# Unions as Brokers of Transition from Authoritarian Rule

## Insights from Tunisia

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In October 2015, the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its contribution to peaceful democracy-building following the mass protests that led to the ouster of President Ben Ali in 2011. The Quartet comprised four key players in Tunisian civil society, including the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA), the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers. The UGTT was, by far, the most prominent player in the Quartet. Posturing as a power broker, the union mediated conflict between competing political parties at a critical juncture in the country's transition. This high-profile role goes beyond a conventional unionist role, where unions' behavior is confined to the protection of members' interests. In this sense, the UGTT moved beyond "the particular and particularized grievances that are the raison d'etre of the organization and engage in political actions, especially those that have little or nothing to do with members' reasons for belonging" (Ahlquist and Levi 2013).

The UGTT's highly political intervention in Tunisia's transition motivates the central theoretical question of this paper: When do trade unions emerge as major political actors or adopt an agenda that transcends their members' material interests? Given their typically large and stable membership, trade unions often have strong organizational capacities and the potential, in some cases, to emerge as platforms for political mobilization. This makes it particularly important to understand the conditions under which trade unions shift between unionist and political agendas. Existing explanations—focusing on the degree of trade union autonomy from the state, labor's material incentives to support democratization, and the labor movement's relationship to elite actors in the transition—do not sufficiently account for the UGTT's high-profile political role in Tunisia's transition, as well as the fact that the organization has sometimes prioritized its political role over its members' material interests.

Using a historical analysis of the evolution and trajectory of the UGTT, I argue that the context in which trade union organizations emerge and whether their formation precedes the establishment of a post-independence regime has important long-term implications for the type of union activism in a given country. If trade union organizations have a strong presence at the time of regime formation, and if their institutional identity is tied to broader struggles (perhaps the struggle for national independence), these unions are more likely to have an expansive view of unionism. Given authoritarian attempts to co-opt trade union leaders, however, it is through rank-and-file militancy that the legacy of a broader vision of unionism is sustained. This is a different kind of dynamic than that described by John Ahlquist, and Margaret Levi where leaders play a central role in convincing members of endorsing issues that go beyond their narrow material interests (2013).

In Tunisia, the UGTT was formed ten years prior to independence and its formative years were defined by its critical role in the struggle against colonialism. This meant that the UGTT entered the post-independence period as an organization with strong nationalist credentials. The UGTT's legacy as a nationalist actor remained an inspiration for many of its members despite sustained attempts to co-opt the UGTT's leadership under the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes.  This legacy was sustained

over time through rank-and-file militancy, which pressured the leadership at key contentious moments in the history of the organization. Rank-and-file mobilization during these periods was a key factor in pushing the otherwise complacent UGTT leadership into asserting a more oppositional stance toward the regime during the 2010/2011 uprising. Given the UGTT's unstable relationship with the regime, union leaders eventually succumbed to rank-and-file pressure. This vision of trade unionism also informs the UGTT's behavior in the post-Ben Ali period.

There is an element of path-dependence to the argument made here. Following Pierson and Levi, I adopt a narrow conception of path-dependence in the sense that "once a country or region has started down a track, the costs of reversal are very high. There will be other choice points, but the entrenchments of certain institutional arrangements obstruct an easy reversal of the initial choice" (Levi 1997, 28). This logic implies that once a particular type of unionism emerges in a given context, it will be difficult to change the character of those unions.


## BEYOND ECONOMISM

Scholars of unionism distinguish between various types of unionism depending on the scope of activities/demands pursued by trade unions. One of the most prominent distinctions is that between "business unionism" and "social movement unionism" (Ahlquist and Levi 2013: 12). Business unions typically focus narrowly on their members' interests. As such, they engage in politics only insofar as it is "directly relevant to their members' interests" (Ahlquist and Levi 2013: 12). The concept of 'social movement unionism' has been applied to a variety of contexts in labor studies and has taken on a number of meanings (Seidman 2011; Moodie 2012). Gay Seidman notes that the concept aptly captures the broadened activism of militant labor movements in the global South. "In authoritarian Brazil as well as apartheid South Africa," she argues, "factory workers backed up broad demands for political democratization with shop-floor militancy, disrupting production in support of both workplace and political goals" (2011: 95). The Tunisian UGTT's role as a broker between competing political parties in the country's transition from authoritarian rule is an example of this.

The existing scholarship on trade unions does not systematically address the question of why some unions emerge as business unions while others as social movement unions. Ahlquist and Levi have recently tackled this question as it pertains to the study of trade unions in democratic contexts. Concerned with why individuals agree to participate in unions that embrace causes beyond their members' narrow interests, Ahlquist and Levi highlight the role of leaders in creating "communities of fate" and making it worthwhile for members to join (2013, 2). Although this argument offers valuable insights into the micro-foundations of engagement in unions that transcend their members' interests, this paper is concerned with the broader conditions under which this type of union emerges. In addition, the logic behind Ahlquist and Levi's emphasis on leaders' capacity to offer incentives for members to support broader agendas is less applicable in non-democratic contexts, where union leaders are often co-opted by authoritarian incumbents. In those contexts, it is theoretically more plausible for rank-and-file members to push more radical agendas than union leaders.

A second set of explanations emerges out of the literatures on state-labor relations and democratization. Both literatures are concerned with the conditions under labor movements adopt an oppositional stance against authoritarian incumbents, thereby endorsing explicitly political

agendas. An important strand of the scholarship on democratization stresses the role of social classes, especially labor, in processes of democratization (Collier and Mahoney 1997; Collier 1999; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; Bellin 2000). The focus on the role of social classes was partly a response to elite-centric explanations of democratization, especially in the dominant paradigm on democratic transitions. Within this framework, several scholars argue that labor adopts a pro-democratic stance when doing so supports its material interests.

Examining European cases of democratization, Ruschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens argue that the working class played an important role in these processes because doing so served workers' material interests (1992). They argue that "the working class was the most consistently pro-democratic force. The class had a strong interest in effecting its political inclusion and it was more insulated from the hegemony of dominant classes than the rural lower classes" (1992, 8). Regardless of their disagreement over which class is the primary agent for democratization, Bellin notes that scholars in this tradition agree that democracy is the product of struggle between social forces and that these social forces are motivated by material interests. Bellin thus concludes that "social forces are most likely to champion democracy when their economic interests put them at odds with their authoritarian states" (2000, 177).

While still emphasizing material considerations as the core determinant of unions' support for democratization, Bellin argues that the conditions of late development alter labor's calculations by increasing its dependence on the state for financial support. "Collaboration rather than confrontation thus makes the relations among capital, labor, and the state in LCDs and this stands in marked contrast to class-state relations in the early industrializers" (Bellin 2002: 154). Hence, labor and capital are "contingent democrats" in late developing countries, according to Bellin.

> The peculiar conditions of late development, the greater need for and availability of state sponsorship, the change in political discourse and its implications in the context of mass poverty, can thus disjoin the material interests of capital and labor from the cause of democratization and discourage these social forces from playing a leading role in the campaign for democracy. But in attending first and foremost to their material interests, these social forces are no different from their predecessors. Rather, like capital and labor in the first transition, capital and labor in late-developing countries are contingent democrats for the very reason that they are consistent defenders of their material interests (Bellin 2000, 155).

Applying this analysis to Tunisia, Bellin argues that organized labor in Tunisia has very little to gain from democratization. "Organized workers," she argues "are much better off than the vast majority of their unorganized compatriots" (2000, 151). With soaring unemployment rates in Tunisia and the increased size of the informal sector, Bellin contends that organized labor's "economically privileged position in Tunisian society…creates a disjuncture between their material interests and that of the vast majority of poorer Tunisians. Workers do not necessarily see their interests served by mass empowerment and they have less incentive to join forces with other subordinate strata to make the state more accountable to mass interest" (Bellin 2000, 152). On the eve of the December 2010 uprising, this calculus had not significantly changed. Tunisian labor remained economically privileged compared to other societal groups in Tunisia, most notably the unemployed. In addition, as will be discussed in greater depth below, those UGTT activists who supported anti-Ben Ali protests did so because of their background as political activists.

Other accounts emphasize trade union autonomy as an important factor in determining the role that unions play in supporting anti-regime protests (Kraus 2007; LeBas 2011). Adrienne LeBas makes a compelling argument regarding the potential for trade unions to harness political opposition under authoritarian rule. She contends that even in cases where a history of state corporatism creates "ties of dependency between the state and organized labor," labor unions have the potential to oppose authoritarian regimes. This hinges on the degree to which organized labor is autonomous from the regime. "Where allied trade unions possess autonomy from the state and the ruling party, their institutions can be subverted from within. Internal union elections make unions more responsive to grassroots demands than state dictates. The result is the gradual transformation of a state ally into an oppositional actor" (LeBas 2011, 40). For LeBas then, autonomy spells an oppositional role for labor unions because it allows for the subversion of these from within through the election of militant activists to key union positions. Similarly, examining cases of democratic transition in Africa, Jon Kraus shows that "ten of the fifteen cases (67 percent) where trade union protests played a large role in democratization involved countries where there was trade union autonomy or periods of such autonomy" (2007: 271).

Trade union autonomy is certainly critical for allowing for the emergence of trade unions as platforms for opposition under authoritarian rule. At the same time, however, it is not clear that trade union autonomy guarantees this role. While variation in the degree to which organized labor is autonomous from the state helps explain the conditions under it plays an oppositional role in transitions from authoritarian rule, it does not necessarily account for the underlying motivations for this role. In a sense, variation in the degree to which organized labor is autonomous from the state does not necessarily explain whether unions emerge as champions of democratization because it serves their members' material interests or for other considerations.

Finally, research on democratic transitions posits that the labor movement's status during the transition is partly determined by its relationship to elite actors and position vis-à-vis hard-liners and soft-liners. While offering important insights, these accounts do not fully capture transition dynamics in cases where authoritarian incumbents are unseated by mass uprisings. In addition, such accounts stress the relationship between labor movements and leftist or communist parties as an important factor in explaining labor's involvement in the transition. The Tunisian case presents some challenges to these accounts. Not only did the UGTT emerge as independent from major political parties in the transition, it became an agenda-setter in later stages of the transition.

Drawing primarily on the case of the UGTT in Tunisia, I advance an alternative argument that is rooted in the historical origins of the organization and the fact that its formative years were shaped by a vision of trade unionism that embraced nationalist demands and transcended members' interests. The UGTT's legacy as a national actor whose agenda encompasses broad societal goals that go beyond members' short-term material interests was sustained for generations, despite repeated attempts to co-opt the organization's leadership under the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes. This expanded vision of unionism was reproduced through two primary mechanisms: (1) an ethos of "radical unionism" at the rank-and-file level, which fueled militancy, and placed pressure on the union's leadership to return to this vision of unionism; and (2) a process of self-selection where members join because they are committed to this vision.

## THE UGTT'S HISTORICAL LEGACY: BETWEEN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Unlike many trade union federations operating under authoritarian rule in the Middle East and North Africa, the UGTT was not a product of the post-independence state in Tunisia. Formed 10

years before independence, the UGTT played a historic role in the struggle against colonialism. As Eqbal Ahmad notes,

> At the time of Tunisia's independence her trade union, more than the Neo-Destour, wielded a coherent, consistent, and functioning ideology. It stressed self-reliance and autonomy of trade unions within the framework of national cooperation….And it claimed a program of social and economic development which its leaders were intent on promoting in the national interest (Ahmad 1966, 160).

As such, the UGTT entered the post-independence period in Tunisia as a credible national actor, with a strong vision for the country's political and economic development. This unique history lends it "special" status among its regional counterparts, according to many of its members.

In addition to its involvement in the armed struggle against French colonialism, the UGTT has its roots in various attempts to establish unions for Tunisian workers as opposed to French unions that included Tunisian workers. The first attempt took place in 1924 with the establishment of the short-lived Confederation General des Travailleurs Tunisiens (CGTT). The first 'independent unions' emerged in 1944 and later constituted the seed for the formation of the UGTT in 1946.

Soon after its inception in 1946, the UGTT oriented itself as a nationalist organization. Notably, the early generation of trade union activists in Tunisia had a limited view of trade unionism, encompassing only social activism. According to historian Ali al-Mahjoubi, Mohammed Ali al-Hami's project was not a national project aimed at liberating Tunisia from colonialism. His project was mostly a social project aimed at improving the conditions of the working classes that suffered from deteriorating economic conditions (2015: 97). It was not until after the Second World War, however, that Tunisian trade unionism moved into a nationalist direction. A vision of unionism that is more squarely rooted in class-based struggle was embodied by the Union of Tunisian Workers, which prioritized class-based struggle regardless of any consideration for ethnicity, religion, or national origin. Reflecting on these two models of unionism, Abdul Hamid al-Arkash argues that the former took hold in Tunisia after the Second World War.

By its 1951 congress, the UGTT had adopted the struggle against colonialism as one of its main priorities. The congress made it clear that the struggle for workers' rights cannot be divorced from the struggle against colonialism. As such, the UGTT emerged as a key player in the struggle for independence, sometimes engaging in armed struggle. As such, there was a strong connection between social and political struggle. This political orientation was forcefully crystalized in the 14th congress, held in March 1951 (al-Mahjoubi 2015: 45-46). This congress clearly asserted that "serving the national cause is our first duty" (al-Mahjoubi 2015: 45-46). Initially hesitant about the involvement of the UGTT in the nationalist struggle, Farhat Hached eventually became of its main icons. His views shifted from an initial emphasis on class struggle to an emphasis on national unity. This meant the unity of all Tunisian social classes against foreign domination (al-Mahjoubi 2015: 102). Hached also started to believe that "politics is everywhere and if we allow ourselves to ignore it, it will not ignore us" (Ibid.). Writing on the close connection between political and social struggles in a 1949 article,
Hashad writes:

> Would union activism have any meaning without the basic guarantees for freedoms that all people in the world aspire to? Is it possible to achieve social and economic goals for a people that does not enjoy democratic benefits? How can the union

movement develop in a country that does not have guarantees for individual and natural freedoms (quoted in *The Dialectical Relationship between the Political and Social Struggles*, 39).

Writing on the UGTT's history, the prominent Tunisian scholar Abdeljelil Temimi argues that Farhat Hashad, one of the main founders of the UGTT, was committed to armed struggle against colonialism. In 1952, when Bourghiba was sent to Tabarka, Hashad had "embraced resistance as a method and as a course of action…the UGTT truly reflected the ambitions of the [Tunisian] people for independence. As such, the UGTT was a "national space par excellence," that gave rise to "the most important political and intellectual leadership figures in the country," writes Temimi (2009).

Prioritizing the nationalist struggle, however, was not entirely consistent with purely class-based goals. Historians of the UGTT emphasize the trade-off between nationalist and class struggle in the union's history (see al-`Arkash). The decision to focus on the nationalist struggle entailed favoring a nationalist approach toward trade unionism, "even if this comes at the expense of class interests and goals" (al-Arkash 1988, 72). In practice, this meant embracing a unionism for Tunisian workers, "the severing of ties with the European unions and workers' organizations and an alignment—if not alliance—with the nationalist movement" (Zemni 2013, 133). The tension between nationalism and class struggle remained salient for the UGTT at least until Tunisia gained independence in 1956 (Zemni 2013, 133). "Either the workers' movement restricted itself to economic issues and classic trade unionism, thus remaining marginal vis-à-vis the nationalist movement, or it became 'nationalist' and relinquished the class struggle" (Zemni 2013, 133). Nevertheless, the UGTT's brand of unionism combined elements of both socialism and nationalism. As Eqbal Ahmed aptly puts it, "class war took a nationalist content, and given the active influence of French syndicalism, nationalism took on a socialist content" (Ahmed 1966: 157).

The UGTT's membership strategy also reflects its attempt to project itself as a broad-based organization. Compared with French unions operating in Tunisia at the time, the UGTT sought to represent a much wider array of wage earners. Notably, UGTT's membership was not limited to blue-collar workers. Instead, membership was open to a wide range of Tunisian wage-earners, including small traders, artisans, intellectuals, and bureaucrats (al-Hirmassi 1990). As Kenneth Perkins puts it, "More anxious to develop national consciousness than class consciousness, the UGTT swelled its ranks with the addition of associations representing not only salaried workers but also teachers, bureaucrats, and other tertiary-sector employees. By the end of the decade, its strength had increased to nearly fifty thousand, while the USTT's [Union des Syndicats des Travailleurs Tunisiens] numbers remained static" (Perkins 2014: 119). According to al-Hirmassi, the UGTT's attempt to attract a broad membership reflects the fact that the union perceived of itself as an "organization of the people," that is fundamentally concerned with their social and political lives.

Notably, the UGTT's own literature is replete with references to the organization's dual role as a "national" and "social" actor. A book produced by the UGTT's department of studies and documentation, titled "The dialectical relationship between the national and social struggles in the history of the UGTT" captures the prominence of this issue. Citing a few key moments in the UGTT's history, the authors point out the close connection between the "national and social dimensions in the life of an organization destined from its founding to endorse the national issue" (6). "This is the special feature of the Tunisian union movement which chose to have a national expression that transcends the interests of its members to include other sectors of society" (6). The authors go on to suggest that the UGTT's commitment to national issues has occasionally led it to

prioritize its national over its social role (7). In doing so, the UGTT would have compromised its main function (social role) for the sake of the greater national role.

In addition to its legacy as a broad-based nationalist actor, the UGTT's organizational history is characterized by tensions between different visions of unionism. Historian Mohammed Saleh al-Hirmassi documents tensions between two camps within the UGTT. One camp advocated struggle in the sense of economic and political struggle. The other camp advocated a "unionist" direction, separating between economic and political struggles. According to Al-Hirmassi, this latter, reformist camp involved bureaucratic unionists, who often became complicit with the regime. This bureaucratic leadership also resisted the efforts of "radical unionists," who were often accused of politicizing the union (al-Hirmass 1990, 154). Both Bourguiba and Ben Ali sought to limit the UGTT's power by co-opting its leaders. Charges of politicization became readily used by the regime to undermine the UGTT's militancy. For their part, bureaucratic unionists ended up politicizing the UGTT by making it serve regime needs (al-Hirmiassi 1990, 154).

*The UGTT's Legacy and the Drive toward Radical Unionism*

Even if the UGTT's historical legacy as a national actor was salient in the immediate post-independence period, what explains the continued resonance of this legacy more than half a century later? Despite repeated attempts by the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes to emasculate the UGTT and persistent tensions between "radical unionists" and bureaucratic unionists, these attempts have failed to completely undermine the UGTT's legacy as a political and social actor. This legacy is reproduced through a variety of mechanisms. The first is persistent pressure by rank-and-file activists on the union's leadership to honor the union's historical status and return to its original vision of unionism. The second is a process of self-selection where young members join the UGTT because of its unique status as a "political landmark" (Cavallo 2008: 249).

Analyses of the Tunisian trade union movement note the "checkered alliance" between labor and the state in Tunisia (Bellin 2000). Indeed, the relationship between the UGTT and successive authoritarian regimes in Tunisia was characterized by shifts between periods of cooperation, co-optation, subordination, and confrontation. In the context of persistent attempts by authoritarian incumbents to co-opt the union's leadership, I argue that periods of confrontation often reflected internal tensions within the UGTT over the proper role of the UGTT in Tunisian society. Despite the co-optation of bureaucratic unionists, radical unionists remained active at the lower levels of the union structure and occasionally clashed with the organization's bureaucratic leadership. "An enduring feature of the 'normal' functioning of the UGTT," writes Zemni, "has been a sort of original division of labor between a leadership trying to maximize its political influence (something that on occasion brought it under the control of the regime) and a more militant base demanding more justice and freedom" (Zemni 2013: 140). Notably, the most confrontational episodes between the UGTT and Tunisia's authoritarian incumbents took place following rank-and-file mobilization, which forced the union leadership to reconsider its stance toward the regime and return to its legacy. The UGTT's historical legacy as an organization that it is invested in the country's political development has been repeatedly invoked by activists who viewed the union's bureaucratic leadership as too politically complacent. The most important examples are the 1978 and 2011 general strikes.

In the years preceding the 1978 general strike, especially in the early 1970s, the Bourguiba regime considered the UGTT one of the "national organizations" subject to it. The UGTT leadership supported the regime's economic policies and opposed several major strikers, including 1972 strike

by transportation workers in Sfax, and the 1973 strike by transportation workers in Tunis. It also withdrew its support from the 1975 strike by secondary school teachers. During this period, the UGTT's central leadership ratified collective bargaining agreements and agreed to maintain the social peace. Notably, between 1974 and 1977, "the UGTT negotiated forty-two collective agreements with UTICA establishing wages and working conditions in the private sector and status with the government for over seventy public sector enterprises" (Beinin 2016: 32). These agreements were criticized by many rank-and-file workers, who characterized the UGTT's central leadership as bureaucratic and biased toward the regime (al-Kahlawy 2011: 92). This disconnect explains the number of wildcat strikes during this period.

By 1977, however, tensions between the UGTT and the ruling party increased in light of threats against Achour's life. Despite these tensions, the 1978 general strike was prompted by rank-and-file mobilization, which eventually forced the national UGTT leadership to declare a coordinated general strike. Prior to the general strike, UGTT militants organized a number of strikes without the approval of the national leadership. Only 10 out of a total of 455 strikes in June 1977, for instance, were approved the national leadership of the UGTT, according to Ahmed al-Kahlawi, the secretary general of the general union of technical education teachers (qtd. in Mohammed al-Kahlawi, 2011: 224).

The intertwined nature of social and political issues and the UGTT's role in politics was clearly articulated during the 1978 crisis. Speaking in 1977, Hussein Bin Kadour, one of the key figures in independence current within the UGTT said: "Some talk about the UGTT's interference in political affairs. But we firmly believe that workers' lives and livelihood are strongly tied to politics because the word politics has a well-known economic and social component (muhtawa). This is why we say that the UGTT, which was interested during the days of colonialism in the country's politics and struggled not only to increase wages and set prices but also for the country's political independence, now has the right to be interested in redistributive policies and to critique it, if need be" (qtd. in `Adnan al-Mansar 2010: 67).

On the eve of the 2010 uprising in Tunisia, the UGTT's leadership had been thoroughly co-opted by the Ben Ali regime. For the greater part of Ben Ali's rule, the UGTT, headed by Ismail al-Sahbani until his removal in 2002, had become almost entirely emasculated. Sahbani "reorganized the union to normalize its relations with Ben Ali's authoritarian regime; he restructured syndical bureaucracy, pushed aside numerous collaborators and allies of the old leader Achour and integrated a younger and less militant generation of syndical militants in the central structures of the organization. Under this more cooperative leadership, strikes and violent protest became rare and the UGTT, as part of its so-called policy of neutrality, backed nearly all government decisions" (Zemni 2013: 138). The UGTT backed Ben Ali's candidacy in the 1994, 1999, 2004, and 2009 elections (Zemni 2013, 139). Notably, however, the UGTT's backing of Ben Ali in the 2004 and 2009 elections "triggered heated debates within the union's commissions," which reflected tensions between the leadership and rank-and-file.

Despite this, however, militant unionists had remained active in UGTT's local branches and sectoral unions. Given the constraints on political organization under the Ben Ali regime, the UGTT emerged as a platform for Leftists and other political activists. On several occasions, especially in the 2000s, militant unionists in UGTT's local branches supported initiatives that involved a broader constituency or touched on issues that went beyond their immediate material interests. These issues included corruption or human rights violations. In 2005, for instance, local UGTT branches supported a doctor who went on a hunger strike "to support the protest of eight Tunisian civil

society personalities who had been on a hunger strike since October 18, 2005, at the regional office of the UGTT in Sidi Bouzid (Cavallo 2008: 248). As such, "individuals and small groups often join[ed] forces on political issues and act[ed] within the UGTT, sometimes operating out of UGTT offices" (Cavallo 2008).

The 2000s also witnessed a great deal of internal dissension within the UGTT, where the militant base demanded a return to the organization's historical role. In October 2001, a "syndical platform for the rehabilitation of the UGTT" was published to "put pressure on the national leadership. The promoters of the platform criticized the loss of the UGTT's historical role" (Zemni 2013: 139). They maintained that "no real rehabilitation can take place without a total and radical break with corruption and practices that have distorted trade unionism since the Congress of Sousse (1989) and have seriously undermined the union's autonomy, its functioning, and social and national positioning" (qtd. in Zemni 2013: 139). This platform became the central issue discussed at the 2002 UGTT general congress in Djerba. Promoters of the platform included many unionists who were active in the 1970s and early 1980s, "the period of greatest tension with the authorities" (Cavallo 2008, footnote 12). As such, they were committed to a particular vision of trade unionism and lamented the UGTT's "deviation" from "the basic values of the labor union, the ethics of labor unionism, and the social and political role of the UGTT" (Cavallo 2008: 245).

Tensions between the UGTT's militant base and its coopted leadership resurfaced in the lead-up to the December 2010 uprising in Tunisia. It was the militancy of the rank and file that ultimately drove the leadership to support a general strike on January 14, 2011. Following Bouazizi's self-immolation in December 2010, local militant UGTT branches played an active role in supporting the growing popular uprising. "The teachers' union (dominated by leftists and Arab nationalists) played a crucial role in politicizing the movement and confronting the regime" (Zemni 2013, note 12). The fact that UGTT local activists and branches played a central role in organizing anti-Ben Ali protests is best explained with reference to the fact that the UGTT had become a haven for political activists under Ben Ali's closed political system and that UGTT activists continued to view the organization as a national political player, whose responsibilities extend beyond the representation of members' short-term material interests. Notably, the militant activism of the UGTT's local branches was spearheaded by politicized members, "mostly with a Communist or Arab nationalist background" (Zemni 2013, 131). The teachers' union, which helped politicize the movement against the regime, had no economic grievances of its own at the time. Instead, its members embraced broad-based demands about corruption and regime change. The UGTT's local branches, and militant unionists operating within them, used UGTT offices as starting points for protests. The impetus for the UGTT's involvement in the 2011 uprising, then, comes from a politicized militant base, which exerted pressure on the organization's leadership to adopt a more confrontational stance against Ben Ali's regime.

Another important mechanism that reproduced the UGTT's legacy and ensured commitment to its vision of trade unionism is a self-selection process that attracted politicized members the organization. Given the UGTT's historical legacy and its reputation as a national actor, the organization appealed to individuals who were attracted to this legacy. In addition, the fact that many UGTT activists joined the organization at a time when opposition parties were banned meant that the union operated as a vehicle for political activism and served as a safe haven for political dissidents. Cavallo notes that many UGTT members are highly politicized and affiliated with opposition parties (2008: 249). "Even among non-affiliated union members," she argues, "political feelings are one of the main reasons for engagement in the UGTT" (Cavallo 2008: 249). In addition,

even younger members of the organization note that they were attracted to the UGTT for its status as a "political landmark" (Cavallo 2008: 249).

## THE UGTT IN THE POST-BEN ALI PERIOD: REASSUMING A NATIONAL ROLE

The UGTT's legacy as a national actor illuminates its high-profile political role in the country's transition from authoritarian rule. Despite a high level of dependence on the state under Ben Ali (Bellin 2000), the UGTT has emerged as a central actor since Ben Ali's ouster and has assumed a mediating role between various political parties, among other methods by brokering several rounds of national dialogue to help mitigate the political crisis in Tunisia. As Sami Zemni writes, "the UGTT has come to play a central role that stretches beyond its syndical mission. Union leaders have stated unambiguously that they defend not only the workers' interests, but also, in conjunction with civil society institutions and political allies, the institutions of the Republic" (Zemni 2013, 127). When asked about the role of the UGTT in the Tunisian transition, a member of the UGTT's studies bureau insisted that there has always been a "national dimension" alongside UGTT's syndicalist or unionist role. The UGTT had "offered sacrifices in the battle for independence," he added. For him, it was only natural that the UGTT would draw more heavily on this national dimension as it navigated the post-Ben Ali period. That the UGTT is more than just a union was emphasized by several other observers of union affairs in Tunisia. A member of the active journalist syndicate pointed out that the UGTT's basic law stresses the UGTT's commitment to the struggle for freedoms. A union, he said, is an extension of politics. A researcher of union affairs at the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Tunis added that the UGTT sees itself as a partner in the national development project. The UGTT's role in the post-Ben Ali period thus transcends a strictly 'unionist' agenda and is more accurately captured by the concept of 'union plus.' Resisting a strict differentiation between the unionist and nationalist dimensions of the UGTT's activism, UGTT's current leadership sees the organization's prominent role in Tunisia's current transition is seen as an extension rather than a departure from its historic role, even though the UGTT's current political involvement is much deeper than before.

The UGTT's current level of political involvement has raised some concerns, from both within and outside the organization. By choosing to prioritize its political over its social role at this juncture, the UGTT risks taking steps that might alienate its bases, such as committing to maintaining the social peace without consulting them. Critics also point to the fact that the UGTT has not paid sufficient attention to social issues as a result of its current engulfment in political affairs. At the level of the local branches, there is a sense that the UGTT's political commitments may place constraints on the leadership's capacity to negotiate on behalf of its bases in a timely manner. For instance, workers with temporary contracts mobilized in November 2013 to demand permanent contracts, but negotiations over their demands were delayed because the UGTT's central leadership was not available to attend the negotiations. Given the pressing nature of some of the issues involved, it is likely that the organization's bases may become aggravated by such delays. These challenges demonstrate that the UGTT's 'union plus' profile can sometimes clash with its unionist agenda.

The UGTT's leading role in trying to resolve the current political crisis also exposes it to a wider range of criticism, especially from political parties. Ennahda representatives have warned, for instance, that the UGTT risks becoming a partisan player by allying itself closer with the leftist political parties. Ennahda was also critical of the UGTT's reliance on street mobilization as a tool to pressure the government, especially prior to the start of the July 2013 national dialogue round. For their part, some leftist forces have complained that the UGTT has not done enough to champion revolutionary goals and instead chosen to take a more consensual approach. The UGTT has

adamantly rejected all accusations that the organization has become partisan. The UGTT leadership also maintains that the organization is not a political party. Responding to a question about the number of unionists in Tunisia's next parliament in a recent interview with al-Ahram newspaper, UGTT Secretary General Hussein al-Abbasi said: 'We are not a party, so we are not interested in counting the parliament's members who belong to the union, and if there is an MP who belongs to a political party and the union at the same time, they will represent their party and not us. And when anyone tries to get the union involved in his party's interests, he will be removed.'[1]

From a comparative perspective, the UGTT's brand of political engagement is paradoxical. On the one hand, the UGTT's self-image as a dual social and national actor is based on the belief that social and political activism are inextricably linked. On the other hand, in contrast to trade unions in Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Poland, for instance, all of which played a prominent political role in their countries' transition from authoritarian rule, the UGTT has not supported or formed a political party during the transition. In the post-Ben Ali period, the UGTT's leadership has vehemently opposed accusations of partisanship. The UGTT also refrained from fielding a list of candidates in parliamentary elections. Save the brief period during which a few UGTT leaders joined the transitional government, the UGTT has played a prominent political role but refrained from participating in electoral contests or lending institutional support to political parties.The UGTTs' reluctance has to do with its historical relationship to Tunisia's ruling parties, where the UGTT' was often a subordinate player. Closely aligning itself with a political party would threaten the UGTT's autonomy and undermine its credibility as a mediating political actor.


CONCLUSION

Arguing that existing theoretical accounts do not fully explain the UGTT's high-profile political role in Tunisia's transition from authoritarian rule, this paper presented an alternative explanation rooted in the organization's historical origins. Having had a strong presence at the time of regime formation, and having developed an institutional identity tied to broader struggles (such as the struggle for national independence), the UGTT emerged as a union whose self-image is informed both by its unionist and political orientations. This legacy was reproduced over time through rank-and-file militancy and a process of self-selection, where new members were attracted to the organization's historical legacy. This argument highlights the importance of the timing of union emergence vis-à-vis authoritarian regimes. Rather than rival arguments related to union autonomy, this argument urges us to probe why institutionally autonomous unions may embrace agendas that transcend their members' interests.

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[1] Karem Yehia, "Interview: Labour Unions Helped Tunisia Overcome post-2011 Divisions," Al-Ahram, November 3, 2014. http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/114582/World/Region/INTERVIEW-Labour-unions-helped-Tunisia-overcome-po.aspx

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