Legacy Trade Unions as Brokers of Democratization? Lessons 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 former President Zine al-Abidine 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, the Tunisian Human Rights League, 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.

The UGTT's highly political intervention in Tunisia's transition motivates the central theoretical question of this article: What shapes the trajectory of labor unions in transitions from authoritarian rule? And why do some "legacy unions" assume a political role in these transitions? "Legacy unions" are "unions allied with the previous authoritarian regime that survive in the democratic era."[1] Given a legacy of authoritarian control and high levels of "dependence" on the state,[2] it is especially puzzling that the UGTT would support anti-Ben Ali protests and emerge as a powerful political actor during the transition.

Understanding the role of legacy unions in transitions from authoritarian rule, as well as in the post-authoritarian period, is important for several reasons. First, understanding the conditions under which legacy unions can emerge as brokers of democratic transitions, as is the case in Tunisia, can explain the trajectory of regime change in the aftermath of transitions from authoritarian rule. Second, the trajectory of legacy unions in the transition period can shed light on labor's ability to extract concessions in an increasingly globalized world. Third, understanding the trajectory of legacy unions in post-transition periods can shed greater light on the sources of trade union autonomy, a concept that is widely used in the literature on state-labor relations.

Existing explanations—focusing on authoritarian legacies, the degree of trade union autonomy from the state, and labor's material incentives to support democratization—do

not sufficiently account for the UGTT's high-profile political role in Tunisia's transition. Using a historical analysis of the evolution and trajectory of the UGTT, I argue that pre-authoritarian legacies can have important implications for trade union autonomy under authoritarian rule. If unions enter the regime-formation stage with a history of political struggle and with strong organizational capacities, they are more likely to develop a degree of internal autonomy that makes it difficult for authoritarian incumbents to disempower them.

Trade Unions and Democratic Transitions

Comparative research on democratization and state-labor relations under authoritarian rule emphasizes three factors that influence the potential of organized labor to adopt an oppositional role and emerge as a major actor in transitions from authoritarian rule. These include material interests, the degree of labor's autonomy from the state, and authoritarian legacies.

One perspective emerges out of the literature on democratization. This approach views democratization as the result of struggle between different social classes and emphasizes the economic interests motivating these classes to support democratization.[3] Examining European cases of democratization, Dietrich Ruschemeyer, John Stephens, and Evelyne Stephens argue that the working class played an important role in these processes because democratization served workers' material interests. For them, "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."[4]

Eva Bellin extends this research on the role of social classes in processes of democratization to late-developing countries, arguing that "social forces are most likely to champion democracy when their economic interests put them at odds with their authoritarian states."[5] While still emphasizing material considerations as the core determinant of unions' support for democratization, Bellin argues that the conditions of late development alter unions' calculations by increasing their dependence on the state for financial support. "Collaboration rather than confrontation thus makes the relations among capital, labor, and the state in LCDs [late developing countries] and this stands in marked contrast to class-state relations in the early industrializers," she explains.[6] Hence, labor and capital are "contingent democrats" in late developing countries.[7]

Bellin applies this analysis to Tunisia, where, she argues, organized labor has very little to gain from democratization, because "organized workers are much better off than the vast majority of their unorganized compatriots."[8] With the country's soaring unemployment rates and the increased size of its 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."[9] 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. As will be discussed in greater depth below, those UGTT members and unions that initially supported anti-Ben Ali protests did so because of their history of political activism. Thus, a focus on material interests does not fully explain the fact that the UGTT prioritized a national, political role over the course of the transition.

Other accounts emphasize trade union autonomy as an important factor in determining the role that unions play in supporting anti-regime protest.[10] 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."[11] For LeBas then, autonomy facilitates an oppositional role for labor unions because it allows for the subversion of these organizations 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."[12]

Trade union autonomy is certainly critical in allowing for the emergence of trade unions as platforms for opposition under authoritarian rule. The concept of autonomy, however, leaves a number of questions unanswered. First, it is not entirely clear where autonomy comes from. Although the literature makes clear that authoritarian incumbents can constrain labor's autonomy, it is often unclear whether labor can assert autonomy despite these constraints and whether there are alternative sources of autonomy for organized labor. Second, although variation in the degree to which organized labor is autonomous from the state helps explain the conditions under which it plays an oppositional role in transitions from authoritarian rule, it does not necessarily account for the underlying motivations for this role. For instance, it does not address whether unions emerge as champions of democratization because it serves their members' material interests or for other considerations.

Recent work suggests that authoritarian legacies play a key role in shaping the strength of legacy unions in the period following democratic transitions.[13] Teri Caraway, Stephen Crowley, and Maria Cook define "authoritarian legacies" as "actors, formal institutions, informal practices, and cultural or ideological frameworks that new democratic regimes inherit from authoritarian regimes and that shape politics in the democratic period."[14] They point to the fact that unions enter the democratic era with varied resources and mobilization capacities. Discrepancies in these endowments have a

profound impact on the ability of unions to pursue their agendas in the post-authoritarian period.

This article focuses specifically on the UGTT's role in Tunisia's transition from authoritarian rule because it runs counter to prominent theoretical expectations about the role of unions in transitions from authoritarian rule. While theories that highlight unions' dependence on the state can explain the initial reluctance of the UGTT leadership to support anti-Ben Ali protests, they cannot account for the leadership's eventual endorsement of these protests. The fact that the UGTT prioritized a national, political role during the transition period challenges theories focusing solely on material incentives. In addition, explanations focused on material incentives cannot account for the fact that militant sectors with a history of political activism were the most active in supporting anti-Ben Ali protests. Furthermore, the UGTT's emergence as a central actor in Tunisia's democratic transition challenges the assumption of subordination under authoritarian rule.[15] Not only did the UGTT endorse an oppositional stance against the Ben Ali regime—albeit in response to pressure from its rank-and-file—it became an agenda-setter in later stages of the transition. Much like other authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa, the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes consistently tried to tighten their grip on labor by co-opting union leaders and using corporatist strategies. Although these tactics sometimes ensured the subordination of the UGTT to authoritarian regimes, they did not guarantee its complete subjugation. Instead, the relationship between the union and successive authoritarian regimes was punctuated by clear confrontations. The impetus for these confrontations has more to do with the UGTT's pre-authoritarian legacy than its status under authoritarian rule.

The UGTT's role in the Tunisian transition will thus be considered here as a "deviant case study." Deviant cases are "cases whose outcomes either do not conform to theoretical expectations or do not fit the empirical patterns observed in a population of cases of which deviant case is considered to be a member."[16] Deviant cases are useful in generating new hypotheses.[17] As such, the role of the UGTT in Tunisia's transition presents an opportunity to generate alternative hypotheses to explain the role of legacy unions in transitions from authoritarian rule. Rather than focus on the legacy of authoritarian rule, my analysis will point to the strength of trade unions at the time of regime formation. This argument is consistent with Ruth Collier and Andres Schipani's argument about the power of legacies inherited by authoritarian rulers.[18] Although authoritarian incumbents were not helpless in the face of labor institutions at the time of regime formation in Tunisia, I argue that the UGTT's status at the time of independence severely constrained the capacity of authoritarian rulers to completely subjugate the organization. The UGTT entered the post-independence period in Tunisia with a great deal of organizational clout and credibility as a nationalist actor, one whose agenda encompassed broad societal goals that went beyond members' short-term material interests. Equally important, the UGTT had already established an organizational structure that allowed for a great deal of internal dissent. While authoritarian incumbents tried to co-opt union leaders, they were less successful at eradicating internal dissent within the organization. This meant that proponents of "radical unionism" found an

institutional home within the UGTT despite authoritarian constraints on the organization. As I will show, the UGTT's legacy as a nationalist actor inspired a commitment among some unionists to a broader vision of trade unionism and established a degree of internal autonomy, which allowed the militant base to operate independently of the trade union leadership. This legacy also informed subsequent struggles between the central leadership and the militant base, including the latter's attempts to pressure the leadership to reclaim the union's independence from the state. This argument does not imply that the UGTT was destined to play a supporting role in Tunisia's transition from authoritarian rule. Instead, the UGTT's pre-authoritarian legacy made it possible for the UGTT to play that role. In other words, the UGTT's role in the transition cannot be fully understood without reference to that legacy. The case of the UGTT thus highlights some potential limitations of conventional explanations for the role of legacy unions in transitions from authoritarian rule and proposes pre-authoritarian legacies as a plausible alternative hypothesis. More research is required to test the validity of this hypothesis beyond Tunisia.

In this article, I employ a historical institutionalist approach to trace the emergence and trajectory of the UGTT both under authoritarian rule and in the recent transition to democracy. This approach allows me to examine critical junctures in the union's relationship with successive authoritarian regimes. It also maximizes insight into the UGTT's internal organizational dynamics, which allows me to evaluate the extent to which the union's historical legacy has informed decision-making down the road. I supplement this historical analysis with in-person interviews with UGTT activists. Interviews shed greater light on internal dynamics, especially with regard to the relationship between the central trade union leadership and the federations and regional branches.

Unpacking Trade Union Autonomy: Sources and Types of Autonomy

The concept of trade union autonomy is central to many analyses of state-labor relations under authoritarian rule. Yet, we know relatively little about where organized labor derives this autonomy. I suggest that we must look beyond the legacy of authoritarian rule to identify potential sources of labor autonomy. Furthermore, the concept of trade union autonomy can be usefully disaggregated to deepen our understanding of the limits of corporatist constraints on labor's independence.

An important strand of research on state-labor relations points to cases in which the state limits the autonomy of organized labor, or where a host of authoritarian controls have ensured the complacency of organized labor.[19] These approaches attribute a great deal of causal weight to the actions of authoritarian regimes in constraining trade union autonomy. Without disputing the power of such actions, I contend that there are other potential sources of trade union autonomy under authoritarian rule. These sources include pre-authoritarian legacies. To understand how these legacies affect trade union autonomy, three aspects of the status of unions prior to authoritarian regime formation

must be considered: (1) the strength of the union at the time of regime formation; (2) whether the union was established as a grassroots organization; and (3) the extent to which the union was involved in broader political struggles, such as national independence struggles.

First, we must be attuned to the balance of power between unions and other important political actors at the time of authoritarian regime formation. When trade unions are established by authoritarian leaders in the post-independence era, as was the case in Egypt, it is easier for authoritarian incumbents to fully control them.[20] By contrast, when trade unions predate regime formation and are major political players prior to the regime formation stage, they are more likely to have political leverage at the time of regime formation. This provides them with an additional basis for independent action under authoritarian rule. Although this basis for independent action might be overshadowed by authoritarian controls, it sets the stage for internal struggles to regain or re-establish independent action. In other words, a legacy of militancy predating regime formation provides unionists with a reservoir to draw on when making claims against the national leadership. It can also make it more difficult for authoritarian regimes to completely co-opt labor. Even if they succeed in doing so at the level of union leadership, they are less able to erase labor's historical legacy and the ability of militant unionists to draw on that legacy.

Second, when unions are established as grassroots organizations prior to authoritarian regime formation, they are more likely to have set mechanisms for internal accountability that might be difficult to reverse under authoritarian rule. These sticky organizational features might limit the capacity of the authoritarian rulers to bring the organizations under their complete control. In the Tunisian context, the UGTT had an organizational structure that allowed for the emergence of dissent within the union and that gave dissident unionists the opportunity influence the trade union leadership through various mechanisms.

Third, unions whose institutional origins are linked to broader, political causes, such as struggles against colonialism, might be characterized by broader visions of trade union activism among union members. For instance, the fact that the UGTT was a major actor in the struggle against colonialism has inspired a broad view of unionism among its members, whereby the union is viewed as a nationalist actor that is interested in national issues that go beyond unionist demands.

In addition to recognizing these potential sources of autonomy, a full understanding of trade union autonomy under authoritarian rule requires that the concept of autonomy be disaggregated. Disaggregating the concept allows for a better account of situations where labor lacks one type of autonomy but enjoys another. I distinguish between "external" and "internal" autonomy. External autonomy refers to the relative degree of autonomy that organized labor enjoys vis-à-vis the state. This is the variable that is most often invoked in the literature on state-labor relations under authoritarian rule. Bellin refers to levels of labor "dependence" on the state, which "can be deepened by the state's adoption of a corporatist strategy that provides unions financial and organizational support in exchange for political loyalty and self-restraint."[21]

In contrast to external autonomy, internal autonomy refers to the degree of autonomy that federations and branch unions enjoy vis-à-vis the central trade union leadership. Evidence of internal autonomy would be actions, such as strikes, undertaken by federations and branch unions without the approval of the central leadership or in explicit defiance of the central leadership. Labor organizations that emerge as grassroots organizations, as opposed to ones that are formed by the state, are more likely to have internal mechanisms allowing for greater accountability of the leadership to the base. Surely, the level of internal autonomy that federations and branch unions have vis-à-vis the central union leadership can vary over time. The central union leadership can also take actions to restrict internal autonomy by taking punitive measures against activist unionists. LeBas implicitly acknowledges the distinction between internal and external autonomy, and argues that internal autonomy can enable unions to become bastions for political opposition.[22] It is not clear, however, why some trade unions have internal autonomy while others do not.

The distinction between internal and external autonomy is particularly useful because it allows us to compare cases in which levels of internal and external autonomy are relatively equal to cases in which they are not. In Egypt, for instance, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation had low levels of both internal and external autonomy. In Tunisia, on the other hand, one could argue that even at times when the UGTT had low levels of external autonomy, it had relatively high levels of internal autonomy. The fact that the base and middle cadres can operate independently within the union and sometimes exert pressure on the top leadership makes it more difficult for the union to be fully controlled by authoritarian incumbents. Distinguishing between internal and external autonomy thus allows us to capture what might appear like a contradiction, namely the co-existence of limited external autonomy and high levels of internal autonomy.

Conceptualizing the UGTT

In focusing on internal autonomy, my argument emphasizes the importance of internal dynamics in understanding the role of unions in transitions from authoritarian rule. Thus, I do not treat the UGTT simply as a unitary actor. The struggle between militant sectors and the central leadership is vital to understanding the repeated confrontations between the UGTT and authoritarian rulers, including the role of the UGTT in the 2010/2011 uprising. In addition, the fact that the organization has mechanisms for internal accountability has also meant that the leadership has sometimes had to change course in response to demands from the rank and file.

At the same time, the union's historical legacy had important implications for its organizational culture and self-image. There is evidence to suggest that UGTT members do share some common understandings of the history of the organization, especially the

organization's historical role in the struggle against colonialism. These shared understandings are passed on from one generation to the next and are reflected in the organization's own literature. This is not to suggest that these shared understandings necessarily motivate all members of the organization in the same way. Yet, as I will show below, they constitute a reservoir of resonate identity frames in the organization, with which members can make compelling appeals to one another.

The UGTT's Pre-Authoritarian Legacy

The UGTT entered the post-independence period in Tunisia as a powerful grassroots organization that had played a key role in the struggle against colonialism. Considered on par with the Neo-Destour party, the UGTT presented an important challenge for the Bourguiba regime. Indeed, the Bourguiba regime could not ignore the UGTT in the initial stages of regime formation. Some UGTT members were offered cabinet positions and the union was given some say in economic policy making during this period.

The UGTT was formed ten years prior to Tunisia's independence in 1956, and its formative years were defined by its critical role in the struggle against colonialism. Given its important historical legacy, the UGTT is touted by many of its members as having a "special" status in Tunisian politics and in comparison with other trade union federations in the Middle East and North Africa. Not only was the organization involved in the armed struggle against French colonialism from 1952 to 1954, it 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*. The first unions independent of French control 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, however, the earlier generation of trade union activists in Tunisia had a limited view of trade unionism, encompassing only social activism. According to historian Ali al-Mahjubia, Muhammad Àli al-Hami's project was not a national project aimed at liberating Tunisia from colonialism. His project was mostly a social project that aimed at improving the conditions of the working classes that suffered from deteriorating economic conditions.[23] Significantly, it was not until after the Second World War that Tunisian trade unionism moved into a nationalist direction.[24] By contrast, 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.

By its 1951 congress, the UGTT had adopted the struggle against colonialism as one of its main priorities. The congress made clear that the struggle for workers' rights could not be divorced from the struggle against colonialism; consequently, the UGTT would emerge as a key player in the struggle for independence. Leaders of the trade union movement viewed the nationalist struggle as a necessary precondition to advocate

for the rights of Tunisian workers. More broadly, the UGTT made the nationalist struggle the foundation for class struggle and a "strategic entry point to achieving the rights of the [Tunisian] people in bread, land, and democracy."[25] This political orientation was crystalized in the 14th congress, held in March 1951.[26] The congress clearly asserted that "serving the national cause is our first duty."[27]

The relationship between nationalist struggle and class struggle involved important trade-offs for the Tunisian labor movement and presented a challenge for the movement's leadership at the time.[28] 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."[29] In practice, this meant embracing a unionism for Tunisian workers, and "the severing of ties with the European unions and workers' organizations and an alignment—if not alliance—with the nationalist movement."[30]

Initially hesitant about the involvement of the UGTT in the nationalist struggle, Farhat Hached, one of the main founders of the UGTT, eventually became one of the nationalist movement's icons. Hached's 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.[31] Hached also started to believe that "politics is everywhere and if we allow ourselves to ignore it, it will not ignore us."[32] Writing on the UGTT's history, the prominent Tunisian scholar Abdeljelil Temimi argues that Hached was committed to armed struggle against colonialism.[33] By 1952, when Bourghiba was sent to Tabarka, Hached had "embraced resistance as a method and as a course of action. . .the UGTT truly reflected the ambitions of the [Tunisian] people for independence." The UGTT was a "national space par excellence," writes al-Temimi, that gave rise to "the most important political and intellectual leadership figures in the country."[34] Writing on the close connection between political and social struggles in a 1949 article, Hached asks pointedly: "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 who do not enjoy democratic benefits? How can the union movement develop in a country that does not have guarantees for individual and natural freedoms?"[34]

The UGTT staged a number of strikes in the early 1950s against colonial policies and practices. These included strikes in November 1950 against colonial repression and in December 1951 against the French government's rejection of internal independence.[35] The UGTT also organized a number of strikes in 1952, including an April 1952 strike following the declaration of a state of emergency.[36]

Beyond prioritizing the nationalist struggle, the UGTT's membership strategy 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 small traders, artisans, intellectuals, and bureaucrats.[37] 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 *Union des Syndicats des Travailleurs Tunisiens's* numbers remained static."[38] According to Muhammad Salih al-Hirmasī, the UGTT's attempt to attract a broad membership reflects the fact that the union perceived itself as an "organization of the people" fundamentally concerned with their social and political lives.[39] Some historians attribute this broad vision of unionism to the Tunisian civil servants who contributed to the founding of the UGTT.[40] These members were highly educated and most of them belonged to nationalist parties, which raised their nationalist consciousness.[41] The UGTT's orientation as a nationalist actor thus endowed it with a self-image and a membership base that went beyond a strictly class-based organization.

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, entitled *The Dialectical Relationship between the National and Social Struggles in the History of the Tunisian General Labor Union*, captures the importance of this issue for the UGTT. Citing a few key moments in the union'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."[42] "This is the special feature of the Tunisian union movement," they write, "which chose to have a national expression that transcends the interests of its members to include other sectors of society."[43] In addition, the authors explain that the UGTT's commitment to national issues has occasionally led it to prioritize its national role over its social one.[44] In doing so, the UGTT would compromise its primary social function for the sake of nationalist goals.

When Tunisia's nationalist leadership was jailed during the struggle for independence, the UGTT leadership participated in negotiations over Tunisia's impendence. Indeed, the UGTT's secretary general, Farhat Hached, was assassinated by the French in 1952 for his role in the anti-colonial struggle. On the eve of Tunisia's independence from the French, the UGTT was a well-established national organization that saw itself as a partner in Tunisia's national development project. Al-Hirmasī notes that the UGTT's prominent role in the struggle against colonialism gave the organization greater symbolism and popular support and made it less likely for the Neo-Destour party to emerge as the sole power in Tunisian politics.

Not only did the UGTT have symbolic power given its role in the nationalist struggle, it entered the post-independence period with a well-established organizational structure that was difficult for Tunisia's rulers to undo. Built as a grassroots organization, the UGTT was structured in a way that accorded significant power to the base. The UGTT's organizational structure dictates that power emanates from the base and moves upward to "base unions," "federations," and the UGTT's executive bureau. To be sure, authoritarian incumbents can use corporatist controls to gain the loyalty of organized labor. But these strategies are limited by the leadership's accountability to its base, as well as by the ability of the base and middle cadres to make decisions independently of the leadership.

This organizational structure, in place well before the regime formation stage, was an important source of internal autonomy within the UGTT under authoritarian rule. Despite subsequent attempts on the part of authoritarian incumbents to limit the UGTT's external autonomy, the UGTT retained a relatively high level of internal autonomy. This meant that dissenting voices had an opportunity to voice their dissent within the organization and had the potential to influence decision making at the leadership level. These dissenting voices often lamented the loss of the UGTT's external autonomy and its deviation from a more militant history, when the union championed national political issues.

How did the UGTT's pre-authoritarian legacy survive decades of authoritarian rule? I identify four mechanisms. First, the UGTT's legacy as a nationalist actor is heavily emphasized in the union's literature and is a central part of its self-image. As one member puts it, unionists associate the UGTT with "national duty and the public interest."[45] New members become familiar with this legacy through training sessions and through informal channels, such as meetings with older cadres. The UGTT's struggle against colonialism and its subsequent confrontations with successive authoritarian regimes form an important part of what unionists refer to as the organization's "memory." As one union member explained: "This memory is passed from one generation to the next inside the organization and its structures and its meetings and this ensures communication. Muhammad Àli al-Hami and Hached imprinted the national and unionist movement and influenced many generations."[46]

Second, the influx of militants into the UGTT in the 1970s following the radicalization of the student movement injected renewed commitment to the organization's foundational principles and its militancy. This generation of unionists had Leftist orientations and was active in student unions at a time when the student union movement was in a confrontation against the Bourguiba regime.

Third, the UGTT's pre-independence history sparked a process of self-selection whereby young members join the UGTT because of its unique status as a "political landmark."[47]

Fourth, the fact that the UGTT was formed as a grassroots organization means that there are mechanisms for the rank and file to hold the union's leadership accountable. This accountability is clearly reflected in situations where the leadership was forced to change its position in response to pressure from the rank and file.

Internal Autonomy and the Battle for External Autonomy under Bourguiba and Ben Ali

The history of state-labor relations in Tunisia is replete with attempts by successive authoritarian regimes to limit labor's external autonomy. As noted above, however, the UGTT was in a powerful position at the initial stages of regime formation, which made it difficult for the Bourguiba regime to immediately bring it under its control.

Some observers even suggest that the UGTT should be seen as a partner in the national development project during this period.

Under Bourguiba, the regime often clashed directly with the UGTT in an effort to limit its power. Over time, UGTT's relationship with the Bourguiba regime was punctuated by a number of crises (in 1978 and 1985, for example) involving the independence of the organization. On several occasions, the regime imprisoned UGTT leaders, imposed new leaders, and even employed militias to attack UGTT offices. For his part, Ben Ali tried to domesticate the UGTT by consistently intervening to select top leaders and secure their loyalty. Ben Ali's regime also tried to undercut the UGTT's financial base.[48] Despite this, post-independence state-labor relations in Tunisia witnessed periods of direct confrontation between the state and the UGTT. In addition, there is evidence of a great deal of internal autonomy even in times when the UGTT's external autonomy was compromised.

Although Bourguiba and Ben Ali may have ensured the loyalty of unionists at the leadership level, unionists in militant sectors and regional unions at the lower and middle ranks of the organization remained active and occasionally clashed with the organization's bureaucratic leadership. "An enduring feature of the 'normal' functioning of the UGTT," writes Sami 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."[49] Notably, the most confrontational episodes between the UGTT and Tunisia's authoritarian incumbents took place following the mobilization of lower and middle cadres within the UGTT, which forced the union leadership to reconsider its stance toward the regime and defend the organization's external autonomy. The UGTT's historical legacy as an organization that is invested in the country's political development has been repeatedly invoked by activists who view 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 strikes, including the 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. 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."[50] These agreements were criticized by many rank-and-file workers, who characterized the UGTT's central leadership as bureaucratic and biased toward the regime.[51] This disconnect explains the number of wildcat strikes during this period. As Zemni explains, "Many of these strikes were organized without the support of the union's central bodies, putting the leadership in a difficult situation."[52]

By 1977, however, tensions between the UGTT and the ruling party increased in light of threats against UGTT's Secretary General Habib Achour's life. 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 ten out of a total of 455 strikes in June 1977, for instance, were approved by the national leadership of the UGTT, according to Ahmed al-Kahlawi, the secretary general of the general union of technical education teachers.[53]

The intertwined nature of social and political issues for the UGTT was clearly articulated in the lead up to the January 1978 crisis. In 1977, Hussein Bin Kadour, one of the key figures in the 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."[54] In essence, the UGTT was once again asserting its ability to critique the regime's policies, thereby reclaiming its independence from the party and the regime. At that time, UGTT secretary general Habib Achour resigned from the polit-bureau of the ruling party.[55]

Internal calls for the UGTT's independence continued under Ben Ali's rule, despite his attempt to assert control over the UGTT's leadership. For the greater part of Ben Ali's rule (1989–2011), the UGTT, headed by Ismail al-Sahbani until his removal in 2002, had become almost entirely subservient to the regime. Some critical unionists go as far as suggesting that the UGTT was "a part of the regime" in the 1990s. One critical unionist from the secondary teachers' union refers to al-Sahbani's ten-year tenure as the "black decade."[56] Internally, al-Sahbani concentrated power in his own hands, and the executive bureau sought to dominate the federations and branch unions. In 1999, for instance, al-Sahbani "forced the general congress to elect him secretary general (unusually), and conspired with the congress to ensure that his powers would be expanded."[57] During this period, the disciplinary committee (*lajnat al-nizam*) was active within the UGTT, according to the same unionist.[58] The leadership brought wrongful charges against dissenting unionists and corruption plagued the UGTT. According to Zemni, al-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.[59]

Despite this compromised external autonomy, there is evidence of a great deal of internal autonomy on the part of militant federations and branch unions. There is also

evidence of an internal struggle to reclaim the union's external autonomy. According to an opposition unionist, many historically militant federations and branch unions "revolted and continued to make their decisions, and Sahbani could not domesticate them. In strong sectors like the secondary teachers' union, it is rare to be able to remove a leader. If this happens, the whole sector would mobilize."[60]

In addition, given the constraints on political organization under the Ben Ali regime, the UGTT emerged as a platform for Leftists and other political activists. Given the limited avenues of political participation at the time, the UGTT attracted politicized members. 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. Delphine Cavallo notes that many UGTT members are highly politicized and affiliated with opposition parties.[61] "Even among non-affiliated union members," she argues, "political feelings are one of the main reasons for engagement in the UGTT."[62] In addition, even younger members of the organization note that they were attracted to the UGTT for its status as a "political landmark."[63]

Although the UGTT secured consistent yearly raises in scheduled negotiations, some unionists lamented the union's loss of political clout and credibility. These unionists constituted an "independence" or "democratic" current within the UGTT. This current included historically militant federations and branch unions, such as the federations of primary and secondary education, postal workers, doctors, and health, and the branch unions of Sfax, Kairaouan, and Jandouba. Members of this unionist opposition are typically highly militant and politicized and include leftist cadres, many of whom joined the UGTT in the late 1960s and early 1970s after being involved in student activism at a time of great social upheaval and tensions between the regime and the student movement in Tunisia.

The 1990s and 2000s were ripe with efforts by the "independence current" to reclaim the UGTT's independent status and its historical role in Tunisian politics. In 1995, when al-Sahbani issued a decision to cancel a strike called for by the secondary teachers' union, the union revolted and carried out the strike. Many unionists were punished and the central bureaucracy declared the strike illegitimate, according to a prominent unionist in the Secondary Teachers' Union.[64]

By the end of the 1990s, there was growing opposition against al-Sahbani's leadership. A unionist from the independence current notes that there were "voices of protest" in various sectors, such as primary and secondary education, postal services, health services, doctors, and some branch unions, such as Sfax and Mahdia.[65] Asserting their opposition to al-Sahbani, unionists from these sectors and branches moved to stop the May 1 celebrations, forcing al-Sahbani to move them to Tozeur. According to the same unionist, "some unionists went there and encircled him and raised slogans against him and against the regime."[66]

The growing internal opposition against al-Sahbani's leadership lamented the "excessive bureaucratization of the union's work. . .the uncritical alignment of the union

with the government's social and economic policies and the unconditional support of Ben Ali that meant, among other things, complete silence on the issue of human rights and democracy."[67] In 2000, al-Sahbani was indicted on corruption charges; he was forced to resign in 2001. 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."[68] 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."[69] Promoters of the platform included many unionists who were active in the 1970s and early 1980s, "the period of greatest tension with the authorities."[70] These unionists 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."[71]

This initiative dominated the UGTT's 2002 general congress in Djerba. The congress was significant on a number of levels pertaining to internal democratic procedures. It represented a radical departure from previous UGTT congresses, where the regime or ruling party had exerted significant procedural control. For the first time, the congress elected its own president without interference from the regime or ruling party, as was the situation under Bourguiba. In some of those prior cases, the president of the congress was not a voting delegate or even a member of the UGTT. In Djerba, however, as one promoter of the platform and former unionist from Sfax described it, the congress was "legal and legitimate," in contrast to many previous "extraordinary congresses," which had typically been supervised by the ruling party.[72] Also in contrast to previous general congresses, the Djerba congress did not send a letter to Tunisia's president. This deviated from earlier practice and was an indication of the union's assertiveness in its relationship to the regime. For his part, Ben Ali refused to accept the congress as well as the subsequent one in Monastir.

One of the most important decisions taken at the Djerba conference was the passage of article ten, which introduced a two-term limit to leadership roles in the executive bureau in order to ensure greater rotation of power. Beyond its implications for the internal governance of the UGTT, however, the move was intended as a message to Ben Ali, according to supporters of the platform. In essence, the UGTT was schooling the political leadership by demonstrating the need for term limits in important leadership positions. The Djerba congress not only introduced important changes to trade union electoral procedures, but it also signaled the presence of a powerful and vocal unionist and political opposition within the UGTT. In effect, the congress revealed the limits of authoritarian control over the UGTT. According to a prominent supporter of the platform, these measures could not have been passed "if the regime or the UGTT leadership was in charge of the congress."[73] The supporter adds: "The independence current became stronger, and members of the [ruling] Democratic Constitutional Rally could not control the congress."[74]

The Djerba congress had important implications for the independence current within the UGTT. The congress gave the independence current a stronger foothold in the UGTT and started to introduce some "balance. . .between different powers" in the UGTT, notes a prominent member of the current.[75] According to the same member:

> We planted the idea of rotation of power and that there cannot be a single actor making decisions. . .the independence current started to take root and become more engrained. . .After Djerba, the cadres were reenergized and given an opportunity to take the initiative. The level of internal democracy increased. Despite this, some leaderships were supportive of Sahbani. One could say that internal democracy and independence were proceeding but with some difficulty.[76]

Advocates of the independence current argue that the Djerba congress empowered the UGTT to oppose some of Ben Ali's policies and emboldened opposition unionists within the organization. For instance, despite the fact that the UGTT had backed Ben Ali's candidacy "without any critique of the electoral charades of 1994 and 1999," "the 2004 and 2009 elections at least triggered heated debates within the unions' commissions."[77] A former unionist in the health sector recalls that in 2004, "we could announce a neutral position."[78] In 2009, a dissident unionist in the Secondary Teachers' Union notes that several federations and branch unions refused to support Ben Ali's presidential campaign.[79] These included the federations of primary and secondary education, health, doctors, and postal services and the branch unions of Sfax and Kairaouan. A former health sector unionist recalls that "there was more resistance [than in the past] inside the administrative bureau against supporting Ben Ali's candidacy."[80]

In 2004, the UGTT also refused to join the second chamber discussions about the constitution, protesting the fact that some UGTT representatives were going to be selected by the regime. In 2005, Ben Ali was forced to cancel a visit by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in response to UGTT opposition. "This annoyed Ben Ali a great deal," notes an opposition unionist.[81]

On several occasions, especially in the 2000s, militant unionists in UGTT's regional 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, regional 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."[82] This was not unusual, as "individuals and small groups often join[ed] forces on political issues and act[ed] within the UGTT, sometimes operating out of UGTT offices."[83]

The history of the UGTT under authoritarian rule thus reveals a great degree of internal autonomy, even at times when the union's leadership had become completely dominated by the current regime. Unionists at the federation and sector levels took assertive positions toward the central leadership and went as far as demanding a return to the union's independent status vis-à-vis the regime. The rise of the independence current highlights important efforts to reclaim the UGTT's external autonomy.

The UGTT's Role in Tunisia's Democratic Transition

The 2010/2011 Uprising Tensions between the UGTT's militant base and the trade union leadership resurfaced in the lead-up to the December 2010 uprising in Tunisia. It was the militancy of the base-level unions and middle structures (the regional and sector-level unions) that ultimately drove the leadership to support a general strike on January 14, 2011.[84] Following Muhammad Bouazizi's self-immolation in December 2010, regional militant UGTT branches played an active role in supporting the growing popular uprising. Although not responsible for instigating initial protests, which aired grievances about regional marginalization and unemployment, local unions played an important role in politicizing the movement, and giving it "structure and sustainability."[85] The UGTT's local branches became focal points for protest over the course of the anti-Ben Ali protests. Union leaders from traditionally militant sectors, such as primary education, health, and postal services ("traditional bastions of 'trade union left'"), played a critical role in framing the Sidi Bouzid protests in political, rather than socio-economic, terms.[86] Indeed, "The Secondary School Teachers Union, dominated by far left and Arab nationalist trends, gradually adopted a strategy of political confrontation with the regime that went beyond the socio-economic."[87] This lends support to the claim advanced in this article, namely the power of the UGTT's pre-authoritarian legacy, especially the surviving vision among militant members of the UGTT as a national actor, whose responsibilities include defending human rights and championing pro-democracy movements. It also points to some possible limitations of explanations centered on material interests.

Importantly, regional unions did not abide by a provision in the labor code, according to which a strike is only legal if the UGTT's executive bureau is notified ten days in advance.[88] Instead, regional unions took decisions independently of the executive bureau. A unionist from Sfax explains that the strike in Sfax was organized without approval from the executive bureau: "We did not wait for the decisions of the executive bureau, which was forced to approve the decision to strike later."[89]

The decision of the national leadership of the UGTT to support the uprising "proved critical" in ousting Ben Ali.[90] On January 11, the National Administrative Committee issued a communiqué recognizing "the right of regional trade union structures to observe the protests" and the "right of citizens of other regions and professional sectors to express their active solidarity through peaceful protests, and in coordination with the National Executive Office."[91]

Ultimately, the national leadership could no longer ignore the increasing support that various regional branches and federations lent to the protest movement. According to one report, "It had to take into account the commitment of regional and local branches to the movement and was at risk of being marginalized by its own base."[92] The report continues:

> Over time, the UGTT leaders' "wait and see" approach became untenable. The UGTT's Sfax Regional Executive Office member Mohamed Abbas explains: "We did not want to

> repeat the mistake of Gafsa," when the union leadership took six months to comment on the workers' uprising in the mining town, procrastination that earned the UGTT much criticism from the rank and file and regional branches of the union.[93]

The fact that the UGTT's central leadership eventually supported anti-Ben Ali protests and was keen to learn from its previous failures to respond to pressures from regional branches and federations indicates its responsiveness to internal pressure. As noted above, the UGTT leadership responded differently to the 2010/2011 uprising than it had to the mining basin protests of 2008.[94] This could perhaps be explained through the severity of the 2011 protests and the fact that the leadership wanted to avoid repeating past mistakes. Nevertheless, it does indicate the importance of the UGTT's legacy as a national actor and the fact that the organization exhibited high levels of internal autonomy even as its external autonomy was compromised. This argument is consistent with Baccar Gherib's assessment that the compromise between the UGTT and the Tunisian state can "explode" in situations of tension, such as "when the union grassroots challenge the consensus. . .as was the case in the Tunisian revolution."[95]

The UGTT as a Power Broker In addition to illuminating the UGTT's role in anti-Ben Ali protests, the foregoing analysis helps explain the UGTT's high-profile political role in Tunisia's democratic transition. Since Ben Ali's ouster, the UGTT has emerged as a national actor and assumed a mediating role between various political parties by, among other methods, brokering several rounds of national dialogue to help mitigate the political crisis in Tunisia. As 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."[96] When asked about the role of the UGTT in the Tunisian transition, a former 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.[97] 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. To be sure, this political role was not inevitable nor is it without controversy, as will be discussed below. At the same time, however, this role was only made possible given the organization's historical legacy. It also required the agency of key militant unionists within the organization. Several other observers of union affairs in Tunisia have highlighted the fact that the UGTT should be seen as more than just a union. 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.[98] A union, he said, is an extension of politics. 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 as an extension rather than a departure from its historic role, even though the UGTT's current political involvement is much deeper than before.

Conclusion

Given its historical "dependence on the state" and its "aristocratic privilege,"[99] it is surprising that the UGTT emerged as a key player in Tunisia's transition to democracy. Not only did the union ultimately endorse the demands of the 2010/2011 uprising, it played a mediating political role in ensuring the transition from authoritarian rule. Amid growing political tensions and following a series of political assassinations, the UGTT led a national dialogue conference that brought Tunisia's political parties to the negotiating table. Consequently, many credit the UGTT with having steered the country away from potentially violent political conflict.

It is important to note, however, that the UGTT's role in the transition and its status under authoritarian rule have drawn criticism, both from within and outside the organization. Within the organization, the question of what role the UGTT should play in Tunisian politics is not without controversy. While many members concur that the UGTT had a national obligation to play a mediating role in the transition, others question the degree to which the UGTT is capable of balancing this high-profile political role with its more classical role as a trade union that is primarily responsible for advancing its members' interests. Others lament the fact that the UGTT lags behind in addressing serious internal reforms issues. These include internal corruption, the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, and issues of internal democracy. Outside the organization, the UGTT's high-profile political role in the transition has exposed it to criticism from political parties. Representatives from the Islamist Ennahda party have warned, for instance, that the UGTT risks becoming a partisan player by closely allying itself with leftist political parties. Finally, some critics lament what they see as the complacency of UGTT leadership under authoritarian rule.

This article has highlighted the limitations of existing theoretical approaches in explaining the role of the UGTT in Tunisia's transition from authoritarian rule. It advanced an alternative explanation rooted in the organization's pre-authoritarian legacy. 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 by both its unionist and nationalist orientations. This legacy had important implications for the status of the UGTT under authoritarian rule. Not only did it inspire politically-active members to join the UGTT, it allowed for a certain level of internal autonomy that was difficult to constrain by successive authoritarian regimes. This argument demonstrates the importance of the strength of trade unions at the time of authoritarian regime formation. It also highlights the limits of authoritarian legacies in cases where trade unions enter the regime formation stage with strong organizational clout. In the case of the UGTT, attention to the union's status at the time of regime formation exposes some sticky institutional features, including an ethos of radical unionism endorsed by a key constituency within the union and an organizational structure that allowed for internal dissent. In addition, the fact that the UGTT was formed as a grassroots organization meant that there were internal mechanisms to hold the national leadership accountable.

These features were difficult to reverse by successive authoritarian incumbents. Although authoritarian incumbents succeeded in controlling the trade union leadership, they failed to fully transform the UGTT into a subservient organization.

This analysis also has important implications for our understanding of the concept of trade union autonomy under authoritarian rule, a concept that is widely used in the literature on state-labor relations. We need to unpack sources and types of autonomy if we are to understand the long-term trajectory of legacy unions and their behavior in transitions from authoritarian rule. In the case of Tunisia, the UGTT's history as a nationalist actor and its establishment ten years prior to the regime formation stage lent it an important source of autonomy that could not be entirely reversed under authoritarian rule. In addition, the union's pre-authoritarian legacy included an organizational structure that ensured a relatively high degree of internal autonomy, even at times when authoritarian controls severely undermined the union's external autonomy. This internal autonomy allowed for dissenting unionists to voice their discontent and pressure the leadership to endorse more militant positions at key moments in the union's relationship to the state.

NOTES

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