Militant Workers, Coopted Leaders: A Critical Assessment of Workers' Collective Action Through Organized Labour in Tunisia

Golrokh Niazi

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
Doctorate in Philosophy degree in Political Studies

School of Political Studies
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Ottawa

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the dynamics of workers' collective political engagement through organized labour in an authoritarian environment and a regime in transition. While the literature on social movements and organized labour in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has captured the characteristics and impact of repression and corporatist systems on a union structure and elite strategies, this research contributes to a body of work that position the activities, networks and calculations of unionized workers at the centre of analysis. Using the Tunisian General Labour Union as an in-depth case-study, it will show that to fully comprehend the important role of a labour union as a vehicle for political engagement, one must pay close attention to the networks, strategies, and tactics of its militant base.

By adopting a conceptual framework that gives attention to interactions of structures and agents, and therefore not privileging one over the other, it shows how in a region in which unions were conventionally labelled as "inconsequential" and "empty shells," unionized workers, particularly those belonging to more militant sectors, have repeatedly seized on their personal networks and relationships, while drawing on systems of meaning making and shared collective memory to engage in various forms of activism. By doing so, it underscores the limitations of cooptation as a political strategy for ensuring obedience and compliance. Moreover, to better understand workers' activism and political engagement in MENA, this dissertation calls for a change in how "successful mobilization" is measured and assessed. In particular, it draws attention to the objectives and goals of workers' collective action, aims that cannot always be equated with the pursuit of a standardized path to democracy developed largely by institutions located in the West.

To the Teachers of Tunisia

Acknowledgements

It is almost impossible to describe my appreciation and gratitude for those who have raised, supported and guided me throughout the development and writing of this dissertation. In a few words I will try to explain what your presence and counsel has meant to me, but please know that words fail to capture my utmost appreciation to you.

To my parents, Zohreh Enjavi and Javad Niazi, and my brother Reza, thank you for your endless support, for always encouraging me to do better and be better, for being equally excited about my wild plans and dreams, and for your much-appreciated patience during the last several years. I couldn't have done it without you. This is for you.

To my advisor, Dr. Frédéric Vairel, I will forever be grateful to you for everything you have taught me. Thank you for showing me the importance of being in the field, the value of listening to the stories waiting to be told, for challenging me to be a better researcher and writer, and for your support and words of encouragement when life was getting a little too hard. You have made this process so worthwhile and I will forever owe you a deep debt of gratitude.

To Dr. Emily Wills, thank you for your friendship, for being my voice of reason, for being the most wonderful support system, for believing in me all the trillion times when I didn't, and for making me see the power of blending academic work with political activism.

To Dr. Cédric Jourde, taking your class during my first year of PhD is one of the best decisions I ever made. In that class not only did you consolidate my love for comparative politics, but you also helped me grow and develop my intellectual curiosity and joy of research. So much of my work is rooted in what I have learned from you.

To Dr. Janine Clark, meeting you during MESA 2017 is one of the highlights of my doctoral degree. From the first few minutes of meeting you (when you assured me it's okay to be paralyzingly nervous right before a presentation) until now, the trust you have placed in me and my work has helped raise my voice and my confidence. I now stand taller because of you.

To Dr. Michael Orsini, while I did not have the pleasure of working with you, knowing you has reinstated my faith in the presence of compassion, solidarity and allyship in academia. Pursuing a graduate degree is often an isolating endeavor, but you made sure my colleagues and I knew we were being heard. Your support of our initiatives gave me the most important gift: an academic community I knew I could lean on. For this I will forever be grateful to you, and I hope I can follow your example one day.

To Dr. Claire Turenne-Sjolander, Dr. Christian Rouillard, and Dr. André Laliberté, thank you for having my back during some of the most challenging times of this degree. Your mentorship made this dissertation possible.

To my dearest Mr. Saihi and Rami, everything changed the day I came to know you in Tunisia. Thank you for believing in my work and for trusting my research. Your generosity and kindness allowed me to navigate the challenging task of fieldwork. Because of you I was able to fulfill one of my lifelong dreams and in that process fall in love with your beautiful country. I don't know what I would have done without you by my side. Thank you for everything.

To my dearest Zeynab, Lynda, and Emen, one of the best outcomes of my research was meeting you. You gave me a second family in Tunis. I am so grateful that this research has led me to you.

To my Eya, thank you for being the most supportive and awesome research partner. I treasure every minute we spent working on this project together. Some of my fondest memories are with you.

To Philip, you're my backbone, the reason I ever finished, and truly the best thing to come out of my decision to pursue a PhD. So much of this belongs to you. You have gone above and beyond to help me keep my head above the water. I don't know where I would be without you. Thank you for always being the one constant in this chaotic life.

To my dearest Sylvie Lachapelle, Katherine Gignac, Roxanne Boileau, and Philippe Busser, it appears I am finally done writing! Thank you for putting up with my endless and often repeated questions. Thank you for the constant words of encouragement, for your patience, and for all the hugs. Without you as my administrative compass I would have been truly lost.

To my lifeline: Solmaz, Ronny, Nataliia, José, Hanna, Fiorella, Niloofar, Payam, Omid and Gino – you're everything to me. From now on I promise to stop complaining about having to write!

Finally, this research would have been literally (in the truest meaning of the word) impossible to finish without the generosity of all those in Tunisia who took the time to speak to me and who helped me answer my questions. I am forever indebted to you.

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List of Abbreviations

AFL-CIO – American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organizations

BNA – National Agricultural Bank

CGT – General Confederation of Labour

CGTT – General Confederation of Tunisian Workers

CPG – Gafsa Phosphate Company

CPR – Congress for the Republic

ETUF – Egyptian Trade Union Federation

FTDES – Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights

HCCNOP – Higher Committee for the Coordination of National Opposition Parties

ICFTU – International Confederation of Free Trade Unions

ILO – International Labour Organization

ISIL – Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

LTDH – Tunisian Human Rights League

MENA – Middle East and North Africa

NAC – National Constituent Assembly

ONAT – Tunisian Order of Lawyers

PCOT – Communist Party of the Workers of Tunisia

PDP – Progressive Democratic Party

RCD – Democratic Constitutional Rally

UDC – Union of Unemployed Graduates

UGET – General Union of Tunisian Students

UGTT – Tunisian General Labour Union

UGSCM – General Union of Moroccan Trade Unions

USAID – United States Agency for International Development

UTICA – Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts

WB – World Bank

WFTU – World Federation of Trade Unions.

Chapter 1: Revisiting Unionized Workers' Political Engagement in MENA

In November 2016, during a research visit to the small town of Kasserine in the heart of Tunisia, I spent some time at a small local union office speaking to a self-identified "militant unionist." Our conversation focused on life in Tunisia subsequent to the revolution, its achievements and setbacks, its hopes fulfilled and its hopes frustrated, but above all, the role of the Tunisian General Labour Union, or UGTT, in Tunisian politics. After much, often celebratory discussion of the union's role in various events, from the revolutionary uprising of 2010-11 to the national dialogue of 2013-14 and crises of the following years, I was surprised when he suddenly exclaimed to me (knowing I was from Canada): "the UGTT is the Céline Dion of Tunisia, but bigger!"[1]

He was by no means the only union activist to emphasize the importance of the UGTT to me during my fieldwork. Others also employed colourful imagery. One suggested the union was as important as "a mother's milk."[2] Exaggeration on the part of loyal union members wanting to emphasize a point to a visiting researcher aside, there is something intriguing about the perceived importance of the union's role in Tunisian politics. The modest and unpretentious provincial surroundings of Kasserine are hardly glamorous, and yet they are part of the key to understanding an apparent contradiction. On the one hand the UGTT has undeniably been a highly influential revolutionary and post-revolutionary political actor; on the other, in pre-revolutionary political science literature it was mostly written off as essentially coopted by an authoritarian state apparatus. Encapsulated in this anecdote is the idea that it has a broad popularity in the country, and that its reach extends to places where few, if any other institutions, can match it – even if local

[1] Interview with Malek, union representative primary education, Kasserine, December 2016.
[2] Interview with Mariam, union official, office of women workers, Tunis, December 2016.

activists are not simply replicating policies and strategies formulated by the leadership in the sometimes very different conditions of the capital.

This dissertation is an in-depth case study of a trade union's role as a multifaceted political actor. More specifically, it will follow closely the dynamics, forms, and transformations of the unionized workers' political engagement and collective action during five pivotal episodes of mobilization in post-independence Tunisia. By doing so, it seeks to show how the structure, composition and operations of a labour union, internally consisting of a highly heterogeneous working class and elites, externally supported by various allies and sympathizers, enables it to act as a distinct political actor in initiating, and at times, leading collective mobilization – in a way that a myriad of other civil society organizations and opposition political parties have struggled to do.

In the analysis that follows, "union-led collective action" is any collective undertaking initiated or managed mainly by unionized workers. Depending on its objective and the political context, the scale and aim of collective action can vary across time and space and with the diversity of its participants. More specifically, as a union-managed initiative develops from being an issue-specific movement towards one involving wider claim-making processes, the numbers of people implicated swells, from just those affected directly by an immediate grievance to include those individuals who use this collective development as an instrument to advance new objectives. Thus through an in-depth study of the role of a national trade union organization in facilitating and steering collective action, this research contributes to the overall body of knowledge on unions' grassroots activism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), where conventionally workers' organizations have been viewed as "empty shells" (Bellin 2004, 139). In fact, as my fieldwork made clear to me, a union is an assemblage of smaller groups of workers connected to the labour

leaders but characterized by much stronger ties of solidarity amongst themselves. These ties of solidarity are constituted through strikes and sit-ins, discussions and debates, exchanges of ideas with friends and colleagues during mundane daily routines such as going to a nearby café; these activities, even if appearing to focus on more narrowly economic and social questions (such as salaries and working conditions in their particular industry), are nonetheless also fundamentally political. For this reason the empty shell is in fact full. Closer inspection, moreover, suggests it is something more intricate and reticulated.

My contribution is thus to bring our focus to look at how activism and mobilization happened through the agency of a heterogenous and semi-decentralized labour organization, in the context of both an authoritarian system, and then, a regime in transition towards democratic change. I must make clear that in the forthcoming analysis I do not intend to characterize the UGTT as an organizational anomaly in MENA. While because of Tunisia's post-2011 political success, the UGTT appears as an exceptional actor, my analysis focuses less on UGTT's "uniqueness," and more on adopting an epistemic lens that gives greater attention to the agency of smaller units inside an overarching organization whose militant activism cannot be measured on a zero-sum game scale. That said, this close-up scale does not preclude comparative analysis, but rather enables it, because by focusing on these smaller units, the findings of this in-depth case study can be used to better understand the activities of organized labour in the region, even in places where labour's power may appear to be less prominent. The Egyptian Trade Union Federation, for instance, claimed approximately 14.1 percent of the labour force in the 2000s and operated as an active arm of the state designed to control workers (Beinin 2012). Yet despite its mission to curb labour militancy, as Beinin (2012) shows, workers' protests and strikes played a crucial role in delegitimizing Mubarak's regime throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, and its ultimate breakdown

in 2011. Thus, while the Egyptian uprising failed to bring about substantive democratic change, that setback should not negate the significance of organized labour's presence in Egyptian politics as an important contentious actor against the power of the state. In Tunisia, in 2010, unionized workers accounted for 15 percent of the labour force (Adouani and Sedrine 2011), and their participation in the 2010-11 national uprisings played a crucial role against Ben Ali's regime breakdown (discussed in chapter 5). However, that effective participation must be understood against the backdrop of continuous attempts at various form of workers' collective mobilization which allowed for labour's influential presence in 2010.

Before the 2010-2011 anti-government popular uprisings in MENA an extensive body of literature on political change, and especially democratization, had concentrated its efforts on presenting a perspective which, for all the differences between authors, could best be described as one of consensus: on the "persistence" (Hinnebusch 2006), "resistance" (Posusney and Angrist 2005), and "robustness" (Bellin 2004) of authoritarian regimes in the region. Moving forward to the political landscape after the uprisings, and another body of research has emerged to repeat this analysis of the "failure", especially in Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria, to achieve any substantive social or democratic political change (Brownlee, Masoud and Reynolds 2015; Clausen 2015; Droz-Vincent 2014; Lynch 2013; Perkins 2017). The guiding principle joining these two bodies of scholarship reasons that in a world that has supposedly experienced three waves of democratization, the Middle East has systematically failed to follow suit, and that it is therefore imperative to diagnose the cause(s) of this "exceptionalism" and the reasons behind the enduring "democracy dilemma" (Beker and Aarts 1993; Bellin 2004; Hariri 2015; Salamey 2009). Much of this scholarship attempts to contextualize the analysis through the prism of structural deficiencies, institutional fragility, and cultural barriers that stifle any attempt to change the established political

system. As a result, research has accumulated detailing the unfavourable consequences of the nature of state-society relations; weak autonomous professional associations; weak labour unions; fractious and divided opposition parties; fragile institutional capacity; a well-functioning "rentier economy"; robust coercive apparatuses; and, of course, the supposedly anti-democratic Islamic culture (Bellin 2004; Diamond 2010; Heydemann and Leenders 2011; Hinnebusch 2006; Huntington 1991; Kamrava 2007; Lewis 1993; Luciani 1994; Ross 2001; Posusney 2004; Pratt 2007; Waterbury 1994).

In the context of contemporary MENA, the literature has tended to give short shrift to labour unions and workers' movements. Unions, often grouped with other civil society actors, are fundamentally characterized as coopted, self-interested, or relatively weak and hollowed-out institutions, unable to act as formidable opposition to the power of the state. This type of framing is in part due to other entities (such as the military or political parties,) or abstractions (such as "culture," structural (im)maturity, and social development indicators) taking precedence over trade unions and workers' movements in scholars' analyses. Unions are often conceptualized using a top-down approach that concentrates on structural barriers and deficiencies over workers' agency. Nevertheless, while hollowed-out trade unions and coopted workers' movements can be found in any part of the world, there are also examples of labour unions in MENA, even ones characterized as under the influence and control of the state, with a history of activism and political engagement reaching far beyond economic and labour rights.

The scholarly discourse is thus far from monolithic. Maral Jefroudi's history of labour activism in the Iranian oil industry, for example, challenges mainstream literature on the contemporary history of Iran that describes the period between the military coup of 1953 and the 1979 revolution as "dark years for the working class, marked by a paucity of labour activism"

(2013, 191). Shifting away from an ideal-type of labour activism defined in terms of a mass based movement in direct conflict with the state, and by contextualizing the different types of collective action workers participated in, Jefroudi's analysis reveals that in Iran, during the 1960s, despite state-run trade unions and a repressive political regime, oil workers did indeed engage in small-scale, targeted group action, which often involved the appropriation of the regime's economic discourse for their own political ends. Labour activism in this period must therefore be situated within the context of a series of nationwide reforms introduced by the Shah as part of the White Revolution, and the impact of those reforms on workers' repertoire of actions and types of activism. Through the use of an in-depth case-study, Jefroudi challenges an important misconception which contends that trade unionism must be confrontational in form, or lead to a clear zero-sum outcome, in order to be taken seriously as formidable opposition. In fact, she contends that labour's political engagements "can have short life spans and be coopted in the discursive ways they are articulated, but that does not mean they did not occur or were not successful" (2013, 177). Along the same lines, Peter Moore and Bassel Salloukh's (2007) comparative research on the salience of professional associations in facilitating important transformation in state-society relations shifts away from "a focus on political outcomes among the Arab states as constituting a single bivariate outcome – democratization or authoritarianism – to assessing important political change short of democratization" (53). In doing this, Moore and Salloukh reveal "a tapestry of political struggles that fall well short of democratization but nevertheless amount to crucial transformations in state-society relations" (54), all of which are important in determining future regime shifts. Here in trying to understand how a union in an authoritarian setting can mobilize without engaging in direct and open confrontation (thus risking severe repression), the concept of "self-limiting mobilization" as first developed in Beinin and

Vairel (2011), and then further by Vairel (2018) in his analysis of a variety of movements' contentious practices in Morocco, is highly relevant. In his study of the effects of repression on collective action, Vairel shows how activists adapt their actions according to parameters regulating tolerable forms of action as determined by the authorities. Self-limitation thus entails a "strategic selection of contentious practices" (18) stemming from a "careful assessment of possible action and acceptable forms of protest" (19), and can thus be a strategic form of mobilization in the face of repressive authoritarian regimes. Indeed, in the case of members of the National Association of Unemployed Graduates of Morocco, this strategic self-limitation has been successful in helping the movement on occasion open up a space for negotiation with authorities, who thereby reward this strategy (Emperador Badimon 2019). The cases cited above, as well as that of the UGTT in Tunisia can productively be read in the same light, which, as we shall see in chapters 4 and 5 is helpful in arriving at a more nuanced understanding of the union leadership's cooptation under Ben Ali, and the ways in which the UGTT nonetheless retained the ability to mobilize.

Despite the common ground between labour unions and other social and political groups in authoritarian regimes when it comes to their limited room for maneuver, it is worth reiterating that unions by virtue of their ability to mobilize large numbers of workers and potentially shut down production possess capacities for contentious action that are denied to other political and social organizations. This was already the case in the late colonial period when present-day unions in North Africa, or their immediate predecessors, took shape in the context of anti-colonial struggle. Research on anti-colonial movements has thus underscored the political exceptionality of trade unions, even those affiliated with colonial powers, in the battle for independence. This is because historically struggle for political emancipation has been closely intertwined with social and economic rights (Cooper 1996; Fonteneau 2004). In many former colonies, therefore, leaders

of nationalist movements recognized the strategic utility and political weight of unions' mass followings which could then be leveraged in support of the nationalist cause. In Tunisia, as will be discussed in chapter 3, the nationalist movement coalesced around an independent trade union organization, which played a decisive role in advancing the nationalist claim for independence. In Algeria and Morocco, where trade unions were affiliated with the French Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), the formation of a well-organized trade union turned into one of the most important aims of nationalist leaders, who sought above all to make labour the backbone of the nationalist cause (R. F. 1952). In Morocco, for example, the Independence (*Istiqlal*) Party devoted its attention to infiltrating the CGT-affiliated Union Générale des Syndicats Confédérés du Maroc (UGSCM) in order to both provide "Moroccan unionists an invaluable apprenticeship under the tutelage of French masters of unionist profession" and to turn the UGSCM into "an instrument for the attainment of independence" (Forst 1976, 273). In an article published in *The World Today*, the house journal of the British foreign affairs policy institute Chatham House, in 1952, an author only known by initials R. F., writing on the state of unionism in French North Africa, described the strategic importance of an autonomous union for the nationalist movement in the following way:

> The demand for complete trade union freedom is one of the fundamental points of their programme. They see the development of trade unionism would allow them to propagate their ideas much more widely than at present. For example, if a Moroccan trade union could be developed among agricultural workers – the great majority of the native working population – this would give powerful impetus to the nationalist cause among the very poorest classes (256).

It is clear that amongst the many different classes of social actors that can trigger and participate in collective action, trade unions occupy a special place owing to their ability to merge political and socio-economic concerns to mobilize a committed base that is both professionally and socially diverse, albeit to varying extents depending on the country or the union concerned.

And while social movement scholars, as I will discuss in section 1.2, have acknowledged the importance of labour in collective action, given unions' ability to mobilize large and diverse workforces and their control of the means of production (Collier and Collier 1991; Collier 1999), Middle East and North African studies have lagged behind in substantive research that places unions at the centre of analysis. To assist in filling that gap, in this dissertation I move away from a purely structuralist approach in order to examine the impact of the various interactions that take place between different types of unionists, and the impact on collective mobilization of the give-and-takes between a union's different internal political blocs or between these blocs and their external partners.

The rest of this chapter is structured as follows. In section 1.1, I present and outline the four principal research questions and their accompanying sub-questions, which will guide the forthcoming analysis. I then provide an account of how this research topic came to be. Since the theme of this dissertation changed significantly during my first round of fieldwork in Tunisia, this also provides an opportunity to discuss how I conducted that fieldwork and the contribution it made to the way I envisaged this dissertation. Section 1.2 provides an overview of the relevant literature on social movement and collective action, regime change and labour unions, exploring further the benefits of paying more attention to unions' political activities. Lastly, in section 1.3, I present the main arguments of this research project, as well as outlining the subsequent six chapters.

1.1 Research Questions

This dissertation is structured around, and seeks to answer, four general research questions along with three sub-questions. They are as follows:

1) What is the impact of an authoritarian regime's deployment of cooptation, constraint, and repression on a labour union's political activism? And, by extension:

    1a) How does a union retain oppositional agency in spite of the cooptation of its leadership?

2) In post-independence authoritarian Tunisia, how did the UGTT support and participate in collective action?

3) How do a union's formal and informal structures affect its mobilizational power? And, more specifically:

    3a) How do a union's internal networks shift the balance of power and influence between its different branches?

4) How does a union leverage new political openings and social crises to broaden its national role and influence, including taking up the role of a national political watchdog? And, prolonging this inquiry:

    4a) How has Tunisia's new democratic political landscape, marked by a continued surge in collective mobilization, changed the goals and tactics of union activists inside the UGTT?

1.1.1 The formation of this research project

It is important to first explain how the subject of this dissertation emerged during my initial round of fieldwork in Tunisia in early 2016. The 2010-2011 wave of anti-government protests had

offered a critical opportunity to researchers in Middle East Studies to turn their focus away from the supposed persistence of authoritarianism to ask new questions of the possibilities thrown up by politics in the region. Therefore, in preparation for my doctoral research proposal, I was excited to join efforts to rethink deeply entrenched theoretical convictions and tenets about the region. In particular, the downfall of Hosni Mubarak and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's regimes had unlocked formerly unavailable spaces for the emergence and political participation of previously unauthorized or newly established opposition political parties. In this new political environment, I was keen to research historical experiences, conditions and structures that might facilitate ideological moderation and cooperative ties between different opposition parties with little to no background in cross-ideological political engagement. Therefore, in my initial research proposal, the principal political actor under investigation was in fact political parties and their leaders.

The initial research proposal thus addressed the question of opposition cooperation and alliance formation between opposing political parties; the consequence of alliance formation for moderation of ideological rigidity; and its impact on regime transition. In Egypt and Tunisia, the breakdown of authoritarian regimes had led to a strong re-emergence of formerly banned Islamist political parties and a strikingly large number of smaller liberal and social-democratic parties that were competing against each other in the electoral arena (Mahjar-Barducci 2012; Rougier 2012). Following the first democratically held elections, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Tunisia's Ennahda had claimed historic electoral victories, provoking new lines of inquiry on the impact on parties' political and strategic considerations of electoral success and the emergence of incentives to participation in formal democratic institutions (Matesan 2012; Pevna 2011). Within just two years of the nationwide uprisings, however, the socio-economic situation in the region had deteriorated to a point where a new wave of academic texts had emerged to explain how "the Arab

Spring" had given rise to an "Arab Winter" (Kurzman, Fahmy, Gengler, Calder, and Whitson 2013; Prashad 2012). Tunisia, for instance, was facing mass protests in response to a national parliament that had failed to live up to its promise of delivering a new constitution within one year, a rapidly deteriorating economic climate, and an escalating social crisis after the assassination of a prominent opposition lawyer, Chokri Belaid, in February 2013. Piling troubles on troubles, this was followed by the assassination of an opposition member of parliament, Mohamed Brahimi, in July 2013. In July of the same year, in Egypt, the military coup led by General el-Sisi had ousted the democratically elected President Mohamed Morsi while arresting senior officials, members and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and killing hundreds of Islamist civilians (Amnesty International July 2013).

In the midst of these grave crises, the democratically elected political leaders of Tunisia's coalition government, the "Troika," consisting of Ennahda (Islamist), Congress for the Republic (CPR) and Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties, more commonly known as Ettakatol (both centre-left and nationalist), dissolved, and agreed that it should be replaced by a government composed of a team of independent technocrats until new elections the following year (2014). This voluntary resignation was all the more striking because in Tunisia and elsewhere in the region there was little precedent for it. For instance, in June 2005 in Yemen, then president Ali Abdullah Saleh announced he would resign after twenty-seven years in power, an announcement that was hailed at the time as unprecedented, but which proved to be a promise he went back on in June 2006 when he declared that it was the people's will that he stand again (Johnson 2006). Prior to the resignation of the Troika, a group of civil society organizations led by the UGTT, which came to be known as the Quartet, had been putting pressure on the government to participate in a national dialogue (discussed in chapter 6). After months of hesitation, refusal and negotiations, all major

political parties represented in the Constitutional Assembly accepted the political roadmap prepared by the Quartet, and agreed to participate.[3] Ultimately, the success of the Quartet in managing Tunisia's national political crisis enabled the successful holding of presidential and legislative elections in 2014, as well as the adoption of a new constitution establishing a democratic and participatory political system.

By 2015, the Quartet had made international headlines, receiving the Nobel Peace Prize for "its decisive contribution to the building of a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia in the wake of the Jasmine Revolution of 2011" (Nobel Prize 2015). By the time I arrived in Tunis, in February 2016, Tunisia had been hailed as the Arab world's success story in building a democratic political order (Diamond 2015; Keating 2015; Masri and Anderson 2017; Sprusansky 2016). At the time, a popular vantage point for explaining Tunisia's ability to transition out of an authoritarian system centred on the transformation of the country's opposition parties, notably Ennahda's willingness to engage and cooperate with secular-left political parties and other civil society actors (Ayari 2015; Cavatorta and Merone 2013; Guazzone 2013; Netterstrom 2015). In 2015, the joining of Ennahda and the secular-left Nidaa Tounes in a coalition government offered an important opportunity to analyze conditions under which formerly non-systemic parties and opposition leaders are willing to participate in democratic procedures, and the impact of that alliance on democratic transition. Of course, a well-known line of inquiry in political science literature, with particular resonance in Middle East Studies, focuses on elite political learning, the political party inclusion-moderation hypothesis, and democratization (Ashour 2007; Bermeo 1992; Brownlee 2010; Clark 2006; Karakatsanis 2008; Langohr 2001; Schwedler 1998, 2011). In particular, Bermeo's 1992 theorization of the necessity of elites' political learning in the wake of series of

[3] CPR was the only major political party which refused to sign the roadmap prepared by the Quartet and to participate in the process of National Dialogue.

political crises is highly valuable. For Bermeo crises can lead to cognitive shifts which affect leaders' ideas and tactics, and in certain situations enabling "democratic reconstruction." At the time, this seemed highly pertinent to me, as two years earlier Ennahda had voluntarily resigned from the governing coalition, despite its position as the largest party in the Constituent Assembly, because it preferred to demonstrate its commitment to democratic change, rather than insist on staying in power which had proved self-destructive in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood. This was a clear instant of the impact of the cognitive shift on the party's tactics, and their subsequent governing partnership with Nidaa Tounes (secular centre-left) confirmed the fruitfulness of this approach.[4] However, while Bermeo frames her analysis in the context of authoritarian breakdown, I was more interested in how this process continues during regime transition.

With this in mind, of the hierarchy of political actors to consider, I had reasoned that Ennahda's internal strategic considerations and its leaders' political acumen offered an important explanation of Tunisia's relative success in the region. Therefore, at the start of my fieldwork, I spent many days in the hallways of the Tunisian parliament speaking to elected members of the constitutional assembly. Above all, I tried to understand the way Ennahda was adapting itself politically in order to avoid the fate of the Muslim Brotherhood; the influence and legacy of the Collectif du 18 Octobre[5] on party cooperation; and the dynamics of the alliance between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda – an alliance which Nidaa Tounes members represented as 'co-existence', while members of Ennahda described it as 'cooperation'.

[4] Nidaa Tounes was founded in 2012 by Beji Caid Essebsi, a leading political figure under both presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali. His party won the 2014 parliamentary elections and later went into coalition with Ennahda.
[5] The Collectif du 18 Octobre (The 18 October Coalition for Rights and Freedoms), founded in 2005, was a cross-ideological coalition, composed of different secular and Islamist opposition groups united in opposition against Ben Ali (discussed in chapter 4).

As I progressed in my discussions with former members of the Troika government, as well as other members of the Constituent Assembly, the influence of the UGTT on Tunisia's party politics and regime transition was becoming much more palpable. Since the departure of Ben Ali, the country's main labour union had witnessed a spike in membership, cementing its position as the country's most formidable opposition force – and political organization, despite its own rejection of that label. In a series of interviews with Ennahda members, I was often told that the party's decision to dissolve the Troika was motivated by the party's commitment to "doing what is best for Tunisia" – a political line that is used more to fashion the party's image as a moderate force for change, rather than indicating anything substantive about Ennahda's political program. During a much less formal conversation with one of Ennahda's veteran members and a Member of Parliament, I was told that the party's decision to ultimately dissolve the parliament came following the UGTT's ultimatum that they would oppose the government.[6] In a separate conversation with a UGTT official, I was told "you [Troika] need to find a solution because we will not accept any other way. And we are the principal force in this country. You [Troika] need us and we need social peace. This is the force of the UGTT."[7]

In parallel to these discoveries, I was learning more about UGTT's internal makeup. An organization that in the past had been decried as too close to the regime, its "gatekeeper",[8] was revealing itself to be much more than that. This was an organization that seemed to be a complex amalgamation of workers from different social classes and political leanings, composed of different political blocs that sometimes cooperate with, and at other times compete against each other, to influence and change the organization's stance vis-à-vis the government. I realized that

[6] Mouheb, Member of Parliament, Ennahda Party, March 2016.
[7] Interview with Karim, unionist official, Tunis, December 2016.
[8] Interview with Bilel, senior political analyst, Tunis, May 2016.

unionists' overlapping identities reaches far beyond the boundaries of the labour organization. And that their political engagement and activism might be determined much more by what happened outside of the union, but they used their associations with other unionists and with this organization as a whole to further their political cause. Therefore, it struck me that it would be difficult to fully coopt or repress such a complex, multi-faceted structure. As a result of this thought process, I decided to change the subject of my doctoral research to unionists' political engagement and collective action. I set out to research the forms, dynamics, and influence of union members on a political process that was sometimes cooperative, sometimes repressive, and sometimes merely chaotic.

1.2 Review of the Literature

The objective of this research, as mentioned above, is to offer a nuanced study of the role and impact of unionized workers' political engagement through collective action. In part it serves to show that labour-based activism always has wider political dimensions, and this broadly political character of labour demands means that unionists are politically resourceful well beyond other organizations of so-called civil society. This research also unpacks the dynamic of interactions between various networks of unionized workers, and how these interactions can induce and shape participation in collective action.

An area of research highly pertinent to the present study is found in the academic literature on social movement and collective action. Beginning in the 1960s, a growing academic interest in the development of protest and contentious politics facilitated the expansion of social movement research into a distinct area of scientific study and theorization (Della Porta and Diani 2015). Over the years, research on social movements and collective action has dedicated its attention to

different types of movements including the civil rights movement in the United States (McAdam 1988; Morris 1986; Blumberg 2009; Jackson 1969; Morris 2009; Van Delinder 2008); revolutionary movements and mobilizations in authoritarian regimes (Camau and Vairel 2014; Goodwin and Rojas 2015; Goodwin and Skocpol 1989; Skocpol 1979; Tilly 1978, 2004; Vairel 2008, 2014, 2020); anti-militarism, peace and social justice movements (Cockburn 2012; Novotny 1997; Reitan 2012; Toussaint 2009); ethnic, sectarian, and nationalist movements (Beissinger 2002; Coakley 1992; Reger, Myers, Einwoher 2008; Wills 2013, 2016); cross-ideological movements and social movement coalitions (Clark 2006, 2010; Durac 2015; Van Dyke 2003); health and disability movements (Brown and Zavestoski 2004; Kelly and Orsini 2016; Orsini and Wiebe 2014); religious movements and activism (Beckford 1986; Berger 1999; Campana and Jourde 2017; Clark 2004; Huntington 1996; Jourde 2017; Lindekilde and Lene Kühle 2015); the rise of radical right movements (Davies and Lynch 2002; Kaplan 1997; McVeigh 2009; Merkel and Weinberg 1997); women's movement and LGBTQ collective campaigns (Bernstein, Marshal, and Barclay 2009; Bernstein 2002; Giele 1995; Taylor 1989); and, of course, workers' collective action (Beinin 2015; Beinin and Lockman 1998; Collier and Collier 1991; Collier and Mahoney 1999; Grote and Wagemann 2018; Valenzuela 1989; Yousfi 2017).

Over the years, as Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani (2015, 4) have noted, the principal questions animating discussions of this topic have been focused on the following issues and themes:

> (a) the relationship between structural change and transformations in patterns of social conflict; (b) the role of cultural representations in enabling collective action; (c) the mechanisms that render it rational to mobilize around collective goals; and (d) the effects of the political and institutional context on social movements' development and evolution.

Alongside the insights made in this domain, and closely intertwined with the aforementioned research topics, social movement scholarship has been able to contribute to studies on regime change and political transition by paying close attention to just how social pressures from below can cause change in existing political institutions (Goodwin and Rojas 2015; Tilly and Tarrow 2007).

Highly pertinent to the present study is research analyzing the collective composition of social movements, and, more specifically, the relevance and role attributed to trade associations, unionists and the working class. Ruth Berins Collier and James Mahoney (1997, 299) analysis of the special role of the working class and labour action in democratic transition for instance reveals that:

> Although it would be wrong to treat labor organizations as the principal force behind democratization at the end of the twentieth century, the literature as a whole has erred in the other direction in portraying transitions as primarily an elite project, a conversation among gentlemen, with labour protest having relatively little consequence.

Collier (1999) is among a group of scholars who have challenged the hegemonic state and elite-centric paradigms of democratic transition by bringing attention to the role played by organized labour in facilitating authoritarian breakdown.[9] In her research on South America and Western Europe's experience with democratic transition, she demonstrates that sustained labour mobilization indeed played an instrumental role in facilitating democratic regime change. Drawing on her findings on the role of labour during the 1970s and 80s wave of democratizations (1999, 165), she surmises that:

> This labour role was not limited to an "indirect" one, in which the government responded to labour protest focused on workplace demands. Rather, the union movement, or important parts of it, was typically one of the major actors in the political opposition, explicitly demanding a democratic change. More than merely one component or "layer" of a resurrected civil society that moved into the interstices of

[9] Also see Collier and Collier (1991).

> political space opened by incumbents and followed the lead of many other groups, the union movement was sometimes able to create political space for anti-authoritarian, pro-democratic protest. In some cases, union-led protest for democracy contributed to a climate of delegitimation that provoked the institution of the transition; in others it helped derail the legitimation projects of authoritarian regimes.

Likewise, in their cross-national comparative historical research on countries in Latin America, Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992) reached the conclusion that the working class is one of the most consistent pro-democracy forces, and a highly influential one at that, due to the class's ability to organize itself and engage in collective action (245-246). A few years earlier, in a study on labour movements and transitions to democracy, J. Samuel Valenzuela (1989) also examined "the special relationship between labour movements and processes of redemocratization" (446). According to Valenzuela, while it would be incorrect to view labour as the instigator, or the political spearhead of a successful regime transition, in critical moments during the breakdown of authoritarian institutions, trade unions, in comparison to other civil society groups, have a far greater capacity to launch and guide collective mobilization. According to Valenzuela (1989, 447) the reason is that:

> [The labour movement] has an organized network through its more or less permanently established unions which can provide an underlying grid for the choreography of demonstrations and protests. Its mass base normally has specific common interests and a politically tinged collective identity rooted in a lived history. And, most important, unlike other social segments such as students, church-related groups, and neighborhood associations that in some national contexts may share with labour the previously mentioned attributes, the labour movement can disrupt the economy directly through work stoppages.

Furthermore, in the absence of civil and political rights, Valenzuela rightly notes, labour offers an attractive platform to the political opponents of an authoritarian state. This is above all due to unions' ability to offer regime opponents a structure within which to organize themselves. Labour also offers the opposition some political leverage, by way of, for example, disrupting the economy by ceasing production. That being said, Valenzuela maintains that the structure of a trade

union, its degree of centralization or decentralization, can impact the course of political change and regime transition. He argues that national labour movements are composed of multitudes of different identities, individual social actors whose political vision may not always align according to a set of common intentions and goals. Therefore, in a more centralized trade union, it is probable that a tightly concentrated union leadership will be more attentive to the specific goals of labour and the broader aims and uncertainties of regime transition. By contrast, in a decentralized union, the lower ranking leaders of a movement tend to give greater attention to the demands of the union's rank and file. This can lead to competing goals and political loyalties at the expense of securing the democratic transition process (Valenzuela 1989).

It is correct to state that in a deeply decentralized labour movement it would be difficult to align divergent political demands, but it is nonetheless problematic to assume, as Valenzuela puts it, that a strongly centralized labour union is able to reduce internal tensions by creating a structure "devoid of competing political loyalties and ideological attachment" (468). Firstly, it is worth considering if it is ever possible to establish such an ideologically monolithic membership inside a labour organization. To a much greater extent than rights-based associations (e.g. women's rights and human rights groups), unions occupy a pivotal space in the political scene because of the in-group heterogeneity of their membership, who even if they identify as "working class" are drawn from various industry sectors, from public and private employers. In such a context, a systematic indoctrination or ideological manipulation which is able to penetrate all levels of the association equally is highly unlikely. Secondly, an analytic preference for the study of union leaderships, their formation, and strategic calculations, marginalizes the agency of lower ranking unionists and their complex networks. Finally, a further limitation of the literature on trade unions as political agents is caused by the continued application of the centralized / decentralized binary, when in

fact, as I will show in this dissertation for the Tunisian case, the centre of authority inside a union may shift depending on local circumstances such as the preoccupations and decisions taken by unionists independent of the central leadership. By moving away from this dichotomous conceptualization, the possibility is opened up that for most unions authority is neither particularly centralized nor especially decentralized, and the forthcoming analysis will further confirm this intuition.

It is important to point out that apart from scholars who have examined the role of labour unions in collective action and democratization in Latin America and Europe, Africanist scholarship has also made a tremendous contribution to the study of unions' political engagement and collective mobilization (Beckman, Buhlungu and Sachikonye 2010; Kraus 2007; Phelan 2011). In their introductory chapter to *Trade Unions and Party Politics: Labour Movements in Africa*, Beckman and Sachikonye (2010, 5) drawing on the work of Kraus (2007) and Freund (1998), write:

> Historically, African trade unions have been active in broad popular struggles for independence and liberation. They have often been central in resistance to authoritarianism, fascism and dictatorship. This meant extending their concerns and mandate beyond workplace issues and labour-related matters. It required their engagement in wider social and political alliances, both within similar-minded groups in civil society and with political parties whose programmes reflected the concerns and interests of the workers … Experiences from elsewhere suggest that civil and political liberties are essential preconditions for converting the economic interests of workers into rights and entitlements. Unions have allied themselves to groups and movements that share their values and concerns. This has enabled the labour movements to reach out to a larger population than those directly engaged in wage work, so enhancing their legitimacy and promoting their views on development, equity and justice. This is the case with their role in nationalist and liberation movements.

Furthermore, studies of trade union and workers' protest in Africa indicate that despite state-led attempts at union repression and cooptation, one of the most prominent roles unions have taken on is to act as formidable opponents to the state where the latter has attempted to monopolize

authority or resist democratic transformation (Kraus 2007). It is true that in many instances, unions have deliberately stayed away from party politics in order to defend their autonomy (Beckman and Sachikonye 2010). But even during episodes when the state has been able to exert authority over labour's activities as a whole, various internal sectors and political factions within labour movements or organizations have persisted in maintaining their political independence and activism. In his studies of trade unionism in Benin, for example, Azizou Chabi Imorou (2011, 2014) has explored the persistent influence of teachers' unions from the late colonial period to the present and shown both their importance under a variety of political regimes (from French colonial to Marxist-Leninist) and the diversity of unions' strategies faced with a shifting political environment and frequent attempts by the state to implement wholesale reforms of the education system (once every five years on average since independence in 1960; 2014, 362). In his 2011 work, he examines political changes following the aftermath of the 1963 coup d'état, during which the new government tried to de-politicize labour through programs of centralization in order to better control the activities of the working class. During that period, unions belonging to teachers, as well as civil servants, were the new regime's main targets, since they were considered the hub of political activity. Imorou shows, however, that despite the new regime's attempt at cooptation, teachers and their unions continued to be "far from monolithic in their thought and actions" (2011, 31). As a consequence of this diversity, teachers' participation in challenging state authority has, over time, taken place in a "non-linear manner" (2011, 142), by which he means that, whilst in some instances teachers' political engagement took the form of complete estrangement and overt confrontation, at other times their resistance came about through their very participation in and engagement with the system they were challenging. Thus subsequent to the 1994 "New Programme" reforms, where new "competency-based" teaching practices drawing on Canadian

methods and funded by USAID were imposed despite the unions' opposition, teachers continued to teach while implementing the reforms, but with individual schools adapting the program as much as they could, and some, especially older teachers, continuing to use earlier methods as if nothing had happened (Imorous 2014, 358-61). Despite the apparent divergence between confrontational and adaptational strategies, the common element was that Beninese teachers, whether in the colonial and immediate post-colonial period, or more recently, have continued to turn to their unions as a tool for making economic and political claims on the state (Imorou 2011).

Other than Benin, comparative research in Africa shows us that historically labour's political activism has been at the forefront of conflict and political engagement with state authority, particularly in the nationalist movements for independence, for example, the Tanganyika Federation of Labour in Tazania (Bienefeld 1975) or the National Union of Namibian Workers (Jauch 2010), but also in engaging in democratic change, for example the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Kraus 2007; Southall and Webster 2010). Even where, as in Egypt, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) was created in 1957 as an instrument of the state, from 1998 to 2019, two million workers participated in 3,400 strikes and other forms of action (Beinin 2011). Although these strikes were not sanctioned by the EFITU, informal networks in factory towns coalesced and managed to organize collective action (Beinin 2011).

At this juncture it must be pointed out that, so far, the literature on social movements, collective action and democratization has underscored, and supported with the use of case-study analysis, the utility and power of trade unions as a source of political activism and mobilization. Furthermore, the above review has made clear that even under repressive regimes, where unions are allocated minimal autonomy, unionists' inner networks can function as a pathway for collective action and political engagement. Nevertheless, I must note that most of these studies focus on

episodes of collective action following which change in the political institutions, or system as a whole, did occur, even if only temporarily in the case of some African countries. In particular, great attention is placed on labour's ability to initiate and bring about democratic transitions out of authoritarianism. When labour is able to occupy a visible role during periods of democratization, it figures much more prominently in academic discussions. This, of course, has not been the experience of trade unions in the MENA region. Does this mean then that unions must be conceptualized as ineffective political actors, or be viewed as yet another arm of the state? Even more problematic is the assumption that when unionists' political engagement is non-confrontational in form, we should infer that unions have turned into self-serving institutions.

In an influential article, Eva Bellin (2000), who has written extensively on authoritarian persistence in the Middle East, puts forth the claim that as political actors "labour" and "capital" are contingent, not consistent, democrats. For capital, support for democratic reform depends on "its level of state dependence and fear of social unrest" (204). For Labour, "democratic enthusiasm hinges on its level of state dependence and aristocratic position in society" (204). In late-developing countries, Bellin thus contends, labour's enthusiasm for democratization is dependent upon how emerging democratic institutions will advance its economic privilege. Under conditions where labour enjoys an aristocratic position vis-à-vis the general population, it is therefore unlikely that it will champion, and exhibit solidarity with, collective mobilization against the state. Applying this theorization, Bellin draws on the experience of organized labour in Tunisia to argue that the UGTT has long enjoyed a collaborative relationship with the state, a political alliance that has privileged organized workers at the expense of the non-unionized workers occupying the country's many informal sectors. In Tunisia, therefore, labour's dependence on the state, which

has been established through a host of wage and non-wage benefits, and further maintained by a palpable fear of repression, has created a situation where according to Bellin (2000, 203):

> The trade-union movement has distanced itself from the country's fledgling movements for democracy, denying them both financial and symbolic support. In addition, the UGTT has consistently thrown its support behind President Ben Ali, despite the regime's increasing repressiveness and authoritarianism. Labour's desire not to upset the apple cart of state patronage and privilege has prevented it from embracing the campaign for democratization.

Similar discussions of state-society relations in the region underscore how authoritarian systems with their considerable economic leverage over state employees has hindered the emergence of independent capitalist classes, in turn leaving little room for the proliferation of autonomous unions and workers' movements (Kamrava and Mora 1998). In their cross-regional study of civil society and democratization in Latin America and the Middle East, Kamrava and Mora (1998, 906) postulate that Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes have given rise to state capitalism. As a consequence:

> Apart from a brief period in the 1940s and 1950s, a sense of workers' solidarity has not fully developed in the Middle East, especially in countries where a single industry – oil – does not dominate the economy (Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco).

Attention to state-society relations seen through the prism of corporatist and coercive structures seeks to highlight, in certain cases, the underdevelopment, and in other cases, the suppression of non-state actors, including professional associations; these authors then conclude that this state of affairs has contributed to Middle Eastern countries' slow progress towards democratic political change. This is based on the assumption that independent civil society actors, including workers' associations:

> Provide a voice for citizens, act as a watchdog to make elites accountable, model democratic behaviors, act as a mediator between the elites and the citizenry in finding solutions to social, economic and political problems, and assist in reconciling conflicting interests between elites and citizens (Fick 2009, 2).

For these authors, the absence of independent union associations ultimately serves to strengthen the political structures of the authoritarian system. In another study, Doyle (2016) uses a Gramscian analysis to argue that, in MENA, the exploited nature of civil society, including unions, works to reinforce the existing authoritarian power structures. Doyle thus reasons:

> In order to exercise hegemony, the ruling elite cannot solely rely on the domination and power exerted through political society, but also require popular consent for their rule. The question of 'how to obtain the consent and collaboration [of the subaltern classes]? … In this context, civil society is an essential element in the construction of hegemony, by controlling the production of ideas and building and extending consent around the ruling class ideology (406).

In this political environment, trade unions have thus turned into clients of the state, working in "partnership" with its officials, and are reliant on them for protection. In this context, it is highly unlikely that unions will operate to provide an alternative to the political agenda and power structures of the ruling elites (Doyle 2016).

It is important to point out that the literature's emphasis on classifying and offering interpretations of how this corporatist structure stifles grassroots mobilization – above all, by institutionalizing labour into the structures of the authoritarian system – has come at the cost of overlooking the different types of transformations and activism that take place amongst the unionist rank and file (Duboc 2014). A more nuanced analysis, therefore, must look beyond so-called "statist labour", defined by its strong ties to state policymakers who are meant to guarantee unions' economic and societal privileges in exchange for political obedience and compliance. Instead, it is necessary to explore the activities of "mobilized labour" whose operations can not only encourage localized political participation amongst marginalized groups, but during certain episodes of contentious collective action, as in the case of the Tunisian uprising, can, through the merging of these localized political engagements, sway the union's position vis-à-vis the state

(Duboc 2014). Furthermore, in order to understand how localized participation contributes to eventual revolutionary mobilization, it is vital to study the microsociology of that participation, which reveals local sociopolitical dynamics as also important determinants of people's actions, and not just membership of purportedly homogeneous national unions or social categories such as "labour" (Allal 2012). In this regard, the uprisings of 2010-11 were a strong revelation of the epistemic limitations and oversimplifications of approaches that had been applied in understanding the political complexities of labour politics in the MENA region.

In recent years, more emphasis has been placed on a new conceptualization of civil society actors and the broadening of the conceptual space traditionally allocated to different types of non-state political engagement, and this literature is valuable in generating questions about unions too. In his review of the civil society landscape in MENA, Anders Hardig (2015) suggests the formation of a new understanding of civil society as a space where diverse actors, through both cooperation and competition, engage in counter-hegemonic movements to make claims on policymakers. This new conceptualization is meant to bring our analytical frame closer to the actuality of localized collective efforts in the region. Support for this new conceptualization comes from recent events which showed that, for example, despite the corporatist structures in Tunisia and Egypt which had placed trade associations under the control of the state, local unionists had an important political role both prior and during the wake of the Arab uprisings (Beinin 2016; Hardig 2015). Yousfi (2017) in particular in her in-depth study of the UGTT during the crisis of the revolution and its aftermath emphasizes the way in which this role was prepared and legitimized by the union's particular historical trajectory, as a key actor in the anti-colonial struggle and in the formation of the independent state. Hardig's (2015) re-evaluation of civil society actors, however, seeks to structure the discussion around the *space* in which disparate state/elite actors engage with non-

state/grassroots organizations and movements. This study adds to this discussion by looking at the formation and impact of internal *spaces* inside a trade association within which disparate unionists seek to exert their influence over more extensive processes of claim-making.

This project is also in line with emerging research following the success of the Tunisian national uprising that has drawn attention to the strength of the UGTT, whose militant activists within its various branches played an instrumental role in organizing and guiding Tunisians out of a series of nationwide political crises (Beinin 2016; Bishara 2014; Hartshorn 2018; Netterstrøm 2016; Omri 2015; Wilder 2016). In particular, attention has been paid to the distinguishing features of UGTT which sets it apart from other labour organizations in the region. In this respect, the union's historical legacy of anti-colonial struggle, its initial role in the building of the newly independent Tunisian state, the relative autonomy of its local and regional sectors, its robust internal solidarity and geographical reach are often underscored to explain the organization's power in Tunisia. Dina Bashara (2020), who applies a historical institutionalist approach to highlight the limits of existing theoretical approaches that try to make sense of the "deviant" political trajectory of the UGTT, explains that:

> 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 (191).

Alongside this historical institutional approach, Vickie Langohr (2014), acknowledging the influential role of unions in political uprisings, has re-examined the thesis on the positive connection between union pluralism and antigovernment movements in West and sub-Saharan Africa, and has put forth the theorization that during the Arab uprisings, opposition mobilization through organized labour was most powerful in countries with a single union confederation.

The recent surge in interest in labour politics in MENA is a welcome change that has added much needed nuance to a deeply layered topic. However, the above studies still tell us very little about the internal composition, dynamics, and the impact of unionists' interactions on collective action. The structure of institutions along with their accompanying historical legacy do not function in a vacuum. Their legacy is interpreted and their actions are shaped not only by forces external to them, but also through the interactions and networks of their own constituents, interactions that will anchor the organization's – or at least, parts of it – political engagement vis-à-vis the state. In early 2011 in Tunisia, unionists' political participation in nationwide protests helped initiate a positive change in the political system of the country. However, prior to this, for several decades, the absence of long-term overt confrontations did not mean labour activism was simply absent. This dissertation will show that workers' political activism occurs on multiple levels; whether in a deeply repressive environment as in Tunisia until 2011, or in a more open environment subsequently, this activism should not be understood as purely confrontation (e.g. strikes and demonstrations), but as continuing wherever workers gather to discuss matters of interest even without a view to imminent political action. Furthermore, this dissertation will contribute to this new wave of academic literature on union politics by looking inside a union and exploring the dynamics of interactions that help set in motion and sustain unionists' political participation.

1.3 Main Arguments and Chapter Outlines

This dissertation has two connected arguments. Firstly, that labour unions are far more important political actors, even when coopted, than previously argued for in much of the literature, especially in periods of regime change. By virtue of the workers' location in the political economy – the ways in which they are essential both to production and social reproduction (in the case of teachers especially) – they have considerable powers of disruption, meaning that their demands make themselves heard at a social and political level, even when the demands themselves are apparently purely economic, such as for higher wages.

Secondly, unionized workers are not only able to capitalize on their central position in systems of production to put pressure on those in power, but they can also leverage their workers' ties with each other and to external groups with related economic, social, political and national grievances, to construct a multifarious network that can reach various demographics – a capability not easily acquired by more issue-oriented and exclusive organizations. This research thus calls for a reframing of unions' political engagement by demonstrating that union-led group action takes place at different levels, and at different scales, along a collective movement spectrum that can range from direct disruptive confrontation to indirect in-group political activity. Therefore, by placing the heterogeneity of a union's structure at the forefront of the analysis, I shift away from a common tendency to focus on unions' unity of (in)action. Instead, I show that an analysis of a union's political engagement must take into account above all the activities of its different political clusters and their networks; competition and cooperation between these different blocks, largely shaped and influenced by external political actors, is an ongoing process. And even when state repression weakens a union's mobilizational abilities as a whole, its various clusters' sustained internal interactions can serve as a space where collective cooperation is exercised, where lived

experiences and political knowledge are shared, and where social bonds are fastened. This sustained interaction can ultimately serve as an important resource when an opportunity for a more large-scale mobilization presents itself.

In the forthcoming in-depth case study of the UGTT, I will therefore show that *internal* labour dynamics do have broader implications given their role in manufacturing spaces for civic participation by way of introducing and exercising direct and indirect localized group activity and collective action. In addition, using information gathered during nine months of field research spent with Tunisian unionized workers, I demonstrate that to fully understand the decisive role of labour in exerting its influence over more extensive processes of claim-making, one must pay close attention to strategies and tactics employed by its militant base, which are in many cases directed at its own leadership in support of the base's own socio-economic objectives. Therefore, by moving past analysis of the degree of institutional cooptation, I show that the particular importance of unions' political engagement can best be explained by attention to the ways in which local unionized workers have been able to shift the institution's balance of power in their favour to meet their aims.

The upcoming chapters of this dissertation strive to provide a nuanced, context-specific case study analysis of union activism in Tunisia within the bounds of specific and interconnected historical time periods. As a stepping-stone, chapter 2 offers an overview of the theoretical framework and the methodology applied for this project. It brings to light the utility of collective action theory for the study of union politics and the value of detailed case-study research for knowledge production in comparative politics. In addition, it presents the three primary methods used for the collection of data during nine months of fieldwork: semi-structured interviews, document analysis and participant observation. It is important to stress that this fieldwork gave me

access to unionists and other political actors active in ten cities and towns in different regions of Tunisia, in various industry sectors and with divergent levels of responsibility, an access which was vital in demonstrating to me how important the internal dynamics of the union are, and to understand it as a composite entity.

In chapter 3, I provide a detailed account of the UGTT's history, structure and organizational culture. As the main national platform organizing labour, the UGTT represents workers in both the public and private sectors across all of Tunisia's 24 governorates. This chapter, therefore, provides a sketch of the UGTT's internal composition and networks, regulations and procedures, system of decision making and distributions of power. Another noteworthy objective of this chapter is to provide a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which the UGTT has capitalized on the memory and image of its role in the national liberation movement and the building of the newly independent Tunisian state to craft and maintain its legitimacy as a major actor in the country's politics.

This dissertation continues in chapter 4 with the case of the Gafsa Uprising. It is a re-examination of the 2008 rebellion near the phosphate mines that began as a result of a fraudulent employment entrance exam that soon turned into a six-month confrontation between local protesters, led by militant unionists, and the regime. The uprising is also one of the clearest demonstrations of internal conflict and political infighting between the various executive offices and the rank and file inside the UGTT. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with some of its key participants, I explain the reasons for the failure of the Gafsa rebellion, its impact on unionists' political engagement, and its significance for future attempts at unionists' collective action.

In chapter 5, I concentrate on one of Tunisia's most significant recent political episodes, the Tunisian revolution. It cannot be denied that the Arab uprisings of late 2010 took most

academics studying the Middle East by surprise; this chapter, therefore, begins by situating the start of the initial protests in the interior regions within a context that underscores the daily reality for residents in the marginalized regions of the country, and analyzes the emotions of varying temporalities (anger, frustration, and disgust) that arose from this marginalization and were associated with the growing protests. With the onset of the first formation of protesters in December 2010, I (1) show how local union activists acted as movement coordinators; (2) explore the ways in which the Gafsa uprising served as a "lesson" for organizing collective mobilization; (3) examine the reasons behind the discrepancy in unionists' varying levels of support for the demonstrators; and (4) highlight the ways in which networks of local union activists pressured the executive bureau to publicly support the opposition movement.

Chapter 6 is a study of the changing role of the union's political engagement and activism in post-Ben Ali Tunisia. It engages in a nuanced analysis of the UGTT's changing role, from being a refuge for political opposition to a new-found position as the "watchdog" of Tunisia's democratic transition. In particular, the analysis focuses on the role of the UGTT within the National Dialogue Quartet, as well as its continued reliance on national strikes as an effective strategy for claim-making. In the context of this political transition process, I also investigate the potential impact of a new democratic system on the UGTT's political dominance in Tunisia, especially as many of its rank and file now have the political freedom to organize in defiance of the organization's leadership.

Lastly, in the conclusion, I will summarize my findings and reflect on the answers to this project's four leading research questions. More specifically, I will underscore the importance of re-thinking about cooptation as an instrument to control and repress organizational activism, as well as the dynamics of workers' collective action within both authoritarian and transition

environments. Moreover, I will situate the contribution of this research within a field of inquiry that seeks to provide a contextualized understanding of labour's political engagement, and which centres the analysis on the activities, relationships, and networks of agents involved. Furthermore, I will once again emphasize the value of generating an in-depth case study exemplar in the field of comparative politics, and the potentials it has for new avenues for research. I will also discuss some of the limitations of my approach. With all this set out, it is time to move on to the next chapter, detailing the backbone of this work, its theoretical and methodological framework.

Chapter 2: Bonds of Trust, Episodes of Contention. Explaining the Ongoing Mechanisms of Collective Action through Qualitative Fieldwork

"She is a researcher from Canada", Donia – my interpreter, who had been helping me arrange interviews – used to say in response to the standard query on the other end of the phone. As was frequently the case, however, when I met the interviewee in question and introduced myself to him (and it was usually a him), there was a moment of surprise when he heard my name, Golrokh Niazi, and saw someone who did not fit the stereotypical image of someone from the West. This "foreign" name often raised their curiosity about my "true" nationality, about who I actually was. At the start of my fieldwork I had been advised by another researcher (a European man) to introduce myself, not as a political scientist, which (he thought) might invoke feelings of mistrust and suspicion, but as a sociologist. I was also advised to pretend that I was visiting Tunisia with my male partner, and, as much as possible, to avoid any identification with my Iranian roots. For ethical reasons, however, I chose not to conceal who I was, and if ever asked, I answered as much as it was appropriate to share. As it turned out, the parts of my identity that my colleague had perceived as potential "barriers" helped my overall research experience. Although the vulnerabilities and risks faced by female researchers cannot be underestimated (Kwak 2019; Wolf 2018; Williams 2009), at certain moments being a woman researcher, alone in a male dominated working environment, actually aided me in conducting my research, especially when my interpreter and I travelled to the interior regions. There, my interviewees were very generous in arranging safe transportation for us, welcoming us into their homes, securing us interviews, and continuously checking up on us. What is more, my Iranian roots and my interest in political studies acted as an icebreaker and an opportunity for less serious – or at least, less focused – conversation about the politics of the region, and the Iranian revolution in particular, before reaching the main business of the interview. On the

rare occasions that conversation did turn to Canada it often involved enquiries about the immigration process or what life was like under such a cold climate. While in many ways I was an 'outsider' in the field, it soon became apparent to me that for many of my participants my background brought my positionality on the outsider/insider spectrum to somewhere in between. This meant I was often not seen as a Canadian researcher conducting fieldwork in Tunisia, but as someone from the region, a Muslim, albeit Shia, Middle Eastern woman who was there to carry out a study on Tunisia's labour movement. These familiar markers of identity, coupled with my own enthusiasm at being in Tunisia and my eagerness to learn, made many of the participants excited to speak to me, to give their time so very generously to me, and share many of their experiences. This common ground notwithstanding, I also recognize that I entered the field from a position of privilege that allowed me to carry out fieldwork in Tunisia for nine months, an opportunity that is significantly more difficult for a Tunisian Ph.D. student to acquire should they wish to perform fieldwork on labour organizations in Canada.

It would be wrong to convey the impression that my ability to establish a good working relationship with my interlocutors was almost entirely down to my own presence, identity, or positioning. On the contrary, my interpreter Donia played a crucial role in this respect. She was in fact not just my interpreter, but my fixer, research assistant and cultural translator helping me navigate an unfamiliar society. I was connected to Donia through social media. She had experience working as an interpreter in both foreign NGOs and an embassy overseas. Although she had no formal training in politics, and her family were not members of the UGTT, she did have a keen interest in this research. While there are limits to conducting interviews aided by an interpreter, there are also considerable benefits from having a second pair of ears and eyes. As two people we always exchanged notes, ideas and observations following an interview. Furthermore, Donia's

personality turned out to be as important as her language skills. Rarely, when the atmosphere of an interview became intense, Donia had a knack of being able to relieve tension and help my interlocutors overcome any misgivings about talking to me, concerning my motives, or the value of participation in the research.

Through this gradual formation of trust between me and my interlocutors I was able to acquire excellent access to a good number of unionists in a wide variety of locations. Having during the initial period of my research established the importance of unions as political actors, this approach helped me understand in greater depth unionists' ties with each other and with their organization as such, and to gather a rich variety of material about the centrality of these relationships in allowing and guiding various forms of collective action. As discussed in the first chapter, the aim of this dissertation is to reassess the conventional conceptualization of labour organization in MENA through a detailed examination of various spheres of political activity and mobilization inside a union. In particular, I seek to understand how these social ties, which are also ties to the organization and to its history, accumulated over time, shape group practices. I have therefore chosen a case-driven approach guided by a collective action theoretical path, with the proviso that case and theory are in a dialectic relationship: I carried out fieldwork with a certain theorization of collective action in mind, but found that I had to modify these notions as I learned more about the UGTT and its role in Tunisian politics, and this revised theory in turn enabled me to ask new questions of my case study. The following section is an overview of why and how these theoretical and methodological approaches were chosen and evolved.

2.1 Theoretical Approach

As a starting point, the theoretical core of this research rests on the dynamics of collective action and the interactive processes of movement emergence, continuity, and eventual dissipation.

Bearing in mind that I am above all concerned with the modalities of emergence of collective action, its forms and features as determined by its participants, and the consequence of that process on possible social movement formation in both authoritarian and transitional regimes, I focus much less on collective action "outcome" defined in terms of successful realization of pre-determined goals and objectives, such as "democratization."

Social movement theories have preoccupied generations of scholars who have sought to theorize about why, when, and how individuals choose to participate in collective action (Cefaï 2009; Diani and McAdam 2003; Gramsci 1971; Jasper 2010; Marx and Engels 2004; Tarrow 1994; Tilly 2004; McCarthy and Zald 1977). According to two of its most prominent theorists, Tilly and Tarrow, collective action is understood as a "coordinating effort on behalf of shared interests or programs" (2007, 5). Tilly and Tarrow draw attention to the fact that individuals routinely engage in various types of concerted group action; in most instances, however, joint action is carried out beyond the arena of political competition and conflict. Congregations of religious worshipers, sports teams, voluntary associations, charitable societies, poetry and book clubs, and neighbourhood watch groups are just a few examples of individuals who have chosen to band together to participate in a group activity, and therefore to act collectively. Less commonly, collective action gives rise to contentious politics, which is defined as "episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants" (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 5). Analysis of union collective action, however, allows us to expand the scope of their argument, as it often enters the realm of contention without initially involving the government, as unions' primary adversaries are employers, including private sector ones. Nonetheless these types of contention generally soon

become political in McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly's sense, given governments' interest in avoiding disruptions of production or more general breaches of the social peace. Moreover, the UGTT chosen here as a case study both confirms and disrupts this theorization of collective action. On the one hand, UGTT members do share a common purpose, to advance the interests of the workers and thereby of the Tunisian nation. On the other hand, as this thesis repeatedly demonstrates, there are frequent divergences between the purposes of the leadership and those of the more militant members, meaning that the UGTT can find itself both participating in contentious political action (ordinary members, especially more seasoned activists) and trying to mitigate its impact on the government (executive leadership).

It is important to remember that individual participation in collective action is not, however, a "unique or universal process," and thus "varies according to numerous factors" (Diani and McAdam 2003, 27). Going beyond this observation in order to better analyze this variation, we may note that these factors can be the result of, and influenced by, the structural features of society, as well as informal social practices, networks, and more symbolic cultural processes. In particular, McAdam (2003) in his discussion of high-risk collective action points to the importance of "salient identity" and the reinforcement of that identity by organizational and individual ties. In the Tunisian context, one example of the relevance of the salient identity together with its associated network to high-risk activism was the following episode: four days before Ben Ali's departure – although that this would happen was not at all obvious at the time – unionists in the region of Sfax held a meeting to decide on a regional strike. During this meeting, the general secretary of the region gave a moving speech appealing to unionists' sense of responsibility to stand with the people and defend social justice. As one participant recalled to me, the speech, so full of emotion, resonated with those in attendance so much that they agreed to go on strike despite

the high risks of this decision.[10] The strike in Sfax, as will be discussed in chapter 5, turned out to be one of the most consequential events of the uprising.

In this research therefore I synthesize both the structural and symbolic dimensions of collective action. As Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta (2009), in their study of the role of emotions in social movements show, the evolution of the study of mobilization away from a strictly rationalistic and structuralist orientation toward a recognition of the importance of including "group solidarity," "processes of negotiation and interaction," "social networks," "principles and avowed goals," "moral outrage" (Nepstad and Smith 2009), and "symbolic systems of meaning" (Kane 2009), has considerably extended our understanding of this phenomenon. As will be discussed in later chapters, feelings of indignation and injustice have been an important motivational factor in the collective action of unionized Tunisian teachers, one of my main sets of interviewees. Although the analyses of structural and symbolic factors draw on different philosophical traditions, the bridging of the two approaches can offer a more nuanced understanding of the processes and dynamics of union collective action and potential social movement formation.

Among the most relevant concepts for the study of collective action are those of social ties and networks (Friedman and McAdam 1992; McAdam and Paulsen 1993; Snow, Zurcher Jr, and Ekland-Olson 1980). The concept of social network posits that social ties, relationships, and contacts matter in enabling or constraining individuals' decision to participate in a movement (Passy 2003). More specifically, network processes work towards the "socialization and construction of identity"; social ties yield "structures of meaning" and establish "cultural proximity" to a specific movement (Passy 2003). As a consequence, social ties can increase an

[10] Interview with Morched, union member, primary education, Sfax, March 2017.

individuals' closeness to a collective action – potentially increasing their chances of participation depending on the various ways in which they shape individuals' preferences. By incorporating the role of networks and social connections in my analysis, I seek to narrow the gap between the structuralist and cognitive processes of meaning and decision-making, in order to better explain types of collective action inside a union. The system of social relations in this context is highly pertinent to understanding group activity. As Passy (2003, 3) explains:

> Ties are imbued with stories. Therefore, social networks (as islands of meaning) shape the individual preferences and perceptions that form the basis for the ultimate decision to participate [in collective action]. Thus, networks shape both stable aspects such as values and identities and more volatile aspects such as perceptions and preferences.

In accordance with this approach, the "structural-connection function" (Passy 2003) is instrumental in shaping the likelihood and intensity of participants' involvement in a collective movement. Moreover, under more repressive political systems, social ties play an even greater role in the covert process of recruitment for collective action (Passy 2003), as trust, acquaintance, and even friendship are an important element in encouraging participation in high-risk activities. Nonetheless, it is important not to assume that social ties in networks act spontaneously and automatically; they must be made and remade, and therefore the concept of the "social tie" must be demystified. I therefore take the concept of social network and look closely into how social ties can operate as catalysts of collective action.

Closely linked to the idea of the social network is the concept of collective identity, defined as when individuals "come to feel part of a group, cognitively, emotionally, and morally, and are willing to take action on its behalf" (Jasper 2014, 50). In this context, collective action is sometimes used to describe a sense of solidarity, the bonds of trust and loyalty experienced by members of a group (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2009; Taylor and Whittier 1992). In my case study of the UGTT, the formation of a unionist identity can be traced back in many unionists' life

histories to their entry into university where they became members of their student union, that is to say prior to them becoming a member of the UGTT. These common experiences, as well as a shared sense that unionists are inheritors of a proud unionist history, has given rise to a collective pride and affection for union activism. This strong sense of collective identity has strengthened group solidarity in support of collective action, particularly amongst Tunisian teachers.

However, social networks, collective identity, and structures of meaning operate within certain historical, cultural and social settings. Importantly, social movement research not only recognizes the centrality of meaning-making to mobilization, but emphasizes the value of this meaning-making for our own attempts to make sense of the movements we observe and analyze. It is therefore sometimes useful to blur the lines between the observer and the observed to show the importance of incorporating activists' worldviews into academic analysis "not just as objects of study but also as agents of study" (Kurzman 2008, 11). Thus, as Kurzman (2008) explains, "if people come to view their community's institutions as resources for social movement activism, for example, and they attempt to act on this understanding, then the understanding constitutes the resource as resource" (10). By making movement participants a central feature of the analysis, we are able to provide a more nuanced understanding of people's varying responses to collective action and mobilization. Equally importantly, by incorporating activists' systems of meaning-making into analysis, we are able to account for the activities of movement participants inside institutions, including Arab labour organizations, that were deemed ineffective and inconsequential by some academics. Culture, in particular, conceptualized as both a symbolic and a material system of meaning-making, helps explain individuals and groups' identities and practices, norms and customs, modes of relationship and social ties, as well as type and form of collective action (Jasper 2014; Ross 2009; Wedeen 2002). Culture as a system of meaning-making

exists inside an individual in the form of "memories, muscular tensions, languages, motivations, and capacity to interpret", but it is also embodied in the form of "books, speeches, posters, buildings, dancing, and musical recordings" (Jasper 2017, 288), among other material supports. Inclusion of a cultural lens on collective action can identify ties and meanings formed by individuals in connection to a particular group and collective identity, which can then provide a framework for the interpretation of motives and group action (Melucci 1996; Ross 2009). Additionally, Wedeen's (2002) notion of culture as "semiotic practices" brings attention to *processes* of meaning production, making it possible to examine "how symbols are inscribed in practices that operate to produce observable political effects" (713). A theoretical approach that connects structures with culture provides an opportunity "to reenvision all dimensions of politics, even some of the most structured and rigid ones" (Jasper 2017, 297). Regrounding analysis of social movements in the study of culture also requires we pay attention to the emotional charge of symbols and meanings and therefore to the vital role emotions play in the formation of both social movements and the collective identities that both contribute to and emerge from them (Goodwin, Jasper and Polleta 2000).

In the case of the UGTT, symbols associated with the working-class struggle, decolonization and political resistance, inscribed (like many trade unions across the world) in a vocabulary centred on social justice, solidarity and comradeship, have produced an action-oriented group identity sympathetic to collective action – particularly in the interior regions of the country (discussed in chapter 4 and 5). At the same time, it should be noted that both networks and culture as systems of meaning-making are context dependent, and that contextualization is an essential part of explaining collective action and social movements. Context-sensitive theorization can reveal how "[a]n extraordinarily large number of processes and events, political and otherwise,

potentially influence movement mobilization and, they do so in historically complex combinations and sequences" (Goodwin and Jasper 1999, 36). Beinin and Vairel (2013) also point to the importance of context-dependent analysis by showing how informal networks "are imbedded in a local social structure of power" (20). In authoritarian systems, in particular, this is especially relevant in understanding processes of recruitment, mobilization, and immobilization. As Beinin and Vairel (2013, 20) put it:

> Contextually conditioned rationality helps explain how informal networks recruit and mobilize adherents … Members of such networks typically do not envision themselves as autonomous individuals whose rights and obligations can be disconnected from these networks. This is not because they have a "different" culture from the West but because a combination of poverty, states with limited capacity to provide essential services, and authoritarianism makes these networks essential for survival and simultaneously enhances their power over individuals.

As analyzed in chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6, unionists' formal institutional networks formed through a shared history of activism and struggle as *UGTT members* have led to the creation of a strong organizational allegiance. Along with an undercurrent of informal networks, these have made collective action inside the union possible even during periods in which the union's leadership has maintained a conciliatory relationship with the regime. By the former term, I am referring to the ties of solidarity and trust created between unionized workers by virtue of their membership in the UGTT, which can be formed through union related work and activities including acting as elected officials or more simply by attending congresses and other union events, and not only during the official business of these meetings but as part of social occasions linked to these activities. In March 2017, for instance, I attended one such event, the commemoration of the death of Habib Achour on the island of Kerkennah in the governorate of Sfax; Achour (1913-99) was a prominent unionist during and after the anti-colonial struggle, both a founder and subsequently leader of the UGTT. The attendees included the General Secretary of

the National Executive Bureau, members of the Sfax and other governorates' executive bureaus, as well as large numbers of ordinary members. The busy program for the day included all of us getting on a ferry from Sfax to Kerkennah; once there going by bus to the local UGTT office where we sang the UGTT's official anthem and listened to speeches; then visiting the late Habib Achour's house; and finally walking as a group to his grave, where we said prayers. The day concluded with us going to a seaside restaurant where we dined on local fish. Both through activities of striking symbolic charge and through mundane acts of commensality –or even sitting and talking together on a bus – important ties of solidarity between union members *as* union members were being forged.

By informal networks, meanwhile, I am referring to associations made between union members and members of other professional and political groups, such as individuals belonging to the unions of the unemployed; of Tunisian lawyers; and Tunisian students. It is important to note, however, that these networks are not discrete and that ties can be multiple, so that, for instance, two union members may also be joined by virtue of living in the same neighborhood, having attended the same school, supporting the same football team, and so on.

In conjunction with "networks," "culture," and "context," there are other dimensions of collective action and social movement theorization that are indeed useful for this research. Above all, I am referring to the concepts of "repertoires of contention," "frames," and "scale shift". As collective action enters the realm of contentious politics, "repertoires" mean the available forms of contentious performances known to both challengers and their opponents (Benford and Snow 2000; Tilly 1977; Tilly and Tarrow 2007). Repertoires of contention, however, are not fixed instruments; therefore, during periods of struggle, movement organizers and leaders routinely seek to invent and adapt various *forms* of movement participation in order to raise social support and to

put pressure on authorities (Tarrow 1994). Attention to the transformation of strategies is particularly important in analysis of contentious politics in political environments where movement survival rests on activists' ability to adapt and evolve against forces of repression. As noted by Beinin and Vairel (2013, 14):

> Analyzing repertoires allows us to examine anticipations, perceptions, and self-definitions of contentious actors and how they take up a position in the political field … Contentious practices are strongly related to how actors define the political situation. At the same time, a shared contentious practice allows the reformulation of actors' interests and values in relation to their political stances … Repertoires of contention become the subject of struggle when actors define and implement tactics and gauge their potential efficacy in the political environment. Conversely, these struggles are part of activist groups' processes of identity formation.

Closely connected to *forms* of action is the concept of "framing" (Goffman 1974), which is linked to the construction of meaning. Frames are "a kind of underlying metaphor that includes diagnosis of a problem, suggests solutions, and hopefully motivates action" (Jasper 2014, 50). Therefore, frames are a mobilizing device for collective action, and according to Snow and Benford (1992, 136-137) serve to:

> Underscore and embellish the seriousness and injustice of a social condition or redefine as unjust and immoral what was previously seen as unfortunate but perhaps tolerable … Social movements are deeply involved in the work of "naming" grievances, connecting them to other grievances and constructing larger frames of meaning that will resonate with a population's cultural predisposition and communicate a uniform message to powerholders and others.

In an authoritarian context, where the policy of "divide and rule" is frequently employed to split the opposition, a central activity of political challengers involves constructing "frames" (Gamson, Fireman, Rytina 1982) oriented towards receiving broader support. "Frames" and "framing processes" are processes through which new recruits "come – either quickly or gradually – to see the movement's issues as impinging on their own basic life concerns" (Jasper 2017, 287). As will be discussed in later chapters, in a similar way to how contentious politics takes place in

larger political arenas, processes of contention can be found *inside* unions in repressive political environments, where activists, as part of their continued covert mobilization, are involved in the intricate act of "inscribing grievances," "identifying an injustice," and "attributing the responsibility to others" (Tarrow 1994, 123). Moreover, while I do provide here an analysis of such processes under an authoritarian regime, in the form of the events that took place in 2008 in Gafsa during the regime of Ben Ali (see chapter 4), it is important to note that similar contestation *within* the union organization has also taken place in the post-revolutionary setting. For example, in 2017, when the Tunisian government refused to increase teachers' salaries, lower the retirement age, or provide more opportunities for promotion, the teachers' sector of the UGTT went on several months of strikes and participated in large-scale demonstrations. Their attribution of responsibility was directed not only at the government but also the UGTT leadership. Their framing of the injustices was much wider than these specific grievances, and it included a criticism of the government's dependence on the IMF and its general incompetence and corruption, amounting (in their presentation) to the government turning its back on the promises of the revolution.

A final conceptual element related to union collective action is "scale shift" (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). As is often the case, when contentious action emerges from collective action, it does so in isolation in locally confined spheres. Therefore, the task for the political actors involved is to diffuse contention beyond its local origin. The ability of activists to create coordination in collective action beyond its place of origin can lead to the "institutionalization of contention" (Tilly and Tarrow 2007, 97). In this political climate, scale shift, Tilly and Tarrow (2007, 97) explain, "is a complex process that not only diffuses contention across space and social sectors, but creates instances for new coordination at a higher or lower level than its initiation."

For the purposes of my research, I will above all concentrate on "upward scale shift," which involves "coordination of collective action at a higher level (whether regional, national, or even international) than its initiation" (Tilly and Tarrow 2007, 95). In the context of union collective action, a common example of an upward scale shift is the spread of isolated wildcat strikes until they coalesce into a general national strike. In Tunisia, for instance, during the 2010-2011 uprising, the continued pressure from basic members and mid-level unionists expressed through school sit-ins, demonstrations and strikes compelled the national leadership to eventually agree to regionally organized, coordinated but not simultaneous strikes. Contentious collective action is often faced with severe repression meant to terminate any act of opposition; the ability of political actors to leverage their networks to encourage broader participation in contention is therefore an important point of analysis.

Having determined in chapter 1 the importance of a union organization in providing an opening for the formation of various types of collective political engagement, by and large through its rich tapestry of networks and the organizational attachments created between its various clusters of unionized workers and their external allies and sympathizers, here I focus on understanding how these social and structural ties, and forms of symbolic action, in actuality operate. By bringing attention to the dynamics and political consequences of social interactions, collective identity, systems of meaning-making and institutional ties, the concepts discussed above enable the analysis to move beyond a purely structuralist approach to the study of collective action. In this research, through the use of a context specific case study, these concepts are operationalized to show in greater detail the key components that create and affect these systems of interaction and meaning-making, along with their consequences for unionized workers' political activism. Having gone over the conceptual map of this dissertation, the following section will provide a review of the

methodological techniques used for the collection of research findings, and explore how they are closely tied to the theoretical approach adopted.

2.2 Methodological Approach

As mentioned earlier, the central aim of this research is to reassess the dominant understanding of unionized workers' political engagement in MENA through a detailed examination of spheres of collective activity and mobilization inside a labour union. The Arab uprisings of 2011 challenged many of the conventional characterizations of unions in the region, which were framed above all as state dependent or subsumed into a nebulous "civil society," implying either that they were too weak to challenge the state in the latter case, or primarily focused on their material self-interest in the former (Bellin 2000, 2004; Brumberg 2002; Diamond 2010; Kamrava and Mora 1998). The reason for the persistence of this characterization had a lot to do with the proliferation of scholarship that prioritized a predominantly structuralist, state-centric approach to analyzing non-state actors, and according to which the putatively typical coopted labour union or union as hollow civil society actor was part of the overall authoritarian robustness of Arab states. As the events of 2010-2011 revealed, however, like everything else in the region, unions are not as rigid as previously, somewhat reductively, conceptualized. This research projects therefore will contribute to the body of scholarship that is working to add nuance to previously marginalized political actors (Beinin 2016; Bishara 2019; Hartshorn 2018; Yousfi 2017). In this research, I have sought to understand exactly how, firstly, under both an authoritarian regime and during a political transition (in this case towards democratization) unionized workers leveraged their structural position and social ties to engage in different types of collective action; and secondly, how during periods of

political crisis, internal collective movements by activists can affect a union leadership's political position and behaviour in relation to the state.

The strategy of conducting case study research was decided by the intent of this project, which is to offer a nuanced and detailed understanding of unionists' political collective action as determined by their biographical trajectories, organizational membership, interpersonal relationships, their interpretation of their union's history, their role and political strategies, and their actions to realize broader political goals. In the past, critics of case study method have doubted its validity as a scientific method due to concerns over parochialism, problems of case selection, definitional sloppiness, selection subjectivity and biases, non-replicability, absence of control, and the limits of generalizability (Bennett 2004; Campbell and Stanley 1966; Gerring 2004; Sartori 1991). Qualitative scholars across the disciplines of the social sciences have challenged these misconceptions, however, in order to clarify the value of case study research as a form of scientific inquiry, and to underline that similar reproaches can be extended to any method within the social sciences (Becker 1958; Becker 1992; Ragin 1992). Donald T. Campbell, for instance, revising some of his earlier "disparagement," which included the assumption that case studies are biased in favour of "holding belief in abeyance in the face of essentially random evidence", cited his communication with Becker (1970) to clarify that "almost invariably the social scientist undertaking an intensive case study, by means of participant observation and other qualitative common-sense approaches to acquaintance, ends up finding out that his prior beliefs and theories were wrong" (1975, 182).

Moreover, in his informative article, "Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research", Bent Flyvbjerg (2006, 228) sets to correct the leading misconceptions about the case study approach. In one of his most persuasive defenses, he argues:

> The case study is ideal for generalizing using the type of test that Karl Popper (1959) called "falsification", which in social science forms part of critical reflexivity. Falsification is one of the most rigorous tests to which a scientific propositions can be subjected: if just one observation does not fit with the proposition, it is considered not valid generally and must therefore be either revised or rejected.

In his concluding remarks, having defended the value of thoroughly executed case studies, while repeating the insight of Thomas Kuhn (1987), Flyvbjerg writes:

> That a scientific discipline without a large number of thoroughly executed case studies is a discipline without systematic production of exemplars, and that a discipline without exemplars is an ineffective one. In social science, a greater number of good case studies could help remedy this situation (242).

For this dissertation, I consider the selection of the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) as what Flyvbjerg would call a "critical" and "information-oriented" case. A critical case, according to Flyvbjerg, seeks "to achieve information that permits logical deductions of the type, 'if this is (not) valid for this case, then it applies to all (no) cases" (230). In this context, critical cases are considered as one "likely to either clearly confirm or irrefutably falsify propositions and hypotheses" (231). The study of the UGTT enables me to falsify the proposition that cooptation or authoritarian control lead to political paralysis, or that it turns unions into "empty shells" (Bellin 2004, 139). The UGTT is also considered as a "information-oriented selection," the purpose of which is "to maximize the utility of information from small samples and single cases. Cases are selected on the basis of expectations about their information content" (230).

In addition to the above, the UGTT was selected based on the following reasons:

Firstly, immersive fieldwork with this labour union was possible and safe in Tunisia due to the relative success of the revolution and the transitional period. This also meant that there was a great willingness on the part of many actors involved in these processes to speak about their experiences; the unionists have a story to tell and they are excited to recount it, and they were able to do so in conditions that were safe both for themselves and me as researcher in the field.

Secondly, UGTT's country-wide reach enabled me to carry out research outside the wealthier region of Tunis and the coastal areas, in the historically poorer but more politically active interior regions of the country. This is particularly important given that unionists' social ties can vary according to geographical context; it was vital as a field researcher to take into account the significant disparities between the settings in which the unionists operate before attempting to draw up national and comparative analyses as I have done in this dissertation.

As an illustration of this disparity, in a 2012 report entitled *Measuring Poverty, Inequalities and Polarization in Tunisia 2000-2010*, the Tunisian National Institute of Statistics, in collaboration with the African Development Bank and the World Bank, determined that although there had been a gradual decrease in the national poverty average from 32.4% in 2000 to 23.3% in 2005 and 15.5% in 2010, the interior regions (the Centre-West and South-West in particular) continued to have large numbers of people living below the poverty line. The chart below gives an indication of the general poverty levels and trends in the decade prior to the national uprisings.

	Poverty Line			Extreme Poverty Line		
Region	2000	2005	2010	2000	2005	2010
Greater Tunis	21.0	14.6	9.1	4.3	2.3	1.1
North-East	32.1	21.6	10.3	10.5	5.4	1.8
North-West	35.3	26.9	25.7	12.1	8.9	8.8
Centre-East	21.4	12.6	8.0	6.4	2.6	1.6
Centre-West	49.3	46.5	32.3	25.5	23.2	14.3
South-East	44.3	29.0	17.9	17.5	9.6	4.9
South-West	47.8	33.2	21.5	21.7	12.1	6.4

Figure 2.1: Incidence of Poverty by Region (%) (NIS 2012)

Since the ouster of Ben Ali, the Centre-West (Kasserine, Sidi-Bouzid, Kairouan), South-East (Gabès, Medenine, Tataouine), and South-West (Gafsa, Kebili, Tozeur) regions of the country remain amongst the poorest regions of Tunisia, despite their natural resource wealth. By 2016, for

example, when the Greater Tunis and Centre-East regions had reduced their unemployment rate to a comparatively low 13 to 10 percent, the interior regions' unemployment rate measured around 25 percent (Sadiki 2019). Given this situation, it was vital that I had the ability to travel securely across the country, allowing me to speak to a wide range of unionist and political activists.

Thirdly, prior to December 2010, despite the UGTT leadership's close affiliation with the regime, unionized workers engaged in various forms of collective action, and at times contentious mobilization, as illustrated by the 2008 rebellion in Gafsa (discussed in chapter 4).

Fourthly, due to its former ties to an authoritarian system, its participation in the popular uprisings that toppled that same system, and its involvement in the country's democratic transition, the UGTT offers an important case study to understand union behaviour, its consistencies and contradictions, under different political conditions.

The fieldwork for this project was carried out during February-April of 2016, and again from November 2016 to May 2017. The process for collection of data included semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and participant observation. The following section will provide a detailed review of each process.

2.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Detailed case-study research is often built upon a substantial element of personal stories and narratives that are captured through in-depth interviews (Flyvbjerg 2006). The interactional advantage of semi-structured interviews allows for the establishment of rapport and "contextual naturalness," in turn permitting participants to express themselves in greater detail (Shuy 2003). In this context, intricate patterns, descriptions and meanings that are revealed through personal narratives can help: (1) uncover the ways in which individuals perceive and construct their identity

in relation to their group; (2) reveal the social environment in which relations and bonds are formed and political action takes place; (3) explain just how objectives and goals are established; (4) highlight why and how individuals take the decision to participate in group action; (5) permit the researcher to both identify corroborating evidence; (6) and explore details of interviewees' practices, including those with particular symbolic charge.

Equally important, drawing on Denzin (1989), Passy (2003) observes, "life histories or in-depth interviews are particularly able to capture structures of meanings. When individuals talk about themselves, they express the meaning of their practices and convey the subjective interpretation of their acts" (29-30). Concurrently, in the course of face-to-face interviews, the presence of visual signals and non-verbal cues can lead to the collection of emotionally laden responses (Irvine, Drew and Sainsbury 2012). In order to understand the internal dynamics of union political action, I therefore tried to situate unionists' personal stories about and experiences of their activities within the relevant cultural, economic, social, and political contexts. These include a political situation they see as characterized by corruption and injustice, an economic environment marked by severe inequalities, and workers' consequent social and cultural marginalization.

In the early stages of my research, I learned that snowball sampling would be the most constructive strategy in gaining access to key participants. Although union executive leaders are well known and are accustomed – particularly in the last decade following the Tunisian revolution – to speaking to the media, journalists and researchers, participant identification and contact was by no means as straightforward when it came to local activists and representatives in regions outside Tunis. As I traveled across Tunisia, I thus relied on local contacts to reach otherwise difficult to access participants. My interlocutors, who provided detailed descriptions of their

activities as well as their personal accounts of the UGTT's historical legacy and political responsibilities, were those who have been participants in or at the very least witnesses of the collective action, including key episodes of political contention, examined in this research.

It is important to remember, however, that snowball sampling is not merely an arbitrary method. In following this approach, I was very specific about the type of unionists I was interested in speaking to, namely, in the main: unionists who belonged to the biggest and most politicized union sector, education; those with an elected position; those who had been members during at least two major episodes of mobilization; self-described militants; and all the while aiming at gender balance, although this proved to be impractical. These categories were driven by the theoretical questions of this dissertation, and this can therefore be considered a form of "theoretical sampling" (Glaser and Strauss 1967); beginning with broad ideas about the subject matter I was interested in (unionists' collective action and the UGTT's role in contentious mobilization), my initial discussions with unionists and other political activists drew me to focus on these categories in particular, and in turn home in on the particular episodes of mobilization that were important to these interlocutors, as well as on the social ties that enabled action and the symbolic and other forms of meaning-making; in this way "the process of data collection [was] controlled by the emerging theory" (46), and theory was conceptualized and formulated "as it emerged from the data" (47), enabling my "strong confidence in [my] categories ... reformulated by [the data]" (76).

On three occasions I conducted group interviews (2 or 3 individuals) with unionists occupying various positions which were strikingly different in character, in a way that was meaningful for my research. Whereas during one-on-one interviews individual unionists were at ease expressing criticism of the leadership or the organization's political position vis-à-vis the state, in group settings the narrative was generally positive and took on aspects of an official

account, as will be discussed in later chapters. Given the importance to my research of analyzing solidarity as it emerges through unionists' social ties, it was significant to see the active presentation of this solidarity to me, a visiting foreign researcher, when I interviewed union comrades together.

Furthermore, the UGTT, as the main force organizing workers in Tunisia, operates and acts in relation to a host of other political actors and organizations such as major political parties, including Ennahda (Islamist), the employers' union (UTICA), and the long-established Human Rights League (LTDH), among others. These interactions, particularly in recent years, have been very important in influencing the union's political behaviour. During my fieldwork, I therefore tried to capture the diversity of voices that could provide insight into union collective action, help me understand Tunisia and its politics, and eventually allow me to focus my analysis on interviews most pertinent. In total I interviewed 76 individuals for this research; a small number of them were interviewed on more than one occasion. My interviewees included former and (at the time of interview) present members of the UGTT's executive bureau (4 individuals); local, regional, and sectoral union representatives; members of Tunisian civil society; representative of the Union of Tunisian Imams; the Union des Diplômés Chômeurs (UDC); the Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat (UTICA); and the Union Générale des Étudiants de Tunisie (UGET); independent political analysts; lawyers; several of the members of leading political parties; and lastly, a number of bloggers and young political activists. The UGTT members interviewed include representatives from the coastal cities (Tunis, Sfax, and Sousse); northern and central cities (Beja and Kairouan); and the interior and southern regions (Gafsa, Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Tala, and Gabès); I have already discussed the significance of these geographical divisions, and provide further details in chapters 4 and 5; to recap, however, I was mindful when

designing my fieldwork of the decades old marginalization of the latter relative to the coast, including the capital. The regional location of the unionists interviewed is particularly important since historically the level and type of collective action has varied depending on geographical context. As one unionist described to me, the economically poor but resource rich (phosphate and petroleum) interior cities are characterized as "the red regions,"[11] meaning there is constant activity and movement, whereas the coastal regions from where the UGTT draws its historical roots are the economic and political powerhouses of union leadership, and the northern cities, defined above all by agricultural activities, are not often associated with high levels of political activity, yet their support for collective action is nonetheless quite important. Therefore, understanding the ways in which unionists in such diverse geographical context create and sustain multi-dimensional networks in support of their objectives offers an important opportunity to better analyze and understand unionists' collective action.

I should also mention that while I sought to ensure gender parity among my participants, very early on in my fieldwork it was made clear to me that union activity is largely male dominated. Therefore, I was unable to speak to more than seven female union representatives and staff. I must also make clear that other than the leading public figures, the names and positions of all other participants have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals involved. In certain instances where establishing anonymity was more difficult, non-consequential elements and details have been modified or merged with other accounts (Kaiser 2009; Morse and Coulehan 2014). At other times, I have provided detailed individual narratives, for example in chapter 4 on the Gafsa uprising, because the individuals spoken to had prominent roles as organizers as well as participants; additionally because primary documentation is not easily available. Lastly, while

[11] Interview with Zied, union representative, secondary education, Thala, February 2017.

most of my semi-structured interviews would often eventually turn into informal conversations, as a personal guide I developed a non-exhaustive list of themes on which my interviews were based:

1. Personal history: education and occupational background, length of union membership, reasons for joining.
2. The meaning of being a unionist in politics and daily life.
3. Previous personal experience with, and lessons learned, in activism and mobilization under Habib Bourguiba and Ben Ali.
4. The dynamics of the relationships between members of the union's rank and file.
5. The dual role of the UGTT as the gatekeeper of the regime and a safe haven for the opposition.
6. The 2008 Gafsa uprising: type of response and support from union activists, reasons for discrepancy in support from UGTT offices, and reactions to its ultimate outcome.
7. Period of the revolution: personal account of what happened inside union offices, reasons for joining the protest movement, the role of unionists during the revolution, the ways in which coordination on the ground took place and the types of social networks unionists could mobilize.
8. Types of disagreement and disputes within and between networks, which unionists needed to overcome.
9. The ways in which union activists can act as agents in support of collective action during a social movement.
10. The role of the UGTT in Tunisia's transition period: in particular, its participation in the National Dialogue Quartet.

11. Reasons and meaning behind UGTT's self-appointed new role as the watchdog of Tunisian politics.

While these themes were developed to guide and ensure consistency and control in the type of information collected, the informal and non-prescriptive nature of my interviews allowed the participants to explore areas where I may not have had any formal knowledge beforehand. This would have been much more difficult to achieve with rigid structured interviews where opportunities to pose follow-up questions are scarce (Burgess 1986). Drawing on sociologist Vivien Marie Palmer, Burgess explains how this type of interviewing allows the researcher "to probe deeply, to uncover new clues, to open up new dimensions of a problem and to secure vivid, accurate, inclusive accounts from informants that are based on personal experience (Burgess 1986, 165). In several instances, for examples, general conversations about participants' personal histories and backgrounds led to very enlightening discoveries about specific forms of local activism and rebellion that would have not been mentioned if I had adhered to a schedule of fixed questions that define the situation in advance. On one occasion, for example, during a casual conversation with two veteran unionists over tea, as they were reflecting on their younger days of activism, I learned about a secret group inside the UGTT the two of them had participated in in the early1980s to organize against Tunisia's authoritarian regime (discussed in chapter 3). In-depth conversations with sources closely connected to the questions under investigation are thus a valuable and systematic means with which to generate data and therefore new and interesting discoveries unobtainable through other methods.

2.2.2 Document Analysis

Of course, just as with any other research methodology, in-depth interviewing has certain drawbacks. In the present case, while union activists and representatives are a source rich in information, they are also likely, at least at times, to be partial; or concerned to portray their own actions in the best possible light; to have (like all humans) fallible memories; and especially in the case of higher-ranking union officials, to be practiced in certain types of self-justifying discourse. Nonetheless, even in the latter case, these discourses can be very informative when it comes to understanding how leading unionists represent their organization. Moreover, as with any interview, there is a likelihood that my own line of questioning could have influenced and shaped the type of reactions and answers expressed by the respondents. However, even those responses are revealing of the respondents' perceptions of me as an outsider. In any case, this danger is greater with more structured forms of inquiry, as they preclude respondents exploring their own positions and perceptions in greater depth.

No research instrument is thus without its limitations, and concerns over intrinsic biases are found even with regards to the most rigorous quantitative methods (Flyvbjerg 2006). Therefore, the application of more than one qualitative technique is a valuable strategy for adding insight and corroborating research findings. By carrying out semi-structured interviews, I was able to focus on stories of individuals who were involved in the events under study. I further proceeded to supplement this data with document analysis, the corpus assembled ranging from personal materials to public records.

Personal documents included blog and social media posts, newspaper clippings, and printed outlines of event programs. Public records consisting of a large number of declarations, memoranda, communications and internal studies published by the UGTT's executive branch in

Tunis, as well as regional bureaus in Kasserine, Sfax, and Sidi Bouzid. Initial reading of these helped me identify a smaller and more manageable number relevant to this analysis. The declarations focus on specific time periods, in particular: the six-month uprising in Gafsa in 2008; the period of the revolution, December 2010 and January 2011; and the period of the Quartet in 2013 and 2014. Unfortunately, unlike the present period when most declarations are published online through the UGTT website and Facebook account, for the collection of declarations produced before and during the revolution, I had to rely on the aid of UGTT staff and activists. In Tunis, after repeated visits to the national headquarters, my interpreter and I finally managed to persuade the personnel in charge to grant us permission to enter the bureau's archive for a brief period, where I was only allowed access to a limited number of documents. In other regions, through the assistance of UGTT activists I was provided with those declarations that the unionists were able to find. This is important to note, since it meant that I had very little control over which records I was offered. Nonetheless, in the end, the documents assembled provided me with sufficient content to study for the purposes of comparing the language, tone and demands of the executive bureau versus the regional and local branches. Union declarations in particular are an important source of information, since their intended audience moves beyond the traditional "in-group" towards a larger audience.

It is also important to mention that with the exception of a few documents written in French, all the rest were produced in Arabic. When it came to the translation of these documents, I was above all interested in the overall meaning conveyed in the text, because for the purposes of my research it was important to compare the account conveyed to me during interviews with official narratives published or recorded by the organization at various levels. Above all, I sought to group and analyze the declarations according to the specific type of content: detached (no reference to

unrest or protests); conciliatory; and, action-oriented (supportive of collective action). In parallel with this, I paid close attention to the direct target of the texts. Did they address the public? The local or the executive bureau? Or the regime? Lastly, I searched for "significant statements". I identified a "significant statement" as one which communicated an action-oriented message. This could include openly supporting protest movements; commanding collective action (e.g. strikes); or perhaps demanding their termination (Bowen 2009; Kvale, Angrosino, Barbour, Banks, Gibbs, Rapley and Flick 2007).

Personal narratives were particularly useful for the period of the Gafsa uprising, during which this mining region of the country was effectively under siege by state forces. At the time, as the result of the security situation, there was little reporting on the events near the mines, and despite my repeated requests to union representatives for public records or declarations, in the end I was only able to obtain six public statements. The paucity of these statements might be attributed to one or more of the following: firstly, that there are deficiencies in the UGTT's record keeping; secondly, the lack of such records in union offices other than Gafsa suggests that they kept the uprising at arm's length; thirdly, the fact that I was not actually able to visit Gafsa, although given the union's failure to support the uprising there, there is a good chance that they would have been unable to provide me with any further documentation anyway. Against this background, the personal blog of local union activists, and a series of local news articles and images, served to provide context for and clarity about this important, but locally confined rebellion.

2.2.3 Participant Observation

Although this dissertation draws primarily on the result of semi-structured interviews and document analysis, the inclusion of participant observation allowed me to discover how members

of a network interact and construct meaning during official events. Such discovery is important in the context of a labour organization whose political identity and distinctiveness is reinforced through public performances and ceremonies laden with symbolism. Moreover, and equally importantly, participant observation was vital to building excellent rapport and trust between me and the unionists. As well as the events I describe below, on a number of occasions I had the opportunity to visit union offices and spend considerable time there talking to union members. Even though I was initially an unknown researcher of an uncertain origin, towards the end of my stay there I was familiar enough a figure that I was told I should receive an honorary membership to the organization.

During my fieldwork I attended several key events organized by the UGTT. These included the 23rd UGTT Congress held on 22-23 January 2017; the 18th anniversary of the death of nationalist trade unionist leader Habib Achour, held in his hometown of Kerkennah, Sfax; and a three-day conference (rather cumbersomely) titled "The Tunisian General Labour Union and the challenges of a revolution for freedom and dignity, and the foundations of trade union experience, and the requirements of renewal and adaptation," held with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.[12] The observations made during these events are above all pertinent to the new role of the UGTT adopted since the departure of Ben Ali in 2011. In Tunisia's new political climate, the

[12] Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) is the oldest "party-related, publicly financed" (Dakowska 2005, 150) political foundation in Germany, connected to the Social Democratic Party; as with other German party political foundations it has been traditionally committed "to [running] political education projects, to encourage civic involvement in political life and to promote pluralism in the postwar Federal Republic" (Dakowska 2005, 150). Its international activities, similar to other German political foundations, include forming transnational coalitions with trade unions, professional associations and NGOs, serving as research and training institutes in its host country, and most importantly, acting as a mediator in support of the opposition during transition away from authoritarian rule (Dakowska 2005). As explained by Marzo (2019), due to their long-established presence in the country which can be dated back to the 1960s, FES, along with other German political foundations, has been able to gain the trust and cooperation of many domestic actors, including the UGTT. Thus, since the removal of Ben Ali from power, German foundations have been able to play an important role in Tunisia's democratic transition, for instance, by providing multiparty training for opposition political parties, offering training to improve civil society's professional expertise, and by providing a platform to encourage dialogue between various domestic actors.

UGTT has more freedom to leverage its position to stand up to the government. The opening up of political space, however, has meant that the organization must now compete with newly emergent political actors. In this political environment (as will be discussed in chapter 6), public ceremonies and events are a useful strategy for showcasing the power and popularity of the union to its rivals.

2.3 Concluding Remarks

As previously stated, the aim of this research is to provide a greater understanding of how union-led group action takes place at different levels, and at different scales, along a collective movement spectrum that can range from direct disruptive confrontation to indirect in-group political activity. It shows that the union is a complex relational entity whose members' networks are constantly reproduced through various forms of informal and formal activities, and that these networks can be activated for the purposes of mobilization, or moral and political support for those who are mobilizing during more contentious episodes, even as they also reproduce themselves through routine and uncontentious activities such as funerals, weddings, and various social gatherings.

This chapter therefore offered an overview of the theoretical concepts and methods chosen to best carry out this endeavour. Since this project did not focus on discovering causation between two variables, but rather on offering an in-depth understanding of how union political engagement is shaped by the collective activity of its basic and mid-level members, in-depth interviews, collection of primary documents, and participant observations offered an excellent opportunity for the collection of a rich set of data. Theoretical concepts such as collective action, collective identity, social ties and networks, semiotic practices, frames, and scale shift provide a framework to better structure and analyze the information collected, which as explained above

was already shaped by the general theoretical concerns that directed sampling practices and which in turn enabled a more precise theoretical focus. The findings can thus be incorporated into an analysis that extends our knowledge about the organization under study.

In the next chapter I will begin by discussing the history of labour movement in Tunisia and the birth of the UGTT during the national struggle for independence, as well as stressing the importance of playing a part in the continuation of this history for unionists' commitment, indeed devotion, to staying with the UGTT, even during periods marked by a political divide between the leadership and the base.

Chapter 3: Collective Memory in Collective Action. From Anti-Colonial Struggle to Contemporary Mobilization

"The UGTT has a special place amongst Tunisians because historically it has always defended liberty, democracy, and all other noble values";[13] such was the view of one of the union representatives I interviewed. During my nine months of field research, at the outset of my conversations with union representatives, employees and members, I had come to expect that I would be asked if I knew the history of the UGTT. Despite my usual response that I was familiar with the union's legacy, and its formidable role in the national liberation movement, reference to this celebrated history was for my interviewees an indispensable part of explaining, and, more importantly, justifying unionists' ongoing political role and activities in Tunisian politics. The fact that this recollection of the past was so important, and that it was repeated during each interview, revealed something important to me: it is not enough to know important episodes in UGTT history. What is more pertinent is how the reproduction of specific historical knowledge, and the continued reconstruction of the collective memory that underpins it, has influenced, sustained, and legitimized unionists' activism. This chapter explores the systematic appropriation of the collective memory of a certain version of the UGTT's history by subsequent generations of union activists to justify the UGTT's prominent place in Tunisian politics and society. The fostering and reproduction of this memory develops and maintains commitment and solidarity amongst its members, and encourages collective action amongst unionists and their allies.

[13] Interview with Mouez, regional representative, Beja, December 2016.

The following discussion will focus on answering general RQ1 and RQ1a: what is the impact of an authoritarian regime's practice of cooptation and repression on a labour union's political activism? And, how does a union retain oppositional agency in spite of the cooptation of its leadership? To answer this I explore the dynamics of the evolving relationship between the union and the state, and, in particular, the two key confrontations with the government of Habib Bourguiba in 1978 and 1983-84. I argue that despite the severe repression of the union, especially the dismissal and imprisonment of its leadership, the base, already informed by the memory of the union's anti-colonial struggle, continued its activism, even if in a less high-profile manner. What is more, as explained by Friedman and McAdam (1992), "successful movements usually … redefine existing roles within established organizations as the basis of an emerging activist identity" (162). During periods when the union's leadership could be described as "absorbed into the state" (Vandewalle 1988, 605), union activists successfully re-appropriated a salient historical narrative that acted as a moral incentive to maintain membership unity and to promote activism, even if limited in scope. Thanks to the membership's reconstruction of a strong collective identity through the narration of a venerable past, the union could not be reduced to the actions of its executive leadership. In fact, during key political moments, sustained pressure from the union base forced the union leadership to become more responsive to their demands.

By focusing on the UGTT's history as related to me by some of its members, and on the authority of that narrative in shaping the group's identity and operations – or at the very least, those of its more active factions – I find part of the answer to this question, as this narrative has been a persistent counterforce, meaning that even at moments of maximum cooptation, when the union has been categorized as an "empty shell" (Bellin 2004), militant members have been able to

invoke this past and its associated values against the power of the leadership; this history thus represents something that cannot be coopted.

Subsequent to the Second World War, the field of collective memory gained prominence across various disciplines in the social sciences, inspired by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1980), who first elaborated a theory on the subject in 1925. His most fundamental insight was that memory is never merely individual, but necessarily collective and social, that is to say that memories are shared and/or disputed in group settings. Collective memory, defined as "a body of symbols, representations, and narratives about the past shared by a group of people" is a powerful resource that shapes our "social and political preferences" and mobilizes us "to take action" (Cheng and Yuen 2019, 42).

In the wake of Halbwachs's pioneering work, social scientists across a wide range of disciplines, particularly those working on civil rights movements, social uprisings, wars and conflicts have sought to show how collective memories constructed through the appropriation and reproduction of a particular historical narrative contribute to why and how individuals decide to join or reject a movement, as well as to the relative unity or disunity of that movement (Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks 1996; Harris 2006; Preston 1990; Priska 2017; Schwartz 1982). Fredrick Harris (2006), for example, in his examination of the impact of collective memories on Black activism during the US civil rights movement, elucidates how, when certain key events are appropriated by political entrepreneurs to be "incorporated into a group's repertoire of memories" (21), they can later be used as collective action frames through which political actors "articulate grievances, cement group loyalties, establish goals, evaluate new events, and reflect on the possibility for successful cooperation" (22). The collective memories of the Scottsboro trials, the Brown decision, the murder of Emmett Till, and the Montgomery bus boycott, sustained through

commemorations, books and plays, documentaries and websites, were "politically salient to the civil rights movement because of their appropriation as a cause for racial justice" (25). Activists consciously focused on these events to the exclusion of others because they were more effective in generating "solidarity" and "cooperative action" (38). As a result, collective memories acted as "a reservoir for activists who continue to re-appropriate the event" (39) to trigger group unity and mobilization. In this way, collective memories are as much about the needs of the present as they are about the past (Harrison 2008).

Also of importance to the present study is the impact of collective memory on the elaboration of collective identity, and the development of "identificatory determinations" and "formative and normative impulses" from which a group "derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity" (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995, 130). Crucially, however, reconstruction of collective identity through the appropriation of a historical memory can act as a resource for encouraging, but also for disrupting solidarity and collective action amongst members of a group (Gabel 2013; Gongaware 2003; Farthing and Kohl 2013; Polletta and Jasper 2001). As Cheng and Yuen (2019) have argued, the transformation of collective memory into collective identity is not a linear process: "collective identity building is shaped and mediated by the interaction between the memory repositories and the repertoire that express them" (420). The study of collective movements shows that "memories are part of movements' inheritance, working as anchors for contentious politics; they either offer cues and legitimacy or deny them. They might help in forming collective identities but can also strengthen divisions; they can empower or disempower" (Della Porta, Andretta, Fernandes, Romanos, and Vogiatzoglou 2018, 132). For this reason, to what degree a group comes to embrace the past, that is to say is capable of turning it into a force

for unity, is in part determined by how that past is recollected, perceived and commemorated, and the meanings, and moral judgements they continue to attach to it (Jasper 2014).

While the aforementioned studies have deepened our understanding of the impact of the appropriation of collective memory on collective movement, scholarship on union-based collective action has paid less attention to this relationship and its influence on the activities of subsequent generations of union activists. A reason behind this limited attention to collective memory is linked to the preference that is given to classical models which depend on the evocation of structural conditions, material resources and interests, and institutional environments in order to explain workers' mobilizational power and level of militancy (Bellin 2002; Parsa 1988). In his study of voluntary associations in Egypt, for example, Mustapha K. al-Sayyid (2001) contends that how trade unions respond to government activities is determined above all "by social conditions of members, established traditions in certain syndicates, and the success of radical opposition groups in capturing executive offices" (274). Eva Bellin (2002), in her examination of the paradox of state-sponsored development, with specific attention paid to Tunisia, identifies four structural conditions that impact labour militancy. These include the "level of worker concentration," "labor scarcity," "skill level," and "commitment to the labor force" (124-125). While, as stated in earlier chapters, structural conditions do help explain workers militancy and mobilization, they are not by themselves a sufficient explanation. Appropriation of history and the reproduction of collective memory on a transgenerational basis are also important factors in accounting for the persistence of union militancy. Members of the UGTT adopt a highly salient collective identity through the reproduction of a collective memory linked to a particular historical narrative. In this environment, the appropriation and memorialization of history is vital to sustaining the reproduction of their group identity from one generation to the next.

In the case of the UGTT, as my interviews made clear to me, there is a widely shared collective memory based on the ideas of *national liberation*, *struggle*, *sacrifice*, and *martyrdom.* Those members of the organization who subscribe to this version of union's history are consequently more likely to understand their activities in terms of *political activism*, *dissent*, *sacrifice* and, more recently, *national guardianship*. As one union employee succinctly put it, for union activists "syndicalism is a religion and the UGTT is saviour of Tunisia."[14] These more militant and experienced unionists, particularly those in official positions, are often considered to transmit this ethos of sacrifice and struggle inspired by history to the union's rank and file. As will be detailed, the UGTT is a highly diverse community of members comprised of different social and professional classes; the salient features of the unionists' political identity referred to here, which work to encourage and sustain collective action amongst its more militant factions, are developed, and more importantly, infused across these professional and social lines. In order to understand this, "it is necessary to analyze the social and political struggle that created [that] identity" (Taylor and Whittier 1992, 110). For this reason, I discuss a number of key episodes in the UGTT's history, episodes which are central to the narrative of sacrifice, political struggle and the defence of the nation.

This does not mean that the state does not recognize this history; on the contrary, as I will show, the venerable legacy of the UGTT is in part produced and maintained through both tangible and symbolic carriers of meaning including landmark monuments, public images, buildings, and street names, all set up throughout the country in honour of unionist leaders. For the unionists, however, this is evidence of the importance of the union in the national story, of its public role, a legacy of which they are the heirs and defenders. This public validation acts as further justification

[14] Interview with Mariam, union employee, National Office of Women Workers, Tunis, December 2016.

of their narrative. Together with the perpetual reproduction among unionists of stories about the role of the UGTT in the liberation and building of the modern Tunisian state, this memory work continues to influence unionized workers' propensity to support and engage in various forms of collective action and activism. Indeed, it is the reproduction of this history that serves as the moral backbone of the organization. What was striking in my interviews was how often the unionists referred to the role of the UGTT as the defender of the people and democratic values, as well as the sacrifices it had made on their behalf, above all the assassination of its founder. It was based on this that I concluded that unionists continued to stay loyal to the organization, even during episodes of conflict with its leadership, because for them the core values of the UGTT embedded in this history remained unchanged, as if they were the "essence" of the union.

Therefore, in the discussion that follows I am concerned with the formation and influence of a salient unionist collective identity made possible through the reproduction of a specific historical narrative. This is an important undertaking given the concern of this dissertation with collective action, because while collective identity is not necessary to collective action, as I demonstrate in the case of Gafsa (chapter 4) where a collective grievance brought disparate protesters together, it is an important condition for ensuring the repeated insertion of a particular group in collective action over many decades. As will be discussed, the power of history is in its ability to facilitate the construction of a salient identity among diverse individuals who are connected to each other by virtue of membership inside a common entity. In this way, the salient identity produced through history informs the group's political preferences, ideology, attitudes, and actions.

The rest of this chapter is organized as follows. I begin by providing a short account of the history of the labour movement in Tunisia and the birth of the UGTT ten years prior to the Tunisian

independence. In this section I am above all interested in emphasizing the pivotal historical moments and key unionist figures that have been foundational to the main historical narrative reproduced and embraced by its members. Once I have explained how the history of the organization came to be, I will then provide an overview of the structure and internal operations of the UGTT, with the intention of demonstrating its procedural "democracy," which in itself is an important part of this historical narrative; it also provides an insight into how members, from heterogeneous backgrounds, come into contact with one another and transmit that history. While description of the UGTT's internal structure interrupts the historical narrative, this analysis should nonetheless be regarded as integral to the chapter's discussion of collective memory and union identity. The relative autonomy of the UGTT's constituent parts, and the considerable opportunities for member participation, enables those members to describe and legitimize the UGTT as a democratic organization. The diversity of occupational sectors represented, and the network of branch offices up and down the country enable them to present it as a truly national and popular organization. These self-conceptions compliment and further legitimate the narrative of sacrifice and struggle. This becomes clear in the final section of this chapter, a review of the two most serious nationwide mobilizations of unionists that took place during the presidency of Habib Bourguiba, first in 1978, and then again in 1983-1984. With the aid of my interviews with unionists who participated in one or both uprisings, I show just how the legacy of these two conflicts has continued to inform unionists' activism and collective action. Certain, more militant sections of the union both drew on the ability they had to organize within the union because of its structure, and narratives of struggle, in order to challenge a national leadership that was in partnership with the government, in turn creating further material for the narrative of sacrifice and

martyrdom even as they left a lasting legacy of greater pragmatism on the part of the leadership in its relationship with the state.

3.1 The Tunisian Labour Movement and the Origins of the UGTT

Much like the rest of colonized Africa, trade unions were imported into North Africa and the Maghreb by European workers, beginning in Algeria in 1895, Egypt in 1899, Tunisia in 1910, and Morocco in 1924 (Orr 1966). This meant that from the beginning, unlike many other parts of the world where the roots of trade union organizations can be traced to workers' collective grievances caused by the impacts of the industrial revolution, in colonized North Africa, European trade unionists were in actuality members of a highly privileged class (Brown 1973).

In the colonial political context, local exposure to trade union activities came in three forms. First, after a period of time the French national trade union centre, the Confédération Générale des Travailleurs (CGT), started to accept the inclusion of a limited number of Arab contract workers, thus indirectly creating an opportunity for the organization to act as a training ground for indigenous workers in the methods of trade unionism (Orr 1966).

Second, despite the fact that the majority of domestic workers were concentrated in areas of less specialized labour, they frequently worked closely with skilled European workers, and were thereby in a position to observe French unionized workers in action (Orr 1966).

Third, beginning with the onset of the First World War and the subsequent efforts at reconstruction, large numbers of North African workers arrived in France, where "many of them joined French trade unions and political parties; and others served in the French armed forces, where they had at least some opportunities to observe the ways of French workers" (Orr 1966, 72). Therefore, transformations in workers' social and labour interactions, along with labour related

cross-border movements into the colonizer's territory, cultivated a breeding ground for the beginning of efforts by colonized workers to establish independent North African labour organizations. Against this backdrop, as described by Brown (1973), the history of independent trade union movements in North Africa is linked to "the role of the European unionists and leftists as the intrusive foreign sand that enters the oyster, making possible the pearl" (185). In Tunisia, the memory of this long and rich history of struggle for the formation and protection of an *independent* trade union organization continues to influence unionists' interactions with the state.

The first independent Tunisian labour union, the Confédération Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (CGTT; General Confederation of Tunisian Workers), was founded in 1924 by Mohamed Ali al-Hammi (1890-1928). Al-Hammi, born in the southern region of Gabès, is considered, particularly by the UGTT, as the founding father of the independent Tunisian labour movement. Yet despite his importance in Tunisian labour history, there is little detailed information about his life and training. The lack of available material on al-Hammi's life, as discussed by Eqbal Ahmad and Stuart Schaar (1978), is largely the consequence of the circumstances of his time and social condition:

> His date of birth is in question because he was born in a rural community where communal solidarity took precedence over individual identities, and where births and deaths were for remembrances rather than recording. Moreover, as in the rest of the colonies, it was common for families to say that a boy was younger than he really was in order to assure him a longer term of employment. Similarly, the lack of information on his life and activities in Germany is an early testimony to the anonymity of the migrant worker in Europe […] The time and place of his death, his birthdate and schooling, patriots and scholars would later try to research, and would encounter enough difficulties to dispute with each other (254).

Nevertheless, according to Ahmad and Schaar (1978), it is believed that al-Hammi's first known political activity took place "on behalf of the anti-colonial resistance in Tripolitania" (253), though "it is not possible to confirm, for example, … the jobs he held … during the Italian-Turkish

war (1911-12)" (254). It is also claimed that after the First World War, al-Hammi followed his mentor Enver Pasha, military officer and the leader of the union movement in the Ottoman Empire, who fled Turkey to Germany (Ahmad and Schaar 1978). Once in Germany, al-Hammi intermittently attended the Free University of Berlin where he studied political science and economics, and spent some time amongst socialist and labour union groups (Ahmad and Schaar 1978; Jdey 2011).

In 1924 al-Hammi returned to Tunisia, where, driven by nationalist and unionist principles, he launched a consumer cooperative movement in support of exploited Tunisian workers. During this period he was involved in leading some of the first independent strikes in Tunis, as well as in the coastal city of Bizerte (Jdey 2011). That same year, alongside notable Tunisian writer, progressive nationalist, and women's rights activist Tahar Haddad, al-Hammi founded the independent CGTT. The French authorities, however, viewing the rise of a Tunisian syndicalist movement as a threat to colonial stability, acted swiftly, shutting down the union and jailing its founders. Al-Hammi was sent into exile in 1925, and he died three years later in Saudi Arabia in a road accident (Jdey 2011). As stated by Brown (1973, 185), this initial effort at establishing an independent Tunisian trade union movement failed on account of:

> An opposition alliance of the European Socialists and unionists (seeking working-class unity and intent on stifling any rival), the Protectorate administration (antagonistic to any form of organized native activity) and the Old Destour (eager to avoid "unnecessary" trouble with the authorities and out of sympathy with the idea of a proletarian organization led by other than traditional, bourgeois notables).

Despite both the lack of available information and al-Hammi's brief time as a unionist leader, organizer, and political activist long before the formation of the UGTT, he remains one of the most important symbolic figures of resistance and sacrifice in UGTT's reproduction of its collective history. The iconic UGTT headquarters (see image 3.1) are situated in the centre of

Tunis on the Mohamed Ali Square, which has long been the starting point of major union gatherings and demonstrations. Outside the main UGTT building and inside many of its local branches, al-Hammi's photo is hung next to those of prominent UGTT figures (see image 3.2 for more details), including its founder Farhat Hached. His memorialization is not exclusive to the UGTT, however, as in different cities there are schools and streets named after him, and in this way the union's history has been incorporated into the grand narrative of Tunisian national history.



Figure 3.1: UGTT headquarters located at Mohamed Ali Square. From right to left: Habib Achour, Ahmed Tlili, Farhat Hached, and Mohamed Ali al-Hammi. Author's Picture.

Many of the unionists that I interviewed often emphasized his name and legacy in order to demonstrate the deep roots of the Tunisian labour activism of which they were the contemporary bearers. In turn, they wanted to show me that their struggle against oppression goes back almost a century. That the three other leaders who appear alongside al-Hammi at the UGTT headquarters, namely Ahmed Tlili, Farhat Hached, and Habib Achour (see image 3.2), should be consistently singled out as exemplary means that many other prominent and influential union activists are left out of the narrative, indicating that unionists have constructed this shared perspective not out of a desire to exhaustively chronicle the past of their organization, but with attention to the symbolic

charge of these four figures.[15] Whenever they are recalled in conversation or writing, they exemplify – and in their images, embody and represent – core values and therefore serve as inspiration and models of imitation for unionists mobilizing in the present.



Figure 3.2: from right to left: Mohamed Ali al-Hammi (1890-1928), Ahmed Tlili (1916-1967), Farhat Hached (1914-1952), and Habib Achour (1913-1999). Author's Picture.

As explained by Jasper (2014), "the field of collective memory reminds us that influential cultural meanings can be conveyed through the built environment" (59); in this light we can see how continued display of al-Hammi's name and imagery has facilitated the construction and preservation of this history of unionists' long tradition of activism and struggle, which is then passed from one generation to the next. I also found evidence of this reproduction of history in the archives of the UGTT Sfax; one leaflet (see image 3.3), for example, focuses on his pioneering role as a unionist national and anticolonial activist. Strikingly, his "movement" is described in the text as "a pioneering movement not only in the Maghreb, but in all of the Arab world and in

[15] The first of these men was chosen because he is regarded as the founder of the Tunisian labour movement, the other three because they were founders of the UGTT. This selection however excludes Belgacem Gnaoui, who was also instrumental in founding the Tunisian labour movement. Moreover by excluding any UGTT leaders or members subsequent to the foundation it confers a kind of legendary aura on the founders, making them a standard by which others are judged or an inspiration for present action.

Africa." By not actually mentioning his organization (CGTT), but by describing it as a movement, the UGTT is able to situate itself in an unbroken tradition. What is also worthy of note is that he is said to have died in "mysterious circumstances," which might imply that he was assassinated, further adding to the narrative of sacrifice and martyrdom.



Figure 3.3: Mohamed Ali al-Hammi, union pioneer (UGTT Sfax)

The second effort at establishing an independent Tunisian labour union took place under the direction of Belgacem Gnaoui, in 1937, who sought to reinstall a second CGTT. This time, as explained by Yousfi (2017), "conflicts between the union and the Neo-Destour party[16] enabled the colonial authorities to curb the nationalist movement and nip this second attempt at unionism in the bud" (4). Following this latest defeat, it would take another decade until the Tunisian labour movement experienced its most transformative shift when prominent unionist figures in the CGT, namely Habib Achour, Ahmed Tlili, and Ahmed Ben Salah, led by Farhat Hached, officially

[16] Growing dissatisfaction with the strategies of the old leaders of the *Destour* (Constitutional Liberal) party, led some of its younger members, including Habib Bourguiba (Tunisia's national movement leader and first president from 1957-1987) to split from the group to form the Neo-Destour in 1934. The party was renamed the Socialist Destourian Party (PSD) in 1964 to signal Bourguiba's "leftward shift in politics and economics" (Ulrichsen 2018). In 1987, after Bourguiba's removal from power, "the Socialist Destourian Party was renamed the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) and constituted the ruling party during Ben Ali's presidency" (Ulrichsen 2018). Note that 'destour' means 'constitution' in Arabic and that the 'constitutional' in the RCD's Arabic name is 'destouri' (*dastūrī*).

formed the Tunisian General Labour Union in 1946. This third try at an independent trade union proved to be the unionists' charm.

In Tunisia's contemporary history, Farhat Hached undoubtedly remains as one of the most politically significant and symbolically charged national figures. Sixty-eight years since his assassination, in 1956, by the French terrorist organization "The Red Hand" (*La Main Rouge*),[17] his legacy continues to inspire unionists' political activism and collective action. Hached, born in 1914 on the island of Kerkennah, became involved in union activities in 1936 as a member of the transport employees in the French CGT (Heni n.d.). His syndicalist journey is therefore directly linked to the dynamics of colonial rule and the experiences he obtained through his involvement in the French trade union. Brown (1973) describes the impact of this exposure in the following terms: "Farhad Hached and his colleagues, just as their peers in Algeria and Morocco, went through the CGT school of hard knocks and were graduated with honors" (185); as a consequence, the local union leadership possessed "the proper mix of hard-bitten realism, tactical expertise and an idealism tempered in battle with persistence" (186).

It was not until 1944 that, in opposition to the communist-led CGT which refused to support the Tunisian call for independence, Hached along with Habib Achour and a few others split from the organization to create the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of the South (L'Union des Syndicats Libres du Sud). And, one year later, in concert with other trade unionists, the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of the North was formed. The confederations were based upon a three-point program of: "1. Social justice, 2. Equality between Tunisian and French workers

[17] As explained by Thomas Riegler in 2012, "the origins of the Red Hand can be traced to certain vigilante groups set up by the French settler community in the Maghreb during the 1950s. Organizations like La Main Noire [the Black Hand] in Morocco or La Main Rouge in Tunisia had aimed at preventing the decolonisation process by striking against outspoken advocates of self-government. The killers got official assistance through the law enforcement agencies looking the other way and through the active cooperation of the Secret Service" (8).

(working in Tunisia), and 3. Support for national independence and an end to the French colonial rule" (Prince 2012). In January 1946, the two confederations merged to form one unified national union, the UGTT.

Despite the repressive colonial context within which the strongly nationalist UGTT emerged, there are a number of important reasons behind its survival. First, within a year of the liberation of Paris from the Germans in 1944, the communists had consolidated their control over the French CGT (Lorwin 1952). The communists' strength, as explained by Lorwin (1952) in his study of French trade unions in 1944-1945, disclosed itself when they not only maintained control over the leading industrial unions they had acquired before the war, but especially when they claimed victory over some industrial unions previously under reformist leadership. In fact, during the first CGT convention in 1946, "the Communists had a four-to-one lead over their opponents" (527). In this new era marked by ideological polarization, when faced with the communist threat, the protectorate regime had begun to cautiously support the creation of other union organizations that could counter the communist force (Bellin 2002; Brown 1973).

Second, Hached's support for the independence movement allowed for the formation of a strong alliance between the UGTT and the Neo-Destour, under the leadership of the nationalist movement Habib Bourguiba. In fact, as noted by Bellin (2002), many of UGTT's "leading lights (Habib Achour, Ahmed Tlili, Bechir Bellagha, and Ahmed Ben Salah) were originally Destourian militants" (92) who viewed the labour movement "as part of a continuum of national organizations that could contribute to the struggle against colonial domination" (92). Therefore, unlike the old Destour party strategy of avoiding unnecessary confrontation with the authorities, the Neo-Destour's enthusiastic support for the formation of an independent Tunisian labour movement gave the UGTT the crucial backing it needed to organize and mobilize its base (Brown 1973).

Third, soon after its formation, the UGTT leadership moved swiftly to establish ties with foreign-based organizations. One important such entity was the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU),[18] founded in 1949, to which important non-communist unions including the American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) labour organizations belonged. Farhat Hached, similarly to Habib Bourguiba, had decided that the nationalist cause would benefit from pressure put on authorities by foreign partners. The utility of transnational networks has been the subject of Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink's 1998 study, in which they developed the concept of boomerang strategy. According to the authors, "when channels between the state and its domestic actors are blocked, the boomerang pattern of influence characteristic of transnational networks may occur: domestic NGOs bypass their state and directly search out international allies to try to bring pressure on their states from outside" (1998, 12). This strategy was relevant not only in cases where organizations' channels to their states were blocked, but in the colonial setting where states were generally hostile to such organizations from the outset. In an article published in *The World Today*, author R. F. described the role of ICFTU in the following terms:

> In seeking to improve labour relations in the backward areas the I.C.F.T.U. can sometimes call on its affiliates in, for example, Britain or France, to bring pressure to bear on their Governments to make improvements in their colonial territories. Much progress had already been made, before the I.C.F.T.U. was founded, in British colonies, through the labour advisers who were often experienced trade unionists. This has been carried further. In French colonies, however, there have been serious

[18] As detailed by Sturmthal (1950), the Soviet Union, which until 1941 had been "excluded from the international trade union movement" (375), took advantage of the wartime alliance with Western democracies "to establish closer relations with the British and American labor organizations" (375). The establishment of closer ties ultimately led to the formation of the World Federation of Trade Unions. However, the AFL refused to join the Federation because it "considered the Russian unions not "free" labor organizations" (376). In the post-war period, as tension increased between the two blocs, when "the non-Communist unions in France broke away from the Communist-controlled Confédération Générale du Travail to set up "Force Ouvrière" in 1948, the split became inevitable" (376). It was in this context that ICFTU was founded in 1949. It is worth noting that prior to the founding of ICFTU, the UGTT, despite the Communist domination of the WFTU, submitted a request to join the federation. As one of the principal bodies organizing workers, Farhat Hached and Habib Bourguiba contended that establishing ties with the organization was a logical strategy for aiding the Tunisian nationalist movement (Beling 1964).

> difficulties, and I.C.F.T.U. spokesmen have been among the most hostile critics of French policy in Tunisia and Morocco […] It is undoubtedly true, and is admitted by French Government spokesmen, that the Tunisian nationalist movement derived great prestige and increased influence because of the support the nationalist trade unions received from the I.C.F.T.U. (1953, 43).

In addition to establishing connections with foreign institutions, Hached, through his alliance with Bourguiba, sought to position himself and the UGTT with international audiences as a key political figure participating in discussions about the Franco-Tunisian situation. In 1951, for example, he accompanied Bourguiba on a trip to Washington, where according to memorandum of conversation available in the U.S. Department of State Archive, the two men held a meeting with Samuel Kopper, the Deputy Director of Near and Middle East in the Saudi Arabian Embassy. What is interesting to note is that: (1) on this occasion the American officials gave priority to the "Iranian question" over the nationalist movements in North Africa; (2) they saw Bourguiba as the more important of the two, as evident by the fact that the deputy director suggested seeing him privately (Kopper 1951); and (3) while from the Tunisian side Hached's presence clearly indicated his importance as a leader of the nationalist cause at the time, some unionists I spoke to portrayed Hached as the one "who took" Bourguiba on this trip; at least in part of the UGTT's collective memory Hached was thus enshrined as having been on a par with Bourguiba.

This characterization of the UGTT as simultaneously and inextricably defender of the Tunisian workers' interests and of Tunisian national freedom is linked to the political context from which it emerged, and continues to shape and legitimize its members' political engagement. Farhat Hached gave an eloquent description of this twin role in 1952 in Brussels, in a speech at the Confederation of Free Trade Unions, during which he described the organization in the following terms:

> The U.G.T.T. is fighting for the triumph of freedom, democracy, and social progress in Tunisia. In this struggle the U.G.T.T. has constantly come up against the opposition of various bodies set up for their own benefit by a handful of foreign colonial exploiters. Ever since 1881 the policy pursued by these bodies has continuously developed towards greater oppression and complete stifling of the hopes of the

> Tunisian people and the claims of the workers. Under a regime based on terror the social aims of the workers could never be achieved, any more than it was possible for the free and democratic trade union movement to develop properly. For the Tunisian workers, therefore, the most important thing was the establishment of a democratic regime to give the Tunisian people freedom to manage their own affairs" (R. F. 1952, 252).

By the early 1950s, French authorities had reached an agreement to cooperate with the Neo-Destour towards the goal of returning sovereignty to Tunisia. However, in 1952, negotiations broke down, when, as noted by Salah Ben Youssef (a leading figure in the national liberation movement), the French government demanded that "the French community in Tunisia have a share in all the institutions of the country (the Central Government, the national representatives assembly, local bodies and agents in the public service)" (1954, 59). The complete rupture of negotiations was followed by the arrest and imprisonment of leading nationalist movement figures, including Habib Bourguiba. It was during this period that "union chief Hached took charge of the national liberation movement. Hached would lead the movement until December 5, 1952, when he was assassinated by colonialist far-right elements […]" (Yousfi 2017, 4). Prior to his death, Hached's effective advocacy of the cause of Tunisian independence, especially with American labour, and within the I.C.F.T.U., led his opponents to regard him as a serious threat (Hahn 1955). La Main Rouge, for instance, tried to combat Hached's nationalist efforts by depicting him above all as an American puppet; the following is an example of the type of propaganda issued by the organization:

> Against the Enslavement of Tunisia
> By the imperialist American grocers,
> the exterminators of the Red race,
> the assassins of the Porto-Ricans,
> the maintainers of black slavery,
> the hangman of the Philippines
> Rally to the Red Hand
> Against Farhat Hached the American (Hahn 1955, 192).

At a time when French North Africa was in the midst of a struggle for national liberation, Farhat Hached's assassination had serious consequences beyond the borders of Tunisia. In Morocco, for example, where the labour movement was prohibited from organizing its own independent unions, it was obliged to participate in the independence movement through the structure of the Union Générale des Syndicats Confédérés du Maroc (UGSCM), an affiliate of the French CGT, and under the aegis of the *Istiqlal* (Independence) party; against this background, the death of Farhat Hached turned out to be a powerful blow against Moroccan trade union leaders.

Beginning in the 1930s, one of the principal goals of the Moroccan nationalist movement was to achieve the right to form an independent workers' organization, a demand that was staunchly rejected by both the French administration, and the sultan, Mohammed Ben Youssef, who believed organized labour presented a danger to the authority of the Makhzen (Forst 1976). Nonetheless, the Istiqlal party decision to infiltrate the French-affiliated UGSCM, and its subsequent success in ensuring that its various branches had a majority of Moroccans, who were elected to numerous posts, enabled the party to give the union a Moroccan orientation (Forst 1976). [19] By 1952, unionists leaders such as Taïb Ben Bouazza and Mahjoub Ben Saddiq, considered the labour movement to be on course to establish its autonomy; those plans, however, never came to fruition because, following planned demonstrations and strikes in Casablanca against the assassination of Hached, "nationalist and syndicalist leaders were arrested and incarcerated; French unionists were expelled from Morocco. The Istiqlal and Communist parties were charged with collusion to provoke insurrection" (Forst 1976, 277). Severe state repression against trade

[19] The term itself originally referred to "the sixteenth century institution where taxes were gathered before being sent to the treasury of the ummah" (Daadaoui 1011, 42); over time it came to refer by metonymy to the central authority of the Moroccan monarchy.

union and nationalist leaders forced the Moroccan labour movement to remain dormant until 1954 when its leaders were eventually released (Forst 1976).

In Tunisia, meanwhile, Farhat Hached's martyrdom became one of, if not the most symbolically significant events in the UGTT's collective memory. During most of my conversations with union representatives, in their attempt to justify their claims about the UGTT's importance for much of Tunisian society, reference was made to the ultimate sacrifice its leader, and by extension the organization, made for the Tunisian nation. Indeed this was a sacrifice in a genuine sense, because it helped endow the union with a sacred quality. For instance, I was told repeatedly in interviews that during the revolution the police did not enter or directly attack the UGTT offices precisely because these premises should be respected; this reverence thus serves as a great source of strength for the UGTT.[20] Their being off limits recalls one of the most basic meanings of the sacred, namely what is set apart and only accessible under certain conditions (Durkheim 2012; Graeber 2007).[21] It is therefore against this background that ideas of *sacrifice* and *struggle* continue to infuse the union's narrative around activism and collective action. During a conversation with one veteran unionist, from Sfax, he elaborated on the utility of this history:

> A way to improve the UGTT moving forward is … to make sure the younger generations learn about its history. Because this history becomes experience and a lesson, and then the organization touches you … the hardest thing is memory. You should always study the history. Those responsible need to have the spirit of sacrifice. *Sacrifice is the base of success*, this was Farhat Hached's slogan. He sacrificed his life so that the UGTT could live. He effectively practiced this slogan.[22]

[20] For instance interview with Mohamed Chaabane in Sfax, March 2017, and Fadhel, secondary school teacher, also in Sfax, December 2016. This observation, however, was made to me by the majority of my UGTT interviewees, particularly those belonging to more powerful bureaus in Tunis and Sfax.
[21] The UGTT prides itself on being open to all; there is no contradiction, however - the conditions are capacious, but nonetheless firmly exclude the police acting as police. It is also worth mentioning that these conditions were not always respected; in 2011 police in Kasserine for instance did attack the UGTT offices there.
[22] Interview with Chaabane, former UGTT General Secretary, Sfax, March 2017.

I saw just how this history could become part of the younger generation's experience during my visit to Kerkenah to the commemoration of Habib Achour in 2017. The event was both convivial and at times sombre. There were prayers at his grave, and we chanted slogans and sang songs declaring our devotion and commitment to the UGTT, but we also sat down to an ample meal of fish, and the mood was generally a cheerful one. During our ferry ride back to Sfax, I spoke to several union members who had attended the commemoration. When I asked one attendee the reason for her participation in this event, she replied "I come to commemorate the martyrs of my family." Intrigued, I asked who her family was. She replied, "Farhat Hached, Habib Achour, Ahmed Ben Salah." She continued, "this day is the wedding of the martyrs."[23] I was struck by the use of kinship terminology even though she was not related to them in formal terms, as well as her use of the term martyr (*shahîd*) in reference to people who were not actually killed or in the case of Ben Salah not yet deceased.[24] Others invoked similar terminology referring to this event as "a celebration of the symbols of the leaders who have left their mark on Tunisian history."[25]

Nonetheless, the organization cannot be reduced to just its martyred founder, and the union's activities in the years immediately after national liberation are also an important part of its collective memory. More specifically, the legacy that continues to inform unionists' political engagement relates to the organization's involvement in the building of the newly independent Tunisian state. After gaining independence, in 1956, the UGTT and the government of Bourguiba's political ties were further fastened. As noted by Yousfi (2017, 11):

> The union played an active role in building the state, in particular with regard to social and economic reforms. To give one example, the UGTT's 1955 platform resulted in the 1958 healthcare plan, the 1958 education plan and the 1964 industrialization plan. Ministers who had previously served as UGTT secretary general were appointed to implement the plans.

[23] Leila, union member, textiles, Kerkennah, March 2017.
[24] Ahmed Ben Salah passed away on September 16, 2020 at a military hospital in Tunis. He was 95.
[25] Monia, union member, teacher, Kekennah, March 2017.

The fact that the UGTT developed the first social and economic platform implemented by Bourguiba has meant to its members that the union is not merely an organization for collective bargaining and furtherance of members' interests, but also a vehicle for the realization of social justice on a national scale through its influence on policy.

It is this formation of a particular historical narrative and its reproduction by individual members, as well as its material embodiments, that create a collective memory that continues to influence and legitimize unionists' activism. Here I have discussed how this coming of age story is the foundation of this narrative. In the following section, I explain how its history of democratic procedures and internal laws gives members a stake in the organization and allows its heterogenous elements to find a certain level of cohesion.

3.2 The Union's Structure and Procedures

Since its inception, the UGTT has remained the main national labour union representing workers in Tunisian society, although certain important occupational sectors such as agriculture, journalists, and lawyers have separate organizations.[26] With "24 regional unions, 19 sector federations and 21 general unions" (Yousfi 2017, 1), the UGTT has a presence in every small town and village in all parts of the country, representing workers in both public and private sectors. As one veteran unionist put it to me, "the UGTT is inside the people, there is no other organization that can match this level of representativity or coverage".[27] Its vast geographical reach is therefore viewed by many of its members and opponents as one of its principal sources of strength and

[26] Even though since the departure of Ben Ali Tunisia has witnessed the reemergence of independent trade union organizations including the Tunisian General Confederation of Labour (CGTT), the Union of Tunisian Workers (UTT), and the Tunisian Labour Organization (OTT), none has been able to match the scope and representativity of the UGTT.

[27] Interview with Asma, union representative, secondary education, Tunis, November 2016.

influence. Moreover, the scope and size of the UGTT has enabled the formation of a highly heterogeneous membership in a country marked by deep regionalism and class inequality. The organization thus envelopes a rich mix of workers, from healthcare to primary and secondary teachers to textile workers, hailing from different classes of society, a feature which has by definition added to its inclusivity and diversity. Just as significantly, many of the unionists interviewed for this project underscored the range of political ideologies represented within the structure of the union, including Baathists, nationalists, Trotskyites, Stalinists, social democrats, and even Islamists – although most unionists agreed that overall the left-wing forces remain predominant and most organized. However, despite the representation of various political parties amongst the rank and file, the union is adamant that it is not connected to any single party; whereas political parties strive to win seats and gain power, the UGTT, as members repeatedly explained to me, operates on behalf of the workers and by extension the Tunisian people. In fact, as former General Secretary of the UGTT, Abdessalem Jrad, further clarified:

> The UGTT is a democratic organization … It includes all political views and ideologies. Different points of views are living together. However, while union officers are free to have any political view, we have limits. You cannot represent your political party in the UGTT, but you represent the UGTT in your political party.[28]

The notion of democracy has value both for describing its procedures and for its symbolic weight. All members, at all levels, whatever their political affiliations or tendencies, participate in decision-making procedures set out by the basic laws of the union in its constitution. It is for this reason that, according to Jrad, "despite the diversity of thoughts inside the UGTT, members are able to get along, because of the democratic nature of the organization." This is noteworthy because the UGTT was the only organization of any size or significance, legal throughout the years

[28] Interview with Abdesselam Jrad, former General Secretary, National Executive Bureau, Tunis, February 2017.

of authoritarian rule, that had procedures which allowed its members to engage in a range of democratic practices, among them elections, voting, members' meetings, debates and discussions.

Although, as will be discussed, the reality sometimes fell short of this democratic ideal, it was by no means meaningless in practice, and importantly this representation of the UGTT as a democratic organization bestowed upon it a political legitimacy in the eyes of many of its members. This characterization of the UGTT as democratic compliments the narrative of the union as defender of the nation and maker of sacrifices on behalf of the people; it allows members to say that they have long embodied the values that they claim they are here to defend.

With this in mind, it is important to understand how the UGTT is organized, which can be schematized as follows: its core foundation is the local union bodies; on the next level are the regional bureaus and sectoral federations; and at the top sits the thirteen member national executive branch, based in Tunis. With regards to its electoral process, as explained by Yousfi (2017, 20):

> The union's highest body, the National Congress, elects the national executive committee and the secretary general; the base unions and local union bodies comprise the lowest level. Two parallel bodies lie in between at an intermediate level: the regional unions, whose executive committees are elected by base-union representatives on a regional basis (by governorate), and the federations and general unions, which are organized by sector.

Although, without a doubt, the national executive bureau wields significant influence and power, a majority of the unionists interviewed hold the conviction that the basic union members are the true force of the organization, a statement symbolically supported by one of their main slogans, which announces '*an independent union, the base is everything*'.[29] Unionists often indicated to me that inside the UGTT power is not concentrated in the hands of a single individual or office. The UGTT, they claimed, is a democratic organization where decisions are decided in

[29] The Arabic version of the slogan *ittiḥād mustaqill al-qawāʿid hiyya ʾl-kull* was often chanted during many of the union gatherings I attended.

conformity with internal laws. This does not mean there are not important differences of interpretation. For instance, at one end of the spectrum, one unionist insisted to me that the basic members elect officers in key positions and "this is the essence of democracy".[30] At the other end of the spectrum, some unionists, who were more realistic in their appraisal of the union's electoral system, pointed out that prior to an election much internal bargaining takes place as to who should run for key positions. Nonetheless, wherever a unionist is situated on the spectrum, there is agreement that basic members' involvement in these processes is meaningful. Even in the most restrictive interpretation, symbolic weight is accorded to members' participation. Furthermore, the scale and the extent of the union has created distance between local bureaus and the authorities; thus, while the executive bureau must be calculating in its interactions with the state, the local unions, as one member explained, "have more freedom to express their points of view." This is even true for intermediate levels, as this union employee made clear: "in the structure of the UGTT, even regions have more freedom to express themselves than the executive bureau."[31] And lastly, since local unions are the direct link to the population, once they mobilize they can bring more pressure to bear on the executive bureau; it is for this reason that Jrad, for example, asserted that "the executive bureau does not make the decisions, but the decisions come from the basic members and the structure should act in accordance with it." The claim that the executive bureau is ultimately bound by the will of the workers is thus another key element of the narrative of the fundamentally democratic character of the union, even though historically the reality diverges somewhat from this claim (see chapter 4 on Gafsa).

Nonetheless, members are not simply an undifferentiated base; as the unionist quoted above suggested, the other source of the organization's strength originates from the support it

[30] Interview with Asma, union representative, secondary education, Tunis, November 2016.
[31] Interview with Taher, union employee, National Office of Young Workers, Tunis, February 2017.

received from the regions; this was a view I heard frequently during my conversations with the regional representatives of the UGTT. According to this line of reasoning, the resiliency of the UGTT to withstand pressures imposed upon it by the state and other rival political forces is underpinned by the commitment of its regional bureaus in remaining loyal and supporting the position of the UGTT as Tunisia's most important national union. Part of this regional commitment, particularly in the Tunisian South, is once again linked to the history of the labour movement. For instance, as explained by one union representative in Sfax, the country's second city and largest port:

> Sfax is the powerhouse of syndicalist work. Farhat Hached, Habib Achour, and many other militants are from this region … Syndicalist roots and traditions of the UGTT in Sfax are special … On December 4th, 2012, when UGTT headquarters were attacked,[32] Sfax the very next day went on a strike. When there is a problem, the General Secretary of the UGTT comes to Sfax. Because the UGTT here is always ready. Historically, after Sfax then comes Gafsa [the centre of a major mining region]. These regions represent the strength of the UGTT.[33]

In this regard, it is important to consider the bidirectional quality of power. It was made clear to me by a number of interviewees that if a region, say, decided to go on strike, that they could only do so with the authorization of the executive bureau in Tunis in the form of a single signature from any of the thirteen members – and yet they could always count on this authorization being granted. Even at the height of the revolution, one union officer from Kasserine told me, he drove to Tunis in order to obtain a signature from the executive authorizing their strike.[34] The UGTT's structure and the relations between its components are not therefore a centralized, top-down hierarchy of the command-and-control type, but a partially decentralized dialogue in which

[32] On December 4, 2012, just before the start of a march from Mohamad Ali Place in commemoration of the assassination of Farhat Hached, trade unionists were attacked by an organized group of people thought to have been affiliated with the Islamist political party Ennahda. According to news reports, the assailants attacked the UGTT headquarters with knives and sticks and inflicted damage on its offices (Reuters Staff 2012).
[33] Interview with Moussa, union representative, private sector and social security, Sfax, March 2017.
[34] Interview with Aziz, union representative, secondary school teacher, Kasserine, February 2017.

the constituent parts are mutually dependent, even if there is a clearly outlined pyramid with the national leadership at the top, the base at the bottom, and the sectors and regions mediating between them.

While the UGTT's structure can certainly be characterized as following certain democratic procedures and involving basic members up to a point, the organization's funding and sources of income are significantly less transparent. It is therefore important to remember that there is a counter-narrative, one which, while recognizing the importance of the UGTT, is more critical, especially with regards to the opacity of its finances. This was expressed to me by one Tunisian civil society activist, who described it thus:

> The role of the union in Tunisia has always been controversial. We believe that it is true that the UGTT is a historic institution that played a very important role in Tunisia's independence and even after … They are part of the civil society and they have a strong influence in politics. I think this is something that should not be mixed up with the fact that the UGTT is accountable to the people. Because the UGTT does not belong to [specific] people, the UGTT belongs to history of Tunisia. I think the UGTT has different approaches, or different visions sometimes, and we disagree with them when it comes to accountability and transparency. We don't know the budget of the UGTT – it is a taboo to talk about their budget. We don't know how the UGTT is managing its finances. They are managing millions of dinars. They receive funds from the state, they receive funds from their members, they have 500,000 members. They also receive funds from international institutions, like the World Bank. We are not accusing anyone, but we don't know because we have never seen anything published. So, we have doubts.[35]

It is worth noting that whether or not the UGTT receives foreign financial support, and if so, how much, remains a contested issue, and while some civil society activists argue that it does, the UGTT denies this claim. However, unlike the decree-law banning political parties from acquiring funding from "foreign or 'unknown' sources – direct, or indirect, financial, in goods or services (Art. 19)" (Kausch 2013, 3), the 2011 decree-law on associations provides legal permission to associations to receive foreign financial assistance, aid and technical support, except

[35] Interview with Walid, civil society activist, Tunis, May 2016.

from those countries with which Tunisia has no diplomatic relations (Mnasri 2011). Therefore, unlike governments such as Egypt's, who are wary of "foreign assistance" directed at associations,[36] since the departure of Ben Ali, Tunisia's recognition of the potential value of foreign financial and technical support for its democratic process has led to development of a legal framework favourable to foreign funding (Kausch 2013), even though a large number of local civil society activists believe that these funds favour large, highly professionalized international NGOs to the detriment of smaller, Tunisian organizations (Weilandt 2019). Nonetheless, ineffective oversight mechanisms have prevented administrative authorities from ensuring that associations comply with state's regulations. By way of example, while all donations to NGOs exceeding 500 dinars must be done through a traceable bank transfer, according to research conducted by Anwar Mnasri (2016) regarding foreign funding, "most of the financing operations are made in cash, which makes it practically impossible to control them" (46). Therefore, the lack of oversight with respect to donor agencies has resulted in a rise in public fear of foreign influence in Tunisia's political process (Kausch 2013).

Returning to the UGTT, those skeptical towards the possibility of the UGTT receiving foreign funding, underscore that for the union's leadership, financial independence is quite important, and, more importantly, that the union does not require external financial assistance anyway. As one veteran unionist reasoned, the UGTT receives a monthly membership fee of 3 dinars from workers in the public sector, and 1.25 dinars in the private sector. Annually this small membership fee adds up to millions of dinars. Furthermore, the unionists continued, somewhat

[36] Egypt's security agencies' suspicions over NGOs receiving foreign financial support has contributed to the shrinking of the country's civil society due to severe government crackdown (Human Rights Watch 2017). In 2016, for example, Egyptian authorities arrested Azza Soliman, a lawyer and founder of the Centre for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance, over foreign funding allegations. That same year, the assets of at least 16 human rights defenders, were frozen over similar accusations (Human Rights Watch 2016).

vaguely, the UGTT is in possession of important financial assets, including a luxury hotel in the upmarket coastal town of Gammarth near Tunis, rental properties, and numerous wedding venues throughout the country. Therefore, for this member, although the union's expenses are high, it should not have any problem supporting its financial independence.[37]

The ineffectiveness of state oversight and auditing of the UGTT's finances, especially its sources of income, means it is harder to verify if the UGTT always complies with the rule of law. This is also the case for other Tunisian organizations, such as NGOs, however. There are thus limits to the UGTT's ability to champion democratic norms. Nonetheless, comparison to Egypt would suggest that the union through its procedures has acted as an important incubator of democratic practices. For instance, in his study of the labour movement in Egypt, where under Mubarak organized labour was under direct control of the state, Beinin (2011) explains that "workers electing strike committees and debating whether or not to accept strike settlement terms was one of the most democratic public activities during [that] era" (193). It is in this context that Beinin refers to the labour movement of 2000s as "providing a laboratory for democracy" (193). If this is true of Egypt, then in Tunisia, where the union by virtue of its size and historic role had more freedom of maneuver, the scope for experimentation for democratic practices has been correspondingly greater.

3.3 The Unionists' Uprisings of 1978 & 1983-84

In the course of my fieldwork, I was frequently reminded by both unionists and non-unionists that during the period of Ben Ali, certain members of the UGTT leadership could have been described

[37] Interview with Aziz, union representative, secondary education, Kasserine, December 2016. The strategy of financing its activities through both membership dues and other means is not unique to the UGTT. In Germany, where trade unions have long played an important role in the spheres of social and economic policies, an important source of income for unions comes from their assets (Dribbusch and Birke 2012, 5).

as obedient to, or at the very least, cooperative with the authority of the state. Moreover, in an authoritarian environment built upon a system based on patronage and favouritism, these kinds of self-serving practices had become standard behaviour amongst union leaders, who opted for a non-confrontational strategy when dealing with state authorities. This acquiescence on the part of the union's top leadership thus provided sufficient evidence for some academics to dismiss the potential of the union as an agent of democratization. Eva Bellin, for example, in her 2002 book, *Stalled Democracy: Capital, Labor, and the Paradox of State-Sponsored Development*, presented the argument that in "late-developing countries" state-sponsored industrialization had given rise to a specific kind of capital and labour, which she labelled "contingent democrats." In these countries, Bellin proposed, labour and capital have less interest in challenging an authoritarian state that is particularly attentive to their material interests, and as such they are less enthusiastic for democratic change. To confirm her proposition, she specifically focused on the case of Tunisia's authoritarian relapse following Ben Ali's empty promise to initiate democratic reform after his "medical coup d'état"[38] ousted Bourguiba from power. In reference to Tunisia, Bellin wrote:

> Retreats from democratic opening, unfortunately, are not all that surprising. What is surprising in the Tunisian case is the muted response it drew from society. News of democratic setbacks elicited little protest from Tunisian citizens. A small coterie of brave-hearted intellectuals and professionals centered in Tunisia's Human Rights League and one or two small opposition parties waged valiant battle against this retreat. And the few Islamist intellectuals not yet swallowed up by the maw of state repression voiced dissent as well. But other groups in society that might have been expected to protest the regime's change of heart proved surprisingly different. Most notably, organized labor, long a pole of political activism and opposition in Tunisian affairs, stood stoically by Ben Ali's regime (2).

[38] On November 7, 1987, Ben Ali, invoking Article 57 of the Tunisian constitution, gathered a group of medical experts who declared that Bourguiba's deteriorating physical and mental state rendered him incapable of meeting the obligations of the office of president, thus opening the way to Ben Ali's assumption of power (Ware 1988).

Although academic research indicates that during Ben Ali's tenure, certain prominent union leaders did indeed come to represent the very injustices that many of the Tunisian youth were fighting against (Allal 2012), the aforementioned approach, which both looks at the union top-down and homogenizes the rank and file of the UGTT is certainly one reason the small-scale collective activities of various groups inside its structure have often been overlooked. As will be explained in later chapters, despite the complicity of the union's leadership with the authoritarian state, precisely because of the way its historical legacy has been kept alive, activism on the part of members has always been essential to its internal functioning. Moreover, to observe and explain union leaders' behaviour above all through the prism of material interest is to overlook the continued impact of unionists' history of collective action on their relations to Ben Ali's regime. Barring the revolution of 2010-2011, in post-independence Tunisia the two most noted nationwide mobilizations took place during Bourguiba's presidency. The first was in 1978, dubbed "Black Thursday," and the second was in 1983-84, known as the "Bread Riots." The repression of these two uprisings and the price some union officials paid made the union leaders more circumspect in their dealings with the regime. These experiences thus took centre stage in the political memory of union leaders (and some activists) and would be paramount in shaping their interactions with the new government of Ben Ali from 1987 on.

3.3.1 The Neo-Destour and the UGTT: Between Alliance and Conflict

From the 1950s till the 1980s Tunisian politics was overshadowed by the domineering figure of Habib Bourguiba, who embodied both anti-colonialism and modernization on the one hand, and on the other, authoritarian tendencies which became more pronounced later on in his rule, as he projected himself as a rational, enlightened, patriotic and scientific leader establishing a "strong

state" in order to "guide" his people to democracy (Micaud 1969). Following on from the close alliance between the UGTT and the Neo-Destour in the anti-colonial struggle, in 1956 the two entered into a system of cooperation, including UGTT participation in government. In an effort to maintain unity between the single-party state and the UGTT, Bourguiba offered high ranking political positions to UGTT leaders, including ministerial posts; they were also customarily members of the Neo-Destour Political Bureau and Central Committee. To ensure political accord with the UGTT, Bourguiba adopted the union's national economic and social program. As noted earlier in this chapter, this meant that the 1958 healthcare plan, the 1958 education plan, and the 1964 industrialization plan were all taken from the union's platform, and these plans were implemented by ministers who had earlier served as UGTT secretary generals. Equally importantly, throughout the 1960s, the government agreed to the creation of farming and business cooperatives, as well as state-run enterprises, with the objective of decolonizing the economy and with the aim of maintaining the UGTT's support with a more socialist-leaning industrial plan (Yousfi 2017).

On the other hand, under the guise of national unity and in an effort to tighten his grip over Tunisia's political landscape, Bourguiba became directly involved in the internal affairs of the union. His involvement extended as far as "[replacing] secretary generals, hav[ing] them transferred, or appoint[ing] and then fir[ing] them, as he did with ministers" (Yousfi 2017, 11). What is more, "most union officials were drawn from the Destour ranks until the early 1970s and political officials approved candidacies for union positions based on party loyalty (Yousfi 2017, 11). The nascent autocratic system thus sought to incorporate and take control of the UGTT in order to consolidate its authority.

There is a rich body of scholarship on the nature of corporatism in authoritarian regimes in the Middle East (Bianchi 1989; Ehteshami and Murphy 1996; Posusney 1997), as well as similar concepts such as "national-populist social pacts" (Heydemann 2007). For Heydemann (2007), the resilience of authoritarianism in the Middle East can be explained through this "model," which involves the organization of mass politics through both formal and informal governing arrangements; trade unions are part of this formal structure, along with courts, parliaments, NGOs, professional and peasants' associations, acting to restrain "authoritarian rulers [from] behav[ing] selectively" (27). While these pacts allow regimes to "incorporate interests, absorb oppositions, coopt competitors, [and] build flexible coalitions" (35), this elasticity is nonetheless compatible with existing norms, formal institutional arrangements, and conventions of informal politics. The durability of authoritarian regimes can thus be attributed to the benefits a wide range of actors gain from participating in these arrangements. Meanwhile, in their examination of the transformation of corporatist states, Ehteshami and Murphy maintained that in countries where nationalist movements replaced the old colonial structure with a single-party rule, as in Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt, for example, the new political systems were framed around a corporatist model where political grievances and interests were aired through "the established and internalized system of interest articulation" (1996, 754). According to the authors, in this context, the corporatist state considered "society to be organic, rather like a body with many parts functioning harmoniously … 'the brain (the government) and the nervous system (the party) control these parts … to achieve a desired end" (755). Therefore, corporatism enabled the new ruling elites to articulate the economic goals of socialism by applying "top-down interpretations of socialist structures and ideological concepts. The evolving practice of engaging the state as principal or sole producer … were more

likely to be motivated by the desire to eliminate opposing power-bases than to genuinely transform society" (758).

In addition, in his study of associative life and unions in single-party regimes in Egypt, Algeria, and Syria, Harik (1994) argued that these organizations came to function as a corporatist organ and a partner of the authoritarian regimes, "[by] giving up the right to strike in return for special favors" (48). Dina Bishara (2018), drawing on Bellin (2000) and Posusney's (1997) theorizations, asserts that the durability of corporatist systems rests with the authoritarian regime's ability to guarantee material and political interests in exchange for political support, in particular, from organized labour. Therefore, the advent of economic liberalization can disrupt this corporatist bargain by way of diminishing the size of the public sector, and therefore the unions' base, and increasing the number and influence of new actors (35). With regard to Egypt, Bishara focuses on the tension that can emerge inside this contractual relationship, both between the state and organized labour, as well as between the coopted union leadership and the rank-and-file workers. She contends:

> Trade union leaders stand to lose from the advent of economic liberalization … These losses may be mitigated, however, especially in cases where trade union leaders are effectively coopted by the state – through integration into ruling parties or ruling coalitions. In such contexts, coopted leaders have an interest in maintaining their access to political power and may be isolated enough from the rank-and-file workers, rendering their failure to actively oppose the government's economic policies irrelevant for their ability to maintain their positions in the trade union hierarchy (35).

In Tunisia, however, as I will explain shortly, despite the regime's strong hold over the executive branch of the union and despite the state's economic shift towards liberalization, the rank-and-file workers instead of simply "[bypassing] the official union structure to press for their demands" (37), made reversing the leadership's contractual relationship with the government one of their key objectives. Moreover, freeing the union structure from the grip of the authoritarian

regime was an objective that drew on unionists' collective memory of its autonomy and the successful struggle in the colonial period that had made that possible.

By the late 1970s, significant tensions between Bourguiba and the UGTT had begun to emerge.[39] There were two bones of contention. Firstly, Bourguiba's rule, from early on autocratic in character, only grew in its dictatorial tendencies, such that by 1974 he had himself announced as president-for-life (Brown 2001). This gradual expansion of authoritarian rule had as one of its most important consequences the absorption of the UGTT into the institutions controlled by Bourguiba; the union, which had been its equal during the independence struggle, was thus rendered a secondary actor incapable of challenging the state. The second and concurrent bone of contention was the government's economic transition from the socialist experiment which had failed to ameliorate the economic situation of either peasants or salaried workers (Vandewalle 1988) in favour of programs of market liberalism. This new economic approach adopted in the early 1970s, however, while it did stimulate economic growth, generally benefited already affluent sectors of society at the expense of Tunisian workers (Vandewalle 1988). The most important consequence of this was the 1978 general strike.

In parallel to these developments, ideological shifts inside the union began to generate a fissure in the customary alliance with the government. By the early 1970s, militant left-wing university students were consolidating their base inside Tunisian universities, particularly inside the General Union of Tunisian Students (UGET), with demands including free elections, the end of the single party and the dismantling of the repressive state apparatus (Allal and Geisser 2018). Soon a new generation of university graduates had entered the labour force bearing this new

[39] That is not to say there were no tensions earlier on. In 1965, the government and the UGTT entered a period of crisis over the union's demand for pay increases (Yousfi 2017). The escalation of this crisis led to the arrest of UGTT general secretary Habib Achour.

political consciousness with them. They constituted a new force within the UGTT, with its base inside decisive sectors including primary and secondary education, transportation, health, post and telecommunications, and petrochemicals. Apart from defending the rights of the workers, this new group sought to reinvigorate unionists' political activism by recapturing the institutional autonomy of the UGTT in defence of those workers affected by the regime's economic policy. This new militancy manifested itself in the form of an increasing number of wildcat strikes in the mid-1970s (Vandewalle 1988).

As militant syndicalists' scope of influence grew, so did tensions between Bourguiba and the UGTT, resulting in a revision of their relationship from mutually beneficial cooperation to one of confrontation and suspicion. Continued pressure from the UGTT's grassroots members, along with mounting economic, social, and political problems, compelled leading UGTT figures, most prominently Habib Achour (UGTT General Secretary) to resign from the Political Bureau of the PSD. Former regional General Secretary of Sfax, Mohamed Chaabane, who also resigned at this time, asserted to me that "when Bourguiba recognized he was no longer able to get involved in the affairs of the UGTT, when he saw his influence was weakening, he unleashed his militia and security."[40] In 1977, an assassination attempt on Habib Achour, which unionists attributed to Bourguiba's armed militia, prompted syndicalists to go on a two hours strike. In an article published in *al-Shaab* (see figure 3.4), the text cites a meeting held at the UGTT bureau in Kerkennah, Sfax, hometown of Habib Achour, during which it was declared that "workers are a force that cannot be eliminated by assassination."

[40] Interview with Chaabane, former UGTT General Secretary, Sfax, March 2017.


الشعب ص 4
الحياة القومية
الجمعة 11 نوفمبر 1977
قرطنة
الاضراب شامل
.. وعزز التجار وأصحاب المهن الحرة

Figure 3.4: "The strike is total: traders and the self-employed have honoured it." UGTT's al-Shaab 11 November 1977 (Source: UGTT Tunis archive)

As the relationship between the ruling Destourian Socialist Party and the UGTT continued to deteriorate, the union called a general strike on January 26, 1978, to protest against the growing economic crisis and continued attacks on the union and its leadership. The general strike of 1978 is in itself significant because it is an early and prominent example of how the rank and file of the UGTT could pressure the leadership to support their demands. Prior to the union's leadership leaving the Political Bureau of the ruling party, as already mentioned the number of wildcat strikes

to demand wage increase and to protest unfair dismissal had been on the rise; in May 1976, for example, it was reported that a group of workers demonstrated outside the UGTT headquarters "over the lack of support from the union leadership, chanting 'Achour Murderer!' " (Disney 1978, 13). Again, in January 1977, when the UGTT's leadership signed a "social contract" with the government designed to maintain social stability during its five-year economic plan, 600 union members attending the 1977 UGTT Congress signed a petition condemning the leadership for excluding them from the consultation process "in violation of the most elementary principles of trade union democracy" (Disney 1978, 13).[41] These actions on the part of the membership, in addition to attacks on unionists, prompted the leadership to call a general strike as a warning to the government "to respond to the demands from the base who are beginning to lose patience…" (Disney 1978, 14). The general strike unleashed a violent confrontation between state security forces, unionists and workers, which resulted in the death of more than 200 individuals (although the official figure put the number between 40 to 100) (UGTT 2021a; Disney 1978), while the estimated count of persons injured in the events "numbered in the thousands; some 1600 were arrested, over 33 were given jail sentences of up to seven years, and more than 10 [continued] to be held without charges" (Disney 1978, 12). The leaders of the UGTT were removed, arrested, or placed under house arrest. The crisis offered Bourguiba the opportunity to fill those newly vacant positions with pro-regime forces.

[41] This is Disney's paraphrase of the language of the petition.



Image 3.5: a photograph of the General Strike in Tunis on January 26 (Disney 1978,13)

During an interview in Sfax with two UGTT representatives, they recalled how during this highly repressive period a group of syndicalists created a secret militant faction dubbed *Shuʿla*, the "Flame."[42] They outlined how the Flame focused its activities on defending the rights of the workers, disseminating information on the workers' movement, and opposing the dictatorship of the ruling party. To strengthen their political base, some members of the Flame acted as discussion leaders inside various student clubs, particularly groups which concentrated on political economy, Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, history, and political philosophy. The group established a radio station inside the local UGTT office to broadcast criticisms directed at the government. Moreover, when Bourguiba arrested journalists working for the UGTT journal *al-Shaab*, "the People," the Flame founded a clandestine journal called *The Secret People.*[43] They also recounted how after the crackdown, "militant leaders from the left organized some clandestine groups, including a

[42] Interview with Salah and Nouri, union representatives, secondary education, Sfax, March 2017.
[43] Interview with Salah and Nouri, union representatives, secondary education, Sfax, March 2017.

'national initiative committee', to secretly guide the direction of the syndicalist movement." When Bourguiba began to fill decisive leadership positions with pro-regime allies "to make the union unrepresentative of its base," the militant sectors secretly organized discussion circles to aid the syndicalist cause. Beyond political activism, other secret activities included financially supporting the families of imprisoned unionists whose salaries had been cut off.

In the early 1980s, Bourguiba's government initiated another round of economic liberalization. Most significantly, for the purposes of this narrative, in 1983, at the request of the IMF, the government temporarily lifted "subsidies on primary foodstuffs to fulfill certain requirements for international loans," which resulted in in the cost of bread increasing 108 percent (Aboueldahab 2018). Consequently, at the end of 1983 and the beginning of 1984 Tunisia witnessed a rolling wave of protests, which came to be known as the "Bread Riots." Unlike 1978, while the UGTT did threaten a general strike, none actually took place as Bourguiba ultimately ordered that price increases be rescinded. Nonetheless, during this period, many of the leaders as well as members of the rank and file did support the protests; the riots ultimately resulted in over 900 injuries and more than 800 arrests (Nelson 1986, 230), including members of the UGTT and some of its leaders.

Returning to the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter, as a closer examination of the events of 1978 and 1984 demonstrate, even within authoritarian political systems, regime practices of cooptation and repression do not automatically result in the hollowing out of a union's oppositional agency. The UGTT was clearly on occasion an effective oppositional actor. However, it must be viewed as a composite actor. As stated earlier, while during the early years of the newly independent state the UGTT's leadership was very much a part of the ruling party's apparatus, the gradual expansion of mobilization by the base and the pressures – or threats of pressure – they

imposed in the form of wildcat strikes forced the union leadership to reconsider and change its working relationship vis-à-vis the state. Part of the effectiveness of the tactic of wildcat strike was that they could be deployed symbolically, with many of them lasting for only two hours like the examples mentioned above. These strikes both sent a strong message to the UGTT leadership that the base would not accept the former's complicity with the regime, and a broader demonstration of the potential of strikes to disrupt the economy.

Furthermore, while during both uprisings state crackdowns had a severe impact on the union's leaders and members, these two events also served to enrich the union's collective narrative and cement its foundation in the ideas of struggle, sacrifice, and martyrdom; it is precisely for this reason that this chapter has focused on these two uprisings. They were frequently invoked by my interviewees when they talked to me about the role of the UGTT in its struggle to defend the people.

Lastly and most crucially, these two events served as important lessons that determined top unionists' future action. While the relationship of the leadership with the regime of Ben Ali (who came to power in 1987) can in part be explained through the lens of material interests, the memory of these two events had considerable consequences. When I interviewed Jrad, who participated in and served time in prison during both uprisings, he reflected on the events of 1978. At the time he was the general secretary of transportation sector. He noted:

> Our goal was not to bring the regime down. The strike was not supposed to bother the citizens or to create an additional crisis. We had to do it because there was a dictatorship in the government and they damaged the rights of workers. And they interfered in the political life of the people. For us it was a regular strike, but the regime with its militias and the police and the military … there were many martyrs.

Jrad, who served as the UGTT's General Secretary from 2002 until 2011, was criticized by some of my interviewees for his close relationship with Ben Ali; however, having witnessed

the consequences of 1978 and 1983-1984, he justified a conciliatory approach, elaborating a non-confrontational relationship between the UGTT and the state in the following terms:

> The UGTT should not go into direct confrontation with the regime. We can support the opposition, but should not go into direct confrontation. Because we must support the workers, and if there is a confrontation the workers will suffer.[44]

Chaabane, who also participated in and served time in prison during both events, likewise emphasized that "union work is based on lessons. You need to be courageous but smart. Because your mistake is not just about you; the workers will pay the price."[45] Reflecting on the impact of this history on unionists' activities, Chaabane stated that "in prison we learned many lessons. Patience and bravery. Jail makes you mentally stronger … In the UGTT, you need to have both the strength [to withstand oppression] and the [ability to engage in] dialogue. Because when confronting the security [apparatus], this is the language that they understand." Chaabane's emphasis on the lessons of the past is particularly significant, because the events of 1978 and 1983-84 are the two moments in Tunisian history where the army became involved in the country's politics. The severity of the crackdown was therefore uppermost in the memory of a whole generation of UGTT leaders under Ben Ali who had participated in these events. Eventually, as it turned out in 2010-2011, this memory would provide them with a blueprint for how to respond to new nationwide strikes while avoiding a similar fate. This will be a subject of further discussion in chapter 5.

3.4 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has discussed the ways in which unionists' appropriation of a particular historical narrative, and the subsequent reproduction of a salient collective memory, has been used to sustain

[44] Interview with Abdesselam Jrad, former General Secretary, National Executive Bureau, Tunis, February 2017.
[45] Interview with Chaabane, UGTT General Secretary, Sfax, March 2017.

unionists' solidarity, activism, and legitimize the UGTT's prominent place in Tunisian politics. In particular, the reconstruction of specific historical periods, particularly those associated with trade union pioneers, episodes of colonial struggle, and the events of 1978 and 1983-1984, have allowed union activists to maintain unity and a sense of moral responsibility amongst members. As one union regional representative put it to me, the "strength of the UGTT comes from the fact that it fulfills the needs of many people … morally – human rights, freedom of expression and liberty."[46] Nonetheless, as discussed in this chapter, the interpretation and appropriation of this memory is not monolithic, as is evident in the leadership' use of memory of past conflict with the regime to justify a more conciliatory relationship with the state authorities subsequently.

Divergent interpretations of this memory means that, even though since the 1960s, the UGTT leadership has been closely affiliated with the state, its more militant activists have never ceased their activities. It is for this reason that the state has never been able to fully coopt the organization. Amongst its members, loyalty to the UGTT ultimately supersedes all other political disagreements, a consequence of both loyalty to the UGTT sustained through the reproduction of its history, and of its democratic principles, which, however imperfect in operation, allow meaningful member participation as well as being themselves a source of pride and therefore both collective identity and external legitimation. Even during periods of intense disagreement between militant unionists and the leadership, as Nouri, union representative from Sfax explained, "the strength of the militant syndicalists, when things were bad, was that they did not leave to start a separate union. They stayed with the UGTT."[47] This commitment endured despite occasions where the leadership, when seeking closer relations with the state, sought to punish refractory union

[46] Interview with Nizar, union regional representative, Gabes, December 2016.
[47] Interview with Nouri, union representative, secondary education, Sfax, March 2017.

activists by – for example in the case of teachers, who are public employees –having them transferred to postings in what they perceived as less desirable parts of the country.

Ben Ali, learning from his predecessor's experiences, understood the value of cultivating, and more importantly, maintaining a close relationship with Tunisia's principal labour organization, especially with its executive bureaus. It is particularly during this era that the UGTT came to be conceptualized, including in the academic literature, as an ineffective driver of democratic social and political change. In the following chapter, I will discuss the first major mobilization which took place during Ben Ali's tenure, in which, although it was not initiated by the UGTT, local unionists played a fundamental role, including by organizing protesters. The events of Gafsa offered important lessons to unionists on how to manage – but also how not to manage – collective action when the opportunity for the forging of a wide social movement presented itself in 2010.

Chapter 4: The 2008 Uprising of the Unemployed Youth

On November 7, 1987, upon deposing Bourguiba from power, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, now president of Tunisia, pledged to commence a series of democratic political reforms, declaring grandly, "the Tunisian people is ready for democracy" (Yousfi 2017, 20). Ben Ali's promise of political liberalization was part of an incipient trend in MENA, where, subsequent to the so-called third wave of democratization which started with the Portuguese revolution in 1974 before then spreading elsewhere in the world until the 1990s (Huntington 1991), Arab states in the region "announced major reforms intended to strengthen popular participation in governance" (Lust 2011, 163). Yet, much like leaders in Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain where, "despite a plethora of agreements signed, parliaments opened, and otherwise outward signs of liberalization, no state made significant, un-retracted steps towards freedom …" (Lust 2011, 164), and just as in Egypt partial economic liberalization masked the lack of genuine political reform (Kienle 2001), Ben Ali's commitment to democratic change was short-lived. As his political regime matured, it was increasingly characterized less by democratization and more by adroit management of the forces of political repression. For the greater part of his time as president of Tunisia, one major consequence of his retreat from his initial promise of opening was that his rule benefited from considerable stability, state control of political space largely mitigating against the formation of a robust opposition movement. In the context of Ben Ali's rule, at once novel and yet marked by strong continuities with his predecessor, chapter 4 seeks to answer general RQ 2: under an authoritarian environment marked by cooptation and repression, how did the Tunisian General Labour Union support and participate in collective action?

Much like Bourguiba, the new president maintained a strong single-party system, albeit granting legal recognition to a handful of political parties, though none ever gained more than a few seats in the National Constituent Assembly (NAC). Nonetheless, despite the continuities, it is important to attend to the specificity of the new order. One way in which the Ben Ali era, even after the abandonment of political liberalization, was markedly different from Bourguiba's time in power was in the newly subordinate role of the UGTT, including its leadership's complicity in the adoption of neo-liberal economic policies. Whereas under Bourguiba the UGTT had been a partner of the state for a significant period of time before eventually seeing its status diminish, under Ben Ali it began as an already structurally weakened union as a result of the conflicts of 1978 and 1983-84 discussed in chapter 3.

Once Ben Ali moved away from his promises of democratic opening, he began to control, restrict and stifle potential opposition through a mix of force (Mirjam 2019), cooptation, and favouritism. As a means to ensure political stability, he thus adopted broadly similar techniques of repression to other states in the region. Just as when comparing Bourguiba and Ben Ali, however, attention also needs to be paid to considerable divergences in the dynamics of repression and cooptation. It should be noted that from the 1980s, as explained by Lust (2011), in predominantly Muslim societies "political Islam" and the "Islamist threat" provoked the greatest fear amongst both incumbents and their "secularist opponents" (165). Given these perceptions at the time, many leaders opted for various containment strategies ranging from institutional cooptation to outright repression in order to manage Islamist dissent and secure the status quo (Albrecht and Wegner 2006; Kraetzschmar and Cavatorta 2010; Storm 2009). In countries where the Islamists had proved to be too weak, or where Islamist parties ultimately demonstrated deference to incumbents, authoritarian regimes permitted their limited and regulated inclusion into the existing system. In

Morocco and Algeria (post-2002), for instance, leading Islamist political parties were allowed by the government to participate in the political arena with relative freedom, a situation that was made possible, above all, by the parties' willingness to "show commitment to the incumbent regime" and by not becoming "a genuine opposition force" (Storm 2009, 1001).

By contrast, in Egypt and Tunisia, apart from a brief period of appeasement,[48] confrontation had become the central approach towards the "Islamic threat" (Layachi 2000, 16). In particular, in countries where Islamists had traditionally been excluded from the political arena, as noted by Lust (2011), "incumbents, attempting to promote divisions between secularists and Islamist opponents, would raise the specter of the Islamist threat, suggesting to secularist opponents that they were better off with the 'devil they knew' than the one they did not …" (165). Therefore, in Mubarak's Egypt, for instance, the state's long-term strategy towards the Muslim Brotherhood most notably focused on "[curtailing] the Brotherhood's gains within civil society and [weakening] its ability to garner increased grassroots support", primarily through the "intensification of its crackdown against the group …" (Campagna 1995, 280).

In Tunisia, too, as described by Bellin (2002), "from the moment Ben Ali came to power, the strongest threat to his regime was posed by Islamist forces," which had started to generated momentum "in the wake of the Iranian revolution" (117). Given that Ben Ali soon abandoned his overture to other political actors, bringing at least some Islamists into the political system was no longer an option for dealing with the challenge they represented. Beginning in the 1990s, the government therefore opted for a policy of crackdown, during which time "thousands of movement activists were imprisoned, tortured, or subjected to other human rights violations" (Meddeb 2019,

[48] In Tunisia, between 1987 to 1989, when Ben Ali promised to initiate democratic reforms, the government accepted the political participation of Ennahda in the National Pact of 1988 and the parliamentary elections of 1989. The Islamist Movement nonetheless failed to experience electoral success during these elections (Allani 2009).

6),[49] while a wide spectrum of political forces, including the UGTT leadership (Bellin 2002), remained acquiescent. In particular, during the 1990s, Ben Ali, along with other authoritarian elites, was able to take advantage of the violent conflict in neighbouring Algeria (1991-2002) between the army and the Islamic Armed Movement to legitimize and carry out their repressive policies against Islamist parties (Lust 2011).

Apart from Islamist movements, a second set of perceived threats emanated from other political, social and economic actors viewed as potential regime challengers, mainly groups belonging to the realm of civil society. Here, authoritarian rulers again relied on a mix of methods: reinforcing the institutions of repression, enacting conciliatory measures, and, above all, resorting to the practice of cooptation and favoritism in order to try garner support and to reward regime loyalists (Albrecht and Schlumberger 2004; Bank 2004; Bellin 2004). It is for this reason that, according to Norton (2001), throughout the MENA region, civil society entities in the last part of the twentieth century were often characterized as "deficient, corrupt, aggressive, hostile, infiltrated, coopted, insignificant, or absent …" (8). Cooptation of civil society organizations was an important pillar of regime stability in many countries, with, however, variety in the mode of cooptation, as authoritarian regimes often adopt different strategies depending on the material or institutional opportunities and resources available to them. As explained by Albrecht and Schlumberger (2004), in Arab countries where incumbents have been able to profit from substantial resource wealth, cooptation strategies may often be characterized as "allocative," whereas in semi-rentier economies, such as Tunisia and Egypt, depending on the economic circumstances, states may shift from "allocative" to "inclusionary" practices (383). Regardless of

[49] These abuses were documents by international human rights organizations at the time; Human Rights Watch (1999) for example, estimated that at the end of the decade the majority of political prisoners continued to be Ennahda members, between 1000 to 2000 individuals in total.

their form, however, cooptation strategies have been utilized by authoritarian rulers to widen their power base.

While cooptation is never total, workers' movements in the region have been far from immune from its effects. At the turn of the century, despite this background, scholars such as Ibrahim (2001), nonetheless contended that professional syndicates had been "the most active civil organizations in the Arab World ..." (41), owing to the fact that "they perform[ed] union-like benefits for their membership … because of the higher level of education and political consciousness, and … their relatively independent financial resources" (41). Indeed, in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, professional syndicates were "potent pressure groups during the 1970s and 1980s" (Ibrahim 2001, 41), able thus to bring pressure to bear on their respective regimes. This situation notwithstanding, containment strategies used by authoritarian incumbents did change the dynamics of labour militancy, as the UGTT's leadership's shift to a more conciliatory position vis-à-vis the state in the last quarter of the century shows. However, Albrecht and Schlumberger (2004) go too far in this direction when arguing that Arab trade unions and professional syndicates, rather than "being forums for competing programs or "ideas" meant to serve societies' interests, have been transformed into entities interested in "access to decision-making power and resources" (383). As I will show, even within a political environment where important elements of the UGTT were coopted, for the base and its more militant factions the union continued to serve as the primary vehicle for various forms of collective action and contentious political engagement.

Turning first, however, toward those elements which were by and large coopted, during the early years of Ben Ali the union's leadership sought to rehabilitate its relationship with the state through acts such as participating in the National Pact of 1988,[50] or, in 1989, organizing a Congress

[50] On August 5, 1988, in an open letter published across Tunisian newspapers, Ben Ali called on major opposition groups and civil society to form a National Pact as a sign of national unity.

with the symbolically weighty title of "Reconciliation" (UGTT 2017a). More remarkably, by the 1990s, when Ben Ali had clearly pulled back from his promise of democratic change, the UGTT, as stated by Bellin (2002), "retreated from any directly confrontational political role" (149). Three striking examples of this conciliatory approach, and of the union leadership's cooptation, are the following. First, in 1994, the leadership supported the re-election of Ben Ali as President (Bellin 2002). Second, the union tried to distance itself from organizations such as the Tunisian Human Rights League that worked to reveal human rights abuses of Ben Ali's regime, by, for instance, refusing to publish their press releases and reports in the UGTT newspaper (Bellin 2002). Third, in 2000, when a Tunisian journalist, Tawfiq Bin Brik, working for the French newspaper *La Croix*, went on hunger strike in protest against repeated harassment by security forces after writing about Ben Ali's human rights abuses, the UGTT executive leadership echoed Ben Ali's denunciation of the French press as colonialists infringing on Tunisia's national sovereignty; the French press had supported Bin Brik and criticized Ben Ali's abuses (Sadiki 2002). Different explanations have been proposed for this apparent change in the UGTT's position towards the state. Bellin's own interpretation underscores the impact of Ben Ali's strategy of establishing an accord between the regime and the union leadership as a means to cultivate a popular ally against the Islamist movement (Bellin 2002). According to this line of reasoning then, the mutual desire for an alliance against Islamists ultimately helped bring the UGTT, or at least its leadership, under the influence of the regime.

Other scholars have however attributed this shift in the UGTT's relationship with the state to the dynamics of economic development in Tunisia. Kamrava and Mora (1998), for example, have argued that following the rise of populist leaders in the Maghreb:

> The incoming inclusionary states launched massive industrialization and modernization campaigns and sought to enhance their control over society by building

> up a mammoth, modern bureaucracy. State-led capitalism became the order of the day, and, accordingly, most urban classes became directly or indirectly dependent on the state and its patronage (904).

The authors thus contend that the bureaucratic middle class which emerged from this system was "heavily dependent on the state and its pursuit of rentier economic policies" (905). The consequence of these economic developments was the subject of Bellin's 2002 discussion of "stalled" democracies. In particular, Bellin focused on the political ramifications of state-sponsored development in "late-developing" countries in order to demonstrate the ways in which this form of economic system kept labour and capital "ambivalent about pressing for democratization" (151). Drawing on the experience of Tunisia, Bellin maintained that during the 1990s, despite "high levels of domestic unemployment and the wage pressure imposed by integration into the labour economy …", the UGTT successfully negotiated wage concessions, thanks to the "state-brokered labor contracts." In this environment, labour's achievements were much more dependent on the "political value of the state" as opposed to "labor's market power." Thus, against this context, Bellin pointed out the UGTT saw "its interests best served by a collaborative as opposed to confrontational relationship with the state" (151). Bellin also attributed labour's lack of enthusiasm for democratic change during this period to its "aristocratic position … vis-à-vis the general population" (151), by which she meant that where labour enjoyed a "privileged stance" in society by maintaining a "cozy relationship" with the state, it was unlikely to show solidarity with calls to "make the state accountable to mass interest (i.e., democracy)" (151). Thus, she concluded that in Tunisia:

> To the extent that a campaign for democracy has been mobilized, the initiative has come from other forces in society. Students, free professionals, and Islamists have been among the leaders of the democratization effort in Tunisia. They have organized demonstrations, written editorials, served in the human rights movements. They, rather than capital and labor, have led the fledgling drive for democracy (156).

The above-mentioned studies captured the fundamental features of Ben Ali's regime, which included the presence of strong one-party rule, a robust security apparatus, and an economic system embedded in crony capitalism. This situation – and popular views of it – was encapsulated humorously for me by a political analyst I interviewed, who recalled that before the revolution, "there was a joke, they used to say … it's a little bit vulgar, that the right leg is the party, the left leg is the UGTT, and in the middle is the Ministry of Interior."[51]

Of the various strategies embraced by Ben Ali to ensure his regime's continuity, his attempt at reining in the UGTT is of particular significance precisely because the union had demonstrated its mobilizational power during the Bourguiba period. Ben Ali seemed to have recognized the degree to which Tunisia's political peace was contingent upon maintaining a conciliatory relationship with the leaders of the union. It is surely meaningful that he served as the director general of Bourguiba's national security apparatus at the Ministry of Interior in 1977, and again, following the Bread Riots, in 1984 (Grewal 2016). Thus, by means of cooptation and favouritism, he sought to orchestrate a mutually beneficial relationship between the government and the UGTT's regional and national leadership, albeit one where the government seemed to have retained the upper hand.

Contrary to the studies discussed above which argue that by the early years of the present century it appeared that the UGTT had indeed transformed into a politically quiescent entity, this chapter will demonstrate that this was far from the case. During the Ben Ali era, labour militancy inspired by the legacy of workers' anti-colonial struggles persisted, particularly in the form of small-scale strikes. Furthermore, as will be discussed in this chapter, apart from worker-led collective action, the local UGTT bureaus, especially their more militant members, engaged in

[51] Interview with Bilel, political analyst, Tunis, May 2016.

various forms of symbolic action in support of various opposition movements and groups. The most prominent movement, namely the 18 October Collective, took place between 2005 and 2010 and was a coalition of illegal opposition parties which militant unionists, though not directly involved in the name of the union, nonetheless supported in various ways, including individual participation.

This chapter, above all, however, will pay a special attention to one of the most important events of collective movement during the presidency of Ben Ali, the 2008 uprisings near the mines in the interior region of Gafsa – the first long-lasting and overt public display of discontent and violence towards the injustices and inequalities of the state since he had come to power. Although the six month-long rebellion was initiated by the unemployed youth of the region and not unionists, local militant unionists and their allies were nonetheless important collective action organizers and supporters. Equally significantly, the events of Gafsa are a valuable case study allowing us to re-examine our assumptions about the dynamics of conflict, negotiation and activities inside a coopted union. Lastly, as I will show, although the Gafsa rebellion was ultimately repressed, it served as an important lesson which guided and informed militant unionists' collective action strategies during the 2010-11 uprisings.

The rest of this chapter is structured as follows. Section 4.1 is a review of the strategies often utilized by authoritarian regimes to control and deter union collective action. Next, I will discuss one of the key episodes of opposition cooperation, the 18 October Collective, a cross ideological alliance between legal and illegal opposition groups. While the UGTT was not directly involved in this alliance, as I will demonstrate the multidimensional identity and affiliation of workers permitted their symbolic and direct participation in various ways. In section 4.2 I will turn to the main theme of this chapter, the 2008 Gafsa Uprising, an important episode of collective

action which will permit a nuanced analysis of interactions between militant unionists and their coopted leadership under Ben Ali's political regime. Lastly, I will discuss the reasons the Gafsa rebellion failed to move beyond the localities in which it started, and the ways in which this movement helped expand unionists' repertoire of collective action.

4.1 Mobilization Under Authoritarianism

As already indicated above, containment strategies used by authoritarian regimes to restrict and regulate labour activism have been the subject of numerous studies. Bianchi's (1989) research on the emergence and functioning of the corporatist state in Egypt up until the 1980s offers an important insight into state-union relations. Corporatism, a top-down strategy, was the consequence of a series of improvised decisions in the context of revolution, wars, and attempts to implement socialist planning. Each organization, including the Egyptian Trade Union Federation, had a state-granted monopoly over representation of its members in its own industry or profession, who were obliged to enroll, pay dues, and could thus be monitored and controlled. Meanwhile, these organizations and groups reciprocated by, for example, ensuring that their membership was compliant with the rules imposed by the regime. In this type of corporatist system there is little incentive for organizations, including unions, and interest groups to forge alliances and coalitions amongst each other in support of democratic reform. The whole system therefore enabled the Egyptian state to govern through bureaucratic authoritarianism, even as it nonetheless itself became dependent on these organizations, meaning that they in turn had leverage over the state when it came to realizing some of their demands and interests.

Moreover, Samuel Valenzuela (1989), in his comparative analysis of labour movements within processes of redemocratization, argues that the labour-centred containment tactics

employed by authoritarian regimes can be divided into two categories: "the corporatist and the market" (448). The corporatist approach as described by Valenzuela involves direct state intervention in the formation and control of workers' organizations. This often includes state financing, compulsory membership and leaders who are either state-appointed or at least vetted by the state. As a consequence, collective bargaining is generally also state-controlled and leaders' room for independent maneuver circumscribed. In response, regime opponents may either try to work through official channels while organizing parallel informal networks of union militants, or refuse all interaction with the official system. Sometimes the consequence of this containment strategy is "the creation of a sizable group of union leaders who are beholden to the authorities even if not always their active and enthusiastic supporters" (448). On the other hand, the market approach, as he puts it:

> Tries to weaken unions as bargaining agents to a maximum extent. Collective bargaining is decentralized completely. Strikes are rendered as ineffective as possible by such means as allowing them to be staged only when contracts have expired, preventing the use of union funds for strike support, permitting the hiring of strikebreakers, allowing lockouts, and designating many areas of the economy as "strategic," thereby prohibiting work stoppages in them. Affiliation to unions is made voluntary, the formation of new unions is made easy in order to simulate union pluralism, and membership dues are their only source of financing. Union democracy may be encouraged through frequent elections for new leaders … While all regime opponents with an audience among workers normally seek to participate as actively as possible in union leadership, the state can always repress those leaders it dislikes. Whatever bargaining rights and power unions are formally given have little economic impact, since the restrictions under which they operate render them quite ineffective unless their respective labor markets are tight, which is to say that they hardly make a difference (448).

Valenzuela's description of the corporatist strategy is consistent with Philippe Schmitter's (1974) concept of "state corporatism," which he associated with political systems in which society is subordinated to the central power, where voting does not lead to genuine results, and executive power is "ideologically exclusive and more narrowly recruited" (105). In this context, the

dominance of the state rooted in a corporatist model leads to the growth of a system operating on the basis of "divide and rule," and where societal advancement is contingent upon "a strict system of hierarchy and ladder-working" (Ehteshami and Murphy 1996, 754), all of which can restrict or stifle labour mobilization. Against the background of his earlier analysis where at the institutional level oppositional political and socio-economic actors are to some extent coopted or absorbed by the state and then continue in this arrangement because of the benefits it provides them (Heydemann 2007), Steven Heydemann (2008) then interpreted this as a kind of social contract where Arab citizens are said to "tolerate constraints on political freedom in exchange for state guarantees of employment and welfare" (n.p.). One important element of this contract is the management of labour "through centralized, top-down trade union structures" (n.p.). It is important to note that following the introduction of the economic liberalization of the 1990s this method of controlling labour was perpetuated, despite its origin in a model of a political economy characterized by state intervention. Extending this reasoning, Bellin (2000) argues that in this political context labour's tendency to support calls for democratic change is determined by the degree to which it relies on the state for its material interests, organizational effectiveness and influence. Bellin thus concludes that unions will be hesitant to support a political project that could potentially bite the hand that feeds it.

As the aforementioned studies reveal, much scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding the various methods and techniques adopted by authoritarian regimes to try to block union collective action and activism. Because of a tendency in macro-sociology to focus on institutional, organizational and systemic processes, this literature, with its enthusiastic interest in authoritarian survival, has neglected in-depth case studies focusing on labour's most crucial and necessary element, its membership. This is despite numerous examples which have demonstrated

that organized labour and union activists have been amongst the most effective and dependable civil society actors in popular struggles against fascism and apartheid, colonial, and authoritarian regimes (Adler and Webster 1995; Fick 2009; Ihonvhere 1997). In a detailed study of the role of organized labour in Nigeria's struggle for democracy, for example, Ihonvhere (1997) emphasizes that even in a political climate where the central labour organization failed to take a decisive stance against military dictatorship, workers, especially those belonging to the strategic sector of oil and gas, capitalized on their location in the political economy to bring international attention to the pro-democracy movement in Nigeria. And even though in military-ruled Nigeria, the 1994 oil workers' collective mobilization against the regime ultimately failed, the movement served as an important lesson for the country's pro-democracy constituency on the importance of the formation of a strong alliance between the opposition forces, the importance of strategic planning and group cohesion, and the presence of a critical mass of support.

In Tunisia, in a similar fashion, during Ben Ali's era, while the UGTT leadership had consistently cooperated with the regime, grassroots labour militancy inspired by the legacy of workers' anti-colonial struggles continued to persist, particularly through small-scale strikes. In fact, between 1996 and 2007, according to available data there were 4,352 strikes in Tunisia (Beinin 2016). Just as importantly, as a highly popular and mobilizable constituency, workers have been a vital and dependable source of support for other social actors and political parties in their struggle for their demands just as they were in Nigeria (Ihonvhere 1997). In the following discussion I explore one prominent instance of how UGTT members supported a cross-ideological alliance between civil society and banned opposition parties.

4.1.1 The 18 October Collective

On October 18, 2005, one month before Tunisia was set to host the World Summit on the Global Information Society, eight political figures from civil society and opposition parties launched a hunger strike under the banner of "la faim et non la soumission" (hunger and not submission) as an act of protest against the tyranny of Ben Ali.[52] The eight men, as reported by Farida Dahmani (2015), "moved into the three rooms of a Tunis law firm and stopped eating to demand freedom of political and associative organization, freedom of expression, and a general amnesty for all prisoners of conscience" (n.p.). Out of the hunger strike was formed what came to be known as the 18 October Commission for Rights and Freedoms, forging a unique (within the context of Tunisia) cross-ideological alliance between Islamists and leftists, which lasted for five years.[53] The alliance, according to a vivid turn of phrase in an article on a Tunisian website, served as "a moment of unification in the face of the tyrant, when the men of Tunisia, with all their political and intellectual differences, slept on the same mattress in order to secure rights and freedoms in the face of the system of oppression and corruption" (Krimi 2019, n.p.).

[52] They included members of centre-left, Islamist, and Marxist political parties; human rights activists; lawyers; and a writer. In the post-revolutionary period, several of them gained prominent positions, including being appointed as the minister delegate of the head of Tunisian government responsible for Human Rights and Constitutional Affairs (Ayachi Hammami), being elected as members of constituent assembly (Abderraouf Ayadi, CPR, centre left; and Hamma Hammami, PCOT, Marxist), and being appointed as the Minister of Human Rights and Transitional Justice (Samir Dilou, Ennahda).

[53] Unlike in Jordan, where the much more enduring HCCNOP coalition brought together Islamists, leftists, and centrists, albeit motivated in large part by the perceptions of external threats especially since the 1994 normalization of relations with Israel (Clark 2010), and with cooperation limited to certain areas only (Clark 2006).



Figure 4.1: 18 October Collective Hunger Strike (Zammit 2015)

The Collective, often seen as one of the key instances of opposition cooperation in Tunisia (Allal 2012), cut across the entire ideological spectrum; it was comprised of parties and movements as diverse as the Tunisian Party of Communist Workers (PCOT), the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP, secular-liberal), the Nasserist Unionist Movement (Arab socialist), Islamist (Ennahda), as well as human rights groups (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2011). It saw itself as a "reform coalition, with the objective of providing citizens with a vision of a new Tunisia, built on the shared values of democracy and human rights" (Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2011, 325). One of the outcomes of the Collective was the publication of a joint manifesto entitled *Our Path Towards Democracy*, which outlined the coalition's political objectives including in the areas of the relationship between religion and politics, women's rights, and political participation.

The response from the regime to the Collective was one of force; individual participants and supporters were arrested, imprisoned, and harassed. Vincent Geisser and Éric Gobe (2007) in

their analysis of this mobilization draw attention to the fact that despite a repressive political environment, the movement received the support of various sectors of the UGTT. They cite specifically both the primary and secondary education sectors, postal and telecommunications, health, and Sfax's regional bureau (365). One unionist, a member of the secondary education sector, recalled in our interview that the hunger strike took the following course in Kasserine:

> PDP,[54] POCT, Ennahda, and activists who did not belong to any political party, and many other figures, they took part in that hunger strike in Tunis. In the regions, there were similar actions and strikes which were held in Kasserine and other towns. And I remember there was a hunger strike in Kasserine in support of Tunis, and there was a register that if you go and support this cause, you have to sign your name. I supported that action in Kasserine, and I wrote down my name, and people who supported that movement were searched and followed by police, and they were placed on a blacklist as opposition to the regime.[55]

It is important to note that many of the unionists I interviewed on this subject explained that while the UGTT as such did not directly participate in the Collective, which was principally a coalition between political parties, individual unionists supported this movement in various ways. Strikingly this extended to tangible and not merely symbolic support, including providing spaces for movement activists to gather and meet.

We also should not be misled by the formally correct observation that the UGTT was not involved in this movement, composed as it was of political parties, because many of those parties' activists were also UGTT members, as we shall see. My attention was drawn to this very important point by one unionist who explained, "we should not forget that parties that participated in the 18 October Collective, such as the PDP, and the Communist Party of Tunisia, that their militants were also members of the UGTT."[56] In effect, during Ben Ali's tenure, membership of the union served for some as a practical tool to carry out political opposition activities, albeit covertly and behind

[54] Le Parti Démocrate Progressiste, founded by Ahmed Nejib Chebbi in 1983.
[55] Interview with Aziz, union representative, secondary education, Kasserine, December 2016.
[56] Interview with Salah, union representative, secondary education, Sfax, March 2017.

closed doors. As two self-described militant unionists from Thala put it, "because political activism was occurring in secrecy, many individuals would join the UGTT. They hid behind being syndicalists. Members of illegal parties, in order to continue their activism, would join the UGTT under the cover of syndical work. They felt protected being part of the UGTT."[57] The institution of the union itself – rather than any directive or initiative from the executive leadership – carried out the twin tasks of organizing the workers and giving space for individuals to take part in restricted collective dissent, thus permitting them to develop elements of their opposition identity more strongly.

Returning to the Collective, it is important to note that despite the repression directed towards its participants by the state, as well as the challenges inherent in maintaining a cross-ideological alliance, the coalition nonetheless achieved a certain measure of success. As Haugbølle and Cavatorta (2011) explain, the Collective "demonstrated that divisions could also be overcome through intellectual exchanges around the most sensitive topics such as societal pluralism, democratic procedures and women's rights" (337). While cooperation in the last area in particular might have seemed promising for the Collective's ability to forge meaningful ties between diverse ideological tendencies – in contemporary Jordan for example, the Islamist constituents of the HCCNOP alliance ruled out cooperation in many domains related to women they deemed to fall under the remit of the sharia, such as divorce (Clark 2006) – the Collective faced other challenges in building support. For instance, it appeared to many Tunisians alienated from the political process after many years of authoritarian rule that the Collective represented yet another instance of elite maneuvering. As Haugbølle and Cavatorta (2011) pithily put it, the alliance represented to the public "an exercise in 'old politics' that many Tunisians had grown disillusioned with" (338).

[57] Interview with Zieh and Hamza, union representatives, secondary and primary education, Thala, February 2017.

It was within this context that elsewhere in Tunisia a major protest movement against the clientelist practices of the state emerged, one which was far removed from the elite politics of the capital and which proved to be a relatively durable movement, whose significance also lies in the fact that it brought into the open the dynamics of activism within the UGTT, as well as the union's relationship with the authoritarian regime.

4.2 Challenges of Localized Contention

> The revolution did not start on December 17, 2010. It started way before. It was the accumulation of problems that were piling up until that exact date. The red flag was in 2008 with the Gafsa strikes, that's when we knew that this political system cannot survive any more.[58]

At the start of the new year, in 2008, in the South-Western region of Tunisia, unemployed university graduates and other young people of the governorate of Gafsa initiated a series of demonstrations and protests lasting for nearly six months, events which came to be known as the Gafsa rebellion. These protests, in the words of Allal (2012), were rooted "in the socio-economic marginalisation of large sections of the population, excluded from the labour market and consequently deprived of any social security protection" (58). While the leading actors involved in the uprisings were the unemployed and their families, local militant syndicalists and their allies soon became entangled in the movement as its defenders, in opposition to the state's cronyism but also to the UGTT regional and national leadership.

Before I commence my analysis of these events, however, it must be made clear that by including the Gafsa rebellion in this analysis, I do not intend to draw a causal link to the nationwide uprisings of winter of 2010, even though many of the unionists I interviewed viewed the events of

[58] Interview with Firas, civil society activist, Tunis, March 2016.

2008 as a key episode in the downfall of Ben Ali's regime. As Allal (2012) correctly points out, the various localized protests that took place in the interior regions prior to December 2010 "were rooted in individual historical realities particular to them" (55), and as such any attempt at constructing a clear linkage across series of separate events to a specific outcome, "would be tantamount to teleological bias" (55). While Allal's analysis of the Gafsa uprising focuses on the "processes of political radicalization," I have selected this historical focal point for the way in which it allows for a nuanced analysis of the forms of engagement and interactions between militant unionists and their coopted leadership. Equally important, this case study is a useful example of how repression of a social movement can lead to the expansion of militant unionists' repertoire of contention.

In her book, *Trade Unions and Arab Revolutions: The Tunisian Case of the UGTT*, Hèla Yousfi (2017) describes the Tunisian union movement as "comprised of communities of workers with multiple allegiances – to workers' groups that share the same interests and to tribal, regional, and national groups" (6). The Gafsa uprising, despite its durability and the fact that it provoked a strong response on the part of the regime, was unable to mobilize collective grievances beyond the phosphate mines where mobilization began, thus illustrating the importance of these regional and national allegiances, capable of acting as bars to mobilization as well as vectors of it.

In a setting marked by such cross-cutting allegiances, in order for a collective action of this kind to be successful, one objective of movement participants must be to tip the scales of power in their favour by expanding the mass and extent of their supporters. In a non-democratic environment like the one under consideration, however, where the probability of harsher reprisals is much higher, the endurance of a localized contention is largely dependent upon the capacity of the movement's organizers to produce this scale shift. As noted by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly

(2001), for a collective action to become a major episode of contention requires that the local episode outgrow its local context, and thus experience an "upward scale shift" (332). Through the transfer of information along already established lines of communication ("diffusion"), as well as links established between previously unconnected groups ("brokerage"), conflict is able to spread from one locality to another as it recruits new actors drawn in by broadening and/or novel meanings of contention (333).

In the case of Gafsa, while local unionists did not initiate the uprisings, their involvement had the potential to produce an upward scale shift for two reasons. Firstly, as discussed in chapter 3, Tunisian unionist work is connected to a long and a proud history of activism, a history which is in itself a powerful tool for mobilization; and secondly, due to its geographical reach, syndicalism has the means to mobilize workers in solidarity the length and breadth of the country. Yet a broad mobilization did not occur. By 2008, much of the leadership of the union was either locked into the state's clientelist practices or sought to maintain a conciliatory relationship with the regime. Nonetheless, despite the regime's hold over the UGTT, local militant unionists and their allies did play a role in mobilizing and supporting protesters. As Chouikha and Geisser (2010) have noted, the rebellion in Gafsa was a genuine uprising "from below," which exposed the fact that a real potential for resistance to Ben Ali's regime did exist; these militant unionists were part of this movement.

4.2.1 Gafsa: Movement Emergence and Trajectory of Conflict



Figure 4.2: 2008 Protest in Redeyef (Bounenni 2017)

The governorate of Gafsa is located in the South-West of Tunisia, with the North-Western part of its territory sharing a border with Algeria. The largest employer in the region, the Gafsa Phosphate Company (CPG), dates back to the late nineteenth century. Since the French protectorate over Tunisia, mining has been central for development in terms of job creation and economic growth. By 2008, "Tunisia was ranked as the world's top fifth producer of phosphate rock and accounted for about 4.7% of the world supply" (Taib 2010, 40.1).

Beginning in the 1980s, as a result of structural adjustment programs imposed by the IMF and the World Bank, CPG and its related enterprises were pressured into programs of rapid "modernization" which led to serious of cutbacks to their labour force. For instance, CPG's transition to surface mining activities "led to a 75% drop in its personnel, from 14,000 in 1980 to 5,853 in 2006" (Gobe 2011, 4). Moreover, one condition of World Bank loans was that the

company recruit personnel from beyond the region (Allal 2012). Furthermore, its mineral wealth notwithstanding, Gafsa governorate continued to lag behind the coastal areas, due to inadequate state-sponsored development plans and the absence of any meaningful investment initiatives. Consequently, despite the wealth generated by the phosphate industry, the region remained underdeveloped and experienced an unemployment rate double the national average (Allal 2012), in places reaching as high as 40 percent (Amnesty International 2009). For Gafsians, therefore, mining wealth failed to translate into living standards similar to the coastal regions. What took place in 2008 was therefore an expression of deep-seated grievances stemming from the dominant but declining role of the CPG in providing employment in the region.

These grievances were made visible following a fraudulent recruitment examination. In late 2007, after six years of not recruiting new employees, CPG administered "a competitive examination for 380 temporary technical, administrative, and manual labour positions to over 1,000 applicants" (Beinin 2011, 85). Based on an agreement set in 1986, the company had agreed to allocate 20 percent of the new hiring positions to qualified Gafsians and children of former CPG employees who were deceased or disabled as a result of work-related accidents (Beinin 2011). On January 5th, following the announcement of the results, the mining communities of Redeyef, Moulares, Mdhilla, and Metlawi witnessed spontaneous rallies, primarily consisting of unemployed young men who accused the CPG, and significantly for our purposes the UGTT regional bureau's General Secretary, Amara Abbassi, of nepotism and corruption (Allal 2012). In the subsequent months demonstrations were organized and supported by the Union of the Unemployed Graduates (UDC),[59] local trade unionists, families of former CPG employees, temporary workers, and the families of the jobless. Given how many households contained both

[59] The Union of the Unemployed Graduates, founded in 2006, is the main association organizing the unemployed university graduates throughout Tunisia.

contracted workers of the CPG, and casual or unemployed laborers, they became focal points of protest organization and often female members of these households took the lead in participating in demonstrations (Allal 2012).

It must be noted that Gafsa is a region with deep tribal traditions. Amara Abbassi, the regional UGTT General Secretary, attained his elected position in part due to tribal politics.[60] At the time, critics declared that his leadership was based on corruption, partisanship, and favouritism, and as such he was the target of protesters' slogans; they saw him as the embodiment of "the injustice and the inevitability which the jobless youth of the region were fighting" (Allal 2012, 60). Unsurprisingly therefore, the UGTT's regional office refused to question the legitimacy of the recruitment results, compelling the demonstrators, joined by local militant unionists, to sign a petition withdrawing their confidence from the trade union structure.

Local unionists' participation in the nascent movement continued. According to a post on the Tunisian Arabic-language news website *Turess* titled 'Diary of the Uprising of the Mining Basin',[61] within a few days of the start of the demonstrations, more than sixty trade unionists had rallied in support of the protesters. By January 19th, an estimated 300 protesters had organized a sit-in in front of the UGTT's regional headquarters. In Redeyef, specifically, the local UGTT office acted as a space for the mediation of the conflict. The continued involvement of local unionists led to the arrest of Adnan Hajji, General Secretary of Basic Education in Redeyef; Adel Jaiar, a

[60] By "tribal," as Mounira Charrad (2011) points out, we should not understand some essential, primordial, unchanging structure. A tribe is both a kin-based formation and a local patrimonial network that can be a focus for collective action. In postcolonial Tunisia, Bourguiba's government made a concerted effort to marginalize tribes in the south and west of the country, for instance through confiscations of tribal property, even as the government itself acted in a patrimonial manner, by distributing rewards to its own network of clients, disciplining or marginalizing alternative power sources, and portraying Bourguiba as both "father" of all Tunisians and their *za'īm*, "leader," including of a tribe. These weakened kin-based formations in Gafsa and elsewhere were thus absorbed into the state's own, centralized patrimonial network, able to distribute their own, local patronage only in return for loyalty to the centre, unlike in Morocco, where tribes retained much more power and were celebrated and managed as one of the main supports of the monarchy.

[61] Sabri al-Zghedi (2013) https://www.turess.com/echaab/19493

syndicate member in Secondary Education; Tayeb bin Othman, a member in Basic Education; and Boujemma Chraiti, a member in Health. At his trial, Adel Jaiar, quoted on the prominent Tunisian website Nawaat (2012), defended his position in the following terms:

> I supported this movement on the grounds that I am a trade union official and I believe in what is stated in chapter II of the basic law of the organization … the need to defend public and individual freedoms and to support just social movements. On the morning of April 7, 2008, when we went to the headquarters of the local union, we encountered hundreds of police officers who beat us and dragged us to the police station and then transferred us from Redeyef to Gafsa. As soon as we arrived, … we found Mohammad Yusufi, the hangman, waiting for us. He told me, "since 2002 I have been waiting for you to come." Hinting at my trade union activities.

Prior to his arrest, Adnan Hajji, the leading unionist at the forefront of the uprising, was chosen by other members to represent the population of Redeyef during official negotiations with the authorities in Gafsa governorate in an attempt to find a solution to the crisis. His steadfast support of protesters prompted the UGTT regional bureau to revoke his membership and thereby remove him from his union position. Following his dismissal, Hajji was arrested and detained for three days. Upon release, his involvement with the uprising continued, leading to his second arrest just a few weeks later. As his wife explained at the time:

> Dozens of security officers in civilian [clothes] arrested my husband in the middle of the night. Our house has been besieged for several days by security agents and yesterday they arrested him and took him to an unknown location. I requested to send his medicine on compassionate grounds, but the authorities refused (Dbareh 2008).

This time authorities hoping to send a clear message to the protesters sentenced Hajji to ten years in prison on charges of "forming a criminal group with the aim of causing damage to public and private property, armed rebellion and assault of officials during the exercise of their duties" (Amnesty International 2009, 10).

I met with Adnan Hajji in 2017 in Tunis. For Hajji, continued pressure from demonstrators, guided by militant unionists and lawyers, compelled the UGTT to change course and show support for the detainees. He explained to me:

> How the UGTT got involved in the matter is that inside the UGTT some of these trade unionists are honourable and revolutionary. The education sector, the health sector, the higher education sector, many sectors and regions supported us. Many days of solidarity were scheduled, and they put pressure on the leadership of the UGTT. They organized days of solidarity and meetings in the regional bureaus and in the headquarters of the general trade unions, they called the leading members in the executive bureau, they invited the prisoners' families, and [all this] movement [was aimed at] denouncing the tyranny of the leadership. The leadership of the UGTT found itself compelled to act.

Before the leadership acted, a number of different elements of the UGTT supported the uprising albeit to varying degrees, but chiefly members from the sectors of primary and secondary education, railways, and health; as already discussed, the sectors of education and health in particular are known for their militancy and political activism. As one union teacher from Sfax recalled, for example:

> We brought some leaders from the mines here to give a speech in front of the UGTT [office] even though the regional leadership had forbidden it. The reason it was forbidden was because there were instructions coming from the national leadership in conjunction with the regime. That is why the left syndicalists always argued that the regional, national and the regime were conspiring together.[62]

Other union officials told me about the symbolic act of standing outside their local UGTT bureaus with their comrades in a show of solidarity with what was happening in Gafsa. It must be noted, however, that this show of solidarity was far from uniform, as some syndicalists belittled these union activists by referring to them as the "group of the mines."[63]

[62] Interview with Salah, union representative, secondary Education, Sfax, March 2017.
[63] Interview with Salah, union representative, secondary education, Sfax, March 2017.

Nevertheless, the arbitrary detentions and unfair trials of protesters and trade unionists comprised a moment that forced the UGTT leadership to take a stand on the crisis in Gafsa.[64] On June 7th, 2008, the executive bureau released a statement signed by General Secretary Jrad calling "for the release of the detainees", emphasizing that the answer to the crisis was not to be found in "more security but rather through enlarging the circle of dialogue" and that "society's safety is closely related to guaranteed freedom of speech and peaceful protests" (UGTT 2008a). On June 25th, UGTT's Regional Administrative Committee in Gafsa also released a statement expressing "strong condemnation of all forms of violence, regardless of its source," denouncing "security-related abuses in the mining basins," and calling for the release of "detainees who have expressed their right to work in the context of peaceful marches" (UGTT 2008b). The following month, on July 8th, a statement signed by General Secretary Jrad again called for the "necessity of addressing the social situation in the mining basin," and "removing all forms of tension, releasing the detainees and the prisoners, and allowing space for dialogue between social parties … capable of limiting unemployment ... especially for those who hold degrees" (UGTT 2008c). These were not, however, necessarily strong statements in support of the protesters, but rather diplomatic attempts on the part of the UGTT leaders to maintain their relevance during the dispute and facilitate the re-establishment of social peace. It would seem that they were trying both to stay loyal to their self-presentation as defenders of the people and to their post-1987 pragmatic attitude to relations with the state. As one lawyer from Kasserine who voluntarily represented the detainees at the time told me, "the UGTT [leadership] did not want to get involved – same thing that happened at the

[64] While there must have been debates within the executive leadership before they reached consensus in response to members' pressure, the only member of the Executive Bureau at the time I had access to was Jrad, and in any case it is far from certain that these high officials would want information about such debates to become public.

beginning of the revolution [2010-11] – and it was Hajii that embarrassed them. For six months they [the UGTT] didn't support them [protesters]."[65]

By early October, the Primary and Secondary Education, Post and Telecommunication, and Health sectors had begun to release joint declarations demanding an end to the unfair trials and calling for a day of solidarity in support of detained protesters and trade unionists. On October 13th, these sectors released a statement in which they called for the active participation of their members in the "Day of Solidarity" to be held October 24th, 2008, in front of the UGTT headquarters in Tunis, under the banner: "for the right to work, the release of all detainees in the mining basin, the suspension of trials, the abolition of sentences against them, and their return to work" (UGTT 2008d). On the "Day of Solidarity" these sectors released another declaration in which they emphasized their "compliance with the constitution of the Tunisian General Labour Union and its principles" and called "for more action to activate the decisions of its structures in order to support and end the grievances faced by the citizens of the region [Gafsa] …" (UGTT 2008d).

In Kasserine, in particular, militant unionists and the local bureau were very active because the authorities had decided to stage trials of detainees there. As local interviewees remembered, members provided food and transportation to lawyers and journalists coming from Tunis. They also "supported organizations [such as] Amnesty International, the Human Rights League, and the Women's Democratic Union" by offering them their premises as a meeting space. More significantly, on October 5th, on World Teachers' Day,[66] teachers in Tunisia went on a one-day strike during which "they called on the regime to release the [Gafsa] detainees."[67] In other

[65] Interview with Ameur, lawyer, Kasserine, December 2016.
[66] Celebrated annually under the auspices of UNESCO.
[67] Interview with Zied and Hamza, union representatives, secondary and primary education, Thala, February 2017.

localities distant from events in Gafsa, while there were no actual mobilizations, according to one union member, syndicalists engaged in various acts of "moral support", for example, "there were syndicalists who went [to Kasserine] to attend the court proceedings. There were also syndicalists who marched to the court in support of the detainees."[68] On a different occasion, a union official from the sector of education recalled that during this period:

> There were foreign syndicalists that came from France to cover the situation in Gafsa, the UGTT provided them with transportation and accommodation. When I was not teaching, they rented for me a car to transport a group of them to the courts … UGTT [executives] did not appear to be involved in the movement … But there are more political sectors [i.e. politicized] … and that is why syndicalists from secondary school took care of the many foreigners that came in solidarity.[69]

Finally, nearly one year into the uprising, in December 2008, the UGTT's executive bureau released its most categorical statement in which it tried to diffuse the situation by directly addressing Ben Ali. The statement, in part, read:

> The Executive Office of the Tunisian General Labour Union is following with great concern the recent developments in the trials of those arrested in the events of the mining basins, which led to different sentences up to ten years in prison. Firstly, as much as it respects the judiciary and its verdicts, the judgements against detainees are harsh, unexpected, and do not reflect the most effective way of dealing with the related events. Secondly, calls upon the president of the republic, under the progressive policy followed by him in releasing a number of detainees, to intervene to release the tried detainees in order to establish a peaceful climate characterized by dialogue, consensus, and stability (UGTT 2008f).

According to Taher, a UGTT member in Tunis, "when syndicalists were being jailed, while they [leadership] did not openly support the social movement, they negotiated with the government for them to be released. This decision by the leaders was the result of both pressures from local syndicalists and events, but also because of the principles of solidarity between unionists."[70]

[68] Interview with Taher, union official, National Office of Young Workers, Tunis, February 2017.
[69] Interview with Noor, union representative, secondary education, Tunis, February 2017.
[70] Interview with Taher, union official, National Office of Young Workers, Tunis, February 2017.

In the end, on November 5, 2009, on the twenty-second anniversary of his presidency, Ben Ali granted amnesty to sixty-eight prisoners, including Adnan Hajji (Beinin 2011). In the following section, I will discuss the reasons why the rebellion remained confined to the region around the mines and why it received only modest solidarity towards its cause from the rest of Tunisia. I will also explore what lessons these events offered militant unionists when it came to organizing collective action against Ben Ali.

4.3 "So that we do not forget and so that everyone bows in respect to it [Gafsa] and draw inspiration from its essential lessons"[71]: Lessons from Gafsa's Social Movement

There are several important reasons as to why the rebellion in Gafsa remained restricted to the areas of the mines. First and foremost, at the national level, in order to prevent the spread of the protests into other parts of the country, Ben Ali ordered the army to besiege the region. As a consequence, the towns of Redeyef, Moulares, Mdhilla, and Metlawi were encircled by security forces who enforced strict movement control, including towards journalists and lawyers who sought to access protesters, as well as curfews. In addition, in order to deter the media from reporting on the rebellion, journalists who were following the developments near the mines were intimidated, arrested, and at times imprisoned (Nawaat 2012). The latter tactic in particular helped stop the spread of news about the protests to other regions. Thus, as the rebellion escalated, the regime was able to ensure the movement remained restricted to specific localities.[72] The negative consequences the siege of Gafsa had for collective mobilization became perhaps one of the most important lessons learned by militant unionists and subsequently incorporated into their repertoire

[71] Sabri al-Zghedi (2013) https://www.turess.com/echaab/19493

[72] During my interview with Adnan Hajji on March 11, 2017, in Tunis, he mentioned that during the period of the Gafsa uprising, a similar movement centred on economic development emerged in Feriana (a city approximately 100 kilometres from the mines, in the governorate of Kasserine). That movement, however, was quickly crushed by the state's security apparatus.

of contention. As I will discuss in the next chapter, during the 2010-2011 uprisings, an important strategy adopted by militant unionists was the coordination of their mobilization efforts in order to prevent the regime from encircling the protesters in any one city; as state forces moved to encircle demonstrators in one town, others in nearby towns would begin to mobilize. As Salah, a schoolteacher from Sfax put it, "in 2010, militant (leftist) syndicalists started moving, and, of course, they remembered the events of Gafsa and for them it was revenge towards the regime and the bureaucratic leadership."[73]

The next important reason behind the containment of the Gafsa rebellion is linked to the construction of the narrative on the reasons behind the crisis. In many respects the Gafsa rebellion exposed Tunisia's deep-rooted problems, including "youth unemployment, extreme poverty in the peripheral regions of the country, nepotism, government infiltration of labour union organisations, a lack of any room for free expression and representation, and finally a security approach to all protests" (Africa Research Bulletin 2008). In the economically neglected interior regions, in particular, any one of these issues might have been sufficient to mobilize residents in its support. Yet, as far as the rest of Tunisia was concerned, the six months of demonstrations, sit-ins, strikes, and arrests were for the rest of the country a locally specific workplace disagreement initiated by disgruntled youth and the unemployed. This view was shared with me by a UGTT employee who was a university student during the Gafsa uprising. As he put it:

> From the beginning the manifestations and activities of people in Gafsa did not have great resonance. They said, "I want work because I am in Gafsa." There was no harmony with other regions. The problem in Gafsa was also the intervention by the police that repressed the movement … But Gafsa did not have the right demands and [it did not] defend democracy sincerely. It was only about their right to work, especially in this company [CPG]. And this logic was refused by other regions [UGTT bureaus], even [the] people refused. Corruption existed in everything. In Kasserine, for example, any test for employment was corrupted … In 2008 I was unemployed and in UGET [Union Générale des Etudiants de la Tunisie], and I was continuing my

[73] Interview with Salah, union representative, secondary education, Sfax, March 2017.

> education. I remember I was not very excited about Gafsa because we were also unemployed and this logic that they [CPG] should not hire anyone else from other regions was not supported. And this had a negative consequence for the opinion of other regions.[74]

Further exacerbating the challenge faced by protesters was the dynamic of relationship between the regional UGTT leadership, local militant unionists and other regions. As mentioned earlier, for many protesters the general secretary of the UGTT's regional bureau, Amara Abbassi, "the boss of the UGTT" (Allal 2012, 60), embodied the corruption and clientelism that the locals were protesting against. Yet, unlike the events of the 1970s (discussed in chapter 3) when continued pressure from below prompted the UGTT leadership to resign from Bourguiba's political bureau, in 2008, the response from UGTT executives was primarily one of disavowal or reprisal. One union member explained the situation in these terms: "we need to consider the nature of the regional leadership in Gafsa. The specificity about Gafsa is that the leadership is decided according to tribal politics. In Gafsa there is the tradition of the tribes … and because of this phenomenon they took many of the [employment] vacancies."[75] According to this logic, the direct connection of the regional leadership to the protest movement in turn created a dynamic within the structure of the UGTT which was highly unfavorable to the protesters. When in a conversation with Chaabane, the former UGTT general secretary in Sfax, I asked about the rebellion in Gafsa, he responded to my inquiry by stating "there was a confrontation between Hajji and the regional UGTT. If the region had supported the movement, we would have cooperated with them."[76] The events in Gafsa thus appeared to other union bureaus as an internal workplace disagreement that was to be resolved locally. The government's strategy of isolating and repressing the movement through the use of both force and the control of information about the events near the mines

[74] Interview with Ridha, union employee, Tunis, March 2017.
[75] Interview with Nouri, union representative, secondary education, Sfax, March 2017.
[76] Interview with Chaabane, UGTT General Secretary, Sfax, March 2017.

prevented the movement from reaching a critical mass in its support. As Tilly (2004) has noted, the scale, durability and scope of a collective action is dependent on the ability of the movement's organizers to draw on a range of strategies and resources to increase the number and commitment of its participants. One way to achieve this objective is through the framing of grievances in a manner that will appeal to a wider demographic. Although the protesters in Gafsa did not succeed in advancing their claim-making strategies beyond the location of the mines, the mobilization nonetheless revealed the necessity of a strong opposition network supported by close coordination between different groups that can withstand symbolic and discursive strategies of manipulation and repression imposed upon it by the regime. Thus, as I will discuss in the following chapter, with the onset of mobilization in 2010, an important objective for protesters who were guided by militant unionists was to frame a local grievance in ways that would gain national recognition.

Nonetheless, despite its limitations, in 2011 for its participants the Gafsa uprising came to symbolize the beginning of the end of Ben Ali's regime. Even at the time, some participants viewed it as the prelude to a direct assault on the regime, and would in late 2010 themselves participate in the first demonstrations of what would become the revolution (Allal 2012). With the benefit of hindsight, Gafsa could be incorporated into the narrative of the victorious revolution. During my conversation with Hajji, for instance, he made the point of referring to the rebellions near the mines as the "the cornerstone of the revolution." From his point of view, "the destabilization of the regime started in 2008. The first shock of the 2008 encouraged others to do the same in 2010. In 2008 the regime was solid and the UGTT [executives] abandoned us. But in 2010, in Sidi Bouzid, the UGTT [rank and file] got involved from the first day." During our conversation Hajji reiterated that it was important to remember that the events of Gafsa represented "the longest social movement in the modern history of Tunisia." Therefore, it is not surprising that "most of the slogans used in the

revolution in 2011, were drafted in the mining basin events in 2008, For instance, 'Employment, Freedom, and National Dignity' and 'Employment Is a Right, O You Gang of Thieves.'" Thus, in the wake of the revolution, Gafsa came to stand for a movement much broader and grander than had been imagined by most observers at the time.

4.4 Concluding Remarks

Analysis of the UGTT's activities under Ben Ali, culminating in its ambiguous involvement in the 2008 Gafsa uprising, has brought to our attention how union activism, political participation and collective action can unfold inside a labour organization subordinated to the hegemony and dominance of an authoritarian state. Moreover, drawing on extensive interviews with participants and observers of the rebellion, my analysis has once again underscored the ways in which cooperation, solidarity and conflict inside a union organization are determined by the overlapping interactions of interests, strategy, ideology, identity, personal bonds and networks. It is important to once again recall that the UGTT, like many organizations of its kind, is a site of internal conflict; members' self-perceptions, as activists, militants, or executive leaders for example, shape how they respond to events like Gafsa, leading them to frame them as a grave injustice requiring a concerted national response, or alternatively diminishing their status to that of mere local disagreements. Moreover, in the case of the UGTT, even during periods when the union leadership sough to maintain a conciliatory relationship with Ben Ali's regime, driven both by the memory of past conflict and the desire to preserve their status in the clientelist network of the state, as the cases of the Collective and the Gafsa rebellion revealed, militant union activism and political participation continued, albeit indirectly and at times in secrecy. In the next chapter, I will explore the role of the union base and its continued activism, not always aligned with the preferences of the

leadership, in the context of the 2010-2011 uprisings. Even more so than with Gafsa, the observation made to me by one union employee in Sfax held true for the events of the revolution, namely that, "the history and nature of the UGTT is that the middle structure and the base are the ones that push the leaders in support of movements [protests and strikes]."[77]

[77] Interview with Moussa, union employee, private sector and social security, Sfax, March 2017.

Chapter 5: The Union at a Crossroad. The Fall of Ben Ali

> I'm going to say something that not many people know, when protests started in Sidi Bouzid and Ben Ali's security was stopping people, the executive bureau sent three members here the same week Bouazizi killed himself. They examined the situation and wrote a report to the government that they [the regime] must stop the arrests, remove security out of Sidi Bouzid, and let prisoners go. If not, the situation will get very bad. So, they [the regime] let some prisoners go, but the security and police stayed. By [January] 20th protests moved to Kasserine.[78]

The strikingly transnational reach of the demonstrations that erupted in December 2010 in Sidi Bouzid, located in the heart of Tunisia, took many academic and non-academic experts in Middle East politics by surprise (Gause III 2011), an experience remarkably reminiscent of experts being caught out by the unexpected collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989, or the Iranian revolution a decade earlier (Keddie 1995; Kuran 1995). Their scope and the rapidity with which the revolts came about presented a sharp contrast with longstanding conclusions on the stability of MENA's authoritarian regimes (Bellin 2004; Hinnebusch 2006). With respect to Tunisia, in particular, questions were raised as to "how did this politically stable, westernized, highly educated, tolerant, and relatively prosperous society erupt into popular protests that toppled one of the strongest police states in the Arab world, and plunge the entire region into a wave of popular revolts?" (Kaboub 2012, 1). Behind this type of question, however, lie a series of highly contestable assumptions. In this chapter, by analyzing the Tunisian national uprising, and the participation of the UGTT in it, I will show just why these assumptions are misleading.

In the preceding chapters, by taking an in-depth look at the activities of the UGTT's more militant sectors and members, I showed just how, contrary to previous conclusions on the authoritarian character of MENA, and, in particular, Tunisia, beneath the façade of national

[78] Interview with Salem, regional representative, Sidi Bouzid, December 2016.

political stability and strength, episodes of localized contention were an important feature of authoritarian regimes. And even though under the authoritarian systems of Bourguiba and Ben Ali major episodes of collective action – the 1978 General Strike, 1983-84 Bread Riots, and 2008 Gafsa Uprisings – were ultimately stifled due to both severe regime repression as well as minor concessions, these episodes of collective movement nonetheless offered critical lessons to union activists on ways to circumvent state repression in order to prolong their movement's survival. As will be explained shortly, these lessons were put in practice most prominently during the 2010-2011 uprisings, both in a vertical manner as coordination between different levels of the union structure, as well as horizontally across its many networks.

Through an analysis of the Tunisian General Labour Union participation in the 2010-2011 national uprising the upcoming discussion will focus on answering general RQ 3 and RQ 3a. Firstly, how do a union's formal and informal structures affect its mobilizational power? Bearing in mind that I intend to examine how unionists leverage previous experiences of collective action during episodes of mobilization, I will also examine how, secondly, a union's internal networks function to shift the balance of power and influence between its different branches?

During the uprising, local militant unionists acted both as movement supporters and coordinators, in spite of a national executive leadership that sought to uphold social peace by refraining from direct confrontation with the regime. While militant unionists drawing guidance from the events in Gafsa recognized the value of securing the spread of the movement beyond its place of origin, with the purpose of changing the balance of power in favour of demonstrators, a more reluctant leadership sought to avoid events reminiscent of the confrontations of the 1970s and 80s. Therefore, in this analysis, I will pay careful attention to the ways in which coordinated actions by local union branches and their networks, inspired by events of the past, changed the

balance of influence inside union structures and gave strength to the movement, allowing it to be widespread and robust – actions which ultimately persuaded the national executive leadership to change its conciliatory approach towards Ben Ali's regime.

This chapter is structured as follows. I will start in section 5.1 by reviewing the socio-economic situation in pre-2011 Tunisia. While the problems associated with marginalization have already been discussed in chapter 4 with regards to the 2008 Gafsa uprising, and questions such as unemployment, poverty and inequality had national resonance then, as we saw the Gafsa grievances and demands were framed primarily as locally specific. The thread running through this chapter is therefore a focus on how initially local protests, responding to local conditions, in 2010, did become national, unlike in 2008, leading with great speed to the 2010-2011 national uprising. This section thus recounts the farmers' movement in Regueb, a village 40 kilometres from Sidi Bouzid, and explores how the protest there of the indebted against government land confiscation drew on strong moral emotions (Jasper 2011). These in turn fed into the protests of December 2010, and section 5.2, which analyzes the widening of the revolt through the increasing involvement of UGTT members, stresses the importance of emotions in the early days of collective action formation, prior to the recruitment of more experienced activists. It thus focuses on the period of the uprising as remembered by some of its unionist participants, in order to explore how union activists and leaders – actors directly involved or impacted by the social crisis – interpreted the situation and determined their response to the crisis. Pursuing the story further, section 5.3 provides a comprehensive analysis of how the union base obliged the central leadership of the UGTT to support the national movement, and by doing so helped tip the scale of power in favour of the protesters. Of course, it is impossible to confidently state who, or what considerations, forced Ben Ali to leave Tunisia after only three weeks of demonstrations. However, the UGTT's ultimate

involvement in the protest movement in the form of large-scale demonstrations and regional strikes, made possible through the involvement of its local offices but eventually approved by the executive bureau, must be viewed as a determining factor in precipitating Ben Ali's flight, and the breakdown of his regime.

5.1 The "Red Zones" and the Perpetual Struggle to Overcome Marginalization

Economic inequality and political exclusion were hardly new to Tunisians on the eve of the revolt. Such conditions are rarely, if ever, a sufficient cause for the outbreak of a nationwide uprising. Nevertheless, neither the protesters' anger, nor their demands, could be understood without comprehending these conditions. First, however, it is worth noting that in spite of the systematic obstacles many Tunisians faced, the national and international discourse on Tunisia's developmental progression painted a highly misleading, because far more optimistic, picture.

In 2010, just a few months prior to the uprising, the World Bank reported that the national unemployment rate in Tunisia had declined to 13.04%. In parallel fashion, in Egypt, where similar protests broke out in January 2011, the national unemployment rate had declined to 8.75%. In fact, up until the start of the unrests, the neo-liberal policies of both countries were lauded by international financial institutions as sound "structural reforms," which sustained fiscal responsibility while boosting national competitiveness – an economic approach that was credited with helping Tunisia and Egypt weather the 2008 financial crisis.

Yet what these national figures failed to show, and the praises of international technocrats concealed, was the extent to which unequal resource distribution, both material (public and private investments and infrastructure), and immaterial (administrative capacity and distribution capabilities), contributed to the marginalization of large segments of the population, especially

those in regions where social, economic and political exclusion had deep historical roots (Sadiki 2019). Thus, in this respect, deceptive representations of economic performance, perpetuated by international donors and national leaders alike, served as a tool for authoritarian control. Béatrice Hibou (2006), in her analysis of how everyday economic mechanisms were deployed as techniques of domination, contends that the perpetual construction of a discourse surrounding Tunisia's fictional "economic miracle" helped serve systems of control and repression. As a system of governance, these techniques had permeated numerous social and economic spheres including the tax system, social programmes for disadvantaged people, urban development programmes, control of informal and illegal practices, and "management of Islam" (192), among others.

As a form of authoritarian power, this official discourse was able to maintain and perpetuate itself through the systematic tweaking of facts and information by authorities, including:

> […] [their] strategic choice of comparisons: measuring Tunisia's economic performance against that of sub-Saharan Africa rather than that of Asia or Turkey, or judging present advances against strategically chosen periods in Tunisia's history. There has also been a systematic amnesia with regards to past performance; the appropriation by the administration and central power of social dynamics; the elaboration and concealment of facts; recourse to secrets and rumours; a continuously blurred line between 'transparent' and 'opaque' practices; the absence of critical analysis and a free press; selectivity of information used and the deployment of such information; modes of presenting domestic decisions according to current fashion and international rhetoric; and difficulties of access to information (193).

Historically speaking, in Tunisia, subnational poverty and unemployment rates have been much higher in the Centre-West and Southern regions of the country, commonly called the "interior regions." Prior to the uprising, Centre-West governorates suffered from a poverty rate of 32 percent, compared to 8 to 9 percent in the Centre-East (the Sahel) and Greater Tunis (Sadiki 2019). However, poverty and unemployment were only one consequence of regional marginalization. Economic underdevelopment results in severe consequences for health, human

development, education and the environment. In 2009, while the national average for infant mortality was 17.8 per thousand, in the Centre-West regions that number was 23.6 per thousand (Sadiki 2019, 4). While the interior regions are marked by decades of marginalization and exclusion, they contain much of Tunisia's natural wealth and resources. Nevertheless, their social and economic yields are systematically extracted for the benefit of Greater Tunis and the Sahel. For instance, as reported by Sadiki (2019, 4), "only kilometers away from Sidi Barrack, the country's second largest dam, residents of Toghzaz in Jendouba (North-West) use donkeys to transport water from public fountains and are sometimes forced to drink from reservoirs that have been certified as hazardous."

The division between regions and classes from which resources and value were extracted, and the beneficiaries of that extraction has by no means disappeared since 2011, and nor have the perceptions that legitimize those divisions for some by minimizing their impact on others. Thus over dinner one night in Tunis with two Tunisian businessmen, the conversation turned to the economic grievances of their many less well-off fellow citizens. In a pitying tone one of them declared confidently that Ben Ali had wanted to help them, for instance with something called the 26.26 fund, but that by getting rid of Ben Ali they had wrecked their own chances. This fund, commonly referred to by its postal account number, Caisse 26.26, but formally known as the Fonds National de Solidarité, was a public service enterprise established in 1992 with the intention of fighting poverty, socio-economic exclusion, and eradicating the "shaded zones" (Hibou 2006, 201). As a charitable organization of which Ben Ali was a beneficiary (Camau 1997), 26.26 relied upon donations and financial contributions from individuals, public and private enterprises. Citizens were constantly encouraged to give, and many did. The biggest donors, however, were large firms and businesses who by so doing gained better access to the president and his inner

circle. Moreover, when it came to accounting for how the money in 26.26 was managed, "there [was no] budget, no beneficiaries list, no chart of management organization, no pattern of resource distribution, no evaluation of the fund's activities"; ultimately, the enterprise served as a system for "negotiations and settlements between the business community and the presidential palace" (Hibou 2006, 200).

Corruption and the enrichment of the few at the centre thus made a stark contrast with the difficult economic circumstances of many Tunisians. Shared grievances such as unemployment, rampant corruption, and lack of economic opportunity, had been festering for several years and contributed to several smaller-scale protests and helped unite protesters around common socio-economic demands; eventually these protests grew and coalesced into a larger movement, as we shall see, and slogans encapsulating these demands, such as "employment is a right, you gang of thieves," helped define the larger narrative of this movement. In particular, the "moral economy" of the protestors was outraged (Thompson 1971): not only was there a concrete demand for jobs, but this was inextricable from the moral judgment of those of whom they were made. Ultimately the uprising was conditioned by political and economic policies that were built on a system based on discrimination, inequality and regional segregation. Even Dominique Strauss-Kahn, managing director of the IMF, quoted in Sharif Ismail (2013, 62), ultimately observed, "What does it mean for most people around the world if you have a recovery in macroeconomic figures but it doesn't produce jobs? The example is Tunisia."

In this regard, it is significant that prior to the events of December 17th, 2010, in other parts of the interior and southern regions protests had become a common occurrence. One important example was the Ben Guerdane revolt in August 2010, which erupted when marginalized locals who relied on illegal trade and smuggling with Libya for a living suddenly faced a new cross-

border tax of 150 Tunisian dinars (Allal 2012; Kaboub 2013). An important aim of this research is to call into question the standard image of the interior region as devoid of human agency, replacing it with a picture of a reality in which these regions have long been at the centre of the struggle for social, political and economic justice. It is worth recalling the observation of one unionist in the sector of education in Thala, a town in the governorate of Kasserine, with an estimated population of fourteen thousand inhabitants, made to me: "there are red zones in Tunisia. Number one is Thala. There are places that are always moving. Citizens using any event to protest."[79]

In this context, it is worth looking a little more closely at a somewhat neglected movement that appeared in Regueb, a town on the outskirts of Sidi Bouzid, where local farmers had started to coordinate protests and sit-ins against the state-controlled Banque Nationale Agricole (BNA) and its land loan repayment system. This was a clear demonstration of how a failed economic policy merged with rampant political corruption could provoke a vigorous popular response.

In 2003-2004, under a government scheme designed to encourage young farmers to invest in the agricultural sector, BNA offered loans to be used for the purchase of farmland, but set the interest rates between 12% and 20%, which was much higher than the national average.[80] In the following years, as many of the borrowers were unable to keep up with their repayment plans, the bank refused to re-finance payments to avoid the imminent possibility of the loss of their assets. According to a report published by France24 in the summer of 2010,[81] farmers unable to maintain their repayment plans were forced to declare bankruptcy and ordered to abandon their land so it could be sold at auction. According to court statements, "letters sent to the farmers about their

[79] Interview with Zied, union representative, secondary education, Thala, February 2017.
[80] In 2003, the average lending rate in Tunisia was 6.8% (Sacerdoti 2005).
[81] France24 is a French state-owned international news and current affairs television channel and website in French, Arabic and English.

looming bankruptcy were methodically sent to the wrong addresses. That left the farmers with no option but to file for bankruptcy because they'd surpassed the date when they were able to contest it. Then, during the auction, there was only one person bidding for the lands (which was, incidentally, sold for a measly sum)" (France24 2010). The whole process reeked of corruption and bribery.

As reporting on the farmers' protest later revealed, Mohamed Bouazizi, the "iconic" figure of the 2010 revolution, was directly affected by the events in Regueb. Slimane Rouissi, a UGTT member, quoted in an article published in *The Observer* (2012), recalls meeting Bouazizi at the time:

> I met Bouazizi back in July 2010, during the farmers' protest. His uncle was one of the farmers whose lands were seized. This affected Bouazizi directly, because he had worked with his uncle since 2006 in the town of Regueb; however, his entire family had to move to Sidi Bouzid after his uncle lost his land.

While farmers have a separate union (the Tunisian Union of Agriculture and Fishers, UTAP), local UGTT members showed solidarity with the protesting farmers, in particular by joining in their sit-ins. Although this initiative did not require the UGTT executive leadership's approval, it is important to remember that the UGTT members participated on their own initiative. UTAP had tended to look after the interests of large landowners, even though smaller farmers have been historically members of this organization. In 2012, this neglect would lead to some members defecting from the union to join a separate workers' organization (Farmers' Union of Tunisia) (Ayeb and Bush 2014).

As Mathilde Fautras (2015) in her research on land dispossession protests in Regueb states, the right to land was not a final aim of the demonstrations in itself, but it characterized "other underlying demands relating to rights in general in the rural world" (16). The interpretation of land conflicts, therefore, must be carried out within a larger context of national policies that

"contributed to accentuating inequalities and exacerbating tensions" (16). Ultimately, Bouazizi's self-immolation blew the lid off the interior region's simmering discontent, and, in Regueb, that first protest took place in front the of the BNA, a symbol of state-sponsored inequality and clientelist practices (Fautras 2015); Bouazizi, before becoming in death an "icon" of the revolution, not only for international audiences but even for many urban Tunisians, was a rural worker who participated in protest against the government's longstanding marginalization of the countryside and its inhabitants (Fautras 2014).

5.2 From Anger and Exclusion to Collective Action

5.2.1 Becoming a Martyr: The Case of Mohamed Bouazizi

In the early stages of my fieldwork I realized in my interviews and conversations with people that Mohamed Bouazizi, the young man whose self-immolation provoked the eruption of the so-called Arab Spring (Bady 2012), evokes emotional responses ranging from national pride and admiration, to passionate expressions of resentment and betrayal. Amongst militant unionists and young activists, who continued to see the revolution as a worthy cause despite ensuing socio-economic downturns, Bouazizi was presented to me as a respected martyr – albeit with varying degrees of conviction.[82] At the same time, amongst the more affluent population living in the wealthier part of the capital, particularly individuals whose businesses have been severely affected by rising security threats and the economic crises which have plagued the country since Ben Ali's removal, Bouazizi was a despised figure who had betrayed his country. In fact, on more than one occasion, I was told that I was foolish to believe the story of Bouazizi, that he was no hero and that his family

[82] For instance interview with Morched in Tunis, member in the Union of Unemployed Graduates, November 2015, and Khalil, a secondary school teacher and union member, in Sidi Bouzid, December 2016. This observation, however, was made to me many times during my conversations with self-identified militant unionists and young activists.

was a culprit in the conspiracy against Ben Ali.[83] Meanwhile, for everyone else I interviewed, Bouazizi came across more simply as a pitiable figure who symbolized the hardship felt by young Tunisians.

The details of what pushed Bouazizi to set himself on fire have been recounted many times over. What is important for present purposes, however, is that Bouazizi was a desperate, socially voiceless young man with no real economic prospect in sight, and that his sense of helplessness was shared by many young Tunisians, particularly in the interior regions. Often what is recounted of Bouazizi's final days is that his only source of income, his fruit cart, was confiscated by a female police officer, who slapped Bouazizi across the face as he sought to retrieve his cart – a public act considered deeply humiliating in a male-centred society (Honwana 2011). This version of the events, however, was contested by the officer concerned, who claimed not only did she not physically assault Bouazizi, but also that he assaulted her by twisting her fingers (Ayad 2011). She was arrested soon after the incident, but eventually acquitted in April 2011 by a court of first instance (Ayad 2011).

Following the confiscation of his only source of income, Bouazizi tried to file a complaint against the policewoman but to no avail. At the same time, he sought to meet with the governor of Sidi Bouzid, who refused his request, further pushing him to threaten to self-immolate. On December 17th, while standing in front of the governorate of Sidi Bouzid, he emptied a can of paint thinner on his left arm and lit a match. 90% of his total body surface area was burnt as a result. He was transferred to a hospital in Sfax and then to the Centre de Traumatologie et des Grands Brûlés (Center of Traumatology and Great Burns) in Ben Arous, a city located just south of the capital Tunis. On December 28th, Ben Ali visited Bouazizi in the hospital, promising his mother that he

[83] Conversation with Fares, business owner, Tunis, March 2017.

would send her son to France for treatment – a promise that never came to fruition. Bouazizi died from his injuries on January 4, 2011, in Tunisia, just ten days before Ben Ali's overthrow.



Figure 5.1: Ben Ali visiting Bouazizi in the hospital in Ben Arous (source: Gulf News).



Figure 5.2: Both photos were taken by the author during a visit to Sidi Bouzid in 2017. Image on the left shows a grand poster of Bouazizi outside the Post office in city centre. The image on the right is a monument in the shape of Bouazizi's cart near the Musée de la Révolution.

As had happened numerous times in the past, the localized demonstrations that followed Bouazizi's self-immolation could have easily settled down and disappeared in a matter of weeks or months. A great deal of explanations have been presented for the exceptionality of the 2010-

2011 uprising, from the force of social media, to the role of cyber-activists (including at least one self-described unionist Facebook addict) and bloggers turned online journalists sharing vital information with major networks like France24 and Aljazeera, to the power and resilience of Tunisian youth and women, and going so far as attributing Tunisia's experience to the Tunisian military's political calculation to defect from the Ben Ali regime (Breuer, Landman and Farquhar 2015; Brooks 2013; Hmed 2012; Honwana 2013; Lecomte 2014; Zayani 2015). I contend that indeed a combination of these factors played an important part in facilitating the expansion of the uprising that led to Ben Ali's regime breakdown. For the purposes of this research, however, what matters most is the ways in which these sporadic movements were able to sustain and link themselves together to eventually merge into one national collective mobilization. The UGTT leadership, as the largest organized force in the country not entirely absorbed by the regime, had to choose a side. The consensus of scholarship on civil society and unions at the time might have led observers to conclude that the union, as an institution whose interests were tied to Ben Ali, would have opted to stay aloof from the protest movements. The UGTT, however, as it will be discussed shortly, owing to the activities of its base and more militant members, ended up taking on a crucial role in bringing about the end of Ben Ali's regime.

5.2.2 Protest Formation

On December 18th, a day after Bouazizi set himself on fire, his family and friends along with number of other residents in Sidi Bouzid, including local unionists, assembled in front of the governor's headquarters in protest (Yousfi 2017). Since tensions already existed in the region as a result of events in Regueb, soon more residents including students, teachers, and union activists joined the protests. As Tarrow (1994) observes, social movement theory has established that

participation in collective action is determined not principally by ideological commitments but by participants' pre-existing relationships and social networks. In Regueb, for example, participants in demonstrations were farmers, in a small town, who often knew each other as well as having shared grievances, together with a small number of unionists connected to one another through union activities. In Sidi Bouzid, the protesters were in the beginning motivated by a strong sense of outrage prompted by Bouazizi's self-immolation, and more generally this outrage was embedded in a widely shared sense of general indignity rooted in their lack of "any social or political capital" (Allal 2012, 58).

Malek Sghiri (2013, 9), a former leader of the General Union of Tunisian Students (UGET) and a political activist, described life under Ben Ali in the following way:

> You could go mad. That is how living in my dear country, Tunisia, made me feel. I concluded, not entirely seriously, that every Tunisian who, like me, looked closely at the situation in his homeland must carry within him the seeds of such a madness … From the outside all seemed fine and nothing was fine from within …. In the city streets and suburbs, in the villages and towns, all was sad and shocking: faces yellowed by the vicissitudes of fate, the evaporation of dreams.

While, writing after the revolution, Sghiri's turn of phrase clearly implies a sort of performance for his readership, it is important to take this feeling of bleakness and despair seriously. Bouazizi's public self-immolation, the most devastating form of protest – although he was by no means the only young Tunisian to take his life in this manner (Camau 2014) –ultimately came to symbolize a collective sense of outrage and a public outcry that had to be heard, although it came to do so across Tunisia because of his presentation, probably originating in union and other militant and activist circles, as an "unemployed graduate," a description that resonated much more with the frustrated urban middle classes facing a dismal unemployment situation than with his actual background as a farm worker (Fautras 2014; Hmed 2012). While in the declaration issued by the Sidi Bouzid bureau of the UGTT on December 19th 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi is presented

(in article 1) as simply a "young man" who condemned injustice and fraud, article 2 declares that the "real reason" for the current situation of confrontation with security forces is unemployment "in the ranks of university graduates." (UGTT 2010a). Thus while the Sidi Bouzid UGTT did not explicitly frame him as an unemployed graduate, there is a slippage between his personal situation described in the first article and the root cause of the protests stated in the second.

Nonetheless, while the triggering of collective action in the country's major towns and cities had much to do with the reframing of Bouazizi as a kind of martyr whose experiences were similar to his urban counterparts, his career reminds us that analysis of the uprising must begin in places like Regueb, before exploring how the protests following his death in Sidi Bouzid swiftly found an enthusiastic response across much of the country from people who processed the moral shock in the form of short-term emotions (anger, outrage) shaped by longer-term emotional and moral moods (frustration, disgust, despair, and sadness).

In the interior regions, the existence of the deep-seated economic and social tensions already pointed too, and the corresponding prevalence of adverse emotions toward the government offers a crucial part of any explanation of the initial small-scale collective action. Jasper (1998) had already pointed to the importance of emotions in protests (404-405):

> An integral part of all social action, affective and reactive emotions enter into protest activities at every stage. Some help explain why individuals join protest events or groups, ranging from emotional responses they can have as individuals to those that recruiters can stir in them. Others are generated during protest activities, including both affective ties among fellow members and feelings toward institutions, people, and practices outside the movement and its constituent group. These affect whether a movement continues or declines, and when.

In the case of the UGTT, it is important to add that affective ties between the members of the organization were especially strong between more militant members of the base because of years of trying to stimulate the union's more cautious leadership into action; members of the

leadership in turn were bound more tightly together by a shared fear of repression. In Jasper's more recent work on emotions and social movements (2011), he makes a useful distinction between short-term "reflex emotions" and longer-term emotional dispositions, which he calls "moods" (286-287). Importantly for the present case, one major type of long-term emotion is what he refers to as "moral emotions," which "involve feelings of approval and disapproval based on moral intuitions and principles, as well as the satisfactions we feel when we do the right (or wrong) thing, but also when we feel the right (or wrong) thing, such as compassion for the unfortunate or indignation over injustice" (287). Longstanding disillusionment with Tunisian authorities and their failure to address socio-economic exclusion, and its attendant diminishment of the dignity of those affected by it, was precisely this sort of moral emotion. Given this situation, Bouazizi's death acted as a "moral shock" which provoked reflex emotions, principally anger. Gamson (1992) points to how such a moral shock does not so much precipitate a political movement where one had not existed before as clarify or activate people's already existing values. One of the roles of long-term emotions or moods is to condition short-term reflex emotions, and we should therefore see the protests after Bouazizi's death in Sidi Bouzid not as a mere spontaneous eruption of anger, but as an activation of people's values in response to an event in which were condensed many of the key themes that fueled long-term moral outrage. These included state corruption, police violence, poverty, precarious employment, and the impunity of state officials. Treating emotions in this way allows us to distinguish between different types and temporalities of emotions, as well as to highlight how they are mutually connected. In 2010 therefore protesters in Sidi Bouzid transformed long term feelings of despair and moral outrage into an anger that was potentially productive in its insistence that some kind of change must come (Gould 2009).

I should also make clear that I am not suggesting in the early days of demonstrations, protesters' actions were aimed at large-scale national change. As is often the case, the formation of a locally confined protest occurred in response to a specific grievance or perceived act of injustice, especially against people who had very little to lose in the first place, but faced losing even that (Tilly 1977), such as was the case of the unemployed graduates demonstrating against the hiring practices of the Compagnie des phosphates de Gafsa, the smugglers in Ben Guerdane protesting against new customs taxes, or the farmers in Regueb protesting in response to BNA policies.

This local context is a vital link between the long- and short-term emotions described here, on the one hand, and the fact that the protests broke out at a specific time and place, on the other. In order for protests to occur, local activists long focused on these particular problems had to activate networks and generally make use of existing relationships, relationships that themselves had a long-term emotional component – what Jasper (2011) calls "affective loyalties," such as bonds of trust between activists from various groups, including the UGTT. Apart from affective loyalties, social bonds and relationships work to connect activists to different sites of contention and shift meaning in such a way as to create more intense commitment on the part of the participants. This is especially important for costly and high-risk contentious action (Passy and Monsch 2014). From December 18th until 22nd, as was described to me, "Sidi Bouzid was on fire."[84] With the formation of early protests came confrontation with the police who unleashed teargas and detained protesters. Unlike previous geographically confined demonstrations, however, a defining moment for this particular uprising turned out to be the consequential involvement of politically active university students, union and cyber activists, who took part in

[84] Mohamed, union representative, secondary education, Thala, February 9, 2017.

the events immediately. Malek Sghiri (2013), for instance, recalls that on December 17th a friend from Sidi Bouzid contacted him to let him know that a young man had burned himself in front of the governor's headquarters. On December 19th, Sghiri recalled coming "to a café in a suburb in Tunis to meet some comrades from UGET (the General Union of Tunisian Students). We decided to launch a general strike in all the colleges to demand an immediate halt to the brutal repression of protestors and to insists that their demands be taken seriously" (19).

In parallel, Tunisian bloggers and cyber activists, among them the late Lina Ben Mhenni, who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 for her contributions as a human rights activist, began publicizing the crisis taking place in the interior regions.[85] In a blog post title "Sidi Bouzid is Burning" dated two days after Bouazizi's self-immolation, Lina wrote:

> Recently, the number of cases of immolation by fire has increased in Tunisia. The protagonists of these actions are generally Tunisian citizens who have lost all hopes in a decent life. Unemployment and poverty are au rendezvous and have poisoned their lives. Some of these incidents are largely covered by the media – by the media I mean citizen media (blogs, Facebook, Twitter) as our official media are limiting their activities to the presentation of the activities of the President … Faced with a government indifferent to the suffering of the citizens, the various components of the civil society and the country's elites should act.

Next to the protesting unemployed youth and university students stood the local militant unionists who joined the protest movement on December 18th in front of the Sidi Bouzid governorate (Hmed 2015; Yousfi 2017). Once again the role of feelings and emotion in these early protests, and specifically in their transformation into national demonstrations, is of note. Michael

[85] Lina Ben Mhenni, born in 1983, was a prominent Tunisian activist, blogger, human rights defender and a lecturer in linguistics and English at the University of Tunis. Her father, Sadok Ben Mhenni, was a leftist political activist who served time in prison under Ben Ali's regime. During my meeting with Lina, in Tunis, in 2017, she told me about a joint initiative with her father which involved collecting books from across the world to be delivered to Tunisian prisons. All throughout her activism she remained an independent voice advocating for women's rights, democratic reform, and human rights. Lina passed away in January 2020 after a long battle with Lupus.

Orsini (2014) points to the significance of emotions in "shifting the terrain of collective action" (151). He stated:

> Once we get over the psychic roadblock that assumes that emotions interfere with reason and are synonymous with irrationality, we can begin to appreciate how emotions – hope, fear, rage, guilt, pride, shame, despair – are fundamental to politics and require a place in our analytical toolkit. Applying an emotions lens to the study of social movements helps us to think about how activists and policy discourses themselves contain emotional scripts that can normalize and legitimize certain modes of behavior and belonging (150).

The UGTT bureau in Sidi Bouzid, for instance, put out a declaration on December 19th in which it made skillful use of such emotional script. It both made appeal to a specific long-standing moral emotion, characterizing Bouazizi's death as a response to "injustice," and drew on the immense emotional resonance of the anti-colonial struggle, noting Sidi Bouzid resistance against "yoke of colonialism" and "many martyrs it had provided to the struggle" (UGTT 2010a). At the same time, through presenting Bouazizi as an unemployed graduate it made a connection to demands for employment that would resonate with a broader population.

As police repression escalated in the interior regions, collective action emerged in larger cities, and by December 26 there were mobilizations in Tunis, Sfax, and Sousse. At the same time, as the police began to shoot protesters, the latters' slogans became blunter. While demonstrators in Sidi Bouzid shouted "sleep easy, martyr! We will continue the fight," in Thala, one of the towns with the highest number of deaths, they chanted "Ben Ali, have patience! We are digging your grave."[86] This was the beginning of an expansion of protesters' demands from satisfaction of local

[86] Interview with Hamza, union representative, secondary education, Thala, February 2017.

grievances to a wholesale replacement of the regime, as famously encapsulated in the slogan "Ben Ali, RCD, Dégage."[87]

5.3 The Surge Upward: The Making of a National Social Movement

Early on in this research, I made clear that amongst the numerous actors involved in a social movement a union may occupy an exceptional role owing to its command over the labour force, its capacity to mobilize workers, its ability to merge economic interests with socio-political issues, and its membership whose economic priorities and concerns are connected to government action. Writing about labour unions in the United States, Jack Barbash (1964) argued that in consequence most workers see their union's role in politics as an extension of their labour activity. Nevertheless, for Barbash, the specific interaction between union and politics was determined by the "prevailing ideologies and ambitious of union leaders" (36). Thus, he maintained:

> There is a substantial distance between the political commitment of the union leadership and the rank and file. For the rank and file members, politics has the re-enforcement of job rights as its main purpose. The widest perspective on political action is viewed by the federation leadership, and the angle of political vision narrows but also intensifies as the leadership moves closer to the actual work situation (38-39).

As a general observation, however, even though it is correct to presume that there often exists a large gap between the political commitment of union leadership and the rank and file, the case of the UGTT among others shows how it is misleading to reduce ordinary members' political vision to simple economic interests. Here Barbash was too confined by his mid-twentieth century US example; the transformation of US union members into self-interested bureaucracies focused

[87] Gobe and Salaymeh (2016), in their study of Tunisian lawyers' participation in the 2010-2011 uprising, note how on January 11th the Tunisian Bar Association called for a general strike across all Tunisia to be held on January 14th. Drawing on interviews with its participants, the authors describe the day of the strike when lawyers formed a protective ring around protestors who had gathered in front of the Ministry of the Interior shouting "Ben Ali Dégage" – a chant that would become one of revolution's most famous slogans.

on increasing remuneration had already been noted by sociologist C. Wright Mills in the 1950s; contemporary "community unions" in the US work to adopt techniques from social movements in order to reverse this process; a similar development has been observed in the UK (Durrenberger and Reichart, 2010; Lazar, 2012; Mollona, 2009). Elsewhere, comparative studies of union-state relations have confirmed that workers' political participation can indeed encompass a wide range of objectives and purposes. Joel Beinin (2016), in his research on the workers' movement in Egypt shows that even under stringent authoritarian leadership and with a state-affiliated union federation, local branches served as an important tool for engaging in localized acts of civic mobilization, political discussion and training. Beinin explains that while in Egypt the workers' social movement "was not a unified 'labor movement' mobilized by labor parties and union federations in the historic Euro-American sense, Egyptian workers contributed substantially to the culture of protest" (12). He therefore sees it as highly probable that after decades of struggle, albeit under considerable constraints, workers' political participation in defiance of union leadership during the "January 25th Revolution" was an important consideration in the military's decision to remove Hosni Mubarak from the presidency. Likewise, Marie Duboc (2014), observes that, beginning in the early 2000s, wildcat labour militancy by Egyptian workers in defiance of the state-controlled union "challenged the limits of political participation imposed by the state" (248). Moreover, as the analysis of union activists' participation in the Gafsa uprisings revealed, even during situations where members' demands have centred principally on jobs, the right to work is often framed as an extension of larger issues concerning human dignity, the right to life, the right to participate in society, and the right to equality of opportunity – all of which are deeply political.

The 2010-2011 national uprising is another important example of how unionists' political participation in support of demonstrators worked to influence the leadership's political strategy

vis-à-vis state authorities. Union activists, some of whom, as discussed previously, belonged to opposition political parties who found union work within the UGTT to be the most practical means by which to carry on their activities, drew upon past lessons from collective action and leveraged their proximity to workers and other protesters to help orient the movement's narrative beyond economic concerns.

It is important to bear in mind that at the time the union leadership was keen to maintain an amicable political relationship with the regime – a strategy informed by both material interests and past experience of violent conflict with the state. The political commitment of the leadership was thus to maintain social peace, resulting in a judgment imparted to me by one unionist that "the leadership," "the big heads," of the UGTT, were "too close to the regime."[88] In fact, over the course of many of my discussions with local union activists, I was told that while in various local offices unionists planned sit-ins and protest activities in support of the demonstrators, the leadership sought to find a solution to calm the situation. This observation was confirmed to me by Lina Ben Mhenni, the activist and blogger, during coffee one evening. She recalled that:

> Syndicalist activists played an important role. Of course the young people took to the street out of anger and disappointment but syndicalists helped to organize the movement. I remember syndicalists from Sidi Bouzid came to Tunis and told us about the situation there, and they told people to demonstrate again and again to support the people in Sidi Bouzid. The officials of the UGTT, when we were protesting [in front of the headquarters] in December 25th and shouting slogans against the system and Ben Ali, put on music over the speakers to drown our voices. They were not supporting the movement.[89]

In its first (available) published statement on the brewing crisis, on December 21st, the UGTT National Executive Bureau had declared that:

> […] Dealing with the issue of employment based on justice and equity amongst all regions represents one of the solutions for the eradication of the feeling of unfairness,

[88] Interview with Alaa, Regional UGTT representative, Sfax, December 2016.
[89] Interview with Lina ben Mhenni, Tunisian activist and blogger, March 2017.

> which may be manifested by spontaneous reactions leading to social tragedies that become too hard to stop … the general secretary stresses the importance of the government's role in creating equity between the different regions and in carrying out the task of investment to create more employment opportunities for all job seekers, especially young university graduates … It calls the official parties to provide the necessary mechanism … for the settlement of some agricultural properties in order to provide them with the necessary and urgent privileges …. It renews the emphasis on the need to avoid security solutions to contain some of the spontaneous reactions towards unemployment … the executive bureau records with satisfaction the release of some detainees and calls for the release of all remaining detainees in order to create an atmosphere that eliminates all forms of tension and favours calm consultation in the treatment of the reality of employment and development in the region which coincides with the beginning of the local, regional and national consultation about employment (UGTT 2010b).

This attempt by the leadership to continue to cooperate with the authorities ran into the hard reality of members' anger at the violent repression of protesters; according to a UGTT internal report on "les événements de Janvier 2011" (UGTT 2011a), a large demonstration was organized by unionists in front of the headquarters of the union, where the participants showed their solidarity with the families of the victims. This reluctance on the part of the leadership ultimately gave rise to one of the uprising's key slogans, "Oh Hached, look look, the betrayal is so clear."[90]

In order to better understand the leadership positioning at the time, I spoke with Abdessalem Jrad, the UGTT General secretary from 2000 until 2011, who as discussed in chapter 3 was arrested and imprisoned during the 1978 General Strike while serving as the general secretary of the sector of transportation. In the course of our conversation, he claimed that due to the number of crises Tunisia had experienced over the years, "the UGTT was convinced that there should be a change in the country."[91] Therefore, on December 17th when Bouazizi burned himself, "that had a big impact and citizens were ready" for a change. Jrad confirmed that in the course of

[90] I was told by several student activists that this slogan, which invokes the name of UGTT founder Farhat Hached (see chapter 3), was mainly used while gathering in front of UGTT's headquarters, known locally as Mohamed Ali Place, in Tunis.
[91] Interview with Abdesselam Jrad, former General Secretary, National Executive Bureau, Tunis, February 2017.

the uprising there were regular meetings between local, regional, and the executive offices in order for them to keep abreast of new developments. However, he emphasized that there is a difference between a union composed of many different political views and ideologies, acting as an umbrella vehicle for workers' demands as workers, and leveraging ideological diversity as a means to act as the opposition. As already discussed in previous chapters, for Jrad, confrontation with the regime would only have created more problems for the workers – a leadership strategy informed by his own past experience of political activism in confrontation with the regime. It is important to recognize that for Jrad, as well as many other unionists in a leadership role at the time, the crackdowns of 1978 and 1983-84 weighed heavily upon them. This was true both of people like Jrad who were directly involved in those protests, and others whose link to them was through the reproduction of the collective memory analyzed in chapter 3.

On December 28th, as the crisis spread, and just days after the demonstration in front of the headquarters, the Executive Bureau released another statement, indicating that it was following developments in Sidi Bouzid in order to "contribute to the development of constructive proposals to calm the situation in the region and limits its impact". And it once again requested the release of all those arrested as "a prelude to a climate of peaceful dialogue," and called for, among other things, urgent action "to materialize [the] presidential decision concerning the employment of a young person for any family with three unemployed individuals" (UGTT 2010c). Therefore, despite a rapidly worsening situation as well as the protests of its own members, the bureau once against doubled down on its stated aim of working with the government to finding a solution to the crisis. A quarter century of a conciliatory approach to the state could not be expunged in a week.

Political decision-making based on self-preservation and organizational survival was thus connected to the collective memory of defeat in previous national struggles. One consequence of repression is that it can transform some amongst the opposition into more obedient and cautious opponents. As we have seen for Jrad and the leadership, this was a justification for their actions, whereas for several self-identified "militant unionists" I interviewed, this served only as an explanation. They told me that the leadership's "soft cooperation" and "obvious reluctance" to join the uprising was in part the consequence of the bloody conflicts of 1978 and 1983-1984. As one union representative in the sector of education from Kasserine explained to me:

> Nobody expected that Ben Ali and the regime would collapse as quickly as it did. It was very surprising for the whole nation. That is why the leaders of the UGTT were following the scene very carefully. Maybe they thought at the time that Ben Ali was able to control, to extinguish the fire. If they declared themselves as supporters of the revolution, and after that the revolution failed, maybe Ben Ali would punish them, and put them in jail.[92]

It should be remembered that it was only after Bourguiba's removal from power in 1987, during Ben Ali's early years as president when he sought to distance himself from his predecessor's policies, that veteran unionists were able to revitalize the union. Against this background, Ismaïl, a teacher and a union representative from Kairouan, a city in Northern Tunisia, stated that "historically speaking in 1978 there were so many martyrs … the same thing happened again in 1984, but it did not change the regime … And nobody at the time [of the revolution] could predict that Ben Ali would run away. Even Friday morning (January 14th) nobody could guess that."[93] It is clear that having firsthand experience of the harsh consequences of regime retaliation, the higher echelons of the union sought to avoid jeopardizing their relationship with the state. And so, unlike the many local union branches who within days of the unrests opened their doors to the

[92] Interview with Aziz, union representative, secondary education, Kasserine, December 2016.
[93] Interview with Ismaïl, union representative, secondary education, Kairouan, December 2016.

protesters and helped organize demonstrations, the top leadership initially avoided becoming directly implicated in the crisis.

Having discussed the leadership's preferred approach in dealing with the uprisings, it is now important to turn our attention to what was taking place in local UGTT offices, and how the actions of militant unionists ultimately shifted the leadership's position. As discussed in chapter 3, trust and deference towards the UGTT from beyond its ranks has meant that union activists have continuously chosen to stay and operate within its structures rather than to break away from it all together. This continued to be the case during the 2010-2011 uprisings. However, since the UGTT functions according to established and customary rules and procedures, during the uprising, local union representatives were well aware that they required the overt consent and support of the executive branch in order to counter state's coercive measures and propaganda. For the UGTT to change sides and declare itself collectively in favour of the uprising had the potential to shift the balance of power towards the social movement. Consequently, as part of their mobilization efforts, union activists sought to change the political commitment of the union leadership.

5.3.1 Changing Spheres of Influence: Local Unions as Movement's Organizers

Contrary to the executives of the union who sought to maintain a cooperative approach with state authorities, for militant unionists and activists it was the Gafsa uprisings of 2008 that shaped their strategy as they began to organize. For them, the Gafsa rebellion had proven itself to be a crucial lesson on the importance of broadening a movement beyond its place of origin (Hmed 2015). A Tunis-based political analyst explained this point to me in the following terms:

> So, what happened? … [the] revolution was an improvisation … nobody knows what's going to happen, nobody wants to take in charge the repression, you know, because they didn't want to have problems, and it was a problem everywhere … and during this situation with lots of uncertainty, you know, the calculation 'what to do?' … the people, the base, the local [offices], the local cells, the sectors of the UGTT, and the regions begin to mobilize at this moment, they begin to mobilize people in solidarity

> [with] the protesters … At the same time there was no order, in the sense that the direction to make Ben Ali fall … they played a crucial role, sometimes, in terms of organizing, not the rioters, but in order to spread the movement from place to place … the UGTT, you know, had its networks everywhere, and they play a very important role in organizing, because they wanted to take, the, what they call, the assessment, the critical assessment of what happened in Gafsa in 2008, because they stayed only in that region, and they said at this moment [December 2010], 'we are to go to other regions', and this is very important, in order to nationalize, a kind of [movement] … But this is not the UGTT, it's some [elements] inside the UGTT, and some sectors, and some activists, … This is what I wanted you to know, all that to say that [the UGTT] is not one actor![94]

The political analyst's description of the spread of the protest movement recalls Kurzman's (2005) insistence on the unpredictability of revolution, on the fact that revolutionaries themselves do not initially know they are engaged in a movement that will turn into a revolution, that events at the time have a chaotic flavour. Revolutions are revolutions retrospectively. Thus in December 2010, union and other activists were preoccupied with not allowing a repeat of the containment of the Gafsa uprising. Therefore, in order to support movement formation in Sidi Bouzid, it became imperative for union activists to tap into their existing network as a means to expand their activities in such a way that could prevent the state from isolating the protesters. Tarrow (1994, 81) explains that "movement formation":

> […] is the product of people seizing and making opportunities … And opportunities structure applies not only to the formation of movements. Movements *create* opportunities for themselves or others. They do this by diffusing collective action through social networks and forming coalitions of social actors; by creating political space for kindred movements and counter-movements; and by creating incentives for elites to respond.

During this period, as explained to me by many union activists, local UGTT offices in Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, and Thala, as well as those in other towns in the interior regions, served as the

[94] Interview with Bilel, political analyst, Tunis, May 2016.

meeting spot for many protest activities including sit-ins and demonstrations. Ali, a union representative from Sidi Bouzid, recalled:

> Syndicates were at the frontline of the protest. The sector of education has all the cultivated people. It is the sector that speaks about democracy. So primary and secondary education, they organized meetings, marches in front of the UGTT [local office], and in front of the municipality. The situation exploded after the death of Bouazizi, it was a Tuesday [January 4, 2011].[95]

Throughout my discussions it became clear that the UGTT offices were often the site for the start of protest, both for symbolic reasons as well as due to strategic considerations. As elaborated in chapter 3, on account of the UGTT's widely-venerated legacy of fighting colonial oppression, police and security forces were less likely to attack its offices. As a result, during this period, they served as sanctuary for protesters. This notwithstanding, it is worth mentioning that during my visit to the UGTT's regional bureau in Kasserine, I was shown some damage to the interior walls which I was told was caused by security forces who forcefully entered the building in early January 2011. Nevertheless, to have union branches as one of the main launch sites for collective action permitted militant unionists to facilitate coordination strategies amongst themselves and their colleagues in other towns. According to Ali, unionists "have a deep understanding of what is happening in the interior regions and they were the first to present the problems. So they started with organizing meetings, strikes and sit-ins between different cities."[96] Unionists, therefore, were able to leverage from the organizational structure of the UGTT to provide "logistical and political "guidance" to the movement" (Yousfi 2017, 71).

For the purpose of explaining how unionists helped organize a growing solidarity movement in support of protesters, and by doing so ultimately pressured leading union elites to support the uprising, it is useful to provide a description of the space in which union activity takes

[95] Interview with Ali, union representative, secondary education, Sidi Bouzid, February 2017.
[96] Interview with Ali, union representative, secondary education, Sidi Bouzid, February 2017.

place. During my visit to seven union offices I realized that it was common for them to have among their leading personnel charismatic male authority figures with long years of service in the UGTT, a strong record of organizing local protests and strikes, and in some cases of serving jail time. While insufficient attention has been paid to this point in the literature, as admired members of their workplaces and union, these elected representatives were able to capitalize on their status to call meetings and take decisions about protests and strikes in moments of crisis – an important example being the January 12th, 2010 strike in Sfax that will be discussed later in this chapter. For these unionist leaders, the UGTT serves as an incubator for both economic and political activities that ties workers' rights to broader socio-political objectives, thus allowing the organization to act as a vehicle for both nationalist and unionist causes. Other than the union headquarters in Tunis and Sfax, both of which are relatively spacious and well decorated, with a great deal of activity taking place on the inside, others tend to be basic buildings with pictures of prominent unionists covering their walls, while middle-aged men in black coats and berets sit in small groups to talk, smoke cigarettes and drink tea. These spaces thus serve not only as a place for union administrative work, but as locations for socializing, bonding, and ultimately for political interactions.

What does this mean in terms of mobilizational capacity? Although the UGTT is an organization of national historical significance with the ability to disrupt socio-economic peace through organized strikes, union activists still require emerging political opportunities to be able to mobilize in such a way as to convince the leadership to exercise this power. Consequently union activists' first course of action in December 2010 was to leverage their regular contacts to prevent the isolation of the movement, as had happened in Gafsa, by coordinating solidarity protests. As Zied from Thala explained to me:

> In 2010, [the] regime thought they could do what they did in Gafsa. When Sidi Bouzid began to calm down, al-Miknassi, al-Mazzunah[97] and Regueb started to move. In Thala, the movements started on the 24th, it started with some syndicalists, majority teachers and the unemployed. There were strikes and sit-ins in the UGTT office.[98]

Furthermore, in parallel to organizing solidarity protests, as well as facilitating coordination and logistics between different participants – in particular, lawyers and unemployed youth – (Yousfi 2017), local and regional offices in Sidi Bouzid, Sfax, and Kasserine (among others) began to publish statements condemning the violence in Sidi Bouzid and supporting the protesters. The UGTT bureau in Kasserine, for instance, published its first statement on December 21st, in which it declared:

> The popular protest movements witnessed in many parts of the country, starting with the mining basins, Feriana, Ben Guerdane, Regueb, Skhira, and up to Sidi Bouzid is nothing but an expression of the reality of tensions experienced by marginalized social groups … [The executive bureau of Kasserine] expresses its deepest sympathy for the young victim, who, in despair, burned himself in front of the governorate's headquarters in protest against being prevented from making a living … It considers that the case of the young victim is only a sample of hundreds of thousands of young men with higher education and unemployed …. Declares its solidarity with the people of Sidi Bouzid … Calls for the opening of development in Tunisia with the active participation of civil society organizations, led by the Tunisian General Labour Union, which has offered studies for this purpose and which the authorities have met with *carelessness* and *indifference* (UGTT 2010d).

While I do not have an exact figure for the number of statements published during this period, I was told that it was common for more active bureaus to release at least one declaration every few days. These declarations were also a vital tool in framing Bouazizi's self-immolation in terms which evoked national grievances in the form of entrenched unemployment, poverty, corruption, and inequality. This strategy sought to uncover the frustrations of a large number of Tunisians provoked by Ben Ali's kleptocratic system, thus ensuring the formation of solidarity

[97] Al-Miknassi and al-Muzzunah are smaller towns in the governorate of Sidi Bouzid.
[98] Interview with Zied, union representatives, secondary education, Thala, February 2017.

between various groups with the deliberate aim of preventing the isolation of the movement as had happened in the past (Hmed 2015).

Apart from coordinating protest movements, issuance of declarations, publishing the name of detainees and requesting their release (UGTT 2010e), unionists routinely organized and participated in symbolic strikes. In the beginning, in industries involved in mass production such as textiles, union representatives organized two-hour strikes in support of the protesters. In the sector of education, admittedly one of the more politicized sectors of the UGTT, the hands of unionists were tied, with the protests falling in the middle of the school holidays. Nevertheless, they were able to overcome this limitation to some extent by staging symbolic sit-ins. I was told, for instance, that:

> In Sidi Bouzid from December 17th to the 24th the regime thought they would do what they did in Gafsa. The difference is that movements started in Thala on the 24th until January 3rd, every day we organized a sit-in in the office of the UGTT. There were no strikes because the strong sector, education and the teachers were on holidays. January 3rd, when school started, all students and teachers were out on the streets. There was confrontation with the police. From January 4th, especially after the confrontation with the police, teachers and students stopped going to school. This was true of all institutions except for the health sector (hospitals and pharmacies), bakeries, and coffeeshops. If coffeeshops closed, the country would stop.[99]

In early January, as the social crisis escalated and turned violent, it became ever more imperative for the militant unionists to urge the leadership to support the movement in the midst of a highly unpredictable and chaotic social environment. In her in-depth analysis of the UGTT's role during the December 17th uprising, Yousfi (2017) provides a nuanced account of unionists' various forms of involvement in the demonstrations. Nonetheless, she argues that these activities were carried out "within an organizational framework that provided a stable point of reference for the movement. The political crisis led to unexpected events …, but the codified system of roles,

[99] Interview with Zied, union representative, secondary education, Thala, February 9, 2017.

rules and procedures provided a blueprint for action for the unionists …" (71). While Yousfi's emphasis on roles, rules and procedures certainly captures a central structuring element of the UGTT's operations, it risks giving the impression that all interaction between unionists, and all initiatives they undertook, were determined by such codes. This was by no means always the case, however. At times unionists initiated actions that were opposed by fellow unionists, that created friction between them, and that were taken in defiance of other's opposition, including in breach of formal regulations. The following example is one such case.

I met Cyrine, a health care professional and union representative in one of Tunisia's largest cities.[100] Since 2017, the UGTT has made a modest effort to encourage female representation in elected positions, particularly given that traditionally women have been systematically under-represented within the organization across all levels,[101] an absence that I also noticed during my fieldwork when I was only able to interview seven elected female unionists. It is worth noting that Cyrine is the first member of her family to become a union representative. In fact, as she put it, "my family doesn't like the UGTT because they're in business." But, for Cyrine, having worked in a private health centre for nearly ten years, she was familiar with the common problems and issues facing the employees, from doctors to the cleaning personnel. Believing that these concerns could be addressed through the formation of a union, but fearing that she would be reprimanded if her employer discovered her efforts to organize the workers, she collected the necessary signatures required to form a union in secrecy. Reflecting on that period, Cyrine believed she was able to

[100] In order to ensure Cyrine's anonymity is protected, apart from using a pseudonym, I am also excluding information about her exact profession or place of residence as that information could potentially be used to identify her true identity. The interview was conducted in March 2017.

[101] During the 2017 UGTT Congress, a motion was passed to guarantee the presence of at least two women among the elected representatives of the executive bureaus. Nonetheless, as one member of the UGTT National Office of Women Workers explained to me, in Tunisia, syndicate work continues to fall on gender lines and it is still considered as "an activity for men." And so, due to continued division of labour in society between "managing home responsibilities and outside work," women simply "do not have the time" to take on more responsibility in the union.

succeed in her efforts because she was well liked amongst the staff, she was trusted, and equally important, she knew who to trust. Benefiting from a well-established network of colleagues, she ultimately gathered enough support to form a basic union for her place of work under the umbrella of the UGTT.

Reflecting on the events of 2010-2011, Cyrine recalled that it was around December 28th when she received a call from a colleague at a nearby hospital who asked her to go there to help. She was told that wounded protesters were being transferred from Regueb – people who had been shot. When Cyrine arrived, she said she saw a pregnant woman with a bullet in her stomach. Before December 28th she had heard about protests in Sidi Bouzid and some other towns, but she was not aware of the degree of the brutality. It was at that point that she joined the protests in solidarity. Very proudly, she admitted, "from December 30th, I spent fifteen days in the street supporting the protesters." As an elected member of her union branch, however, Cyrine is well known in her sector and the UGTT. Upon participating in several demonstrations, she explained that she received a call from the UGTT regional bureau, and laughing, she explained to me that "they called to say, you are with the UGTT, what are you doing in the street? Did we tell you to go and protest?" In another phone call from the regional bureau she was warned that, "the governor called us [the UGTT regional bureau] to say that Cyrine will be killed." Despite the warnings and threats, however, Cyrine continued to participate in the movement because "as a unionist it was my responsibility." For Cyrine, much like others I interviewed, being a unionist means not just protecting workers' economic interests, but the needs of the "ordinary people" and by extension Tunisian society. Reflecting on the history of the UGTT, Cyrine believed that her unionist work "is not just a social responsibility, it is a national responsibility, it is to defend the country." As Cyrine's account of the revolution demonstrates, while she was able to make use of her network

inside the UGTT to assist protesters, internal tensions and disagreements amongst colleagues about the level of participation appropriate for union representatives forced Cyrine to act against certain codified systems of rules. As discussed in chapter 3, however, unionists such as Cyrine who subscribe to the version of union's history based on the ideas of struggle, sacrifice and martyrdom are more likely to understand their activities in terms of political activism, and therefore when necessary act against the organization's codified rules. It is for this reason that the regime of Ben Ali was never able to fully coopt the UGTT.

By the second week of January 2011, the regime crackdown on protesters greatly increased, leaving a growing toll of victims. At the time, Allal (2012) notes, "a significant portion of the Tunisian population perceived the violent acts of the police as entirely disproportionate, as exceeding the limits of what was reasonable, and thus as the sign of a regime teetering on the edge" (75). As one union representative explained, "on January 8th from 7pm until dawn, 17 people were killed between Kasserine and Thala. I was in contact with the union in Kasserine. They said they need our help. People were dying."[102] The intensification of violence deepened the political divide in a way that "pitted 'them' (the regime, the police, the Trabelsi clique) against 'us', (the people of Tunisia)" (Allal 2012, 75).

The polarization effect of violence is elaborated by Tarrow (1994, 104) who contends that:

> In cycles of protest, violence has a polarizing effect on conflict and alliance systems. It transforms the relations between challengers and authorities from a confused, many-sided game into a bipolar one in which people are forced to choose sides, allies defect, bystanders retreat and the state's repressive apparatus swings into action. The threat of violence is a major power of movement, but it turns into a liability as other actors in the polity become frightened, elites regroup in the name of social peace and the forces of order learn to respond.

[102] Interview with Nabil, union representative, primary education, Sfax, December 2016.

In Tunisia, violence towards protesters including many unionists allowed militant members to gain leverage vis-à-vis the union leadership, thus compelling them to shift away from an alliance built on uncertainty and to clearly choose a side. As mentioned in earlier chapters, amongst Tunisians the region of Sfax is considered as a powerhouse of union work, due to its importance in Tunisia's economic activities including the mining industries (e.g. phosphate), agriculture (e.g. olive oil and almonds), as the largest fishing port and the second largest port overall, as well as on account of its historical importance as the birthplace of key unionist figures such as Farhat Hached. On January 9th the UGTT regional bureau in Sfax was to hold a meeting related to the topic of social security and retirement. Mohamed, a union representative who attended the meeting, told me, "A lot of people were going to come to that meeting, but when we woke up and heard that people had died in Thala and Kasserine, we decided that this issue [social security and retirement] is no longer important. So we made the meeting about the confrontation and [how] to stop the killings."[103] Securing the public support of the union in Sfax would further tilt the balance of power in favour of the protesters.

Mohamed Chaabane, the General Secretary of UGTT Sfax for over thirty years, presided over the meeting. Chaabane is a charismatic leader with a long history in union activism. Though he does not come from a political family, he began his union work in the early 1960s and participated in both the national uprisings of 1978 and 1983-4, for which he spent some time in prison. Over the years Chaabane has thus achieved a prestigious status amongst unionists. Youssef, a union representative from Sfax, described Chaabane as having "a huge influence over unionists. He has a big personality, he respects you, he will tell you that whatever you do I am with you,

[103] Interview with Mohamed Chaabane, former Regional General Secretary, Sfax, March 2017.

don't be scared. Under his shade you love unionist work."[104] Faced with mounting discontent at the time from union activists, Chaabane clarified to me:

> We followed up on the events of Sidi Bouzid step by step. We had a meeting planned on Sunday (January 9th) related to other issues. As the person responsible for UGTT Sfax, faced with what happened on the 8th in Thala and Kasserine, I decided on a strike in my region as soon as possible. By chance, January 10th, I already had a meeting scheduled in the executive bureau in Tunis. At the meeting, the General Secretaries of the 24 regions, plus the 13 members of the executive bureau were in attendance. Initially it was a big problem when I announced this strike. During the executive meeting I was the first to make an intervention to talk about the dangers of the situation, that the police is shooting the protesters, and that it is not possible for the UGTT to do nothing. That made a big impression on other attendees. After a long discussion, I convinced the general secretaries of the regions to follow up and participate in regional strikes. In Sfax, we made a committee because I had to involve all the sectors of the region so that it goes into their heads and they become motivated and brave to participate. We spoke to them about the date, January 12th, and the procedures of the strike. I would say 50,000 people participated. Everyone was fed up.[105]

Youssef remembered the night of the strike. A memo was sent out from UGTT Sfax, in which it was stated that it was everyone's obligation to participate – to defend their existence, even in the UGTT. He said, "we heard that Chaabane during the meeting in Tunis told others, 'I am moving forward with the strike. Success or failure, it will be my responsibility.' So the message was very clear. We should be present for him and the UGTT." The night of the strike, Youssef reached out to his colleagues to say, "it is our obligation to participate. It is the faith of our country". As Tarrow (1994) notes, collective action increases when "challengers … have allies who can act as friends in court, as guarantors against repression or as acceptable negotiators" (88). The public expression of support and action by leading UGTT figures and bureaus was critical for the participation of its less politicized or more reluctant members.

With the official involvement of the UGTT's executive bureaus, lessons of past conflict with the authoritarian state again played a decisive role in determining the union's political

[104] Interview with Youssef, union representative, Sfax, March 2017.
[105] Interview with Mohamed Chaabane, former Regional General Secretary Sfax, March 2017.

strategy. During numerous conversations with unionists, they recalled that the decision to forego a national strike in favour of regional strikes organized over several days was a strategic consideration connected to the events of 1978. Remembering the adverse consequences of a single-day general strike, union leaders sought to minimize potential repression by dispersing their movements. Thus, Sfax alongside Kasserine commenced a single-day regional strike on January 12th. The regional union in Sidi Bouzid released a memo on the 12th, inviting all to participate in a regional strike on the 13th (UGTT 2011b), and subsequently other bureaus followed. The only sectors exempt from this movement, according to Chaabane, were "health because it needed to fulfill its duties and this is the spirit of union work, water and electricity because it impacts everyone, and bread because it is linked to humanity." The following day, more governorates participated in the planned regional strikes, with the capital scheduled to take part on the 14th.

Several militant unionists, including Chaabane, recounted that on January 13th, Ben Ali set up a meeting with General Secretary Jrad, as seen above a union leader known for his conciliatory approach to state authorities. Ben Ali urged Jrad to cancel the strike in Tunis as a way to calm the situation. By that point, however, militant unionists and their base had gained such significant momentum that Jrad was forced to choose a side, and in the end he refused to fulfill Ben Ali's request. On that same day, just after the evening news, Ben Ali addressed the nation in what would be his last televised appearance, during which he announced that he would not seek re-election in 2014. He also expressed:

> The situation needs radical change; yes, a radical change. I've understood your message. I understand the unemployed, the needy, the politicians, all those demanding more freedom. I have understood everyone but what is happening today is not the way Tunisians do things.[106]

[106] Translation of the speech retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpG6Pt6J0o0 on April 30, 2020.

He pledged a positive response to the unrest on the condition that the violence end. Apart from adopting a new tone and lexicon to publicly acknowledge having "heard" the protesters, he chose for the first time to use colloquial Tunisian, instead of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), part of a political strategy to reconnect with a larger audience, particularly those in the interior regions (Lahlali 2011).

It remains unclear what finally forced Ben Ali to leave Tunisia for Saudi Arabia, just short of a month after the start of protests. Some I talked to in the business community believed he was betrayed by his inner circle; others told me he left thinking he would return soon, that this would be a temporary departure to calm the situation. On the contrary, Chaabane contended that the straw that finally broke the camel's back was the Sfax regional strike. As he put it, "so what happens is that on the 12th Ben Ali was watching the strike from his television at home. This is true information, it was published, I read about this in the newspaper. His wife Leila said when Ben Ali saw this on TV, he told her to get ready, 'we have to leave.'"

5.4 Concluding Remarks

Under Ben Ali's regime, the overall fragility and absence of dissenting voices from political opposition, civil society groups and unions were often interpreted by political scientists through the lens of political approval, economic interests, apathy and depoliticization (Allal 2012). Yet, as Allal so rightly puts it, "silence is not necessarily consent" (62). Thus, once an opportunity for collective action presented itself, the opposition was ready to seize it.

The above analysis of the role of the UGTT during the 2010-2011 uprisings provides another example of the ways in which local and middle level militant unionists, many of whom belonged or supported banned leftist parties, were able to leverage past experiences of collective

mobilization to coordinate their efforts in such a way as to influence the political commitment of the union leadership in support of the protesters. This chapter showed how the initial period of what would become the revolution was not simply an upsurge of anger in response to the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, but rather drew on longer term moral emotions such as disgust at the treatment of the interior regions by the corrupt and repressive central authorities. Against this background, anger and outrage were not mere spontaneous outbursts, but shorter-term emotions conditioned by years of neglect. It subsequently highlighted the importance of activists' networks and relationships for spreading the revolt beyond Sidi Bouzid, enabling the extension of contentious action into other localities when it was being repressed in its place of origin. These networks were particularly valuable given the high risks of such contentious action in a repressive environment, and it is equally noteworthy that activists applied the lessons of the repression of the 2008 Gafsa uprising in their determination to mobilize their networks to prevent the state from concentrating the forces of repression in a single location. Finally, local activists' ability to continue the movement in a number of localities pressed the national leadership of the UGTT to act, and to take the side of the protesters against the government. They too were able to learn from experience, but this time from the repression of the 1978 protests where a nationwide general strike had allowed Bourguiba's government to arrest large numbers of leading unionists and order security forces to crack down across the country. With this in mind, in January 2011 the UGTT leadership authorized a series of rolling regional strikes, preventing the regime from engaging in a single, decisive repressive action.

Having performed such a meaningful role in Ben Ali’s removal from power, the UGTT once again entered the national political scene, in a way reminiscent of the early years of independence. In the following chapter, I will thus focus my analysis on the union’s newly self-

appointed role as a national political "watchdog," and the impact of Tunisia's democratic progress on the activities of its more militant sectors and unionists.

Chapter 6: "Strong Unions Make Strong Democracies." the UGTT and 'New' Unionist Activism in post-Ben Ali Tunisia

Since the removal of the single-party regime in Tunisia in 2011, scholars have debated how to characterize the country's subsequent transformations. A comprehensive set of political and social changes, culminating in the establishment of a free and competitive electoral system, a new constitution based on respect for fundamental rights and civil liberties, new legislative provisions in support of gender and racial equality, and an impressive expansion of the available space for opposition activity (including the legalization of previously banned parties), associational life, and civic engagement; does this not at least meet the minimum definition of a revolution?

Admittedly revolution is a deeply contested concept, whose meaning is not stable even for the participants themselves (Camau 2012). One provocative intervention in a long-standing debate is Dunn's restriction of the term revolution to the years 1789-1989. This historically bounded approach by definition excludes Tunisia; so too does his insistence on utopian vision of total transformation of society. For Dunn revolution is a "clearly articulated end it itself: a political horizon with unique theoretical and ideological contents" (Abrams 2018). Curiously, in a conversation with political scientist Abrams, Dunn makes a partial exception for Tunisia, explaining, "what took place was the collapse of a regime and, arguably, the politically orchestrated emergence of a new regime which might actually turn out to be the governmental, social, and economic structure of the society in question for quite a long time ahead. You never can tell how long, but you never could" (3). By drawing attention to the possibility that events falling outside his temporal restrictions might nonetheless be qualified as a "revolution," and yet adding that we cannot know yet, Dunn highlights the problem of temporality: his project is above

all one of defining a particular epoch as revolutionary, even as the continued unfolding of events offers challenges to this periodization. Rather than get bogged down in the problem of defining epochs, then, it is more useful for present purposes to define revolution without reference to temporality, and through the analysis of a number of salient distinguishing features.

Charles Tilly (1977), for instance, offers a definition that draws attention to "the displacement of one set of powerholders by another"; this definition permits the taking into account of a variety of objects of power, "power over means of production, power over symbols, power over government" (7-8). Tunisia's transformed political order, including its new constitution, the consequence of the participation of large number of actors, many of whom were marginalized in the past, would certainly be a case of the displacement of power over symbols and government. Hannah Arendt (2006), too, provides a definition of a revolution which, while developed with other revolutions in mind, can be applied to Tunisia. She contends that "only when change occurs in the sense of a new beginning … to bring about the formation of a new politics, where the liberation from oppression aims at last at the constitution of freedom can we speak of revolution" (25).

Tunisia has indeed experienced the expansion of both formal and substantive freedoms since 2011; one of the most meaningful developments has been the holding of free and contested elections, beginning in that same year. This has been accompanied by a notable upsurge in the number of available forums for political and civil participation. Decree number 88, issued on 24 September 2011, guaranteed the right to anyone resident in Tunisia to establish or join a nongovernmental association (al-Farshishi 2016). According to a study carried out by Wahid al-Farshishi (2016, 52), by 2014, there had been 7,245 associations created since January 14th, 2011. In Ben Ali's Tunisia there were approximately 9000 organizations; only a handful however were

independent of Ben Ali's government (Zayani 2015, 45). There are even more impressive numbers of civil society organizations elsewhere in the Maghreb, but the development of these associations has to be understood in light of state attempt to guide and restrain them. In Algeria, according to figures provided by the Ministry of Interior in 2012, there were 93,000 civil society organizations (Northey 2017, 222). It is important to note, however, that the 2012 Law on Associations, drafted by the state, increased executive power over such organizations despite lobbying by them against the law in 2011 (as "legitimized repression") and criticism of the law in parliament (2017, 216). In Morocco, meanwhile, encouragement of associations has been official policy for some years, but the monarchy has guided associations away from politicization, while restricting their activities if these are perceived as oppositional (Clark 2018, 141). One important element of Arendt's definition of a revolution is that it involves the initiation of something new. In Tunisia, there has been a clear rupture from the old order, and a new political and associational life has come into being, one whose novelty is all the more apparent when contrasted with contemporary developments in Algeria and Morocco.

Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, a wide range of Tunisians, including many of those I interviewed, referred to what started in December 2010 as a revolution. Without detracting from the importance of this lively debate, the terminology employed by those who participated must be taken seriously.

The UGTT, as discussed in the previous chapter, played a major role in the revolutionary process, which continues to this day, and it has been profoundly shaped by it. This chapter will therefore address general RQ 4: how does a union leverage new political openings and social crises to broaden its national role and influence, including taking up the role of a national political watchdog? And, RQ 4a: how has Tunisia's new democratic political landscape, marked by a

continued surge in collective mobilization, changed the goals and tactics of union activists inside the UGTT?

I will therefore discuss the expansion of the UGTT's role from a social movement coordinator, to becoming a political mediator, and, more recently, a self-appointed guardian of the revolution's political objectives and a watchdog over the government. The term "watchdog" refers to agencies established to "scrutinize government decision making and to cement public law values in government processes" (McMillan 2010, 423). Often the objective of a watchdog group is to publicize problematic behaviour on the part of the power holders and to take direct action in support of the public interest. In Tunisia, as will be discussed, the UGTT has taken up this role but has adapted it to include in its realm of responsibilities a more direct involvement in political decision-making.

Before I start, a few necessary clarifications are in order. Since this chapter deals with the period of regime change in Tunisia, and the changing role of the UGTT's various branches within this process, it is important to note that I use the terms 'transition' and 'regime change' similar to how O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) employ them to denote the replacement of one regime by another, irrespective of its type. This is particularly important for the early period of a regime breakdown, as the new system is marked by a considerable amount of uncertainty and political "unknowns." In this provisional political environment, the only certainty is that the old system is in a transition period towards an uncertain "something else." That "something" can be the instauration of political democracy or the restoration of a new, and possibly even more severe, form of authoritarian rule" (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, 3), as has been the case, for example, in al-Sisi's Egypt (Armbrust 2017; Rutherford 2018).

In 2011, the political situation in Tunisia was no exception. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Ben Ali's sudden removal from power came as a surprise to all political and social actors. The transitional government that came into place in that same year, prior to the holding of the first democratic elections, issued decree no. 87 guaranteeing the freedom to set up political parties. The fragile order that immediately succeeded the old regime was therefore populated by a mixture of new parties, some started by new political actors, but also competing with many of the old elites who had served the previous system in various capacities. To add to the political dilemma, the hundreds of newly mobilized political actors, many of whom had very little to no experience in governance, were confronting each other in an environment of serious regional crises and deep domestic turmoil (Berman 2019). The country faced a very real threat of a transition that would lead to the emergence of a new authoritarian order, for three reasons: firstly, the uncertain legitimacy of the transitional regime (Antonakis-Nashif 2013); secondly, the absence of any experience in democratic government; and thirdly, the lack of experience in opposition cooperation that was simultaneously broad, diverse and sustainable, which had existed in other countries in the region such as Jordan (Clark 2010, 2006). Thus, as I move forward in this chapter examining the changing role and political participation of the UGTT during the post-Ben Ali period, I do not intend to insinuate that "political transition" automatically equates to advancement in democratization, even if democratization has been the consequence of the transition process in Tunisia. Democratization is a contingent process and the UGTT has had a significant part in trying to ensure that the transition moves towards a more participatory and open political system. Therefore, my intention is to better clarify the role of the union during the early transition process, and the potential impact of regime transition on labour itself. Specifically I will show that the UGTT has maintained its central position as organizer of labour, even as its political role has

broadened to include being a mediator between contending political parties, and a watchdog over government's activities.

To better contextualize this part of the analysis, it is important to recall that in the first few years following Ben Ali's departure, Tunisia experienced the highs, and the many lows, that accompany a regime transition. These included the holding of elections, followed by multiple resignations of leading political figures including an entire government, political stagnation, grave economic crises, and sporadic incidents of domestic terrorism, all major events that influenced and broadly redefined the role of the UGTT in Tunisian politics and grassroots collective action.

In many ways the first half of the 2010s was a highly dynamic period for the UGTT, as the organization's leadership, hitherto a quasi-oppositional force, solidified its position as a political actor with vast influence on the regime transition process. Nevertheless, even an actor of the UGTT's size and influence depends on the cooperation of others such as the union of lawyers and the union of employers in order to exert an influence over the political transition process, or over subsequent developments.

There are two time periods corresponding to two related modes of union action. The first of these is the period from Ben Ali's departure in 2011 until the adoption of the new constitution in 2014, during which the union tried to impose itself, eventually successfully, as a national mediator. The second is from 2015 when the UGTT received the Nobel Peace Prize until the present; during this period the UGTT once again reinforced its place on the national stage but this time as a political watchdog.

The second period succeeding the adoption of the constitution matters to this analysis, because the country's remarkable shift towards implementation of democratic procedures and practices was accompanied by a continued and substantial number of civil protests,

demonstrations, and social movements in the interior regions of the country (Cherif 2017). In turn, this social phenomenon has once again transformed the internal dynamics of the UGTT's assemblage of members and their grassroots networks. This time, however, in a new political climate where there is much less need for the UGTT to act as a refuge for, and protector of, political opposition, the union rank and file, or at least the more militant among them, are leveraging their position within a more open and democratic space to intensify their own political and economic demands, at times forming external networks with other civil actors, to further objectives not tenable under an authoritarian system.

As a result, I here examine the ways in which a union organization can incorporate itself into, and participate in the early political transition process. I will demonstrate how in situations where political transition does in fact lead to democratic change, the new political system can work towards changing a union's political activism and its structural cohesion.

This chapter is organized as follows. First, I begin by providing an overview of key concepts and influential theoretical perspectives on regime transition, with a special focus on the MENA region. Nonetheless, the conditions for democratization set out in these theories often did not obtain in Tunisia; a closer examination of the Tunisian case suggests an alternative trajectory for democratization, and this is what I will explore by taking a closer look at events which led to the emergence of the idea of a national dialogue.

More specifically, I will discuss the ways in which the UGTT was able to leverage mounting socio-political crises to position itself as the leading opposition and collective action organizer against the first democratically elected coalition government, the Troika, eventually convincing the country's three leading political parties to resign in support of the National Dialogue Quartet, a coalition of four civil society organizations led by the UGTT.

Next, I will review the events of the National Dialogue which helped consolidate the union's self-appointed political position as Tunisia's national political watchdog.

Taking a look at the second phase of the political transition process, in particular the period following the adoption of the country's new constitution, I examine the correlation between democratic change and a rise in collective action mobilization. Specifically I will discuss how the broadening of available space for political participation is changing UGTT's political engagement amongst its various branches and at local and national levels.

6.1 Key Concepts and Assumptions

At the start of this chapter I defined the meaning of one principal concept, "political transition." I also emphasized that in the wake of an authoritarian breakdown, this term should be applied sans its normative connotation that implies a move towards democratic change. In the early period of a regime breakdown, transition is just that, the replacement of one regime with another, independent of the overall transformation in the political system's ideological and procedural characteristics. And while during the early phase of regime change, certain political actors will inevitably push for the creation of a new regime based on democratic principles, to what extent the new system will shift in that direction is unknown. That being said, in Tunisia, after a period of grave political turmoil, regime transition did in fact usher in a new political system away from authoritarian rule, and towards one based on democratic principles.

By 2021, ten years since the start of political transformations and the adoption of a new constitution, the new political and social changes implemented, in Tunisia, by and large conform to a "thick" conceptualization of democracy. In this case, democracy exceeds the minimal requirement defined as "genuine openness and competition in the electoral system," and entails

attributes such as "legal equality of all citizens under the rule of law," "real pluralism in sources of information and forms of organization independent of the state," "substantial individual freedom of belief, opinion, discussion, speech, publication, broadcast, assembly, demonstration, petition, and the Internet," "the right of all adult citizens to vote and to run for office," amongst others (Diamond 2008: 21-22). It is important to note that the different attributes of a democratic political system vary in depth and scope depending on the country in question (Diamond 2008), and in this regard, Tunisia is no exception. Still, over the past decade the country has enjoyed a relatively stable and positive development in establishing democratic institutions and principles rooted in a new constitution.

Having said that, Tunisia's democratic shift played out in contradiction to theorization on regime breakdown in MENA. In *Turbulent Transitions: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War in the Twenty-first Century*, Mansfield and Snyder (2007), re-examining the correlation between democratization and domestic and international war, argued:

> Democratization often goes hand in hand with a syndrome of weak central authority, unstable domestic coalitions, and high-energy mass politics. It brings new social groups and classes onto the political stage. Political leaders, finding no way to reconcile incompatible interests, resort to shortsighted bargains or reckless gambles in order to maintain their governing coalitions. Elites need to gain mass allies to defend their weakened position. Both the newly ambitious elites and the embattled old ruling groups often use appeals to nationalism to stay astride their unmanageable political coalitions … Governing a society that is democratizing is like driving a car while throwing away the steering wheel, stepping on the gas, and fighting over which passenger will be in the driver's seat. The results, when political institutions are weak, are often war (134).

Using case study evidence from the former Yugoslavia, the post-Soviet Caucasus, Burundi, India and Pakistan, Ethiopia and Eritrea, Russia and Chechnya, Mansfield and Snyder theorize that in regions, including many parts of the Arab world, where institutional preparation for democratization is weak, authoritarian breakdown could have catastrophic end results. As a result,

to offset the undesirable side effects of democratization, including the onset of a domestic or external war, the authors suggest that in the hierarchy sequence of transition, institution building (legal, administrative, and journalistic) should take priority over the introduction of open electoral competition (Mansfield and Snyder 2007). Similarly, Thomas Carothers (2002), in his critique of "transitology" contends that contrary to the paradigm's assumption that structural features are not a deciding factor in transition to democracy, comparative studies of former communist countries and sub-Saharan Africa clearly demonstrate that underlying structural conditions, including institutional legacies, "strongly affect the outcomes of attempted transitions" (16). Unlike Mansfield and Snyder, however, Carothers disagrees that democratization unfolds according to a series of "rational sequences," instead describing it as "chaotic processes of change that go backwards and sideways as much as forward, and do not do so in any regular manner" (15). Also contributing to a critical view of the idea of a single necessary order of democratic transition, Wills' (2013) insightful study of women's rights and democratization in Kuwait re-examines Dahl's assertion that a stable path to democratization prioritizes open contestation before full participation, showing instead the important tensions that exist between these variables and which are a constitutive part of this process. By examining the failed enfranchisement of 1999 in Kuwait, Wills demonstrates that there are "multiple paths to the prioritization of the redistribution of power, the rise of competitive politics, and the framework of open contestation within democratic transition" (2013, 184).

Tunisia's experience, too, bears out the observation that there are multiple paths to democratization, albeit to some extent; even if regime breakdown preceded elections, which preceded institutional formation (e.g. of an independent judiciary), much of this apparently rational sequence (in an order different from the one proposed by Mansfield and Snyder) was in fact

entirely contingent, with the first government failing to create a new constitution and the whole process threatened by terrorist attacks and assassinations of political figures before the National Dialogue Quartet was able to mediate a change of government and enable the successful writing of the constitution. Moreover, Tunisia following the collapse of Ben Ali's regime lacked the preconditions Carothers deems necessary for democratic transition including "past experience with political pluralism" (16) and democratic "institutional legacies" (8).[107] Yet this apparent lack of appropriate institutions did not make democratization impossible, nor did authoritarian breakdown lead to catastrophe.

In accordance with Mansfield and Snyder's analysis, Solingen (2003), in her study of democratization in the Middle East concluded that in regions where structural conditions have not ripened for democratic growth, "piecemeal democratization through progressive political pacts" (54) initiated and controlled from above will be less dangerous and more likely to lead to a stable democracy. Others, such as Tom Pierre Najem (2003), looked into comparable structural factors that hindered the emergence of democracy in Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria, and pointed to the "overwhelming power of the state, vis-à-vis state-society relations" (184); thus suggesting, that "in the event that a state crisis did occur in any of these countries, it is unclear, and indeed seems unlikely, that a democratic regime would emerge to replace the existing authoritarian state order" (184). With respect to Tunisia under Ben Ali, in particular, Najem argued that:

> The elements within civil society (i.e., non-Islamist elements such as the bourgeoisie) that in other circumstances might champion democratic development remain poorly developed and do not enjoy the same levels of mass support as the non-democratic Islamist elements … it seems that loosening the authoritarian state order in Tunisia was not a sufficient condition for the establishment of a democratic, or even democratizing, regime (195).

[107] It is important, however, to recall that although the experience of 18 October Collective did bring Islamist, nationalist, and leftist political parties closer, the repressive conditions of Ben Ali's regime placed significant limits on their political activities and interactions.

This argument risks being circular: autocracy has as its basis a massive and overbearing state; the state is massive and overbearing, therefore democracy will be hard to establish even if there is regime change; therefore autocracy will persist. In reality, these statements about the state's overwhelming reach and its inhibition of citizens' political involvement overstated its power, which even if considerable, was hardly all-encompassing.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to see that a reasonably stable democratic order has emerged in Tunisia without it having fulfilled the conditions identified by those writing before 2011. It should be noted for instance that the assumption that Islamists are by default anti-democratic is mistaken, as evident in Ennahda's willingness to compromise with non-Islamist political parties. For example, Rachid Ghannouchi already tried to alleviate concerns about Ennahda's commitment to democratic principles by declaring upon his return to Tunisia in January 2011 that "I am no Khomeini" and that "our role will be to participate in realising the goals of this peaceful revolution: to anchor a democratic system, social justice and to put a limit to discrimination against banned groups" (Bright 2011). Since then, Ennahda has been able to demonstrate a track record, by, for example, its willingness to enter cross-party partnership, such as the first democratically elected government ("the Troika"), and its participation in the National Dialogue Quartet.

6.2 Political Transition: Challenges and Uncertainties of Change

In the case of Tunisia, even though the conditions that led to the onset of national demonstrations in December 2010 already obtained many years prior, the actual regime breakdown took place quite suddenly. Under Ben Ali's system of political domination and repression, subjugated political parties and civil society organizations and groups dependent on the state could not effectively act as legitimate instruments for political participation (Hibou 2011). Against this

background, the first phase of political change in Tunisia seemed to move in a direction that would once again validate the aforementioned theorizations about democratization in the region. While newly emerging ambitious elites were not contemplating war, unlike in Mansfield and Snyder's examples, Tunisia was hit by a different type of conflict. Since the 2010-2011 uprisings, Islamists movements have become a major force in the MENA region, resulting in the outbreak of violence in many societies (Campana and Jourde 2017). In Tunisia, the fall of Ben Ali was followed by a massive upsurge in the number of Tunisian jihadists who had started to join militant organizations, including the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This phenomenon grew at a speed that ultimately pushed Tunisia to have the highest ratio of foreign fighters per capita in the world (Mustapha 2019); "political exclusion," "socioeconomic marginalization," and "lack of development" are amongst the main explanatory factors behind the rise in the number of Tunisian jihadists (Fahmi and Meddeb 2015).

In 2017, on a research visit to the city of Kasserine, one of the epicentres of the revolution that has since turned into a jihadist recruitment ground, to a point where one street is unofficially called the Jihad Avenue, I myself witnessed the stark divide between the relatively prosperous Tunis and the coast, and the interior cities, long neglected by economic development policies, manifested in high unemployment and poverty rates.[108] At the time, my female Tunisian traveling companion and I were met by one of her acquaintances, a young man, hospitable and welcoming in a way which turned out to be typical of the place, who showed us around the town of 80,000 people and gave us his perspective on its many problems. This unassuming town, so many of its buildings made of bare, unpainted brick, was nonetheless full of activity, especially its numerous coffee shops, packed with a male clientele. In one of the very few hotels in the city centre, it

[108] Here I present the result of my own observation during fieldwork; for official economic and social statistics please chapter 2 and 5.

appeared that we were the only guests. Over dinner, I asked our guide how a young man like himself spends his time in Kasserine. He said, drinking tea and playing cards at a coffeeshop. He explained that before the revolution there had been a cinema, but since it belonged to the Trabelsi family it had subsequently closed. Another favourite activity for many men was going to the nearby mountain of Jebel ech Chambi, but ever since jihadists had established a base there, it was now off limits. Nevertheless, despite the severity of the social crisis, I also observed the tenacity and perseverance of the local population. In an accidental meeting with a young high school art teacher, I learned about his theatre initiative at Kasserine's prison where inmates had begun to put on plays by Shakespeare for the local residents. Despite their resolve, however, an increase in the availability of spaces for social participation of various groups, including those adhering to radical views, together with regional instability and ongoing chronic economic hardship, enabled many extremist groups to connect with and recruit more individuals than previously possible. This phenomenon is visible in other less developed and poor areas of the country. In a survey carried out by the NGO International Alert, in 2015, in the impoverished Tunis suburbs of Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen, neighbourhoods known for their high unemployment rates amongst young people, of the 714 individuals interviewed, 35.2% of the respondents cited Salafism "as a defining feature of their neighbourhood after the revolution" (5), 80.5% "claimed to know at least one young person from their neighbourhood who has gone for jihad in Syria" (5), 45% believed their living condition had "deteriorated since the revolution" (5), 44% stating "nothing has changed," and an overwhelming 98.8% percent believing "politicians serve only their own personal interests" (5).

And so, Tunisia's sudden authoritarian breakdown, amidst institutional deficiencies, and its role as the hub of a regional crisis that helped strengthen the surge of jihadist movements,

presented the early phase of the transition period with serious challenges to the possibility of moving the new system towards substantive democratic change. Further amplifying the political uncertainty were newly emerging parties entering the political field with very little to no tradition of co-existence or cooperation. In an interview with a Tunisian writer and journalist, I was told just how before the October 2011 elections, along with several of his colleagues, he sought to create a coalition of newly emerging left-wing political parties, but to no avail. As he explained to me:

> In January, just after the revolution, me and some of my friends, we founded a party. We wrote to many of the new political parties that were similar to us in terms of policy. We went to see them all. We asked them, what do you think about our policy position? We invited them all to work together. We spoke to 20 or 25 party leaders. They all rejected our proposition. They all agreed with our policies, but said no because they wanted to maintain *their own identity*. They said, no, because we have our own logo, and our own name. But that is completely false. Your identity is not more than 10 days old! The real problem in Tunisia is the problem of egos.[109]

Apart from the issue of cooperation between parties, as well as these parties' limited institutionalization, there were also concerns regarding citizens' lack of experience in democratic procedures. Habib, like many of my other interviewees, during my first round of fieldwork in early 2016 when I was still working on cooperation between opposition political parties, emphasized that with political behaviour informed by decades of authoritarian rule, formation of new habits appropriate to a burgenoning democratic order would take some time. Equally important for them was the time needed to encourage the development of trust in new procedures, rules and political institutions amongst citizens. This widely held belief was in itself an element of this lack of confidence in the political process, and actors' ability to navigate the uncharted waters of transition.

[109] Interview with Habib, writer and journalist, Tunis, March 2016.

Against this backdrop, and in the thick of political uncertainty and social crisis, the UGTT stood out as the most robust and influential political participant, immediately working towards entrenching its position as a political influencer and mediators. With its local offices, unionist representatives, and committed members represented all throughout Tunisia's 24 governorates, the UGTT benefited from the organizational and structural advantage not available to other political actors.

And so, immediately following Ben Ali's departure, the UGTT executive board released a declaration calling for:

> The formation of a government of National Unity made up of all the political, intellectual and social tendencies responsible for protecting citizens, ensuring their security and settling current affairs … create independent commissions to investigate abuses by any official implicated in the deaths of innocent citizens following the use of live ammunition during peaceful protests … prosecute anyone involved in corruption and compromising affairs … revise the Constitution and all laws relating to political reform (UGTT 2011c).

Similar declarations followed. They all contained appeals to the union's history; to its role bringing together workers as well as representing the nation; and to workers and union members to remain united and determined, in the spirit of that history and the UGTT's present role; and to the UGTT's resolution in protesting until the authorities met its demands (UGTT 2011d).

Just a few weeks in, starting on 27 January 2011, the union again played an instrumental role in offering material and symbolic support to the young protesters who had travelled from all over Tunisia to the capital to occupy the square in front of the Prime Minister's office, in what came to be known as the Kasbah 1 and Kasbah 2 (March 2011) sit-ins.[110] Fearing that the promised

[110] A point of clarification is in order here. Although during my interviews with UGTT members, the events of the Kasbah 1 and 2 sit-ins were often mentioned as an example of the organization's continued support for the young revolutionaries that ultimately helped facilitated the resignation of the interim Prime Minister, my conversations with many young Tunisians presented a less than flattering picture of the UGTT's involvement. Although many of them acknowledged the positive influence of the UGTT's initial support, they blamed the organization for encouraging the

goals of the revolution could be stolen from them, hundreds of demonstrators with the aid of the UGTT leadership set up camps demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Ghannouchi and the rest of Ben Ali's political machine. During this period, the union leadership along with other political elites and civil society actors (155 members in total), supported and participated in the creation of the Higher Authority for the Realization of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition. The Authority, which was dissolved following the October 2011 Constituent Assembly elections, for the first time provided a framework that allowed civil society actors to take part in law making processes. The Authority, with UGTT's involvement, transformed into:

> A driving force behind the main texts staking out the path to democracy during this initial period of the transition: historic decree-laws such as the one that created the first Independent High Authority for Elections, the one on the organization of the first free and open elections in Tunisia, those concerning the organization of associations, political parties and freedom of the press and the one on the media which created the sector's first independent regulatory authority (Belhassen 4, n.d.)

Despite small milestones, the crystallization of a new democratic system in Tunisia was marked by both internal and external insecurities, even following the successful completion of the first elections in October. For the UGTT, the solution to growing political disputes and insecurities lay with the creation of a National Dialogue supported by all major political actors, a proposition initially supported by a handful of the UGTT's closest allies such as the LTDH. The UGTT leadership, therefore, needed to take advantage of emerging political opportunities in the form of national crises to facilitate a collective action that would force the opposing political actors to support its initiative. The next section looks at the ways in which the UGTT brought to fruition this political venture.

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protestors to leave this symbolic site and hand over the transition process to "professionals," a decision that many of them attributed to the failures of the revolution, such as the continued government corruption and the concentration of power in the hands of a few including the UGTT. For more details, see Choukri Hmed (2016).

6.3 Managing Political Crisis: The National Dialogue

Beginning in the 1990s in various African and Latin American countries, National Dialogue gained ground as a technique for resolving political conflict and discord (Paffenholz, Zachariassen and Helfer 2017), including as part of democratization processes (Stigant and Murray 2015), above all due to its capacity to place traditionally excluded groups alongside more elite stakeholders. Throughout this period constitution-making and political reform through National Dialogues became a popular strategy in many Latin American (ex: Bolivia and Colombia) and African (ex: Benin, Mali, Niger, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo) nations, as a way to promote good governance and peaceful transition (Paffenholz et al. 2017).

During the first half of the 2010s, National Dialogues were also initiated in several Arab countries, including Bahrain (2011-2014), Morocco (2013-2014), Yemen (2013-2014), and Libya (2014-2015), as well as in Tunisia (2013-2014), though in Egypt a proposed national dialogue never materialized (Blunck, Vimalarajah, Wils, von Burg, Lanz, and Mubashir 2017; Rennick and El Souri 2017; Paffenholz et al. 2017). Where dialogues did take place, however, there was no guarantee they would lead to something of substantive value. In Morocco, for instance, many civil society actors distrusted the government-led National Dialogue with Civil Society, with more than 3000 groups boycotting it and forming a parallel initiative, La Dynamique de l'Appel de Rabat (The Dynamics of the Rabat Appeal) (Berrada 2019). As the Moroccan case suggests, issues of trust and inclusion are central to a national dialogue's success. Other noteworthy factors that can impede the process of a national dialogue include the type of reforms and the range of issues included in the discussions; the inclusivity and diversity of participants involved in the dialogue; the degree of participants' commitments and the harmonization of their respective interests; the

structural and organizational preparedness of the dialogue; the level of trust among participating parties; the degree of public and international support; and the dynamics of the local religious, racial and ethnic divides (Blunck et al. 2017; Paffenholz et al. 2017).

In Tunisia, as I will discuss in the following section, the UGTT was able to act as an effective mediator between often mistrustful participants, drawing on its historic legacy, its experience in negotiations, and its ability to threaten to mobilize much of Tunisian labour in protests and strikes should any party to the dialogue prove unduly recalcitrant. The national union was able to leverage a post-revolutionary social climate marked by the simultaneous rise in the number of social protests and the broadening of space for political activism to position itself as the leading collective action organizer against the first democratically elected government, the Troika, eventually convincing the country's three leading political parties to resign in support of the union-led National Dialogue Quartet.

6.3.1 The Quartet

The first calls for a national dialogue emerged in Tunisia, in the fall of 2012, with the formation of the National Dialogue Council headed by the UGTT, the Tunisian League for Human Rights, and the Tunisian Bar Association. Following the first free and fair parliamentary elections large segments of civil society and opposition groups alleged that the new political scene had disproportionately favored the Islamist participation over those of smaller parties and political actors (M'rad, Ben Salem, Mejri, Charfeddine, Ennouri, and Zgarni 2015). Ennahda's impressive electoral performance, which made it the largest party in the parliament with 89 seats, was viewed by more politically liberal Tunisians as endangering the revolution's democratic goals. After winning 39 percent of the votes, Ennahda entered into a cross-ideological arrangement with two

secular-left political parties (CPR and Ettakatol), in what came to be known as the Troika Coalition. In spite of this, many Tunisians continued to fear that with its newly acquired political power, Ennahda could carry out its eventual goal of popularizing and importing Islamism and Jihadism in Tunisia (Marks 2015). While Islamism was rarely the focus of my conversations and interviews, when those discussions did turn to the politics of Ennahda, this alarmist narrative cropped up frequently. In one noteworthy incident, one union employee framed the so-called Islamists question in these terms:

> In 2011 when Rachid Ghannuchi returned to Tunisia, at the airport his followers sang to him the same traditional song that people sang to Prophet Mohammad as he arrived in the Medina.[111] But if we were a country that respected itself, he would be put in jail because he has been involved in terrorism. They are trying to take us back 1400 years … The West thinks that these modernist Islamist leaders are working on their agenda, and these same Islamist leaders are thinking to themselves, let the West trust us let's just keep the status quo long enough until we are powerful to have the Caliphate. When you come back to Tunisia again, you will find a camel waiting for you at the airport. We will have a huge beard and dress like Afghanis. And you will not be dressed like this, you will be wearing the hijab.[112]

This imagery of a "backward" Tunisia is a form of self-Orientalization, where a member of a formerly colonized society seeks to identify himself and his position with one he imputes to a visiting Western researcher by projecting stereotypes of backward and/or fanatical Muslims onto his political adversaries within his own society - and this despite his membership in the UGTT, which began life as an anti-colonial organization. Rabab El-Mahdi (2011), in his analysis of the 2011 Egyptian uprising, made a similar observation in that the dominant narrative propagated by local and international academics and the media, seamlessly worked to produce an orientalist

[111] It has been claimed that when prophet Mohammad reached Medina following the Hijra (migration to Medina), the local inhabitants sang to him Talaʿ al-Badru ʿAlaynā (*O the White Moon Rose Over Us*). Although there have been many renditions of this song, including one performed by Ottawa children's choir, in 2015, singing this ancient Arabic song to welcome Syrian refugees, I could not find any corroborating evidence to show that Ghannouchi supporters in fact sang this song upon his arrival at Carthage airport, in Tunis, in 2011.

[112] Mohamed, union employee, Tunis, March 2016.

representation of the revolution that was "palatable for western consumption" (para. 3). This grand narrative constructed a "modern" image of the uprising as a "youth, non-violent revolution in which social media (especially Facebook and twitter) are champions" (para. 2). Thus the part of the story that involved Molotov hand-bombs and police stations and government buildings set on fire was down-played, as it did not fit into a new Western discourse centered around "Arab Awakening."

Returning to the first attempt at a National Dialogue, as a consequence of these Islamist fears, in order to protect Tunisia's political transition, the Council sought to create a framework for an inclusive and consensus-based treatment of issues concerning the new civil character of the state; the safeguarding of state bodies, educational facilities, and religious institutions from Islamist political manipulation; the establishment of a new development model based on regional equality; and the promotion of civil liberties and respect for human rights and freedoms (M'rad et al. 2015). At the time, the Council witnessed the broad engagement of "50 parties and 22 organizations and more than 200 journalists" (M'rad et. al. 2015, 26) who took part in the first round of discussions.

Two components of the Troika coalition, Ennahda and CPR, however, refused to take part in the Council. The leaders of the two national parties boycotted the discussions on the grounds that the Council included parties composed of former members of the old regime, as well as groups, such as Nidaa Tounes, which they argued did not recognize the legitimacy of Tunisia's new elected institutions (Mrad et al. 2015). Thus, Ettakatol remained the only governing party to join the discussions, in an effort to bridge the divide between the elected government and the Council – a political decision that was also a sign of a growing strife inside the Troika. During an interview with Hichem, one of the founding members of Ettakatol, he explained to me how inside the

National Assembly, all three sides of the coalition had entered into and accepted a power-sharing agreement. This power-sharing consensus, however, did not extend to more substantive government responsibilities such as drafting of the new constitution. On that ground, the parties had reached a deadlock that could threaten the peaceful political transition of Tunisia.[113] With the drafting of the constitution remaining as the most important activity of Troika, the Council, therefore, was viewed as a potential vehicle to overcome a political deadlock. Nevertheless, without the support of Ennahda and CPR, the future of the Council was cut short.

Just one year into the formation of the Troika coalition, the UGTT along with smaller opposition groups, despite their concerns over Ennahda's ultimate political objectives and the unyielding deadlock in the drafting of the constitution, did not have the political leverage to impel Ennahda and CPR to concede to their demands. At the same time, a move towards a more confrontational approach in the form of protests and national strikes would have only widened the divide between the government and the opposition groups.

In this environment, the pathway to a national dialogue rested on finding opportunities that could permit the opposition to both *justifiably* and *effectively* compel Troika to accept this initiative. In various studies on social movements, the type of political opportunities considered as offering options for mobilization are primarily linked to: weak political alliances and divided elites; an increased access to political participation; and the relative strength and weight of the state's coercive apparatus (McAdam 1996; Tarrow 1994). These dimensions however are most applicable in the context of opposition activity and movement formation under an authoritarian regime. As far as the present study is concerned, and in the context of a regime in transition, the dimensions of these opportunities most relevant relate to the role of newly emerging crises. These

[113] Interview with Hichem, founding member of Ettakatol, Tunis, April 2016.

constitute developments external to the realm of governing institutions and actors, but which nevertheless have an impact on their political and strategic considerations. In a political environment that had just witnessed its first democratic held elections, it was the poorly managed and ever-increasing crises that could ultimately give justification to the opposition to organize in collective action.

The political situation in Tunisia took a turn for the worse in the winter of 2012. In December, an attack outside of UGTT headquarters, in Tunis, allegedly carried out by Islamists who were calling for the dissolution of the union, prompted the UGTT leadership to call for a one-day national strike. The following month, on February 6, 2013, Chokri Belaid, a human rights lawyer and the leader of the leftist political party Popular Front, was shot and killed outside of his home in Tunis. This act of political violence further galvanized the anti-Ennahda movement, especially as supporters of the opposition accused Ennahda of being complicit in the killing. As thousands of Tunisians took to the street in protests, the UGTT called for a national strike on February 7th. In this changing political environment marked by mass protests and a coalition on the brink of collapse, Ennahda was finding itself increasingly politically isolated.

Amidst a growing political crisis and ideological polarization, an alternative national dialogue led by President Moncef Marzoukhi, the leader of CPR, was launched at the National Assembly. This new initiative set out to advance the drafting of the constitution through coordinated dialogue between political leaders and parties, barring the UGTT. During an interview, a member of CPR explained the President's decisions in these terms:

> The national dialogue in Tunisia began with the presidency. It was Dr. Marzouki who invited the different protagonists of political life in Tunisia to get together at the Carthage Palace. For us the UGTT shouldn't have a political role. But they turned it into a vehicle against us, like a weapon, in order to create social conflicts, when the Troika was in government. They turned the UGTT into a vehicle and gave it a role it

> shouldn't have. The UGTT is a union which should protect, perhaps, the workers and which should work along those lines, and not get involved in politics.[114]

Despite its ambitious objectives, the president-led initiative failed for a number of reasons. First, as mentioned before, the presence of a mediator with a high degree of political legitimacy is an important factor in increasing the likelihood of a successful national dialogue. Tunisia, in particular, was no stranger to government-led efforts at a national dialogue and pact-making under the façade of "political reform." The 1988 Tunisian National Pact, led by President Ben Ali, and signed by sixteen Tunisian political and social organizations, was discussed within the framework of paving the way towards democratization (Anderson 1991). Yet, unlike most notable models of democratic transition through a succession of National Pacts, Spain being one of its most cited examples, in Tunisia:

> Virtually all the signatories of the pact represented dependencies of the perennial ruling party; far from a compromise or bargain among equals, the pact was an effort to create the appearance of political pluralism in the absence of political actors with autonomous social and economic power. As a result the pact could not play the role its Spanish and Latin American homologues played, and it quickly became little more than a symbol of dashed hopes among liberal intellectuals (Anderson 1999, 4).

In view of this history, in particular, the opposition parties invited to take part in the discussions questioned the impartiality of this "President-led" initiative. In parallel to this, the exclusion of the UGTT further hindered the legitimacy of the dialogue. Particularly during the early phase of the transition, newly emerging political parties had recognized that to be important in Tunisian politics, it was imperative to be accepted by the UGTT. For this reason, political parties including Nidaa Tounes boycotted the dialogue on the justification that the UGTT had a national role to play (M'rad 2015). Ultimately then due to doubts over Marzouki's impartiality,

[114] Interview with Aymen, member of CPR, Tunis, March 2016.

independence, and neutrality, along with the absence of the UGTT, this latest attempt at a national dialogue reached a dead end.

In July of that year, however, two critical events finally tipped the scale of influence in favour of the union. First, on July 3, 2013, in a coup led by army chief General al-Sisi, President Mohamed Morsi was ousted from power. Prior to the coup, protests against Morsi's government had grown in number. They took the form both of a petition, launched in May 2013, called "Tamarod" (meaning rebellion in Arabic), the organizers of which claimed to have collected more than 22 million signatures seeking the resignation of President Morsi (Al-Youm 2013), and nationwide grassroots-organized protests, in part backed by the Interior Ministry and the military. These took place throughout the month of June, with a major demonstration organized for June 30th, which marked the first anniversary of Morsi's election, during which approximately 1 million protesters took to the street (Ketchley 2017, 104). These events further encouraged Ennahda to distinguish its politics from the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly by emphasizing the importance of collaboration and cooperation with other political parties. Second, on July 25, 2013, Mohamed Brahmi, leader of the People's Party, and a Member of Parliament, was gunned down and killed in front of his family. Brahmi's assassination led to the resignation of several deputies, and the start of a sit-in by sixty opposition MPs outside the National Constituent Assembly.

With a dramatic decline in the legitimacy of the state's governing institutions, and a growing media criticism of Ennahda's refusal to participate in a National Dialogue, the political future of the party was hanging in the balance. As Tarrow (1994, 87) noted, "instability in political alignment" and the "changing fortunes of government and opposition parties" are aspects of the changing opportunity structures that can encourage regime challengers to exercise some power and political influence. In Tunisia, in 2013, accumulation of domestic crises not only provided the

UGTT with socio-political justification to intervene in government activities, it also provided Ennahda with a political incentive to change course.

The Quartet, which included the UGTT, the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicraft (UTICA), the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers (ONAT), was initially formed to oversee a national conference against violence and terrorism. But all that changed following Brahmi's assassination. As one union official in Tunis explained:

> The UGTT went to Troika and said you are on the verge of a new revolution right now, and you have two choices: either you leave the country or you will be obliged to shoot the protesters on the street. In both cases you will not have a future in this country … (*Speaking about the Quartet*) the logic was simple. You [Troika] need to find a solution because we [the UGTT] will not accept any other way. And we are the principal force in this country. You need us and the UGTT needs social peace. This is the force of the UGTT. It is now easy to talk about it but it took months for it to happen … There are ideological blockades, political blockages, even personal sometimes. But this is what we know how to do best. UGTT negotiates all the time.[115]

In October 2013, the Quartet presented a "roadmap" to all parties with members elected to the parliament, attending to the most pressing political demands of the country: the constitution, elections and government, though it should be noted that not all parties welcomed this new initiative, with the most prominent refusal coming from CPR. Even the public trust in a national dialogue had started to diminish. Reflecting this lack of confidence in the new political process was a play on words that circulated between more sarcastically inclined citizens who referred to the national dialogue (*al-hiwar al-watani*) as the national donkey (*al-himar al-watani*).[116]

The process of the National Dialogue met with a number of internal obstacles, as well as throwing up strategies for resolving these problems. For example: firstly, while the leadership of Ennahda agreed to participate, Rachid Ghannouchi still had to convince other prominent members

[115] Interview with Karim, UGTT employee, Tunis, December 2016.
[116] Interview with Habib, journalist and political analyst, Tunis, March 2016.

that the party should indeed be involved. Moreover, he then had to persuade his members to assent to decisions made by the National Dialogue. Ghannouchi was ultimately able to achieve this objective because of his considerable negotiation skills, even to the point of sometimes making decisions in advance and then relying on those skills to bring the members with him (M'rad 2015). Secondly, there were tensions with respect to how the National Dialogue should be managed, especially between the UGTT and UTICA. Wided Bouchamaoui, the President of UTICA, for instance, found Abbassi's approach too longwinded and prone to engage in unnecessary debates at the cost of making decisions. On occasions this led her not to attend meetings (M'rad 2015). Thirdly, while there was considerable mistrust between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes, the parties' respective leaders, Rachid Ghannouchi and Beji Caid Essebsi, had a number of bilateral meetings outside the framework of the National Dialogue in order to resolve these differences (M'rad 2015).

With that said, by early 2014, the Quartet was ultimately able to broker substantive roundtable negotiations between 21 political parties including Ennahda. This process paved the way for resolving the crisis by way of establishing a roadmap outlining the creation of an electoral institution to oversee the new presidential and legislative elections, the adoption of new electoral laws, a timeline for choosing a new technocratic government, and the promulgation of a new constitution (M'rad 2015).

There are four principal factors that can help explain how despite grave socio-political volatilities, the national dialogue ultimately succeeded in producing meaningful results. First, it is important to recognize the role of the UGTT as the leading mediator between opposing political parties. The basis of syndicalist work, as stated by the majority of unionists interviewed for this research, is collective negotiations and bargaining. Therefore, amongst all the possible national actors who could act as the mediator, it was the UGTT's social position which distinctly separated

it from those in government making it, if not neutral, at least not directly connected to any one political party seeking parliamentary representation or participation in government. Along with its accumulated skills in mediation, this positioning made it as the most widely resourceful social actor to moderate the national dialogue.

Second, the UGTT, as a political activist who was not a member of the union once explained to me, "does not belong to one person, the UGTT belongs to the history of Tunisia."[117] The organization's legacy of political activism, together with its inclusivity of membership, and its extensive geographical reach, had bestowed upon it a national legitimacy not available to other political actors. In addition, the union's strategy to assemble a coalition consisting of the four leading civil society organizations representing the workers, business leaders, the rule of law and human rights, gave the Quartet collective strength that came from broad credibility and symbolic legitimacy.

Third, from the outset of the dialogue, the UGTT had identified that it was not interested in government power, and that the only goal of the Quartet was to ensure civil peace. The objectives of the dialogue, therefore, centered around the most challenging issues facing the state. Thus the agenda focused on:

> Setting of the next presidential and legislative elections final date; finalization of the constitution and setting the date on which it will be submitted for discussion and adoption by the constituents; choosing the political regime (parliamentary, presidential or mixed); examining the political violence in the country and the likelihood of the adoption of a national charter against violence and extremism; and examining the overall situation in the country in terms of cost of living and the continuing deterioration of the citizen's purchasing power (M'rad 2015, 34).

The strategy of focusing on the most immediate problems helped avoid overburdening the negotiation process.

[117] Interview with Walid, civil society activist, Tunis, May 2016.

Fourth, and lastly, as Zied, a union member in Thala, told me, unionists were having meetings and discussions with members of different parties, simultaneously moving forward alongside the more prominent negotiations in the capital.[118] This indicates that the national dialogue was not just the affair of elite political actors, but at the very least it gave their members the impression they were involved in genuine political participation even in more marginal communities.

The above discussion thus demonstrated the ways in which the UGTT was able to leverage new political openings, and more importantly, emerging domestic and regional crises, to broaden its political activities by acting as a national mediator between democratically elected political parties, and by so doing securing its new self-appointed role as Tunisia's political watchdog.

6.4 'New' Unionist Activism in post-Ben Ali Tunisia?

With the success of the National Dialogue, crowned by the 2015 bestowal of the Nobel Peace Prize on the Quartet, the UGTT had a newfound confidence. In an opinion piece published in 2015, in the *Guardian*, Houcine Abassi, the General Secretary of the UGTT (2011-2017), along with Richard L. Trumka, the President of the AFL- CIO (2009-present) wrote:

> My recent Nobel Peace Prize win for my contributions in Tunisia shows that giving working people a say is the best path toward a more equal and just world … Strong unions make strong democracies … In Tunisia, organized labor was the primary catalyst in winning and sustaining democracy as states around it descended back into totalitarianism … As the largest and most cohesive civil society organization in Tunisia, the labor movement maintained its independence and had the network and infrastructure during the revolution to rally people to the streets behind the democracy movement. And in the tumultuous post-Ben Ali era, trade unions time and time again mediated high stakes negotiations and crafted compromises to achieve consensus – skills labor unions have in droves.

[118] Interview with Zied, union representative, secondary education, Thala, February 2017.

It is worth mentioning that prior to receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, in 2012 Houcine Abassi had received the George Meany-Lane Kirkland Human Rights Award given by AFL-CIO, for UGTT's role in sustaining Tunisia's democratic uprising (Connell 2012). In his acceptance speech, Abassi declared: "while we take pride in being recognized, we feel a growing responsibility to continue our common struggle for freedom and democracy with strong will and determination" (Connell 2012, para. 4).

Two concurrent developments are of note. Firstly, the union's international profile was raised by recognition of and awards for its work in ensuring a peaceful resolution of the political crisis. Secondly, with the democratic opening it had helped foster, its internal dynamics shifted in favour of greater autonomy in the initiatives and demands of its various constituent parts, emboldened as they were by the lifting of the fear and repression that had earlier limited the degree to which they had felt able to act independently of the leadership. As well as the removal of these constraints, the new democratizing political order also entailed the growth of institutions (such as the national assembly, or more generally meaningful elections) which were responsive (to some extent) to popular demands. The consequent upsurge in social movements recalls Charles Tilly's (2004) argument that:

> Democratization limits the range of feasible and effective popular collective action. Democratic institutions, for example, generally inhibit violent popular rebellions. But empowerment of citizens through contested elections and other forms of consultation combines with protections of civil liberties such as association and assembly to channel popular claim making into social-movement forms (13).

In response to this opening up of new political spaces and opportunities for activism, the union's internal dynamics have undergone a transformation, along with the strategies and goals of its different groups. Different union sectors and local offices have been reacting to, or seeking to gain leverage from, the rising number of social movements in the last several years.

Nonetheless, this broadening of the space available for open political activism and civic engagement has coincided with the failure of the state to respond to the growing economic challenges facing the country. While the revival of political life has opened up new opportunities for mobilization, economic decline has provided a common content for the increased number of social movements. Thereby, political transition toward democratic change has in fact encouraged the increased formation of social movements (Tilly 2004).

Even though Tunisia's path toward democratic change was marked by a series of troubling political and economic setbacks, the country's latest constitution nonetheless permits and tolerates citizens' representation and participation in political life. There has thus occurred a broadening of the space available for open political activism and civic engagement, a new political opportunity that has unfortunately coincided with the failure of the state to respond to the growing economic challenges facing the country. Thus, the revival of political life alongside an economy in decline has triggered a sharp increase in the number of social movements.

In broad terms, these movements are a reaction to continuing high rates of poverty and unemployment, particularly amongst Tunisian youth, as well as women of all ages. In parallel to

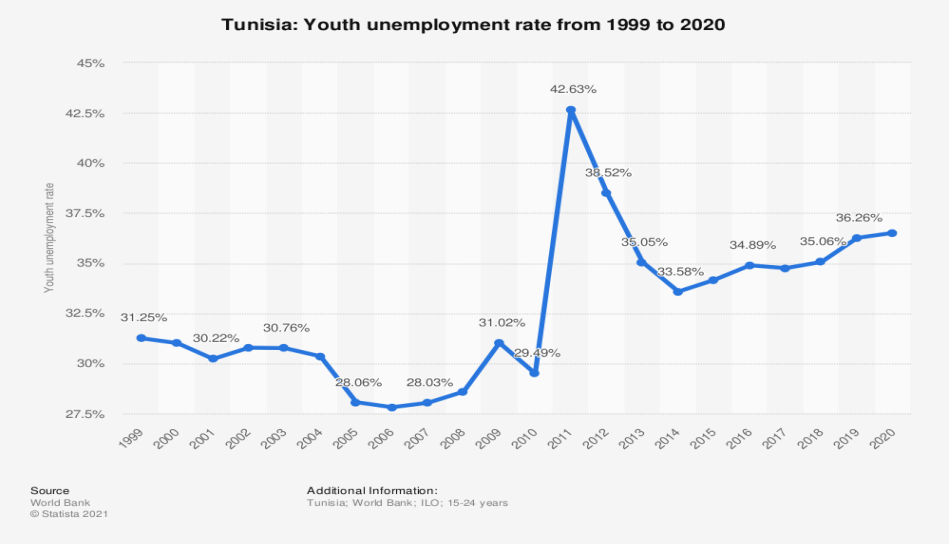


Figure 6.1 (Source: World Bank 2021)

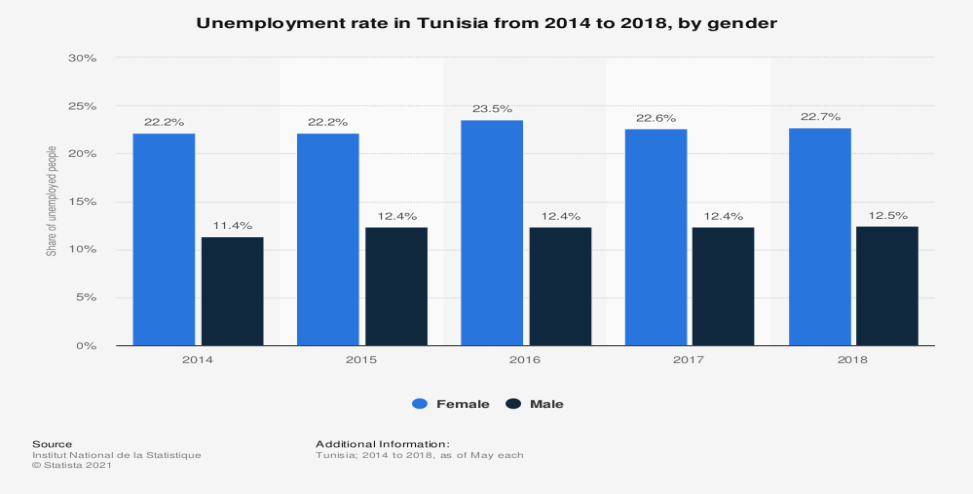


Figure 6.2 (Source: Institut National de la Statistique 2021)

this, the unemployment crisis has intensified regional economic inequalities, which are viewed by many young activists as the consequence (at least partly) of the Tunisian government's commitment to the neo-liberal economic policies imposed by the IMF, in 2016, in exchange for a $2.9 billion, four-year loan (Mahmoud 2018). These new economic measures included wage freezes, especially for lower-ranking civil servants; a three-year hiring freeze; an increased retirement age to help make the pension system more viable; and reduced social expenditure (IMF Tunisia 2016, 18). During this vulnerable period, economic and trade policies imposed by the international community, fixated on reducing national debt at the expense of much-needed expenditure on social and economic programs tailored to the realities of different governorates, have inadvertently intensified the country's difficulties. This speedy push for macroeconomic "reform" blind to domestic realities has fueled social tensions throughout the country. Compounding Tunisia's economic crisis is the emergence of widespread corrupt practices both in the public and private sector, involving the misappropriation of public funds, tax evasion, money laundering, and abuse of power by authority figures (Cournoyer Paquin 2020; Yerkes and Muasher 2017). Frustrations at this parlous state of affairs have been compounded by the near inevitable

mismatch between the expectations of transformation raised by democratization and the necessarily limited capabilities of the new democratic institutions to solve structural economic problems in a short space of time.

Consequently, the protests which started in central Tunisia in December 2010 have effectively never ceased. Demonstrations and strikes have become a routine reality in the relatively neglected interior regions. In late 2018, more incidents of young Tunisians self-immolating were reported by the media (Fadel 2018). Equally troubling is the increasingly high number of Tunisians dying in the Mediterranean Sea as they seek to flee to Europe in search of a better future (Cordall 2018). These dire conditions have further exacerbated the marginalization and dissatisfaction felt by many Tunisians. A continued sense of frustration combined with more open political conditions leading to an upsurge in social movements; however, these examples show that for some there appears to be no solution even within a democratizing political order.

In this climate, newly emerging "decentralized," "open participatory" (Cherif 2017) social movements adapting to new, more open political structures, have brought together both seasoned activists and ordinary participants. Political actors including the UGTT, but also leftist political parties and the students' union (UGET) have built nationwide networks and incrementally cultivated political trust, gradually moving towards formulating more radical economic and political demands (Mahmoud 2018).

Against this background, different groups inside the UGTT are extending their field of operations and redefining their strategy inside these movements with specific political and economic objectives in mind. On the institutional (vertical) axis, the power of the UGTT as a national labour union can be analyzed through two interconnected categories. Firstly, the UGTT continues to exercise far-reaching 'mobilizational' capabilities by virtue of its connectedness to

the workers. As explained to me by Ismaïl, a UGTT regional representative from the governorate of Kairouan:

> A large number of Tunisians are not members of a political party. They go to elections, they vote, but they are not part of a political party. The only organization that has grown since the revolution is the UGTT. From 600,000 to more than 850,000 members.[119]

This increase in membership, however, should not be regarded as a transparent index of the union's increased popularity. Rather it could be accounted for by the greater ease of union registration in the post-2011 environment. Nonetheless, the ability to present this as an increased in popularity enables it to maintain its prominent position in Tunisian politics, by gesturing to an apparent extension of its ability to mobilize large numbers of workers.

Secondly, in a country facing vast economic challenges, the UGTT maintains significant 'bargaining' leverage by way of controlling crucial production activities, particularly in the largest state-owned industries such as textile and mining.

More recently, however, the UGTT executive branch has started to exercise influence in a new way. Ismaïl emphasized to me that the new constitutional and political order meant that "there is enough freedom for the UGTT to act, react and interact." In this new system, the union has been pushing the boundaries of its authority to take a more prominent role in Tunisia's politics and national governance; this was one it occupied during the first decade of the Tunisian independence (Yousfi 2017). In particular, the executive branch has asserted itself as a legitimate national political actor justified precisely by the legacy of its role during the revolution and the early phase of the political transition process. We can regard this as a third power category, namely the power it derives from acting as the watchdog of the state.

[119] Interview with Ismaïl, regional union representative, Kairouan, December 2016.

The change in the discourse and decision-making strategies of the executive branch confirms this point. Often the objective of a watchdog group is to publicize any problematic behaviour on the part of the power holders and to take direct action in support of the public interest. In Tunisia, the UGTT has taken up this role but has broadened it to include in its realm of responsibilities a more direct involvement in political decision-making. As one unionist explained to me:

> UGTT believes its role as a trade union is to act as watchdog of political parties' actions. This is more important than having a seat in the parliament. In other democracies, there are other independent structures that watch and keep an eye on democracy and the democratic transition. Tunisia does not have that. That is why the UGTT felt that this is its role.[120]

This is a doctrine that the organization has internalized, particularly at the executive level. Through my conversations with members of the national and regional executive bureaus, a common point which emerged was that the UGTT has both a unionist role and a national one. Even though I was repeatedly reminded that the UGTT is not interested in political power, that comment was often followed by the observation that the UGTT is the main force in the country, that it is the only organization with offices and membership throughout Tunisia, and that if the government's program in the eyes of the UGTT is not what is best for Tunisia, the union will have to get involved in matters of the state. Despite the insistence of the unionists I spoke with, that this was a natural extension of UGTT's historic national role, the union's new political doctrine contains a potential contradiction between its unionist role – representative of particular interests – and its national role – "watchdog" of the general interest. Furthermore, it is not clear who can hold the UGTT accountable when it interferes in government, for instance as was the case in 2017 when it demanded the resignation of the Minister of Education.

[120] Interview with Kais (UGTT Tunis), in Tunis. April 13, 2016

At the institutional level the union has also been trying to adapt to changing socio-political conditions by reflecting on its past engagement with the state. In 2016, during a conference organized by the UGTT, one member explained to me:

> [...] the subject [of this workshop] is the role of the UGTT after the revolution. The UGTT will be evaluating the past six years; what they have done; and strategic plans for work; according to problems that they had before [for example with Bourguiba]. The UGTT will be making plans and strategies [in essence, discussing the lessons learned and making plans according to those lessons].[121]

It was made clear to me that these questions were not posed once and for all, in order for a definitive answer to be given, rather they are part of an ongoing process of reflection which serves to legitimize at least from their perspective the new ways in which the UGTT participated in the political process.

The UGTT has managed to carve out a dominant space in Tunisia's new political landscape thanks to four advantages it possesses: its extensive networks in many sectors of the economy; its long history of negotiations with various government ministries, such as health and education, as the representative of those workers; its symbolic position in Tunisia's national history; and the leadership's ability to deploy the threat of a national strike against successive governments, an event that can economically paralyze the country. However, as we will see, this new political landscape has also transformed the workings and modes of mobilization that have been created by UGTT militant unionists and lower-ranking members.

Historically, UGTT members have been the organization's strongest asset. It is through its membership, an amalgamation of both the working and the middle classes, that the union is able to directly affect the country's production activities and to instigate mass movements strong enough to alter the social order. Nevertheless, new political openings along with growing

[121] Interview with Alaa, Sfax regional union representative, Hammamet, December 2016.

economic constraints have also affected the union's lower branches, most of all the militant unionists and ordinary members' reactions and strategies inside newly emerging social movements. This transformation is becoming clear as union members transition from hierarchy to increased self-regulation to achieve their economic objectives. The Chalk Revolution is an important example of this transformation.

6.4.1 The Chalk Revolution

A recent and enduring movement carried out by schoolteachers, one of UGTT's most politicized sectors, offers an excellent illustration of this phenomenon. The significance of this movement is linked to six factors: (1) this is a unionist movement showing that sections of the UGTT are as involved in these social movements as non-union groups, such as the unemployed youth; (2) the movement was initiated by the UGTT's most active sector, the teachers, despite lack of consistent support from the leadership, thus offering an excellent illustration of ongoing structural tensions; (3) it demonstrated the potential for more overt and resilient activism and collective action amongst different groups and sectors in the new, more democratic environment; (4) the movement was provoked by the effects of IMF imposed policies; (5) the protests continued, albeit intermittently, for nearly three years; (6) and finally, the terminology adopted became quite militant, as evident by the name the Chalk Army, a tone which was later taken on by other sectors such as health during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The movement began in 2017, but its most militant phase commenced later. From November 2018 until February 2019, following the government's refusal to increase wages in accordance with IMF austerity measures (Amara 2018), schoolteachers commenced four months of protests and strikes, which came to be known as the "Revolution of the Chalk Army" (Ben

Chaben 2019). The teachers referred to themselves as the "Chalk Army," because the notion of the "army" inspires principles of unity, determination to win, and persistence (Ben Chaben 2019). As Taib, a teacher who participated in the protests also explained to me, "we said we are the 'Chalk Army' to mean, we can go on strikes, we have our say, other sectors don't underestimate us."[122]



Figure 6.3: "For a radical and real reform of the educational institution" (Argoubi 2018)

The demonstrations were directed against the Tunisian authorities' IMF agreement on an economic reform agenda that would prohibit an increase in salaries, opportunities for professional promotions, improvements in working conditions and the lowering of the retirement age. According to Taib:

> Protest was about a sense of injustice. After the revolution most sectors saw a betterment in their working condition other than teachers. Teaching is a very hard job, physically and mentally, classes can have up to 40 students, schools are not very equipped. 1300 dinars is a basic salary for a teacher, which can only go up to 1600 dinars after 30 years. And with inflation this salary is nothing.

[122] Interview with Taib, UGTT member, secondary education, Sfax, November 2020.

It is important to note that in this movement members of the education sector targeted not only the government and the Ministry of Education, but also the UGTT's executive branch which tried to persuade striking teachers to return to work. Significantly, a distinguishing feature of this mobilization was the political diversity of its participants. As Tunisian researcher Abdelrahman Ben Chaben, explains in his 2019 report on the movement, a younger generation of teachers was prominent in it by virtue of a well-established network that had emerged through their earlier participation in the students' union, in the revolution itself, or in many of the post-revolution social justice campaigns such as "I will not forgive."[123] The movement could only be effective, however, because these younger, creative activists familiar with the new, dynamic conditions they had helped shape combined with the experienced senior generation of teachers who had come of age through covert political activism under the previous regime (Ben Chaben 2019). Despite pressure from the UGTT executive and the government, the teachers refused to give in, continuing their demonstrations and strikes independently of the union leadership. Significantly these involved both protests in front of the Ministry of Education and marches to UGTT headquarters.

Protestors invoked both work related and nationalist slogans, and at times attacked the government, the Prime Minister, and the UGTT General Secretary directly, with slogans such as "Ya Hached, your glorious Taboubi sold your children,"[124] "the teacher is always strong, you government of the IMF," "where is your right, you poor person? –At Chahed and Christine's!"[125] (Ben Chaben 2019). After months of tension and continuous autonomous school strikes, the UGTT and government reached a deal agreeing to increase the wages of more than 650,000 public

[123] The social justice movement 'I will not forgive'was formed in reaction to President Essebsi's Administrative Reconciliation Act (2017), which would have pardonned pre-revolutionary business elites and officials accused of corruption.
[124] Farhat Hached (1914-1952), UGTT founder and first General Secretary, and Noureddine Taboubi is the current Secretary General of the UGTT.
[125] Youssef Chahed, Prime Minister of Tunisia (2016-2020), and Christine Lagarde, former managing director of IMF.

employees. The historical significance of this movement lies in how the education sector of the union acted autonomously for several months to defy the authority of the union leadership, before eventually gaining its support to win victory in its confrontation with the government.

Whilst there was a long history of more militant members mobilizing and pressuring the leadership into supporting them, in the new, more open conditions of a democratizing Tunisia, this movement had an unprecedented character. With fear of repression removed, the Chalk Army was much more direct in its escalation of their stance (refusals to mark, strikes, demonstrations). The movement was also far more prominent nationally than an uprising like Gafsa in 2008, especially given how many Tunisians with children in school were affected by their actions. Furthermore, the teachers were unequivocal in publicly and officially defining themselves as a "militant" union sector, a self-description that was subsequently adopted by other sectors such as health. Finally, the participation of a generation of teachers that had come of age with or after 2010-2011 meant that there was a prominent role in the mobilization for activists who were also members of other, newer associations or political groups, and that the goals of the protest could be framed as defending the achievements of the revolution.

6.5 Concluding Remarks

The UGTT's role in Tunisian politics has changed considerably since the revolutionary mobilization of 2010-2011. Yet one constant has been its ongoing importance on the political scene. This chapter has examined how a national union can maintain its centrality during regime transition away from authoritarian rule, and how changing socio-economic conditions can press it to adapt its role.

After 2011, the UGTT first had to find a new role immediately subsequent to the fall of the old regime, which it did as a mediator between contending parties as part of the National Dialogue Quartet. The success of this process proved crucial in ensuring that regime transition in Tunisia has not been from one authoritarian order to another, but has involved a democratization process. Subsequent to the National Dialogue, the UGTT found it had to respond to socio-economic difficulties and the new, more open political environment.

As part of this broader picture, within the union lower ranking and militant unionist groups openly put pressure on the executive branch in a way not possible under the previous system. Previously, even when in conflict with the executive branch, lower ranking officers still needed the UGTT for protection against the authoritarian regime. In this new political climate, local unionists have more freedom to act collectively in order to advance objectives specific to them. In the future, however, this transformation might pose a threat to the union's internal cohesion, one of its chief sources of strength.

That there has been an upsurge in social movements is the result both of post-Ben Ali political reforms that have expanded and democratized the space available for civic mobilization, and a reaction to the inability of the new political order to do anything meaningful about entrenched socio-economic inequalities. It is important to note, however, that it is not the modes of mobilization that have changed. Standard practices such as demonstrations and strikes continue to be unionists' main tools. What has changed is that the end of state repression has allowed the flourishing of a rising number of political campaigns and social groups, and that members of, or participants of, one of these are often involved in others, making the creation of networks linking activists easier, in turn promoting solidarity between these different groups and increasing their longevity. Nonetheless, what is certain is that the UGTT will continue to try to maintain its position

as a major national actor if by no other means than through grand gestures of political theatre. As one unionist recalled, following Ennahda's congress in 2017, the UGTT held its own congress inviting 7000 members, even though the capacity of the auditorium was only 5000. Indeed, according to this unionist, if UGTT wanted to invite 60,000 members, then 60,000 would come. Knowing I had attended the 2017 UGTT congress, he concluded, "At the congress, did you see people crying [because moved by the grandeur of the occasion]? I told you, the UGTT is in the heart of the people. Ennahda made a big Congress, so UGTT made a bigger Congress. Nous sommes là, nous sommes the biggest!"[126]

[126] Interview with Zied, union representative, secondary education, Thala, February 2017.

Conclusion: The Diversity of Union Work in MENA

> In the UGTT, you have the executive bureau but then you also have the syndicalists, and the regional bureaus, places like Gafsa and Sfax, they have a lot of power. The executive bureau is not really the leader of the UGTT, syndicalists are the leaders. It's like us, the lawyers, on January 14th it was our basic members that were in the streets, the executive bureau was not there with us, but we pushed them to accept our demands. The UGTT is the workers![127]

In the spring of 2017, two weeks prior to returning to Canada, I spoke to two self-identified veteran militant unionists from the city of Sfax in the lobby of my hotel. The meeting had been arranged by Alaa, a union official whom I had first met at a UGTT conference, where, despite the modest duration of our conversation, what he told me was of great importance, bearing as it did on the conciliatory attitude of the union's executive branch toward Ben Ali's regime. Over time, owing to my frequent visits to various UGTT offices and events, I had established a strong rapport with a number of unionists, including Alaa. As a result, they were ready to help me with my research, as manifested in their desire to assist in arranging my interviews. While these personal relationships enabled me to overcome the challenge of organizing meetings with union members, collecting internal data and archival documents (particularly those published pre-2011) proved to be a much more difficult task. Understandably, although the unionists I approached were open to speaking about their roles and experiences inside the UGTT, they were often more hesitant, or at times unable, to share internal facts and information about the organization; this even included sharing data about the membership size of the union's various sectors and branches. While they did have access to this information, they simply viewed it as something for internal use only and not to be shared with outsiders, such as visiting researchers. Moreover, due to the organization's

[127] Interview with Imen, lawyer, Tunis, February 2017.

poor and unmethodical record keeping, in part a consequence of a strategy deemed necessary during Ben Ali's tenure to avoid possibly sensitive information falling into the hands of the security services, I was mostly only able to acquire documents that my interlocutors were in possession of and willing to share, which often did not amount to much.[128] Rather to my surprise then, on that spring day as I spoke with the two veteran syndicalists, Moncef suddenly walked in on our interview holding stacks of documents. Without my knowledge, he had spent some time collecting archival documents going as far back as the 1970s. As he handed over the files to me he said, "if you're going to write about the UGTT, you need to know the whole story."[129] This story is far larger than this dissertation can encompass. Many of the documents provided to me were not relevant; for instance, there were many texts pertaining to Saddam Hussein as a champion of anti-imperialism, and a large quantity of pro-Palestinian materials. While not the focus of this study, these documents remind us that UGTT members have long sought to forge ties of solidarity with groups they view as oppressed, or people purporting to represent them, and in a way consistent with the principal sympathies of Arab nationalism. Other documents lacking vital context such as author or date were difficult to decipher. Nonetheless, there were useful information and images pertaining to the activities of unionists over several decades. I have drawn on these in particular for my account of UGTT history in chapter 3, the 18 October Collective, and the Gafsa rebellion in chapter 4.

This dissertation has thus been an attempt to tell a part of that "whole" story. As with all the processes, events, and objects of the social and historical sciences, in truth no single account

[128] While in Tunis I was allowed to enter and collect authorized documents from the UGTT's archives. For declarations and reports produced by union bureaus in other regions, I had to count on my networks inside the UGTT. After each interview I would mention the documents I was looking for (often signed declarations in support of various social movements or workers' protest) to see if my interlocutor could help me locate copies. We should not imagine that, just because under a transition to democracy political conditions have ameliorated, all the habits acquired and required for survival under authoritarianism have simply melted away.
[129] Alaa, union representative, Sfax, March 2017.

can capture the full complexity of this multilayered, nuanced, heterogenous, and at times, contradictory organization. Therefore, in this project, I focused on responding to the following research inquiries:

1) What is the impact of an authoritarian regime's deployment of cooptation, constraint, and repression on a labour union's political activism? And, by extension:

    1a) How does a union retain oppositional agency in spite of the cooptation of its leadership?

2) In post-independence authoritarian Tunisia, how did the UGTT support and participate in collective action?

3) How do a union's formal and informal structures affect its mobilizational power? And, more specifically:

    3a) How do a union's internal networks shift the balance of power and influence between its different branches?

4) How does a union leverage new political openings and social crises to broaden its national role and influence, including taking up the role of a national political watchdog? And, prolonging this inquiry:

    4a) How has Tunisia's new democratic political landscape, marked by a continued surge in collective mobilization, changed the goals and tactics of union activists inside the UGTT?

Throughout this dissertation, I supported the proposition that of the numerous groups that can participate in collective action and social movement, labour unions must be considered as one of the most influential and effective players both within an authoritarian corporatist context, as well as a regime in transition. This is because of unions' ability to mobilize their members by way

of blending socio-political concerns and economic demands. Union leaders are able to use their connections with the workers as leverage against employers and those in power. In addition, these groups tend to be made up of a membership representative of various political tendencies, social classes, and occupational backgrounds, thereby enabling a more inclusive political engagement not possible through issue-specific (e.g. human rights) organizations.

As a start, in the opening chapter, I offered an overview of the academic research on unions, social movements and collective action, showing that while the existing literature is highly informative and valuable, it remains incomplete. As I discussed, when organized labour is able to occupy a visible role during episodes of collective action, specifically in the course of democratization, it figures much more prominently in academic discussions and analyses. This, of course, has not been the experience of trade unions in the Middle East and the Maghreb. As a consequence, a considerable quantity of scholarly work has tried to ascertain the reasons behind the endurance of authoritarianism, and the failures of democratization efforts in MENA (Bellin 2004; Clausen 2015; Droz-Vincent 2014; Perkins 2017). While as discussed at greater length in chapter 1, social movement studies have underscored the importance of unions in launching and guiding collective action in colonial and authoritarian settings (Collier and Collier 1991; Collier 1999; Kraus 2007; Phelan 2011), and there has been valuable research on the ability of unions in inducing "crucial transformations in state-society relations" (Moore and Salloukh 2007, 54) in Arab states, because of the supposed persistence of authoritarianism, the role unions were assumed to be able to play in this research was circumscribed.

Following the events of 2010-2011, however, the conceptual space available to the study of unions, and non-state political engagement more generally in the region broadened, and this shift has been valuable in bringing more focus on unions too. In the wake of this newfound interest,

I maintained that the Tunisian General Labour Union, an amalgamation of regular workers, militant activists, and key leaders coopted by the authoritarian system, offered an exemplary case to study. To do so, I focused on unionized workers' participation in collective action during five pivotal episodes: 1) the 1978 General Strike; 2) the 1983-1984 Bread Riots; 3) the 2008 Gafsa rebellion; 4) the 2010-2011 national uprisings; and 5) the 2013-2014 National Dialogue Quartet. The general function and consequence of cooptation on the UGTT's oppositional activity, and the dynamics of unionists' involvement in collective action, were examined throughout the chapters centred on post-independence authoritarian Tunisia. My analysis drew particular attention to the importance of considering not just the impact of a union's structure and institutional legacy, but also the networks, symbols and interpersonal relationships that exist amongst its members, which collectively determine different forms and levels of political engagement.

7.1 Rethinking Cooptation: Unionist Mobilization in Authoritarian and Transition Environments

Through a study of union-based political activism in Tunisia, and by drawing on extensive interviews with union members, activists and political officials, I was able to reach the following key findings. Firstly, as discussed in chapter 3, I demonstrated how the continued reproduction of a shared collective memory through the appropriation of a particular historical narrative can boost solidarity and maintain a group's identity from one generation to the next. In the case of the UGTT, through an analysis of the principal narrative surrounding the history of Tunisia's labour movement, and the role of union and workers in the struggle against colonization, chapter 3 portrayed just how a widely accepted collective memory based on ideas of national liberation, struggle, sacrifice, and martyrdom, has led to the formation of a group identity more conducive to political activism and dissent. This memory is not formally inculcated (through official training in

the union's history, for example), but everywhere union members go as participants in union activities this history is produced and reproduced: in the photographs in union buildings, in their songs and slogans, the stories of activism shared in pamphlets, speeches, and the UGTT newspaper or simply in conversations over tea. In this way, the union's history is internalized at a personal level, creating a sense of belonging in members and driving their desire to participate in, and take responsibility for, contentious action. In this context, the authoritarian practice of cooptation could not lead to the hollowing out of the union's oppositional agency, as its members and representatives, or at least its more militant factions, continued to subscribe to an identity that encouraged activism and labour militancy.

In addition, chapters 3 and 5 highlighted the importance of moving beyond a conceptualization of a union's leadership strategy that frames decision-making processes primarily through the lens of corporatist relationships, economic privilege and material interest (Bellin 2002). A review of the impact of state repression on labour showed that many of the actors involved in that process saw their conciliatory approach as a political tactic meant to protect the workers and the union. While economic interests are undoubtedly an important consideration for any individual participating in such an institution, my interviews underscored the necessity of including in our analysis unionists' interpretation of the reasons behind their strategies and forms of action, rather than simply assuming they were motivated by economic interests. Many of my interviewees, for instance, saw the UGTT's conciliatory relationship in the Ben Ali years through the lens of political necessity and survival in a repressive environment, building on their and other unionists' experiences and memories of political conflict under Bourguiba. This strategy was not completely the result of careful and deliberate planning on the part of the leadership; rather it was profoundly informed by intensely personal experiences of state violence. For example, one senior

official, once I had finished formally interviewing him, took me out to the backyard of his house and explained to me that during the Bread Riots security forces dragged his son outside, lifted him by his ankles, and pointed a gun at his head.[130] It is preciously this and similar stories that it is vital to take into account when explaining the executive leadership's conciliatory relationship with the authoritarian regime. A great merit of fieldwork is that it permitted me access to this kind of storytelling.

In chapter 3, we also took a closer look inside the formal structure and procedures of the UGTT, along with its more informal networks amongst its lower ranking members, to see that inside a highly dynamic and heterogeneous organization the centre of authority often shifts according to local perceptions and circumstances. This finding differs from earlier academic conclusions on the subject which argued that centralized unions are better equipped for alleviating internal organizational tension and can thus better address the specific goals of labour (Valenzuela 1989). A close examination of the UGTT also made clear that inside a semi-decentralized union with an extensive geographical reach, and an inclusive and diverse membership, decision-making power often cannot be concentrated in a single office. This arrangement gives more space for internal bargaining and negotiations, which in turn positively affects the mobilizational power of the lower and middle ranking unionists whose sustained collective action can put more pressure on the executive bureau's decision making, despite the constraints imposed by repression and cooptation. This insight confirms research showing that unions can engage in collective action at various scales without having to resort to overt confrontation in an authoritarian environment. Azizou Chabi Imorou's study of the teachers' union in Benin (2011, 2014) demonstrated that the

[130] This interview was conducted in spring 2017. I have quoted this interview elsewhere in the dissertation, but given that this story was not part of the formal interview, and its sensitive nature, I have thought it best to maintain his anonymity.

non-monolithic character of the organization meant that some union members were able to resist state attempts to force new conditions upon them by effectively ignoring them. In the case of the UGTT, I have extended this insight by showing that thanks to the structure of the union, cooptation cannot fully permeate and disable members' ability to act, as evident from their organizing to force the executive leaders to resign from Bourguiba's Neo-Destour's Political Bureau, show support to the detained unionists and protesters in Gafsa, and openly back the demonstrators during the uprising of the winter of 2010-2011.

Likewise, through studies of key events discussed in chapters 4 and 5, it became clear how a coopted union can nonetheless become involved in and support collective action. There are other cases of unions in repressive political systems managing to act independently of the state because they were careful not to seek confrontation but to articulate their demands in language and through actions that were acceptable to the authorities. For instance, Maral Jefroudi's (2013) review of oil workers' political engagement in Iran during the 1960s, showed that in the context of a political climate marked by state repression, labour's cost-benefit analysis of collective action led to the determination that to improve their conditions, workers needed to utilize soft tactics, such as articulating their grievances in terms of the regime's developmental discourse, so as to avoid direct confrontation with the state. Her study of collective action by Iranian oil workers demonstrated that while "actions can have short life spans and be coopted in the discursive ways they are articulated … that does not mean they did not occur or were not successful" (177). While not specifically focusing on workers' collective activism, Vairel (2020), in his examination of the selection of contentious practices in Morocco, showed that the strategy of "self-limitation" imposed by activists concerning their "targets, numbers, and moments chosen for mobilization" (2), should be understood in terms of strategies that are informed by past defeats and experience

of repression. Activists' restraint in political struggle is therefore "the result of trial and error" (4), and "a careful assessment of possible action and acceptable form of protests" (19), which will not necessarily result in violent repression. My research builds on these insights, while focusing more on the role of militant union members in carving out a space for independent action, including non-confrontational forms of political engagement such as informal discussion groups, and small solidarity circles outside local union offices. These interactions are meaningful because they can create ties between people where they did not exist before, or, in the case of solidarity circles, further reinforce social bonds between activists – bonds characterized by trust and familiarity – which in turn can facilitate participation in often high-risk, contentious action (Passy and Monsch 2014). I also build on the importance of looking into activists' past "trial and error" in collective action in order to demonstrate how militant unionists' knowledge of past attempts at mobilization informs their strategies in ways that seek to reduce the risk of violent repression against both the union and its members, as well as to sustain and protract collective action .

In chapter 4, therefore, my analysis of the Gafsa rebellion demonstrated that cooptation is never total, and that cooperation and activism on the part of organized workers are bounded by the overlapping interactions of interests, ideology, identity, personal relationships and networks. In Gafsa, we saw that despite a union leadership that was by and large entangled with the regime, local militant unionists and their allies were an important source of support for the protesting unemployed graduates, and indeed played an instrumental role as collective action organizers. Chapter 4 also underscored the impact of diverse membership on collective action and activism. In an authoritarian system where available space for political participation is substantially limited, union membership can act as a vehicle for political activism. The analysis of the 18 October Collective (2005-2010) underscored the ways in which individual unionists participated in and

supported this coalition. In an environment where opposition party membership and activism had to occur in secrecy, the UGTT provided an umbrella under which opposition operations could continue. Under such a system, cooptation became increasingly difficult.

In chapter 5, through an in-depth examination of the events of 2010-2011, we saw most clearly just how a labour union can participate in collective action and guide national protests. While there had been ample focus on the corporatist character of the Tunisian state, and the impact of this contractual system on the activities of the UGTT and its leadership, my aim was to build on the literature which shifted the focus to the historical legacy of the UGTT (Bishara 2020), or the heterogenous character of its members' networks and activities (Yousfi 2017). Additionally, I build on work showing how unionized workers in Mubarak's Egypt, despite the corporatist state control of labour, managed to meet, organize, and carve out spaces for political discussions and activities (Beinin 2012, 2015), as well as work emphasizing the importance of paying attention to not just disparate spaces in which state/elite actors engage with non-state/grassroots organizations (Hardig 2015), but also the internal spaces in which militant unionists interact with union members and the leadership. By carefully observing UGTT members' personal networks, I concentrated in particular on the power and influence of local union leaders and militant unionists with a history of activism, often starting at university, and with a proven readiness to get involved in protest movements they did not themselves start. These activists are also adroit at drawing on the union's place in collective memory in order to mobilize in spite of a lack of support from the leadership.

This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of labour's political engagement, by centring the analysis on the activities of agents involved in mobilization within a revolutionary context that is simultaneously local and national, rather than simply abstracting the positions and activities of the leadership and writing about them as if they were the union. This perspective

helped show how unionists in various sectors and branches engaged in semi-autonomous horizontal networking and cooperation to influence the political commitment and strategies of the executive leadership, which in turn affected the character of the institution's relationship with the state. This chapter also underscored how, during a revolutionary situation militant unionists were able to draw on lessons learned from past attempts at collective mobilization, and how these lessons shaped their strategies and choices. For example, unionists, remembering the 2008 Gafsa uprising, understood the necessity of spreading the protests outside their places of origin, thus ensuring that the movement would be protracted, and that in 2010-2011 the government could not concentrate its forces on repressing an uprising in a circumscribed location.

Having discussed the forms and dynamics of labour's political engagement within an authoritarian context, chapter 6 concentrated on the role of labour subsequent to the breakdown of authoritarian rule. Most importantly, the chapter uncovered how a national union can maintain its centrality during regime transition away from authoritarian rule by acting as both a grassroots mobilizer and assuming the role of a national political mediator. As part of this process, following the success of the National Dialogue, it took on the role of "watchdog," both bringing pressure to bear on governments not responding to its demands, and positioning itself symbolically as an ever-present and influential political actor of a fundamentally different kind from any of the political parties. The UGTT, in particular, has been able to take up such different tasks due to its heterogeneity and semi-decentralized structure, meaning that different levels and categories of membership are able to leverage different opportunities that are presented within the post-2011 social and political environment. While the lower ranking members, who are now less dependent on the leadership for protection, are freer to organize and mobilize with respect to issues specific to them, the executive leadership is seeking to position the union as a national decision-maker, on

a par with but not functionally reducible to and therefore institutionally distinguishable from ruling political parties.

7.2 Constructing Exemplars in Comparative Politics: Directions for Future Research

My principal aim in this study was to provide an in-depth look inside the informal and formal workings of a trade union, especially in the context of a region where labour has often been framed as inconsequential. I have shown that far from being inconsequential, the UGTT has long been a consequential actor in Tunisian politics even when its leadership has been coopted. Emphasizing the significance of one labour union in this way should lead us to re-evaluate unions and labour movements in other authoritarian political systems where these have been largely written off as limited in influence. In so doing I have demonstrated the value of in-depth case study research. In an academic field often too focused on proving and disproving theories based on variation between paired variables, through this research I have constructed an important exemplar that adds to our discipline's practical understanding (Passeron and Revel 2005). As noted by Flyvbjerg (2006) "social science has not succeeded in producing general, context-independent theory and, thus, has in the final instance nothing else to offer than concrete, context-dependent knowledge" (223). Attention to the political sociology of a particular labour union, building on interview materials, participant observation, and even on historical and archival research, can elucidate continuities – structural features that persist across time, such as the cleavage between the more militant members of the base and the more cautious, and often coopted leadership, or the widely shared commitment to specific practices of memorialization of the union's past of struggle and sacrifice – at the same time as it establishes how the emergence of these structures is contingent, derived from the particular contours of events such as the repression of the uprisings of 1978 and 1983-1984. A

comparative approach like the one pursued in this thesis allows for the extraction of detailed and nuanced conclusions, forming a body of knowledge that can be applied to other cases. This dissertation therefore offers a detailed examination of a case study central to our scientific knowledge of the role of unions and organized workers in collective action. Nevertheless, while this is a single-case study, its findings are well placed to serve as a basis for future comparative research, because in many countries unions exist that organize meaningful portions of the workforce and therefore provide a space for political organization and collective action even where this is in an authoritarian setting and even where such action is far from implying the pursuit of a standardized path to democracy developed largely by institutions located in the West.

While workers organizations are often included in our conceptualization of wider civil society, and some may – as in the case of the UGTT – describe themselves as such, the empirical findings of this research are that the role of a large and diverse union is sui generis, both civil and political: an organization that can at once act as the mediator between competing political groups, a mobilizer of collective action against employers and/or the state, while itself a space of political contention. It is thus a fundamentally political entity without being either a political party or having any *direct* designs on power.

The next important implication of this research comes from my principal data sources, and the significance of paying attention to the narratives and stories recounted by individuals, which tend to be marginalized in more abstract, theoretical accounts of political mobilization and collective action, yet without whom the institutions and events that are the basis for such accounts would not have existed or have taken place. In-depth interviews as the primary method for data gathering helped reveal the nuances of the internal workings of organized labour, the intricacies of relationships between union members, and between different sectors and branches. This project

showed that narratives and storytelling produce, regulate and transmit meanings, emotions, intentions and symbols that help generate and shape individual and collective identities, decision-making and action (Benhabib 1990; Davis 2002; Polletta 1998). Even though no story is entirely objective, they contain within them explanatory elements that are often missed in purely structural analyses focused on a causal relationship between two variables. Therefore, by analyzing my questions through a case-study approach, "the research thus [became], instead of the refinement of measures of association between independent and dependent variables, the story of how something inevitably got to be the way it is" (Becker 1992, 210).

While I have underscored the value of an in-depth case study for the field of comparative politics, this research design has its own set of limitations. From the very beginning, semi-structured interviews formed the bedrock of this dissertation. As I have already acknowledged, for the duration of my fieldwork I was reliant on local contacts in order to access unionists willing to be interviewed. In this regard, I had little control over the selection process of the interlocutors involved in this project. Moreover, due to issues previously discussed regarding the gender divide in union work, most of the interviewees were male with an average age ranging from 40 to 60. To mitigate these limitations, I tried to ensure regional representation in my analysis while making sure the majority of my participants self-identified as "militant" unionists – the group most pertinent to this study. In this way, I was able to both find interlocutors who were best placed to tell me about their personal histories of militant activism within the UGTT, while recognizing that the dynamics and drivers of this activism were regionally variable. Nonetheless, given the diversity of the UGTT this meant that the present research takes less account of the views and experiences of less active or militant union members. The arguments of this study must thus be situated in the context of a highly diverse and dynamic national organization, where members 'enthusiasm for

political engagement and activism can vary depending on local economic development levels, their access to resources and opportunities, the union's legacy in their region, to name just the most important. Finally, while the findings of this dissertation have valuable comparative potential for future research on unionized workers 'political engagement in the region, a research design focusing on two comparative cases, for instance Egypt and Tunisia, could have provided very important insights into the mobilizing force of a union's historical legacy, workers 'discursive practices, and the ways in which militant unionist identities are constructed. The Egyptian case would make a striking point of comparison: the ETUF, founded in 1957, in the era of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, has historically functioned as a state organ with a mission to control and subordinate the workers, and it thus has lacked the legitimacy and legacy the UGTT has had amongst Tunisians, especially as a former anti-colonial actor. These limitations notwithstanding, even under Mubarak, local branches and groups inside the ETUF served as a "laboratory for democracy" (Beinin 2011); members also engaged in frequent wildcat strikes without authorization from the leadership. A comparative study would therefore in the Egyptian case build on existing work to explore what, on a more personal and small group level, sustained this activism, despite the union's greater proximity to the authoritarian state and despite the lack of a collective memory of the union as a resistance force.

These limitations notwithstanding, given that the bulk of this dissertation focused on unionists' political activism during authoritarian periods of Tunisian history, Tunisia after the fall of the Ben Ali regime offers an excellent opportunity to re-examine the role of labour as an agent in support of democratic political change, as well as the impact of this political transition, which continues to be accompanied by severe economic and social crises, on organized labour's credibility as a vehicle for political transformation. This dissertation demonstrated that a union,

forged in anti-colonial struggle and tempered through many decades of co-existence with authoritarian rule, could adapt and find new, important roles for itself in a newly democratizing environment. Nonetheless, in light of the surge in social movements in the late 2010s, new opportunities are emerging for scholars to examine whether the UGTT will continue to be a meaningful and effective vehicle for collective mobilization and political engagement for a new generation of unionized workers who are broadening their networks and finding new avenues to participate in politics outside the shelter of a union. New possibilities will thus arise for research as unionists' stories will continue to unfold.

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