

The national role of the Tunisian General Labour Union

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The Tunisian trade union movement occupies a position of leadership in the recent history of Tunisia. Perhaps we are not exaggerating by considering it to be unique within the Arab and African world. It is closely tied with both the national and socialist struggles and sought to organise union activity independently of foreign organisations. The unions linked their struggles to the issue of national liberation from the yoke of colonialism, considering this to be the path towards social progress for workers.

This early realisation of the close connection between the two issues: national liberation and social emancipation, is what distinguished the union experiment and made it unique to Tunisia. The colonial authorities took action against all forms of union activity since the 1920's. They banned the "General Confederation of Tunisian Workers", the first Tunisian union organisation that was independent of the foreign organisations and which was founded on 31 October 1924. Most of its leaders were arrested, at the head of them was the union leader Mohamed Ali El Hammi, on 5 February 1925. Despite the failure of their attempt, it facilitated the identification of the main principles of union activity in Tunisia. It is still considered the first of the most important attempts in forming the link between the nationalist and socialist causes. Moreover, it was the first step towards a unionist experiment to converge the socialist and political agenda. This may explain the intensity of the reaction from the colonial French power towards all union resistance. An attempt to revive the General Confederation of Tunisian Workers was also suppressed and action taken particularly against its General Secretary, Balkasim Al-Kenawy during the year 1936.

The course of founding these organisations did not stop with the two aforementioned failures. The union leader Farahat Hashad emerged from the ranks of union activists, who drew on his wide ranging knowledge of the international history of union movements, particularly French movements, and his familiarity with both the attempts of the General Confederation of Tunisian Workers, in progressing from these attempts to the formation of a new union organisation, the "Tunisian General Labour Union" in the year 1946. Among the most prominent mottos of this union was "Independence". Despite the fact that the most important demands made in the by-laws of the meeting had a hint of socialism, its main concerns were economic measures. The demands were originally centred on improving the social situation for workers (an increase in wages, a retirement system, family allowances, paid holidays, etc.) However, Hashad added economic demands, such as, the nationalisation of major institutions and the acknowledgement of the right to work for all. Perhaps the most prominent result from this experience was laying down the foundation of the strategic decision to couple the social and political struggles, as he stated towards the end of 1949: "Does unionist action have any meaning without the political assurance of the freedoms that every man aspires to? Can social and economic achievements be realised by a people that do not enjoy the benefits of democracy? How can a union movement develop in a country where there are no guarantees of individual and natural freedoms?" Despite his awareness of the difficulty of securing social gains for workers in a colonised country, faced with military force, he added: "The struggle for economic freedom is only an aspect of the fight for social freedom."

The "Red Hand" subsequently assassinated the national and union leader, Farahat Hashad, precisely because he had brought about a closer connection between the issues of national independence and socialism. He had also emphasised the importance of the role of workers' organisations in leading the defence of freedoms and independence. This was stated clearly during the fourth congress held in March 1951, which announced that 'the national duty is the workers' first duty'. The organisation also supported all industrial action, which was political in nature, such as the

strikes of 19 January 1952, which were organised in coordination with the New Constitutional Party and its leaders. The leaders of the party were subsequently arrested by the colonial authority.

This unionist attempt created a solid foundation for a unique Tunisian model and delineated the features of the struggle for a generation of union activists who strove to adhere to the principles laid down by the founders of the movement. Therefore, it is not strange that the Tunisian General Labour Union should contribute to the building of the modern state, following independence and during the period in which Bourguiba governed. Nor, that it should be active in both the social and rights struggles during the era of Ben Ali, or that it should embrace the Tunisian revolution for freedom and dignity that took place on 17 December 2010/14 January 2011.

The voices that today call to exclude the Union from the political process, are unaware of the character of this organisation or the leading role it played during major political events and deep crises, which threatened to rock the country, in the aftermath of both colonialism and the revolution. The French authorities had previously played the same role and the response to them was 'politics exists no matter where we are, even if we try to ignore it, it will not ignore us.' The Tunisian worker, during his struggle for social emancipation constantly comes up against political obstacles which he must overcome, 'and he will not be able to do so if he does not face them directly.'

Our loyalty to the pioneers of the Union movement and our constant modernisation of their attempts, have provided us with a great deal of awareness with regards to our rights and duties: our duties towards ourselves, our compatriots, our union, our union activity and towards the nation. It has also provided us with an education founded on the concept of the greater good of the nation, a dedication to the love of it, and the appreciation of individual and societal freedoms as the principle basis for social progress. No worker can consider himself free if he did not gain his freedom as a citizen, and he cannot possess a sense of solidarity with his peoples' fight for national independence and social emancipation from exploitation and corruption; and the establishment of the foundations of citizenship and democracy.

Our interest in political economics, diplomacy, security, or regionalism stems from our conviction that none of these policies are of value, if they are not aimed at realising social justice and utilised to effectuate the happiness, well-being and peace of mind of all citizens, without distinction.

The Tunisian General Labour Union has no ambition to assume power and is not interested in political posts. It is concerned with economic and social policies that will improve the living standards of Tunisians, secure their dignity and guarantee their political freedoms. The Union has proven this and demonstrated its commitment to nationalism during its role in sustaining the course of the revolution since 17 December 2010 to the present. It utilised its organisational power and the will of its activists to ensure the success of this course, in the face of a weak political power and its organisational fragmentation, caused by tyranny and repression—a repression which threw people into prisons and displaced others. The Union also strongly contributed to any political reform and democratic transition witnessed in Tunisia. It was able, as a result of its credentials in activism and a legacy of credibility among all political parties, to find the terms of consensus building at each stage of the extended transitional process; both prior to the elections of 23 October 2011, as well as in their aftermath.

Anyone who has followed the Union's activism in the political arena realises the extent of its commitment to the issues of the populace and its level of ambition in the fight for freedom and dignity. It did not stand in passive neutrality towards the peoples' movements prior to the revolution, but since its outbreak, the union has stood beside those revolutionary Tunisian youths, the residents of the deprived inner city areas and other marginalised peoples. It supported the movements, its activists joined the protesters, and it opened its headquarters to those fleeing police brutality and

sniper bullets. This catalyzed the launch of the course of the protests and the historic strikes that destroyed the pillars of the regime.

In the face of a political void, the Union continued its struggle to rescue the country politically, and prevent the fall of the state and its institutions; it worked to prevent the country from sinking into chaos and civil war. It was involved in the sit-in protests at Al-Kasbah 1 and 2, where it brought all its weight down to the benefit of the forces of the revolution in the Assembly for the Protection of the Revolution, and in favour of democratic political reform under the slogan "There must be a Constituent Assembly". This led to the formation of an independent and neutral interim government, under the leadership of Beji Caid Essebsi, as well as the formation of the High Authority for the Protection of the Aims of the Revolution, Political Reform and Democratic Transition. These were able to manage the interests of the country with consensus until the elections on 23 October 2011, which resulted in the "Al-Nahda Movement" securing a majority of its members in the Assembly. This victory enabled the movement to govern in conjunction with the "Congress for the Republic" and the "Ettakatol Party". This tripartite cooperation became known as the "Troika".

However, the rule of the Troika did not adhere to the agreed time limitation placed on its existence prior to elections being held, namely one year. In that time the new constitution should have been framed and the state should have passed quickly from the transitional phase, to the phase of permanent institutions and political stability, after free elections had been held. This delay led to an agitation of the political situation and fuelled partisan conflicts, which threatened the outbreak of chaos as the legitimate mandated period of the National Constituent Assembly drew close to its end on 23 October 2012. To avoid the threat of the country falling into civil war and chaos, the Union was, as usual, the first to pre-empt a non-mandated action by presenting an initiative to extricate the country from the political crisis. It received a positive response from some of the largest and most influential national organisations, most notably, the Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts, the National Order of Lawyers and the Tunisian League for Human Rights. They launched the "National Dialogue", which held its first meeting on the basis of the Union initiative on 16 October 2012. The General Secretary of the Tunisian General Labour Union, Hussein Abbassi, announced that the initiative involved saving the country by the means of a discussion between everyone. He emphasised that the initiative was not against any group, or intended as a replacement for government or legitimacy, but was to realise national reform and secure consensus for the higher good of the country. He pointed out that 'based on our belief in the necessity of working together to realise the goals of the revolution and the fulfilment of its claims, we must all contribute to the remedy of the economic, social and security situation, in difficult and challenging circumstances. We call on all political parties, the government, associations, and organisations for the need to hold a national and collective meeting, in which real conversations take place to reach major consensus, which will ensure the management of the transitional phase. This discussion must avoid conflict and be based on the following principles; the adherence to the ideals of the civil state, the Democratic Republican system and the cultural capital which the Tunisian people have accumulated over the years. It shall also respect human rights, the guarantee of public and individual freedoms, as well as the principles of citizenship and justice, in order to break with the system and practice of tyranny. It shall renounce all forms of violence, respect differing opinions and accept others. It shall confront the phenomenon of terrorism and all calls inciting violence.' This initiative represented a political solution and restored hope that the aims of the revolution would be realised. Moreover, it restored confidence amongst all groups of Tunisian society aspiring to freedom and to live with dignity, in a civil republic, governed by freedom, democracy and social justice.

This initiative received a major response from different political groups, except for two parties from the Troika, namely Al-Nahda and the Congress for the Republic, on the pretext that the Nidaa Tounes (Call for Tunisia) Party was taking part. The third member of the Troika, the Ettakatol Party agreed to be involved in the discussion, also due to the fact that Nidaa Tounes Part was taking

part. These pretexts were given despite the fact that the Tunisian General Labour Union insisted that all political parties be involved, without exception, as the success of extricating Tunisia from this crisis depended on a consensus being reached between all of these parties. With the conclusion of the final statement of the discussion, held in October 2012, came renewed action by the Electoral Commission, the ratification of the Electoral Law and the conclusion of the drafting of the new constitution. It also led to renewed energy in reaching consensus over major issues facing the country, such as, the issues of those killed and injured during the revolution, employment and regional development; and to set priorities in relation to these issues; as well as the joint consideration of how roles should be divided in order to restore confidence and ensure cohesion between the different social groups and strata, within a new social contract.

The Tunisian General Labour Union strove to calm the charged atmosphere experienced by the country since 23 October 2012, by working with different groups. It also strove to ensure political stability in order to protect the country from volatility and the setbacks that would bring it back to square one. However, the forces of evil and the hand of terrorism stretched out to assassinate a unique political leader and one of the most prominent faces of the political opposition and of human rights in Tunisia on 6 February 2013. In the face of such a calamity and heinous crime, which shook all Tunisians, the Tunisian General Labour Union called for a general strike to be held the day after the assassination. This event was the beginning of the end for the government of the Troika and the expression of its scandalous political shortcomings in managing the transitional phase. Subsequently, and with the passing of only a few days, the Prime Minister and Secretary General of the Al-Nahda Party, announced his resignation on 19 February 2013, after failing to form a coalition government. The country entered another phase of perpetual fear of an unknown future.

The attempt to rescue the political situation led to movement on the part of both the institutions of the President of the Republic and the government under the leadership of Ali Laarayedh. They attempted to achieve this through the mechanism of the National Dialogue, which was boycotted by a large number of opposing parties, as well as the Tunisian General Labour Union and national organisations that held to the Union initiative, which they considered to be the most credible and neutral. Indeed, the dialogue of the Prime Minister failed and the ruling parties were left with no option, but to return to the camp of the Tunisian General Labour Union. Discussions resumed during the second round of sessions held on 16 May 2013. In attendance were the Al-Nahda Movement, the Congress for the Republic Party and the three heads of state.

After exhaustive discussions, during which the Tunisian General Labour Union attempted to surmount the obstacles between the political parties, a final statement was reached and agreed upon by all of the participants. One of the most noteworthy stipulations related to the constitution, which it was agreed, should adopt a democratic political system, should guarantee the civil state, as well the respect of human rights, freedoms and the exercise of them. This should include the freedom of belief and the right to join a trade union. The participants also confirmed that there would be more attention given to the general state of the country, as they considered the success of the transitional phase to be dependent on addressing the economic, social and difficult environmental issues facing the country. They also considered of central importance to the success of this phase, taking urgent measures to address the decline of purchasing power in the country; to combat smuggling, monopolies and parallel-trade; and to expedite the implementation of regional development projects, particularly in deprived areas. Participants also encouraged serious action to be taken to enact the social contract and to maintain a general climate that will ensure these measures are realised.

They were also careful to stipulate that the administration, mosques and all state institutions, particularly educational institutions, should remain neutral and avoid partisan recruitment. They further called for the launch of an urgent investigation into what they called the

ties of the Protection of the Revolution, asking that legal measures be taken against its illegal branches. They also affirmed the need to investigate the assassination of Chokri Belaid. They considered this assassination to be a strike at the security and stability of the country, as well as at the course of democratic transition. The participants called for the authorities to urgently discover the group behind the murder and the individual offenders who are guilty of planning and carrying out the assassination.

Two months after this sizeable progress and the success of the Tunisian General Labour Union in bringing the political parties together around the negotiating table, the issue of political assassinations resurfaced. On this occasion it was Thursday 20 July 2013, the date Tunisians celebrate the formation of the Republic, when the country woke to the news that the Representative in the National Constituent Assembly and the Secretary-General of the People's Movement, Mohamed El-Brahmi had been assassinated. This caused the Union and all other organisations involved in the discussions to suspend them in order to return once again to save the country. Five days after the assassination, the Union put forward an initiative to extricate the country from the crisis and to complete the transitional phase. The initiative centred on the dissolution of the government and its replacement by a non-partisan government, with independent national credentials. The National Constituent Assembly would be retained, but its term would be limited to one year in which it must complete its mission. This occurred after the members of the opposition within the Constituent Assembly also suspended their work in the Assembly. The situation represented a fundamental obstacle in the constituent path of the transitional phase.

The Tunisian General Labour Union attempted once again to calm the situation, by utilising the confidence held in it by the members of the opposition. After dozens of sessions and marathon meetings the Union was able to convince the members of the Assembly who had withdrawn to change their position in accordance with the Union's initiative and the road map laid down by it.

The Union continued to hold arduous consultations with different political groups, particularly the Al-Nahda Movement, which had held onto power and rejected the most important principles of the road map, namely the resignation of the government and the formation of a government of national competencies. In the aftermath of further protracted discussions, the Tunisian national dialogue quartet forced the Al-Nahda Party to see sense. It also announced its acceptance of the initiative and its willingness to join the national discussion on the basis of the road map specified for this purpose.

5 October 2013 was a definitive day, which Tunisia spent in a great deal of confusion and anxiety. The occasion was the gathering of all relevant parties at the conference centre in the capital, to sign the road map. However, some parties preferred to exclude themselves from the event, including the Congress for the Republic, the third party in the Troika, which refused to subscribe to the road map.

Despite the success of the National Dialogue Initiative, which won approval at home and abroad, doubt campaigns and accusations were launched at the Union, accusing it of stepping out of its social role, of behaving with bias towards certain groups and of a lack of neutrality. The Union faced these accusations with a frank stance. It affirmed that a workers' organisation takes action in accordance with the requirements of the national interest and no one can prescribe the course it should take. It also confirmed that it had no interest in governing or in political positions, and that it was only interested in overcoming national obstacles and ensuring the security of the country.

The experiences of the organisations overseeing the National Dialogue, particularly the leadership of the Tunisian General Labour Union, were always present to give hope to the possibility of overcoming obstacles. The patience and perseverance demonstrated by the Tunisian General

Labour Union to complete the rescue mission, and its sophistication in managing conflicts without reaching a situation that further provoked the political, economic, social and security crises affecting the country reassured the public. National figures contributed to the success of the Dialogue, at the head of which was the principle union activist, Hussain Al-Abbassi; Wided Bouchamaoui, President of the Employers' Organisation; the Dean of Lawyers, Fadil Mahfouz; and Abdessatar Ben Moussa, the President of the Human Rights Association. These individuals did not leave the National Dialogue tent (the headquarters of the Ministry for Human Rights and Transitional Justice) until they obtained an undertaking to form three workshops to oversee the success of the three channels required for the completion of the transitional phase (the government, the constitutional and electoral channels) from all the participants. In the face of the intransigence of the Prime Minister, Ali Laarayedh, and his refusal to officially resign, citing the need to finalise the wording of the constitution and its ratification, the opposition threatened to withdraw from the National Dialogue and for matters to return to the starting point.

This refusal did not affect the determination of the organisations overseeing the National Dialogue to execute their national duty. These organisations did indeed have the last word, as the Prime Minister, Ali Laarayedh, undertook in writing, before the national dialogue quartet, to resign on 25 October 2013, in accordance with the road map.

On the basis of this undertaking, the Assembly Representatives who had previously withdrawn returned to the National Constituent Assembly to complete the ratification of the new constitution by a majority. This surprised everyone and proved that the will to reach consensus within Tunisia existed. It also gave people a great deal of hope. Moreover, it inspired the Representatives from the opposition to suspend their participation in the Assembly in protest at the amendments made to the Rules of Procedure.

The opposition considered these amendments to be equivalent to a coup within the Assembly, against the mechanisms of its operation and within the ruling coalition. It pointed to the fact that many of the amendments dealt with the absence of Representatives and the powers of the Prime Minister. It also confirmed the fact that these amendments bore no relation to speeding up the framing of the constitution, as stipulated by the National Dialogue road map.

In a statement by the Representatives they argued that in adherence to the constituent and governmental stipulations of the road map, and in accordance with the directions of the organisations overseeing the National Dialogue, the democratic opposition announces the suspension of its participation in the work of the Constituent Assembly. They further stated that they considered the amendments to be a coup against democracy and the logic of consensus applied during the National Dialogue. They further stated that they undertook to have the amendments revoked.

The organisations involved in overseeing the majority discussion within the National Constituent Assembly bear the responsibility for making the situation worse, which drove the Al-Nahda movement to reverse these amendments, despite the conflict that arose as a result of this matter.

After this achievement, the National Dialogue was obstructed by the dilemma of the course of the government. Opinions differed and conflicts arose in relation to choosing a Prime Minister in accordance with the stipulations of the road map. Discussions continued for almost a month without an agreement being reached, which led the General Secretary of the Tunisian General Labour Union, Hussain Al-Abbassi, to announce that the impact of this stalemate would be the failure of the National Dialogue and an end to the mission of national dialogue quartet. Subsequently, it would leave the country subject to any number of possibilities. Mr Al-Abbassi further stated that in

response to a request by a majority of parties for an extension to enable a consensus to be reached, it was decided that the National Dialogue would be extended for a 10 day period up to Saturday 14 December 2013. This was to provide a last chance to the political parties, that they may realise the sensitivity of the circumstance through which the country was passing.

Al-Abbassi pointed to the date of 14 December 2013 as a decisive date in the history of Tunisia, as it is its last hope. The results of this day will define the fate of the country. He clarified that if there was another failure to reach consensus, there would not be a further extension of the National Dialogue. Al-Abbassi further stated that the country would witness a heated social winter, particularly with the reversing of the sovereignty of Tunisia.

14 December 2013 was indeed a decisive day in the course of the National Dialogue. A day in which Tunisians held their breath fearing failure and the national dialogue quartet, specifically the Tunisian General Labour Union, could do nothing but take the lead and let each party bear the responsibility of its actions. This was the statement of the General Secretary of the Union, who had granted the political groups an extension until the 14th December 2013 to reach a consensus on a candidate for Prime Minister or to announce failure. Late on the night of 14 December 2013, the choice of Mehdi Jomaa, previously the Minister of Industry in the Laarayedh government, to be the new Prime Minister of the government was announced.

Despite the fact that the opposition was not united in its support for the appointment of Mehdi Jomaa, it accepted the results of the dialogue in a cultured and civilised way; and respected the wishes of the national dialogue quartet to progress in the completion of the remaining phases of the road map, recognising the sensitivity of the situation the country was in.

The result of this progress was that the National Constituent Assembly had elected the members of the Independent High Authority for the Elections within three weeks. Thus, completing the third course identified in the road map, which was itself a source of legal disagreement with the Administrative Court. However, thanks to the intervention of the parties overseeing the dialogue, it was possible to overcome the legal problems relating to the exclusion of certain candidates from membership to this Authority. Therefore, the election of the High Authority was completed within a framework of consensus and with respect to the law.

In relation to the constituent course pertaining to the ratification of the constitution, the National Dialogue played a major role in overcoming the conflicts that had existed for a long time without consensus being reached. Therefore, 26 January 2014 was another watershed in the history of Tunisia. Hussain Al-Abbassi, the General Secretary of the Union stated: "Consensus on the new constitution is a joyous national event, which coincides with the remembrance of painful national incidents witnessed by Tunisia on 26 January 1978, during the trade unionist uprising."

The Constitution received 200 votes in its favour and was rejected by 12 votes, while 4 votes were retained, amidst a celebratory atmosphere in the National constituent assembly, and in the presence of local and international media. This event represented the crowning glory of the efforts of the national dialogue quartet and was a historic victory for the Tunisian General Labour Union, for all the political parties and all elements of the civilian population. This put an end to the wave of questioning raised by certain parties, which tried to exclude the organisation from the national scene. These parties failed in backing the union into a tight corner. The Union proved its merit in leading the problem solving and demonstrated that the aim of its leaders and activists is to save Tunisia from its political crisis. Moreover, it has shown that it is a national power and shall continue to play its national role despite any and all obstacles. Thus, the Tunisian General Labour Union has proven that it is capable of initiating social balance and is capable of playing a modulating role within

the political scene. Moreover, that it is capable of remaining true to the principles established by the forerunners of the Tunisian trade union movement.