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Labour and democracy in the Maghreb: The Moroccan and Tunisian trade unions in the 2011 Arab Uprisings

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Abstract

This article focuses on the part played by Moroccan and Tunisian labour in the 2011 Arab Uprisings and their outcomes, aiming to add fresh evidence to the long-standing debate over the place of social classes in democratisation processes. In Morocco, most labour confederations supported a new constitution that did not alter the undemocratic nature of the political system. In Tunisia, instead, rank-and-file trade unionists successfully rallied the single labour confederation in support of the popular mobilisations, eventually contributing to democratisation. The most important facilitating factor for these divergent processes and outcomes was the different level of working-class power existing in the two countries. On the eve of the Uprisings, working-class power was higher in Tunisia than in Morocco and this enabled Tunisian workers to mobilise more effectively. Democratisation in Tunisia, however, has so far failed to address the demands for social justice that were at the core of the Uprisings.

Introduction

This research examines the roles played by Moroccan and Tunisian labour in the 2011 Arab Uprisings and their aftermath, with the aim of contributing fresh evidence to the long-standing debate over the place of social classes in democratisation processes. Morocco and Tunisia are particularly fit for comparison because they are relatively similar cases, despite the fact that the first is a monarchy and the second a republic. In fact, they are both Maghribi countries and share the legacies of the French protectorate

and parallel paths of neoliberal structural adjustment. Both were recently invested by a wave of mobilisations for democracy and social justice in which the trade unions were involved. However, in Morocco, against the background of the campaign of the *Mouvement 20 Février* (M20Fev) for democracy and social justice, most labour confederations supported a new constitution that did not alter the undemocratic nature of the political system. In Tunisia, instead, politicised union militants successfully challenged the policy of compromise with the regime held by the top leadership of the single labour confederation *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* (UGTT), contributing to the eventual democratisation of the country. Democratisation in Tunisia, however, has so far failed to address the demands for social justice that were at the core of the Uprisings.

The central argument is that the most important facilitating factor for these different roles of the trade unions in democratic struggles and their outcomes was the different level of working-class power existing in the two countries. The comparison of working-class power in Morocco and Tunisia shows that, on the eve of the Uprisings, working-class power was higher in Tunisia than in Morocco and that this enabled Tunisian workers to mobilise more effectively for democratisation. These findings support the body of literature claiming that working-class power, other things being equal, tends to contribute to democratisation, in the Middle East as elsewhere. Therefore, the Arab Uprisings' 'modest harvest' in terms of democratisation can also be seen as a consequence of, *among other factors*, the high labour-repressiveness of the region.

The article is based on fieldwork including 96 semi-structured interviews, a digitalised press archive of over 2,000 items, and the analysis of labour legislation, socioeconomic statistics and other documents produced by the state and the trade unions. The author spent 18 months in the researched countries. The archival research took place in the documental centres of Rabat and Tunis. In Tunisia, the interviews were conducted in Greater Tunis, Kasserine, Gafsa, Sfax and Sidi Bouzid as well as in smaller towns in the vicinities of these cities. In Morocco, the interviews were carried out in Rabat, Casablanca, Tangiers, Marrakesh, Khouribga, Agadir and Fez. Most interviewees were rank-and-file and mid-level trade unionists from a wide range of employment sectors.

However, workers with no union responsibilities, top-level union leaders, social movement and party activists, civil servants, experts and members of the unemployed associations were also interviewed. Moving outside of the capital cities and talking with activists and workers located in different positions in respect to the labour confederations allowed the author to gain a more multi-faceted and articulated grasp of Morocco and Tunisia's working-class mobilisations and trade unionism.

The first section discusses labour in democratisation processes with a specific focus on the Arab Uprisings; it then spells out the indicators of working-class power used for this research. The second section provides a brief account of the historical construction of working-class power in Morocco and Tunisia and a description of the respective balances of class power on the eve of the Uprisings. Against this background, the last section tells how the relevant actors behaved during the Uprisings and in their aftermath, tracing the developments that resulted in the outcomes under investigation.

Measuring class power: The working class in the 2011 Arab Uprisings

Class power and democracy

In the historical debate over social classes and democratisation, some authors argued that the bourgeoisie (e.g. Moore, 1966) or the middle class (e.g. Lipset, 1960) have a privileged role, while others claimed that labour has historically been the most consistent pro-democracy collective actor because democracy is in the interest of the workers (e.g. Esping-Andersen, 1985; Rueschemeyer et al., 1992; Therborn, 1977). In the latter view, working-class power is an important positive factor in democratisation processes.

Academic work on labour in the 2011 Arab Uprisings has also maintained that labour was a significant pro-democracy actor. Much research going in this direction deals with Egypt (Alexander and Bassiouny, 2014; Beinun, 2012; De Smet, 2012; El-Mahdi, 2011; Totonchi, 2011), which historically has been the Arab country attracting the greatest attention from labour scholars. More recently, Tunisian labour similarly came under the spotlight. This was due to the decisive role of rank-and-file trade unionists in the

Uprising, which became clear as the UGTT turned into a central broker of the political negotiations that followed Ben Ali's downfall (Mizouni, 2012; Netterstrøm, 2016; Omri, 2017; Wilder, 2015; Yousfi, 2015).¹ Tunisia is the only country concerned in the Uprisings that has democratised, and organised labour participated directly in this outcome. In a comparative perspective, both Beinini (2016) and Allinson (2015) imply that the fact that Tunisia had the strongest working class in the Arab world contributed to its democratisation. In a similar vein, Del Panta (2017) holds that authoritarian resilience in Algeria is due, among other things, to labour weakness there.

However, the claim that Tunisia was the Arab country in which working-class power was highest before the Uprisings is not uncontroversial. In fact, in an important pre-Uprisings study on 13 Arab countries, Cammett and Posusney suggested that the country where labour had most leverage was Morocco:

General political liberalization should enhance union freedoms, and the struggle for organizing rights is intrinsically part of democratization movements. Variation in the authoritarian structures of Middle Eastern countries, and related differences in union-state relations, suggests arenas where progress can be expected, at least in the short term. Thanks to both partisan competition and competitive unionism, Morocco is already furthest along in freedom of association and appears to provide the best environment for additional advancement. ... Thus, this paper lends further support to the comparative finding that single party states appear to have the most resilient form of authoritarianism and suggests the intriguing possibility that some of the historically conservative monarchies of the region may ultimately prove to be the most progressive on labor rights. (Cammett and Posusney, 2010: 276)

The validity of this claim cannot be assessed against the existing literature. Recently published academic research on Moroccan labour is very scant and almost non-existent in the English literature. Zemni et al. (2012) compared workers' struggles in the 2011 Arab Uprisings of Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia, but the article – while valuable – contains no substantial analysis of Moroccan trade unionism. Buehler (2015) produced an article

showing how, in 2011, the Moroccan unions gained socioeconomic concessions thanks to the context of political instability. But the second most recent English-language work on Moroccan unions is a short MERIP report dating from 30 years before (Clement and Paul, 1984). At the time of writing the present article, there is no published academic work, in any language, providing an in-depth comparison of working-class power in Morocco and Tunisia. The article thus contributes to filling this gap in the literature.

According to Cammett and Posusney: ‘Moroccan exceptionalism reflects that country’s long history of competitive unionism’ (Cammett and Posusney, 2010: 271). But this emphasis on the institutional arrangement of competitive unionism might be partially misleading. The right to form alternative trade unions is certainly an asset for workers (and it falls under the indicator of civil and political rights below), but union fragmentation is often considered as a liability (e.g. Korpi and Shalev, 1979). Thus, whether the abundance of labour confederations is positive or negative for workers should be established through a historical analysis of the processes through which they came into being, depending on the relative weight of mobilisation from below versus divide-and-conquer tactics from above. Therefore, competitive unionism is not the best single indicator for measuring working-class power and a multidimensional approach is preferable.

Erik Olin Wright defines class power in these terms: ‘In the context of class analysis, power can be thought of as the *capacity of individuals and organizations to realize their class interests*’ (Wright, 2000: 962). He then distinguishes between working-class ‘structural power’ – depending on workers’ position in the economic system – and ‘associational power’ – depending on the strength of labour organisations. This distinction is particularly useful because structural power, unlike most indicators on associational power, provides information on the potential for workers’ mobilisation both within *and without* the trade unions and, as we will see, the Uprisings featured both kinds of mobilisation.

For analytical purposes, the lower layers of the waged middle class are included here within the working class, given the convergence of interests and organisations of the two

categories. Unwaged workers are also included, as the author shares the perspective according to which, especially in the global South, it is misleading to consider as working-class members waged employees only (see Van Der Linden, 2014).

Working-class power is seen here as arising both from ‘economic’ factors (e.g. sectors of employment or characteristics of the labour market) and ‘political’ factors (e.g. civil and political rights or collective bargaining institutions). However, this relation should not be seen in deterministic terms. Working-class power, even in its most structural elements like the sectorial location of the workers, is historically constructed through successive rounds of social struggles and can change through further conflicts. A given balance of class power indicates a certain distribution of resources between classes, pointing to a range of likelier outcomes. But actual outcomes and the way in which they occur can in no way be pre-determined in the face of the agency of social actors that mobilise class power through contingent strategies.

Indicators of working-class power (see Table 1)

To assess working-class *structural power* in Morocco and Tunisia, the following indicators are singled out as the most informative, given the availability of data and the characteristics of the cases:

1. *Sectorial location* refers to the distribution of employment in economic sectors that tend to provide, other things being equal, more mobilising potential and more advantageous conditions to the workers (e.g. manufacturing versus agriculture).
2. *Job security* is heuristically measured through the share of workers having open-ended contracts and social security benefits. In both countries, open-ended contracts grant a series of legal protections against layoffs. The preciseness of this indicator is affected by the impossibility to measure the extent of actual implementation of the labour legislation. However, as labour law violations were similar or worse in Morocco relative to Tunisia (see below), this difficulty does not invalidate the indicator.

3. The *Human Development Index* provides information on how much workers – who constitute the majority of the population of Morocco and Tunisia – are wealthy, healthy and educated, and thus empowered to mobilise for their interests. Moreover, in the absence of complete and reliable data on wages, the combination of GNI per capita and inequality indexes outlines a picture of the national distribution of income to the workers. This is also consistent with the theoretical choice of including unwaged workers in the working class.
4. The *social wage* refers to the level of public expenditure for welfare services and it indicates the extent to which workers are independent of the market for their education, health and social security, and of charity for poverty relief. This partial decommodification, in turn, reinforces their bargaining power.

Some apparently obvious indicators, like wage levels and unemployment rates, do not appear in the list. The problem with wages is the absence, at time of writing, of publicly available complete data for the Moroccan private sector. Comparing the legal minimum wage of the two countries presupposes that it is equally applied in both, which is very far from warranted for all legal indicators. Unemployment rates are normally used as an indicator for the tightness or looseness of national labour markets, which in turn affects workers' bargaining power. Official unemployment rates, however, are not very meaningful in global South countries that do not provide unemployment subsidies. In fact, workers are thus forced to somehow work anyway, no matter the availability of 'decent' employment. Unemployment rates in the global South are lower than in the West, but working-class structural power is not higher in the former. Morocco's official unemployment rate in 2010 was 9%, four percentage points lower than Tunisia's 13% (ILOSTAT), which even used a more restrictive definition of unemployment. However, these numbers have a very limited meaning, knowing that in the same year 23.5% of the Moroccan employed population fell within the 'unpaid employed' category (HCP, 2011). Surely, both Moroccan and Tunisian workers face extremely loose labour markets, marred by acute underemployment and precarity.

To assess *associational power*, the following indicators are used:

1. *Trade union density* is the most common indicator of union power. Other things being equal, unions with more members can stage larger and more effective mobilisations. The preciseness of this indicator is affected by the fact that unions can sometimes mobilise non-members too. However, as shown below, it is in Tunisia (where union density is higher) that trade unionists contributed more successfully to mobilise the non-unionised.

2. *Collective bargaining coverage* reflects the unions' capacity to improve workers' wages and conditions through collective agreements, and it is, therefore, another classic indicator of union power.

3. *Civil and political rights* define the range of contentious action to which workers and their organisations can recur without facing state repression and the extent to which workers can elect representatives of their choosing in state institutions.

4. *Internal democracy* is not a direct indicator of union power, but it refers to the extent to which union power is the power *of* the workers, rather than just power *over* the workers (see Hyman, 1975). This aspect is of particular importance in authoritarian countries, where unions can be little more than appendages of the regime. Limitations of internal democracy can appear both as bureaucratic practices restraining rank-and-file democracy through formal rules (see Camfield, 2013) and as patrimonial practices through which the union leaders maintain undemocratic control by violating formal rules.

The reader will notice the absence of labour parties, tripartite institutions and competitive unionism. In fact, these elements cannot be considered as straightforward indicators of working-class associational power, because they can act as vehicles of both empowerment and co-optation/weakening depending on the context. They will be discussed in the empirical section, but they cannot be synthesised as univocal indicators.

Also missing is the breadth of union freedoms in the two countries before 2011 because it is difficult to assess. Stallings (2010) used an index composed of legal provisions and reports on labour law violations by the International Trade Union Confederation, the US State Department and the ILO. The resulting index states that *de facto* union freedoms were higher in Morocco than in Tunisia. However, evidence from the author's interviews

and archival research points towards the opposite direction. For example, the author witnessed three cases (Doha, Maghreb Steel, Med Paper) in which hundreds of striking Moroccan workers were fired for defending their union representatives against illegal layoffs. While anti-union discrimination in the Tunisian private sector is a very widespread phenomenon, to the author's knowledge violations on this scale are unseen there. In any case, both reports by international agencies and qualitative fieldwork are anecdotal evidence for a quantitative phenomenon and cannot be seen as conclusive. Despite the gaps in the data, the overall divergence between Morocco and Tunisia on the above indicators is significant and coherent enough to allow for solid conclusions on their different balances of class power before the Uprisings.

Table 1 – Indicators of working-class power

Working-class structural power	Working-class associational power
Sectorial location	Trade union density
Job security	Collective bargaining coverage
Human Development Index	Civil and political rights
The social wage	Internal democracy

Building class power: The historical construction of the balance of class power

Social struggles and political regimes

Moroccan and Tunisian trade unionism first appeared under the French protectorate through the local sections of the French *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) (Ayache, 1982–1993; Ben Hamida, 2003). In 1944, the Tunisian CGT cadre Farhat Hached led a split that resulted in the founding of the UGTT two years later. Since its beginnings, the UGTT participated in the National Movement in alliance with the nationalist Neo-Destour Party. But, on 5 December 1952, Farhat Hached was assassinated in Tunis by the French secret services. The Moroccan CGT leaders thus called for a demonstration of solidarity with Tunisia in Casablanca, which was repressed in blood by the French authorities. These dramatic events established Moroccan labour as

one of the three poles of the National Movement, along with the nationalist Istiqlal Party and the armed resistance. But only on 20 March 1955 did the Moroccan labour leaders found the *Union Marocaine du Travail* (UMT) as an independent Moroccan confederation. After Morocco and Tunisia achieved Independence in 1956, in the former hereditary rule persisted while in the latter it was abolished. The labour movements of both countries had participated in the National Liberation struggle, but in Tunisia this happened through a national confederation from an earlier stage and thus the role of labour was more central.

In Morocco, the regime that emerged after Independence was built on a *conservative* social basis led by rural landowners. In 1961, the new king Hassan II took direct control of the executive and reversed the Istiqlal's initial redistributive and industrialising policies, as he feared that an overhaul of agriculture would undermine his rural power base (Leveau, 1985 [1976]). The splits within the National Movement after its failure to gain control of the state led to the early beginnings of competitive unionism in Morocco, with the foundation of the Istiqlal-linked *Union Générale des Travailleurs du Maroc* (UGTM) (see Menouni, 1979). Meanwhile, since the defeats of the early 1960s, the UMT leadership grew increasingly compromising with the Palace.

In Tunisia, on the other hand, the new regime was based on a *populist* social basis, which resulted in a programme of import-substitution industrialisation and a series of material concessions to the working class that were never to be seen in Morocco (Ben Romdhane, 2011). There was a deep overlapping of memberships in the single party, the single trade union and the state; a triangular state–party–union architecture typical of populist corporatist regimes. But the UGTT – while allied to the regime – preserved a certain degree of autonomy, the scope of which varied historically depending on the political conjuncture (see Hamzaoui, 2013).

In both countries, the 1970s were characterised by the leftwards radicalisation of the student movement and by a large strike wave (Belaïd, 1989). However, in Morocco, the severity of state repression prevented the New Left originating from the universities to build an important presence in the labour unions. Meanwhile, faced with the UMT's

immobilism and lack of internal democracy, the socialist party *Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires* (USFP)² created its own union, the *Confédération Démocratique du Travail* (CDT), on 25–26 November 1978 (Benhlal, 1985).

In Tunisia, conversely, the New Left ex-students joined the workforce and the UGTT at once. While workers grew restive, the radicals demanded internal democracy and challenged the submission of the union to the ruling Destourian Party (see Bellin, 2002). These mobilisations culminated in the 26 January 1978 UGTT general strike, that was violently crushed by the security forces. The regime jailed and tried tens of union cadres, including the quasi-totality of the UGTT National Executive Committee (NEC). But, despite the defeat, these struggles dismantled the triangular state–party–union architecture as it used to be, an achievement with far-reaching, long-term consequences that did not obtain in the other Arab populist countries. On the one hand, a solid leftist opposition had emerged within the confederation. On the other hand, after this bitter conflict, the top union leadership ceased to be a reliable ally of the regime.

During the 1980s, the Moroccan and Tunisian states entered a fiscal crisis that pushed them to negotiate stabilisation plans with the IMF and enter neoliberal structural adjustment. Severe protests and crackdowns marked their transition to neoliberalism. In Morocco, these included the repression of the 20 June 1981 general strike called by the CDT, of the January 1984 Bread Riots, and of the 14 December 1990 general strike called by the CDT and the UGTM. In Tunisia, the Bread Riots of 1983–1984 were quashed in blood and throughout 1985 the regime escalated its crackdown on the UGTT.

After structural adjustment, Morocco partially opened its political system while in Tunisia authoritarianism remained steadfast. In the mid-1990s, Hassan II started negotiating with the opposition parties to prepare a smooth transmission of the throne to his son Mohammed VI. The CDT and the UGTM toed the line of their parties and, since 1994, took part in a series of negotiations aiming to institutionalise a consultative social dialogue (Catusse, 1998). In 1998, the USFP was thus allowed to lead the government. The socialists hoped to democratise the country and improve social justice, but these goals remained largely unmet. Because of this, in the 2000s, the CDT distanced itself

from the USFP and entered a phase of splits and decline. From these splits, the USFP-linked *Fédération Démocratique du Travail* (FDT) emerged, but the electoral weight and political significance of the USFP kept falling.

In Tunisia, between 1985 and 1988, the regime survived on sheer labour repression. However, the continuing rise of the Islamists on the one hand and persistent wildcat strikes on the other made this arrangement untenable (Alexander, 1996). Ben Ali, who had taken power on 7 November 1987, needed a social basis to contain the Islamists and the easiest solution was reconstituting the corporatist alliance with the UGTT in a neo-liberal ‘post-populist’ form. Material concessions to the workers were partially retrenched, which was ‘compensated’ by a potentiated network of patron–client corrupting practices penetrating the union (Feltrin, forthcoming).

Morocco promulgated its first Labour Code in 2003. It was apparently a bargain in which the unions accepted the flexibilisation of the formal labour market in exchange for the protection of union freedoms and other concessions. However, my interviewees were adamant in declaring that no real general improvement of union freedoms took place, which seems confirmed by persisting very low union density in the private sector. In the meantime, during the 1990s, New Left militants released from prison had built a radical opposition within the UMT, especially in the agricultural federation, the teaching federation, the local administrations federation and the Rabat regional union (Feltrin, forthcoming). The UMT left would attempt to use its power bases within the union to rally the labour movement in support of the 2011 mobilisations, but its efforts were unable to change substantially the line of the confederations.

In Tunisia, Secretary General (SG) Ismail Sahbani led the UGTT into acceptance of neoliberal reforms and political support for Ben Ali. However, Sahbani’s association to the policies of the regime, coupled with escalating internal authoritarianism and corruption, undermined his grip on the organisation. In September 2000, he was replaced by Abdesslem Jerad. As detailed below, the late 2000s were characterised by an increasingly bitter internal battle between the supporters and the opponents of Jerad’s policy of compromise with the regime. The UGTT internal opposition would become an

important element in the making of the 2011 Tunisian Uprising.

In sum, the divergent outcomes of historical social struggles in Morocco and Tunisia led to a different balance of class power in the two countries on the eve of the Uprisings. In the aftermath of National Liberation, Moroccan labour was marginalised by the ruling social coalition and it was unable to decisively influence the policies of the regime. The UMT's declining power encouraged its leadership to increasingly compromise with the Palace despite the lack of concessions, and to take a conservative position when the 1970s upsurge of social unrest came. The neoliberal turn saw the further weakening and fragmentation of Moroccan trade unionism, a crisis widely recognised in public debates.

In Tunisia, the central role played by the UGTT in the National Movement allowed it to gain a strong foothold in the social coalition underlying the new regime, and to influence its initial policies to a large extent. This resulted in a populist social pact in which the working class gained significant material concessions but came at the cost of the partial subordination of the confederation to the regime. Despite this, when neoliberal restructuring started to take root in the 1970s, workers' mobilisations were able to push the UGTT leadership to acts of radical opposition. While these attempts ended in defeat, they formed cracks in the triangular state–party–union architecture of populist corporatism and built a relatively strong militant power base within the UGTT.

A different balance of class power

This section provides further evidence for the thesis that, on the eve of the 2011 Uprisings, working-class power was higher in Tunisia than in Morocco. Some of the figures in Tables 2 and 3, while coming from authoritative sources, are unlikely to be exact. But the scale and the coherence of the differences between the indicators for the two countries allow drawing safe conclusions.

The long-standing results of Hassan II's basic continuity with the colonial policy of primary product export – as a result of his political wariness of industrialisation – are still evident. In 2010, Morocco's agricultural sector employed 36.3% of the workforce, while

in Tunisia it employed only 15.1% (ILOSTAT). This is an important factor in placing a higher share of Moroccan workers in unwaged and/or informal jobs, limiting the potential recruitment pool of the trade unions. Morocco's small public sector is also a liability to working-class power since violations of the labour law and anti-union behaviours are much more common in the private sector. Finally, Tunisia has a higher proportion of workers in industry and in large enterprises, where organising potential is more elevated.

Table 2 – Working-class structural power

When possible, the author selected data for the years immediately preceding the 2011 Uprisings.

	Morocco	Tunisia
Sectorial location	–	+
Waged employment in total employment	44.2% (2010) ¹	68.3% (2010) ¹
Formal employment in total employment	47.1% (2000-08) ²	64.3% (2000-08) ²
Public sector employment in total employment	8.5% (2010) ³	22% (2010) ⁴
Industrial employment in total employment	20% (2010) ¹	29.4% (2010) ¹
Manufacturing employment in total employment	11% (2011) ¹	18.3% (2010) ¹
Employment in 100+ firms in total employment	17% (2015) ⁵	40% (2015) ⁵
Job security	–	+
Workers with open-ended contracts in total employment	11% (2010) ³	42% (2011) ⁶
Social security coverage	30% (2008) ⁷	78.9% (2010) ⁸
Human Development Index	–	+
Position in HDI ranking	114 (2010) ²	81 (2010) ²
GNI per capita (PPP 2008 \$)	4,628 (2010) ²	7,979 (2010) ²

¹ ILOSTAT

² UN-HDI

³ HCP 2011

⁴ Calculated by the author based on IMF 2014 and INS 2011

⁵ European Commission 2015

⁶ INS 2013

⁷ CNSS Morocco 2009

⁸ Ministry of Social Affairs Tunisia 2012

Income Gini Coefficient	40.7 (2006) ⁹	35.8 (2010) ⁹
Coefficient of human inequality	28.5 (2014) ²	21.4 (2014) ²
Population in multidimensional poverty	28.5% (2000-08) ²	2.8% (2000-08) ²
Adult literacy rate	56.4% (2005-08) ²	78% (2005-08) ²
Mean years of schooling	4.4 (2010) ²	6.5 (2010) ²
Life expectancy at birth	71.8 (2010) ²	74.3 (2010) ²
Infant mortality (per 1,000 live births)	32 (2008) ²	18 (2008) ²
The social wage	-	+
Public expenditure on social benefits (% of GDP)	4.3% (2011) ¹⁰	7.7% (2011) ¹⁰
Public expenditure on education (% of GDP)	5.7% (2000-07) ²	7.2% (2000-07) ²
Public expenditure on health (% of GDP)	1.7% (2000-07) ²	3% (2000-07) ²
Overall working-class structural power	-	+

With regard to job security, Tunisia has larger shares of workers under formal open-ended contracts and enjoying social security.

Despite the Moroccan regime's recent efforts to promote economic growth and social indicators – which resulted in some improvements and much international praise – the fact remains that Morocco is still the poorest country in North Africa and the lowest-ranking on human development. In 2010, Tunisia's GNI per capita was 172.5% that of Morocco. At the same time, Tunisia had lower Gini and Human Inequality Coefficients, which means that Tunisian workers (in the author's broad definition) were less deprived than Moroccan ones. These different performances on human development are not only due to Tunisia's historically higher economic growth but also to its larger welfare spending. Despite the slowdown in welfare expansion, in the neoliberal period Tunisia was the highest social spender in the region (El-Said and Harrigan, 2014: 113).

⁹ World DataBank

¹⁰ IMF Government Finance Statistics

This is another confirmation of the old social sciences discovery that revolt is not explained by absolute deprivation. What seems most significant in Tunisia is the widespread perception of the neoliberal erosion of the former populist social pact. In Morocco, strictly speaking, there never was a populist social pact,³ which probably lowered the expectations of many Moroccans. Myriam Catusse observes that: ‘Contrary to Tunisia or Algeria, the Moroccan welfare state has never lived its golden age. ... Therefore, the problem of “disengagement”, or of the privatisation of social protections, did not represent a radical break’⁴ (Catusse, 2010: 189).

Table 3 – Working-class associational power

	Morocco	Tunisia
Trade union density in waged employment	6% (2015) ¹¹	23% (2010) ¹²
Trade union density in total employment	3.2% (2015) ¹¹	15.8% (2010) ¹²
Collective bargaining coverage	5-10% (2015) ⁵	90% (2015 and before) ⁵
Civil liberties rating (1 best, 7 worst)	4 (2010) ¹³	5 (2010) ¹³
Political rights rating (1 best, 7 worst)	5 (2010) ¹³	7 (2010) ¹³
Internal democracy	Low	Medium
Overall working-class associational power	–	+

Morocco, before the 2011 Uprisings, featured a higher degree of civil and political rights than Tunisia. However, despite these freedoms, Moroccan unions remained very weak, as the other indicators of associational power show. In Tunisia, the tension between relatively high working-class power and very low civil and political rights probably contributes to explaining the sudden and insurrectional trajectory of the country’s democratisation.

In Morocco, the relatively large scope of action for opposition parties allowed for the

¹¹ HCP 2016

¹² Calculated by the author based on UGTT and INS 2011

¹³ Freedom House

existence of party-mediation between most trade unions and the state. At the same time, the Moroccan state's mode of union incorporation through social dialogue touched a broader range of policies than Tunisia's narrow incorporation via triennial national-sectorial wage bargaining. Moreover, Moroccans enjoyed the right to form new unions, while in Tunisia attempts to create alternative confederations were repressed (except in times of crisis between the UGTT and the Destourian Party). But, so far, party-mediation, social dialogue and competitive unionism have not enabled the Moroccan unions to attain significant power and were more often vectors of partial co-optation and weakening, as the CDT's history shows.

By the 2000s, there were about 20 labour confederations in Morocco. The creation of new trade unions was encouraged by the fact that a share of parliamentary seats in the higher chamber is reserved for labour representatives based on the results of professional elections. Each political party thus attempts to create its own union-wing to maximise its parliamentary seats. Four confederations gained the 'most representative' status in the 2009 professional elections: the UMT, the CDT, the FDT and the UGTM (in decreasing order). However, 65% of the elected private sector workplace representatives had no union affiliation. Low union density means that even the largest confederations directly represent an extremely limited fraction of the working class. In this context, the proliferation of trade unions – with little difference between them except for their party allegiance – is hardly a blessing for Moroccan workers because each confederation wields meagre power and coordination becomes costlier.

Union density in Tunisia was probably almost four times as high as in Morocco in 2010 and has increased after the Uprising. In 2010, an ILO report estimated union density in the Tunisian private sector at 27% (ILO, 2010). This is an exaggeration, and the 10–15% estimated by the European Commission (2015) seems more accurate. But the latter figure is still higher than Morocco's overall union density of 6%, which includes the more unionised public sector. Moroccan unions lament widespread, systematic and severe anti-union behaviours in the private sector, despite the Labour Code.

In Tunisia, since the 1970s, national and national-sectorial collective bargaining also

applies to non-unionised workers, which results in a collective bargaining coverage of about 90%. In 2010, Morocco only had one national-sectorial collective agreement (for bank employees), one multi-employer local agreement (for truck drivers working with the Casablanca Port) and 10 firm-level collective agreements (Agueniou, 2010).

Until the Uprisings, union democracy in Tunisia was marred by the regime's attempts to impose a pliant leadership. But the struggles of the 1970s made unilateral state control over the UGTT untenable. This resulted in a compromise in which the union leadership had to be acceptable both to the regime and most of the union base. Up to the 2000s, the regime kept intervening effectively and in manifold ways in internal union life (Feltrin, forthcoming). However, basic internal regulations – like the periodic election of the union leaders through congresses – were respected.

In Morocco, the unions' internal democracy was only indirectly constrained by the regime through (decreasing) limits on the space for political opposition and (enduring) tolerance for union repression in the private sector. Because of low union density, legitimation and funding for the unions come more from the state than from their members. It is estimated that only 10–15% of the Moroccan unions' budget comes from membership fees (Trari, 2017).⁵ This imbalance allowed for severe disregard for internal regulations. Between 1995 and 2010, the UMT held no national congress at all. In the 2000s, the SGs of the three historical confederations had been in charge for decades. Mahjoub Benseddik remained UMT SG from the union's foundation in 1955 until his death in 2010 (55 years). Abderrazak Afilal led the UGTM from 1962 to 2006. Noubir Amaoui, elected SG at the CDT First Congress in 1978, still heads the union today.

The analysis of these multiple indicators thus shows that overall working-class power, in both its structural and associational dimensions, was higher in Tunisia than in Morocco on the eve of the 2011 Arab Uprisings.

Using class power: The trade unions in the 2011 Arab Uprisings and their aftermath

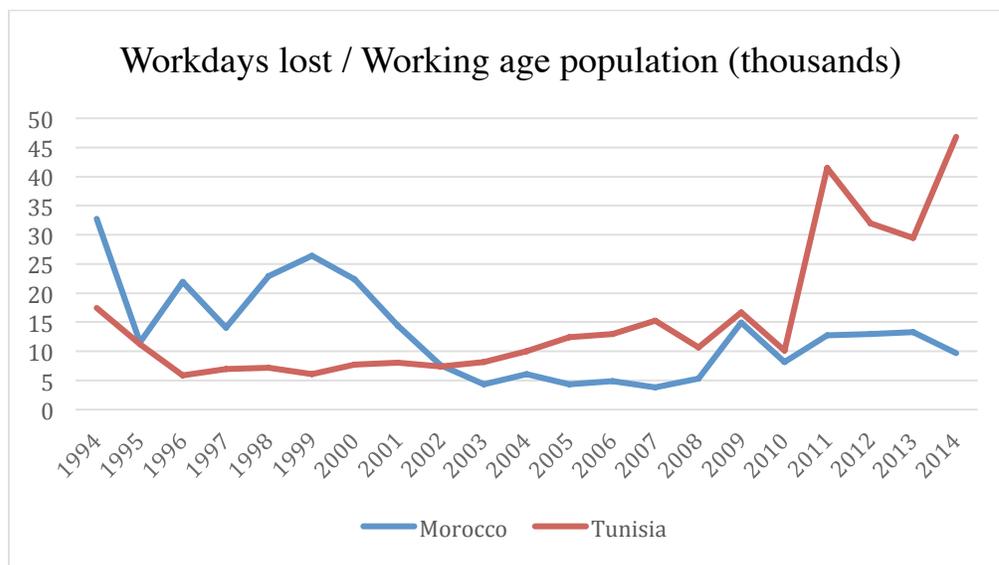
Morocco: Trade union fragmentation and regime resilience

This section provides a narrative of the 2011 mobilisations in Morocco. It will be shown that the Moroccan trade union leaderships faced relatively weaker pressures from below compared to Tunisia and that they had less power vis-a-vis the regime. Most of them, therefore, eventually supported the non-democratic constitutional reform led by the Palace and none took radical action (e.g. general strikes) against the regime. This is different from Tunisia, where, despite the compromising attitude of the top union leadership, the UGTT was pressured by the revolts of the precarious workers and by its own internal dissidents to call for the regional general strikes that were essential in the downfall of the regime.

In the late 2000s, various social mobilisations emerged in Morocco, particularly over employment, the cost of living and access to resources (Bogaert, 2015). The most remarkable were the Bouarfa movement against rising water prices and the Sidi Ifni movement for employment. Local union activists participated in both cases.

Graph 1 – Strike activity in Morocco and Tunisia 1994-2014

The comparative value of this graph is limited by the fact the Moroccan Ministry of Employment does not record strikes in the public administration.



Sources: ILO, Ministry of Employment Morocco, Ministry of Social Affairs Tunisia

In 2009, workdays lost because of strikes – which had remained low throughout the 2000s – saw a sudden spike (see Figure 1), and strike activity remained relatively high in 2010. The government, however, cancelled the autumn social dialogue negotiations, because the economic crisis discouraged concessions. On 3 March and 3 November 2010, the unions held national general strikes in the public sector demanding higher wages, which the government refused. In January and February 2011, strikes were declared by several groups of workers like miners, social security employees, dockers, tax collectors and teachers. Ministry of Justice employees had been holding weekly strikes for months.

When the Tunisian Uprising erupted, Morocco was thus already in the midst of a wave of social mobilisations within and beyond the workplace. In 2011, strikes surged and several movements of precarious workers were mounted. The latter included out-sourced workers reclaiming direct hiring, informal street vendors requesting space for their business, or unemployed graduates demanding public sector jobs (Emperador, 2011). The M20Fev was only the most visible strand of this broader unrest. It was initially a coalition of leftist groups and independent activists, but they were soon joined by the Islamist organisation *Al-Adl Wa Al-Ihssane*. On 20 February 2011, the M20Fev staged its first national demonstration. Since then, it held periodic protests demanding democracy and social justice (see Bennani-Chraïbi and Jekhllaly, 2012; Desrues, 2013).

The three largest confederations (UMT, CDT, FDT) initially endorsed the M20Fev. The UMT and the CDT were also part of the M20Fev National Support Committee. The fourth confederation, the Istiqlal-linked UGTM, refused its support since the beginning, because it had no interest in backing a movement that was embarrassing a government led by its party of affiliation.

The regime attempted to defuse popular unrest with the mix of opening and repression that it had experimented with since the 1990s. A crucial element in this strategy was the separation between the ‘political’ M20Fev and the ‘apolitical’ protests for immediate socioeconomic needs. On 14 February 2011, the Istiqlali PM Abbas El-Fassi met the opposition parties and announced a series of socioeconomic concessions: the doubling of the budget for consumption subsidies, the hiring of unemployed graduates in the public

administration, and the reopening of social dialogue with the unions. On the same day, the Ministry of Justice employees were offered an agreement that promised to fulfil their demands. On 27 February 2011, the royal counsellor Mohamed Mouatassim received the SGs of the country's five largest unions: the UMT, the CDT, the FDT, the UGTM and the UNTM.⁶ The exact content of the meeting is unknown, but Mouatassim announced Mohammed VI's willingness to satisfy the demands of the unions.

The new social dialogue started on 4 April 2011 with the participation of the UMT, the FDT, the UGTM, the UNTM and the main employers' organisation. The CDT initially boycotted the negotiations, but it eventually joined after the first bargaining rounds. The negotiations ended on 26 April 2011 with a list of generous concessions. The most important were: all public administration wages were raised by 600 dirhams (US\$77.6 at the time) per month; the share of public employees to be promoted went from 28% to 33%; the minimum old-age pension increased from 600 dirhams to 1000 dirhams (US\$129.4 at the time); and the national minimum wage increased by 15%. The unions had thus far been unable to win these concessions by their own strength, but regional instability and mounting social unrest pushed the regime to accommodate them.

On 9 March 2011, Mohammed VI announced a constitutional reform that partially addressed the demands of the M20Fev. But the latter refused these proposals since it maintained that the new constitution had to be drafted by a democratically elected constitutional assembly and not by a committee appointed by the king. The USFP, however, agreed to engage in this political process, which distanced its associated union FDT from the M20Fev.

The UMT left attempted to rally the whole confederation in support of the M20Fev. It did so most effectively in Rabat, where its control of the regional executive committee allowed it to make the union premises available to the M20Fev for assemblies, events and related activities. The Rabat UMT also created the network 'Trade Unionists for the M20Fev', attempting to link labour unrest with the movement for democracy. The network had, however, a relatively limited impact. The UMT NEC half-heartedly accepted these initiatives, but the rupture came in the run up to the referendum for the

approval of the new constitution, to be held on 1 July 2011. The M20Fev called for a boycott of the referendum, as the proposed text, despite its concessions, left crucial powers to the Palace. The UMT left demanded that the confederation keep neutral on the referendum but, on 21 June 2011, the NEC publicly endorsed a Yes vote.

The CDT thus remained the only union siding with the M20Fev and boycotting the constitutional referendum. However, the CDT did not promote this position through radical action like regional or national general strikes. Most M20Fev militants interviewed for this research charged that the CDT's support became timid because the confederation 'sold out' by participating in the social dialogue and accepting material concessions with the implicit condition of abandoning radical political opposition. Whatever the plausibility of these claims, the crucial fact is that the CDT alone did not have the power to call a successful general strike. In fact, the country's second union had a self-declared membership of 61,500 (0.6% of the employed), hardly enough to change the political equilibrium.

An interviewed M20Fev activist made the following comment:

I don't think the unions represent the workers here [in Morocco]. If we analyse things historically, the unions have had an important role in the past But with time, their role has diminished gradually, and trade union density is lower than ever, 3% by now [3.2% of total employment]. ... So, if they can't give concrete answers to the problems of the workers, how are they going to play a role in the movement or influence the general public opinion?⁷ (Fez, 17 March 2016)

The new constitution passed with 98.5% approval, which set the stage for early elections on 25 November 2011. The Islamist PJD won a majority and was thus allowed to form a government. After the elections, the M20Fev began to gradually lose steam. As the mobilisations waned, the UMT NEC decided to regain control of the Rabat union buildings from the left. On 5 March 2012, the UMT Administrative Commission dissolved all the structures of the UMT Rabat, expelled the leftist union leader Abdellah

Lefnatsa and appointed a ‘provisional committee’ to run the regional union. On 22 March 2012, the three leftist NEC members (Abdelhamid Amin, Abderrazak Drissi and Khadija Ghamiri) were expelled in turn. In the following weeks, the UMT NEC attempted to dissolve the executive committees of the national sectorial federations controlled by the left. This is how an UMT militant interpreted these moves:

The regime had started to see the importance of the left within the labour movement, the unions. ... Especially for what concerns the important role played by the UGTT in Tunisia. This has pressured the Moroccan state to take hard and sharp decisions regarding the UMT left. (Rabat, 14 March 2016)

It took years for a new compromise to be found between the UMT left and its leadership, but the overall result was a renewed weakening of internal democracy within the country’s largest union. This somewhat reflected the situation of the country, as the regime moved to limit several of the concessions delivered in 2011.

Tunisia: Trade union polarisation and democratisation via insurrection

In the 2000s, rising strikes accompanied increasing signs of tension in Tunisia as well as within the UGTT. The mounting social opposition against Ben Ali’s regime emboldened the UGTT left to demand further internal democratisation, while SG Jerad and his associates attempted to maintain the compromise between the confederation and the authorities. At the 2006 Congress, after a major controversy, oppositional unionists managed to halt the NEC’s attempts to abrogate the two-term limit on presence in the NEC, mandated by Article 10 of the internal regulation. In the following years, Jerad and his Secretary of Discipline Ali Romdhane rolled back the trade union secondment and froze the membership of several dissident cadres.

In this tense context, the Gafsa Revolt broke out on 5 January 2008 (Allal, 2010). The

mobilisation started as an informal protest by the precarious youth for secure employment and local development, with striking similarities to Morocco's Sidi Ifni movement (Allal and Bennafla, 2011). In the village of Redeyef, public administration UGTT militants led by Adnen Hajji set up a negotiating committee to support the precarious youth's demands. They were thus able to turn the protest into a protracted social movement. The opposition between the politicised UGTT militants and the Gafsa UGTT regional executive committee was at the fore, and, on 19 February 2008, the latter froze Hajji's UGTT membership.

The 'witch-hunt' within the UGTT and the events of Gafsa prompted the dissident trade unionists to step up their efforts for internal democracy. This resulted in the establishment of an internal UGTT current called *Rencontre Syndical Démocratique Militant* (RSDM), aiming to coordinate all the progressive dissident tendencies within the confederation. Two leaders of the RSDM explained to the author:

[The RSDM] was a leftist group that wanted to make internal democracy in the UGTT. As we always say that the UGTT is the engine of the country, we wanted to limit the mandates of the UGTT's leader in order to do the same with the country as a whole.⁸ (Tunis, 10 December 2015)

For the first time the internal opposition jointly organised and acted as such. Because the opposition had always been there, but before each group tended to act alone. (Tunis, 2 November 2015)

SG Jerad and the RSDM were thus squaring off in view of the next Congress, when the unforeseen happened. The Tunisian Uprising started on 17 December 2010 in the marginalised region of Sidi Bouzid, with the self-immolation of the street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi and the ensuing clashes between the police and mostly precarious youths demanding employment and local development (see Hmed, 2012). It was the RSDM spokesperson in Sidi Bouzid, Atia Athmouni, along with other public

administration unionists, that coordinated with the protesters to launch a local committee to support the mobilisations. As Hèla Yousfi pointed out, the politicised UGTT militants contributed to the Uprising in three main ways: the politicisation of the ‘spontaneous’ movement, the coordination with the other organised actors, and the mediation with the political and trade union authorities (Yousfi, 2015: 65). Another crucial task was using the UGTT’s infrastructure to spread the movement geographically and reduce police pressure on the mobilised cities. A primary school teacher from Gafsa brought his own example:

I had been in touch with the comrades in Tunis, Sfax, Kasserine. Yeah, on the phone. ... [An UGTT militant from Kasserine] got mad at me and said: ‘Do something in Gafsa or don’t ever call me again!’ So on 11 January we decided to march from the UGTT premises that were already encircled by the police, we were just about 20 people. ... On the way back, we [and the police surrounding us] bumped into the kids coming out from school, and the whole thing kicked off and continued for days. (Gafsa, 22 October 2015)

The RSDM called for a solidarity demonstration in front of the UGTT headquarters in Tunis on 25 December 2010. It was the first relatively large protest in the capital and was stormed by the police. Five UGTT sectorial federations then called for a new demonstration for 27 December 2010, which was also repressed. The slogans of the two demonstrations were explicitly against the regime, one of the reasons why SG Jerad publicly disavowed them. The UGTT NEC had in fact proved willing to mediate for the liberation of the arrested protesters, but, at the same time, it attempted to contain the forms of unrest that posed a serious threat to stability by resorting to (unarmed) violence or by using political slogans.

On 8 January 2011, the police fired live bullets on unarmed protesters. The killings created widespread public outrage and disorder, which gave the opportunity to the UGTT militants to step up their pressure on the union’s mid-level and peak structures. On 11 January 2011, the UGTT National Administrative Commission authorised regional

general strikes to support the demands of the protesters. The general strike in the industrialised region of Sfax came on 12 January 2011. The demonstration gathered tens of thousands of protesters, and it is recognised as the turning point of the Uprising because it was the first massive mobilisation outside of the marginalised regions. On 13 January 2011, there was the general strike in the Sidi Bouzid region. On 14 January 2011, the general strike of Greater Tunis took place. It was meant to be a mere two-hour stoppage, but it turned into a large demonstration with clashes in the vicinity of the Interior Ministry. In the late afternoon of the same day, while the demonstration was ongoing, Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia.

The UGTT, as the largest civil society organisation in the country, was central in the negotiations over the new political system. In the months following Ben Ali's departure, protests continued throughout the country while a massive strike wave began. On 11 February 2011, the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution (NCPR) was created, with the participation of the UGTT, to give a more formal representation of the revolutionary movement vis-a-vis the government. In March, the NCPR agreed to dissolve in favour of the Higher Committee for the Realisation of the Objectives of the Revolution, which substituted the disbanded parliament.

This negotiated process led to the country's first free and fair election, won by the Islamist party *Ennahda* on 23 October 2011. Soon, hostilities broke out between *Ennahda* and the UGTT. In fact, many UGTT members, under the new leadership of SG Houcine Abbassi, perceived the whole organisation as being under the threat of a conservative and anti-union government. *Ennahda*, for its part, accused the UGTT of encouraging strikes for 'political reasons', that is to overthrow the government. While the strikes were genuine attempts by the workers to seize the occasion to improve their livelihoods, the UGTT certainly used them to increase its bargaining power in the political negotiations.

In February 2012, the UGTT headquarters were attacked by pro-government demonstrators. The subsequent assassinations by Islamist terrorists of the leftist political leaders Chokri Belaïd and Mohamed Brahmi precipitated a political crisis. In this context, the UGTT emerged as the leading actor of the 'Quartet' (including also the main

employers' association, the Tunisian League of Human Rights and the Bar Association) that brokered the National Dialogue between the government and the opposition. As a result, in January 2014, a new constitution was approved, the *Ennahda*-led executive resigned in favour of a 'technocratic' government, and the date for the new elections was set. After the elections, a government led by *Nidaa Tounes* (mostly a continuation of the old Destourian Party) and including *Ennahda* was sworn in. This 'grand coalition' appears to have stabilised, at least temporarily, the democratic transition.

The Tunisian Uprising confronts us with the paradox of the importance of trade unionism in concomitance with the relatively marginal role of industrial workers. The real protagonist of the Uprising was the precarious youth. As we have seen, Tunisian workers, even the unwaged ones, have more structural resources than their Moroccan counterparts (e.g. education), which contributes to explaining more sustained mobilisations. In the marginalised regions where the Uprising started, industrial employment is almost irrelevant. It is the public administration unions that gave the UGTT a capillary network in all the areas of the country. However, one should not discount the role of factory workers in Tunisia's industrial centres. With the regional strikes in industrialised Sfax and Greater Tunis, the industrial estates mostly stood still and empty, causing great economic damage, while demonstrators asking for the departure of Ben Ali flooded the city centres. The union militants were thus able to use the UGTT's associational power to create a juncture between precarious and relatively secure workers, despite the NEC's compromising line.

Conclusion

This article has shown how different levels of working-class power were historically constructed through divergent trajectories of social struggles in Morocco and Tunisia. It has argued that, on the eve of the 2011 Arab Uprisings, working-class power was higher in Tunisia than in Morocco and that this facilitated a more significant role of Tunisia's trade unions in democratic struggles.

Overall working-class power in Tunisia was higher in both its structural and associational dimensions. Higher levels of ‘human development’ and welfare provisions (e.g. education) constituted more resources for the mobilisation of non-unionised precarious workers in the marginalised regions. The larger size of industry, of the public sector and of the share of workers enjoying relative job security allowed the secure workers to mobilise effectively in solidarity with the precarious. In order for this to actually happen, the initiative of activists on the ground was crucial in building pressure on the UGTT top leadership, so that the union’s associational power could be used to bring into existence solidarity between different working-class factions.

Conversely, in Morocco, relatively low structural working-class power endowed the Moroccan precarious workers with fewer resources to mobilise, while the secure workers constituted a more limited share of the population. The lower radicality of the protests meant that the Moroccan trade unions faced weaker pressures towards radical action, which contributed to the compromising line held by the majority of their leaders in spite of the efforts towards the opposite direction by many activists. Moreover, the associational weakness of the unions facilitated the regime strategy of fragmenting and depoliticising social protest along sectorial demands that could be managed within the system in place.

These findings are in line with the claims of authors identifying Tunisia as the Arab country featuring the highest level of working-class power and reinforce the broader theory according to which working-class power usually facilitates democracy. However, they do not exclude future democratisation in Morocco. In fact, working-class power in Morocco appears to be higher than in most other Arab countries and could increase significantly relative to its levels of 2011. Additionally, working-class power is only one among several factors that can facilitate democratisation.

These conclusions do not idealise Tunisia as a workers’ paradise; very far from it. Tunisian workers’ power is high *relative* to the standards of a staunchly labour-repressive region. Moreover, since democratisation, Tunisian workers have faced rising unemployment, stagnating real wages and declining standards of living. The UGTT’s

political incorporation in the new order has failed to deliver on social justice, putting the union in a difficult position especially vis-a-vis the precarious factions of the working class, whose mobilisations have continued, including the latest wave of unrest in January 2018. The inability of the Tunisian democracy to address the grievances of most citizens poses a serious legitimacy problem for democracy in the region as a whole. The social struggles of the future will tell whether these dilemmas will be resolved through more democracy or a full-scale return of authoritarianism.

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Notes

1. See also Feltrin (2018) and Meddeb (2011) for an analysis of Tunisian precarious workers.
2. The USFP originated, through the *Union Nationale des Forces Populaires* (UNFP), from the left of the Istiqlal Party.
3. Nazih Ayubi’s classic approach sees Middle Eastern populism as a ‘coalition between the urban popular classes and a predominantly middle-class leadership that is intent on changing the status quo’ (Ayubi, 1995: 206).

4. Translated from French by the author.
5. Based on Ben Romdhane (2011), 57% of the UGTT's budget in 2005 came from membership fees; 51% represented dues from public sector employees (who are charged more than private sector workers), collected by the state through a direct check-off system. The state could and did suspend this system in times of crisis. But most militant trade unionists were to be found in the public sector, and they did use their membership to pressure the UGTT NEC.
6. The *Union Nationale du Travail au Maroc* (UNTM) is the labour confederation linked to the Islamist *Parti de la Justice et du Développement* (PJD).
7. The interviews were conducted in French. All the quoted excerpts were translated into English by the author.
8. According to the Tunisian Constitution of the time, presidential candidates could not be older than 75. As Ben Ali had turned 74 in 2010, he was trying to amend it in order to run for a new mandate.

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