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Tunisia

Trade Union Power and Democratic Transition in Tunisia - The UGTT: A Unique Story, An Unprecedented Experience

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Description:

In the wake of the collapse of the dictatorship in Tunisia, the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) constituted a key player in ensuring the country stayed on track for a peaceful transition to democracy. This article is intended as a guide facilitating better understanding of the UGTT's power which allowed the trade union to assert itself and serve as a balancing force in a national context marked by strong political competition and significant social instability. In this context, the authors explore the origins of the UGTT's power and analyse how these power resources were articulated and combined in the national dialogue (between October 2013 and November 2014), a process that allowed the country to extricate itself from the political impasse, earning the UGTT and three other civil society organisations the Nobel Peace prize in 2015

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In Tunisia's peaceful transition to democracy following the revolution in 2011, the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) played a major role, leading a civil society initiative that proved decisive to overcome a phase of severe political division and crisis. The involvement of Islamists in the post-revolutionary government did not only aggravate tensions within Tunisian society, but also put the UGTT's power to the test. The paper provides an in-depth analysis of the Tunisian success story that gained international acclaim with the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize.

A historical force since Tunisia's struggle for independence from France, the UGTT mobilised different power resources during the revolution and transition to democracy. Though nominally supportive of the regime at leadership level, the UGTT had also been a political counterweight and pooled different currents in its ranks - qualities that, along with a strong presence in all parts of the country, were key to successfully promote national dialogue. In the current context, marked by economic crisis and austerity, the UGTT faces the challenge of renewing its power to retain power, as a force aiming to shape a more socially just, democratic Tunisia.

Trade Unions in Transformation is an FES project that identifies unions' power resources and capabilities that contribute to successful trade union action. This study features among two dozen case studies from around the world demonstrating how unions have transformed to get stronger.

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1. Introduction

Six years after the "Arab Spring", Tunisia constitutes a unique case in the region with democracy up and running, a new constitution and a government made up of both secular and Islamist players. [1] The role of civil society, and notably that of the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), was absolutely key in the process of peaceful transition to democracy.

Trade unions mobilise resources that define their power in a given situation. Using the concept of power resources, differentiating four dimensions of trade union power - associational, structural, institutional and societal power (Schmalz and Dörre 2017) - we propose in this article to draw up a frame of reference to provide better understanding of the way in which the UGTT simultaneously deployed these four dimensions in support of the demands of its members; to hold collective social protests in several regions of the country; and promote peaceful transition to democracy.

The popular uprising against the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali in Tunisia took place from 17 December 2010 to 14 January 2011. During this period, riots spread from the south and central-western areas of Tunisia towards the economic heartland of the south of the country, Sfax, and on to the capital. Initially erupting in the highly populated areas of the city, protests then spread to the centre where several demonstrations by artists, trade unionists and lawyers took place. As the revolutionary movement gained ground, quite literally, the regional trade unions deployed their resources of associational and societal power spontaneously, giving the movement the strength to resist police repression exercised by the authoritarian Ben Ali regime. Once Ben Ali had fled on the 14 January 2011, the UGTT united the activities of political parties towards establishing a democratic regime. How exactly were the union's power resources mobilised during this strategic phase of the revolution, leading to the first democratic elections of the National Constituent Assembly (ANC) in 2011?

As both economic and political players, trade unions live the relationship between these two roles in a complex manner, and indeed the priority afforded to each element varies from one country to another and one period in time to another (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2010). In the case of Tunisia, the trade union power of the UGTT is at the very heart of nation-building and the process of democratic transition.

The first attempts to form a Tunisian workers' union date back to 1924, some 42 years prior to the country's achieving independence. As a French protectorate, Tunisia saw its trade union movement take root within the French workers' movement and subsequently free itself definitively in 1946 with the creation of the UGTT. Thanks to its extensive presence on the ground and a strategic alliance with the political movement of national liberation, the Tunisian workers' movement allowed the country to achieve independence after ten years of struggle, ultimately melding the aspirations of workers with those of society as a whole. Therefore, the creation of the UGTT initially stemmed from a broad interpretation of the role of a trade union within society (Ennaceur 2000) [2]. A founding principle is translated into two fundamental missions the Tunisian trade union movement pursues: to improve the living and working conditions of workers, and to bring influence to bear on the direction and programming of public development policies.

Following independence, and as a result of the fact that the political elite leading the country comprised members

from both the trade unions and the party of national liberation, nation-building became the subject of dual-headed political governance, on the basis of consensus around a corporatist model of the state (Redissi 2006). Four major national organisations of civil society, including the UGTT [3], coexisted with the purpose of supporting the economic and social programmes of the state. This necessarily rooted the trade union movement's identity in an understanding of its role as fluctuating between action focussed on demands and action focussed on participation. How has the union been able to gather these power resources in the context of its ambivalent relationship with the authoritarian state, appearing both as an organisation subject to state power, and a fierce force of opposition, fed and sustained by the political forces that combine to form it?

Postcolonial Tunisia may have modernised socio-economically, but it did not democratise. The Tunisian corporatist model recognised the autonomy of four civil society organisations, but conflicts were managed exclusively by the centre. In the case of the UGTT, this provided a structural logic in which the trade union bureaucracy can play the role of a decision-making body, reconciling both social and political stakes, adjusting its position according to the power relationships exerted within and outside the trade union as well as the popular protests of the moment. [4] As a result, the UGTT has enjoyed tactical relationships with political power, dictated by the climate and interests of the moment, with a strategic concern for maintaining unity and independence (Ennaceur 2000). Several major crises tarnished this trade-off, with the UGTT suffering a number of times from attempts by the ruling power to subjugate it; schisms; violent confrontations; and repression of trade union leaders, especially during the crises of 1972, 1978 and 1985. Against the background of social demands and popular protest, the authoritarian drift of the state party gradually saw the UGTT become a refuge for militants and independent political circles, with the result that at its core we see a cohabitation of corporatist, regional and political interests sharing a common imperative to preserve the unity and independence of the union.

Enriched by the experience of internal competition among groups, by cohabitation and solidarity over several decades, the UGTT developed skills that proved indispensable after the fall of the dictator in terms of initiating and stimulating national political dialogue alongside the Tunisian Order of Lawyers (ONAT); the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH); and the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Commerce and Handicrafts (UTICA), the groups which make up the Quartet.

With the accession of the Islamist party to power following the first elections in 2011, the country entered a process of ideological and social polarisation around the drafting of a new constitution. Parallel to this, workers' protests as well as collective protests by those excluded from development, notably the unemployed and those working in precarious subsistence jobs, fed tensions and conflicts with the new Islamist powerholders. Three political assassinations and terrorist acts exacerbated the ideological and social polarisation of Tunisian society, with a large number of Tunisians naming and shaming the Islamist party Ennahdha . In this context, how did the trade union organisation deploy its power resources? How did it mobilise these resources to support social protests and a peaceful transition towards democracy simultaneously, earning the Quartet the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015?

The following analysis will provide keys to comprehending the nature of trade union power in Tunisia by analysing the trade union power of the UGTT through the prism of the dialogue process and peaceful transition. A range of actions and instruments of power used by the trade union empowered them, against the background of political competition, to assert their influence and function as a balancing force.

2. The UGTT's Power Resources

2.1 Mobilisation of Trade Union Power to Effect Revolutionary Change

From 17 December 2010 to 14 January 2011, the period of the Tunisian revolution, regional and local trade union associations opened their premises to protesters and made their voices heard in national and international media. They were the initiators of numerous acts of solidarity with protesters, organising gatherings, marches and regional general strikes in different governorates to protest against police brutality. These trade union structures, close to people's lives both geographically and sociologically, manifested their support for demands for work, liberty and dignity, while the trade union centre was more hesitant to define its attitude to power. The relative autonomy of these local associations, despite the centralised organisational model of the UGTT, was decisive in placing it on the trajectory of change. This autonomy of the grassroots trade unions and regional bodies had already been in evidence in 2008 in support of the revolt in the mining basin of Gafsa. [5] This revolt is considered in the region to have been the beginning of the social protests that ultimately led to the end of the Ben Ali regime, in that the profile of the protesters corresponded to that of those excluded from the labour market and from development more generally (Chouikha and Gobe 2009).

Local lawyers active in militant careers in political opposition also expressed their solidarity with protest movements against the regime of Ben Ali by placing themselves at the head of protest marches and encircling certain demonstrations, alongside the regional trade union associations and outside the framework of regulatory institutions (Gobe, 2011). In response to a series of shootings at Sidi Bouzid and the region of Kasserine in the centre of the country, trade union grassroots groups exerted sufficient pressure on the executive office of the UGTT that on the 11 January 2011 they decided to authorise regional unions to organize general strikes in support of the Order of Lawyers. This crucial step in the modern history of the organisation constituted a precedent for building new relationships between intermediary structures and the centre characterised by greater decentralisation of trade union decision-making. The somewhat ambivalent position assumed by the trade union in social conflicts is in fact a unique case in the Arab world.

Following Ben Ali's "flight", a government was formed and presided over by Ben Ali's Prime Minister. The UGTT and the national council of the Order of Lawyers took the initiative to transform the popular protest movement into a political initiative aimed at defending the revolutionary dynamic, in partnership with parties of the political opposition and the members of civil society who shared that goal. At the conclusion of their meeting on the 25 of January 2011, the participants, from all political stripes, including the Islamists, demanded the "dissolution of the government, a fight against corruption and especially the creation of a protective body for the revolution to pilot the transition towards the democratic election of the National Constituent Assembly" (Khzouri 2016: 8-12). [6] On Saturday the 19 February 2011 thousands of demonstrators from across the country converged on Government Square, the Kasbah, in support of this demand.

A new government was then named under the presidency of Béji Caïd Essebsi [7], who decreed the creation of the "Higher Commission on Political Reform and Democratic Transition" [8]. The decree gave him the authority to ensure freedom of expression and democratic and transparent election of the ANC. During the period of his incumbency, this body functioned as a "democratic national assembly" in relation to the new government right through to the organisation of the first democratic elections for the ANC in October 2011. The assumption of power by the Islamist party Ennahdha then triggered a process of ideological and social polarisation in Tunisian society in the context of which the UGTT was led to play a central role, both by means of its mission of support for social demands and its role as political player by multiplying initiatives for a peaceful transition to democracy (Khzouri 2016).

2.2 Mutual Reinforcement of the Power Resources of Trade Union Action The strengthened associational power of the UGTT is a historic achievement in which the unity of the trade union movement has been central. After the dictator fell in 2011, the UGTT saw its membership increase substantially. It is estimated members now number around 600,000 out of a working population of four million, ultimately representing the principal organised force in the country. This aspiration, which flowed out of the social protests of the 2011 revolution, originates in the trade unions' historic stance in favour of freedom and democracy, enshrined in article 25 of its statutes, and its struggle in favour of the social demands of marginalised groups.

In effect, the initial role of the trade union movement in nation-building allowed it to accumulate associational power resources by participating in the construction of the Tunisian state. The organisation therefore ended up maximising its members as assets in the public sector, where it had a monopoly on worker representation. Its active participation as a national association in the advent of the Republic during the first twenty years of independence gave it the privilege of benefiting from the system of deducting trade union dues at the source and regular subsidies from the social security coffers, especially through the presence of its representatives in Parliament and in government.

The UGTT also has infrastructure resources at its disposal which allowed trade unionists to pursue their mission across the entire country. The departments of the trade union headquarters and the sectorial federations have personnel and offices in Tunis. In all of the governorates, the regional and local associations of trade unions have offices equipped for administrative activities and trade union meetings, and manage a permanent staff. [9]

In line with international labour laws, workers' representatives have the facilities they need for the free exercise of the activities they perform on behalf of workers. There is generally full participation of members in strikes in the public sector and in private enterprises where the employees enjoy union representation.

The UGTT makes a portion of its own resources available and mobilises international cooperation to organise seminars on different topics of current interest [10] and training for its members. [11] These regular seminars are also an opportunity for trade union leaders to discuss different topics informally. Moreover, the union is able to mobilise technical expertise within the country for the topics addressed, among other reasons thanks to close ties to the academic world. This is a benefit of the fact that the trade union brings together in one movement representatives from both manual and intellectual professions.

The centralised organisational model of the UGTT determines the division of tasks within the organisation, the procedures and the distribution of resources for leading campaigns and defending the interests of the workers. The regions and local levels enjoy relative autonomy which allows them to effectively mobilise based on inter-union solidarity and external solidarity for social protests on behalf of those excluded from regional development.

The presence of several political currents at the heart of the organisation is handled by the fundamental principle of making the trade union identity the common denominator, regardless of political identity, with a view to maintaining trade union solidarity and thus maintaining the UGTT as a unitary trade union. Internal tensions run high when this principle is not respected by one of the members of the trade union movement, for instance, when one of them defines its trade union actions as a function of the political strategy of their respective political party. These tensions are regulated by internal dialogue, recourse to executive bodies and to the election of these bodies when the divergence is too deep. [12] The organisational culture of trade union unity is largely fed by the collective trade union struggle and freedom of expression which characterises the members of the organisation. For the UGTT, this characteristic led to its developing a strong skill in managing conflict and bringing together different interests around a common mission.

The UGTT's weak negotiating power in the labour market is offset by its strong institutional power. At the beginning of the 1970s, Tunisia began a process of economic liberalisation with the development of the manufacturing industry, notably textiles and garments. It is a subcontracting industry depending for its competitive edge on low salaries and legal precarity of its employment practices. The workforce mobilised in this industry is unskilled and therefore easily replaced in times of low unemployment, particularly among women. The trade unions' negotiating power in relation to the labour market is therefore relatively weak. Added to this is the low rate of union membership in this sector. [13] Nonetheless, social legislation attributes to the UGTT an institutional power which compensates for its negotiating weakness with regard to the labour market.

In effect, the trade union's active role in building the nation following independence in 1956 earned it the right to

participate in the design and execution of Tunisian policies regarding promotion of social legislation (Ennaceur 2000), in line with the main conventions of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), most notably the core conventions, all of which Tunisia has ratified. The Labour Code compensates for the low rate of trade union membership in the private sector in that the provisions of a collective agreement »apply to all employers and all workers in professions within its field of application« (art. 38 of the Labour Code). Moreover, in the same Article, the Code stipulates that "the collective agreement shall be concluded between the most representative unions of employers and workers of the industry concerned in the territory where it should apply". In the Tunisian context, the UGTT and the UTICA are the most representative organisations of employees and employers since they enjoy monopoly status.

Associational and institutional power resources are mutually reinforcing. This dynamic optimises negotiating power in the public sector but can sometimes favour abuse of power. Following a labour dispute, frequent shifting of the social dialogue from the company level to the industry or central level makes up for the weak negotiation power of a grassroots trade union. The organisation of the UGTT into professional federations by sector ensures trade union solidarity across companies, offering more negotiating power resources to a given grassroots union. Trade union solidarity is optimal in a region when the local trade union is supported by the regional trade union association which then activates the inter-sectoral solidarity in the region of the labour dispute. [14] Trade union solidarity is the third cause of strikes in Tunisia.

In conclusion, associational power reinforced by institutional power maximises the UGTT's negotiating power in the public sector. Social achievements make public sector jobs a valuable stake in regard to selection processes for access to this employment. [15] At the same time, abusive use of trade union power through recourse to the right to strike, notably in public services for education, health or transportation, has the tendency to tarnish the image of trade unionism in Tunisian society.

2.3 Societal Power, Indicative of the Role of the UGTT as a Counterweight

The societal power of the UGTT operates on three axes: internal solidarity, external solidarity and its power of discourse. The UGTT's internal solidarity is relatively strong since it is the accumulation of several social achievements acquired in trade union struggles and the resistance to repression, particularly over the course of major crises in its relationship with the authoritarian political regime during the 1970s and 1980s. Internal solidarity against trade union repression, and around the fight for trade union independence with regard to power, reinforced ties among regional, political and corporatist interest groups. The associational and institutional power resources are constantly being mobilised to defend and promote trade union unity and decent work.

External solidarity, for its part, is made manifest when the UGTT inserts itself into local and international alliances with organisations defending the same political and social values. Since the UGTT is not solely a trade union organisation, it constitutes through the reach of its field of intervention and multitude of interests, an essential element in, and promoter of, civil society (Ennaceur 2000). The UGTT's cooperation is close with lawyers who defend liberty and democracy, for instance, as well as with the LTDH, in whose creation it played a significant part, and the feminist movement, specifically the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women. The trade union's proximity to Tunisian civil society is made clear also in its central role in the creation of the Tunisian Social Forum in 2013 under the slogan »A different Tunisia is possible«.

Following the revolution, trade unionists played a contributing role in the creation of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), which works on labour law, women's, environmental and migrants' rights. [16] Moreover, relations with the employers' organisation, UTICA, took on an exceptionally political dimension during the post-revolutionary period, [17] when the two social partners formed an alliance to head off the risk of the country falling into civil war. This political alliance echoes their historic joint involvement in the national liberation movement and is a factor reinforcing the UGTT's societal power, as well as that of the employers' organisation.

At international level, the UGTT's cooperation with trade union organisations is particularly well developed regarding Arab countries, those of the European Union and foundations promoting social democracy, such as the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. [18] Participation in the activities of the ILO is both regular and intense. The UGTT is a member of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and helped establish the Arab Trade Union Confederation (ATUC) [19] with the mandate to promote democratic, progressive and independent trade unionism in Arab countries. The organisational chart of UGTT's centre includes a department charged with international cooperation headed by a member of the executive committee, demonstrating the strategic importance afforded to international trade union solidarity.

After the revolution, external solidarity assumed a particular form, which consisted in supporting social collective protests by the unemployed organised into a network of associations. Frequently, this solidarity was also extended to citizens who were demanding development in their region, a mission which was difficult, if not impossible, to assert in the context of the authoritarian Ben Ali regime. This social solidarity expressed by the UGTT regional unions gave the Tunisian trade union movement the ability to strengthen its societal power beyond its own natural field of operation.

The final type of societal power resource is trade union discourse, which often relates to trade union struggles anchored in the collective conscience. The UGTT's fight is assimilated into the struggle against trade union suppression, the love and defence of one's country, concern for its prosperity and the sacrifices made for security and sovereignty. [20] Even if this discourse remains repetitive, with only minimal sway in public opinion today because the union currently lacks a vision of development that could respond to the challenges the country is currently facing, this historic posture and the skills that the organisation was able to develop have largely helped confer on them the historic role which it played from 2011 to 2013, when the most serious political crisis the country has known since independence occurred.

3. Trade Union Power Put to the Test by the Islamists

3.1 The Societal Model Announced by the Islamists Divides Tunisian Society

Buoyed by its victory, winning the majority of seats in the first elections for the ANC on the 23 rd October 2011, the Islamist party Ennahdha joined up with two other parties and forged ahead with wielding power on the basis of democratic legitimacy. The major sit-in organised on 16 March 2012 in front of the headquarters of the Constituent Assembly by hundreds of Salafists demanding adoption of Islamic sharia as the reference text for the constitution caused voices on social media to call for a large-scale march on the capital on 20 March, Independence Day, to reject the societal model announced by the Salafists, whose activities were tolerated, if not encouraged by Ennahdha.

Violent incidents, in some cases bloody, spread across the country. This was the case, for example, on 14 September 2012, when hundreds of militants from Islamic circles attacked the Embassy of the United States of America, or on 18 October, when a representative of the then-opposition party Nidaa Tounes died in Tataouine in the south of the country on the fringes of clashes between its members and demonstrators close to the Islamists in power. The murder on 6 February 2013 of Chokri Belaïd, Tunisian left-wing political figure and lawyer, triggered large demonstrations and a mood of popular outrage, weakening the popularity of Ennahdha and boosting its opponents. The process of dividing Tunisian society, beyond the realms of ideological polarisation in the political elites, was taking on real dimensions. Removing Ennahdha from power became the goal of the opposition and of a significant number of Tunisians who considered the Islamist party in power and the Salafist extremists to be defending one and the same vision of society.

Encouraged by several opposition groupings, the UGTT, the army, the employers, Algeria and Western countries, Hamadi Jebali, the head of the government and the Secretary General of the Islamist party, proposed forming a

»government of national competence without political allegiance« in order to calm down the social and political revolt. Hostile to such a solution, the Ennahdha party doubled down on the »democratic legitimacy of its access to power« whilst also claiming »innocence« in the face of accusations that it was responsible for the assassination of Chokri Belaïd. The ideological polarisation, leading to an alignment of the debate along questions of identity only grew worse at the heart of the ANC and was spread via television media across Tunisian society, yielding daily exchanges of violent insults among Facebook users against the background of a social media civil war, and putting on hold any response to the social demands that were at the origin of the popular uprising of 2011.

3.2 The Revolution Frees Up All Trade Union Resources in the Service of Social Justice

The unilateralism of the Islamist party and its sense of power on the day following the election of the ANC meant the leaders of the party failed to appreciate the strength and independence of the Tunisian trade union movement, underestimating its capacity to create and mobilise solidarity. The offices of the UGTT's regional structures became the meeting point for striking workers and all categories of society who were protesting their exclusion from development.

Compared with 2010, the number of workers' strikes more than doubled in 2011 and 2012, before dropping back in 2013 and 2014, though remaining at a high level (Tunisian Ministry of Social Affairs 2014). Demands for improvement in working conditions and salaries were the principal cause of these strikes. The precarious nature of employment was an important aspect in this regard. Workers joined the strikes both in solidarity with the trade union and other workers in support of their demands. The scale of the strikes in 2012 and 2013 was one of the factors explaining the tension between the UGTT and the Islamist incumbents. Results were obtained to secure employment for numerous workers in precarious employment relationships, both in the public and private sectors, but given the sheer size of the problem, this phenomenon continues to trigger strikes in both sectors to this day.

Social protests, described as "general strikes" by people demanding development, became frequent occurrences. These protests took the form of large demonstrations in the main town or city in a region, bringing together workers and non-workers, and they were accompanied by the closure of shops and businesses as well as other services. The unemployed represented the most dynamic social category in these social protest movements. [21] The citizens demanded drinking water, electricity, accessible and good quality public health services, and an end to pollution of the environment. In short, they named a range of challenges that constituted the overall demand for a new model of inclusive development.

As they had during the revolutionary phase, the regional UGTT trade unions offered the protesters logistical assistance and the expertise of the trade union movement: how to express their demands on banners and in petitions; negotiate with local authorities; mobilise internal and external solidarity in their locality; and bring pressure to bear with the ministries concerned with the problems in question. This external solidarity from the UGTT was the opportunity for it to activate its mission for regional development, long suppressed by the authoritarian political regime that had forced the union to act within the limits of its corporate reach. [22] As a result of this fact, it placed the trade union centre in a position of conflict with the newly elected Islamist power holders who came to see it as a political rival. The revolution thus liberated all of the UGTT's power resources used for mobilising, not just within the limits of its own organisational limits, but also beyond these to the benefit of categories of people in society suffering unemployment, poverty and job insecurity in the informal sector.

Support for social protests in recent years was not sufficient to achieve social justice and indeed remains the central preoccupation of many Tunisians to this day. The challenge that must be met is to organise workers in the informal sector - workers such as Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire on the 17 December 2010, providing the spark that unleashed the Tunisian revolution. Certainly, the Tunisian social legislation co-constructed by social partners in the context of collective bargaining applies in principle to the informal sector, but its effectiveness could only be

guaranteed by trade union coverage in this sector. Renewal of the UGTT's organisational structures and its methods of action should therefore be put on the agenda. A beginning was made with the new social contract signed on 14 January 2013 which recognizes the problem of the informal sector as a problem to be resolved by tripartite social dialogue on employment policy and professional training. [23]

3.3 The Culture of Independence of the Trade Union Movement Put to the Test by the Islamists or the Risk of Civil War

On the 20 February 2012, following a strike by refuse workers, Ennahdha militants piled garbage up outside the doors of the UGTT offices. This aggressive act provoked great anger from trade unionists, for whom these offices represented their very identity and their political struggle against the authoritarian regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali. [24] The crisis reached its height when the premises of UGTT were once more attacked by Ennahdha militants on the 4 December 2012, the eve of the commemoration of the assassination of the great union leader Farhat Hached (1914-1952). Houcine Abassi, Secretary General of the trade union centre, describes the event thus:

The second assassination of Farhat Hached occurred today (...) Those who think they can weaken the UGTT and its struggle for democracy and social justice are mistaken! At this time, the door of confrontation is open and they are the ones who wanted it that way!.

(Ben Hamida 2012)

Transportation, schools and administration all came to a standstill in subsequent days in four regions of the country, Sfax, Gafsa, Kasserine and Sidi Bouzid. These stoppages, organised by a call from the UGTT regional structures with the support of the trade union centre, culminated on the 13 December 2012 in a national strike and carried with them the real risk of triggering violent confrontation and thus civil war. To avoid this risk, the trade union centre took the wise and difficult decision to cancel the general strike: the UGTT Secretary General gave a public explanation: "The difficult situation our country is experiencing, the tense climate, the security lapses and threats at the borders are all factors that have compelled the UGTT to put the interests of the people first," (DirectInfo 2012). This sense of responsibility from the trade union centre was very well received by the public. The mobilisation of all of UGTT's power resources to the benefit of its members and all categories of society seeking dignity has been independent of the government's ideological orientation both before and after the revolution. In fact, it was pursued during successive governments even led by secular leaders formed after the legislative and presidential elections of 2014. Since the 1970s, the UGTT has always fought to defend its independence in pursuing its trade union strategy. Police repression or political imprisonment of the sort which occurred in 1978 and at the beginning of the 1980s did not succeed in making them renounce these principles. The strategy of the Tunisian trade union centre has therefore been characterised by a culture of independence which sustains its societal power and its power of negotiation in the economic and social spheres. There is no doubt that misuse of this trade union power would only serve to tarnish the image of the UGTT in Tunisian society. In such cases, the leading bodies of the trade union centre seek always to limit this risk by internal debate and even disciplinary measures where necessary.

4. Mobilisation of Trade Union Power in the Service of a Peaceful Transition Towards Democracy

4.1 Failure of the First UGTT Initiative for a National Dialogue

Beginning in October 2012, in full confrontation with the ruling power, the UGTT took the initiative in calling for a national dialogue following major political tension around the drafting of the new constitution, a process which was

slow and saw violent exchanges of words among Members of Parliament. The initiative failed because the Ennahdha party and its ally, Congress for the Republic (CPR), the party of President of the Republic Moncef Marzouki, elected in December 2012 by members of the ANC, remained absent from these national dialogue sessions. The ideological and social polarisation of Tunisian society reached a new height following the assassination of Mohamed Brahmi, an opposition Member of Parliament, on 25 July 2013. This escalation led the UGTT on 30 July to launch afresh its mediation initiatives with a draft discussion paper suggesting a political compromise. This compromise envisaged the resignation of the government led by Ennahdha, but opposed dissolving the ANC, thus setting itself apart from the demands of the opposition. The UGTT considered the election of the ANC as an achievement in the democratic transition that shouldn't be reversed. The initiative therefore presented detailed proposals oriented along two courses of action:

- ▶ Form a government whose president and members are independent of parties and do not have the right to stand for legislative or presidential elections in order to guarantee free, transparent and democratic elections; [25] and the fight against terrorism. [26]
- ▶ Revise the version of the constitution dated 1 st June 2013 and rejected by the opposition, with the technical support of a commission of experts with a view to achieving a broad political consensus on content (Khzouri 2016: 58).

The UGTT linked its societal power to that of the employers' union, the UTICA, on the basis of a shared vision regarding the imperative of saving the country. The two social partners were joined by two other associations, smaller in scale but influential in the political sphere, the LTDH and ONAT. Together, these four organisations formed what from then on became known as the Quartet, taking responsibility for stimulating national dialogue for a peaceful transition toward democracy.

4.2 Recourse to Multi-dimensional Trade Union Power to Exit the Political Impasse

In a context fraught by heightened political tension, economic crisis and social instability, on 6 August 2013 the president of the ANC decided to suspend the constituent body's work until a national dialogue could be launched. The downfall of Egyptian President Morsi in July 2013, and with it Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, led Ennahdha to rethink its hostile stance towards national dialogue, aided by Béji Caïd Essebsi, founder of the Nidaa Tounes party, who took the initiative to call on the Islamist party president to engage in a televised dialogue. By referring to the roadmap proposed by the Quartet, a way out of the political impasse was found.

The central position occupied by the UGTT in stimulating national dialogue is linked to its societal power resources and its capacity to play the role of mediator. [27] Both prior to and after the revolution, whatever government was in power, the UGTT showed its independence and capacity to mobilise different political forces around a common goal and to negotiate and construct a compromise by dialogue. The trade union has become a place where all political forces may coexist, and has thus come to be perceived as a shared historic achievement by the entire political class. Its associational and societal power resources guarantee the neutrality of the political dialogue for all parties concerned and above all the actual implementation of the political roadmap adopted.

In this respect, the other members of the Quartet, the ONAT gathering several political strands; the LTDH, which is respected by all; and the employers' organisation, constitute an additional societal and political guarantee. The accumulation of collaborative skills and the experience of negotiation of the organisations making up the Quartet have enabled them to convince all concerned parties to begin work on the national dialogue around three processes: the constitutional process i. e. finalizing a new constitution; the electoral process, setting up the new independent higher authority responsible for supervising the next elections; and the governmental process, discussing the choice of a new consensus-backed Prime Minister responsible for forming a government of technocrats.

During the national dialogue proceeding between the 25 October 2013 and 10 November 2014, the Secretary General of the UGTT at the time, Houcine Abassi, played a key role in focusing discussions on finding solutions at a time when divergence was strong on the questions before them. To this end, the Quartet mobilised their »mediation«, »framing«, and »articulation« skills (Lévesque and Murray 2010). The UGTT and its employers' partner, the UTICA, knew how to capitalise on their historic experience of working with multiple players, particularly political players, and how to engage with questions outside their specific purview. This gave them the capacity to manage and arbitrate often contradictory needs and demands expressed by the parties to the 27. national dialogue, and to adjust to the political situation in the country by formulating positions and a strategy of peaceful transition towards democracy.

Finally, the organisations making up the Quartet also deployed their "articulation skills" earned from their capacity to build cross-party solidarity during trade union and political activities. These skills were mobilised most notably after they had won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015, capitalizing on the results of the national dialogue at international level in the hope of limiting the negative impact of terrorism on the economy.

All of the parties to the national dialogue, including Ennahdha, are to be commended for giving Tunisia a new constitution based on consensus between the Islamists and secular modernists. The constitution is set to regulate the relationships between these two ideological poles based on respect for the great achievements it represents: i) rights and liberties; ii) forming a republic and a civilian state; and iii) decentralisation at three levels, with direct elections at municipal and regional levels and indirect elections at département level (Constitution of the Tunisian Republic 2015). This legal achievement ensuring peaceful political contests is still fragile; indeed the challenge still to be met is nothing short of an »apprenticeship« in democracy and the structural transformation of state institutions and civil society.

5. Conclusion: Renewing Power Resources to Retain Power

Preparing conditions for a better future and enduring social progress in a country where the poverty rate is 15.2 per cent (INS 2017), is the real shared challenge Tunisia faces. Through the national dialogue headed by the Quartet, and in particular the UGTT and the UTICA, the country demonstrated its capacity to contend with divergent interests to achieve national consensus, thereby fuelling the engine of change. Nevertheless, political stability was achieved at the expense of the social question and the pursuit of democratic transition will of course throw up considerable challenges in the next decade which will put the UGTT's strategic capacity to »renew its powers to retain power« to the test.

Through the prism of power resources, we have tried to provide an analysis of the sum of constituent elements that make up trade union power as a way of evaluating their relevance in the ever evolving context in Tunisia. This allows for a first reflection on the strategic stakes the UGTT will have to address if it wants to pursue trade union renewal in a Tunisian society still in full flux.

The strong presence of the UGTT in the public sector accords it a power that should be mobilised to reform this same sector. The disconnect between the different roles of the state - public authority, manager of public assets, and service provider - all create obstacles to economic growth and inclusive development. By removing these obstacles in several areas, the state should demonstrate that change is necessary to respond to the challenges and thus ensure greater credibility for its discourse and reform programme. The trade unions, on the other hand, are defending the public sector, but do not put forward a vision or trade union practices that might contribute to achieving equity, efficiency and quality of public services. Thus, the risk of tarnishing the trade union's image in Tunisian society is very real.

Secondly, the UGTT fights for decent work but is underrepresented in the private sector which employs the majority of the working population in Tunisia, including those in the informal sector. Without trade union presence in the private sector, social legislation may not be applied. This reduces the social impact of the trade unions' institutional power and reinforces segmentation in the labour market. Consequently, the UGTT should reorganise its field of activities to include private sector workers with a view to strengthening its representation, promote the transition from an informal economy to a formal economy, and develop social dialogue around improving competitiveness of companies through decent work. [28] In this sense, the UGTT's leadership is crucial for the renewal of the social dialogue which should promote more economic growth and decent jobs, in order to consolidate the democratic transition by linking social democracy and political democracy (Ben Sedrine and Amami 2015).

Equally, the renewal of trade union action presupposes that a new organisational and management model is put in place by the UGTT, one that ensures transparency of its activities and responsiveness to the diversity of workers' needs, notably those in the private sector. In this regard, strengthening access for women and young people to positions of trade union responsibility is the great challenge facing the renewal. The recent UGTT congress in January 2017 began this change in the sense that it introduced quotas for women at all levels of the hierarchy and by putting in place an additional post at regional and central levels for better coverage of the private sector. Pending the application of the new statutes, for the first time in January 2017 the congress elected a female member to the executive board of the UGTT and soon after that two other women integrated the centre's governance structures, namely the bylaws and financial control committees, respectively. Women and young people will most likely become key players in further developing the process of change begun at the recent UGTT congress.

Raising the question of trade union pluralism in Tunisia, the revolution also favoured the emergence of new trade unions. Their creation stems from initiatives by former UGTT trade unionists. The right to trade union pluralism is inherent in the principles of trade union freedom enshrined in ILO Convention 87. When this convention was drawn up in 1948 the aim was to protect the independence of trade unions, to safeguard the freedom of workers to create trade unions of their choice and to join said unions (ILO 2010). It was not the objective of the convention to achieve proliferation and fragmentation of trade unions (ILO 2010). The emergence of new trade unions today signals a radical change in the environment in which the UGTT operates and forces the UGTT to take note of the real risk that its traditional power resources could be weakened.

Another work in progress for the UGTT is the question of alliances with civil society. The negative effects of globalisation which have set limits to traditional trade union demands can be offset by investing more effort into social matters alongside civil society players. The stance that UGTT adopts in its action alongside Tunisian civil society players, and in particular in its relations with the unemployed and citizens more generally, will determine its social mission in the years to come and will help define the contours of its future political action.

Finally, the new "social contract", signed in January 2013, infused with the values of the revolution, has so far remained mere words on paper. The challenge will be to put this into action to develop social democracy and thus strengthen the democratic transition.

The democratic transition is a process that is long, because of its complexity, but also slow for social classes eager to see improvement in their living conditions and regain their dignity. The UGTT today bears the weighty responsibility of not disappointing the hopes and expectations of the Tunisian people.

Source [Friedrich Ebert Stiftung](#).

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[1] The current government of "national unity" obtained a vote of confidence from the Assembly of the Representatives of the People (ARP) on 27 August 2016. It is the product of a reworking of the government elected in the 2014 elections. In addition to the ministers from the majority political coalition, composed primarily of the Ennahdha and Nidaa Tounes parties, the government also contains former office holders from the trade union and ministers of the minority.

[2] Mohamed Ennaceur, former minister of social affairs in the 1970s, is a strong expert on the UGTT. He is currently President of the Parliament.

[3] The three other major civil society organisations are: l'Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat (UTICA), the employers' union, l'Union Tunisienne de l'Agriculture et de la Pêche (UTAP), the organisation representing farmers, and l'Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne (UNFT), the organisation representing women in Tunisia.

[4] The other organisations cited above were more fully subject to the authoritarian power of the state than the UGTT.

[5] The Gafsa strikes, also referred to as the "events in Gafsa" or "the revolt in the mining basin of Gafsa" were a series of major protest movements which shook the mining region of south-west Tunisia. When the authorities acted to quash this action, which mobilised wide swaths of the local population, there were fatalities, hundreds of arrests, alleged acts of torture and heavy condemnation from various leaders from the associational and trade union world, as well as from journalists who had covered the events.

[6] Khzouri was the rapporteur for the proceedings of the national dialogue.

[7] Current president of the Republic of Tunisia elected in 2014 by universal suffrage in the context of a road map adopted by the national dialogue

[8] Executive Order 6/2011 dated 18 February 2011.

[9] The trade union centre currently employs 550 people. Moreover, the organisation has a printing house which publishes its weekly journal Echaab and sometimes other publications. Lastly, they also own and operate an insurance company and a hotel.

[10] For example, reform of the education system, social security, and preparation of collective bargaining strategies.

[11] These often relate to social legislation and address in particular the new trade union leadership at the grassroots.

[12] This was the case during the last UGTT congress in January 2017 when two candidate lists were presented for the election of the executive committee.

[13] The rate of trade union membership for salaried employees is 17.5 per cent in enterprises of six or more employees according to a survey by the International Labour Office in 2014 (ILO 2015).

[14] The region corresponds to the administrative division of a governorate (préfecture).

[15] The results of these selection processes are often judged as fraudulent and tainted by corruption and clientelism, giving rise to social protests by the unemployed

[16] The FTDES is a non-governmental organisation which is neutral, independent of all political parties or religious institutions. It was created in 2011 with the goal of defending economic and social rights at the national and international levels. Certain trade unionists are members of its central office located in Tunis. It is part of different international networks including the International Federation of Human Rights Organisations (FIDH), Migreurop, Loujna Tounkaranké, and Boats 4 People.

[17] The horizontal relationship between the two organisations is almost non-existent since they are linked vertically through the corporatist state, each seeking to derive benefit from its privileged relationship with the state (Redissi 2006).

[18] A permanent segment of the activities of this German foundation in Tunisia is devoted to working with the UGTT with the aim of promoting social democracy (<http://festunis.org>).

[19] The Arab Trade Union Confederation was created in 2014 (<http://arabtradeunion.org>).

[20] Recurrent references in speeches by trade union officials, notably in moments of crisis in relation to the regime in power. <http://festunis.org>, <http://arabtradeunion.org>

[21] The unemployment rate is particularly high in the interior regions (western regions). The female unemployment rate is around double the male rate.

[22] During the rule of Ben Ali, the government established numerous consultative structures on topics relevant to development plans. They were a sham participatory process, however, since the point of view of the UGTT, as well as other members of committees, was not even considered

[23] This new social contract inspired by the values of the revolution relates to: i) economic growth and regional development, ii) employment and professional training policies, a focus which envisages the progression of workers from the informal to the formal sector, iii) professional relations and decent work, iv) social protection, and v) the institutionalisation of social dialogue.

[24] The major protest movements often gather outside the UGTT offices to organise their solidarity and assert collective pressure on the authorities.

[25] The recommendations for the organisation of elections also included the following elements: ensure a secure environment, dissolve the »Leagues of protection for the revolution«, and guarantee the neutrality of the administration, schools and places of worship (Khzouri 2016: 56-57).

[26] The recommendations for the fight against terrorism were as follows: i) pass an antiterrorism law; ii) have public service trade unions from the security sector participate in reforming the system of national security and iii) create a national commission of enquiry into political assassinations and terrorist crimes (Ibid.: 57-58).

[27] The parties to the national dialogue designated the Secretary General of the UGTT and the President of the ONAT as chairman and official spokesman respectively of the national dialogue sessions (Khzouri 2016: 79).

[28] This concept integrates the productive dimension of work with that of just wealth distribution, especially a decent wage, job security and social protection.