

No Ordinary Union: UGTT and the Tunisian path to revolution and transition

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ABSTRACT

Through interviews with local actors, original research in Arabic, French and English, this article revisits the Tunisian revolution of 2010-11 and the ongoing transition with a view to investigate the role of local agency in radical change and protest movements over several decades, something which has been ignored by analysts and academics alike. It argues that the Tunisian General Union of labour (UGTT), the main trade union in the country, founded in the late 1940s under French colonial rule, has had the institutional structures, popular appeal and undeniable record to play a structuring role for protest and resistance to the state for decades. It served as a focal point, not only for the working class but also for society as a whole, impacting the revolutionary process and the ensuing transitional period in significant ways. The article argues that this move goes some way towards explaining what has been described as Tunisia's particularly promising path in the unfolding Arab revolutions.

KEYWORDS

UGTT (Tunisian General Union of labour), Tunisian revolution of 2010-11

Taking initial stock of the “Arab Spring” early in 2011, Michael Hudson enumerated five cases of “conventional wisdom” about Arab and Middle East politics before the uprisings: authoritarianism in the region is durable; democratization is an inappropriate goal and is impossible to reach in the Arab world; populations are passive either due to rentier state policies or coercion; Arab nationalism is dead; the Middle East regional system is essentially stable.¹ These assumptions, Hudson suggests, have led analysts and academics to focus on the system as such and on the state, with the consequence that “the strength and durability of protest movements” were ignored.² This could be due to “group-think, theoretical tunnel vision, ideological agendas, insufficient attention to the work of Arab intellectuals, and a lack of multidisciplinary approaches”.³ In addition, one could even speak of *de facto*, and often willing, academic and media collusion with authoritarian regimes in the region and with their supporters abroad.⁴ Pascal Boniface goes even further and talks about forgery in his book, *Les intellectuels faussaires: le triomphe médiatique des experts en mensonge*, which analyses the French scene. He shows the bias and the implications of such expertise: “These intellectuals have explained to us how backwardness, which they consider germane to these societies, made them immune to democracy, which justifies the recourse to war to free these peoples from their dictators”.⁵

¹ HUDSON, Michael. "Awakening, cataclysm, or just a series of events? Reflections on the current wave of protest in the Arab World" in BSHEER, Rosie and ABU-RISH, Ziad (eds.). *The Dawn of the Arab Uprisings: end of an order?* London: Pluto, 2012, pp. 26-27. His comments were first published on 16 May 2011.

² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See OMRI, Mohamed-Salah. “Arab and Islamic Studies in the Context of the ‘War on Terror’ in Britain and the United States” in TEMIMI, Abdeljalil (ed.). *Al-jami’at wa la-bahithun al-arab: bayna al-hurriya wa mumarasat al-raqabah* [Universities and Arab researchers: between freedom and the practices of censorship], Tunis: FTRSI, 2011, pp. 79-98 (in Arabic). See also the comprehensive sociological study: GUESSOUMI, Mouldi. *Mujtama’ al-Thawra* [The Society of the Revolution] Tunis: Faculty of Letters, 2015.

⁵ BONIFACE, Pascal. *Les intellectuels faussaires: le triomphe médiatique des experts en mensonge*. Paris: Jean-Claude Gawsewith, 2011, p. 83 (my translation).



Mohamed Ali Square, where the headquarters of UGTT are located. This iconic square in the heart of Tunis, named after the founder of the first union in 1924, has served for decades as a focal point for demonstrations, sit-ins, hunger strikes and assemblies. The square is decorated with the flags of the union and the country and the pictures of the founding fathers of unionism in Tunisia.

In my view, the lack of attention to local intellectuals underlies a wider point, namely, an assumption that local organized agency is absent from the region, or that agency is limited to political parties or the military. The underlying premise is that the Arab world was incapable of producing agency, which is not military, tribal, factional, or in the form of exceptional individuals, whether secular or religious, hence the academic and media attention given to issues of identity politics, radicalism, terrorism and political Islam in general. Moreover, it betrays a widely held assumption that Arabs have not produced reflection and analysis or knowledge on their societies, which are worthy of consideration. They are considered known or knowable rather than producers of knowledge. Yet, it is striking how local academics have had a very different view of the events.⁶ And much of the current essay is in fact based on local analysis and sources, mostly written in Arabic, and on interviews of key figures in Tunisia.⁷

⁶ See, for example, the special issue of *boundary 2* where Tunisian scholars and activists assess the revolution in their country: <http://boundary2.dukejournals.org/content/39/1.toc.pdf>

⁷ These local sources include: Temimi's numerous works, most notably *marsad al-thawra al-tunisiyya* [Observatory of the Tunisian Revolution] in 3 volumes (1500 pages); TIMOUMI, Hedi. *Khud'at al-istibdad al-na'im fi tunis; 23 sanah min hukm bin Ali* [The Deception of Soft Dictatorship in Tunisia: 23 years of Ben Ali's rule] Tunis: Dar Mohamed Ali, 2012. For the events themselves and chronologies, see, for example: WESLATI, Salah. *Democracie ou guerre civile*. Tunis, Nirvana, 2012. This book chronicles in detail 90 days (January 14- March 14, 2011), with background to the 2011 revolution. Part of the relevant archive of UGTT is still at the Ministry of the Interior because of police raids during various occasions in

A number of mysteries and question marks surround the Arab Uprisings in general and the Tunisian revolution and its outcome, or the so-called “Tunisian exception”, in particular. Before 2011, Tunisia was in fact the rule rather than the exception in the thinking outlined above in a number of ways: stable, growing steadily, homogeneous, functioning well, and a hot tourism destination. What made Tunisians rise up? Why was the Tunisian path to transition different from Egypt, Syria, Libya and Yemen? Why has it been hailed as a “success story”? Would it not be more appropriate to ask: a success story for whom? For the march of the market economy and liberal democracy – hence the immense interest from the United States in particular? For the revolting masses? For political Islam? Only a nuanced, well-informed analysis of pre-2011 society and its politics would provide a proper understanding of the revolution and its aftermath.

In a paper titled, “Why the Tunisian path was singular and why does it matter”, I argued for a number of factors which could account for this singularity: the movement of protest was from country to city, the role of the military was limited and the labor movement was strong.⁸ Unlike the Egyptian revolution, which was mostly urban, in Tunisia one can speak of a rural revolution. It started in the interior and moved towards the Northern cities, prompting local historians to talk about the invasion of the city by the country in a recall of the 1864 revolts.⁹ By rural, however, I mean towns located in rural areas, with a mainly agricultural economy but which have, due to the specificities of nation building in Tunisia and compulsory and universal education, the same problems as well as similar structures of resistance as big cities. Along with these reasons, there was the well-known story of an early activation of social media, particularly in terms of circulating information. Mobile telephone became the main medium, reversing the regime’s success in cutting off and isolating the 2008 rebellion in Gafsa from public view. Social media enhanced the speed and extent of information circulation within the country at first, and then to a wider audience. As a result of this, by January 14, most world media, including al-Jazeera, France 24 and even the BBC had already been to and reported on the killings in Kasserine, Regueb, Thala and elsewhere in the interior, which took place

the confrontational relationship with the state. Some of the archive may never be recovered because it has been either lost during raids by the secret police or destroyed in the chaotic weeks after January 2011. I also interviewed Sami Tahri, the director of *al-Sha’b* newspaper and spokesperson of the UGTT, 17 April 2014 at *Al-Sha’ab* newspaper. Some ideas in the present paper have been published in my previous articles, see in particular: Trade unions and the construction of a specifically Tunisian protest configuration. *OpenDemocracy*, 13 September 2013. Retrievable at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/mohamed-salah-omri/trade-unions-and-construction-of-specifically-tunisian-protest-configuration>; This is not a jasmine revolution. *Transnational Institute*, January 2011. Retrievable at <http://www.tni.org/article/tunisia-revolution-dignity-and-freedom-can-not-be-colour-coded>

⁸ OMRI, Mohamed-Salah. “In What Ways is the Path of the Tunisian Revolution Singular? And Why Does this Matter?” Paper presented at the conference “The Arab Springs: How do we understand the popular movements and political changes in the Middle East” at Sophia University and The Japan Institute of International Affairs, Tokyo, Japan, 29-30 January 2012. The army is a key element in any argument about the Tunisian path since, unlike elsewhere in the Arab world, it was never in government and was never powerful politically. Its role, to be neutral and even protective of the revolution, proved to be a key factor in the way things turned out.

⁹ JDEY, Ahmed. « Pour une histoire de la Tunisie du 14 Janvier 2011: la fin d’un dictateur et l’amorce de la construction démocratique » in *La Tunisie du XXIème siècle: quel pouvoir pour quels modèles de société*. *EurOrient*, no. 38, 2012.

January 8-10.¹⁰ The participation of women and lawyers, an important and historically active body of resistance in Tunisia, led the way in many parts of the country, and articulated – and even raised – the demands of the people to a more political level. Much of this is well known. What is less known is that activists in The Tunisian General Union of Labour, better known by its French acronym, UGTT (*Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail*), Tunisia’s main trade union organization, played a leading role in spreading information and participating in the early responses to the Bouazizi self-immolation.¹¹

All these elements taken together have been determining factors in the revolutionary process. In addition, the elements of the transition were, in my view, embedded in the dynamics of the revolution itself. This is in contrast with Egypt where such demands and thinking about a post-revolution transition were, in a way, controlled, not by the protesters or civil society, but by the army. In the present essay, I would like to zero in on what might be called the labour union factor, which is truly an exception, but was overlooked by Tunisia observers until recently.

Tunisia has an organized labor movement that is unique in its history and social dimension. The UGTT, I argue, has been the most influential *structured* and *structuring* force of resistance and social contention in independent Tunisia. And while social contention in the country has been neither the most vigorous nor the most radical in the region (Algeria has far more riots for social demands than Tunisia and several other Arab countries – Yemen, Libya, Sudan - have had more radical movements in recent history), the organized labor movement sets the country apart and explains much of the way things have unfolded in 2011 and since.¹² In other places, I develop an argument for the intersections between the labor movement and the culture of dissent as whole.¹³ Here, I pursue the argument by revisiting the history and the dynamics before and after 2011, with a view to this character and role of UGTT, that is, as a *structured* and *structuring* force, noting as well the ways in which such a force may have contributed to curtailing revolutionary ambition. In light of the regressions registered in the revolution, for a complex set of reasons which range from the rise of identity politics to violence, foreign intervention and the weakness of the alternative parties, I ask: in what ways and to what

¹⁰ Jeremy Bowen, the BBC Middle East Correspondent at the time, notes in fact how complacent and inattentive major media outlets had been to Tunisia specifically because of the success of the image promoted by the Tunisian state and the uncritical acceptance of it around the world. He says: “I realized the significance of what was happening in Tunisia only when I was prompted by an email from a Tunisian academic at Oxford University in early January asking why the BBC was not taking the uprising seriously.” BOWEN, Jeremy. *The Arab Uprisings: the People want the fall of the system*. London, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012, p. 38.

¹¹ Bowen notes that the first information on the self-immolation was passed to the international media by local UGTT activists, who also organized the first demonstration to protest it the next day. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹² For a view of the role of workers and unions in the Egyptian revolution, see, ALEXANDER, Anne and BASSIOUNY, Mostafa. *Bread, Freedom and Social Justice: workers and the Egyptian revolution*. London: Zed Books, 2015.

¹³ OMRI, Mohamed-Salah. “Intersections between the Labour Movement and the Culture of Protest in Tunisia” in *Bread, freedom and social justice*. Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge, CRASH, July 11-12, 2014.

extent has the weight of UGTT or what I call the Tunisian unionist ceiling of ambition, contributed to taming or regulating the revolutionary process? In other words, was the revolutionary process *structured* as (at?) the image of the UGTT in a way?¹⁴

From incubator of protest and refuge for dissent to powerbroker

Trade unionism in Tunisia goes back to the early twentieth century and has had both local and international aspirations since its inception by Mohamed Ali al Hammi (1890-1928), founder of the General Federation of Tunisian Workers in 1924.¹⁵ But it was with the charismatic and visionary Farhat Hached (1914-1952) that a home-grown strong organization would emerge. Hached learned union activism and community organizing within the French CGT for 15 years before splitting from it to start UGTT in 1946.¹⁶ His union quickly gained support, clout and international ties, which it mobilized in order to pressure the French for more social and political rights for Tunisia, and to consolidate the union's position as a key component of the national liberation movement. And it is specifically because of its birth in the midst of the struggle against French colonialism that the union had political involvement from the start, a line it has maintained throughout its history and guarded vigorously since. The unions' charter reflects this orientation. Its aims include: "building a socialist and nationalist economy, independent and free from all forms of dependency; calling for fair distribution of national wealth in a way which guarantees the aspirations of all workers and lower sections of society; defending individual and public liberties, and reinforcing democracy and human rights; supporting all people struggling to reclaim their sovereignty and determine their destiny and standing in solidarity with national liberation movements across the world".¹⁷

¹⁴ The legalization of the revolutionary process led by the Ben Ashour committee, which would result in the National Constituent Assembly, was sponsored and protected by UGTT. The spelling of all Tunisian names of people and places follows French convention. For example, the name of the founding member of UGTT is normally transliterated in English as Farhat Hashad, but is kept as Farhat Hached. The essay is dedicated to "al-Ittihad".

¹⁵ Mohamed Ali Al-Hammi was self-educated, travelled extensively, including spending some time in Germany where he studied political economy. Upon his return, he called for the establishment of workers' cooperatives across the country. The details of the founding were recorded by al-Hammi's friend and collaborator, Tahar al-Haddad in his book *al-Ummal al-Tunisiyun wa dhuhur al-harakah al-naqabiyyah* [The Tunisian workers and the rise of labor unionism] (1927). Tunis: Dar Bouslama, 1987.

¹⁶ A sizeable number of studies document and analyse Farhat Hached's legacy. See MANSOURI, Salim. *Risalat al-Ittihad al-Am al-Tunisi li al-Shughl, 1946-1956* [The Mission of the Tunisian General Union of labour: 1946-1956. Tunis: Dar Mohamed Ali, 2013. This publication gathers the editorials of the newspaper *Sawt al Amal* written by Hached from 1947 and 48 and by Ahmad Ben Salah in 1955 and 1956; MOKNI, Abdelwahid. *Farhat Hached: al-mu'assis al-shahid wa al-qa'id al-shahid* [Farhat Hached: The founding witness and the martyred leader]: (Tunis: Samid, 2012). This publication makes extensive use of Hashad's speeches. See also BEN HMIDA, Abdessalam. *al-harakah al-naqabiya al-wataniyya li al-shighhila al-tunisiya, 1924 to 1956* [The Nationalist labour movement of the Tunisian working class], vol. 1. Tunis: Dar Muhammad Ali, 1984.

¹⁷ UGTT. *Al-Nidham al-dakhili* [Internal Regulations]. Tunis: UGTT, 2007. One of the main tools in defending these goals is the right to strike. The Charter states: "The strike is a legitimate right in union struggle and is part and parcel of union rights included in the constitution (p. 100). The new Tunisian

These aims were articulated, among others, in Hached's address to workers on 16 May 1947, to mark the Bardo agreement of 1881, which surrendered the country to French rule. He says: "the workers' struggle to improve their material and moral conditions is then tightly linked to the higher interests of the country, because such improvement requires a social change which cannot be obtained as long as the nation is subjected to the colonial system".¹⁸ There are global resonances to this strategy, as he explains: "If union movements in free nations fight big capitalism and the governments which support it, it is incumbent upon the workers of colonized nations to combat that system which is really the exploitation of an entire people for the benefit of foreign capitalism".¹⁹

With such early credibility and closeness to the interests of the wider population, UGTT has enjoyed continuity in history and presence across the country, which paralleled and rivaled the ruling party at the height of its power under President Bourguiba and his successor Ben Ali, that is, from 1956 to 2011. With 150 offices across the country, an office in every governorate and district, and over 680,000 current members, it has constituted a credible alternative to this party's power and a locus of resistance to it, so much so that to be a unionist became a euphemism for being an opponent or an activist against the ruling party.²⁰ This geographical reach and popular presence carved out a breathing space and provided institutional structuring for dissent. And it is in this sense that one can argue that UGTT has been the outcome of Tunisian protest and resistance movements and their incubator at the same time.

For example, in 1984 the union aligned itself with the rioting people during the bread revolt; in 2008, it was the main catalyst for the disobedience movement in the Mining Basin of Gafsa; and, on December 2010, the UGTT, particularly its teachers' unions and local offices across the country, became the headquarters of revolt against Ben Ali. The fit between the revolution and UGTT was almost natural since the main demands of the rising masses, namely jobs, national dignity and freedom, had been on the agenda of the union all along. The union was also very well represented in the remote hinterland, such as in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine where the revolution began. Events, which started as spontaneous, were soon framed by local trade unions. This became a strategy by which sectorial strikes, particularly by teachers, soon turned into regional general strikes, starting from the South and moving northwards. An extremely important one was that of

constitution stresses this point in article 36, stating that union rights, including the right to strike are guaranteed. See *Dustur al-jumhuriyyah al-tunisiyyah* [The Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia]. Tunis: Official Press, 2014.

¹⁸ MANSOURI. *Risalat al-Ittihad al-Am al-Tunisi li al-Shughl, 1946-1956. Op.Cit.*, p. 81. Hached also stresses, in the second newspaper of UGTT, *sawt al-'amal* [Voice of labour], that while the union does not intervene in party politics, it assumes its responsibility in matters of public concern.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ From 1956 until 2011, the ruling Neo-Destour party and its successor, RCD, dominated completely political life in the country with a structure which penetrated even the smallest of towns and lowest sections of society. The party became synonymous with the state.

Sfax on 13 June 2011 where the largest demonstration until then was organized and articulated political claims, peacefully, in front of the UGTT local office. The culmination of such series of protests was the 14 January strike in Tunis at which point the head of the regime collapsed.

For these reasons, successive governments tried to compromise with, co-opt, repress or change the character of the union, depending on the situation and the balance of power at hand at any given moment. In 1978, UGTT went on general strike to protest what amounted to a coup perpetrated by the Bourguiba government to change a union leadership judged to be too oppositional and too powerful. The cost was the worst setback in the union's history since the assassination of its founder in 1952. The entire leadership of the union was put on trial and replaced by regime loyalists. Ensuing popular riots were repressed by the army, resulting in tens of deaths.²¹ More recently, in 2012, UGTT sensed a repeat of 1978 and an attempt against its very existence. On 4 December 2012, as the union was gearing up to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the assassination of its founder, its iconic headquarters, Place Mohamed Ali, was attacked by groups known as Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution. The incident was ugly, public and of immediate impact. These leagues originated in community organisation in cities across the country designed to keep order and security immediately after 14 January 2011, which were later disbanded, and become dominated by Islamists of various orientations. On 26 August 2013, a group of trade unionists founded the Tunisian Labour Organization, which aims according to its leaders at correcting the direction of UGTT. To the attack on its offices, UGTT responded by boycotting the government, organizing regional strikes and marches, and eventually calling for a general strike on Thursday 13 December, the first such action since 1978. To the founding of a parallel union, Sami Tahri, the UGTT spokesman, reacted with dismissal, arguing that this was no more than the reaction of losers who could not win elected offices in UGTT and failed to drag the union into the "house of obedience", referring to the new organization's ties to the Al-Nahda party.²² Tahri's confident tone and political statement are backed up by history, which demonstrates that the UGTT has warded off several attempts at takeover, division or weakening over the past sixty years or so, as I mentioned above. This time, too, it prevailed.

²¹ The ruling party attempted to install a parallel trade union under the pretext of "rectifying the direction" of a UGTT whose leadership was judged to be openly hostile to the ruling party and government policies, and a nest for left-wing dissent. One justification for this move was put forth by an important leader of the government loyalist group, Abdessattar Al Chennawi: "[the UGTT leadership] turned the Union into an open field for the opposition of all orientations except Destouri unionists, for the Destour Party is not represented in the union while known and prominent opposition figures hold high offices in UGTT. For this reason, 90% of 'the honourables' come from the Destour party". AL-HADDAD, Salim. *al-ittihad al-am al-tunisi li al-shukghl wa al-nidham al-burguibi [The Tunisian General Union of Labour and Bourguiba's Regime: Between Harmony and Confrontation]* Vol. 2. Tunis: UGTT Documentation and Research Unit, 2011, p. 286.

²² On the attack by the Leagues, see Tahri's response: <http://elaph.com/Web/news/2012/12/779396.html>.

Despite antagonistic relations with governments before and after the revolution, or perhaps because of them, UGTT remained arguably the only body in the country qualified to resolve disputes peacefully, but also to offer mediation albeit with a view to defend its own positions. After January 2011, it emerged as the key mediator and power broker in the initial phase of the revolution, when all political players trusted and needed it. And it was at the initiative of the union that the committee regulating the transition to the elections of 23 October 2011 was formed.²³ UGTT's role was crucial in framing debate, steering decision-making in the chaotic period, starting the Council for the Protection of the Revolution, and serving as meeting place of all the parties at a time when parties were either small, insignificant politically or formed recently.²⁴ At the same time, UGTT used its leverage to secure historic victories for its members and for workers in general, including an agreement to secure permanent contracts for over 140,000 temporary workers and pay raises for several sectors, including teachers, as well as a rise in the minimum wage for the agricultural sector.

As Tunisia moved from the period of revolutionary harmony in which UGTT played host and facilitator, to a political, and even ideological phase, characterised by a multiplicity of parties and polarisation of public opinion, the union was challenged to keep its engagement in politics without falling under the control of a particular party or indeed turning into one. But, due to historical reasons, which saw leftists channel their energy into trade unionism when their political activities were curtailed, UGTT remained on the left side of politics and, in the face of rising Islamist power, became a place where the Left, despite its many newly-formed parties, kept its ties and even strengthened them.²⁵ For these reasons, UGTT remained strong and decidedly outside the control of Islamists. But they, in turn, could not ignore its role and its status, nor could other parties, particularly the newly formed, centrist party, Nida Tunis. At the grassroots level, Islamists kept their membership and took part in UGTT-led labour action, and continue to do so today. At the level of leadership, and after attempts to weaken it by supporting a parallel union as I mentioned above, they were compelled to settle with the fact that the organization held the key to social peace in the country.

²³ The so-called Ben Achour Committee named after its president, the constitutional scholar Iyadh Ben Achour, was called initially the Higher Political Reform Commission, set up on 17 January 2011. UGTT was instrumental in its expansion and constitution as a body to control the interim government and run the transition to the election of the National Constituent Assembly, under the new name, The [Higher Authority for Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform and Democratic Transition](#) as an amalgamation between the original commission and the Council for the Protection of the Revolution set up by UGTT, political parties and civil society organizations. See testimony by Ben Achour dated 30 April 2011 in Temimi. *Observatory Vol. 1*, pp. 181-208.

²⁴ UGTT called for this council on 15 January and hosted it. *Ibid.*, p. 258.

²⁵ The Executive Bureau of the UGTT emerging from the Tabarka congress held on 25-29 December 2011 was dominated by the forces which make up the Popular Front (specifically, the Patriotic Democratic current; the Pan-Arab nationalist parties and the Workers' Communist Party).

It is remarkable, but not surprising, that during the crisis of 2013, which resulted from the assassination of the Leftist leader Chokri Belaid and the pressure on the Al-Nahda-led government to resign, the balance of power and much of the rational management of the deep political crisis depended on the UGTT and its partners, the Tunisian Association of Human Rights, the Lawyers' Association and the UTICA (the Tunisian Union of Industry, Commerce and Traditional Crafts), known as the Quartet. All parties spoke through the UGTT and on the basis of its initiative which consisted in dissolving the government, the appointment of a non-political government, curtailing the work of the ANC (National Constituent Assembly), reviewing top government appointments and dissolving the UGTT's arch enemy, the Leagues for the Defence of the Revolution.²⁶ Union leaders are known to be experienced negotiators and patient and tireless activists. They honed their skills over decades of settling disputes and negotiating deals. For these reasons, they were able to conduct marathon negotiations with the opposing parties and remain above accusations of outright bias. This is not an isolated initiative or a new one by UGTT. In fact as early as 1951, the union served as leader and convenor of Tunisian civil society against French rule. On 12 May 1951, it invited the General Union of Tunisian Farmers, The Tunisian Craftsmen's and Tradesmen' Union and the Neo-Destour Party to help set up The Committee for the Defence of Constitutional Guarantees and Representation of the People.²⁷ Hached also represented Tunisia at the United Nations in 1952, months before his assassination.

UGTT between post-revolution dynamics and limited ambition

With a labour movement engrained in the political culture of the country, and at all levels, a culture of trade unionism has become a component of Tunisian society. Yet, there has not been a proper sociology of this despite the important implications to Tunisia as a whole.²⁸ Protest culture in Tunisia has been deeply affected by labour unionism, which has been tenacious, issue-oriented, uneven and mostly organized. But UGTT has also been affected, in turn, by the political left, the student movement and women's movement, as I will demonstrate below. The unevenness runs largely along the degree of unionisation and militancy. For example, the education sector tended to be the most vocal and most organised. Agricultural workers and white-collar workers are also unionized, and even intellectuals had to work within the confines of or in synch with unions. For the

²⁶ MHENNI, Mrad. "Fa'aliyyat al-mujtama' al-mahalli wa al-thawrah al-tunisiyya: qira'ah fi tajarib al-lijan al-mahalliyyah li himayat al-thawrah" in Temimi, Abdlejalil (ed.). *Al-thawra al-tunisiyya wa al-rabi' al-arabi: ahammiyat al-tahawwulat al-juyusiyasiyya*. [The Tunisian Revolution and the Arab Spring: the importance of geopolitical changes]. Tunis: FTRSI, 2012. pp. 171-192.

²⁷ See the manifesto issued by this meeting in the Tunisian Office for National Liberation in New York in *Farhat Hached: Tunisian labor leader, patriot, martyr*. [New York: the Tunisian Office for National Liberation, 1953], pp.30-31.

²⁸ It was remarkable how during my field work in *al-Sha'b* newspaper and the UGTT local offices, people came to the union to look for jobs, financial aid, or even to solve personal disputes. This was no new trend, UGTT officials assured me.

political Left, one challenge after 2011 has been in fact how to move away from being trade unionists and become politicians; in other words, how to think beyond small issues and using unionist means in order to tackle wider issues and adopt their attendant methods. This meant finding different and broader bases for political alliances and laying out projects for society at large, rather than for sectors or sections of it. Yet, it is remarkable how post-2011 alliances have broadly kept the same patterns operating within UGTT before the revolution. The Popular Front, which is made up mainly of the parties that have affiliation within the executive bureau of the UGTT, has not had much success in recruiting members from outside its union bases.²⁹ Even their interlocutors in Nida Tunis, which leads the current coalition government, are also trade unionists, most prominently Tayeb Baccouche, a former Secretary General of UGTT from 1981 to 1984.

The interface between UGTT and the student and women movements which are both exceptionally active in Tunisia has been significant and not without paradoxes. There have been close relations between the main student union, the General Union of Tunisian Students (Union générale des étudiants de Tunisie, UGET) and the wider labour movement both in activism and in membership, as the university tended to be a training ground, which prepared leaders to be active in UGTT once they leave education. The UGET, which was founded in 1952, has worked closely with the UGTT since then and both would gradually move away from the ruling party, albeit at a different pace. The radicalisation and even what might be termed the leftist turn in unionism in fact finds some of its roots in this flow, as the university in Tunisia, particularly in the 1960s, 70s and 80s was a space of radical activism and left wing politics, which was barred from open political organization under successive governments.³⁰ It supplied the UGTT with its most radical elements at the low and middle-levels of the organization.

With regard to women, a key paradox of the UGTT has been its support of women's causes, but reluctance to promote women to its own leadership. The widespread practice of limiting women's access to the glass ceiling does not truly apply to other aspects of civil society institutions in Tunisia. Women have reached the presidency of UTICA, the Journalists' Association and the Magistrates' Association. While the absence of women in the leadership of UGTT could be explained by the very nature of trade union work, which requires time and presence in public places which are not friendly to women, such as cafes, this remains a serious lacuna of UGTT, which is challenged to be at a step with, if not leading, in this area. In Tunisia, this is particularly important as the role of women has been a marking feature of the society at large and of its protest culture in

²⁹ For a full view of the Tunisian Left, see MOULDI, Guessoumi. "The Map of the Tunisian Left". In KLAFFAT, Kalil (ed.) *Mapping the Arab Left: Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Sudan, Morocco, Algeria*. [Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2014], pp. 16-42. On the Popular Front and its composition, see the same publication.

³⁰ On the early history of the student movement, see DHIFALLAH, Mohamed. *Al-madraj wa al-kursi: dirasat hawla al-talabah al-tunisiyyin bayna 1961 wa 1981: nash'at antalligensia* [*The amphitheater and the chair studies on Tunisian students between the 1950s and the 1970s*]. [Sfax, 2003] (in Arabic); and CHAGROUCHE, Tahar. *Le mouvement étudiant tunisien, 1961-1981: genèse d'une intelligentsia* [Unpublished thesis, Université Paris VII, 1984].

particular throughout the post-independent period, within and outside the labor movement.

The union has also been accused of bureaucracy and corruption at the top level, which triggered several attempts at internal reform and even rebellion over the years. There is in fact considerable power and money associated with being a top union official in Tunisia, which, in a climate of rampant corruption led many leaders to collude with businesses and the government; the discredited former Secretary General Tayeb Sahbbani is an example of this. But this had less effect on grass-root support, local chapters and the middle cadre of the union. Since 2011, UGTT seems to have regained the cohesion it lacked during the Ben Ali period when the gap between the leadership and the grassroots was wide. Yet, the practice of democracy and plurality in Tunisia over the past half century was almost the exclusive domain of the university and the trade unions. Both had electoral campaigns for office, sometimes outside the control of the state, as was the case in the university during the 1970s and 80s. In fact, the state stepped in specifically to quell such practices when the outcome was not in its favour. Two memorable incidents testify to this.

The first one was in 1972, when the majority of students defeated the ruling party lists and secured the independence of the UGET. The second was in 1978 when the ruling party was overruled by the UGTT leadership, as I mentioned above. In both cases, the government proceeded to take over or ban the unions. The type of democratic practice in these two institutions was also in place in the Lawyers' Association and some other minor civil society associations which were all severely repressed, notably, the Judges' Association, the Tunisian League of Human Rights and the Journalists' Association. It is no surprise that two of these have led the reconciliation effort and that all four worked in concert and at the forefront of preserving the aims of the revolution, particularly freedom, dignity and the right to work. The coming together of these associations has, I argue, mutually affected all of them, not only in terms of widening the field of protest, but also in terms of bringing to the fore the wider issues of human rights and freedoms. Democratic practice was therefore linked not to the normal running of society, i.e., as a practice of citizenship, but as an opposition or resistance activity. This gave democracy a militant edge, which it did not lose, but which also affected its character. It was in a sense a democratic act to protect the union against non-democratic dominant forces, including and chiefly the ruling party and its student and labour arms. The practice of citizenship was not possible during the authoritarian rule of the one-party system while elections in the UGTT and other key civil society organizations were not aimed necessarily at producing the leadership most capable of advancing union professional interests and demands, but to keep the ruling party at bay. Hence the weak presence, if not outright absence, of ruling party members in most union offices for decades.

The gradual coming together of these strong civil society institutions shaped a critical mass whose weight was impossible to ignore. Attempts to dominate this coalition aimed at shaping the future of the country and its revolution as a whole. The Al-Nahda party, for example, ignored this coalition for a while, but ended up accepting the solution

the UGTT and its partners negotiated, when they realized that an open alliance of the UGTT with the opposition in a coalition would become hard to beat. A key moment was when the UGTT declared a national strike in the aftermath of Belaid's assassination at a time when Al-Nahda was accused of having a hand in the killing.

Conclusion

A combination of symbolic capital of resistance accumulated over decades, a solid record of results for its members and the working people as a whole, and a well-oiled machine at the level of organisation across the country and sectors of the economy, made the UGTT unassailable and unavoidable at the same time. It has been a key feature of Tunisian political and social life and a defining element of what some have called the Tunisian "exception" in the MENA region. For this reason, in times of national discord, the UGTT has been capable of credible mediation and power brokering. It also remains a key guarantor that social justice, a main aim of the revolution, would remain on the agenda. Yet, the UGTT faces an unprecedented situation where a separation between politics and unionism is likely. Its own challenges are to remain the strongest union at a time when three other splits union have emerged, and to maintain a political role now that politics has been largely turned over to political parties. But the realignment between liberal and the main Islamist party in a strong coalition, changed the game altogether. The UGTT is now trying to find its feet, especially now that its driving activist force, Leftists, are in a minority political opposition.

There are many who regret the reluctance on the part of the union, which was a powerful king maker in the early months of the revolution, to step in and take control of the country. They argue that by failing to do so it had effectively handed over power to its own enemies, namely neoliberals or Islamist parties. On why the union did not form a labour party, although the moment was ripe for it, Abid Briki, spokesperson of the UGTT in 2011, commented in March 2011: "This may weaken the UGTT, and may push us to real union plurality. The strength of the UGTT comes from the presence of all political factions within its ranks. If we were to rush into founding a party, the union would turn partisan, which would weaken it and encourage other parties to form their own unions".³¹

So far the union continues to be held together and is active in the on-going social protests, but its political role has been reduced considerably. The balance of political power in the country has not yet been settled, but the latest elections moved it towards the centre in a combination of the old guard, rising Islamists and business. No major economic and social gains have been made to address grievances supported by the revolution and the UGTT, making strong trade unionism much needed today. Whether the revolution would mark the end of the political dimension of the UGTT, or whether it

³¹ Testimony by Abid Briki, spokesperson of UGTT during the period of the revolution on 26 March 2011. See *marsad al-thawrah al-tunisiyya* [observatory of Tunisian Revolution]vol. 3, Tunis: FTESI, .p. 271.

would consolidate a *de facto* alliance with Leftist parties, remains to be seen. The UGTT is no ordinary union. It has determined the character and impact of the labor movement and affected Tunisia as a whole since the late 1940s. It impacted significantly the 2011 revolution and the transition period, and is likely to play an important role in the future of the country. In this, it is unparalleled elsewhere in the Arab world. And it is largely because of it that one may confidently say that Tunisia is not Egypt, or Syria or Libya or Yemen. Before 2011, the confluence between a largely secular and humanist opposition and an engrained labour activism have been, I claim, the main bases of a Tunisian formation, which allowed the development of a culture of resistance to authoritarianism with a specific humanist and social justice content. At the same time, the UGTT, and the culture it nurtured, were perhaps not revolutionary enough to provide the leadership and the ambition necessary to turn the 2011 uprising into a workers' revolution. Instead, it took part, a constructive one, in *structuring* the transition to a political phase where it may see its own role curtailed, a phase in which radical politics could be freed from the political limitations of trade unionism. The challenge facing the UGTT is to maintain the independence and appeal of the organization as a sure, and necessary, refuge should neoliberalism or Islamists win the day and should plurality in organized labour follow the fractious political field.