

The Tunisian General Labour Union - Candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize¹

by Lassaad El Asmi

The Tunisian General Labour Union (known by its French acronym UGTT) is perhaps the country's strongest civil society organization. For decades preceding the democratic change in Tunisia, the UGTT played a major role in organizing and maintaining popular resistance to the dictatorship and continues to play a positive role in the democratic transition process started after January 2011.

While trying to maintain distance from political power in Tunisia and even despite tense and sometimes outright antagonistic relations with the various governments before and after the revolution, the UGTT was nevertheless always considered neutral enough and especially popular and powerful enough to resolve crises and settle disputes. During the months following the revolution of January 2011, the union played a central role in federating the various political players and creating a consensus for a peaceful democratic transition. Independent intellectuals as well as key players from a broad political spectrum found in the UGTT the perfect space to work out a consensual plan for the transition period which eventually led to the first popular and democratic elections in the country since its independence, those of 23 October 2011.

The involvement of the UGTT in national affairs is not new. Before independence from France in 1956, the UGTT was instrumental in mobilizing resistance and putting pressure on French and local authorities for independence. Following independence, the UGTT continued to be a key actor as a national organization and social partner in the important process to form the first national government and present the first national economic and social programme.

During the past three decades, the UGTT struggled to promote public and individual freedoms and to preserve as far as possible its independence from the different governments in place, a struggle which resulted in the imprisonment, torture and even assassination of many of its militants. Union members were often the first targets during periods of violent crackdown on partisan activities and freedom.

In the 14th of January revolution, the UGTT has played a very important role in mobilizing people to demonstrate against the Ben Ali regime. In many demonstrations throughout the country pictures of former secretary-general Farhat Hached were paraded reminding Tunisians of the struggle for independence. The UGTT played a decisive role in the strikes, rallies and demonstrations that led to former president Ben Ali's flight from the country.

The UGTT was at the forefront of framing the objectives and vision of the popular protests and political debate on the future of

Tunisia. Thus, it has acted and continues to act as a safeguard to ensure a peaceful transition to democracy, and lead the country to greater political, social and economic stability.

The UGTT prefers to remain neutral with respect to the various political players in the country. Thus, in the legislative elections of 23 October 2011, the UGTT decided neither to present its own candidates nor to support any political party or individual candidate. UGTT managed to forge a solid alliance with the employers' association UTICA that at the end proved to be a cornerstone of the successful transition. It was the "social partners' front" that finally initiated the process of national dialogue established in 2012. Thanks to the momentum resulting from this process, Tunisia succeeded in overcoming a major challenge by voting a new constitution which enforces universal human rights standards.

After the escalation of violence, terrorism and the assassination of two opposition leaders in 2013, the country once again verged on the brink of civil conflict. The UGTT intervened by calling all the political parties and social partners to a national dialogue process with the aim of reducing the prevailing political and social tension and move forward with the process of democratic transition.

The roadmap presented by the UGTT- which attracted a wide consensus - was adopted by political parties. The roadmap will act as a framework for the next steps of the democratic transition process, through setting up a "government of independent competences" committed to ensuring economic and social stability and preparing the next presidential and legislative elections, which should take place at the end of 2014.

All of these sacrifices and efforts by the UGTT were not made in vain. They contributed to harnessing considerable support for Tunisia from the international opinion during the last three years and confirmed the role played by this country as a success story and a model of a peaceful democratic transition.

¹ The Norwegian Nobel Committee recently approved the nomination of UGTT, Tunisia's largest trade union federation, for the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize

Lassaad El Asmi has a doctorate in Mechanics from the University of Paris VI and an HDR in Applied Mathematics from the National School of Engineers of Tunis. On Feb. 9, 2011 after the revolution, he was appointed as President of the University of Carthage, and later that year in August, he was re-elected for a term of three years.