

When unions make history: the UGTT's role in Tunisia's transition to democracy

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Trade union power and democratic transition in Tunisia The UGTT: a unique story, an unprecedented experience

A case study by Sami Adouani and Saïd Ben Sedrine

With 600,000 members out of a working population of around four million people, the UGTT is the largest, and most influential, organised force in Tunisia.

Despite numerous challenges, most notably the economic and security situation, Tunisia has received widespread acclaim for its relatively peaceful transition to democracy following the 2011 uprising that resulted in the overthrow of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. In recognition of this achievement, the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet – made up of the Tunisian Bar Association, the Tunisian Human Rights League, the UTICA employers' organisation and the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) – was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015. The role of civil society, and notably that of the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), was key in the process of peaceful transition to democracy.

In a recent study, entitled Trade union power and democratic transition in Tunisia - The UGTT: a unique story, an unprecedented experience, Sami Adouani and Saïd Ben Sedrine shed light on how the UGTT managed to tap into its unique history and ample resources to keep political dialogue alive at times of crisis and to ensure Tunisia's successful transition from decades of autocracy to an emerging democracy.

The UGTT was formed in 1946, when Tunisia was still a French protectorate, and it played a key role in the post-World War II struggle for independence. When Tunisia finally won independence in 1956, the UGTT had two key aims, note Adouani and Ben Sedrine: "To improve the living and working conditions of workers, and to bring influence to bear on the direction and programming of public development policies." In fact, the report asserts that, along with other major civil society organisations, the UGTT was closely intertwined with the nascent state and supported its socio-economic programmes.

The relationship between the UGTT and the state was ambivalent, however, during the decades of authoritarian rule that followed (Habib Ben Ali Bourguiba from 1957 to 1987 and Ben Ali from 1987 to 2011). While the UGTT managed to work with a certain degree of autonomy, it also experienced violent repression at various junctures and served as a temporary sanctuary for opponents to the regime.

Building democracy, strengthening workers' power

When the protests against Ben Ali began in December 2010, the UGTT, after a moment of hesitation by its leadership, threw the full weight of its resources behind the revolution, a process pushed by

the regional and local trade union associations that “opened their premises to protesters and made their voices heard in national and international media”. Propelled by the grassroots support for the revolution, the UGTT supported protests across the country and organised general strikes.

The UGTT’s decision to support the January 2011 lawyers general strike in particular marked a new era of alliance-building for the trade union centre and formed the bedrock for a postrevolution civil society alliance that would transform “the popular protest movement into a political initiative aimed at defending the revolutionary dynamic,” according to the report.

Following the fall of Ben Ali on 14 January 2011, the UGTT’s influence grew as it led the national dialogue in an urge to resolve escalating political conflicts and secure the drafting of the country’s new constitution. Uniting civil society stakeholders in support of the dialogue proved key to progress on the political level. The role played by the UGTT during the revolution and initial transition translated into a surge in numbers: now with around 600,000 members out of a working population of around four million people, the UGTT reinforced its position as the largest, and most influential, organised force in Tunisia.

A look back at the UGTT’s history helps to understand how it could reach this position of strength. Throughout its history, the UGTT has been able to forge its identity as a unitary trade union, bringing together different political currents, say Adouani and Ben Sedrine. That way, it was able to broaden its social power base and increase its associational strength, developing “expertise in conflict management”. It was this experience with balancing different interests and negotiating consensus that can be considered to be at the root of the UGTT’s key mediation role during the transition, according to the study.

What lies ahead?

Tunisia is still going through a period of transition and the challenges that lie ahead are huge: the economy is in crisis, unemployment is high – particularly amongst young people – and terrorism is a threat to stability. As Adouani and Ben Sedrine put it, “political stability was achieved at the expense of the social question” during Tunisia’s transition to democracy.

With the initial enthusiasm of the revolution waning, the UGTT needs to adapt accordingly, the authors say. Making greater inroads into the private sector, where it remains under-represented, addressing precarity in the informal sector, and investing in young people and women, will be some of the issues the union will have to tackle in the coming years. Adouani and Ben Sedrine also suggest that the UGTT needs to change its approach towards the public sector, since its “current union vision and practices do not promote fairness, efficiency and quality in public service, thereby potentially harming its image in Tunisian society”. Finally, the UGTT will need to maintain “its ability to transcend diverging interests” if democracy is to be a lasting success. The post-revolutionary UGTT will need to “find new sources of power if it wants to retain its power”.

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