal salvation can ever be found on earth. And it is a crime to resort to unbridled evil in the fight for what is allegedly good. As the philosopher Karl Popper said in the

wake of National Socialist and Stalinist tyranny, "If we do not want to plunge the world into renewed disaster, we must abandon the notion that we can will into existence a happier world."

Radicals' responses may be tempting, because they are simple. Democracy, by contrast, is not simple. But balancing different interests creates solutions which can be accepted by majorities. Democracy creates the environment in which as meaningful, secure and prosperous a life as possible can be recreated time and again as circumstances change. This requires democratic, transparent and at the same time stable institutions at all levels right down to communal level. This in turn requires a strong civil society like that which is emerging in Tunisia just now. Also needed are politicians in whom the people can trust.

Particularly in societies in transition, much depends on whether officials are persons of integrity unencumbered by the past. That is why we in the former GDR did not regard actively confronting the past while equipping society for the needs of the future as a paradox. We wanted answers to people's questions. Who in the ranks of the old leadership bears responsibility for profound injustice and must be called to account in the courts? Who supported the repressive system by spying on his or her fellow citizens and has therefore lost the moral authority for a public service position as a teacher, lawyer or police officer?

Other societies have answered these difficult and emotionally charged questions differently than we did in Germany. Take South Africa, for instance, where perpetrators were promised immunity if they confessed truthfully. To my mind, however, one fundamental principle was and is important: namely, to show that the new democracy will help justice prevail and thus heal old wounds. This strengthens the citizens' confidence in the rule of law and promotes inner unity.

I hope I have shown that some of the fundamental issues you are dealing with here in Tunisia are not so very different from the questions we have had to deal with in Germany. For that reason, I feel a great affinity with the situation in your country. It moves me not only as President, but also as a citizen, because it marks a new chapter in the history of democracy – this time in a country with an Arabic and Islamic culture. Germany and Europe stand firmly by your side as allies in the spirit and policy of democratisation.