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"Labour organisation in the Arab Spring: A comparison of Tunisia and Egypt"

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In 2015, the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize to Tunisia's National Dialogue Quartet – a mediating force of four civil society groups – for its "decisive contribution to the building of a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia in the wake of the Jasmine Revolution."[1] Of these actors, the Tunisian General Labour Union, a national confederation of labour unions (commonly referred to by its French acronym the UGTT), could be considered one of the most instrumental in forging the outcomes of Tunisia's post-revolution political landscape.[2] The comparative success of the liberal democratic transition in Tunisia, although still unfolding, makes it of particular interest when assessing the outcomes of the Arab Spring. This essay will primarily consider the unique position of the Tunisian labour movement and associations of the unemployed at the outbreak of revolution and will argue that the success of a transition to liberal democracy in Tunisia correlates with the strength of organised labour: in particular, the unique historical progression of the UGTT.

In order to investigate the progress of Tunisia's revolution, I will consider the comparable example of the Egyptian labour movement, which like Tunisia, participated strongly in the 2011 uprisings. However, unlike Tunisia, the

[1] "Nobel Peace Prize – Press Release," 10 October 2015. Available [Online]: https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2015/press.html;
[2] The three other members of the National Quartet were Tunisian Association of Human Rights, the Lawyers' Association and the Tunisian Union of Industry, Commerce and Traditional Crafts.

Egyptian labour movement remained fragmented, with the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), the only legal trade union prior to 2011, wholeheartedly complicit in President Hosni Mubarak's regime.[3] In 2013, after mass protests against then President Mohamed Morsi, Egypt saw the installation of former head of the armed forces Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as president, effectively returning Egypt to military dictatorship.

Authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have a long history of either repressing oppositional forces, or coopting them into the state machinery if the political circumstances dictate.[4] In Tunisia, Ben Ali oversaw a particularly effective police state that suppressed a culture of political protest prior to 2011, ensuring that the UGTT remained a stark anomaly. The UGTT, while having a history of sporadic collaboration, also had history of resistance.[5] Yet, some have noted that "democratization is so complex an outcome that no single variable will ever prove to be universally necessary or sufficient for it."[6] In many ways the Arab Spring has reinforced the existence of complex distinctions between states in the MENA region: tribal affiliations, sectarianism and religious divisions have wrought vastly different outcomes from the protests that erupted in 2011. This essay does not seek to argue that the role of organised labour is the only factor in determining the transition to

[3] Jack Shenker, "Hosni Mubarak's puppet trade union federation dismantled," The Guardian 5 August 2011.
[4] Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 36, no.2 (2004): 142.
[5] Joel Beinin, *Workers and Thieves: Labor Movements and Popular Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2016), 97.
[6] Ibid., 141.

democracy. Social movements are complex and teleological arguments that attempt to homogenise them risk essentialising abstract categories (the march of history, economics, etc), when more particular circumstances remain more relevant.

With this in mind, a number of theoretical strategies have been adopted when considering the MENA region, its supposed exceptionalism and the Arab Spring. Structuralist moderninsation theory was popular for some time before it was superseded by the postmodern turn that emphasised the particular over the universal, specifically the idea that the "ideological terrain" of the Arab world was not conducive to Western-style democracy. Neither approach is sufficient to understand a region that is as dissimilar as it is alike, while culturalist theories that emphasise the role of Islam descend into problematic discussions of cultural relativism. Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and the late Charles Tilly have "insisted on the uselessness of choosing among culturalist, rationalist and structuralist approaches to contentious politics" and instead, over a significant period of time, have produced the more tangible framework of Social Movement Theory (SMT). SMT encompasses a broad definition of social movements from ethnic struggles to large-scale revolutions and has sought to understand how and why they occur – from political openings, formation of networks to contentious practices.[7] But as Joel Beinin and Frédéric Vairel have discussed, it has been difficult to establish broad categories of understanding in the example of the Arab Spring, which defied expectations both in its occurrence and its

[7] Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 305.

subsequent varying outcomes.[8] Many categories simply fail to apply: the nature of authoritarianism in Tunisia and Egypt offered very few openings or opportunities through which protestors could agitate for change while the idea of an "awakening" of civil society in a Habermasian sense fails to hold up to scrutiny.[9]

However, there are some observations that remain relevant: "cycles of contentious activity" are applicable to Tunisia – both before and after December 2010 – and Egypt. Both states experienced contentious episodes prior to 2010 and Egypt in particular saw the mobilisation of informal networks, either through the intelligentsia, or the labour movement in sporadic opposition to the regime.[10] It is these similarities in contentious episodes that have led me to consider the two examples of Tunisia and Egypt here.

Egypt and Tunisia, although similar in many ways, remain states with divergent histories and contrasting geo-political roles, and this has wrought particular challenges post-2011. The most notable difference between the two states, and which has had a defining role in Egypt's post-revolution transition, is undoubtedly the comparative strength of the military. While the role of the military will not be explicitly considered here, the military in pre-revolutionary

[8] Frédéric Vairel and Joel Beinin, "Introduction: The Middle East and North Africa beyond Social Movement Theory," in *Social Movements, Mobilisation and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, eds. Frédéric Vairel and Joel Beinin (Standford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 1-29.
[9] Ibid., 16-19.
[10] Joel Beinin, "Political Economy and Social Movement Perspectives on the Egyptian and Tunisan Popular Uprisings of 2011," *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series* 14 (2016), 9.

Tunisia was far weaker, played a reduced political role and consequently social forces like the UGTT were better able to push for change post-Ben Ali.

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The UGTT is Tunisia's largest trade union and claims a membership of 750,000 (of four million active workers) and 15,000 unions nationwide.[11] Formed in 1946, it played a central role in Tunisia's struggle for independence from France, won in 1956. This in turned guaranteed it a certain level of autonomy in the following authoritarian rule of Tunisia's first president Habib Bourguiba, who was reliant on the UGTT to consolidate regime legitimacy. Under Bourguiba, the union was inconsistent in its cooperation or confrontation with the regime. The 1960s saw a period of relative stability and collaboration, yet throughout the 1970s – most notably the 1978 general strike – and 1980s the union militantly opposed attempts to implement IMF-back neoliberal economic reforms. This became a distinctive feature of the UGTT, that unlike other trade unions in the Arab world it never fully integrated into the state apparatus. Instead, it maintained two duel – albeit ambiguous – positions: a bureaucracy and leadership that was most often complicit with the state, but more significantly, a tendency to fall on the side of the workers and activists when attempts to resist the ruling power put pressure on the union leadership in times of crisis.[12]

[11] "The Price of Independence: Silencing Labor and Student Unions in Tunisia," Human Rights Watch, 2010. https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/10/21/price-independence/silencing-labor-and-student-unions-tunisia

[12] Héla Yousfi, " The Tunisian Revolution: Narratives of the Tunisian General Labour Union," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring*, ed. Larbi Sadiki (Milton Park: Routledge, 2015), 320.

This tendency to waver between varying levels of autonomy and radicalism, afforded the UGTT a certain level of popular credibility that is unique in the MENA region. Yet, with the bloodless coup by Ben Ali in 1987, came the forceful insertion of a leadership more favourable to the regime. The following decades saw the bureaucratic arm of the union become increasingly collaborative and at odds with the rank and file membership, more often moving to suppress labour activism than encourage it, and even openly supporting Ben Ali's presidential campaigns in 1995 and 1999. However, despite the corruption that came to define it by the turn of the millennium – then Secretary General Ahsessalem Irad was unabashedly collaborative – and the insidiousness of Ben Ali's authoritarianism, there still remained space for dissident action within its ranks, leading some to remark that there were in fact "two UGTTs".[13]

This is in stark contrast to the case of Egypt. The ETUF, Egypt's only legal expression of organised labour, was founded in 1957 under the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Under Nasser, workers were offered economic benefits in exchange for their capitulation to the regime. The ETUF, therefore, was not designed as a means of collective bargaining, but of control: its leadership was seen as openly subservient to Mubarak's proceeding regime and actively sabotaged dissidence within the labour movement to the extent that its dismantlement was one of the key demands of labour activists in 2011.[14] Aside from the ETUF, there existed only two NGOs that advocated for labour rights: The Centre for Trade Union and Workers Services and the Egyptian Centre for

[13] Ibid., 322.
[14] Joel Beinin, "Political Economy and Social Movement Perspectives," 7.

Economic and Social Rights and their influence within the movement is debatable.

During the twilight years of Mubarak's regime, Egypt experience impressive growth, with the World Bank ranking the state as one of the top ten "reformers" in world.[15] Yet during this period the division of wealth became more severe, with the World Bank also noting that nearly 44% of Egyptians are "extremely poor."[16] Meanwhile, while the regime reaped the benefits of a string of privatisations that raised over US$5.34 billion in a single year, real wages remained lower than they had been in 1988.[17]

In the absence of a union that could be considered somewhat autonomous, the labour movement was forced to adopt different, more dynamic oppositional strategies in pursuit of economic justice. Indeed, thanks in part to a perceived decrease in the government's violent suppression of workers, the 2004-2011 period saw a labour movement that was perhaps more militant than Tunisia's, with an unprecedented level of strike action that saw an estimated 1.7 million workers mobilising in over 1,900 strike actions against a string of neoliberal reforms that pushed privatisation and cut welfare.[18] This occurred without the support of the ETUF, with systemic tensions forming between workers and the

[15] Joel Beinin and Marie Duboc, "A Workers' Social Movement on the Margin of the Global Neoliberal Order, Egypt 2004-2012," in *Social Movements, Mobilisation and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, eds. Frédéric Vairel and Joel Beinin (Stanford: Standford University Press, 2013), 211.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Eric Lee and Benjamin Weinthal, "Trade unions: the revolutionary social network at play in Egypt and Tunisia," *The Guardian*, 10 February 2011.

union – in 2007 striking workers in Ghazl al-Malhall called for the impeachment of the local union committee – and in January 2011, the ETUF actively discouraged Egyptian workers from participating in the anti-establishment protests.[19]

But, despite labour militancy during this period, the absence of a democratically credible, formally organised and somewhat unified union through which workers could collectively agitate and express their grievances wrought particular challenges. The absence of such an organisation ensured that when the country entered its new period of upheaval in 2011, workers remained focused on local workplaces rather than consolidating around cohesive national demands, seriously undermining their ability to effectively wield power.

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When the Arab Spring first ignited on 17 December Tunisia 2010, after the self-immolation of street-vendor Mohammed Bouazizi in the rural outpost Sidi Bouzid, the West developed an unhealthy interpretation of the role social media and advanced communication technologies played in the initial uprisings. But, 2010 was not without pretext. Rather, the decade prior saw a number of social issues come to a head in Tunisia, perhaps most significant of which was the unemployment rate which hovered between 13-16 per cent nationwide, but which was a high as 40 percent in some rural areas.[20] Ben Ali's regime had overseen the implementation of an uneven economic development model –

[19] Dina Bishara, "Labor Movements in Tunisia and Egypt: Drivers vs. Objects of Change in Transition from Authoritarian Rule," *SWP Comments* 1 (2014): 2.
[20] Joel Beinin, "Working Class Revolutions? The success of the insurgent movements correlates well with the strength of organised labor," *The Nation,* 12 September 2011.

backed by the IMF – that saw a concentration of wealth in the capital and coastal areas, while the south, centre and west became increasingly marginalised.[21] This occurred in a period where Tunisia was being hailed as an "economic miracle" by the likes of Western leaders such as Nicholas Sarkozy.[22] Yet, there has been an unwillingness in the West to consider the role of organised labour in what was both an overthrow of an authoritarian regime, but also a profound rejection of the neoliberal orthodoxy.

Tunisia experienced significant economic and demographic change over the proceeding 30 years, which created a social crisis particularly in relation to the number of unemployed, educated youth. During the period between 1975-2010, the MENA region experienced the highest rate of growth in average years of schooling than any other region.[23] However, this was coupled with a baby boom during the 1970s and 1980s that ensured that the amount of youth entering the workforce in 2010 was four or six times that of those reaching retirement age.[24] The heightened expectations within the bulge of tertiary educated youths – or the "*lumpen intelligentsia*" as described by Carrie Wickham – but continued reproduction of class inequality created an untenable social context.[25] As Benjamin Stora has commented, "the Tunisian paradox lay in the contradiction –

[21] Hayeb, 470.
[22] Nicholas Sarkozy cited in Beinin, Workers and Thieves, 56.
[23] Kevan Harris, "Making and Unmaking of the Greater Middle East," *New Left Review* 101 (2016): 29.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Carrie Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt* (NewYork: Columbia University Press, 2002), 25, cited in Ibid.

unsustainable in the long term – between a high level of education and an authoritarian state treating its citizens as illiterate."[26]

Although there were 4,352 strikes in Tunisia from 1996 to 2007, far more than in Egypt, they were generally never sustained, quickly collapsing after a few days at most.[27] In contrast, by 2008, one of the largest expressions of social tensions fomenting in Tunisa was the Gafsa Mining Basin strikes, the most significant seen since the Bread Revolts of January 1984.[28] The regime responded violently to the protests: three people were murdered, 100 arrested and charged and 33 unions members given prison sentences of up to 10 years.[29]

Gafsa is a poor region bordering Algeria known for its phosphate mines. The strikes were initially triggered by the results of a corrupt hiring contest by the region's largest employer the Compangnie de Phosphates de Gabe (CPG) that had run annually in collusion with the UGTT. It quickly accelerated into a five month-long protest against the clientalism, nepotism and long-term structural and economic issues that plagued the Tunisian labour force. Tactics differed from town to town: Redeyef, the exception, saw local unionists organising in direct opposition to the UGTT leadership, personifying once again the split personality of the union. In other towns a mixture of strikes, occupations and protests were organised without the official union's involvement at all.

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[26] Benjamin Stora, "Tunisia is not Algeria, nor is it Morocco, nor Iran," *Marianne* 718 (2011): 41 cited in Bishara, 469.
[27] Beinin, "Political Economy and Social Movement Perspectives," 11.
[28] Eric Gobe, "The Gafsa Mining Basin between Riots and Social Movement: Meaning and Significance of a protest movement in Ben Ali's Tunisia," *Working paper* (2010): 1.
[29] Ayeb, 473.

Gafsa is significant, both because the protests lasted several months, just a few years prior to the revolution, and also because they involved the same plurality of actors: from blue to white-collar workers, Tunisia's frustrated and educated unemployed, high school students and rank and file union activists. But the UGTT leadership did not adopt a revolutionary stance in this instance. The strikes therefore became as much an expression of latent dissatisfaction with UGTT collaboration and corruption – activists culminated their protests by occupying the local branch – as it was an expression against the regime.[30] Yet, what the Gafsa protests do signify is that a strata of Tunisians were willing to organise both within and outside the union when the situation dictated, but moreover, that they were willing to put pressure on their own union leadership to adopt a more progressive position. Equally significant, is that there was a convergence between the demands of blue and white-collar workers and the lumpen intelligentsia.[31]

However, the Gafsa strikes failed to spark a revolution, despite the fact that the grievances were much the same as those that triggered the protests in 2010. Unlike the latter, Gafsa remained a marginal issue for many outside of the region. And in addition to being relatively leaderless and disorganised, it often descended into riots, rather than strategically agitating for clearly defined aims.

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[30] International Labour Office, *Yearbook of Labour Statistics* (Geneva: 2006, 2008) cited in Beinin, 11; Lee and Weinthal.
[31] Habib Ayeb, "Social and Political Geography of the Tunisian Revolution: the alfa grass revolution," *Review of African Political Economy* 38, no. 129 (2011), 468.

It is after the January uprisings when the strength of organised labour becomes critical and where there begins to be greater divergence. It was UGTT activists who initially passed footage of Bouazizi's self-immolation to regional news network Al-Jazeera, before organising a protest for the following day.[32] The protests developed to involve a multiplicity of actors far beyond the reach of UGTT. In these initial stages of the revolution, social media and mobile phones undoubtedly helped in coordinating activists, but they cannot be solely credited with the revolution's success. The UGTT rank and file was pivotal in coordinating strike action that spread from Sidi Bouzid outwards towards other regional centres and the capital, putting pressure on the union bureaucracy. As one Professor from Tunis described it:

> As usual, the UGTT bureaucracy tried to avoid direct political confrontation with the regime. But when you put pressure on it, when the local branches put all their pressure on it, the bureaucracy is forced to adopt the political demands of the local branches.[33]

The uprisings in Sidi Bouzid caught the bureaucracy by surprise and once again demonstrated that it was out of step with its membership. But its eventual swap from a "mediating position" to direct calls for regime change marked a shift in the revolution's momentum. It proved pivotal in encouraging 30,000 to the

[32] Mario Diani and Caelum Moffatt, "Modes of Coordination of Contentious Collective Action in the Middle East," in *Popular Contention, Regime and Transition: Arab Revolts in Comparative Perspective*, eds. Eitan Y. Alimi, Avraham Sela and Mario Sznajder(New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 43; Jeremy Bowen, *The Arab Uprisings: The People want the fall of the System* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 38.
[33] Union activist cited in Yousfi, 325.

streets on 12 January, with calls for another general strike to follow two days later, by which time Ben Ali had already fled to Saudi Arabia.[34]

The first free elections in the country's history were held nine months after the initial protests, which saw 90 percent participation rate.[35] The Islamist party Ennahda, by far Tunisia's largest and most organised party at the time, succeeded in winning 41% of the vote, forming government in coalition with the two main secular parties, and generally interpreted as a mandate to draft Tunisia's new constitution. However, this political context proved to be a fractious period: two members of the opposition – Chokri Belaid of the secular Populist Front and Mohammed Brahmi of the Arab nationalist People's party – were shot dead during the first half of 2013, and the UGTT also experienced attacks on its offices. In response, the union organised the first general strike since 1978 – two years after the initial revolution. This shows that the UGTT had become an institution that was not only instrumental in the regime change, but which was essential to ensuring the survival of liberal democracy in the immediate post-revolution aftermath.

This interpretation contradicts the idea that demands for human rights and political representation in Tunisia can be separated from demands for social justice and higher living standards against a neoliberal regime. While class differences may have led to different emphasises between working and middle class participants in the movement, the existence of explicitly working class

[34] Diani and Moffatt, 43.
[35] Elizabeth Fair, " The Election of Ennahda and the Future of Tunisian Democracy," *Stanford Journal of International Relations* 13, no.1 (2011): 41.

organisation supported and ensured the viability of characteristically liberal demands. For example, it was a coalition of unions and civil societies groups that defeated through public pressure Ennahda's proposed draft constitution that deemed women "complementary" and not equal to men.[36] And it was the unions that, under the threat of violence during 2013, could back up such demands using the powerful tool of industrial action.

Dina Bishara has pointed to the UGTT's role in forging Tunisia's independence, its historical militancy and lack of political affiliation in providing the union with credibility as a political mediator.[37] Indeed, with a membership of roughly 750,000 it certainly had greater political reach than most established political parties, particularly in the initial years post-Ben Ali when the secular opposition was split into minor parties with limited resources. The UGTT functioned as a progressive oppositional force when parliamentary opposition was still consolidating itself –and facilitated the "Quartet" that has helped bridge political divides.

Yet, some have questioned the impact of the UGTT in Tunisia's revolution. Niklas Plaetzer has even gone so far to suggest that the UGTT has "been largely reactive to the ephemeral grassroots organisations, which culminated in the overthrow of

[36] Valentine M. Moghadam, "Islamism, Feminism, and Resistance: Rethinking the Arab Spring," in *The Sage Handbook of Resistance*, eds. David Courpassaon and Steven Vallas (London: Sage Publications), 90.
[37] Bishara, 6.

the Ben Ali regime."[38] Plaezter fails to give evidence for what constitutes an ephemeral grassroots organisation as opposed to rank and file UGTT members and others, who operated both inside and outside of union structures. Moreover, to think of the UGTT as homogenous, with static politics in the vein of a political party, is to fundamentally misunderstand what a union is. As this essay has shown, rank and file members of the UGTT were, in general, far more radical than its leadership and that this tension has always existed within the union: many of the strikes at Gafsa existed both in spite of and thanks to the UGTT. More significantly, what Plaetzer fails to acknowledge is how these activists had already laid the groundwork for a progressive shift within the UGTT, which was a critical catalyst for the revolution, while providing the institutional framework that unified progressive forces in the immediate post-Ben Ali period.

The irony of critiques such as Plaetzer's, who claims that moderate "civil society" groups, in which he includes the UGTT, in fact prevented more grassroots oppositional movements from emerging, is that it was only after January 2011 that Tunisia saw the emergence of new expressions of organised labour. The legalisation of formerly banned unions, as distinct from the UGTT, such as the Confédération Générale Tunisienne du Travail (CGTT), which advocates for trade union pluralism and giving workers viable alternatives for representation, was only possible once grassroots movements had to at least some extent captured

[38] Niklas Plaetzer, "Civil Society as Domestication: Egyptian and Tunisian Uprisings beyond Liberal Transitology," *Journal of International Affairs* 68, no.1 (2014): 259-60.

the UGTT's agenda in alliance with other civil society groups.[39] The victory of retaining a relatively more progressive and grassroots control by the rank and file over organised labour led to further, more progressive victories. This includes the emergence of even more democratic, and perhaps radical, trade union associations – but does not contradict activists working within those structures.

In contrast, in Egypt where there was no consolidation of organised labour, the movement began to splinter and devolve into political sectarianism. During the occupation of Tahrir Square, workers formed the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), which sought to link workers demands to those of the revolution.[40] Yet, the EFITU had already split by the summer of 2011, inexperienced and unable to unify around common demands, it was ineffective at agitating during the interim political period. Nascent unions began to emerge, despite the strong opposition of the ETUF, but were still confronted with legal obstacles from the old regime that made it impossible to represent workers effectively, let alone provide strike action that could be a force for political change.[41]

[39] Bishara, 5. It is important to note that while union pluralism was legal under Ben Ali – attempts to formally register alternative unions were largely thwarted, deliberately drowned in bureaucratic red or ignored entirely: effectively rendering them illegal. See Human Right's Watch's paper: "The Price of Independence" which gives a very in-depth overview Tunisian attempts to organise outside of the UGTT.
[40] Beinin, "Political Economy and Social Movement Perspectives," 12.
[41] Bishara, 3.

The division between political liberalism and organised labour in Egypt was more pronounced than in Tunisia, such that Khalid 'Ali, Director of the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social rights could comment: "The workers did not start the 25 January movement because they have no organising structure."[42] Demands for economic, social justice, were considered at best adjacent to the demands for political reform. Ahmed Maher, a co-founded of the 6 April Youth Movement and in a turn a key leader of the Egyptian protests, considered workers' demands as "sectoral" rather than national and insisted they played only a minor role in the 25 January uprisings.[43] There was little coalescing between demands for liberal democracy and social justice.

The election of Mohamed Morsi in 2012, leader of Egypt's Islamist, Freedom and Justice Party, did not indicate that laws would become more favourable to labour, and eventually led to similar widespread concerns about a creeping political authoritarianism. But unlike Tunisia, due to Egypt's historically suppressed and fractured labour movement, it was unable to exert a progressive power to back up the demands of the movement, leading protestors, in desperation, to eventually embrace the return of military rule under General Sisi. This is a distinct feature of Egypt's post-revolution labour movement – in attempting to navigate the plethora of legal obstacles and violence that remained in place under Mubarak, Morsi and now Sisi, workers are less able to exert political influence, to the severe detriment of democratic change.

[42] Khalid 'Ali cited in Beinin, *Workers and Thieves*, 135.
[43] Ibid.

Despite Tunisia and Egypt both having what could be considered historically strong labour movements, expressed through informal strikes or institutional membership, the comparative political influence is striking. I have argued that the difference is tied to worker-activists in Tunisia achieving a greater degree of positive, formal political organisation through the UGTT, to the extent that was feasible under Ben Ali, and later both during and after the revolution. This doesn't mean that the UGTT should be idealised or to diminish the fact for many years its leadership was readily collaborative with Ben Ali's regime, but that such an organisation always held revolutionary potential. Conversely, Egypt's labour movement faced a far more difficult challenge in confronting both Mubarak's and subsequent regimes' violent suppression and severe co-option of legal union structure, the ETUF. This can begin to explain why the UGTT had such a profound impact on the outcomes of the revolution, while Egypt's movement floundered.

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