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ADDRESS BY H.E. DR. GEORGE ABELA, PRESIDENT OF MALTA, ON THE OCCASION OF REPUBLIC DAY – GRAND COUNCIL HALL, THE PALACE, VALLETTA – TUESDAY, 13TH DECEMBER 2011

Today, the Maltese People celebrate Republic Day. This is my third speech on this occasion and, as previously, I shall express my thoughts on the significance of this day. I wish, to begin with, to greet former Presidents who served before me as Heads of the Maltese State and to honour the memory of those among them who have passed on. Each, in his or her own way, have left a personal mark and rendered a service to the State and the Nation.

It is now 47 years since independence and 37 years since the proclamation of the republic. Our Constitution lays down the parameters on which the State of Malta is founded and, as I see it, it has Man at its core. I say this because one of its most important chapters, Chapter 4, recognizes and guarantees fundamental human rights and freedoms without distinction of race, place of origin, political opinions, colour, creed or sex. These rights arise from the fact that they are natural where their subject is Man and this is the reason that the Constitution does not grant these rights but recognizes and guarantees them. Our culture, beliefs and traditions place Man at the centre and this is reflected in the Constitution. The Constitution, therefore, must be at the service of Man and of the People and must continue to safeguard democracy.

The Constitution has served us well for almost half a century but this does not mean that, from time to time, it would not be necessary to amend it in such a way as to increase its relevance in the life of the Nation and to further strengthen democracy. Democracy requires that there be the free expression of different opinions and continuous dialogue between those who hold contrasting views. Debate strengthens democracy and helps it to respond to new circumstances that develop with the passage of time for nothing in life is static. Democracy is the nation's achievement and must be safeguarded at all times.

The President symbolizes national unity and is the guardian of the constitution. While he must maintain a position above party politics, I believe he has a duty to put forward for public debate matters that may be in the interest of all. It is with this in mind that I am proposing that, during the first half of the coming year, a public forum would be held to discuss which constitutional reforms may be necessary and relevant to our times. It is my wish that this be done in a mature way with public participation so that the discussion would be diffused among all sectors of society.

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The Constitution, as the supreme law of the land, is a living organism and, as all organic life, it evolves according to the environment in which it thrives. The first changes to the 1964 constitution were made ten years from independence that is in 1974. It is not possible on this occasion to go into detail about these changes. Suffice it to recall that the constitutional amendments which required a qualified majority took place because the two parties represented in parliament at the time entered into negotiations that led to agreement that those changes would be made. Actually, the model of negotiations between the two parties with the purpose of reaching agreement on constitutional changes, which were then carried by a qualified majority of the House of Representatives, may suggest the hypothesis that it gave rise to a constitutional practice or unwritten convention in the Maltese democratic system which was then also followed in effecting the 1987 constitutional amendments.

One may argue that the fact that the 1974 constitutional amendments were not made by popular approval expressed in a referendum but simply following an agreement between the two parties, may have been the seed of the two-party system we have today.

To come to the present, it seems that consensus is growing, particularly among the two main political camps, that new constitutional reforms have become a necessity. This is only proper because such reforms are not possible without agreement between the two sides of the House of Representatives although one must not ignore other political exponents and civil society which must also play its part in the debate. It would seem that the two political parties represented in parliament have already taken the first steps towards this reform process although I believe that they must be careful not to set off on parallel paths that, as we know, cannot lead to a converging destination. While I am glad that the political parties have started or will be starting these initiatives, I think that if we wish to go for discussions on the desired reforms we must consider what possibilities exist.

One possibility is that whereby the Select Committee of the House of Representatives set up by resolution of the House and given the mandate of making recommendations to Parliament on matters regarding, among others, the strengthening of Parliament and the strengthening of the Constitution, should resume its meetings. In this venue, the two parties would have the opportunity of discussion, and not only among themselves, and if necessary negotiate and possibly reach agreement.

Another possibility is similar to that adopted at the time when 1974 constitutional amendments were being negotiated and Sir Anthony Mamo had shown his willingness to bring together delegations of the two parties to talk about the proposed changes in the Constitution and the two parties had accepted.

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One may also mention another possibility which is that, as had happened before the 1921 and 1947 self-government constitutions were promulgated, a constituent assembly be formed composed of representatives of all political parties, civil society and all those who are interested and able to contribute, with the aim that a new constitution be drafted and presented to parliament.

I am always available to play my part, if so requested, with the sole purpose of strengthening democracy in our country for the benefit of our People after holding wide-ranging discussion with all interested parties.

Republic Day is also an occasion when one makes certain reflections about our country and its role in the international community. In recent months, we had the opportunity to show that, in vital matters, we were able to act in such a way that there was generally harmony between those who are of different views. I am referring to the part played by Malta as a centre of humanitarian assistance during the events in North Africa. I think it was clear that there was consensus that we had a mission to accomplish as a country that has relevance in our region within the context of an essential humanitarian service. Though it is often the case that more emphasis is laid on division between the different camps, this was an occasion where it was clearly evident that agreement is possible where the national interest is concerned. It is to everyone's satisfaction that Malta drew the admiration and the respect of the international community and showed that it is not closed within itself or isolated from the rest of the world but it is a nation ready to shoulder its responsibilities according to prevailing circumstances.

The same may be said as regards the agreement reached on the 9th of the current month at the summit held in Brussels where all the countries of the European Union with the exception of the United Kingdom agreed how the Euro is to be strengthened and that rules should be made on limits to deficits and national debts. For this goal to be achieved, it will be necessary for the rules to be incorporated in our Constitution and it seems that there is already agreement between the parties on the general lines and this bodes well so that the necessary changes be made. This is a source of satisfaction because the present global economic situation, particularly that in a number of European countries necessarily has and will continue to have repercussions on our country. While debate remains a symptom of a dynamic democracy, it is fitting that there should be the widest agreement possible as to how we should seek the best methods so that the country would continue to develop and enlarge its economy. Economic development should have as its goal the People's welfare, assistance to those most in need and social justice.

On a day of national significance such as this, it is just to remember those Maltese who, throughout history, have toiled so that our country moved forward as an independent, republican

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and democratic State in which we succeeded in building the society we have today, whether they worked in the political, social, cultural or religious fields. It was these individuals, alone or in cooperation with others, who had a vision about the goals of the Maltese nation and the generations that followed continued to build on the foundations they had laid.

Republic Day is an occasion when official honours are awarded to persons who merit decorations for services rendered to the nation and to Maltese society in one way or another. I believe it is important that such official recognition be given to those who gave their contribution towards the common good. While I congratulate them most sincerely, I also express my appreciation to many others who, although not being rewarded with decorations, give their time and their talents for the benefit of their neighbours.

Thank you and a happy Christmas season to all.