

UGTT in Tunisia Empowered or Overpowered A Reassessment of the Role of the Labor Movement in Tunisia

Ferial Zaghdane & Moosa Elayah

An analytical paper published by the Governance and Peacebuilding Center

May 2020

Website: <http://www.mena-acdp.com/2018/01/25/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/gcpb11>

For contact: dr. Moosa Elayah, elayahmaa@gmail.com



UGTT in Tunisia Empowered or Overpowered

A Reassessment of the Role of the Labor Movement in Tunisia

Ferial Zaghdane & Moosa Elayah

(French: Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail)

Introduction

Granting the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize “For its decisive contribution to the building of a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia in the wake of the Jasmine Revolution of 2011” (Nobel Prize, 2015) was a major achievement for Tunisia and the revolution. Along with the Tunisian Order of Lawyers (ONAT), the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), and the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Commerce and Handicrafts (UTICA), the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) was one of the four awarded organizations for its major role as a moderator in the 2013 political spiral (Churchill, 2016). The UGTT is unlike any other union as its leaders believe it to have more than the classic role of union. The UGTT is believed to have a mission in Tunisian society differently than most other trade unions. Since the founding in 1946, it was considered responsible for a dual mission: not only defending the rights of workers, but also, guarding Tunisia’s independence on its journey to “modernity” and democracy. This mission has linked necessarily the union’s with its fluctuating role between action focused on demanding rights and action focused on participation in civil society and governance. This brings us to the questions this papers seeks to explore the historic milestones that enabled the UGTT to attain the power it currently has over the years in the context of its ever changing relationship with the different authorities that governed the country and the constant change of its role, appearing at times subject to state power while other times being the unstoppable “beast” of opposition supported by popular masses.

This study is an exploration of the foundations of the labor movement in Tunisia and an assessment of its multiple roles played throughout history in the country with a special focus on the dual socio-political and economic mission. Aiming at demonstrating how labor unions can be an empowerment to countries if well

The UGTT is in desperate need for a revitalization and restructuring. Changes to the structure that link leadership to the members should be less vertical. The option for electing the leader should be available to the masses aspiring to the UGTT as their savior from injustice

managed and reformed, a number of recommendations concerning structural internal reform and revitalization are provided in this paper following a deep analysis of all the aspects of the topic. This study is mainly based on secondary resources from academic research articles and grey literature (newspapers, official websites...) which provides the space for further more elaborate research on the matter from the perspective of NGO management and not from a political perspective which is almost a rarity.

Historically, the general tendency of popular opinion is to consider trade unions as damaging to the states and uncontrollable once powered up masses. Taking the example of the labor union strikes in the UK before their long fight with Margret Thatcher. They were technically swamping the cities in garbage in protest and no one was able to stop them, be it police, the law or even the government. They were even called "a politicized mafia" (Mount, 1983). Reforming the unions and limiting their power was Thatcher's number one priority as she strongly believed that were directly challenging the government authority and "invincibility" (The Guardian, 2013).

The body of literature focusing on political sociology often conveyed trade unions as ancient established bureaucratic systems with an anarchic anti-establishment leadership (Darlington, 2012). They are often perceived as a weak unnecessary knot in the fabric of government institutions. However, unions having power and taking an active role in governance and policy setting is not always a negative aspect. Instead of considering labor movements as a dispensable product of the past, the new study of the labor field of research over the past two decades has been strongly emphasizing on the ability of organized labor to act strategically and have a significant role in governance. The focus should not be on eliminating or "taming" them under the rule of the state. Contrarily, the focus should be on equipping them with innovative organizing strategies, new forms of participation and campaigning instead usually accompanied by constant reform and check in a process called labor union revitalization. This new concept will allow the unions to have a significant role in governance and guarantee their right to participate in policy setting as an indispensable component of civil society instead of constantly trying to force their way into recognition with chaos, strikes and hatred towards any form of establishment. (Turner, Katz and Hurd, 2001; Clawson, 2003; Agarwala, 2013; Murray, 2017).

In the debate concerning trade union renewal and restructuring, the theory of Power Resources Approach (PRA) served as its founding assumption by recognizing that organized labor can defend its interests successfully by collectively mobilizing power resources (Schmalz, 2017). Following this same theory, if the labor unions' interests fall hand in hand with those of the collective interest and public good, having power and resources could strengthen civil society and assert its role and weight as a third sector.

Overall, being both economic and socio-political players, trade unions constantly try to delicately balance these two roles and assert their entitlement to being an essential institution in the fabric of states and their histories even though the priority afforded for each side of the equation varies depending on the specific context of county and time (Hyman, 2010).

UGTT: Ever Present Throughout History

The UGTT has been an essential component of the history of Tunisia ever since its establishment in 1946, 10 years prior to Independence by Farhat Hached. At that time, such an organization was crucial for the independence process and the organization of the resistance movement under one roof. It welcomed people from different classes, professions, religions, ages, and intellectual capacities as they all shared a common goal and faced a common enemy.

Over the years however, especially during the two authoritarian regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali, the role of UGTT in the public sphere was ambivalent. The organization was faced with a number of challenging internal conflicts that in consequence lead to the unstable relationships with the two regimes. The dynamic was swaying between a tensed relationship of opposition faced by tight surveillance and times of support and freedom to some extent. For example, in January 1978, the UGTT organized a general strike that was severely oppressed by police forces and resulted in the imprisonment of the organization's secretary general at the time. Ironically, a decade later, the UGTT declared their approval of Ben Ali's policies and promised to be his watchdog over the activity of the workers'. These two instances are considered milestones in the history of Tunisia but also for the UGTT as they marked the bizarre shift in dynamics with authority throughout its history. This ambiguous attitude towards the regime is the main reason behind all the critiques spoken of the UGTT which will later hunt it even after the revolution and the important role it played. The UGTT's local branches and members surprisingly managed to stay neutral. They chose to keep away from political flirtation with the regime being far from center of the spotlight (Bishara, 2014).

It is important to note though that despite its shaky position and the ambiguous role the UGTT had played during that time, people kept seeking the shelter of the union in the face of hardships and injustice as they have always done historically. It was still considered "the fort of the unprivileged". (Ennaceur, 2000).

In 2011, the situation suddenly changed. The UGTT surfaced as a major player in organizing and supervising the anti-Ben Ali demonstrations and protests despite the refusal of the organization's leadership to acknowledge and support these protests until two weeks after the beginning of the uprising. Despite all, the role of the UGTT in keeping the protests organized and peaceful was undeniable.

During post-revolutionary Tunisia's bumpy road to stability, the union continued to be a force and insisted on leaving a trace in the process. Notably, the number of strikes has massively increased in the following years in all sectors and major conflicts rose with the different governments that took over. However, the UGTT insisted on it as a healthy reaction to freedom and right to protest and demand rights and not an attempt to dictate policy and manipulate the governments. In 2013, a critical and decisive year in the destiny of the revolution, a chance came by for the UGTT to prove its point. That year was the year of massive ideological clashes between the different parties and their fight over authority. The Quartet, including the UGTT thus sponsored the National Dialogue Initiative September following the assassination of former leader and founder of the People's Movement party Mohammed Brahmi, during which, the UGTT presented an action plan to overcome the political and ideological conflict that had plagued the country since the revolution (Bishara, 2014). The initiative and the role played by the UGTT and the rest of the quartet organizations to solve the crisis have won the movement a peace prize two years after.

Overall, the history of the UGTT is telling of its uniqueness as a labor union. Since its foundation, it was dually active as a political force and economic rights' advocate. From the hardships of occupation, to the injustice of authoritarian regimes to end by a crucial political environment that threatens the new democracy, the UGTT was there to leave its mark. Despite its questionable loyalty to the regimes at times, people still trusted it to be the shelter for them against the atrocities of the government. However, other than the historic mission it adopted and the popular opinion of it, what makes the UGTT unique as a labor union? The following section will provide an overview of all the aspects that give the organization more weight than a regular labor union.

Peculiarities of the UGTT

The UGTT is a nationally recognized organization with a respectable weight and ability to intervene in policy making just like any political party in the country. This makes it more than just a social movement advocating for the rights of workers:

- **Popular Support and National Recognition:** After 2011, the UGTT witnessed a substantial increase in membership. The estimation of its members currently falls at roughly 600,000 out of a total labor force of 4 million. Accordingly, the organization is officially popularly recognized as the ultimate representation of the country's organized force (Bishara, 2014). The increase in membership rate is a result of the popular trust in the union's historic stance in favor of freedom and democracy and long struggle for the demands of the underprivileged. In fact, playing a decisive role in freeing the country from occupation and the establishment of the post-occupation republic allowed it to gain social support.

- Despite facing tensions at times often fueled by ideological differences in relation to the current role of the UGTT and its involvement in political arena, most political parties and other organizations in the civil society look up to the UGTT organization with ultimate respect for the UGTT and cherish its efforts in moderating political differences for the sake of the new democracy during the political crisis of 2013 (Adouani, 2018). They all believe in its active role as an organization serving the public good.
- **Absence of Competition:** The UGTT have exercised a monopoly on worker representation whether intentionally or unintentionally. Interestingly, the increase in the permissiveness of the legal system in Tunisia thanks to the revolution did not much assist the new unions established after 2011 that were unable to compete with the organizational power of the UGTT. The historic participation of the UGTT in all national milestones as a popular force for change. Since independence, the UGTT has had much greater credibility for its history of advocacy and militancy (Adouani, 2018). To some extent, that prevented any other attempt to establish a new labor movement as most of them fail for lack of recognition, support or resources. It is hard to fairly compete with a long history and a large base of resources.
- Although the Tunisian constitution guarantees that right to protest and establish a union, only three trade union organizations were established mostly by former UGTT members and leaders (Bishara, 2014). The Tunisian General Labor Confederation (CGTT), for example, was founded by former UGTT activist Habib Giza back in 2006 and only legalized in 2011. The membership of the organization increased from 10,000 in 2011 to 50,000 in 2013 (Bishara, 2014). Despite all efforts, this organization serves only as a health indicator of the success of democracy, but its presence is insignificant in the political or social arena against the UGTT. In reality, only the UGTT has been given a pass to engage in official negotiations with the government as an organization and as the only official representation of workers and union activity.
- **Organizational Structure, Strategy and Resources:** The UGTT is governed by a centralized model of management. The leadership of the union, which is not elected by the base members but by the board committee only, is responsible for all organizational tasks from task assignment, resource allocation to agenda setting. The regional offices and local branches still enjoy a relative amount of autonomy and independence though which allows them to socially mobilize protests whenever required following the approval and the directions from the central leadership. The offices of the UGTT headquarters and the national branches own official offices/buildings and hire dedicated personnel. In all counties of the

country, the affiliates of local and regional trade union bureaus have fully equipped offices set up for professional administrative meetings and activity in addition to a permanent staff (Adouani, 2018).

- The UGTT follows a strategy of strike action and government negotiations. The two most famous examples are that of the strike against a state-owned textile plant in “Ksar Hellal” in 1977 and the work stoppage concerning phosphate miners in the same year (Disney, 1978). The UGTT scored victory over the government in both of these two strikes following that tactic. In 1978 also the UGTT called for an unprecedented general strike (Adouani, 2018). It was the only general strike in its long history of activism and strikingly successful nationally.

Evidence from Comparison with the Labor movement in Egypt

In an attempt to account for the “uniqueness” of the UGTT as a labor union with a special twisted mission and specific circumstances, we sought to compare it to the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), a neighboring labor union with the same historical weight and significant role in the 2011 uprising.

Egyptian and Tunisian workers participated diligently and massively in the organization of strikes and marches during the uprisings against the two long standing authoritarian regimes of Mubarak and Ben Ali in early 2011. However, unlike its Tunisian counterpart, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) was not enthusiastic about the participation of Egyptian workers in the uprising and called out for its members to be neutral (Bishara, 2014). Unlike the situation in Tunisia, the establishment of new independent unions in Egypt represented a significant challenge to the already weakened position of the ETUF as it was a loyal subject to Mubarak’s regime and refused to take action even after leaving its battered labor to self-govern and defend their own rights by themselves (Bishara, 2014). It is also worth noting that even though Tunisian law recognizes union pluralism, unlike the Egyptian law, no other union was officially legalized other than the UGTT until the end of Ben Ali’s regime (Bishara, 2014).

Challenges and Recommendations

Despite its undeniable organizational power, the UGTT still faces a number of challenges coming from the leadership insistence on fulfilling the prominent political mission it adopted. These challenges include the need to delicately balance the two political and social causes the leadership chose to fight for since the founding days. Internal structural issues, the rising competition from the independent unions, and the increasing criticism constantly received from political parties as the organization ventures out of its socio-economic aspects and delves more and more in the political realm are all obstacles the organization has to radically and seriously resolve in order to progress and preserve its current status as a national force.

Venturing in the political arena in the current Tunisia and trying to establish itself as a political force in the country instead of focusing on its social mission left the UGTT with a high risk of igniting the opposition of the base members and losing popular support. Critiques constantly point out to the fact that the UGTT has turned a blind eye to social problems in favor of political power and privilege both nationally and internationally. The base members and the local branches believe that the leadership has walked away from the fight for the rights of the unprivileged by indulging in the political power dynamics which might restrict its ability to negotiate on behalf of the working people and express their concerns as a non-neutral part in the conflict.

The UGTT interference in political endeavors has also prevented the leadership from paying enough attention to the current internal problems that threaten the integrity of the organization and might gradually weaken it. Suspicions of corruption, money embezzlement and abuse of power and resources have always haunted the UGTT but were never seriously and radically addressed which leaves space for constant accusations. The UGTT is also often accused of collusion with international powers, a serious threat to its social and political position as a guardian of national independence and values. Regarding internal democracy, the leadership position should be democratically elected by the base members and not treated as an exclusivity to the top level leaders. The matter of underrepresentation of women in the organization's leadership positions has also risen especially after the revolution even by supporters of the UGTT who stressed the serious need to put an end to corruption issues and recognized that the leadership of the UGTT should not be exclusive to men (Adouani, 2018). These radical changes will require significant efforts to eradicate the mentality governing the current leadership. All these steps are required for a full process of revitalization and structural reform of the UGTT. Only then, this organization will have unlimited popular support and solid proof against critiques and accusations.

References

- Adouani, S. and Ben Sedrine, S. (2018), Trade Unions in Transformation: Trade Union Power and Democratic Transition in Tunisia, *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*.
- Agarwala, R. (2013), Inventory of Informal Worker Organizations: India.
- Baker, V. (2015), The Role of Civil Society in the Tunisian Democratic Transition, *University of Colorado, Boulder*
- Bishara, D. (2014), Labor Movements in Tunisia and Egypt: Drivers vs. Objects of Change in Transition from Authoritarian Rule, *SWP Comments*, January, German Institute for International and Security Affairs,
- CLAWSON, D. (2003). The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements. ITHACA; LONDON: Cornell University Press. Retrieved April 30, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv3mtbnp

- Churchill, A. (2016), Labor organization in the Arab Spring: a comparison of Tunisia and Egypt, Kuwait Program at Sciences and Po, https://www.sciencespo.fr/kuwait-program/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/KSP_Paper_Award_Fall_2016_CHURCHILL_Amie.pdf
- Darlington, R., & Upchurch, M. (2012). A reappraisal of the rank-and-file versus bureaucracy debate. *Capital & Class*, 36(1), 77–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309816811430369>
- Disney, N. (1978). The Working Class Revolt in Tunisia. *MERIP Reports*, (67), 12-14. doi:10.2307/3011401
- Ennaceur, Mohamed (2000): Les syndicats et la mondialisation : le cas de la Tunisie. International Institute of Social Studies: ILO working document.
- Murray, G. (2017). Union renewal: what can we learn from three decades of research? *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*, 23(1), 9–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1024258916681723>
- Nobel Prize Press Release (2015), The Nobel Peace Prize for 2015, *Nobel Prize Organization*, Norway, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2015/press-release/>
- Schmalz, S., & Thiel, M. (2017). IG Metall's comeback: Trade union renewal in times of crisis. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 59(4), 465–486. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185617714818>
- Schmalz, Stefan & Ludwig, Carmen & Webster, Edward. (2018). The Power Resources Approach: Developments and Challenges. *Global Labour Journal*. 9. 10.15173/glj.v9i2.3569.
- Travis, A. (2013), National archives: Margaret Thatcher wanted to crush power of trade unions, *The Guardian UK*, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/aug/01/margaret-thatcher-trade-union-reform-national-archives>
- Turner, L. & Hurd, R. W. (2001). Building social movement unionism: The transformation of the American labor movement [Electronic version]. In L.