Arab Reform Initiative

BETWEEN THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ROLES AND THE CHALLENGES OF ORGANIZATION AND REPRESENTATION:

Independent Professional Unions in the Arab World

edited by
Jamil Mouawad

COVER: Medical workers in Cairo, Egypt, gathered around the union building to protest the beating of two doctors by police officers in January 2016 - 12 February 2016.

All papers in this volume are translations from Arabic to English

NOVEMBER 2021

Table of contents

Introduction

Jamil Mouawad

Overview

Labour unions and independent professional associations in the Arab World have always played a pivotal role in advocating for workers' rights, and economic, social, and political rights in society at large, by widening the scope of political participation and safeguarding public freedoms, especially in post-independence states. However, as authoritarian regimes ran rampant in the region and the ruling class tightened its hold on state agencies and institutions, these regimes, be they military or sectarian, began to crack down on union and partisan activity, either by outlawing it with legislations or by voiding it of its meaning through the establishment of pro-regime labour unions and federations. In Iraq, for instance, Decision no. 150 was issued in 1978 and made workers and professionals part of the Iraqi government as public employees, thereby turning the State into the main employer. Similarly, the "Inqaz regime" in Sudan issued the Law on Public Interest in 1989, which terminated the employment of thousands of people, most of whom were affiliated with the Railway Workers Affairs Association and the Gezira Farmers Union, two pillars of advocacy-focused union action. In Lebanon, the ruling class went on to engineer elections in a way that would guarantee exclusive representation in the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers, thus ensuring that its interests rather than those of workers be represented. Nevertheless, unions and associations, especially professional and sectoral ones, along with civil society organizations, remain a key institutional actor in the overall mobilization scene, playing a major role in filling the void left by the decline of political parties.

Indeed, professional associations have emerged as a key player in major turning points (the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003) or the outbreak of popular protests in 2011 (also dubbed the Arab Spring). The legacy of union action in Arab states, especially given the decaying political life, has been consolidated beyond question as professional unions came into their key position of mobilizing and organizing grassroots movements and reflecting their vitality. Independent professional associations are not labour unions in the legal sense of the word. They are rather sectoral representative bodies, originally established to advance the interests of their members and protect their economic gains. They often represented middle-class groups, which in many cases had supported the regime (in Algeria, for example). However, with the historical changes in their socio-economic situation due to an open economy and neoliberal policies, these classes resorted to their unions to voice their opposition to the economic systems' policies, sometimes even going so far as calling for toppling the regime. In Iraq, for example, several journalists founded the National Union of Journalists in 2003, which provided an alternative and pioneering experience for union action following the ruling Baath Party's decades-long domination over unions. In Egypt, independent unions were revived in the wake of the fall of the Hosni Mubarak regime in 2011 before the new regime took away their independence by cracking down on public space. In contrast to the Sudanese experience, where professional unions had a leading role in organizing protests and later assumed a negotiating role in the transfer of power (the Sudanese Professionals Association), the popular movement in Lebanon (the 17 October 2019 Uprising) yet again highlighted the pivotal role of professional associations after years of being captured by the ruling political parties.

As such, independent professional associations have become an important political player in the Arab World. They have secured a pivotal role in political and sectoral-professional representation and have been vital in mobilizing protests and creating public opinion supportive of economic, social, and political rights.

Therefore, in line with its work on understanding the pillars and conditions of change in the Arab World, the Arab Reform Initiative created a space for reflection and dialogue in order to conduct discussions on the reality of independent professional associations based on their growing role in the Arab World over the last decade. It sought to provide an in-depth review of papers by researchers from the Arab World, which discussed the situation in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt. Based on the outputs of the papers in this publication, a series of discussions and talks was conducted with researchers and actors in independent professional associations in an effort to understand their role and secure a connection and common space among their members so that they could exchange experiences and strengthen communication.

The Papers

The papers in this publication discuss the theme of "Independent Professional Associations" through their role in the popular movement. These structures have an important role in organizing, or at least trying to organize, protests. However, these efforts are usually faced with challenges mainly regarding civil society's capacity to organize in countries that have known significant

political stagnation resulting from authoritarian decisions aimed at abolishing partisan or union life. The publication includes five case studies from the Arab World: Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt.

Sudan: The Sudan paper, written by Mohamed El Agati, Omar Samir, Abdel Moneim Sayed Ahmed, and Zeinab Srour, reviews the Sudanese Professionals Association. It presents this body as the accumulation of previous experiences that developed from clandestine action beginning in 2012, to public work in 2016, all the way to playing a critical role in the Sudanese protests of 2018. The paper outlines the evolution of SPA demands for a regime change "by raising more general issues that go beyond professional matters, such as wages and reforms in the educational, health, and service sectors, issues that concern professionals and non-professionals alike." SPA legitimacy was bolstered through rights advocacy, thus becoming a political player that formed alliances with other parties to establish a broad opposition coalition, the Forces of Freedom and Change, which later contributed to the political transfer of power. The paper also explores the organizational and future challenges facing the SPA, based on the political developments in Sudan in the wake of the fall of the Omar al-Bashir regime.

Algeria: The Algerian case study, written by Nacer Djabi, examines independent associations in Algeria since their inception in the early 1990s and their focus on sectoral specificities of professions, unlike traditional official unilateral unions. Independent unions stand out because of their ability to "take into account the specificities of their demands and the skills they have, [as well as] the evolution of their demands, bases, and ways to protest." The paper highlights the strengths of these independent associations in the popular movement and the weaknesses that kept them from assuming a larger role in the face of power realignment and the decline of the popular movement.

Lebanon: The paper, written by Jamil Mouawad, offers a critical review of the experience of independent professional associations in Lebanon, in addition to the attempts to form them. It explores two main experiences: the Order of Engineers and Architects (OEA), where the 17 October Uprising supporters secured a landslide win in the 2021 elections; and the experience of professors in the Lebanese Professionals Association (LPA-Professors), an effort born out of the popular movement of 17 October 2019. The paper discusses the meaning of "independence" and its meaning in the Lebanese political framework. It also presents the main organizational factors which could facilitate or hinder independent union action if these challenges are not overcome.

Iraq: The Iraqi case study, written by Ali Taher Alhammood, focuses on the National Union of Journalists, an endeavour founded in 2003 in the wake of the downfall of Saddam Hussein's regime. "It challenged the prevailing obedience to the State as the historically dominant employer and sole economic rent provider. As such, the emergence of the national union was a breakthrough, as the overall context discouraged such experiences. It was not in the interest of citizens, most of whom were State employees, to adopt projects that challenged its policies." The paper explores the position of the new union from discussions about the need for establishing a new union for journalists (or reactivating and retaking the existing union), as opposed to establishing an association seeking to advocate for journalists. It highlights the reasons why the union strayed from its fundamental objectives and moved towards technical work, i.e. training similar to those provided by civil society organizations. The paper also examines the internal challenges of the Union, including the relation with or domination by the left wing, or the relationship with the regime, down to the internal divergence among its various components.

Egypt: The case study, written by Shimaa El Sharkawy, discusses the obstacles that hindered the experience of independent unions. It follows a chronological review focusing on three stages: the establishment of independent unions on the eve of the January 2011 Revolution; the prominent role of independent unions following the Revolution; and the receding role from 2012 to date. The paper also explores the key problems faced by the independent unions with a historical review of each stage while simultaneously highlighting the corresponding internal challenges.

The Challenges

A comparative reading of the papers reveals the main challenges facing independent professional associations in the Arab World. These issues are presented as general questions that, when answered, could develop and reinforce their activity.

The Debate of Political vs. Association-based Demands

The debate between political action (i.e. the association as a stakeholder in the public political space, with a clear position on the establishment) and association-based action (i.e. limiting the role to advancing the interests of members only) seems to be key for clearly defining the work and goals of independent associations (developing demands, creating alliances, and so on). Some actors in these independent associations believe that they should not interfere in politics, while others consider that the very activities of association action (i.e. organizational and advocacy activities) fall precisely under political action. In fact, many efforts struggled with the dilemma of which type of action to prioritize.

However, the key problem does not lie here. Rather, the issue is related to the internal homogeneity of the unions, the legitimacy of their representation, and their ability to reach an agreement about whether or not to participate in power. The following question poses itself: To what extent are independent

professional associations homogeneous enough to be able to encourage public mobilization to fill a political role larger than their strict role as associations?

Defining Roles

Given the crisis in political life and stagnant representative space (with the lack of traditional parties and labour unions), independent professional associations provide representative frameworks that can play a major role in securing the transfer of power. The biggest challenge for these frameworks lies in the difficulty of defining that role: are they a mediator managing the political process between different parties, or are they an inherent political stakeholder (i.e. should they develop their role as political stakeholders?)? Furthermore, we must clearly define the concept of "independence," which could take on different dimensions in the five case studies: are they independent from the State as an employer, or independent from the ruling parties? Or from the web of interests that controls the political economy of these countries?

A Crucial Role in Reviving Democratic Life

A critical challenge facing independent associations is their ability to revive democratic life, maintain an open public space, and resist the military and traditional elites strengthening their control over politics and other aspects of societal organization. Advocating for the right to the freedom of association, for social and economic rights, and for the right to protest is still the most that these associations, as representative associations, can offer to the public political scene, regardless of the nature of their role (political or professional). Here lies the question about the importance and necessity for unions to adopt representative (the importance of youth representation) or participatory (allowing for participation in decision-making) democratic paths.

Legal Obstacles

Legal obstacles seem pivotal in invigorating or undermining the freedom of independent professional associations. In Iraq, for example, several MPs presented a draft law (Law on Labour Unions and Professional Associations) that provides for union pluralism in accordance with the constitution. "However, the law was set aside after preliminary deliberations, as it seems that many official unions, such as the Bar Association, Engineers Association, Medical Association, and many others were opposed to it, in an attempt to maintain their unilateral hold on union action in their fields, rather than have to deal with a multiplicity of unions." In Lebanon, it is impossible to establish an independent union without the approval of the relevant minister. This is a legal obstacle in itself that sometimes contributes to the fragmentation or weakening of association-based action. In such a context, what role can existing associations play in the process of overcoming legal obstacles and mobilizing a rights movement calling for the freedom to establish unions, be they labour or professional?

Challenges of Identity and Organization

It is also necessary to examine union identity and the need for renewal given the changes in political and economic systems around the world. Unions do not monopolize workers. There is an explicit demand for "ideological and intellectual renewal to adapt to national and international developments and their various socio-economic and political ramifications." Not all workers and professions are organized within unions. However, there are large groups that organize their ranks and sometimes take action outside of unions, as they are not part of the formal labour market (or the organized economy). As such, how will the labour unions, particularly sectoral unions, also contribute to reconciling people with politics, and more specifically to reviving union action without restricting it to intellectual ideologies (i.e. unions being the responsibility of the left only)? And how, in turn, can they contribute to representing workers who are not members of unions?

Under-representation of Women

Women are generally under-represented in independent professional associations, as shown in the five case studies. Women's representation is not commensurate to their level of participation in popular protests and their large role in rights advocacy (e.g. female lawyers have played a leading role in defending detainees in Sudan and Lebanon). Unions should not only represent sectors but also, and more importantly, they should represent all segments of society. How can real (and not ceremonial) representation of women within these unions be ensured?

Conclusion

Based on the Arab World's rapid political developments, caught between an old regime clinging to power through such tactics as military coups and a new system that is still taking shape with continuous popular movements and emerging parties, free professional associations take on a cornerstone role in organizing the masses, defending rights, and giving institutional legitimacy to mobilization work. Free professional associations are representative structures with enough organization and legitimacy, obtained through elections, to advance rights demands either regarding members and their association and professional interests, or national issues related to social, economic, and political rights. Certainly, these unions will be faced with many challenges, chief among these being how to balance demands for union action and advocacy for political action. However, this does not deny the fact that unions have consolidated their status as a key player in the overall protest and

organizational landscape.

It is therefore essential to develop an agenda that focuses on further exploring the role of independent professional associations, centring on two main streams. First, a research agenda should be developed with a focus on the role of independent professional associations, while attempting to document the experiences of activists to guide internal self-reflection. Second, a dialogue-based policy agenda should be put in place to find areas of convergence between independent associations in the same country or in the Arab World. Naturally, this dialogue is complemented by introductions to and networking with similar successful experiences from outside the Arab World to draw lessons learned and exchange expertise.

Endnotes

1. The Forces of Freedom and Change are Sudanese political components comprising the Sudanese Professionals Association, the Sudan Revolutionary Front, the National Consensus Forces, and the National Opposition Alliance.

Sudanese Professionals Association:

Structure, Evolution, Roles and Coalitions, Challenges and Future Prospects

Mohamed El Agati
Omar Samir
Abdel Moneim Sayed Ahmed
Zeinab Srour

Introduction

Strong trade unions and professional associations are among the most important forms of civil society organizations. These organizations are the best suited to contribute to overcoming dictatorships, driving democratic transformation, promoting freedoms, and ensuring that economic and social rights are maintained in the various sectors which they regulate. These include health, education, housing, transportation, labour and employment, freedom of association, as well as the right to protest and strike. Professional associations, such as labour unions, have always been a target for totalitarian regimes in the Arab region. Autocratic regimes aim to control organizations and unions, void them of any substance and goals, and exclude them along with their leadership from professional and political participation that might potentially lead to networks and connections that could threaten those regimes or even advance the interests of union members.

Nonetheless, the Arab region has seen a few experiences where efforts were mobilized to organize, overcome the aforementioned context, and impose successful attempts to change it. Among these experiences is the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) – the most prominent organized effort in the protests that led to al-Bashir's resignation on 11 April 2019 after years of networking attempts among independent trade unions and months of various means of protest.

This study explores how we can understand the role of independent trade unions in the democratic transition based on the Sudanese experience. It also looks at the capacity of these organizations to challenge attempts by dictatorial regimes which prevent associations that may drive or lead any social chance that opposes them. This paper will also examine various dimensions of the current experience based on the previous historical context of trade unions in Sudan before the SPA and subsequent mobilization efforts. Additionally, it seeks to analyze the SPA's structures, alliances, development before, during, and after the December Revolution, as well as decision-making mechanisms. The study also considers the SPA's role in the movement, negotiations with political forces and the army during the transitional phase, organizational challenges in the current political context, and its structural alignment with the assumed roles as well as potential prospects.

This study uses an analytical approach based on desktop research and the analysis of articles and texts concerning the SPA. It also reviews the SPA's discourse during the transitional period, relationships with other parties based on first-hand accounts, statements and documents it issued, and written views of its members. A series of interviews with some members and key figures have been conducted, taking into account the gender and age diversity within the SPA community.

Background: Union Activity in Sudan pre-SPA

Labour activism emerged in modern Sudan as a direct result of the substantial changes brought about by British colonialism and its engagement in the economic and social lives of the Sudanese people. The emergence of production projects and infrastructure-related activities in Sudan was key to the boom of a sector made up of menial workers and craft professionals. This set the stage for the establishment of various labour unions.[1] Historically, labour activities mainly centred on opposing colonizers and their policies. In 1908, sawmill workers were the first to hold an organized strike, demanding better working conditions. The air of activism gradually made its way to public cafés in local markets to discuss labour issues. British colonizers were pressured into establishing workers' clubs in the three cities of Khartoum (Khartoum Pan, Omdurman and Khartoum North) in 1934. This trend was propagated afterwards across all labour cities in Sudan. Various labour groups took on educational, training and political roles in fighting against colonialism by demanding the establishment of trade unions and the spread of wall newspapers and labour theatres. The first labour magazine was issued in 1946, "Al-Amel Al-Sudani"(The Sudanese Worker).[2]

Trade Unions and Political Action (1947 - 1985)

Trade unions in Sudan were officially established in 1947. The Railway Workers Affairs Association became the first modern union to be established in the country. Afterwards, the idea was developed and more pressure was exerted on the British. The colonizers finally recognized union rights to organize. As a result, the first Labour and Employment Act was issued in 1948, along with the Union Registration Regulations of 1948. Accordingly, the Sudanese union movement gained legitimacy and momentum.

On 18 May 1949, the first labour conference convened and adopted the Labour Union Constitution; efforts continued and culminated with the establishment of the Sudanese Workers' Trade Union Federation in November 1950. These laws and regulations remained valid until 1960.

These developments resulted in the emergence of the "Multi-organizational Front," which organized and led popular actions all the way to civil disobedience and strikes. These efforts ultimately mobilized the October 1964 Revolution, which overthrew Ibrahim Abboud's dictatorship (1958 - 1964). The same was true for the Sudanese popular uprising in March 1985, when the people chose their leadership represented by the "Union Association." Some believe that the political conditions fostered by the rescue regime[3] had a different impact on union action in Sudan. Consequently, it manifested in two main aspects. On one hand, the regime's repression and crackdown on activists harmed political parties. Indeed, it weakened their ability to engage directly with the people, thus isolating generations of Sudanese from tapping into the political legacy and struggle of these parties and groups. On the other hand, the void born out of the forced absence of political institutions strengthened the role of civil society, namely unions and other civic organizations, which sought to fill the public sphere with their demand-centred activities.[4]

Surviving the al-Bashir Era

Al-Bashir's regime was vehemently against union action in Sudan and sought to dismantle and control associations by dissolving legitimate unions within institutions. Nonetheless, the legacy of union activity in Sudan persisted and never ceased. Efforts were made to reinvigorate the Union Association, which was established in 1985 and dissolved by the rescue authority in June 1989 long before the establishment of the SPA. The regime worked on dismantling unions and displacing workers through the Law on Public Interest. It targeted labour leaders and accused them of being leftist – particularly members of the Railway Workers Affairs Association, the Gezira Farmers Union, and other institutions known for consolidating union action in Sudan.[5] The rescue regime quickly held a conference for union dialogue in August 1990 to abolish existing legitimate trade unions.[6] However, the labour protests and movements did not subside. In 1994 and 1996, several professional sectors organized protests and strikes, such as the doctors' strike in April 1996.[7] Just as they were key players in previous Sudanese uprisings, unions and union associations were also direct victims of dissolution, liquidation, confiscation of funds, and replacement with loyalist unions, or the imprisonment and abuse of their key figures under other laws.

Union Action among Professionals

After 2005, Sudan experienced an openness to freedoms and political engagement following the signing of the Naivasha Peace Agreement with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement. With improving economic conditions in the wake of the war, workers in public institutions had a growing interest in union action, namely school teachers, university professors, physicians, lawyers, and media professionals. As such, various initiatives emerged to organize union action around various issues, including the Teachers' Committee Against Financial Cutbacks and the Legitimate Sudanese Doctors Syndicate, which organized strikes and memoranda submissions to governing bodies. However, coordination and cooperation among these movements was subpar. They relied mainly on individual networking among party members already active in unions.

Coordination among Union Components and the Birth of the SPA

The real cooperation among opposition union components began during 2010-2011 following the elections and the secession of South Sudan. Political and professional actors from the opposition movements focused their efforts on creating effective union alliances that could advocate against regime policies and unilateral political decision-making. As a result, what was then known as the Sudanese Professionals Federation was established in 2012. The name was later changed to the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) in 2013 through joint coordination among the Teachers' Committee, the Journalists' Network, the Legitimate Sudanese Doctors' Syndicate, and the Democratic Lawyers Association. The current SPA Facebook page was created at the end of 2012. The very first post defined the SPA as an alliance of professional unions. The Secretariat's Media Bureau also shared videos documenting some SPA activities during the same year, such as seminars and appeals launched by the Central Committee of Sudan Doctors to help those injured during the 2013 protests.[8] Before the revolution, the page was characterized by a discourse focused on professional demands. Although it stayed away from political demands, comments made by some union members touched on political discussions. Protest momentum in Sudan, coinciding with the Arab Spring may have helped push for greater coordination. At the time, totalitarian regimes also found themselves unable to hold their ground before international leading telecommunication companies. In fact, economic liberalization now required more integration rather than restrictions, thus allowing for more digital spaces to enhance coordination among these entities.

This extended union and organizational legacy further strengthened the role of the SPA in leading political change.

Indeed, many leaders of the Union Association that was established in the mid-eighties, have contributed to the rise of the SPA and were among its leadership. Union leaders had worked to form legitimate shadow unions to express their non-recognition of unions and bodies brought about by the al-Bashir regime. In 2012, approximately 200 professors from the University of Khartoum agreed on establishing an unofficial union. Other professionals in Sudan were encouraged to follow their lead, which led to the formation of the following bodies: the Legitimate Sudanese Doctors Committee, as the counterpart of the Sudanese Doctors Syndicate; the Sudanese Journalists Network, as a counterpart of the General Union of Sudanese Journalists; and the Democratic Coalition of Lawyers as an alternative to the Government Bar Association; in addition to many clandestine committees and organizations in other bodies and institutions.

These efforts were made despite some differences regarding SPA establishment and history. Some consider that the SPA started with all clandestine efforts that led to the SPA and the launch of the SPA page on social media platforms in 2012, while others believe that 2016 marked the true beginning of a strong SPA presence in the public eye. This is the history adopted by the SPA website. The SPA was established in 2016 by virtue of the first Charter for Professionals, drafted by three founding members: the Central Committee of Sudanese Doctors, the Sudanese Journalists Network, and the Democratic Coalition of Lawyers.[9] However, the SPA effectively launched its activities in 2012, even if it remained secret until 2016,[10] when the SPA Charter was drafted. Disagreements on the recording of the rise of the SPA can be traced back to the subsequent waves of memberships, the advocacy and union bodies that followed, and the organizational dimensions the SPA took until it reached its final form with most of its membership base.

Role of SPA and 2018 Revolution

Although the SPA's role in preparing for the first week of mass mobilization in 2018 remains unclear – especially demonstrations across various states that resistance committees helped coordinate – the SPA played a pivotal role in mobilizing the masses in the capital, Khartoum, by calling for a march to Parliament to submit a memorandum demanding better wages on 25 December 2018. The widespread public response prompted the SPA to continue mobilizing, rallying, and calling for protests, thus playing a prominent leading role as the situation continued to develop.[11] The resulting organizational development allowed the SPA to actively participate in planning the revolution against al-Bashir's regime.

SPA: Extension of Previous Experiences and New Roles

In form, the SPA role during the December 2018 revolution seems almost identical to previous professional organizational experiences and their important political roles in Sudan. It also gives a glimpse into the role that unions played in October 1964 and April 1985, respectively. On 17 October 1964, the Sudanese organized a popular movement where the "Multi-organizational Front" – a union organization – played a decisive role against the rule of President Ibrahim Abboud (1958 - 1964). In another similar experience, a spontaneous popular uprising erupted in March 1985, in which participants opposed President Jaafar Nimeiry (1969 - 1985). Professors at the University of Khartoum were quick to organize a union association of lawyers, engineers, money-changers, and public insurance employees. They were joined by the University Students' Union, and the Doctors' Syndicate, who also organized a strike and marched to the presidential palace. Following consecutive strikes and demonstrations demanding the resignation of the president, the army under the command of Abdel Rahman Swar al-Dahab, declared its allegiance to the people and thus ended Jaafar Nimeiry's rule on 6 April 1985.[12]

Consequently, union organizations and associations had a similar key role in mobilizing against military regimes through political strikes and phased civil disobedience, down to halting all economic activity and paralyzing the whole country. These efforts led to the ousting of Presidents Abboud, Nimeiry and later, al-Bashir[13].

What Sets the SPA Experience apart from Previous Union Activity in Sudan?

Despite the similarities between the roles of trade unions and coalitions across all three revolutions (1964, 1985, and 2018), the SPA experience is unique in terms of the general context and political conditions, as well as its organizational structure.

Upon examining the post-independence period, one can comment on the "weak political action and organized political movement in 1940s post-WWII. This existing movement failed to manage the country and establish democracy or promote development. It was followed by 30 years of al-Bashir regime that further weakened political action and prevented all activity. Anyone able to engage in clandestine action had to proceed with restrictions. They were denied normal communication and political variable analysis, thus requiring a change of starting points, rhetoric, etc., and causing this period of weakness."[14]

However, under al-Bashir's regime, an extended and relentless movement boomed, contributing to and supporting professional and trade union action with political cadres drawn from the active youth who joined the SPA post-revolution. The growth of sectors affected by the regime and its wars in the south and in Darfur revived organizational endeavours. In its first and second waves, the Arab Spring also inspired the Sudanese, who had nothing to lose on the eve of the SPA's rise. Furthermore, the

telecommunications revolution and the reach of social media platforms provided new tools to overcome the traditional security crackdowns led by security and military regimes, including the al-Bashir regime. This resulted in the rapid shift from clandestine to overt action at a lower cost compared to previous organizational attempts. Nonetheless, the SPA became distinguished thanks to its pages on social media, which contributed to reiterating the demands voiced in the streets into clear expressions, as well as banners and slogans that attracted millions of Sudanese.

In addition, the SPA was also known for keeping up with society's evolution towards decentralization, the flexibility of organization, thought, and movement. Historically, organizations, demonstrations, change, and revolutions would take place in the capital, Khartoum, and then spread to the provinces and rural areas. However, this time around, the revolution started from the far corners of the rural areas – in roaring demonstrations – then gradually moved to the centre. There, the SPA fostered these actions and led the great demonstration that lasted for four or five months until the regime was overthrown.[15] Therefore, the nature of organizational and technological developments, along with decentralized virtual activities, have greatly contributed to creating and facilitating organized waves of discontent that were able to successfully change the centre of governance and power.

Some SPA key figures believe that the association's approach is different from previous organizational attempts in terms of the work methodology based on phased goals aligned with SPA nature, capacities, and operational context. The pre-2016 union coalitions were mostly burdened by politicization and partisan agendas. Their activities were dominated by sloganeering and galvanization, making them an easy target for the regime's security services, which often succeeded in dismantling them, reducing their impact and distorting their image. Like the ruling regime, the opposition political parties were also responsible for thwarting efforts to form the pre-2016 trade union coalition. This was due to their continuous attempts to make unions bear the brunt of standing up to the repressive regime. By establishing the SPA, unions tried to prevent these negative consequences. SPA founders agreed to employ a well-thought-out methodology when establishing the association. The objective of union joint action was to ensure the greatest consensus on professional issues and demands. This was reflected in the SPA Charter and bylaws. SPA leaders included a year-long action plan developed through a series of workshops to rally the largest possible base of supporters in the shortest possible time, through advocacy and professional activities that mobilizes the bases around common and unifying, uncontentious issues. Of course, there were the aspirations of realizing the political dream of change and overthrowing the regime, but this was not foreseeable at the time or intended given the SPA's weak base. Within a year of implementing an action plan, the SPA's main ambition was to become a strong body with a serious role in the public scene and political life. As such, the first matter raised by the SPA was the issue of wages, given its significance at that time.[16]

The SPA then enhanced its activities and tools, shifting from an organizational movement to an association of professionals. This change was implemented to enhance its capacity to achieve the aspirations of those who practice the same profession. The SPA also sought to build a unified and strong union movement with members drafting regulations through dialogue, seminars, charters, detailed action plans, and engaging in a rapid transition from clandestine to public action – all while mobilizing under an oppressive regime. The SPA later attempted to change the regime by raising general issues that went beyond professional matters, such as wages, educational reforms, health and service reforms, and issues of concern to professionals and non-professionals alike. The movement opposed the privatization of the health sector, and rejected the regime's economic policies that for decades had resulted in worsening living conditions, increased drug prices, and undermined union freedoms and labour laws. These efforts helped pave the way for the movement and its leadership. This was all clear in the statement of the Commitment to "Build and Serve", which the SPA issued and called on individuals and entities to sign.[17]

The SPA deployed through advocacy and voiced its demands as a stepping stone that would help it gain legitimacy among professionals and the Sudanese people. However, with the start of the revolution, the SPA forged alliances with many parties, leading to the coalition of the Forces of Freedom and Change. The SPA then became a political coalition that relied on the legacy of a social movement spanning across professional unions.

These developments can be summarized chronologically as follows:

Year	Organizational development	Issues and Objectives
2012	Unofficial collaboration between the Committee of Sudanese Doctors and the Democratic Coalition of Lawyers.	Revival of associative union action and organization of independent unions.
2014	Sudanese Journalists Network joins SPA. SPA Facebook page goes online.	Planning starts to include sectoral campaigns aimed at raising wages and improving working conditions across various sectors.
October 2016 - July 2018	SPA is officially established through a written charter based on an official alliance among the three committees that also explains the SPA's Statutes, methodology, and raison d'être. SPA now includes eight-member entities.	The objectives mentioned in the charter are18: Restore the freedom, independence, and democracy of trade union action based on professional groups. Reclaim union and professional rights of workers, guaranteed by international instruments and covenants, in addition to the acquired rights, and combating injustice and job exploitation. Strengthen professional associations in respective fields of work to expose established and opportunistic unions affiliated with the regime, and defeat them in elections. As it works to restore the independence and democracy of trade union movements and reclaim rights, the SPA strives to address pressing daily issues of professionals.
December 2018	Restructuring the SPA to match up to its role in organizing the movement and leading demonstrations and protests. Memberships reach 17 entities. Creating new committees and increasing the number of media committee members.	Calls for raising the minimum wage and a march to the presidential palace. Participation in the Atbara demonstrations against the deteriorating economic conditions and the rise in bread prices.
January 2019	Engaging in a broader coalition with the Revolutionary Front and the National Consensus Forces, within the Forces of Freedom and Change.	Adopting popular demands of overthrowing the regime, holding its figures accountable, and contributing to formulating and elaborating demands.
April 2019 - March 2021	Withdrawal from the forces of Freedom and Change. Some splits and reorganization. 15 entities as shown on the Association website.	Focusing on key events during the transition period. Attempting to combine professional and general political demands. Elaborating protest demands of professionals

Role of SPA in the Movement

The SPA paved the way for the revolution. When the SPA issued a statement calling on citizens to take to the streets in downtown Khartoum at the beginning of demonstrations to protest high prices and low wages, not many had heard of the SPA. However, thousands responded to the call, although the political opposition parties remained silent for the first few days. In early January, these parties united and joined the calls for changing the regime, but people on the ground were responding to the SPA rather than political parties. By the end of January, the SPA seemed to largely express the demands and aspirations of the Sudanese protesters. Its Facebook page hosted the largest forum of pro-movement actors. It formulated the demands of the demonstrators, identified protest locations, provided medical and logistical support to all demonstrations, disseminated data and publications, and through its committees, documented injuries and deaths among protesters. The SPA called for a mass demonstration on 25 December, to march to the presidential palace to hand over a memorandum calling for al-Bashir to step down. The demonstration was met with excessive violence and dispersed. Nonetheless, the SPA has been organizing many daily protest activities since then.

In general, the union entities within the SPA has initially relied on using professional issues, such as low wages, deterioration of the work environment and conditions, as a way to place further pressure on authorities, and reveal its inability to provide the rights and fulfil the demands of the masses. Many unionists had believed that this would prompt the people to take to the streets and demand that the regime be overthrown. Therefore, the popular movement that was born in December 2018 was aligned with SPA efforts.

SPA: Structure, Evolution and Alliances

Keeping up with the Revolution: Structure and Evolution

When it was first established in October 2016 as an organization, the SPA was made up of three founding subcommittees: The Central Committee of Sudanese Doctors, the Sudanese Journalists Network, and the Democratic Coalition of Lawyers. In mid-2018 on the eve of the day that the movement was declared, the SPA included eight professional lobbies which were not recognized by the government of the ousted President al-Bashir. This included the following founding committees: Sudanese Engineers Association, University Professors Association, Teachers' Committee, Sudanese Veterinary Preliminary Council, and the Committee of Sudanese Pharmacists. "A group of doctors, teachers, engineers, pharmacists, university professors, farmers, veterinarians, money changers, auditors, civil aviation staff, and journalists have participated in the first meetings."

The SPA currently consists of fifteen professional member organizations and bodies

According to some SPA leaders, the association was not marked by a dramatic structural evolution from the pre-revolution phase. In fact, it maintained the administrative and organizational composition that was first approved by its founders. They had chosen to adopt a horizontal structure headed by an SPA Council made up of all concerned union bodies, with two members for each. The structure also included a Secretariat made up of five bureaus, staffed per the vote of the Council members, provided that each bureau includes at least one representative from each union body. However, during the revolution, some modifications were made to the SPA structure by adding a number of members to the SPA Council and Secretariat since new union entities were joining the SPA. These included: the Preliminary Committee for the Syndicate of Engineers and Environmentalists, the Human Resources Professionals Committee, the Professional Pharmacists Association and other bodies that have recently breached 16 union components. The grassroots movements also forced the SPA to expand the functions of some Secretariat bureau – such as the Events Bureau, which previously focused on organizing regular SPA activities including exhibitions, seminars, and protests. During the revolution, there was a need to establish a Field Bureau affiliated with the Events Bureau. Its mission would be to lead the movement during the revolution. It was led by Professor Adel Keller.

The functions of the Media Bureau were also expanded to include several departments. Activists partaking in the revolution without affiliation to any SPA founding professional body could also work and belong to this Bureau. The early SPA structure included an Organizational Bureau whose main task was to communicate and coordinate with professional bodies that did not sign the Association›s charter. Developments within the popular movement required a more encompassing role from the Organizational Bureau, including contacting political forces and parties to ensure coordination with SPA. The Bureau was also entrusted with communicating the SPA Council's vision to other parties that joined the SPA in

organizing and managing demonstrations on the ground.

However, some individuals within the SPA believed that start of the revolution was critical to creating real transformation when it comes to the SPA's structure, nature, and role. Escalating revolutionary action on the ground required a more flexible structure that could manage new movements and unions emerging during the revolution. In the same context, the grassroots nature of the revolution attracted new groups to the SPA, which were not affiliated to any specific professional category. Work necessities required experts in different fields to join the SPA Secretariat bureaus, such as media professionals and some party cadres with experience in leading demonstrations and securing convoys.

Coordination and Alliances: Managing External Relations

The SPA structure expanded significantly during the revolution, with the expansion of the media bureau and the increase in the number of spokespersons in the country, as well as abroad. The SPA also launched a new phase of planning to manage the movement and direct it towards achieving the demands of the Charter of Freedom and Change by shifting towards a fully civilian government, which would lay the foundation of a new political experience for the country. The SPA worked to develop its structure and bureaus to keep up with the requirements of managing sit-ins. In fact, the number of Bureau members, particularly the Events and Field Bureaus, was increased. This Bureau became increasingly significant as protests area widened, given the growing need to secure entrances, control circulation, and check items brought in by attendees to avoid problematic breaches by affiliates of the previous regime. A new Secretariat for External Relations was also established and charged with external communication, both with political forces and parties that did not sign the Charter of Freedom and Change. Then, the same secretariat started engaging with the military and its command council. Later, it began operating under the Communications Committee established by the SPA Council, while also encompassing the Forces of Freedom and Change. As the SPA accepted new members, the Secretariat was replenished with cadres of qualitative capabilities. For instance, the Media Secretariat consisted of 12 people at the beginning of the revolution. During the demonstration stage, this number reached 45, with hundreds of volunteers. Service and coordination committees were also established to deliver material and in-kind support to protesters. Doctors also played a key role by establishing field hospitals.

To manage protest areas, the SPA had formed ad-hoc teams, such as health and nutrition committees. Since it had no previous experience in managing sit-ins, it sometimes had to deal with developments as they were happening on the ground. The independent initiatives launched by civil society and all individuals participating in the revolution had the greatest role in facilitating the task of the SPA to ensure the success of the sit-ins that lasted for over a month.

Some of these alliances were key to the SPA. Indeed, it had remarkable coordination with some movements, such as the "Girifna" (we've had enough) movement. This was an opposition coalition that included a group of civil society organizations, trade unions, and political activists from various movements and parties. One of the most prominent groups that sought to plan for the outcome of the revolution was known as the Freedom and Dignity Initiative, or "Hirak" for short. This was an initiative founded by a number of politicians, trade unionists and human rights advocates. Its goal was to create a consensus among the various political factions and society groups by collecting signatures for the initiative's charter, which was called the "Declaration of Freedom and Dignity." The SPA was among the signatories. Later, several political entities, such as the Sudan Appeal Coalition and the National Consensus Forces, joined the initiative. Despite difficulties in collecting signatures, the initiative garnered large consensus among many entities. When the popular movement started in 2018, the SPA initiated communication with the Hirak initiative to enhance coordination and cooperation, especially since the SPA was planning on organizing massive mobilization efforts to demand wage modifications. As a result of this communication, the SPA adopted the Charter of the Hirak initiative, Declaration of Freedom and Dignity, and made some amendments to its clauses to mould it into the Declaration of Freedom and Change. As such, the SPA's direction shifted from focusing solely on union issues to overthrowing the regime and forming a transitional government

In addition to union and professional components affiliated with the SPA, the association entered into a broader alliance with greater goals, calling on parties to sign a charter and be part of the revolutionary movement when it issued the Declaration of Freedom and Change. Therefore, the SPA became a driving force in the revolution. At this point, the Coalition of Forces of Freedom and Change was born. Formed during revolutionary activities in 2019, this alliance was tasked with handling the coordination and leadership of the movement on the grassroots level. Along with the SPA, it included the Revolutionary Front and the National Consensus Forces and the Opposition Federal Association. Here, the SPA moved to the next step in its evolution to become part of a broader political alliance. Political forces affiliated with the Coalition became allies to the SPA. Opposition political forces that signed the document then became part of the SPA, namely the Sudan Appeal Coalition, the National Consensus Forces, and the Opposition Federal Association. This required additional coordination efforts made by the SPA through expanding the scope of its membership and bodies.

During negotiations following the ousting of al-Bashir's regime, SPA members and allies in the Forces of Freedom and disagreed

on some issues, which the Military Council used as an excuse to evade and postpone negotiations several times. However, the SPA's negotiating stance was more consistent with two main parties within The Forces of Freedom and Change, namely the bloc of the National Consensus Forces and the Civil Forces Association, given the shared outlook on the need for radical change to achieve the revolution's goals. In contrast, the Sudan Appeal Coalition was closer to seeking a truce and accepting a partnership with the military.32

The SPA was also closely aligned with youth resistance committees, i.e. revolutionary committees established by SPA in the neighbourhoods during the demonstrations. Therefore, the SPA's relationship with some political forces during the negotiation was more coordination-focused than an actual coalition. This is particularly true for the Coalition of Forces of Freedom and Change, whose members had different negotiating tactics and stances. Although the resistance committees were originally formed from partisan forces, the SPA's support for these committees' actions and the large number of volunteers during and after the revolution both ensured that the overwhelming majority of these committees did not belong to political parties. The strength and effectiveness of these committees were made clear on the one million-person demonstration of 30 June 2019, after the violent dispersal of the General Command protest on 3 June. Committees were able to completely galvanize people to protest what had happened and to demand that negotiations be halted with the Military Council whose forces had carried out a heinous massacre. However, both parties (the Revolution Forces and the Military Council) went on to sign within reason, an agreement providing for a civil-military partnership during the transitional period.

The SPA's alliance with the largest possible number of civil and political forces before and during the revolution was indeed a major power factor. However, the lack of clarity in the frameworks of cooperation with those coalitions brought their differences to the surface. The common goal of overthrowing al-Bashir had already been achieved, so it was unclear what would happen next during the transitional period. This was evident in the crisis between the SPA and some affiliated union entities, on one hand, and with the resistance committees and neighbourhoods, on the other. This dispute also strongly resurfaced since May 2020.

Lack of Representation for Women

The SPA also suffered from a structural crisis that goes against its principles and goals, as it lacks a fair representation of women. In fact, the participation of women in the revolution was not proportionately reflected in all of the institutions brought about by the uprising. Women had a strong presence across all stages of the popular movement. For instance, female lawyers were the most available for emergency trials, defending detainees, activists, and leaders of revolutionary groups who were imprisoned by al-Bashir's regime. Moreover, female doctors had been the pillars of all field hospitals supporting the demonstrations. Female protesters were also the most courageous and daring in standing up to the regime›s oppressive apparatuses. However, despite their active role, women were not fairly represented in power structures and negotiations after the victory of the revolution. This is noticeable and clear in the representation of women in the committees of the Coalition of Forces of Freedom and Change and its central body – the SPA Secretariat and Council, as well as the post-revolution Sudanese government.

Structure, Management and Decision-Making Mechanisms

Since its establishment and until the December 2018 revolution, the SPA had worked under the radar to ensure the secrecy of activities and conceal SPA members' identities for fear of arrest. According to an SPA official spokesperson, the task at that stage was getting organized and politically contextualizing the people's without the intention of evolving into a political party or any other official form.

As a result of the SPA's clandestine nature in the beginning, leaders and affiliated organizations remained anonymous. The association strived to clearly articulate the people's demands. It utilized secret tactics while mastering the art of manoeuvring and working around a brutal police state. These conditions prompted the SPA to hold consultations locally and abroad in order to choose the best moment to take action. Indeed, the movement chose August 2018 without revealing its members and bodies or internal processes. This was so that the organization could avoid the regime's anticipated backlash, which could include the repression and detention of its members if their names were made known to al-Bashir's security agencies.

However, one could say that the SPA built its structures horizontally following a pattern similar to the decentralized administrative organization of the Sudanese State. The SPA has a Secretariat and a Secretariat General. It consists of a central body and offices belonging to the country's respective states. The political and security conditions surrounding the establishment of the SPA had played a key role in dictating the methodology and approach in terms of membership, selection of leaders, and identification of decision-making mechanisms. Between 2012 and 2016, the crackdown practised by the rescue regime towards political and trade union action in Sudan made it imperative that most of the internal organizational activities remain secret. Member unions had to keep their coordination secret because they were not legitimate trade bodies in the eyes of the state. Accordingly, the SPA's leadership and decision-making mechanisms remained secret. In July 2012, the SPA established its first leadership Council, which selected some of its members

to staff an executive bureau to start work and decide on the SPA's role in supporting strikes organized by doctors at that time. In 2013, the SPA endorsed a popular movement against the government's economic policies and proceeded to provide support through various means of resistance. Strikes, seminars, workshops, and statements were the most prominent forms of action during that period.

The SPA maintained its cohesion through the administrative and structural arrangements made by its constituent entities in the early days; namely the drafting of organizational regulations; a clear distribution of tasks and role; the adoption of an annual action plan; and the continuous training of members. All of these steps contributed to the SPA working efficiently as one body without discrimination. The anticipation of the regime's actions and behaviours also played a key role in helping the SPA plan ahead to sustain revolutionary action on the ground, even after the arrest of some of its leaders. The SPA Council formed an alternative shadow Secretariat and ensured constant communication with its leadership, even before the demonstration began. When the regime's security agency arrested well-known SPA members Mohammed Naji al-Assam, Ahmad Rabih Sayed Ahmad, Ibrahim Hasballah, Taha Osman Ishaq, and others, the shadow secretariat had filled the void created by the arrests and succeeded in developing the SPA's capacities, thereby ensuring it continued to lead the revolution.

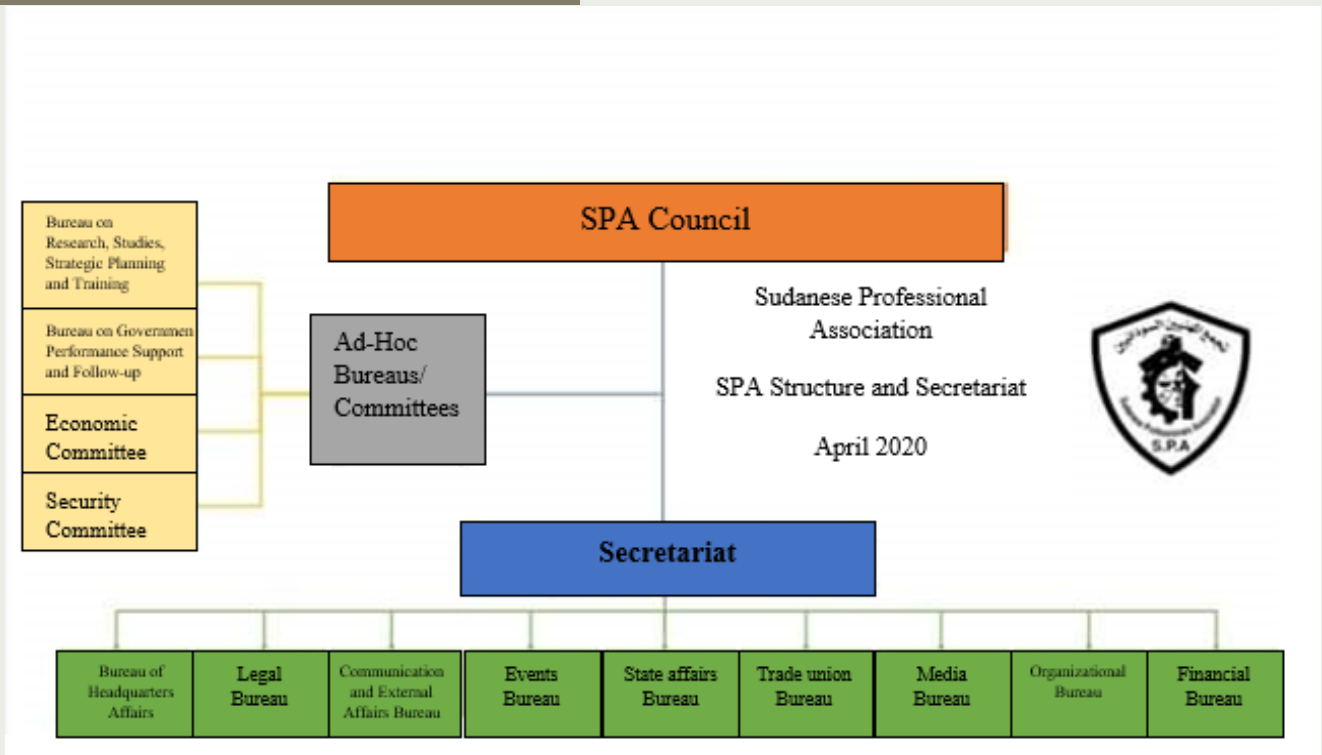
As for the post-December revolution phase, the SPA showed its ability to manage and organize itself to lead the popular movement on the ground, through a comprehensive structure and a specific leadership illustrated in the following chart:

Conflict Management

During the revolution and negotiation talks with the Sudanese Military Council, the SPA seemed to function more like a liaison among its different member organizations whose differences were becoming more pronounced. The strongest point of contention was during the SPA Secretariat General elections in May 2020.[19] The SPA had chosen the composition of its new Secretariat General, and it did not include some of key revolutionary figures. These member entities rejected the new Secretariat General, including the Environmentalists Association, the Central Committee of Sudanese Doctors, the Committee for the Restoration of the Journalists Union, the Meteorological Professionals Gathering, and the Democratic Coalition of Lawyers. The Central Committee of Doctors stated its rejection for "all outcomes of the SPA Council meeting, having disregarded all proposals to discuss the remarks of the last session, the budget and the political vision." It accused the SPA of clearly submitting to a partisan bloc. The Democratic Coalition of Lawyers withdrew its representative from the new Secretariat General, and called for action to revoke the "shameful" and "invalid" decisions. The SPA also rejected the outcomes of the meeting, calling for the drafting of an SPA statute with specific tasks and prerogatives. Meanwhile, the Environmentalists Association said it refused to turn the SPA to a "façade and a political party." It also called for "holding accountable any member who violated the SPA Charter and regulations and infringed on customs and democratic union action."[20]

In July 2020, internal disputes escalated among SPA member organizations. In fact, the SPA suspended the membership

Organizational Structure of the Sudanese Professionals Association 2020



of 5 professional unions: the Central Committee of Sudanese Doctors, Engineers Association; HR Professionals Association; Meteorologist Association; and Environmentalists Association. This decision was made a few days after the SPA's official Facebook page was hacked and taken over by dissidents. Some SPA members were able to retrieve the hacked Facebook page, which caused disputes in conjunction with the million-person demonstration on 30 June. The SPA said that its decision to suspend the membership of the 5 associations was due to their continuous violations of the SPA Charter and regulations. It also relieved all official spokespersons of their duties and withdrew its representatives from the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change and government committees and councils, pending a review. The SPA also took legal action against those who "hijacked its official page."[21]

Then, a crisis arouse because the SPA signed a political agreement with some armed groups. On 26 July 2020, a day after retracting its recognition of all existing structures under the Coalition of Forces of Freedom and Change, the new SPA Secretariat signed a political alliance agreement with the Sudan People›s Liberation Movement, led by Abdelaziz al-Hilu. As a result, the SPA was accused of allying with armed groups at the expense of the Forces of Freedom and Change, as well as seeking to build a new political bloc aimed at reviewing the constitutional document signed after the ouster of al-Bashir's regime. It was also accused of organizing to review laws and decrees; calling for the fair redistribution of wealth in Sudan; restructuring the armed and other regular forces; and handing over the accused of the Darfur crimes to be tried before the International Criminal Court. These demands would put the government-sponsored by the Forces of Freedom and Change in a critical position. These demands were rejected by some SPA bureaus. The Gezira bureau in central Sudan announced its rejection of all organizational steps taken unilaterally by the central body without the offices in the states.[22]

One of the SPA's biggest strengths is that it is a coalition made up of elected professional associations. However, since the SPA was born under the previous regime without the election of new leaders for its sub-organizations, this turned its strength into a contentious matter.

Since it consists of 15 professional associations and some political forces, the SPA structure is characterized by organizational flexibility and decentralization. However, the transitional phase required broader dialogue to make decisions and also to safeguard the unity of the organization. The latter proved to be a difficult feat in light of society's expectations, as well as SPA members themselves.

The SPA also had solid regulatory and organizational documents, as well as converging political leanings that strengthened the relationships among its members. These regulations may have guaranteed the SPA's unity until its goals are achieved; however, its transformation into a functional group, coupled with Sudan's prolonged transitional period made it difficult for all members to commit to the organization's regulations and Charters.

On the other hand, the SPA had some weaknesses, including its inability to welcome new members. The founding members also felt the weight of political developments more than new members. The processes to manage its offices, political alliances, and its structure of subcommittees were also poorly streamlined. This became apparent when it came to electing SPA leaders. The organization was faced with a crisis, as it was unable to abide by or gain consensus to amend its regulations. Moreover, the groups controlling its structures – the Council and Secretariat – currently only consist of people from central Sudan, who are distinguished from their counterparts in the provinces in terms of class and intellect. This is contentious since Sudanese provinces and peripheral areas were the primary driving force of the revolution.[23]

The SPA also lacks clear processes for transparency, governance, and decision-making. The regulations available on its website are not made available on all media platforms. Its administrative and financial regulations are also not yet clear. In addition, its democratic process within its administration, the relationships among key members, and its decision-making processes are also ambiguous. If this lack of transparency is a product of the SPA's covert behaviour pre-dating the revolution, the current phase requires more clear and disseminated guidelines to regulate relationships with external coalitions, unions and other political entities to hold leaders accountable and establish clear criteria for the admission of new organizations.

The nature of issues coming to light in the post-revolution period affects the SPA's key players, as well as the organization overall. Much is expected of the SPA, given the growing aspirations of its members to take on administrative positions or management roles during the transitional period. The SPA is often held responsible or blamed for mistakes made by the transitional government and military representatives in the Sovereignty Council. Therefore, coordination and reconciliation among professional and political unions seem to be a very complex and daunting task.

After revolutions, public employees usually feel that professional or political alliances have already fulfilled their functional roles and therefore must step aside or be repositioned in the public sphere. They also feel that professionals should be separate from political entities, and the private from the public. Regardless of the validity of this schism, it often creates conflicts among political and professional movements during the post-revolution transitional phase.

SPA Role in the Movement

The most prominent event organized by the SPA was a demonstration that took place on 25 December 2018. It was the first time the SPA called for a march towards the presidential palace "to hand over a memorandum to the Presidency of the Republic, calling for the president to step down immediately, at the behest of the Sudanese people and to avoid bloodshed." The SPA cleverly anticipated an improvement in wages; the violent popular uprising in the city of Atbara; and the first march causing al-Bashir to step down only six days after the start of protests.

Then, the SPA contributed to issuing the Declaration of Freedom and Change on 1 January 2019, which was released with the endorsement of four main players: the Sudanese Professionals Association; National Consensus Forces; Sudan Appeal Coalition; and the Opposition Federal Association. The Declaration outwardly demanded the ousting of al-Bashir, a comprehensive and just peaceful transition, and the establishment of a transitional government with a mandate of 4 years. Thus, the SPA transformed the uprising from a movement with scattered demands into a bona fide revolution with clear and specific goals – not just demands for better wages for professional sectors.

On 6 April 2019, the revolution, led by the SPA, witnessed a radical transformation in its call for protests. That month, following SPA's calls for mass mobilization, a number of demonstrations took place in the capital. Although police and security agencies tried to disperse them, the persistence and perseverance of demonstrators broke the security cordon around the Sudanese Army Command Center (General Command). The demonstrators accessed the main streets around the centre. Many ambushed the residence of the head of the regime in the State Guesthouse, thus securing a conquest for the rebels and a defeat for the regime and its security agencies.[24] In other words, protest activities managed by the SPA succeeded in imposing the General Command strike as a fait accompli, which contributed to tipping the scales of power from the regime towards the protesters.

The SPA then quickly turned into a main driver and organizer of popular and opposition movements against the al-Bashir regime. Even the manner in which demonstrators followed the SPA garnered attention. To a great extent, protesters adhered to the times, places and slogans set by the SPA, which was remarkable. The SPA also succeeded in using national symbols affiliated with revolutionary nostalgia, such as the Atbara train and patriotic songs. This was all key in feeding into the struggles of the public and connecting the youth to Sudan's revolutionary past. In terms of planning for demonstrations and grassroots action, the SPA didn't just settle for the media aspect, but it also had ad-hoc bureaus such as the Events Bureau and Field Committees. These SPA subcommittees prepared for demonstrations by documenting the number of participants and the success of mass protests. There were also other committees in charge of protecting demonstrators and identifying points of movement, as well as managing field hospitals and providing provisions and resources for protesters. On the other hand, the SPA had a field committee for monitoring and analyzing data regarding the size of demonstrations, as well as monitoring the measures taken by the regime and its security forces, and other variables that took place on the ground.[25]

The SPA succeeded in assembling independent professional entities to reach goals that unions had long tried to achieve during al-Bashir's era. It also succeeded in managing independent union action for nearly four years before the revolution, and in managing alliances with political forces that were key in bringing down the regime. Thus, the SPA was successful in engineering the Sudanese Revolution, as well as managing a very difficult negotiation phase with the military that had for decades been known for internal strife and military rule. Even though the SPA had faced difficulties in maintaining its alliances or even actively participating in the management of the transitional phase to establish a new regime, it remains one of the most prominent actors on the Sudanese political scene. It contributes along with other players to the discussion about the transitional phase; the peace process; the new constitution; the parliament; the roles of the various parties; how to manage the transitional phase; assessing adopted policies; and voicing professional demands.

The SPA, however, is still faced with numerous challenges and crises with regards to its role, structure, rhetoric, as well as alliances and coalitions. There is a disconnect between the SPA's central leadership and offices across various Sudanese states due to some decisions made by the SPA, such as the movement's alliance with armed groups and its attempt to withdraw from the Forces of Declaration of Freedom and Change. According to many members, the SPA is a group of individuals where not every member of a professional union or trade union is necessarily considered a member of the SPA. It is also not a federation of free trade unions or labour unions that was elected in a democratic context, professionals given their vocation and function acted and agreed to organize thus calling for the restoration of the union movement."[26] The SPA movement has not yet been tested in a democratic or transitional context. As such, individual alignments could encounter dual loyalties between political organizations to which SPA members belonged.

The SPA's biggest challenge in the transitional period is balancing between its union and political roles, as well as clarifying the relationship with the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change, and the extent of divergence and convergence between the two entities. The dispute is growing in intensity due to the SPA's absolute support of the Forces of Freedom and Change movement and the Abdalla Hamdok government and its policies.

One of the SPA's key strong points is the accumulated organizational and political experiences of its members and leaders. Many were part of previous attempts to organize professional and labour efforts into similar federations. They also shared previous political and organizational experiences, as

most of them were affiliated with some political parties such as the Communist Party, the Baath Party, the National Umma Party, and others. Their previous participation in similar associations also positively impacted the development of a model coalition of unions. Therefore, the SPA, which led the revolutionary movement in 2018, was a natural extension of the preceding organizational attempts. The founding members remained the same until 2012, to which the Central Committee of Sudanese Doctors and some post-revolution unions were added.[27]

SPA's Role in the Transitional Phase Negotiations and Arrangements

On 11 April 2019, Sudanese Defense Minister, Awad Ibn Auf, announced on official state television the arrest of President Omar al-Bashir and the formation of a Military Council to govern the country for two years. The SPA and Sudanese opposition coalitions then voiced "their complete and utter rejection of the army's statement and considered it a coup against the revolution. They also stated that demonstrations would continue until power was handed to a transitional civilian government. They called for maintaining the sit-ins in front of the General Command of the Armed Forces in Khartoum and the rest of the provinces."

In a later statement, the SPA issued an appeal to army officers, calling on them to stand against "the regime's so-called guardians who were attempting to hijack the revolution." The statement also called upon the Sudanese to stay in the streets across the country until power was handed over to a transitional government that represents the revolution actors."[28] After revolutionary actors held their ground and vehemently rejected military rule for the transitional phase, Awad Ibn Auf eventually announced his resignation, along with his deputy, Kamal Abdel Maarouf. This came after the military assumed power for one day, led by the transitional Military Council that was established after the ouster of al-Bashir. Following Auf's resignation, Army Inspector General, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan was appointed as his replacement.[29] Some described this step as a "new victory for Sudanese protesters."[30] The SPA refused the appointment of al-Burhan, saying "no to people who change masks from al-Bashir to Ibn Auf and al-Burhan."[31]

Between 11 April and the dispersal of the protest in front of the General Command, neither the military, the SPA, nor the Forces of Freedom and Change were ready to negotiate. Some SPA leaders assert that the SPA's agenda in the post-regime period did not include dialogue or negotiations with the Military Council. Its slogan was: No negotiation, no dialogue; yes to handing over full power to civilians. SPA leaders believed that any negotiation talks with the military would mean failure of the revolution and derailment of its victories course so far. After a closer look at the facts, the rebels and SPA had the upper hand, which mean that they were not the weaker party that needed to negotiate. This was the rebels' general outlook of the al-Bashir regime.[32] Nevertheless, early on 13 April 2019, the SPA took the initiative to release the names of its negotiating team with the Military Council.[33] Then, a turning point came when the Rapid Support Forces[34] announced that it was siding with the revolution in mid-May and refused options to forcibly disperse sit-ins. Faced with this new reality, revolutionary players had to choose between continuing the sit-in at the risk of dividing the army and turning Sudan into the Syrian model; or starting negotiations with the army and its militias, and thus sharing power based on this step. Consequently, SPA leaders supported the second option.[35]

The Military Council tried to circumvent the Forces of Freedom and Change by highlighting the Sharia and Rule of Law bloc, which rejected bilateral negotiations between the Council and the Forces of Freedom and Change. Given this reluctance, the Forces of Declaration of Freedom and Change submitted on 1 May 2019 a constitutional document to the Military Council detailing its vision for the transitional period. It identified the three levels of governance (federal, regional, and local). The document also identified the creation of transitional government institutions, including a national sovereignty council; a council of ministers holding the supreme executive authority in the country; a legislative body empowered to legislate and oversee the performance of the executive authority; an independent judicial power; and regular forces that are subject to the decisions of the sovereign and executive authorities. Then, they demanded that the transitional Military Council respond to their constitutional document in writing within 72 hours maximum. The SPA here took the initiative to bring forth carefully calculated documents to the negotiating table.

Then came the violent and deadly dispersal operation for the sit-in in front of the General Command in June 2019, where 108 people died and more than 500 were injured.[36] This tested the negotiation process and led to a loss of trust between the Military Council and revolutionary actors. In a statement, the SPA accused the Rapid Intervention Forces, led by Military Council member and Vice-President of the transitional Military Council, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as "Hemetti,"[37] of being directly responsible for the dispersal,

According to some observers, the Military Council was making arrangements to take power and organize elections within a year before negotiations with the revolutionary bodies even began. There was no explicit or official recognition that the Forces of Freedom and Change represented the revolution. Their proposal for a civilian government was to have it as an executive body under the Military Council's authority, provided that no political actor is prevented from participating, even those who were part of the regime ousted by the revolution.[38] This became evident on the evening of the sit-in dispersal, when the head of the transitional Military Council, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan,

made a televised statement to state that all agreements reached with the Forces of Freedom and Change are null and void. He said he intended to form a technocratic government and hold general elections within nine months. However, with determination from the Sudanese people and the perseverance of the Forces of Change, in parallel with external pressures – whether by the United States or the African Union on allies of the Military Council in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – al-Burhan declared the very next day that the transitional Military Council's was ready to negotiate again with the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change.[39] The news regarding the military's committed violations and the violent dispersal of protesters also did not help the general's case.

Some believed that the decision to engage in negotiations with the military was a major turning point in the course of the revolution, with effects still rippling to this day. The outcomes of negotiations, after several months-long nationwide popular protests, did not live up to the expectations of the rebels and the Sudanese people. As a result, disputes echoed between the SPA members and rebels unaffiliated with any organizations.

Mohammed Naji al-Assam, a member of the SPA negotiation committee, believes that the SPA's participation in the negotiation process with the Military Council was not a unanimous decision made by relevant bodies. For example, the SPA Secretariat was not initially aware of the decision. None of the members of the negotiating delegation, most of whom were members of the SPA Secretariat, were aware of the decision. Therefore, some forces wanted to impose the negotiation option as a fait accompli, especially given the subsequent confusion of SPA decisions, such as recanting on its previous announcement to form a civilian transitional government from inside the sit-in square. This had a damaging impact on the SPA's image and credibility among young rebels.[40] This step was the result of a debate over the decision between a radical movement that refused all talks with the military given the bloodshed, and a more moderate course of action that saw in continued protests without negotiation a reproduction of the Syrian or Libyan crisis in Sudan.

As a response, the SPA and the Forces of Freedom and Change used popular momentum and international pressure to demand the resignation of the political committee of the Military Council, which was managing negotiations with revolutionary actors. This is indeed what happened thanks to the pressure exerted by the SPA grass-root bases and the continued protests. New tasks for the transitional period, along with new demands were added to negotiation talks so that those involved in the violent dispersal of the General Command sit-in would be held accountable. This also resulted in more radical positions vis-à-vis the previous regime and the military.

During the two months between the dispersal of the sit-in and the signing of the agreement between the Military Council and the Forces of Freedom and Change, the SPA combined negotiations, protests, and lobbying as a strategy to impose its demands on the military. On 4 August, the Military Council represented by Hemetti, and the Forces of Freedom and Change represented by Ahmad Rabih – a "founding member of the SPA" – signed the draft constitutional declaration "that consisted of 70 legal articles specifying how power will be transferred from the Military Council to the Sovereign Council and other transitional state bodies."[41]

The SPA's role in the negotiation process was not limited to being a voice for the people's demands, it also included coordinating between different blocs and resolving differences and disputes within the Coalition of Forces of Freedom and Change itself – namely between the Sudan Appeal and National Consensus coalitions. The SPA also had a role in communicating with the motivated base and providing information about the negotiation path and developments. The Policies Committee at the SPA-Freedom and Change was the main body that prepared the terms of negotiation with the Military Council. They had the same output, in terms of the structures of the executive authority and legislative council, and the civilian-military sovereignty council. The rationale behind the military's participation in power was the need for them to ensure security during the transitional period and prevent a military coup.

On 21 August 2019, following the successful mediation of the African Union and the Ethiopian Prime Minister, as well as the support of the United States and the European Union, a 39-month transitional phase was launched to end with elections. During this phase, power would be shared between the army and the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change – which was seen as the leader of the popular movement. Both parties signed a political declaration that reversed the balance of power between the transitional Military Council and the Forces of Freedom and Change.[42] The declaration also outlined the nature of the partnership between the two blocs and their respective political goals. They also signed a constitutional agreement that included details on governance structures and requirements needed during the transitional period, especially for the peace process with armed groups. Among basic measures, the Military Council was dissolved and the Sovereignty Council was formed. It consists of a combination of military and civilians, with more civilians in number. Abdullah Adam Hamdok, who was nominated for the post by the SPA, was selected as prime minister.[43]

However, the relationship between the SPA and the government whose prime minister the SPA had named was riddled with tensions. In January 2020, the SPA harshly criticized the government for violating the constitutional agreement by appointing three ministers of state, while the document stipulated that the cabinet should not have more than 20 ministers.[44] The relationship between the SPA and the government was further shaken, especially after disputes over the government's stance – either supporting or opposing its policies and measures for the transitional phase – between the Forces of Freedom and Change, on one hand, and the SPA and resistance committees, on the other hand. The latter even called for the million-person protest on 30 June. Abdullah Hamdok gave a televised address to the Sudanese people on the evening of 29 June 2020, showing

that the message was well-received. He stated that within two weeks, a series of decisions would be made to rectify the course of his government and make a ministerial reshuffle that would include seven ministries. However, the resistance committees, along with some political forces that believe that the government had accomplished nothing after nearly a year in power, insisted upon taking to the streets and calling for the appointment of civilian governors across the states, as well as the establishment of a legislative council, and prosecuting old regime figures. They also called for resuming an investigation into the massacre of the General Command of the Army sit-in dispersal and improving the country's economic state.[45]

Hamdok tried to calm the SPA's anger and the resistance committees by dismissing the Minister of Health, a defecting SPA member. He kept his promise to change six other ministers. He also promised to respond to the million-person procession of 30 June. However, when the structures of the transitional authority were being identified, the SPA announced that its leadership would not participate in any level of government. However, it nominated people for a number of positions within the quotas allocated to blocs affiliated with the Coalition of Forces of Freedom and Change. These nominations included Mohammed Hassan al-Taishi for Sovereign Council member, Abdullah Adam Hamdok for Prime Minister, and Lina el-Sheikh for Minister of Social Development and Labour. At a later stage, some SPA leaders occupied some government positions, such as Rashid Saeed Yaacoub; Deputy Minister of Culture and Information; Amjad Farid Kabir; Assistant to the Prime Minister; and Taha Othman, a member of the Empowerment Elimination and Anti-Corruption Committee – a committee affiliated with the Sovereign Council.

Over time, the SPA became divided into two camps: one in support of the Hamdok government and also demanding that the Freedom and Change entity be safeguarded, while the other called for the elimination of both so that they could be held responsible for the failures of the past period. This adds to the complexity of the matter. The sharp polarization within the SPA, and the Forces of Freedom and Change, help us understand the problematic aspects that have hindered forward movement on many important issues. It has also pointed to the presence of a large gap between the government and supporters. This issue is exploited by parties that want to maximize and consolidate their gains during, and also well beyond the transitional period. Others are seizing the opportunity to take power, namely the remnants of the old regime who benefit from disputes among revolutionary actors by using the rifts to reinforce their presence with the people. This, however, does not negate the presence of partisan differences. To add to rifts, there were also accusations that the Sudanese Communist Party "hijacked" the SPA and tried to infiltrate professional bodies at the expense of its allies, hence jeopardizing the SPA.[46]

In the context of the crisis between the SPA and Forces of Freedom and Change, the SPA was very critical of the Central Council of the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change. Tensions grew following the Juba Agreement for Peace between the government and some armed groups. The agreement required some amendments to the constitutional document that was to be endorsed. The SPA believed that the agreement would introduce unnecessary constitutional and legal complications to the transitional period, especially amidst an already precarious political situation. According to the SPA, it was possible to develop a way to implement the agreement without tampering with the constitutional document that was subject to various views. However, despite some flaws, it represented a consensual reference for managing the transitional phase, through understandings between the Forces of Freedom and Change and the Military Council. The current form of government was even shaped based on this reference. As a result, the SPA began making the same accusations towards the Forces of Freedom and Change as the one used by the Military Council to evade negotiations with SPA after al-Bashir's ouster. These would include accusations regarding how the Central Council of the Forces of Freedom and Change was formed, as it was perceived as being unrepresentative of the revolutionary players; and therefore, does not reflect all of their opinions. This means that the Council is not authorized to unilaterally form a Legislative Council, or qualified to represent all rebels.[47] As such, the SPA may also be at risk of cracks and divisions due to the sharp polarization marking the transitional period, as well as the complexities of the Sudanese scene. Other contributing factors could be the SPA's inability to balance between its relationship with the government and its constituent union bodies, as well as its relationship with grassroots movements, or its evolution into an organizational political body that has already served its purpose. To stay relevant and prevent this from happening, the SPA must reinforce any connections it has with the professional and labour demands that are still relevant to the Sudanese people.

SPA: Matching Structures and Roles

When it was first established, the SPA could have been described as an entity whose role is to improve and develop trade unions that could take independent, professional action. However, given the stalemate in the public sphere and the developing situation in Sudan, the SPA found itself caught in a transformation well beyond its organizational and administrative capacities. The SPA has made several attempts to adapt to new developments, by modifying its structure, alliances, or roles. Perhaps, engaging in an alliance with some political forces, then leading a political coalition greater than the sum of its constituent bodies – such as the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change – was a major cause of the current disruption in its overall roles and composition.

Despite the developments in terms of its structure and roles, some believe that the SPA has not yet evolved from a unifying professional and organizational entity to a partner capable of governing the transitional period. So far, its future roles are not even clear. The SPA is still struggling with defining its future roles and their appropriate structure. This confusion is evident in the expulsion and then re-admittance of some bodies that sometimes disagreed with the association's leadership. Therefore, the structure, regulations and role of the SPA do not meet the requirements of the current transitional phase. The revolution won and the SPA has become a partner in governance through various ways, including choosing some ministers and officials, recommending some of its members for governance positions in various neighbourhood and regions, or by sometimes playing the role of the opposition. To keep up with pace of this stage,[48] the SPA needs to develop a new path towards modernization.

The SPA's alliances truly affect its structure. Given its membership in a broader political coalition, such as the Forces of Freedom and Change, there seemed to be competing roles between the two blocs, with signs of conflict already surfacing. The SPA accused the Central Council of Forces of Freedom of siding with the government and trying to unilaterally form a Legislative Council that didn't represent the Sudanese people. Meanwhile, the Central Council accused the SPA council and its Secretariat of being politicized and left-leaning, hence damaging its role as a union and professional entity. This heated dispute led to the SPA breaking away from the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change on 25 July 2020.[49] This dispute is based on a conflict of roles, weak coordination, and opposing sides. Since the revolution which fostered their alliance was over, the SPA and factions associated with Freedom and Change movement are now polarized. If disputes between the two movements continue at this rate, it may lead either to the dissolution of the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change or the SPA itself – especially since alliances and coalitions between the two entities overlap both vertically and horizontally. Although the SPA was a key player in disseminating the Declaration of Freedom and Change, the SPA's withdrawal is a severe blow to the latter. The SPA and relevant alliances need new mechanisms to handle the ever-growing transitional tasks required to achieve post-revolutionary success with local, regional, and international support.

Problems faced by the Forces of Freedom and Change and the balance of power between its constituent political parties also reflect on the SPA. They both suffer from structural weakness, given the differences in the political weight of fundamental constituents within this coalition. They have different intellectual and political directions, a lack of unified leadership, and the inability to create consensus on decision-making mechanisms. This was clear when the Revolutionary Front – which represents the armed movements in the conflict-rife regions of Darfur, South Kordofan and the Blue Nile – began to object to the initial political agreement in July between the Military Council and the forces of Freedom and Change.[50] The Revolutionary front is an essential movement with the forces of Freedom and Change.

Some SPA leaders believe that the organization's increased politicization during the revolution and transitional period had distanced it from its trade union essence. They also believe that it brought some differences among its members to the surface, thus exposing structural weakness. It also became clear that long-term harmony between union entities within the SPA had caused the organization to neglect establishing an internal conflict management mechanism.[51]

Based on requirements set by the Sudanese political scene, as long as the SPA does not separate its professional tasks from its political role and partisan commitments, it could be viewed as a temporary functional organization whose existence is linked to the state of the transitional period. Given its current composition, the SPA is not expected to transform at any stage into a political party because it lacks the necessary elements and conditions for this transformation.

SPA Future Prospects

Like many political and social actors in Sudan, the SPA is still trying to answer the long-overdue post-independence questions about the state. These included questions of governance, the constitution, as well as the relationship between religion and state – which remains a complex issue in Sudan. Some questions centre on citizenship and how Sudan deals with different nationalities and ethnicities, as well as various economic reforms that could guarantee a fair distribution of resources among the different ethnicities and groups. The SPA is considering these matters during the transitional period as a permanent constitution and election law are drafted.[52]

In this context, the SPA presented its vision for the country, the economic system, and the governance model in Sudan during the transitional phase in two papers on 21 April 2019, just days after the ousting of al-Bashir: "A Proposal for Governance Structures and Drafting the Constitution for the Transitional Period in Sudan" and "A Proposal for the Characteristics of Rescue Program for Sudan during the Transitional Period."[53] It is a vision based on a civil, democratic state that relies on the values of freedom, dignity, social justice, equal citizenship, separation of powers, and the rule of law. The rescue plan focuses on urgent economic measures for the transitional period, addressing living hardships, and ending the war by achieving peace with armed movements. It also touches on increasing economic stability by maximizing production and focusing on the agricultural sector, civil service reforms, healthcare, and educational reforms. It also discusses how to achieve justice in the distribution of wealth and power and building balanced economic trade relations with neighbouring border countries. The SPA presents detailed policy points and alternatives to the current situation. Therefore, it is vital for the SPA that decision-makers in Sudan include these policies and alternatives in their agenda during the transitional period.

The SPA is also trying to play the role of mediator between the Forces of Freedom and Change and union and professional groups on the other side. In addition, it is trying to ensure that it has oversight over the transitional period, whether by pushing for the establishment of executive institutions, Empowerment Elimination Committees, or by lobbying for the restructuring of the Central Council of the Forces of Freedom and Change to ensure a balanced representation in the Legislative Council. To this date, both entities are still disputing the details. The SPA is still critical of how the Forces of Freedom and Change manages its relationship with the SPA, other political factions, and the government. Freedom and Change is a political coalition, whereas the SPA is still trying to maintain its union and professional form.

The SPA still needs to support and train its cadre to manage and balance the relationship between union and professional action, on one hand, and political activities, on the other. It also needs to build capacities in managing consensus and negotiations with other political factions. In this context, it is possible to hold workshops that bring together groups of the Sudanese Professionals Association and some regional union organizations such as the Tunisian General Labour Union and strong union organizations in Algeria, Morocco, and Jordan.

To overcome current challenges, the SPA needs to reconsider administrative and structural arrangements implemented by its constituent entities in its early days and engage new entities and members, especially when drafting new regulations or adopting annual action plans. Therefore, the SPA needs training on how to plan strategically and develop think tanks to be able to support its work and enhance its performance and structures.

Interview list:

The interviewees were chosen based on the following matrix:

Suggested interview list:

Category (has at least one man or one woman at each level)	Men	Women
SPA leaders	2	1
SPA Members	1	1
SPA Members who came into power after the revolution	1	1
Unions that dealt with the SPA	1	1
Government officials that dealt with the SPA	1	1
Parties that dealt with the SPA	1	1
Civil society organizations that dealt with the SPA	1	1

Ibrahim Hasballah Abdul Mawla, member of the Democratic Veterinary Committee, member of the Secretariat of the Sudanese Professionals Association, personal interview in his office in the Animal Production Research Centre, Khartoum North, Sudan, 1 October 2020, 11 a.m.

Ihsan Fakiri, member of the Sudan Doctors Syndicate, activist and leader of the "No to Women›s Aggression" initiative, personal interview in her house in Kafouri neighbourhood, Khartoum North, 5 October 2020, 5 p.m.

Ahmad Rabih Sayed Ahmad, member of the Teachers' Committee, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Council, personal interview in his office in AL Moa'lem Medical City, Khartoum, Sudan, 7 October 2020, 6 p.m.

Qamariya Omar Mohamed Hussein, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Council, member of the Teachers' Committee, personal interview on 27 September 2020, 10 a.m., in her office in the State Ministry of Education, Khartoum, Khartoum North, Sudan.

Mohammed Naji al-Assam, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Council, member of the Central Committee of Sudan Doctors, personal interview on 7 October 2020, 10 p.m., Africa Conference Hall, International University of Africa, Khartoum, Sudan.

Faisal Bashir Bakhit, member of the Professionals Association Council, member of the Central Council of the Forces of Freedom and Change, member of the Engineers Union Restoration Initiative, personal interview in his office in Khartoum 2, 8

October 2020, 2 p.m., Khartoum, Sudan.

Salah Jaafar, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Council, member of Professional Pharmacists Association, personal interview on 30 September 2020, 5 p.m., Sudanese Professionals Association headquarters, Khartoum, Sudan.

Samaher Al Mubarak, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Council and Secretariat, member of Professional Pharmacists Association, personal interview on 30 September 2020, 8 p.m., Sudanese Professionals Association headquarters, Khartoum, Sudan.

Mohammad Omar El Sayed, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Council, member of the Democratic Coalition Lawyers, personal interview in his office, 10 October , 2020, 11 a.m., Khartoum, Sudan.

Mervat Hamad El Nil, political activist, member of the "No to Women›s Aggression" initiative, leader in the Civil Forces, personal interview, 6 October 2020, 5:00 p.m., Khartoum, Sudan.

Tamader Ismail, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Secretariat, personal interview in her office in the Ministry of Education, 7 October 2020, 9 a.m., Khartoum, Sudan.

Rashida Haroun, former candidate for the Sovereignty Council, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Council, personal interview at the Teachers' Union office, Federal Ministry of Education, 30 September 2020, 1:45 p.m., Khartoum, Sudan.

Aya Ahmad Khojaly, civil activist, president of the "We Are for Them" charitable organization, personal interview in the International University of Africa, 3 October 2020, 4:45 p.m., Khartoum, Sudan.

Muhammad Alamin Abdulaziz, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Secretariat, leader of the Sudanese Revolutionary Front, personal interview in the Grand Hotel, 1 October 2020, 3 p.m., Khartoum, Sudan.

Nujoud Najmuddin Omar, researcher and political activist, member of MANSAM, personal interview in the International University of Africa, 4 October 2020, 11 a.m., Khartoum, Sudan.

Endnotes

1 Amira Bakri Al Mahi, Sudan's Political History 1889 - 1956, Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Khartoum, Faculty of Literature, 2000, p. 114.

2 Ahmed Khair, A Generation›s Struggle, Khartoum, The Sudanese House of Books, 1970, 3rd edition, p. 75.

3 Omar Al-Bashir›s regime 1989 - 2019

4 Ihsan Fakiri, member of the Sudanese Doctors Syndicate, activist and leader of the "No to Women›s Aggression" initiative, personal interview in her house in Kafouri neighbourhood, Khartoum North, 5 October 2020, 5 p.m.

5 Al-Bashir's regime enacted the "Law on Public Interest" in 1989, according to which thousands of employees were dismissed in all sectors, claiming that the public interest required getting rid of surplus labour. This action was setting the stage for privatization and aimed to an empower his supporters in these institutions. (https://bit.ly/2SQr1vq)

6 Haider Ibrahim Ali, Civil Society and Democratic Transition in Sudan, Ibn Khaldun Center for Development and Dar Al-Amin for Publication and Distribution, Cairo, 1996, p. 147.

7 Ibrahim Hasballah Abdul Mawla, member of the Democratic Veterinary Committee, member of the Secretariat of the Sudanese Professionals Association, personal interview in his office in the Animal Production Research Centre, Khartoum North, Sudan, 1 October 2020, 11 a.m.

8 Ahmad Rabih Sayed Ahmad, member of the Teachers' Committee, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Council, personal interview in his office in AL Moa›lem Medical City, Khartoum, Sudan, 7 October 2020, 6 p.m.

9 Website of Sudanese Professionals Association: https://bit.ly/36M59UW

10 Issam El-Zayat, Declaration of Freedom and Change: 4 Forces Leading the Sudanese Revolution, Idaat, 12/4/2019, https://bit.ly/3kTexuF

11 Omar Samir, Sudan Protests: Any Prospects for a Desired Change? Arab Forum for Alternatives, https://bit.ly/2DoCrhF

12 Ibid. p. 59.

13 Atta Al-Hassan Al-Bathani, The Problem of Political Transition in Sudan, Analytical Entrance, Edited by Muhammad Ahmed Al-Filabi, Regional Center for Training and Development of Civil Society, Initiative of Professors in University of Khartoum, 1st edition, 2019, p. 58.

14 El Shafee Khodr, Revolution and Democratic Transformation in Sudan, What is Happening in the Region? Arab Forum for Alternatives, https://bit.ly/37auyHN

15 A. El Shafee Khodr, ibid.

16 Mohammed Naji Al-Assam, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Council, member of the Central Committee of Sudan Doctors, personal interview on 7 October 2020, 10 p.m., Africa Conference Hall, International University of Africa, Khartoum, Sudan.

17 SPA website, a Commitment to Build and Serve, dated 13/1/2019, http://bit.ly/3v57CF5

18 To check the charter, see al-Rakoba newspaper website, dated 30/7/2018, http://bit.ly/38dfMBF

19 Escalating disagreements in the Sudanese «Professionals» Association, and Freezing 5 Memberships, Arabi 21, 3 July 2020, https://bit.ly/3jcFjyw

20 Disagreement Over the Secretariat General of the "Sudanese Professionals Association", Anadolu Agency, 13/5/2020, https://bit.ly/2B4Zgq1

21 Escalating disagreements in the Sudanese Professionals Association, and Suspending 5 Memberships, Arabi 21, July 3rd, 2020, https://bit.ly/3jcFjyw

22 May Ali, Sudan, The SPA Secession: "The Revolution" feeds on its Children, the Lebanese newspaper «Al-Akhbar", 27/7/2020, https://bit.ly/2CPaHmF

23 Rashida Haroun, former candidate for the Sovereignty Council, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Council, personal interview at the Teachers' Union office, Federal Ministry of Education, 30 September, 2020, 1:45 p.m., Khartoum, Sudan.

24 Awad Ahmed Suleiman, The Sudanese Revolutions: Political Change or Democratic Transformation, Reading in the 19 December Revolution and its Results, Policy Analysis Series, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha, Qatar, 2019, p. 9.

25 Samaher Al Mubarak, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Council and Secretariat, member of Professional Pharmacists Association, personal interview on 30 September 2020, 8 p.m., Sudanese Professionals Association headquarters, Khartoum, Sudan.

26 El Shafee Khodr, Revolution and Democratic Transformation in Sudan, What is Happening in the Region?, previously mentioned reference

27 Faisal Bashir Bakhit, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Council, personal interview in his office in Khartoum 2, Khartoum, Sudan, 8 October 2020, 2 p.m.

28 The Sudanese Professionals Association rejects the army›s statement and calls for the sit-in to continue, TRT Arabi, 11/4/2019, https://bit.ly/30bBCRc

29 Ibn Auf steps down as head of the Military Council in Sudan, Lebanon Debate, 12/4/2020, https://bit.ly/39jBO71

30 Diplomats: The departure of Auf strengthens the power of the demonstrators› rhetoric, Tahrir news website, dated 12/4/2019, https://bit.ly/2Hw15zw

31 Sudanese Professionals Association refuses al-Burhan as a president of the transitional council, Russia Today, dated 12/4/2019, https://bit.ly/3nT0mYr

32 Qamariya Omar, previously mentioned interview.

33 The negotiation team announced by the Association included 6 of its leaders, namely, Mohammed Naji al-Assam, Taha Osman, Ahmad Rabih, Ibrahim Hasballah, Qamariya Omar and Muhammad Alamin. See Adel Abdul Rahim, Sudan.. "Professionals Association" reveals the names of its negotiating team with the military council, Anadolu Agency website, dated 13/4/2019, https://bit.ly/2IZB5gs

34 Paramilitary militias formed and composed of Janjaweed militias that used to fight on behalf of

the Sudanese government during the Darfur war.

35 El Shafee Khodr, Revolution and Democratic Transformation in Sudan, What is Happening in the Region? previously mentioned reference.

36 108 deaths and 500 injuries: the toll of the Khartoum sit-in dispersal, Al Khaleej Online, 6/6/2019, https://bit.ly/3j5SP79

37 108 deaths and 500 injuries: the toll of the Khartoum sit-in dispersal, Al Khaleej Online, 6/6/2019, https://bit.ly/3j5SP79

38 Ahmad Rabih Sayed Ahmad, previously mentioned interview.

39 Arab Center for Research, Sudan: Where is the crisis heading after the sit-in dispersal?, 13/6/2019, https://bit.ly/2ZzE5pk

40 Mohammed Naji al-Assam, previously mentioned interview.

41 The «Constitutional Document for the Transitional Period for 2019» can be viewed via the following link: https://bit.ly/3m65hop

42 . Atta Al-Hassan Al-Bathani, The Problem of Political Transition in Sudan: Analytical Entrance, Edited by Muhammad Ahmed Al-Filabi, Regional Center for Training and Development of Civil Society, 2019, p. 74.

43 Sudan... Hamdok and the Professionals Association look into securing "paths for the procession of millions of June 30th", Anadolu Agency, https://bit.ly/3j66smP

44 Abdel Hamid Awad, Sudan: Professionals Association sharply criticizes Hamdok›s government, the New Arab, dated 26/1/2020, https://bit.ly/35YxEzo

45 Al Ser Sayed Ahmad, Is Sudan on the path of a new political alignment?, Assafir, 24/7/2020, https://bit.ly/3jTs2eT

46 Muhammad Abu al-Fadl, Party polarization multiplies the crisis of Professionals Association in Sudan, Alarab newspaper website, dated 10/6/2020, https://bit.ly/3kZySi0

47 Official page of the Sudanese Professionals Association, dated 16/11/2020, https://www.facebook.com/SdnProAssociation

48 Salah Jaafar, previously mentioned interview.

49 Aljazeera.net, Sudanese Professionals Association withdraws from the Alliance of Freedom and Change Forces, dated 25/7/2020, https://bit.ly/35Zqjzw

50 Khaled Osman Alfeel, The agreement of the Sudanese parties and the challenges of the transitional period, Aljazeera Centre for Studies, dated 5/9/2019, https://bit.ly/338oD5F

51 . Samaher Al Mubarak, previously mentioned interview.

52 El Shafee Khodr, Revolution and Democratic Transformation in Sudan, What is Happening in the Region? previous reference.

53 For more information, check the two papers on the SPA website: https://bit.ly/3fvuqq7

25

Algeria:

Independent Unions and the Stalled Democratic Transition

Nacer Djabi

General Overview and Key Questions

This analysis starts by providing a brief historical overview of Algeria's trade union experience. It considers the movement's historical depth, doctrinal foundations, and significant milestones. It then explores the conditions that contributed to the rise of independent unions in their earliest form, as well as their evolution over time in terms of demands, labour rules, and utilized methods of expressing demands – such as prolonged and recurrent strikes. The study also examines the relationships between unions and official political institutions, which directly introduced roles assumed by skilled middle-class workers during a time of political and socio-economic turmoil. This situation has raised concerns from middle-class Algerians, who have become accustomed to the comfort zone and protection of the rentier national state and have therefore turned to union action – a novelty for the middle class.

Since Algeria's independence, skilled middle-class groups have acted as a "political force" and a sizeable part of the regime's social base within national state institutions. Their union, party, and administrative experiences were fundamental to state bureaucracy. These groups also promoted ideological propaganda from within official educational, religious, and media structures they monopolized. They were empowered by their education and command of the Arabic and French languages in a society that suffered from illiteracy in the first years following independence. However, when more factions of Algerian society became educated, these groups lost some of their functions and advantages.

The main focus of this study addresses the roles of independent unions and union members both as individuals and elites. They emerged to partake in the political labour movement that Algeria had fostered to demand democratic change, following the Arab Spring. Protest movements began in January 2011 and reproduced the now-prevailing form of popular protest in Algeria until the start of the popular Hirak movement in 2019, which was distinguished in several ways. Then came the COVID-19 pandemic, the subsequent economic crisis, and further social and political fallout.[1]

Algeria has in recent years witnessed a highly dynamic political period, with the launch of the Zeralda conference,[2] where the democratic transition was considered for the first time by a wide range of opposition parties from across the political and intellectual spectrum around specific political demands.[3] The participation of unions took many forms, such as union Organizations, while some union leaders preferred to participate as public figures to preserve their union role set forth by law.[4] They also had concerns about the unity and cohesiveness of unions, which were made up of activists from various political backgrounds who do not necessarily share the same ideologies.[5] However, this position did not prevent some union members from supporting the transition or engaging in the political sphere as known national figures. Independent unions have transformed into pivotal collective participants advocating for social demands.

These events took place at a time of crisis for a regime that refused to engage in reforms. There were several opportunities the regime could have seized to achieve a smooth democratic transition, facilitated by at least three important factors. For one, the country's improved financial situation could have covered the social cost of the transition. Also, a new school of thought overtook the masses, with a focus on popular socio-economic demands. It was characterized by negotiation and compromise. It overtook the culturalist and religious rhetoric that had prevailed during the 1990s. At the time, this rhetoric had turned into a real obstacle that prevented various parties from engaging in negotiations and reaching consensual solutions.[6]

As a result, Algeria was pushed into what was described as a civil war with high human and material costs. International and regional lobbyists also advocated for political reforms. The regime introduced some reforms by announcing a constitutional amendment, promoting audio-visual investments in the private sector, and issuing a new law for associations and political parties. However, these reforms fell short of the opposition's expectations and failed to address the imploding political situation. This was confirmed a few years later in February 2019. To learn about the role of unions within this context, the study will focus on this political period, which was characterized by widespread calls for democratic transition. The role of unions

exposed the Algerian regime's inability to change and engage in democratic transition. Based on historical experiences and lessons learned, this stance became a well-established political ideology among official political figures, military institutions, and the Algerian elites.

Key Questions and the Study's Problématique

It would be difficult to grasp the pluralistic experience fostered by independent unions in Algeria, without reflecting on the history of unions in the country,[7] as well as their socio-professional rules and roles inside and outside the labour market. The experiences of union and their relationship with official political and institutional entities between 1962-1988 (while it persisted) should be considered. That dynamic had many comparable traits to other Arab and African experiences, especially during a historical period characterized by single-party systems and unionism.

The single union – the General Union of Algerian Workers (l'Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens - UGTA) monopolized union action in both public and private sectors, as well as all economic sectors, including the service industry and administration. The agricultural sector was dominated by the General Union of Algerian Farmers, but it later lost its advocacy function after the transformation of the Algerian agricultural sector and the move from large and medium-sized private ownership of European colonists to self-managed properties in the post-independence era, and finally back to privatization in the early 1990s.

Union action first began in the industrial and service sectors, mainly in the private sector during the post-independence period. At the time, the state-owned public sector rose to prominence as a competing economic sector, as a result of the nationalization of foreign companies expanding further, or the construction of new public institutions following the launch of development projects in the mid-1970s.[8]

During the colonial period, union experience in Algeria was characterized by pluralism on French and Algerian soil. It involved Algerian workers, namely unskilled workers who were most likely uprooted from their rural origins, as well as city dwellers who joined the service sectors, such as rail transportation. This union experience was regulated by the General Confederation of Labour (CGT), close to the Communist Party.[9] It was also the most relevant for Algerian workers, given their lack of skills as rural individuals who had only recently joined the industrial workforce. They were more focused on material and economic demands, rather than qualitative ones. At the time, connections to holistic socio-political movements and demand action were greatly politicized. This notion had a long-term ideological impact on the Algerian union experience until the 1980s and persisted until the rise of independent unions that changed the focus of demands.

Algerian workers had also joined the French CGT for political reasons. It presented the least hostile stance to calls for independence, which was a top priority for Algerian workers, even in terms of economic and social demands. Algerian workers held important positions in industrial sectors, such as mechanics and mines during the golden age of the French labour movement in the early 1950s. In addition, the national union experience – which used the same socially-diverse vessel – was characterized by its involvement in the service sector, such as railways and healthcare. This experience helped provide the national union movement with union frameworks and was behind the formation of the General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA), given the skills of workers in these sectors – namely the hired middle class.

In addition to this ideological legacy – derived from the French union experience on both French and Algerian soil – one must not forget the pivotal role of national political ideology at the time, which was marked by strong labour and union movements in France and around the world. This ideology had a clear impact on union philosophies since the very beginning of the national movement in the 1920s. At the time, workers in the diaspora – especially France – had formed its social base. This gave Algerian nationalism a labour element before the Algerian War of Independence, which led the national movement to draw more on its small peasant and bourgeois nature in creating elites and refining its political doctrine.

This populist political doctrine was re-adopted post-independence by the national state. During that time, society was more familiar with and vulnerable to class discrimination, so the wider public was not accustomed to preserving or defending the economic rights of individuals and groups. Therefore, it was acceptable for the idea of union monism to be enshrined as part of a broader monism in politics as well.

Independence: How and When?

The Constitution of 23 February 1989 and laws governing union action had to be enacted in 1990[10] at this political juncture to enable the legal establishment of independent unions that recognized workers' rights to strike and form political parties. It was not unusual for most of these unions to exist within public institutions, such as in the education sector, health, and public administration where the state was the employer. However, there were a few unions in the air transport and public industrial sectors that continued to be monopolized by the UGTA as a general rule. The public employment sectors are characterized by the in-house training of the workforce, with working conditions similar to those of the hired middle-level groups. These dynamics will be discussed in detail when considering union and political representation, as well as their strong engagement in framing elections.

Employees and many skilled groups have long suffered in their work throughout the post-independence period, and even before the historical union legacy. This was due to the unions' perception at the time, which focused on a homogeneous approach that refused to cater to any sectoral or professional peculiarities. This experience prompted employees – which were growing in number – to leave official unions at the first opportunity when the 1989 Constitution allowed the formation of independent unions that catered to the specificities of their skills and demands.

These employees were convinced that they would be able to gain greater negotiating power and focus on their long-ignored demands if they organized themselves independently. In old unions, which were dominated by industrial and low-skilled workers, collective demands dominated the discourse. They were material demands promoted based on a centralized decision that was difficult to influence on a sectoral level. It was negotiated with the central public authority, the government, or sometimes even the presidency.[11] It happened several times following covert labour strikes in the public sector as well as authorised strikes in the private sector.[12]

Algeria has indeed witnessed a historical union experience. State employees, such as educators and professors assumed important roles more relevant to their skill sets, qualifications, and speech and writing abilities within the political union experience as a part of state bureaucracy that has expanded over time.[13] These roles also granted state employees more participation in framing and benefiting from municipal and legislative elections under single parties, pluralist parties, and civil society associations. Educators became more recognized and played several roles in the public sphere, including representation and management, at the local, municipal, and national legislative levels. This dynamic lasted for years before more educated, qualified, and socially diverse groups emerged to compete for the roles that the older generations had largely monopolized in the past. This may be one of the reasons why educators leaned towards independent union action after the decline of their financial and symbolic social status. Their traditional roles of union and political representation were outdated and had reached a dead end.

Unions have long suffered from non-recognition, following the enactment of laws by the government of Mouloud Hamrouche on the right to form independent unions and the right to strike in 1990. These laws adopted various reforms in the context of the events of 5 October 1988 and the ratification of the 1989 Constitution. The government had faced a difficult economic, political, and security situation that eventually triggered its resignation. The country then plunged into crisis as a by-product of the poor facilitation of the transition period following the invalidation of the 1992 legislative elections' results. The political and security situation was not conducive to the emergence of an independent union experience, following the precarious security situation in urban areas where these new unions were active.

This had represented the first failed attempt at political transition by the Algerian regime after the country's independence at a time of great uncertainty and conflict among various constituents of political and military elites. It ended with a political stalemate that turned into civil war once new political players entered the scene, causing a reshuffle of official political elites. The regime was used to resolving political conflicts internally among a small number of groups who had monopolized power. The government was far disconnected from the public, who mobilized during this radical political moment when the regime had little legitimacy.

The economic situation was also not conducive to developing a new union experience. The economy was in a state of disarray following the adoption of options in favour of the market economy and private initiatives with all their negative implications for the public economic sector. This was new for the state, which was the first investor and employer in the country. These decisions were implemented at a time of economic crisis that later resulted in mass layoffs and the privatization of public enterprises. This benefited, however, both Algerian and foreign private investors. These measures were enacted with uncertainty and lack of transparency amid a political crisis that only grew more complex in a new media environment, alien to Algerians. Rumours, misinformation, and poor professionalism were on the rise as independent media platforms emerged in a country with a nascent media and journalism sector. This juncture strongly reflected the political turmoil that was characterized by deep conflict between political and military elites within and outside regime institutions. The Kasdi Merbah government, which ushered in the post-October period, was forced to resign after one year in office – from 9 November 1988 to 9 September 1989. It was then succeeded by the Hamrouche government, which was marred by upheaval and political instability. The government resigned on 4 June 1991 in the wake of a general strike by the Islamic Salvation Front protesting the project to divide electoral districts, which was accused of favouring the National Liberation Front. At the time, the regime relied heavily on elections as a mechanism to achieve a political transition that failed to secure any real consensus.[14]

Adding on to political disorder, unions were now faced with a backlash and crackdown by the state even after they were legally recognized. Unions were denied access to halls for meetings and prevented from distributing memos and leaflets. Some union members were threatened and bribed, as part of the state's various crackdown methods. This was due to the bureaucratic mindsets of officials and political elites who had long been created under the umbrella of one single party. Political elites had also been struggling with internal rivalry with the new elites who were created after the emergence of political and media pluralism. These official elites struggled to shed the by-products of their political upkeep. They refused to deal with new union figures in the workplace, whether in hospitals, schools, or public administration roles. As a result, work relations had been reshuffled in an environment managed directly by the state as an employer at a time of political and security crisis.

It took a long time for state bureaucrats to accept the idea of

engaging directly with independent unions, even as unions have become key mobilizers of social and political life following Algeria's re-established political stability at the start of the new millennium in 2012. Between 1992 and 2002, unions played a minimal role for almost a decade after their legal recognition. This was due to the political crisis in Algeria that had made it very difficult for individuals to engage in advocacy and union action. As a result, unions were stuck in a grey area for a very long time.

Independent Unions: From Legal Recognition to Negotiations

Independent unions have been able to cement their presence in many sectors, including health, education, and public administration. Unions had managed to organize and include large numbers of their staff members across national and local institutions in the country. Employees had distanced themselves from the UGTA structures, which were present but became ineffective in these sectors. The UGTA focused on fulfilling the political roles associated with the strategies of the official regime as usual, despite the unprecedented union internal struggle that resulted from splintering ranks. These divisions led to the establishment of new independent unions that were off to a strong start.

These unions showed a strong capacity to recruit by resorting to prolonged and frequent sectoral strikes over categorical demands at a time of financial growth for the employer, i.e., the national state. They helped professional groups obtain reasonable wage increases and therefore contributed to the improvement of their lives. This achievement helped unions regain credibility and distance themselves from the negative reputation associated with the old experience. It also gave union action greater legitimacy among new groups and attracted the attention of the local and international press.

The recurrence of such strikes across critical sectors – such as education, health, transportation, and public administration – forced officials to negotiate with unions. The legal deterrence method – the state's basic strategy – had failed, as did its stalling to legally recognize unions. Indeed, the state had stalled and refused to recognize unions in various ways, such as denying union members official cards, even after all legal conditions had been met. The state's procrastination went on for years, forcing new unions into a state of unknown legal status. The report of the Federal Commission of Inquiry of the International League for Human Rights noted that after 10 years of constitutional and legal recognition of independent unions, they remained subject to violations and discriminations by the state. These violations were not limited to finances. In this same context, the justice system had been used to declare strikes illegal, before or even after they had occurred. It put into question the people's right to strike. However, this did not prevent unions from organizing regular strikes[15] to force the state to negotiate. This was not an easy task under a regime that vehemently refused the independent representation of its citizens. The old guard in Algeria always believed itself to be the only qualified representative of the people, especially the middle class which it has always kept close.

The bureaucratic state could not continue refusing to negotiate with unions for much longer. This is because independent unions had often succeeded in crippling economic activity through recurrent strikes that sometimes lasted for several days in critical sectors, such as education, health, and public administration.[16]

Negotiations would not have been possible if the bureaucratic state and its elites did not change their minds. This was thanks to consistent engagement and contact between official actors and unionists concerning the strikes and other protest movements. Negotiations, however, would have been futile if ministers enjoyed long tenure, as was the case of the Minister of Education, Boubekeur Benbouzid.[17] Similarly, independent unions had clashed with Minister of Education Nouria Benghabrit on issues of union action, culture, and values.[18] These conflicts were further aggravated by media coverage, which focused on some of the minister's real and fictitious characteristics, as well as family and educational trajectory.[19] The media fuelled social tensions by asserting that the state's financial situation was strong enough to meet some of the demands expressed by the strikes, such as better wages and other demands related to working conditions.

The state's comfortable financial situation helped facilitate the launch of some sectoral negotiations between the concerned minister and sector unions, mostly supported by the Prime Minister. However, these talks did not amount to formal negotiations at the level of the government, which refused to involve independent unions. As such, the UGTA maintained its monopoly on the representation of workers in Algeria under the pretext that it is a "pluralistic" professional union – a strong confederation with the status independent unions cannot obtain as they represent only one professional group, such as the health sector, education, or administration.

The government's flexibility in negotiating with these unions would not have been possible had it not been for their success in winning the battle for public opinion. Unions still won over the public even after resorting to recurrent strikes across key sectors that had negatively impacted the daily lives of Algerians. Unions succeeded, partly thanks to the support of the independent media. Union groups, however, did not have the support of official media, which was private but still aligned with the government, nor that of rival political forces that were against union protests.[20]

The authorities had rejected all requests to establish an independent labour confederation that had been developed since the start of the millennium. However, unions could have participated in formal negotiations organized regularly by governments, with employer unions in attendance[21] as well as the UGTA, which still maintained its monopoly over official labour

representation, despite the weak and chaotic performance. This confirmed the government's concern with the emergence of an independent labour confederation to rival the UGTA. Unlike the early 1990s that shook the regime in the wake of October 1988 and forced it into political openness, this period was not marked by the same reformist will. (The Constitution of 1989 had recognized unions, parties, and their right to strike.)

The confederation project was aimed at reducing class divisions in the independent union experience and expanding its limited demands, which focused on wage concerns within the public employment sector. It could have created a new power balance, not only within the labour force but also in the political arena. The government was aware of this possibility and thus refused to accredit the confederation (which was then made up of 13 unions) even after it was officially established in November 2018. However, this refusal did little to prevent these unions from turning to joint protests and strikes under the name of the Education or Health Union Coordination Committee, as was the case in May 2021. This resulted in a strike led by Civil Protection Forces who sought to escalate their actions by organizing a march to the Presidency of the Republic on 2 May 2021. Police confronted the protesters using CS gas near the Presidential Residence.

This strike had raised regular professional demands, but it was prohibited by the judiciary based on an analysis that focused on the peculiarity of the Civil Protection agency, which was technically not entitled to strike. Penalties and legal action were imposed on 230 members who were suspended from active duty. At the time, two different official approaches were discernible. The first one focused on pointing accusations against the protest movement, as per usual during the last period. The second approach saw the President of the Republic calling for dialogue with social partners on the occasion of the Council of Ministers meeting. It coincided with the march of the Civil Protection Forces towards the Presidential Residence, thus repeating what police had done in October 2014. This gave labour strikes a clear political dimension. They were carried out amidst an intense political and social environment driven by imminent legislative elections to be organized following the demands of Hirak. The movement had returned in full swing after halting activities due to COVID-19 but was now faced with a new approach from officials. The state's new approach was to ban marches and use force to disperse protesters, as was the case during demonstrations in Ramadan.[22] The political space was tense, as confirmed by an editorial in an army magazine, which pointed accusations towards protest movements: "Under the cover of protest movements and social demands, subversive parties continue their destructive and provocative operations by inciting workers and employees of certain sectors to organize strikes that may appear to be claiming rights on the surface, but that seek to thwart the upcoming legislative elections, thereby dragging the country into unnecessary chaos. These parties and those who had prepared for bombings against citizens are two sides of the same coin. Their purpose is to bring Algeria to its knees. They will spare no effort to implement subversive plans aimed at galvanizing the masses and spreading chaos, using shortages in goods, rising prices, and incitement to strikes."

The President of the Republic and the Prime Minister adopted a similar tone in various official media outlets.[23] They launched a full blow anti-union campaign, claiming that the economic situation was negatively impacting the healthcare sector: "some ill-willed movements have been trying to add fuel to the fire and sow discord", as per the statement of the Prime Minister on 6 May 2021.

The Role of Independent Unions in the Hirak and Democratic Transition

By calling for action and raising demands, independent unions have objectively become political opposition even though they did not have specific political demands. This focus on professional demands did not prevent some union activists from participating in the Muzfran Conference for Democratic Transition that provided a space for consultations and deliberations for political groups and unions for several years between 2014 and 2017 and called for a political transition. The conference was marked by the participation of unions,[24] in the second meeting on 30 March 2016, to assert the outcomes of the first meeting held on 10 June 2014.[25] Several issues had been raised at the time regarding the democratic transition agreed upon by various political movements, including the national, democratic, and Islamist currents as well as national[26] and union figures. Political roles were assumed given the unrest and warning signs of a regime in crisis as it prepared for presidential elections, constitutional amendments, and 2017 legislative elections. These were just some of the reasons that sparked the first-of-its-kind conference in political life. Participating parties had failed to coordinate their positions on legislative elections, which they entered as divided forces – except for the political alliance that enabled the Islamist parties to engage in elections,[27] between the Justice and Development Front and the Movement of Society for Peace, which consisted of offshoot parties from main movements. Some unionists affiliated with these political parties submitted their applications for these elections. Around 10 unionists won during the reduced term of parliament (2017-2021) under different party tickets. Among them were the Liberation Front, National Democratic Coalition, the Workers' Party, the Nahda Party, and the Future Party, representing the UGTA and independent unions mostly affiliated with the education sector from many states, including Southern Tamanrasset. These unionists were more loyal to party affiliations than any other union affiliation, so nothing prevented them from understanding social concerns and issues that were debated in Parliament.

In parallel with these political roles, unions have prioritized their

recognition on the ground[28] and certain categorical demands, such as raising wages,[29] and their right to strike[30] and negotiate as a representative labour party. Unions have resorted to long sectoral strikes to assert their presence. They compete among themselves as new unions that were established at about the same time as the UGTA, with which they coexist in the same sectors and workplaces, among groups that lack previous union advocacy experience and have joined union action in the same period.

These skilled hired groups joined union advocacy action rather late, after having felt a decline in their social status and prestige. The Algerian society had experienced changes that gave rise to more educated groups who competed with the older skilled generations. These new groups began to take the old guard's place in the national state, which was also starting to experience profound changes. As a result, the social base turned to the groups reaping higher economic or educational benefits from these changes, thus creating distance between lower-middle-income groups such as teachers and small state employees and the more well-off groups, such as private-sector entrepreneurs and better-educated groups. This shift was also reflected in the political stance and roles associated with governmental representation. It put these now outdated groups at a distance, despite being once used as the state's political weapon for so long within the unilateral political and union experience. As such, the unionists associated with the "old guard" turned to raising demands and union action to offset their loss of social status.

Not all skilled groups that were impacted by the economic liberalization and the new market economy joined independent union action, which was launched in the early1990s by middle-income employees. This was also the case with state employees; technocrats from the public industrial sector also preferred to build a professional association that did not necessarily focus on demands, but on defending the public sector. These segments felt threatened by the country's new and more formal economic choices made available by the private sector.

This strategy made industrial public-sector elites – who were an intrinsic part of the state's technocracy – feel threatened. They also moved closer to state institutions. These attempts were illustrated by their engagement in tripartite meetings as representatives of public industry structures. Their position was very much aligned with the UGTA and was utilized to broker a strategic deal between industrial workers, the historic "old guard" union, and public-sector frameworks. However, it ultimately failed to address an efficient process of dismantling the public sector.

In practice, these options created greater heterogeneity within this technocratic occupational group. This group is mainly compromised of engineers and industrial sector leaders who were a by-product of the economic and social transformations that followed after widespread higher education in Algeria. The heterogeneity of this group of middle level hired workers, which could be their reason for not joining union action like employees, has further increased. This was the case of teachers, professors, and doctors who had strong participation in union action after this group's decline in economic and symbolic standing following the transformation of the industrial public sector.[31]

Public sector senior officials have employed various strategies that confirmed the understanding of labour groups and continued to be a part of the UGTA and refused to move towards independent unions, as was the case with employees. It can only be explained by the various paths that characterized this professional group. Some components benefited from the economic transition and privatization. This transition is geared towards working in the national and international private sector. Some professional groups had benefited by taking advantage of the unbundling of sectors, just as those who had built their institutions to move from an employee to an employer position in sectors they used to manage in the public sphere. Other groups remained in their positions in the public sector without substantial change. The variety of strategies could explain why there was no move towards union action that did not have a strong presence in this occupational group historically before these economic transformations. It acted as a manager but not owner or employer in the public sector, with all the privileges attached to this position. Therefore, this specific professional group entered into many conflicts with workers and their unions, especially in economic sectors with management issues and a precarious financial situation.

The strategy now relied on taking advantage of pluralism in unions and parties among these central groups in all their positions. It allowed some unionists to join Parliament as representatives of different party movements.[32] On the other hand, these unions used the pluralist media scene, including numerous television stations, to highlight leading figures, who became part of the social elites that emerged after pluralism. It opened up the audio-visual space that allowed private television to emerge after 2012. This was in addition to the coverage provided by pluralistic print media platforms, which remarkably covered the protest movements of independent unions. The media reflected the positive image that Algerian society had of unions and demand action, although independent unions organized protests and strikes that had a direct impact on family life. Union activities would often disrupt collective services provided in a society that was already plagued with poor and deteriorating services in terms of healthcare, transportation, or education.[33]

Independent unions became a central collective actor during this period, as parties also tried to reinvigorate their activities. It was set apart by engaging in elections, as was the case in 2017. Many citizens are no longer motivated to partake in elections marred by financial corruption. They felt elections could not serve as a tool for political change and that mass protests proved to be the best way to express their demands to create profound regime change. Political parties were not present, even though some party bases and leaders were involved sporadically. They were subject to political considerations that kept these leaders from becoming key actors within the movement; except in a few cases,

to be discussed in detail below when examining political parties and calls for democratic transition.

Independent Unions: Strengths and Weaknesses

By identifying the inherent strengths and weaknesses of independent unions, or those that later surfaced as institutions in social and political spaces, it is possible to identify the roles in which they failed or succeeded while functioning as organized entities actively calling for democratic transition.

Since their inception, one clear weakness of independent unions is their restricted access to public employment, given their employees' lack of union experience. This is due to having failed in expanding to the private and public industrial sectors. In fact, the public employment sector was faced with an unprecedented crisis of transformation as it tried to maintain some semblance of stability at the start of the independent union experience. The private sector continues to suffer from a massive union vacuum that has expanded over time, unlike the public sector where the UGTA has maintained a presence – namely in strategic sectors such as oil and electricity. New unions could have used this weakness to expand due to the lack of union competition. The failure of independent unions to expand came to light when calling for a democratic transition during the Arab Spring, and especially after the start of Hirak in 2019. These unions failed to recruit groups to organize the strikes that they had called for in order to support the Hirak movement. Independent unions are present in several workplaces, but small numbers. This hinders their recruitment at major sectors or institutions, such as hospitals, schools, or public administration.

Another weakness is their emphasis on categorical unions with the same public employment sector,[34] such as health, education, and public administration. This has made joint action more difficult, even though independent unions launched the Confederation project in response to the regime's attempts to increase the number of unions. In early 2021, new categorical unions were accredited[35] thus cementing the State's strategy of splintering. Their strategy to emphasize categorical unions manifested negative results during the May 2021 strikes during the negotiation process with the Minister of Education, who saw that the unions were divided into several sessions.

Furthermore, the unions are also unable to renew their ideologies and doctrines to be able to adapt to national and international realities. As yet another weakness, this limits them to the outdated concept inherited from original union structures, which were active at a time when little effort was made to form their unique frameworks. Their weakness also showed when they focused heavily on financial and economic demands – i.e., wages, at the expense of qualitative demands, which were raised only in a reserved manner.

Since their inception, independent unions and their permanent management institutions also had a poor representation of women. This could be cited as a central weakness, particularly in sectors dominated by women employees and workers, namely the health and education sectors as per the National Statistical Office. The weak presence of women certainly hinders the recruitment process for unions in the future, especially since all projections confirmed the increasing trend of female involvement in the Algerian workforce. Women were also very active in all protest movements and strikes organized by unions in recent years.

The inter and intra-divisions, as well as elite conflicts among independent unions, are also weak points, given the personal frictions among dissidents. These shortcomings harmed collective action and the formation of blocs, which remains ineffectual in the independent union experience. Furthermore, these rifts have been exacerbated by conflicts between central elites who have assumed national leadership positions and those who remained at the local level. Conflicts usually arise when decisions are set to be made within unions. National leaders are accused of failing to consult with bases and local structure representatives, as reflected in some academic studies. General studies[36] or case studies were conducted on several union experiences and could be reviewed in detail,[37] or even through international comparisons, as noted in this study on Algeria.

Similarly, the lack of openness to the international union experience is also a flaw. This lack of communication is underpinned by Algeria's political isolation, paired with all the difficulties that unions already face when organizing international meetings or participating in foreign delegations. It is also worth noting that even strong international unions are undergoing many shifts as they have to cope with poor standing and diminished roles.

Strengths

In contrast to these weaknesses, it is important to note the strengths of Algeria's new union experience, such as strong categorical representation within the sectors where they operate – i.e. health and education sectors. This is obvious in the protests and strikes organized by new unions in recent years. Demonstrations were covered by national media, despite the ongoing distrust of relevant ministries[38] which has reduced these unions' efforts of recruitment. This sentiment has created a battle of statements between unions and relevant ministries. Unions have also been successful in reaching demands, such as an increase in wages and improved working conditions when the financial situation of the employer-State improved. This has elevated the credibility of unions and promoted strikes as a means of protest among groups that historically were not used to voicing demands in any form, let alone radical forms like

prolonged recurrent strikes. Until recently, these groups were more familiar with the regime's rhetoric and had never engaged in protest.

The ability to negotiate[39] could be counted as a strength. Union leaderships have quickly gained experience in the complex and new negotiating process. This came despite being kept from engaging in key negotiations with the government's oligarchic troika – the UGTA as the official representative of all workers.

Another strength is the institutional management within unions, coupled with power-sharing among various union elites who have different intellectual, political, and democratic capabilities. It has often led to changes in leadership for conferences organized regularly by unions, out of respect for their laws and concern for the administration's interference. These elites had suffered in the past. They had to deal with official political interference and poor power-sharing, especially with regard to leadership positions.

The emergence of union elite who were quickly accepted by Algerian society is yet another strength. Unionists had a successful national media presence and engaged well with the press, where they were able to announce protests and participate in official negotiations. Their presence in the media brought employment back as a public debate topic – sometimes at the expense of political debate, which was long dominated by ideological and constitutional themes in Algeria. This was due to the strong presence of religious political movements at the beginning of the failed political transition process in the early 1990s, which provided for the legal recognition of parties and unions, and the right to strike after the ratification of the 1989 Constitution.

Political Unions and Political Parties

The relationship between unions and political parties continued for a long-time during union monism until the early 1990s, despite the resistance of union leaders in the first few years after independence. At the time, unions were calling for the separation of union activities from official politics.[40] In a climate where this relationship was cemented in many third world countries, the calls for independent union activities did not gain much traction until the constitutional and legal reforms of 1989 – the year that saw union pluralism and the start of independent unions. Algerian laws that forbade any organizational association between a political party and a union does not necessarily prohibit the affiliation of union members with political parties as individuals.[41]

That was the case of union leaders who ran for legislative elections on partisan tickets in several cycles. The partisan-political and union relationship can only be understood through an analysis of the political roles of middle groups during the monism and post-pluralism periods. They were described as a "political weapon" in the regime arsenal, especially in the monism period, during which the regime had used them to advance political projects, such as elections. A good example is that of teachers who were known for their remarkable involvement within the structures of the Liberation Front, after their numbers had increased and became heavily Arabized, bringing them intellectually closer to conservative political movements. Pluralism eliminated this distinction of teachers, once other more qualified groups engaged in independent union activities, such as university professors and doctors.

As part of state bureaucracy, teachers and administration officials were among the top beneficiaries of pluralism as they engaged in political parties, particularly Islamic parties. As a result, connections were made later between these Islamist movements – led by the Islamist and independent unions. The unions were "accused" of being close to this Islamist political movement, which was not historically known for union action in Algeria, but more for its interest in charitable and philanthropic activities. On the other hand, the left-wing movement showed great weakness during this period. It was no longer able to compete in the world of employment, where it had long played important roles in Algeria and also around the world. However, the National Movement maintained its presence in the world of employment and in union leadership even when it experienced an intellectual setback that cost it its modern spark. It also benefited from its openness to the labour movement in Western countries. The movement, however, paid a price for doing the bidding of the state since independence. The setbacks accumulated over time were further exacerbated by its intellectual-political self-isolation and its distance from modern groups. Its social base was thus dominated by rural, modestly educated, elderly groups, as reflected in its continued victory in local and legislative elections[42].

Prospects of Independent Unions

The success of independent unions in the short- and medium-term hinges on the potential success of the currently stalled democratic transition in Algeria. It is essential to break old regime processes and move towards greater transparency and civic participation. More legitimate institutions and political elites must be produced and emerge based on a transparent regular election process with high citizen participation. This would bring Algerians closer to accepting a democratic transition, a notion that is still rejected by official ruling elites. This resistance is still present in political and media discourse and has happened time and time again when crises take their toll, even as the media and public recognize the regime's faults.

The idea of a democratic transition was rejected by official

elites, after being settled by anarchy and instability in the State institutions, as experienced more than once in Algeria. The October events that led to the announcement of political and legal reforms to the 1989 Constitution are a modern example. This period coincided with political violence and a civil war that lasted more than 10 years. It only finished after the collective political sphere suffered a great deal, followed by a failed political transition, from monism to pluralism. Official elites say they resist the democratic transition because they fear possible foreign interference. This took place with the initiative of Sant'Egidio supported by the political opposition in the mid-1990s in cooperation with the Italian Church. Other examples that they point to are the experiences of Syria and Libya, which are presented in Algerian media as failed models of political transition marred by violence and foreign interference. Former President Bouteflika exhibited similar resistance to democratic transition in the final phase of his rule when he rejected the proposal of the opposition within the Coordination Committee for Democratic Transition in Zeralda between 2014 and 2016.

In Algeria, even if some proposals are "adopted," they are emptied of their political content, such as the establishment of an independent national electoral body and the promulgation of a new legal and constitutional framework. However, it would occur without consulting with the participants who drafted the proposal. This was the case of the Arab Spring. The regime dealt with its repercussions through partial openness. New parties that had previously applied for registration were recognized. There were promises to change legal and constitutional framework in 2016 without affecting the essence of regime administration, mechanisms, and power relations – which indeed continued unchanged.

While democratic transition remains the demand of many political actors within Hirak since its inception in 2019, the top priority is a greater guarantee of individual and collective freedoms of Algerians. This includes union freedoms, which cannot evolve for the better without the effective independence of union action. This is not only a concern for independent unions but also the UGTA. In fact, independence would keep the UGTA away from mobilizing political and ideological roles in which they dominated for decades under the regime. As a result, it lost its ability to recruit and distorted the image of union action among workers, employees, and many societal factions.

This positive scenario of evolution in union action does not solely depend on this change in the overall political and institutional framework. It also depends on greater transparency and capacity to create legitimate institutions with relevant individual freedoms.[43] Favourable economic and social circumstances are also key for this positive scenario to materialize, although it varies from sector to sector.

Based on various socioeconomic indicators, the situation is more likely to deteriorate – mainly due to Algeria's shrinking fiscal revenues, declining exchange reserves, and its reliance almost entirely on fuel. The country's failure to diversify the economy will have a tangible impact on the short-term across all sectors, even those that have seemed relatively unaffected by the crisis in the past. For instance, this applies to public employment sectors where independent unions are active. This could potentially escalate tensions in the work environment in a sector run exclusively by the state as an employer.

These strains may prevent unions from achieving their usual demands, in terms of raising wages in this difficult economic situation. All workers are facing a significant deterioration in their purchasing power, which could also harm the ability of unions to recruit, especially since the union experience is still young and exists in a hostile institutional environment. Their existence could be called into question in different ways, as some indicators in 2021 have already begun to suggest.[44] The union movement is finding itself in a defensive position in the public industrial sector and the private sector, where it's on the verge of going extinct. Independent unions and leaderships have failed to strategically deal with these power balances. They focus solely on the sectoral analysis so far, based on their only experience within the public employment sector, which is still in a relatively protected economic and social position, compared to other economic sectors. As such, they resorted to protest movements and radical strikes, characterized by their length and recurrence. When these actions are announced, only the power balance with the public employment sector is taken into account – not the total national forces present during the timing of the announcement.

Therefore, the successful establishment of a union confederation in the future has gained greater importance to expand the prospects of the modern union experience. Public authorities continue to take a hostile position, fearing that the UGTA's monopoly as an official union close to power is compromised. The confederation project also could contribute to pulling the union experience out of this classification, which prevents wide-scale recruitment outside the public sector. This was illustrated in the unions' attempts to carry out a general strike in line with Hirak, before the presidential election on 29 October 2019.

Summary and Conclusions

The results of legislative elections held on 12 June 2019; the Constitutional referendum on 1 November 2020; and the presidential elections held after the start of the Hirak on 12 November 2019 all illustrated the difficulties of political change in Algeria. This assertion was confirmed when old political parties took back the majority of Parliament seats in a near-total absence of citizen participation. Election boycotting rates rose to an unprecedented level – only a 23.02% participation rate. Algerians had also boycotted the presidential election that led to Tebboune's win, with a 39.8% citizen participation rate, as well as the Constitutional referendum, with 23.03% participation. Several opposition groups had previously announced[45] that they were boycotting these events. They

also called for a consensual democratic transition, a proposal repeatedly rejected by the regime, which has always opted for elections instead. Consequently, citizens[46] were not represented and as always found themselves before a political crisis that required qualitative political change. Instead, citizens resorted to legislative elections, which took place during a reinforced crackdown on all kinds of freedoms. Hirak activists, journalists, and jurists were also targeted by a wave of arrests. The media and political environment became more closed off and several signs warned of a socioeconomic crisis.[47] Then came the COVID-19 pandemic which further exacerbated the consequences.[48] In this climate, elections could not offer the necessary political reform, particularly since the regime once again reiterated its resistance to change.

Despite the many strengths of independent unions, their future will be more complex in a political and economic context that is now more prone to further deterioration. In fact, unions could have been utilized to contribute to a democratic transition, a constant demand among popular Algerian movements. Yet, unions continue to face inherent weaknesses, such as their failure to produce nuanced narratives to adapt to social and cultural change in Algerian society and the poor representation of women in leadership positions. In parallel, union movements are undergoing profound transformations at the international level that have negatively affected their overall performance. The Algerian union experience no longer has a positive example to follow internationally or regionally.

The crisis of the national state has also had an adverse effect on Algerian unions. Their social base is undergoing immense transformation and is growing close to new owner groups that quickly accumulated sources of wealth and prestige. Thus, they relied on their proximity to the national state based on diverse connections to fulfil new tasks with new means, such as television channels that turned into a fanfare for regime rhetoric. They not only competed with public channels, but also with the historic efforts of the educated middle class defending and monopolizing the dissemination of regime projects propaganda among the masses. This foretold of the regime's abandonment of political services provided by the middle-income groups. They always acted as a "social sponsor" and later as an employer, with regard to the independent unions present in the public sector. Therefore, these middle groups will turn more towards demanding union action that they can link to political demands, as evidenced by their multifaceted participation in the Hirak movement, which at least in its first phase raised political demands that focused on conducive conditions for a political transition. Middle groups can thus succeed in collating the Hirak's political and social demands under an economic and social scenario likely to deteriorate further in the short-term among masses, including the middle classes, workers, and owners alike. As a result, middle-class unions can be given a greater role in influencing the development of events if they recognize how to build a successful popular alliance to lead the call for change. A democratic transition in Algeria is still possible, despite all the pitfalls and the regime's rejections.

Endnotes

1 One million jobs have been eliminated, according to official data, affecting vulnerable jobs. See Liberté newspaper, 28 March 2021, available at http://www.algerieinfo.com/

2 See our study on the roles of the political opposition, available at https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/node/4002

3 It was the first conference that gathered political parties and national figures in Algeria, as opposed to the 1995 Rome platform sponsored by the Sant›Egidio Foundation and held outside Algeria to find solutions to the security and political crisis. The regime also rejected the recommendations of this platform during that period of unrest. Check the link for more details on the agreement.

4 See the legal text.

5 Zaamouche, Fawziya. PhD thesis in common law. Relationship between Union Action with Political Action in Algeria, Constantine 1 University 2012. Available at https://bu.umc.edu.dz/theses/droit/AZEA3945.pdf

6 The radical Islamic movement proposed implementing Shariah Law and the Islamic state in an environment of growing divisions among elites over linguistic and cultural issues further deepening rifts between the elites and many of its social base.

7 A study published in Insaniyat magazine tried this by examining the independent union experience of teachers in the western region of Algeria to introduce recruitment through teachers, available at https://journals.openedition.org/insaniyat/15041

8 Development projects were launched as part of the first 3-year plan 1967-69, the dirst and second 4-year plans 1970-74 and 174-77, see more details: Dr. Amer Hani, Reading of Development Plans in Algeria(1967-2014), available at http://dspace.univ-msila.dz:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle

9 Nacer Djabi and Kaidi Lakhdar, Une histoire du syndicalisme algérien, (History of Algerian Unionism). Chihab Publishing, 2005.

10 This study will not discuss the short experience of the Islamic Work Syndicate that was associated with the Islamic Salvation Front, as a political organization. The Syndicate was closer to the Confederation because it assembled several categories of workers under the same union organization. Activities were suspended simultaneously with the dissolution of the Islamic Salvation Front after the failure of the general strike it had called for after the results of the legislative elections in 1992. It will not talk about the Ahsan Syndicate of the Hams Islamic Movement - the Muslim Brotherhood - which quickly disappeared.

11 Labour strikes in some critical sectors such as shipping and railways used to reach Boumédiène personally, who would decide on their demands.

12 The Labour Law recognized the right of workers in the private sector to organize a strike and but stayed silent on the issue in the public sector without overtly authorizing it until 1990, when the right was recognized for all workers, including state employees, except for a few groups such as the police and prison guards.

See Koriche Nasr-eddine, Justice and Conflict Management at Work, available at https://journals.openedition.org/anneemaghreb/351?lang=en

13 Nazih N. Ayubi, Over-Stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East, translated by Amjad Hussein, Centre for Arab Unity Studies Beirut 2010.

14 The project to divide electoral districts was accused of favoring the parties in power in rural and desert areas, such as the Liberation Front - the party of the Prime Minister - at the expense of the Islamic Front whose presence was more prominent in urban areas in the north of the country.

15 See Al-Shorouk's daily coverage of teachers›strike initiated by independent unions on 8 November 2009, available at https://www.echoroukonline.com%

16 As what happened in mid-Ramadan, when the education unions announced their intention to strike on 9-11 May 2021. At the same time, Civil Protection Forces were on national strike and marched to the Presidency of the Republic, they were confronted by the police on the 2 May 2021. This situation led the President of the Republic to call for dialogue with social partners in sectors that showed discontent, such as health and education. And before that, the postal sector was also on strike. See: https://www.france24.com/ar

17 Boubekeur Benbouzid served as Minister of Higher Education between 1994-1997 and Minister of Civic Education until 2012, when the pluralist union experience was launched in the education sector and before that the higher education sector, with the experience of the National Council of Professors of Higher Education, which mobilized union action during this period.

18 Nouria Benghabrit's poor command of the Arabic language and some of the reported allegations about her family and political background have led some unions to take hostile stances towards her. This affected the social environment in the sector during her mandate as Minister of Education between 2014-2019, which was marked by many strikes.

19 The appointment of Nouria Benghabrit as the Head of the Ministry of Education did not respect the sector that characterized the division of ministerial posts between the francized and arabized elites that the Ministry of Education had traditionally held. See our study on the subject of political elites and their relations with linguistic and value divisions. Nacer Djabi. Algeria: The State and the Elites, Dar

Al-Shehab Publishing house, Algeria 2008.

20 Most TV stations that were established after 2012 are owned by businessmen. They were later accused of corruption and imprisoned after the 2020 Hirak. Ali Haddad, for instance, had owned the Waqt El Djazaïr newspaper, and two television stations until he was imprisoned and his two stations closed. This is also the case of Mahieddine Tahkout, owner of Numidia TV.

21 Consecutive governments accepted the plurality of employers› unions. However, they insisted on rejecting pluralism from the part of workers whose representation was monopolized by the UGTA.

22 It was also the case during the 114th and 155th marches that took place in the month of Ramadan 2021 on 14 and 21 May. They suffered the same fate of the student marches organized during the same period.

23 See the statement of the Prime Minister on 6 May regarding the labour strikes that took place during this last period -Ramadan 2021, available at https://www.elbilad.net/Article/

24 See the constituent declaration of the National Opposition Consultation and Monitoring Body, available at

https://www.facebook.com/HmsDz/posts/976496609100288/

25 See the outline of the draft of the first Conference for Freedoms and Democratic Transition, which was presented by the Coordination Committee for Democratic Transition after the first Muzfran meeting on 10 June 2014, available at https://hoggar.org/2014/06/01

26 Five former heads of government, such as Ahmed Benbitour, Ali Benflis, Miqdad Saifi, Sid Ahmed Ghozali and Mouloud Hamrouche Ziada, participated in the conference, whose sessions were chaired by a former minister, Abdelziz Rahabi. Former ministers and political officials were also in attendance.

27 The alliance - the Renaissance, Justice and Building - took place among parties that were originally one party before splintering at intervals from the main movement, the Nahda Movement (Rnaissance), which was led by Sheikh Abdullah Jaballah. In addition to the New Building party which split from the Movement of Society for Peace. It won 15 seats, while the Hams led coalition won 33 seats in alliance with the Front for Change, a splinter that came to exist under former leader Abdul Majid Manasreh.

28 According to a statement by the Ministry of Labour issued in April 2018, only 17 unions operating within the framework of the law were recognized. See: https://www.ennaharonline.com

29 In the statement announcing its establishment under the Temporary Coordination Committee of Secondary and Vocational Education on 6 March 2003, the Independent National Autonomous Council of Teaching Staff in the Ternary Education Sector CNAPESTE raised several demands including a 100% increase in wages of secondary and vocational educators, the enactment of the Law on Secondary and Vocational Educators, and the right to retire after 25 years of active service.

30 In order to escalate the impact of protest movements, unions organized marches in the streets and public squares on 26 May in several Algerian cities. Marches were led by union leaders and headed to the Ministry of Education.

31 Cadres of public companies in Algeria, Privileges of Downgrading, Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée, p. 105-106, 2012, available at http://journals.openedition.org/remmm/2729

32 More than a dozen unionists have joined Parliament as deputies with the parties Political Islam, Liberation Front, and the National Democratic Coalition in the last parliamentary term 2017-2021. An interview with A.M., a unionist MP, compared to a larger number in previous parliamentary terms.

33 See the details of the strikes in terms of their causes and consequences in the education sector in particular in the study conducted by Mounir Sawalha from the University of Tebessa on unionization and strikes in Algeria, available at https://platform.almanhal.com/Files/2/50506

34 Several new unions were formed within each sector for some professional paths which raised the concerns of accredited unions. This was the case of the education sector, where 23 unions were recognized across a short period during 2021, see: https://ultraalgeria.ultrasawt.com/

35 For more details about the development of the education sector in terms of the number of teachers and professors, see

36 See Laila Tamin. Bureaucratic Transformation Process in Union Organization. Master›s degree from Annaba University 1998, available at: https://journals.openedition.org/insaniyat/8888

37 See the Master›s Thesis by student Abdel Wahed Hosni from the University of Oran about the CNAPESTE of Ain Temouchent, which was presented in 2016, available at

http://www.univ-oran2.dz/images/these_memoires/FSS/Magister/TMSS-39/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9%20%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A9%20PDF.pdf

38 All strikes organized by unions are targeted by distrust as reflected in the national media and conflicting statements about the actual participation rates, like all strikes around the world.

39 Samir Sghir, Negotiations and Strikes in Algeria after 1988. Case study of the Independent National Council Union, Doctoral Thesis, Department of Sociology, University of Algiers 2, 2021.

40 Among the leaders who defended the independence of union action from politics, one must note the famous unionist, known for his writing on this subject:

Boualem Bourouiba. The Algerian Union Movement Against Power Struggles -1962-63, Naqd Magazine, No.4, 1993.

Or his book published posthumously:

Boualem Bourouiba, UGTA in the first years of the 62-65 independence.

41 Article 5 of the Electoral Code states the following: Union organizations are distinguished in their goal, nomenclature, and administration from any political association. They cannot be linked n structure or in membership to any association of a political nature, or receive subsidies, gifts or bequests in any way from these associations. They cannot participate in their funding. However, members of the union organization are entitled to join in an individual capacity in associations of a political nature.

42 Nacer Djabi, Algeria: The State and the Elites, Dar Al-Shehab publishing house, 2008.

43 The legislative elections held on 12 June once again confirmed the inability of this type of election to become a means of political change that would contribute to a successful democratic transition, after being boycotted by large groups of citizens and many political parties. The result was the return of the same traditional conservative political forces rejecting political change.

44 The editorial of the army mentioned in this study as a reference.

45 All democratic parties consisting of left-wing parties and the Rally for Culture and Democracy boycotted these elections in addition to the Socialist Forces Front.

46 The Liberation Front only secured the lead in Parliament with 828,287 votes out of a total of 23 million registered voters in the election. The Front won 98 seats, compared to 208,000 votes for the Hams Movement, which in turn won 65 seats. the National Democratic Rally secured 58 seats based on 190,000 votes. 153,987 votes won the Future Front 48 seats, and finally, 106,000 votes allowed the National Construction Movement to win 39 seats out of a total of 23 million voters, of whom only 23% participated in these elections. The canceled ballot papers exceeded the one million mark.

For more details see the Announcement of the Constitutional Council issued in the Official Gazette, available at

https://www.joradp.dz/FTP/jo-part123/A2021051.pdf

47 This period was marked by a drought that forced authorities to reduce the distribution of water to major cities such as the capital, where residents of some neighborhoods resorted to blocking public roads and taking to the streets. This phenomenon is likely to worsen in light of the delayed rainfall until autumn.

48 Hafida Ameyar.(direction) Algeria in the COVID pandemic, crises, Hirak, and decantation. Published by friends of Abdelhamid Benzine. Algiers. 2020

37

Lebanese Trade Unions and Independent Professional Associations:

A Review in Light of the Popular Movement

Jamil Mouawad

Introduction

On 17 October 2019, Lebanon saw the rise of a popular movement denouncing the widespread corruption of the country's ruling class. Dubbed the 17 October Uprising, the unprecedented movement swept through various major Lebanese cities, including Beirut, Saïda, Tyre, Tripoli, and many others. In parallel, academics and activists debated the importance of having various organizational frameworks (partisan, union-based, or professional) that could take charge of organizing popular protests. These organizations would help frame demands in political agendas that play a crucial role in achieving the desired democratic transition.[1] This discussion – or at least parts of it – resulted from the almost total absence of any effective official union role in the popular movement, as opposed to other uprisings in the Arab region, where independent professional associations or trade unions played a pivotal role in the action. They demanded change, organized protests, and even took part in negotiations – such as in Sudan's case).[2]

In fact, a quantitative study carried out during the 17 October Uprising showed that 95% of protesters were unaffiliated with trade unions. It also revealed that only 5% of demonstrators were affiliated with free-profession unions, such as non-labour professional associations or unions that include physicians, lawyers, nurses, engineers or the Teacher Union for example.[3]

Based on this discussion, some citizens focused their efforts on improving the roles of existing professional unions by freeing them from their affiliations with the traditional ruling parties so that they could reclaim their fundamental function. Others sought to establish new independent professional associations capable of playing pivotal roles in organizing the masses and voicing demands. This became one of the October Uprising's objectives – in parallel with other demands, such as the independence of the judiciary and forming a transitional government with exceptional legislative powers.

These crucial demands were the result of years' worth of efforts that sought to advance unions that are independent from the ruling class and conventional political parties. Unlike other experiences in the Arab world, where independent unions gradually transformed into key players and organizers of protests, such as the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) or the National Council of Professors of Higher Education in Algeria, the popular movement in Lebanon highlighted the potential role of professional union in reclaiming democratic life through these entities. It also fostered attempts of creating independent professional unions, such as the Lebanese Professionals Association (LPA).

Undoubtedly, the 17 October Uprising created a massive momentum among unions which was reflected in most elections since 2019. The post-uprising era saw protest supporters defeat the ruling parties. Melhem Khalaf was elected Head of the Beirut Bar Association in 2019, opposition factions won student council elections at private Lebanese universities in 2020, and there was a landslide win for the Order of Engineers and Architects in 2021.

Most recent publications about unions or independent professional/labour associations in Lebanon attribute the inefficient and weak union organizational skills to two main reasons. First, the influence of traditional and sectarian political parties on professional and trade unions, and by extension the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (CGTL). The CGTL gradually submitted to the ruling class and became one of its pawns, rather than taking on a crucial role in advocating for workers' rights.[4] Second, the weak role of trade unions in the neoliberal and rentier economy that has taken over Lebanon since the end of the Civil War (1975-1990).[5] This has marginalized the official advocacy of professional and trade unions and has fostered the informal economy.[6] Naturally, these factors inevitably restricted the capacity of professional/trade unions to advocate for their rights and demand change. These organizations have been denied the role of fostering, launching, and organizing popular action. They have been incapable of participating in laying the foundations of a new Lebanese regime, per the calls of some opposition forces. In other words, the violations committed by the sectarian neoliberal regime in Lebanon have suffocated political or union organizations, which could have provided the backbone for a successful uprising to achieve a transition to a new political regime.[7]

Furthermore, this paper presents an alternative approach to understanding the role of unions or professional associations in Lebanon, beyond the "sectarian" and "neoliberal" dimension. It examines the organizational and political challenges facing these entities, particularly by discussing the question of the relationship between "union" action – i.e. unions exclusively advocating for worker's interest and so-called political action. It also discusses the impact of this debate on the odds of successful organization and advocacy, all the way to winning union elections, and perhaps playing a larger role on the national scene. Indeed, researcher Agnès Favier, who has already studied student movements in Lebanon prior to the Civil War, notes that the union vs. political question has always been at the centre

of "union" discussions and their attempts to self-organize on a students' level in this case. This, in turn, directly affected their political effectiveness, as well as their sustainability. There were many organizational obstacles, two of which stand out. First, the wider the representation – the less homogeneous these unions were politically, the more their demands diverged. Second, in an attempt to avoid this dilemma, they sometimes applied the "lowest common denominator" principle to ensure cohesion. These two obstacles certainly weakened their organizational capabilities and prevented them from playing a pivotal political role in the country.[8]

Consequently, the question examined in this paper lies in the debate and the separation or complementarity between purely demands-based union action (on a union or professional association level) and political action (on a national level). To what extent does this question impact the sustainability or effectiveness of independent unions in Lebanon, particularly during the popular movement? Are independent professional unions supposed to adhere to the "lowest common denominator" principle to organize and defend their interests? Or, should they transform into launch pads for a political partisan organizations?

This paper will attempt to answer these questions by providing a critical review of the professional union experience in Lebanon, or even the attempts to form independent professional associations. It will focus on two main experiences stemming from the 17 October Uprising: the landslide win by Uprising supporters in the Order of Engineers and Architects (OEA) elections in 2021, and university instructors' experience with the LPA (LPA – Professors) – an attempt born out of the popular movement on 17 October 2019. This study relies on in-depth interviews with union and social movement players in Lebanon, with respect to their experiences with union action and attempts to form independent unions. Subject-matter literature was also reviewed, while closely following these professional associations and unions, as well their electoral campaigns.

The paper is written in four chapters. Chapter 1 provides a general and quick overview of the history of union action in Lebanon, while providing an overview of the need to differentiate between trade unions and professional associations (also called unions in Lebanon). The second chapter addresses the concept of union "independence" in Lebanon, the changes made to this concept, and the refusal of some to use it when defining their union action. Chapter 3 presents the OEA experience and the win of the "Naqaba Tantafid," which translates from Arabic into "The Order Revolts coalition, which stemmed from the 17 October Uprising. The fourth and final chapter reviews the LPA, or Professors experience and its short-lived journey. Lastly, the study draws general conclusions and inferences about the importance and challenges of independent union action in Lebanon.

Unions: Advocacy for Rights and a Reflection of the General Political Context

Historically, labour, demands-based movements pre-date the creation of The State of Greater Lebanon (1920). Mount Lebanon had witnessed a series of popular demands-based protests – Ammiyat in Arabic, or Popular Organizations – led by peasants against feudalism and land owners. Following the enactment of the 1919 Ottoman Law, which identified the functions of associations in Lebanon, labour associations were formed – mostly involving workers and employers alike and focused on objectives of cooperation and support amongst members.[9]

Labour and demands-based movements in Lebanon evolved over the years. They were mostly influenced by left-wing – such the communist revolution – or even right-wing ideologies. These movements were not isolated from the larger political or partisan context of the country. In fact, they were often a reflection and an outcome, sometimes even a precursor to it. For example, the General Federation of Tobacco Workers in Lebanon was founded in 1924, based on an initiative by Fouad El-Chemaly, who co-founded the Lebanese People's Party, which later became the Lebanese Communist Party. In 1944, the General Federation of Worker and Employee Unions in Lebanon was founded, consisting of 15 (fifteen) unions and 12 (twelve) union committees. Following independence in 1943 and the structural evolution of the Lebanese economy, unions played a crucial role in advocating for workers' rights with employers. They called for the enactment of a labour law that guarantees and protects their rights from injustice (1946).[10] These movements later gave way to the CGTL in 1958.

Right before the Civil War, when wages were shrinking under exacerbated social crises and political demands advanced by national left-wing parties, unions played a crucial and pivotal role in demands-based movements – whether run by students or workers. However, these social movements were soon faced with a harsh reality. The Lebanese capitalist system in crisis, combined with other factors, had led to the outbreak of the Civil War, given the economic disparities between different social classes on the one hand, as well as the centre (Beirut) and peripheral areas – southern Lebanon, northern Lebanon, etc. – on the other.[11] Despite consecutive crises and violent civil clashes, demands-based movements continued to evolve. The CGTL was even capable of mobilizing the masses into calling for the end of the Civil War in the late 1980s.[12]

In the aftermath of the Civil War and the Taif Agreement, the role of CGTL seemed reinvigorated. It had illustrated that it was

capable of mobilizing the masses against the government, as well as its abilities to advocate for workers' rights. Against the backdrop of the devaluation of the national currency and the nationwide economic crisis in May 1992, the CGTL – headed by Antoine Bechara – organized national protests that overthrew Omar Karameh's government. In 1997, there was a clear official intent to subdue the CGTL with the decision to ban protests and some members supporting the government to increase the odds of securing the CGTL president position.[13]

Since then, the CGTL faltered in advocating for the rights and interests of workers and employees, while gradually joining the ranks of the political authority bodies and representing their interests instead.

Consequently, as unions mirrored the general political context before the Civil War, they were entangled with and infiltrated by parties using a political and sectarian quota system. They also used unions to advance political or economic agendas. Despite this dominance, unions soon began to show signs of independence from the ruling class. As the neoliberal economic system increasingly affected labour over the past two decades, several attempts were made to form unions, such as the Spinneys workers' attempt to form a union. This was actually the first attempt at a trade union in the private sector. This experience was marred by clientelism that undermined the ability of workers who wanted to form a union to act independently from their employers.[14] There was also the difficulties of being pre-approved by the Ministry of Labour and the fallout of workers filing the application. The Union of Migrant Workers in Lebanon was also formed with the direct support of Lebanese activists.[15] One of the most important labour movements was the Union Coordination Committee (UCC), which practically laid the foundation of the popular "You Stink" movement that protested the waste crisis in 2015 until the 17 October Uprising.

During the 17 October Uprising against the ruling elite and mainstream parties, many participants denounced the absence of professional/trade unions. These unions were seen as a tool that could have potentially fulfilled an essential role of mobilizing and organizing the masses, or perhaps playing an even greater role in ensuring the transition of power. Since then, union and student council elections took on a new dimension. They no longer reflected attempts and initiatives by individuals. Rather, they became directly connected to a popular grassroots movement calling for the ousting of the political class. Therefore, professional/student union/associations transformed into frameworks exhibiting the first signs of the desired change and the reflection of popular demands.

Independent Professional Unions: Names and Expectations

The 17 October Uprising has not achieved much of the immediate demands raised by the different components of the popular movement at the time – such as the Independence of the Judiciary Law, a transitional government with exceptional powers, or the enactment of a law to recover Lebanon's stolen assets. However, it gave way to new public discourse that vehemently opposes the ruling class under the "All Means All" slogan, which means that all political parties and ruling participating in post-war governments were seen as responsible for the economic and social collapse of Lebanon.[16] This opposing view of the ruling class was reflected in union elections. It manifested practically through three key elections, where the opposition forces defeated mainstream parties, namely:

- The Beirut Bar Association elections, won by Melhem Khalaf, lawyer and current Head of the Beirut Bar Association. He was dubbed the "thawra," or "revolutionary" candidate.
- Student council elections that took place within private universities
- OEA elections

The results of these elections came as a natural and direct extension of the 17 October Uprising. Some even say that the parliamentary elections in Spring 2022 will yield a similar outcome for Lebanon's opposition, even if the win is not yet guaranteed. The conditions for winning union elections are quite different from those of parliamentary elections. They involve many political and electoral factors to be determined according to the political context in Lebanon and resources needed for the elections, including those necessary electoral campaigns, etc. Therefore, it is important to point out two considerations. First, the professional unions discussed in this paper are not trade unions that represent a large workforce. They are professional unions, which represent a middle class that may find it easier to free itself from the ruling regime. Second, the confusion over the meaning of the term "independence" – or even its many associated interpretations – has significant impact on political coalitions.

Professional Associations and Trade Unions

Before delving into the role of unions and their impact on political national change, it's important to point out that what are in fact

called professional unions or "free profession" unions (the Bar Association, the OEA, and others), are not trade unions. They are not even unions per se. Legally, they are formed by virtue of a law passed by Parliament. They are not regulated by the Lebanese labour movement or the Law on Social Security, but rather, they have their own laws and regulations. One of the main conditions to practice the profession is union membership. As such, the State would relinquish its role in regulating the profession, "hence the nomenclature of free professions, as in free from the Law, and by extension the Labour Law."[17] In general, the main concern for these entities is to first ensure the interests of members and determine the terms of membership in order to protect the profession. For example, non-Lebanese nurses cannot join the Order of Nurses, ergo non-nationals cannot practice nursing in Lebanon.[18]

In contrast, trade unions are regulated by the Lebanese Labour Law and the Law on Social Security. Membership is optional, i.e. individuals may join the union but it's not a stipulation for practicing their profession. Trade unions are established through an application submitted by a group of individuals to the relevant minister – in this case it's submitted to the Minister of Labour. This process has sometimes hindered the creation of independent trade unions due to the vulnerability of applicants between filing the application and obtaining the license. The employer is entitled to terminate the employment of these individuals who don't have any legal protection. In other cases, it has facilitated the creation of pseudo shelf-unions that have no real representation, and just help secure victories for mainstream parties in CGTL elections. In this context, one must note that union action is restricted in Lebanon. The country did not sign the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention,[19] requiring every trade union to be licensed by the relevant ministry, i.e. Ministry of Labour.

Therefore, the so-called free profession unions are not, in fact, unions, in the legal sense of the word. These types of unions represent mainly the middle class, and not necessarily the working class.

Independent Unions

It is common knowledge that mainstream parties have infiltrated and controlled trade and professional unions. This justified calls by opposition forces to reclaim union action and achieve independence. The interpretation and uses of the term "independence" has gradually led some to fully reject it as an attribute of the opposing union movement. According to activist and journalist Paul Achcar, who followed and engaged in most civil social movements since the end of the Civil War, independence is an "ambiguous term. Sometimes it refers to the left, while other times it refers to the opposition. Sometimes it evokes revolution, and sometimes it pertains strictly to professional matters.[20] As such, the word "independence" could hold many interpretations, according to the prevailing political context in which it is mentioned. However, despite the many dimensions that the term "independent" takes on, it was usually used as an umbrella term by anyone running for union (parliamentary or municipal) elections against the parties in power operating based on quotas and clientelism. In fact, this call for independence varied from individual initiatives that mostly relied on the social capital of union positions candidates, to independent union movements, as well as the rejection of the very term "independent" in the OEA elections in 2021.

In the narrow sense of the word, independence was sometimes linked to "independent" individuals, who do not belong to political parties but have a certain social capital. This was the case when the OEA's independence at one point was associated to the persona of Assem Salam (1996-1999) who won the OEA President position against PM Rafic Hariri's candidate, campaigning on the platform of Beirut reconstruction.

However, some believe that a critical look into these so-called "independent" experiences is indeed required. According to architect Abir Saksouk, "Assem Salam or the pre-Civil War unionists are part of the 'experts' belonging to a certain social class that is already linked to the ruling political class. They contributed to the creation of the OEA (influenced by conceptions of modernism). The OEA laws they drafted were not always in the best interests of society, but mostly of the elite. For instance, mandating that construction permits must go through the OEA 'robs' people of the possibility of practicing vernacular architecture, outlawing them. In addition, the OEA Law itself does not differentiate between an employed engineer/architect and an employer engineer/architect (owner of the firm). Consequently, the employed engineer/architect falls within the same category of major firms, having the same rights, but also the same obligations."[21]

These interpretations do not necessarily serve society as much as they do the elitist vision of the union's role. As a result, unions become an extension of the Lebanese regime and its spirit.

On the other hand, independence was also linked to autonomous union movements. In the late 1990s, some activists from the OEA grouped together and later participated in several order elections as one bloc. It was formed by activists from the Communist Party, based on a personal decision rather than a central one from the party's leadership. At that time, they were considered independent. They later left the Communist Party and established what is now called the Independent Professional Choice, which participated in many union battles.

Despite this independent union movement, mainstream parties operating on quota standards remained largely in control, thus hindering the rise of a fully-formed bloc to run against them in elections. Instead, so-called independent candidates would be chosen for support, and the differences between parties and their agendas would be manipulated in an attempt to get these candidates across the finish line. These movements also included members close to the ruling parties,[22] but with common views

on union action: "when politics divided them, their profession brought them together."[23]

As a result, There was no explicit political rhetoric disseminated by the union movement and unions – i.e. their view on the regime, political life and reinstating unions as a key player on the Lebanese political scene.[24] Consequently, the rhetoric among professional unions remained for decades limited to matters relating to their members and their benefits, such as insurance and policies. However, these movements provided implicitly a political rhetoric – albeit shy – critiquing the performance of parties, inside the union and in the national scene. For example, Bar Association elections involved discussions on public freedoms and human rights under the Syrian mandate in Lebanon.

In 2015, as a response to Lebanon's waste crisis, a grassroots youth movement (You Stink) openly criticized the ruling class. They also held the government accountable not only for the waste crisis, but also for the rampant corruption in the country as a whole. The movement relaunched the conversation about the need to reclaim representative institutions through elections in order to influence the desired change and bring the protests from the streets to institutions. Different groups emerged from this movement, embodying the spirit of opposition. For example, Beirut Madinati, which in Arabic means Beirut, My City, consisted of educated middle-class people, including university professors, technicians, and experts with their own views of the city. There were also other initiatives like Citizens in a State, or Baalbek Madinati (Baalbek My City). These initiatives participated in the 2016 municipal elections. Beirut Madinati achieved excellent results in the Beirut municipal elections, coming ever so close to breaching PM Saad El Hariri's backed ticket. This experience was very encouraging for many people leaning towards the opposition. This was gradually reflected in union elections, especially the OEA.

The popular movement that gradually gained definition against the ruling parties combined, gave a new meaning to independence. It meant independence from concepts of political quotas, sectarianism, and freedom from clientelism. Initially, this independence did not mean absolute opposition against the regime and parties in power. The independence question was already discussed during the 2018 OEA elections, which prompted candidate Jad Tabet to not reject parties and affiliated engineers, but "to ask them to carry the mission of engineers to their parties rather than that of the parties to the OEA"[25] as a condition to stop quota practices and solidify the OEA independence. This laid the foundation for a rhetoric calling for an "OEA independent from the quota principle," where key positions on the OEA council and delegate committees are freed from partisan and sectarian quotas. There was also explicit discourse regarding the need to fight the outrageous waste of OEA funds (hospitalization process), and to distance the profession from clientelism networks (issuing permits, etc). "So, independence means working for the interests of all engineers and architects and not just for parties to use the OEA for their own benefit (conferences, lands acquired by the OEA, engineers chosen based on partisan affiliation, etc.)."[26]

Finally, after the 17 October movement fostered the creation of partisan political groups with their own rhetoric and clear agendas, independence was interpreted in a way that made some completely reject using the term "independent" to define their political and union work. "We are not independent, we support the 17 October [Uprising]," meaning they belong to the 17 October Uprising forces. According to certain activists, this fact cannot align with so-called independents, a nomenclature adopted by certain parties close to the political regime. The independence rhetoric "was and always will be the system's Trojan horse in unions and politics, to infiltrate the change that is coming."[27] Therefore, it is necessary to reject this term, to shut down all attempts by mainstream parties and forces "to ride the wave of the Uprising wave," as they say.

The Order of Engineers and Architects (OEA): From "Naqabati" to "The Order Revolts"

The Order of Engineers and Architects (OEA) was established in 1951 by engineers from similar social classes and educational backgrounds. Due to their privilege, they were in some way independent from the political class, despite their close ties through social or even familial relations.[28]

However, mainstream parties gradually took over the OEA, like other professional and trade unions in Lebanon. With time, the OEA became a "service" union, reinforcing clientelism and subjugation to governing authorities. The OEA played a significant role in serving the rentier economy and providing considerable profit for investors by facilitating the work of contractors, such as through construction permits. This substantially limited the role of the OEA to commissions and played a big role in providing the best offers for medical coverage.[29] Simultaneously, the "elitist rule" once again turned into a political base. Parties and sects controlled the narrative and took over union action.[30] In contrast, sectarian parties operating on the basis of clientelism and quotas did not assert absolute control over the OEA. Consecutive elections, as previously mentioned, were marked by independent players or groups that vehemently tried to save the OEA from quotas and the corrupt ruling class. Albeit, these attempts were always limited in opposition anchored in the social capital of certain individuals or groups that were somewhat independent from their parties. Furthermore, these experiences were practically separate from any popular movement on the ground. The first OEA elections that were directly linked to popular movements took place in 2017, when the independent forces only won the OEA presidency position with their "Naqabati"

campaign. Then in 2021, "The Order Revolts" ticket secured a landslide win in the OEA council and delegate committees.

"Naqabati – My OEA for the Female and Male Engineer": A Partial Success Story

The first OEA elections to be directly, or indirectly, involved with the popular movement were the OEA presidency elections in 2017, following the "You Stink" movement of 2015 and the municipal elections of 2016. In 2017, a new entity was formed under the name of "Naqabati" (My OEA) before later becoming "My OEA for the Female and Male Engineer".

"My OEA" consisted of seasoned engineers who had already run in elections such as Bachar Abdel Samad and Habib Sadeq of the Independent Union Choice, and members of the Beirut Madinati campaign, as well as a group of young independent academics and activists. These youth groups introduced a specific dynamic through their regional work by organizing large-scale meetings that naturally took on union and political dimension against the influence of traditional leaderships. Therefore, Naqabati provided an opportunity for different generations to come together and develop a campaign agenda, as seasoned and young activists played a significant role in the popular movement.[31] The Naqabati platform could be considered the result of years of hard work aimed at ensuring OEA independence from quota-operating parties and reclaiming the "builder" profession to its former glory, far from the role that slowly distanced the OEA from the concerns of society. In 2017, Eng. Jad Tabet ran for the position of OEA President at the head of the Naqabati ticket on the platform of "Reclaiming Union Legacy to Build Society and State"— given that its role was limited to "recording construction transactions and playing mediator between the engineer and the insurance company."[32]

Therefore, Naqabati became an attempt to reclaim the engineering profession and acknowledge its social role. Jad Tabet won the elections under the Naqabati, or independents' ticket, after a fierce battle with Free Patriotic Movement's (FPM) candidate, Paul Najem, who led a coalition ticket including the FPM, Hezbollah, Amal Movement, Lebanese Forces, and the Future Movement.[33] However, the Naqabati ticket lost the OEA council seats to the parties' coalition. As such, the OEA council and president were not on the same page, thereby allowing mainstream parties to ensure their interests to a great extent through OEA membership.

The Naqabati initiative was faced with several challenges, namely being an electoral coalition established only after two months of efforts. Its members were bonded by the lowest common denominator – fighting the corruption of the ruling class and the need to win OEA elections. According to a campaign activist, "campaign organizers were the ultimate decision-makers. Decisions were not open for discussion. The process was not participatory and no committees were formed to tackle specific issues. Decision-making remained in the hands of the elite that had formed Naqabati and had run in the elections[.]"[34] This led to a rift between the base and the elite later on, post-elections. It was not necessarily due to political or ideological reasons, but rather to "generational" factors, according to Naqabati members. Decisions were made by the older, more seasoned political generation and Naqabati could not accommodate the younger generation, which was eager to work – radically at times – in tandem with the anger building up among the grassroots against the ruling class.[35] Young activists tried to establish decentralized work structures that were not exactly welcomed by the leadership. This reflected the vision inside Naqabati – a seasoned, experienced generation versus a young, eager but inexperienced generation. Some believed that, for the seasoned elite, the role of "the youth was to provide support and gain experience, only." Therefore, Naqabati was an electoral coalition and not a professional or political structure with a clear set of goals. Despite repeated attempts to identify some political direction, discussions always lacked an economic, or even political dimension in general. According to a member, "our only common denominator is that we belong to the opposition forces. We did not set a political, economic, and social direction. We did not have bylaws. It was more of a coordination framework among individuals."[36]

Obviously, the aforementioned factors negatively affected the work of Naqabati after winning the OEA President position. Some activists believe that the decision-making process could not sustain the engagement of a large number of opposition engineers. In fact, "decisions were kept centralized and made by 7 or 8 individuals. As a result, Naqabati, as a group, was later excluded from union action."[37]

Despite winning the elections, Naqabati was effectively unable to set clear decision-making processes. According to someone working in Naqabati (the campaign), "it was an ambiguous coalition," and was forsaken the moment Naqabati won the OEA presidency. As a result, many young engineers were discouraged. An implicit or explicit schism became evident between some activists and the OEA President, and thus by extension between them and the OEA, despite keen efforts to place the OEA at the core of independent political action. Naqabati was not a positive experience for engineers affiliated with opposition movements. Many of them were frustrated with "the appeasement within the OEA, and consequently appeasing the parties in power, as well as their inability to fight…."[38] By the time the 17 October Uprising erupted, a rift set in within Naqabati ranks. At the time, certain engineers called on Jad Tabet, OEA President, to announce his explicit support of the Revolution, to present the role desired from the OEA in the popular movement and transition to power. Tabet did not respond to these calls, despite some attempts to protest this neutrality and demands to shut down the OEA. As the popular movement evolved, along with the attempt to form the Lebanese Professionals Association, many decided to move

on from Naqabati to "LPA – Engineers", voiding Naqabati of members – except those who are closest to OEA President Tabet.

"The Order Revolts": A Model?

The 17 October Uprising has certainly given many a glimmer of hope of reclaiming the political space and initiating change. This included hopes of taking back control of unions to rid them of quota-operating parties. The first post-Uprising elections were held in the Bar Association and were won by the current President of the Bar Melhem Khalaf – dubbed the Revolution's Candidate. This win created new momentum for those who had given up on union action. It affected the opposition engineers directly, especially that OEA elections were to be held in March 2019, four months after the popular uprising. For the activist engineers, "the 17 October Uprising imposed its decentralized and participatory traits, turning the table on traditional union action practiced by mainstream union forces and parties."[39] Therefore, the thought process focused on the need to fulfil the Uprising's demands on the one hand, and to prepare for OEA elections on the other. As a result, many activist engineers joined the LPA (an association that was still under development at the time meant to follow the popular movement). They formed what later became LPA – Engineers. The OEA elections were undoubtedly a main objective for the LPA – Engineers, which included opposition parties and groups that do not necessarily agree on all political matters, but on the need to overthrow the parties in power — LiHaki, also known as My Rights Group, the Communist Party, and Citizens in a State. They too worked on the basis of the lowest common denominator. Naturally, the elections overshadowed all other demands due to their imminent date. An external relations committee was formed, consisting of Bachar Abdel Samad, Ali Darwish, Imad Amer, and Abir Saksouk. The committee met with opposition parties. According to a committee member, they "realized after the meetings that the parties do not want this framework,"[40] for many reasons, including the lack of a unified political vision and objective), hence the idea of forming "The Order Revolts" coalition. In addition to LPA – Engineers, it included developing parties and groups aligned with the 17 October movement –the Communist Party, Ammiyat 17 Teshrin People of 17 October, Citizens in a State, Jal El Dib Rebels, etc.). At the time, the union movement was scattered. Within one year, there were three main groups all at once: Naqabati, The Order Revolts, and LPA – Engineers. After the establishment of The Order Revolts, and the migration of what was left of Naqabati, the LPA – Engineers became an empty shell, because it never unified them in the first place. It never went beyond expressing support for the Uprising. The Order Revolts turned into an electoral framework that would go on to winning the elections. It was born out of discord to fulfil a need for a unified body to converge views "between the different groups and to go through the elections, unified. LPA – Engineers started by gathering most of the components associated with the 17 October Uprising, with an interest in or involvement with union action. This resulted in an open coalition comprising over 17 different groups."[41]

The first discussions, within LPA – Engineers or The Order Revolts, seemed democratic. However, their tendency towards partisanship was already showing at the time. "The coalition almost turned into partisan cantons. It also showed the main differences between opposition parties." As a result, disputes were aligned with partisan ideologies regarding the role of the Uprising. One of the main points of dissonance revolved around the relation between the professional and the political. Were they supposed to seize this opportunity to solely focus on propelling the profession and its social role further? Or should they solely build this framework as a continuation to the existing popular movement and demand a transition of power? This led to alienating certain architects who were trying to defend the city and its way of life under the pretext of being close to ruling parties. Indeed, many reformist architects were first marginalized from The Order Revolts only because they were close to the parties in power, hence the differentiation between a "rebellious" engineer and an "unrebellious" engineer. The Order Revolts became a reflection of the revolution at some point. Instead of unifying efforts on a union level, it turned into a political battlefield, sifting through the rebels and non-rebels. There was no room left for discussions pertaining to union matters. "Topics were limited to fighting the system, while discussions around the social role of the union became non-existent."[42]

However, despite these challenges that reflected the political climate in the country at the time, the experience was transparent from day one. In fact, unlike the outcome of the Naqabati experience, which mainly revolved around Jad Tabet, the work done by The Order Revolts was participatory, democratic, and decentralized. For example, participating forces voted to choose the coalition's name from several suggestions. "The Order Revolts" –which clearly showcases the alignment between the 17 October Uprising and the coalition – won.[43] In addition, different committees were formed, such as the Candidates Selection Committee. It focused on setting frameworks for public debates among candidates and providing equal opportunity and unified standards for choosing the right candidate, similar to preliminary elections.[44] In spite of significant challenges and differences in the first few months, the illegal deferment of OEA elections for seven consecutive times was ultimately for the benefit of The Order Revolts. The deferment was in principle due to COVID-19, but in reality, mainstream parties wanted to postpone in an attempt to gain more time and for fear of losing. It provided them with enough time to get organized. The coalition had the opportunity to put its house in order, persevere, communicate with engineers, and engage in developing an agenda that places the OEA right at the centre of the fight for social causes. In 2019, Aref Yassine, dubbed as "the man of humble beginnings" won the presidency of the OEA[45]. His victory was unlike that of others who had won before him either for belonging to a certain social class and having a social and professional capital, or for being close to parties in power. It was a victory aligned with the spirit of the 17 October Uprising and proof of the efforts made on the ground. This victory also went against the typical sectarian quota approach. For years, the Future Movement had believed that it was the party that named the future President of the OEA. The

candidate that won however, was closer to the Communist Party. He is a Shiite, and the first OEA President to strike his sect from the Civil Status records in Lebanon. The regime accused Aref Yassine of being a communist, yet he ran a mainly solo electoral campaign and had view opposing to the Communist Party.[46]

Furthermore, The Order Revolts introduced a unique experience to the electoral scene in Lebanon. It started by setting a specific mechanism for candidate selection that had started with the Beirut Madinati municipal campaign.[47] It consisted of a public debate in order to choose the candidates for OEA president. However, the lack of female candidates was noticeable, despite the substantial gender diversity in its base. The platform was developed based on a democratic and participatory approach, reflecting the principles of the 17 October Uprising. The platform committee visited various regions to survey engineers. It also held regional meetings to develop a platform that spoke to the aspirations of engineers and architects.[48] Unlike the previous experience, the battle of the generations turned into a generational exchange of expertise: experience met with youth and the spirit of the revolution. This exchange significantly helped reign in the coalition. Moreover, the platform was not only limited to the organization of the profession like before. It went as far as making the OEA a pivotal actor in society. The first and second items on the platform – as in the priorities seemingly – called for an effective role for the OEA. They proposed that the OEA "present solutions and work alongside other unions on matters of public interest," and to become "the first line of defence of society."

Through this platform, The Order Revolts explicitly stood as the complete opposite of the ruling regime, as clearly seen in the promotional video for its electoral campaign, transcribed into the table below:

Us (The Order Revolts)	Them (The Regime)
A coalition born out of the Revolution	A system consisting of the ruling parties
Elections are a means to enact change from within	Elections are a means to score points
A coalition that relies on research, participation, democracy, and transparency	Groups implementing the agenda set by the chief according to alliances
For holding the elections on time and effecting change as soon as possible	For stalling the elections until their quotas are complete
Our candidates are chosen based on public criteria and debates	Their candidates are chosen based on last-minute deals

Table 1: The Content of one of the promotional videos of the order revolts

While this win was a clear victory for the 17 October Uprising, it started an extensive debate on the nature of alliances during union elections. The Order Revolts is comprised of 23 groups born out of 17 October.[49] They made an alliance with the Lebanese Opposition Front[50] that consisted of parties that some consider to be a part of the political system— such as the Lebanese Kataeb Party, or the Independence Movement. Indeed, when the time came to form ballot tickets, there was an intense debate started by those who refused to agree to an alliance with these parties. The discussions and negotiations resulted in these parties refraining from nominating any individual representing or affiliated with any party, in order to promote transparency and enact peaceful, democratic change within the OEA.[51]

Lebanese Professionals Association (LPA) – Professors: Impossible Organization?

After the popular uprising broke out in Lebanon in October 2019, many individuals came together by personal initiative to form what later became known as the Lebanese Professionals Association (LPA). The LPA is an independent inclusive framework comprising many representatives of free and liberal trades, professions or sectors, such as: engineers, physicians, university professors, journalists, workers in the art sector, etc. The idea actually started to take shape on a WhatsApp group through "personal relations and individuals who had previously worked in the field and have past experiences… each individual started talking to a group of people of the same profession…it started with small groups that grew over time."[52]

The Sudanese experience was the organizational reference for this specific Lebanese initiative. A group of university professors (from private and public institutions) were calling for a protest around the same time. Although there was no initial contact, the two groups eventually connected to coordinate and to meet for the first time in Laazariah Square, where around fifty people including physicians, university professors, and artists came together. The Lebanese Professionals Association was chosen as a name for the group, which consisted of independent individuals, as well as others with clear political affiliations – such as The Communist Party, LiHaki Group, or Citizens in a State.

It is an open association that includes individuals from different free professions and sectors. At the start, it did not have clear objectives. However, it worked on motivating the struggle based on societal needs rather than primary sectarian and regional. It aimed to liberate professional syndicates, unions, and associations from the control that the regime had imposed since the end of the Civil War, as well as supporting the uprising and its demands.[53] Nonetheless, these objectives remained general, changing from time to time according to the general context and the discussions that developed later on as the LPA evolved.

Although the common denominator was to create an independent entity without affiliations to any political party, discussions seemed thorny, most notably with regards to the political and advocacy role. As a result, arguments were had between those who wanted to benefit from this platform and turn it into a political entity, i.e. a party with a national role, and those who wanted to optimize professional unions. The latter also wanted to reclaim these platforms from mainstream parties, or those who see the association as a body supporting the popular movement on the ground.

Consequently, many questions arose: Is the objective only to support the popular movement, or to take over the regime? Is the objective to overthrow the regime, or to open a dialogue to fulfil demands? Is the objective to form shadow unions, or to reclaim the unions dominated by mainstream parties?[54] The confusion was reflected bit by bit in subsequent statements, where, at times, "the demands decreased, due to the lack of clarity on the vision, while adding new general directions related to democracy and secularism."[55] In all cases, these discussions were happening within the various groups, including the LAP – Professors.

The Lebanese Professional Association - Professors

A large number of private and public university professors joined the popular movement when it first broke out. Their first contact was through open WhatsApp groups by personal invitation. The group was formed and its members decided to head to the streets, not as individuals, but as "University Professors Revolt." They called for a protest on 23 October 2019 in Riyadh Al Soloh Square.[56] Slogans were raised indicating the inclusive role of the LPA within society: "University Professors Stand United with Our Students…We want education and job creation inside our country, not abroad". They issued a statement stating: "We are an independent group of university professors in Lebanon. We called for this protest near Martyrs Square today and formed an association to support the popular revolution. Our aim is to organise our ranks in the academic workplace, bring forth our demands, and coordinate our movement. The LPA is a professional association. We leave political propositions to other popular movements. We are working on reclaiming our space for professional organization."[57] At first, participants shows great enthusiasm and reflected serious conviction to get organised based on the profession in the workplace (namely universities). However, discussions were later derailed and became problematic. Political disputes turned personal in certain cases, and the identity of the founders of the initiative was called into question. The most important lesson learned from this experience is preparedness and organizational abilities, especially since the attempts to form a professors' association were parallel to the popular movement and were, in fact, a reflection of it. There were also several issues associated with establishing a new professional entity.

The General Context: "Political" or "Professional" Organization in Parallel to the Popular Movement

The most prominent challenges to the process of organizing were linked to the general context because it's technically impossible to isolate external factors (political or economic). The first issue was related to the political-professional debate. It is no secret that some wanted to build upon the organizational dynamic in order to transform the professional platform into a political one, to discuss political matters, and perhaps turn it into an organized "political party." Others considered this dynamic damaging, as the goal must solely revolve around advancing the professors' demands and improving professional conditions. In other words, the goal was to turn this association into what resembles a "union" that advocates for professors in particular and represents the educational sector in Lebanon.

Undoubtedly, the main political issues proposed at the time reflected the spirit of the uprising, but also contributed to some discord when forming the LPA - Professors. Politics were more divisive than inclusive, and several discussions characterized by multiple dimensions also took place. Some professors from various ideological backgrounds accused those who were pro-unions of being leftist and wanting to undermine "Lebanon's wealth in the liberal economic system." As such, they were quick to box unions and the left wing together, and called for completely forsaking the idea of unions. Others tried to keep the platform a general entity, limiting its role to supporting the revolution, since teachers and professors are the "mind of the revolution" and their job is to support the rebels on the ground. This was rejected because not only did it seem elitist, but was also counter-revolutionary, given that the popular movement refused any representative leadership at the time.[58]

National politics were bound to cause a rift that jeopardized the initiative's survival, but the union movement also faced major challenges, such as the lack of unity among educational staff. The main question was: how could one body represent professors across Lebanon, when there are significant differences in legal and professional statuses from one university to another? Even though these political discussions were highly complex, they deepened the rift in views and weakened harmony among initiative founders. The professional and advocacy matter seemed much more complicated and problematic. It was first considered a secondary issue, but it soon turned into a challenge as work progressed. The homogeneity of the legal statuses and various grades of professors was a topic of discussion, given the differences between public and private university professors. For example, it's common knowledge that private university professors – unlike in the public Lebanese University – are not considered employees since they work on a monthly contractual basis. They are also excluded from the NSSF and do not have a representative body on the national level.

As the economic crisis worsened in Lebanon and the national currency lost more of its value, faculties in universities did not suffer the same as the general public. Some universities offered their professors a part of their salaries in US dollars to compensate for the devaluation of the Lebanese pound. Others paid them according to the Central Bank's digital platform exchange rate (/3900/ LBP per USD), while others kept the same official exchange rate (/1500/ LBP per USD). Consequently, financial concerns and demands among professors across Lebanon were no longer unified. Instead, the general political environment created fundamental differences with respect to the demands and their priority from one university to another. Therefore, the founders of the initiative were unable to adopt a clear position on this matter.

Representation, Membership, and Decisions

At first, the initiative was spontaneous and filled with enthusiasm. However, as attempts to organize progressed, key issues regarding representation emerged and became one of the more thorny issues. For example, there was a discussion on whether the objective was to create a union in the legal sense of the word, or to limit it to an association. Forming a union requires, as previously mentioned, a permit from the Ministry of Labour, based on an application submitted by a number of professors. This posed an obstacle, especially since many participants did not agree to establish a union against the administration of their university (i.e. their employer). Some professors tried to benefit from several experiences (meeting with Ghassan Slaiby and The Legal Agenda). The pseudo-strategic decision was to refrain from creating a union. But the truth is that "in order to fight this battle, there must be ten people ready to submit a permit application, knowing that they could get fired; but there were not enough people to move forward with it."[59] Some professors also discovered by chance that there was a previous attempt to form a union for university professors in 2016. They had indeed formed a union chaired by Georges Nehme, Ph.D., the current Dean of the Faculty of Economics at Sagesse University. However, this was "voluntarily kept a secret by the founders who did not want to respond and discuss it."[60]

Aside from the important point of whether or not to form a union or an association, there is the issue of representation. Who is considered a "professor" in the midst of the different types of work contracts in private or public universities: professors with tenure and working full time, part time, or teaching one session per year? Of course, it was very hard to regulate this issue, especially that the entity insisted on the concepts of participation and democracy. Other additional issues came to light when individuals who were not necessarily professors participated in the discussions. Another problem was whether the person was representing the university or themselves. In some groups, certain professors avoided positioning themselves against

the university and its administration, considering the timing unfavourable. As such, defending the university became an integral part of their objective. Meanwhile, others considered this idea to be in complete contrast with the concept of professional organization which does not necessarily entail aligning employer interests with those of the employee.

Finally, as part of the representation issue, there was the matter of representative capacity. According to one of the professors, "it was hard for me to speak on behalf of my university or the professors, because I was not empowered to do so, nor was I elected for it. My participation was in an individual capacity."[61] Sometimes professors of the initiative spoke for their colleagues or the professors of Lebanon without any official representative capacity. The body (LPA – Professors) did not yet get around to addressing these multiple problematic points.

Furthermore, another glaring issue in this context was related to the fact that professors who represented private universities were not organized within the workplace. Some universities even prohibited organized action. This is how a main thorn in the issue emerged: "an unorganized body wants to get organized in an unprecedented political crisis. Impossible."[62]

Subsequently, discussions within certain groups revolved around the purpose of this experience considering the massive hurdles they were facing, particularly given the difficulty of unifying demands, or even political concerns amongst everyone. This crisis impacted each individual differently. As a result, a search began for other parallel or alternative frameworks to the national structure, while limiting the scope to the university itself. It was impossible to organize nationally before locally on the level of every university, and setting the foundations for a union movement from within. This presented another opportunity, the organizational framework on the university level.[63] However, this too faced substantial challenges.

The Virtual Space, COVID-19, and the Beirut Port Blast

Since the inception of the initiative, it seemed that WhatsApp was the main platform used for discussions and dissemination of invitations. However, this mechanism negatively affected the general course of the movement. WhatsApp, in fact, formed an open gathering space, leaving the door open for those with no direct capacity or who had never participated in founding meetings in universities, yet whose voices were heard within these groups and influenced the discussions directly. The other issue lies in the group setting in WhatsApp. It was not an appropriate space for constructive discussions. Most times, particularly after the popular movement subsided, "a large number of irrelevant messages would be circulated, sometimes even misleading messages…this does not contribute to constructive discussions but rather to confusion. And so, the groups became a waste of time."[64] Some tried to replace it with more personal and private initiation meetings on Zoom. But the experience did not allow for side discussions like in-person meetings that remove obstacles. According to one of the professors, "if there was a dispute in person and an attendee left the meeting, we can always follow them, speak with them, and try to convince them to return to the meeting, which is impossible on Zoom."[65] This hindered the efforts to organize as COVID-19 waves hit the country and caused lockdowns.

However, in addition to the initiative emerging as a response or continuation of public political context (the popular movement), the union experience also faced many issues that were out of its control, such as the economic crisis or the Beirut Port blast. All of these events combined weakened the initiative. For example, a group of professors from Saint-Joseph University were supposed to present bylaws, but the plan was abruptly terminated for many reasons, such as the Beirut Port blast. It is also worth noting that, as the economic crisis in Lebanon intensified, the initiative turned from union action and advocacy to humanitarian work, as requested by certain activists. Certain groups worked on providing food and medicine to people in need. Some of these initiatives quickly veered to a "religious" direction of helping the poor and such, despite the numerous attempts to move from the "charity" perspective into solidarity, a difficult concept to think about in the light of a rapidly-progressing crisis.[66]

Conclusion

This paper addresses the reality of independent professional associations in Lebanon. It studies the case of the OEA, and examined how the opposition forces defeated mainstream parties. It also highlighted the attempt to form an association for professionals and the experience of university professors. Both cases demonstrate the importance of organizing, as well as the clear differences between the two experiences. The first being an experience based on past trials, cumulated over the years. It shows how the joint efforts of people with experience and the energy and enthusiasm of the youth could lead to victory and an exemplary level of organization. The second experience proves that it is difficult to organize in the midst of a popular movement. It also shows that it is impossible to agree on objectives if the movement lacks leadership and clear values. In conclusion, cumulative efforts are very necessary, but so is providing space for organizations and discussions that are aimed at reconciling different perspectives and reinforcing trust factors among activists and other actors in the movement. This is one of the most important ingredients of union success. In contrast, the paper notes that new experiences need more time, however hard it may be to keep their distance and shield themselves from external events. As such, we must think of experiences as long-term, cumulative efforts rather than spur-of-the-moment ideas to shadow popular movements.

Endnotes

1 Dirani Ahmad, Slaiby,Ghasssn, Hariri, Nizar, and Scala, Michele. "The Lebanese Syndicate Movement in the face of the 17 October 2019 Uprising." Confluences Méditerranées Journal 4 (2019): 135-147.

2 See for reference: "Sudanese Professionals Association: Structure, Evolution, Roles, and Coalitions – challenges and Future Prospects?" Mohamed El Agati (Lead Researcher), Omar Samir (Researcher), Abdel Moneim El Sayed (Field Researcher and Research Assistant), Arab Reform Initiative, 2021.

3 Bou Khater, Lea, and Rima Majed. «Lebanon's 2019 October Revolution: Who Mobilized and Why.» Asfari institute for civil society and citizenship (2020), p.15. http://www.activearabvoices.org/uploads/8/0/8/4/80849840/leb-oct-rev_-_v.1.3-digital.pdf

4 Khater, Lea Bou. «Lebanon's October 2019 Revolution: Inquiry into Recomposing Labor's Power.» South Atlantic Quarterly 120, no. 2 (2021): 464-472.

5 El-Kak, Nadim. Alternative Labour Unions in Lebanon: Comparative Reflections and Lessons, The Lebanese Centre for Policy Studies, April 2021, https://www.lcps-lebanon.org/featuredArticle.php?id=342

6 Approximately 55% of the workforce in Lebanon is informal, contributing directly to its dispersion and inability, or even unwillingness, to become organised.

7 Majed, Rima. Understanding the October Uprisings in Iraq and Lebanon, Global Dialogue, Volume 10, Issue. 2, 2020 https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/category/volume-10/v10-i2 /

8 Favier, Agnès. "Engagement Logics and Protest Methods in Lebanon: Creation and Annihilation of a Generation of Intellectual Militants (1958-1975)". PhD dissertation, Aix-Marseille 3, 2004.

9 Couland, Jacques. "Union Movement in Colonial Contexts: Lebanon Case Study". Le Mouvement Social 68 (1969): 57-76.

10 Karame, Lama. "Unions vs.. Judiciary: 1946 Labour Law when the Law Became a Weapon Wielded by the Workforce." Legal Agenda, 26/01/2012.

11 Nasr, Salim. «Backdrop to civil war: The crisis of Lebanese capitalism.» Merip Reports 73 (1978): 3-13.

12 Dølerud, Magnus. "The Anti-war Movement in Lebanon, 1975–1990." In The Routledge History of World Peace Since 1750, pp. 296-306. Routledge, 2018; Achcar, Paul. "Perspective of a Public Space Renaissance based on Peace Movements", in Beyhum Nabil (dir.), Rebuilding Beirut: Bets on the Possible, Lyon, Etudes sur Le Monde Arabe Collection, n=5, p.319-330.

13 https://www.almayadeen.net/files/778331/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%85%D8%AA-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%87%D9%82%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86--

14 Scala, Michele. "Clientelism vs.. Protesting: The Example of the Mobilisation of Spinneys Workers in Lebanon. Confluences Méditerranées 1 (2015): 113-123

15 Kobaissy, Farah «Organising Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon.» International Union Rights 22, no. 4 (2015): 22-23.

16 Jamil Mouawad and Paul Achcar, "One Year into Lebanon›s "17 October Uprising": Is There a Reason to Celebrate?", Arab Reform Initiative, 26 October 2020.

https://www.arab-reform.net/ar/publication/%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B6%D8%A9-17-%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%87%D9%84-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A3/

17 Interview with a university professor, Beirut, 10 October 2020.

18 The following unions (for the legal profession, veterinary medicine, legal midwifery, and nursing) only allow Lebanese nationals to practice the professions. Other unions, despite allowing non-Lebanese to practice the profession, have set conditions that may be impossible for some (like the Palestinians), particularly the condition of reciprocity and having the right to practice the profession in their country of origin.

19 Adopted on 9 July 1948 by the General Conference of the International Labour Organization, in its thirty-first session.

20 Interview with activist and journalist Paul Achcar on WhatsApp, 15 March 2021.

21 Interview with Abir Saksouk, Architect, Zoom, 26 March 2021.

22 "The Independent Professional Choice" included an array of members close to mainstream parties (Future Movement, Hezbollah…)

23 Interview with Imad Amer, Architect, Zoom, 9 February 2021.

24 Interview with Imad Amer, Engineer, from the rights group LiHaki (My Rights) and organiser in "The Order Revolts" movement.

25 Press conference on 7 April 2017, Jad Tabet, Naqabati (My Union) candidate for president of the OEA in Beirut addresses engineers affiliated to parties.

26 Interview with Abir Saksouk, Zoom, 26 March 2021.

27 Raed Abou Hamda, Lessons Learned from "The Order Revolts": Victories in Numbers and Methodology, Megaphone, 23 July 2021. See link: https://megaphone.news/%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%B6-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA

28 Saksouk, Abir. "The Order Revolts" and the History of the OEA Elections, Megaphone, 17 July 2021. See link: https://megaphone.news/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%B6-%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AE-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8

29 Saksouk, Abir; Abdel Khalek, Yara; and Amer Imad: "The OEA in Beirut: The Historical Context and the Union Reality", in Tools of Mobilisation and Protesting post-Arab Spring as Records of Transnational Actions, p.60-73. https://www.activearabvoices.org/uploads/8/0/8/4/80849840/policy_papers_ar_-_v.3.4-digital.pdf

30 Ibid.

31 Paul Achcar, "Aref Yassine: The Man from Down Under", Megaphone, 14 July 2021.

32 Hoda Hobeich, "Tabet to Al-Modon: The OEA became a Tool to Turn a Profit, Al-Modon, 23 February 2017. https://www.almodon.com/politics/2017/2/23/%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%AA-%D9%84%D9%80-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84%D8%AA-%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%87%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B9

33 The first syndicate elections under the rule of President Michel Aoun. Jad Tabet, in addition to his social and professional capital (his name and personality played a big role, same for Assem Salam earlier), greatly benefitted from the conflict of interests between the traditional parties. He won the presidency while his list (Naqabati) lost. As such, the traditional parties kept the syndicate without its president.

34 Interview with Imad Amer, Zoom, 9 February 2021.

35 Interview with Imad Amer, Zoom, 9 February 2021.

36 Interview with Imad Amer, Zoom, 9 February 2021.

37 Interview with Imad Amer, Zoom, 9 February 2021.

38 Interview with Imad Amer, Zoom, 9 February 2021.

39 Saksouk, Abir; Abdel Khalek, Yara; and Amer Imad: "The OEA in Beirut: The Historical Context and the Union Reality", in Tools of Mobilisation and Protesting post-Arab Spring as Records of Transnational Actions, p.60-73. https://www.activearabvoices.org/uploads/8/0/8/4/80849840/policy_papers_ar_-_v.3.4-digital.pdf

40 Interview with Abir Saksouk, Zoom, 26 March 2021.

41 Saksouk, Abir; Abdel Khalek, Yara; and Amer Imad: "The OEA in Beirut: The Historical Context and the Union Reality", in Tools of Mobilisation and Protesting post-Arab Spring as Records of Transnational Actions, p.60-73. https://www.activearabvoices.org/uploads/8/0/8/4/80849840/policy_papers_ar_-_v.3.4-digital.pdf

42 Interview with Abir Saksouk, Zoom, 26 March 2021.

43 Saksouk, Abir; Abdel Khalek, Yara; and Amer Imad: "The OEA in Beirut: The Historical Context and the Union Reality", in Tools of Mobilisation and Protesting post-Arab Spring as Records of Transnational Actions, p.60-73. https://www.activearabvoices.org/uploads/8/0/8/4/80849840/policy_papers_ar_-_v.3.4-digital.pdf

44 Saksouk, Abir; Abdel Khalek, Yara; and Amer Imad: "The OEA in Beirut: The Historical Context and the Union Reality", in Tools of Mobilisation and Protesting post-Arab Spring as Records of Transnational Actions, p.60-73. https://www.activearabvoices.org/uploads/8/0/8/4/80849840/policy_papers_ar_-_v.3.4-digital.pdf

45 Achcar, Paul. Aref Yassine: The Man from Humble Beginnings. Megaphone, 14 July 2021.

https://megaphone.news/%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%81-%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%AC%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B0%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D8%AA%D9%89-%D9%85%D9-%86-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AA

46 Slaiby,Ghassan. Reflections on the left-wing in Lebanon on the Occasion of the OEA Elections, Annahar, 11 July 2021. https://www.annahar.com/arabic/section/140-%D8%B1%D8%A3%D9%8A/11072021125319411

47 Mouawad, Jamil. A Portrait of "Beirut Madinati", The Legal Agenda, 17 July 2016. https://legal-agenda.com/%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%b1%d9%88%d8%aa-%d9%85%d8%af%d9%8a%d9%86%d8%aa%d9%8a-%d8%a8%d9%88%d8%b1%d8%aa%d8%b1%d9%8a%d9%87

48 About the campaign. See: "The Order Revolts" – DRI Lebanon. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQLVjCFdXZ8

49 As follows: Beirut Madinati, Jal El Dib, Tajadod Democrati Movement, Khat Ahmar, Saida wal

Jiwar, Ammiyat 17 Teshrin, Lubnan an Jadid, Wadi Al-Tim Group, LAP – Engineers, Citizens in a State, Secular Group in the Engineering Sector, Anti-Corruption Popular Observatory, Mentechrine, Tahalof Watani, Lubnan Hawiyati, Hawa Teshrin, Lebanese Communist Party, Chouf wa Aley, National Bloc, Likaa Mehani Handasi, IEA.

50 Including: The Lebanese Kataeb Party, Indepence Movement, Khat Ahmar, Takadom Party, Likaa Teshrin, Ammiyat 17 Teshrin, Nabad al Janub, Rebels, Tajamo' Muwakabat Al Thawra, Akkar Revolutionaries Group, Northern Revolutionaries Union.

51 Foz, Nader. The Order Revolts and the Lebanese Opposition Front Join Forces during the OEA Elections. Al-Modon, 25 June 2021.

52 Interview with Ghassan Issa, Medical Doctor, Zoom, 9 October 2020.

53 Some of the objectives set by one of the association's founders Dr Ghassan Issa (Interview with Ghassan Issa, Medical Doctor, Zoom, 9 October 2021).

54 For example, many journalists objected to forming an "alternative press union" considering it a failure to reclaim the Lebanese Press Syndicate from the ruling class.

55 Interview with Ghassan Issa, Medical Doctor, Zoom, 9 October 2020.

56 Independent University Professors Association, 23 October 2019.

57 23 October 2019.

58 Interview with Jihad Nammour, University Professor, Zoom, 13 February 2021.

59 Interview with Nizar Hariri, University Professor, Zoom, 16 March 2021.

60 Interview with Nizar Hariri, University Professor, Zoom, 16 March 2021.

61 Interview with a university professor, Beirut, 20 April 2021.

62 Interview with Jihad Nammour, University Professor, Zoom, 13 February 2021.

63 An organizational attempt within Saint-Joseph University.

64 Interview with Jihad Nammour, University Professor, Zoom, 13 February 2021.

65 Interview with Nizar Hariri, University Professor, Zoom, 16 March 2021.

66 For example, assistance targeted 100 families at first and went on to reach 300 families.

51

The Problematic Relationship between Union Action and Protests in Iraq:

A Case Study of the National Union of Journalists

Ali Taher Alhammood

Introduction

The overthrow of the dictatorial regime in Iraq on 9 April 2003 raised many questions about the prospects for change, which did not occur in the country by internal will, but rather by foreign intervention. External powers left the country war-torn and without a clear internal social base to manage and organize the process of change. The collapse of institutional structures, the need for new institutions, and the strong desire to break free from the constraints of the past motivated protesters and civil movements to take over Iraqi streets. These protests began since the very first days of political change after 9 April 2003. For instance, hundreds of military personnel who were discharged held protests in Baghdad; thousands protested against the American occupation in Najaf; and dozens demonstrated in support of the Personal Status Law, rejecting its amendment by the Islamists who joined the government for the first time after the dictatorial era had come to an end.

Intellectuals, journalists, and activists played a leading role in mobilizing people and shaping public opinion, as well as in defending individual and collective freedoms since the first years following a regime change. These continuous activities, which lasted for an entire decade after 2003, led to the formation of a parallel union to the official Iraqi Journalists Syndicate, which was established in 1959.

This experience contributed to successes that have had an impact on Iraqi media, culture, and society overall. The trajectory of this union also offered profound lessons about collective volunteer work, which is essential to the establishment of any similar union in the early stages.

The importance of this paper lies in the fact that the National Union of Journalists is the first union to demonstrate continuity and lasting influence over an extended period, not to mention that it has had a significant impact on the political process, the lives of journalists, and the experience of collective work. The importance of delving into the experience of the national union also stems from the fact that it challenged the prevailing obedience to the State as the historically dominant employer and sole economic rent provider. As such, the emergence of the national union was a breakthrough, as the overall context discouraged such experiences. It was not in the interest of citizens, most of whom were State employees, to adopt projects that challenged its policies.

This study aims to explore a unique experience of union action led by young independent journalists. It explores the difficulties of establishing unions in Iraq – not only because of the limited margin of freedom – but also because of the ongoing economic, legal and political problems that have lasted for several decades.

This document is divided into three main sections:

1- The Contexts of Union Action in Iraq

- Historical and Legal Background of Trade Union Action in Iraq
- The Economic Context of Union Work in Iraq
- Civil Society and the Political Context after 2003
- Paradoxes of Journalism in Iraq

2- The National Union of Journalists: Origins and independence

- Law on the Protection of Journalists and their Rights
- An Association or a Union?
- Methodology of Action
- Main Challenges

3- Lessons and Perspectives of Union Action in Iraq to Protect Freedoms

Historical and Legal Background of Union Action in Iraq

According to some historians, the professional organization for artisans in Iraq dates back to the second half of Abbasid rule in the 11th century A.D. At that time, internal economic and political developments led to the first regulations relating to artisans. Each trade or craft had a sheikh (or leader) who was supported by local authorities. These individuals received official recognition, and they were contacted and consulted on specific issues. The

trade leaders forged traditions and customs among themselves, which were approved by the authorities and taken into account by judges and arbitrators when considering disputes between workers.[1]

During the Ottoman era, the system of "superintendents" (naqabat al-sharaf) governed social organizations in major cities such as Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, Karbala, and Najaf. These superintendents, or nuqaba, played a social role towards the inhabitants of their cities and a political role in the face of the Ottoman sultans and their representatives, including governors and army commanders. The "category" system also remained the main social organization system for artisans during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Iraq, bringing together artisans, workshop owners, and employers. Each category of work had rules related to financial matters, particularly the wages of workers, the level of production, and taxes levied on the products.[2]

During the last decade of the Ottoman Empire, legislations were issued to regulate the practice of legal agents (lawyers), as well as a system regulating the practice of medicine and another scheme regulating the practice of pharmacy.[3]

After the establishment of the Iraqi state in the early 1920s, the government issued decisions to establish a number of unions. During the early days of the monarchy and based on previous Ottoman laws and the constitutional traditions of other countries, these associations included clubs, such as the Iraqi Bar Association in 1918; the Iraqi Medical Association in 1921; the Workers' Association in 1928; the Association for the Cooperation of Barbers in 1929; and the Business Owners Association in 1929.[4]

Promulgated in 1925, Article 12 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Iraq recognized the freedom of Iraqis to express their opinions, publish, assemble, and form associations and join them within the limits of the law. Article 26 of the 1970 Constitution also stated that freedom of association and unions is guaranteed, so long as they are formed by legitimate means and in the best interest of the nation. Article 22 of the Constitution of 2005 also guaranteed the right to form and join trade unions and professional associations.

The Iraqi legislator also issued labour legislations that regulate employment contracts and outline the rights and obligations of employers and workers or professionals. These legislations also guaranteed the right of workers to create unions, including the Workers Law No. 62 of 1936, Labour Law No. 151 of 1970, and the current Labour Code No. 71 of 1987.

In 1978, Decree No. 150 was issued, which completely transformed trade union action. This decree stated that workers and artisans would be listed as official employees of the Iraqi government, thereby weakening the role of unions at the political and institutional levels. The decree was issued under the Baath rule, which came to power following a coup d'état in 1968. It was in line with the State's socialist vision of the economy, and it also aimed to suppress opposition and dissolve parties, which were often active through trade unions and student unions.

Unions and syndicates remained under the law and the government's grip during Saddam's rule, and they also became an official tool used by the Baath Party to force people to join its ranks, draft intelligence reports and monitor citizens.

The official Iraqi Journalists Syndicate also fell victim to this practice under the Baath regime. Comprising only journalists from official newspapers and institutions, it echoed the ideological orientation of the Baath and implemented the decrees imposed by the Revolutionary Command Council.

The official Iraqi Journalists Syndicate was established by law in 1959. The famous poet Mohammed Mahdi al-Jawahiri was its first president. The union currently has more than 16,000 members and is officially linked to the State's departments and is granted an annual budget from the government

The Economic Context of Union Action in Iraq

Iraq's economy is heavily dependent on oil revenues, with oil accounting for more than 95% of the annual budget and 75% of its GDP. Despite this, the entire oil sector accounts for only 1% of the country's total workforce, which means that the Iraqi economy is extremely under-diversified. Statistics reveal the risks that the Iraqi rentier economy poses. By the end of 2020, the number of people receiving a government salary (civil servants, military personnel, retirees, and people receiving social benefits) was 4,800,000, which is the equivalent of 55% of the total working population. This percentage poses serious risks when compared to other countries, such as Iran (5%), Egypt (7%) and Jordan (13%). The economic risk posed by the large proportion of Iraqis employed by the State lies in the weakening of the private sector, while the political risk lies in the lack of interest in building institutions that support workers' rights.

This rentier economy is the result of more than 21,000 laws, instructions, regulations, and orders issued from the days of the monarchy until 2003, all of which are in favour of a rentier socialist economy supported and directed by the State. This, however, is contrary to the laws and regulations necessary for the success of the private sector and the country's market economy system.[5]

Due to all these factors, the government in Iraq receives easy oil revenues and has become the primary employer. This has caused significant weakness in the private sector, which has relied on the State for decades. Naturally, this has undermined trade unions in various professions and sectors.

Despite this, unions were able to challenge the government

when given any margin of freedom. For example, between 2003 and 2005, unions successfully organized protests and demonstrations in Basra against the "privatization" of the oil sector.[6] However, the role of these unions quickly diminished, and their work within the various State ministries was undermined due to the general challenges facing union life in Iraq, such as the lack of organization, financial resources, and administrative experience, as well as the conflict of interest, whereby unionists are employees and union members at the same time.

These union movements took place in light of sudden and rapid media access and the desire to show the great freedoms granted by the post-2003 regime. These freedoms have remained one of the most important achievements of the period following the change of the dictatorial regime in Iraq, and they manifested themselves in the issuance of hundreds of newspapers, magazines, television channels and the formation of thousands of civil society organizations.

Civil society and the Political Context after 2003

Civil liberties are among the most notable achievements in post-2003 Iraq. The rights and freedoms section of the current Iraqi Constitution includes about 20 articles upholding citizens' right to life, security, and Iraqi nationality. This includes the rights to work, health, social care, establish trade unions and join associations and unions. The Constitution guarantees the freedoms of speech, press, assembly and protest, the establishment of parties and respect for personal status, as well as the freedom to practice rites. However, the implementation of these constitutional articles on freedoms faced several challenges, such as the reluctance to adopt laws guaranteeing rights and freedoms, including the law on freedom of expression; the right of assembly; protest and demonstrations; the law on freedom of access to information, and even the annulment of previous laws relating to unions or the adoption of pluralism in the country.

The main components of civil society in Iraq (civil organizations, trade unions and the media) were established before 2003. Numerous trade unions, dozens of humanitarian and human rights organizations, and media organizations (newspapers, magazines, radio stations, websites) have existed in Iraq for a long time, some of which were established abroad and returned to Iraq after 2003. After the change of the political system, thousands of civil organizations were formed, and hundreds of media outlets reflected the will of the public and the new democratic image. Many organizations and media outlets undertook new experiences in advocacy and education on public participation in elections. They also promoted the new constitution and defended human rights, including the causes of women and minority groups. They also contributed to emergency relief and humanitarian action, providing real opportunities for communication and offering a public space that brings together various ethnicities and religions.

It should be noted that, as professional groups, unions traditionally follow specific laws in Iraqi legislation. After the political change in 2003, it was necessary to adopt new legislation to regulate civil society organizations, which have sometimes been considered as a parallel form of unions in terms of professional affiliation (the case of the National Union of Journalists for example). The advantage of the NGO law was that it covered all organizations – which was not the case of unions, as each of them had a separate law enacted throughout the legislative history of the Iraqi State.

In terms of funding and expenditure, unions and civil society organizations can be divided into five main groups. The first group includes charities that receive funds primarily from religious institutions or political parties, whereby these political actors benefit from the publicity provided by civil society organizations or their collaborators, especially during election periods.

The second group consists of protest and anti-government organizations. These organizations have staged numerous protests, mainly after the Arab Spring of 2010. Some of these protests did not have clear demands and slogans – such as the protests held on 25 February 2011. Some observers pointed out how disconnected these organizations were from the concerns of the Iraqi people, such as those that were organized in support of the coup d'état against Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi on June 30. However, some protests had rightful demands. These were highly organized, clear, and influential demands, such as the one that took place on 31 August 2013, which called for the abolition of the privileges and pensions of Members of Parliament. These protest organizations do not require significant funding as long as they are active on the streets or social media pages.

The third group consists of so-called "elitist" organizations, which focus on elite gatherings and participate in conferences, seminars, and meetings with the media, without necessarily reflecting how deeply rooted they are in Iraqi society or representing real segments of the Iraqi society. These organizations, which are accustomed to dealing with international organizations and Western embassies, appear to be the most significant recipients of U.S. assistance to trade unions and civil society organizations during the presence of foreign troops in Iraq. Their US financial assistance amounted to about $850 million, according to Lucy Chang, senior democracy advisor at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

The fourth group mainly consists of unions that operate under separate laws passed before 2003 (such as the Journalists Syndicate, Doctors Union, Engineers Union, Health Professionals Union, Workers Union, etc.). They receive their funds in line with the law and as part of the official state budgets, as well as from subscription fees and the services they provide to members. Because unions rely on public funding and their relationship with

State institutions, they have lost interest in public affairs and are guided by the will of political authorities. This has been evident in almost every post-2003 protest; as official unions took no part in them.

The last group includes civil society organizations, which seek to provide specific services. They are self-financed or funded by voluntary contributions and are often small in size and low in impact.[7]

According to official statistics, by the beginning of February 2015, there were 2,192 unions and NGOs in Iraq registered under the current NGO law, specialized[8] in several types of professions and trades, development, relief, culture, human rights, media, and youth issues.[9]

As for the media, the number of registered Iraqi TV channels increased from 2 before 2003 to 108, including 28 local channels, 25 satellite channels, and 55 radio stations in 2005.[10] This number grew to 121 local, satellite, and radio channels by the end of 2014,[11] without taking into account the dozens of Iraqi satellite channels that preferred to broadcast from outside of Iraq.[12] This significant growth of Iraqi media played an important role in creating the motivation and need to establish a union/association that defends the rights and freedoms of its workers.

The Paradoxes of Journalism in Iraq

As the Iraqi political system collapsed on 9 April 2003, political events and questions about the nature of the new regime quickly unfolded. This newfound freedom encouraged many elites and intellectuals to try and influence public opinion through the media. The first generation of Iraqi politicians came to power after 2003, relying on two essential factors to draw their legitimacy: the first one was their opposition to the dissolved Baath party, and the second was calling for the establishment of a democratic regime based on elections, as an alternative to the dictatorship. Owing to these two demands, and with the support of international backing, the new political system gained legitimacy (in the sense of being accepted by the Iraqi people). This first generation consisted mainly of the political opposition formed before 2003 by the Islamists and the two Kurdish parties, which have a long track record of struggle against the dictatorship. They both have also suffered immensely from sectarian and nationalistic discrimination and are constantly wary of regional and international alliances. As this generation was constantly familiar and affiliated with religious, sectarian, and national affiliations, they did not hesitate to take refuge in these identities and express them in their daily discourse as part of the political quota system that distinguished the new regime. Of course, this generation has fully adapted to the new political system, which has provided them with all the necessary funds, authority, status, and sense of security.

Alongside the first generation, a second generation of educated young people emerged, which shared the same concerns as the first and also suffered from crimes of the former dictatorial regime. However, this generation was organizationally and culturally distant from the first generation. This, coupled with the competition to reach political positions through the quota system, may have kept them out of power. But, it turned them into a main pillar of the new cultural consciousness in post-2003 Iraq. The second generation of active intellectuals was motivated to work primarily in the media and press since the latter and social media platforms provided them with a dual influence on public opinion and political powers.

The second generation sought to achieve system reform, through daily awareness activities and multiple protests it held from 25 February 2011 to the peak of these efforts in July 2015.

It was in this context, characterized by a sense of freedom from political affiliations with national and sectarian parties, coupled with the desire to express this freedom, that journalists felt the need to challenge authorities and their policing practices, which were seen as an extension of the former dictatorial regime.

These journalists identified themselves as advocates of the political reform project and as “free” journalists practising, at the same time, their profession and civil activism and defending freedoms.[13]

Journalists enjoyed a certain immunity, similar to politicians. After 2003, civic activities succeeded in raising awareness of the restriction of civil liberties, making attacks or restrictions against journalists problematic for the government.[14]

In addition, media outlets that were not affiliated with the parties in power supported the movement of activist journalists, who became the basis of the civil movement in Iraq, given the weakness of unions and the novelty of civil society organizations. These media activists organized a large campaign called “Baghdad will not be Kandahar.” This movement had condemned the assault by the Mahdi Army militias against a number of female students in Basra in 2008, along with many other protests and demonstrations. Journalists have been the mainstay of Iraqi protests from 2003 to July 2015. It can be said that journalists and media outlets – which play a key role in shaping public opinion – consisted of the educated elite. They were themselves activists in civil society organizations, and simultaneously the voice of political opposition on the streets. This is an Iraqi paradox by excellence.

National Union of Journalists: Origins and Independence

Following protests by activist journalists and new civil society organizations on 25 February 2011, as well as the Arab Spring uprisings, political authorities sought to reach out to the press by presenting a draft Journalists Protection Law to the Iraqi Parliament. The first draft of the law drew strong reactions from the press, which felt that the law, if passed, would restrict freedoms and distinguish journalists from the general public – similarly to how politicians distinguished themselves with financial privileges and unreasonable powers.

Journalists argued that the very name of the law, which entitled them to "protection" and provided for their allocation of plots of land, free treatment, and other privileges, was merely a bribe from the government. They asked that the title be changed to "the rights of journalists" and that discriminatory clauses contained in the draft be abolished.[15]

The law also reinstated articles related to publication offences and related laws, such as the Cinema Law, the Iraqi Publications Law, and the dissolved Ministry of Information Law. The latter was suspended by Paul Bremer, the civilian governor of Iraq after 2003. This gave journalists the feeling that the Iraqi political system had reverted to tyranny.

The position of the (official) Iraqi Journalists Syndicate was to support the draft law and to insist that the government include in all its instructions that "only journalists affiliated with the Journalists Syndicate are recognized as such." The syndicate even stood against journalists who rejected the law and threatened them using various punitive measures.[16]

The (official) Iraqi Journalists Syndicate had always supported journalists seeking to expand the margin of freedom in the country up until the assassination of its president Shihab Al-Tamimi in 2006 by Al-Qaeda, before Mu'id Al-Lami took charge of the president's tasks. Ever since, the syndicate has furthered the interests of the authorities, rather than defending journalists.[17]

After months of debate and media pressure on the Iraqi Parliament, the latter passed the law on the rights of journalists after taking into account many comments from the press, including defining a journalist as someone "working in the field of journalism," rather than as a member of the syndicate.

The success in amending major aspects of the law created a spirit of solidarity among leading journalists and prompted the creation of a new union to defend journalists after the official Syndicate had abandoned this task.

Since the beginning of 2010, the press has been witnessing an increased repression of civil liberties, including the difficulty of issuing legal permits to civil society organizations. The licensing process lasted for several months unless the organization in question had political ties or an Islamic name. Other forms of restrictions included banning journalists from filming or taking photographs except with a special permit, restrictions on the right to protest, and enabling the Media and Communications Commission to monitor newspapers and impose taxes, which are not included in the powers defined by the Constitution. Many journalists stated that "carrying a camera at the time was equivalent to carrying an RPG 7; it put journalists' lives at risk."[18]

With all these developments taking place, and as the Arab Spring revolutions were unfolding, journalists were motivated to form an association to protect themselves in particular, and other freedoms more generally.

The Egyptian revolution encouraged Iraqi intellectuals to take to the streets and to become social activists, rather than isolate themselves from society.[19] Despite this, intellectuals and journalists did not oppose the political system and did not demand the overthrow of the regime, as was the case in other Arab countries, because they were often part of the regime and its institutions.

The first Iraqi demonstrations after the Arab Spring uprisings were the pro-equality protests held on Valentine's Day 2011. Many women were among protesters, the majority of whom were activist journalists. "This provoked the authorities because of the organized and civil nature of the protest."[20] The government was aware that intellectuals and journalists, who were part of the elite, were unable to organize large-scale popular protests for objective reasons. These reasons included: the elite's sectarian social division, the fear of returning to civil war, the weakening of the government, and the fact that the government at the time provided relatively good services such as public jobs, salary increases, financial subsidies, etc., primarily due to the massive increase in international oil prices. However, the press community felt the need to reform the political system by continuing protests and media pressure, as well as regulating the sector institutionally and intellectually, without any involvement from the official Journalists Syndicate.

An Association or Union?

The period following the approval of the Law on the Rights of Journalists and continuous protests by the intellectual elite of Iraq represented a critical moment amid heated internal debates – which focused on two main aspects. The first aimed at establishing a new union that would defend journalists and remain actively involved in all aspects of the public sphere, while other intellectuals and journalists defended the official Syndicate

as the historical institution of this field.

The second aspect aimed at calling for the establishment of an association (or a civil society organization) to defend the rights of journalists, in order to avoid confrontation with the legally recognized Syndicate. This was met with opposition by many journalists who called for the establishment of a new union, as they believed that the official syndicate could not be reformed internally. This group also had a hidden desire to confront the government and its institutions.

Those advocating for the establishment of a new union were relying on the "permanent Iraqi Constitution," which guarantees the formation of syndicates and unions without any restrictions like (one union per profession). However, those who were in favour of forming an association believed that this would bring them financial support from international donors who required the presence of an officially registered entity, and that this would not be possible if a union was to be formed.

Supporters of the official Syndicate quietly withdrew from the discussions, while the demands of those who advocated for the establishment of a new journalists' union gained traction at the expense of those who demanded the establishment of an association. Several media figures lost interest in the debate, while others began laying the groundwork for the establishment of the new union called the "National Union of Journalists - Iraq."

The founders stated that the motive behind the establishment of the new union was that the Official Journalists Syndicate did not abide by professional standards when deciding whether to include or exclude journalists, making its decisions instead based on how close journalists were to the government. It used to single out who they believed were "problematic" journalists and deny them media coverage licenses. It took advantage of its power to issue press identity cards, granting them as gifts to those who founded fictitious institutions or became mouthpieces for the government. Moreover, the syndicate was known for selling press cards to taxi drivers to use them to cross security controls. Terrorists, who were arrested later, also had taken advantage of this lax system.[21]

According to the founders, the official Syndicate took advantage of its media privileges and was provided with a cover for clubs, bars, and gambling venues, as properties of the Journalists Syndicate are protected by law. Hence, the official Syndicate turned into a caretaker of government interests, rather than protecting those of journalists. For instance, it did not take any administrative, legal, or even media action to protect journalists from the actions of security forces.[22]

The dialogues held between journalists culminated in holding the constituent congress of the National Union of Journalists in early 2013, which also represented a flashpoint in the conflict between the educated civil elite and the Islamists in power. For example, in an attempt to prevent journalists from arriving to the Sheraton Hotel, where the constituent congress was supposed to take place, the government cut off roads leading to the hotel.

Despite these obstacles, the first constituent congress was held in the presence of a number of supportive MPs. The congress resolved the question of the union's legality based on a constitutional article that upholds the freedom to join and establish unions. The Iraqi Constitution does not indicate that a profession must have one single union, and the Iraqi Parliament had not yet approved new union laws. Thus, "the union had a strong constitutional justification but did not have legal cover. This was similar to the situation of political parties at that time – which took part in the political process based on constitutional provisions that allow citizens to join and establish parties, despite the lack of laws regulating political parties and associations,"[23] according to the agreement on the legal justification of the union during its first constituent congress.

During the constituent congress, members of the Union Council and the President of the Union Council were selected, the subscription fees to be paid by affiliated members were set, and internal regulations on classifying press-related professions (such as photography and directing) were adopted for the first time.

During its first session, the Union focused on pursuing the task of defending public and press freedoms by taking stances and issuing statements. One of the main achievements of the National Union of Journalists was proving that it is possible to have multiple unions for the same profession, despite the opposition of the official Syndicate and political authorities.

The second achievement was its successful attempt to organize a protest in early 2014 demanding the release of Nader Dandoun, a French journalist of Algerian origins. The Union's position was decisive in dismissing the serious charges against him after 23 days of arrest.

However, little by little, the role of the National Union of Journalists diminished in terms of calling for, or participating in protests. Its support for the freedoms of expression and thought was also limited to the statements that it made. Article 38 Coalition in the Iraqi Constitution guarantees the individual's freedom of expression and right to protest and stage sit-ins. The coalition included roughly 90% of non-governmental organizations and many activists, in addition to the National Union of Journalists. At one point, the coalition was the only entity to take a stance in support of freedoms. The National Union of Journalists even failed to take part in the July 2015 protests, despite the fact that its members were the main actors in the protests that had started on 25 February 2011. The National Union took a stance in line with that of Article 38 Coalition in support of the Basra protests in 2018, which left many people dead and wounded.

The National Union of Journalists preferred to express its position in regards to the widespread protests that swept many Iraqi cities in October 2019, leaving hundreds of people dead and thousands injured. Their stance was expressed through pro forma statements issued by an informal assembly of a number of unions supporting the protests.

The Union continued its journey with great difficulty for three sessions (which lasted 3 years each), during which it faced many problems that eventually diminished its role in the cultural and professional arena and its impact on issues related to freedom.

Methodology of Action

It seems that the National Union of Journalists, which was formed after several protests by intellectuals and a long struggle with the authorities, faced various challenges. These are as follows:

- **Lack of internal consistency:** During its three sessions, the Union did not have a mentor or leader. In each session, the president was merely a moderator who relied on a network of acquaintances (or friendships), rather than on openness towards members.[24]

- **Communist influence:** Although the vast majority of journalists are civilians and secular liberals, communist journalists – due to their organizational capacities – were able to take control of many organizations and groups whose internal system is democratic, including the National Union of Journalists. In fact, the number of Communists in the Union's first session was two, and it rose to four in the second session. In the third session, the president was a member of the Politburo and an official spokesman for the Communist Party. The communist presence and its influence over the Union's discourse discouraged many journalists, who saw that the Union had turned into a branch of the Communist Party, whose purpose was to collect funds and grants.[25] However, left-wing members of the National Union of Journalists defended the communists, claiming that the party had not ordered or encouraged its members to join the Union. They also claimed that they had received advice from the leadership of the Iraqi Communist Party not to establish a union, but to instead try and infiltrate the ranks of the official Journalists Syndicate through its internal tools and mechanisms.[26]

- **Authority dilemma:** The members of the Union often acted as a political party opposing the political process through protest and activism, steering away from the Union's main objective, which is to defend journalists in legal and administrative issues and to bring them public privileges.

- **Secular seclusion:** It was decided that the National Union of Journalists would be a union for everyone working in the field of journalism, regardless of their political orientation. During the first meetings of its very first session, the Union Council took the initiative to visit all radio, television, and press stations, in order to invite their employees to join the Union. However, given the political orientations of communist members, this process leaned closer to stations affiliated with the secular left, failing to extend a hand to independents or Islamic stations.[27]

- **Poor model and lack of experience:** The work of unions and organizations in Iraq after 2003 revolved around competition for privileges (such as travel, financial rewards, status in the media sector, etc.). The founding members of the National Union of Journalists had no experience in administrative union work or volunteer work, which posed a real challenge to achieving goals and making progress.[28] A prime example of the lack of due diligence and poor management practices is the loss of the Union's records and archives – including data, documents, and documented positions, as stated by the president of the current session of the National Union of Journalists.[29]

- **Lack of independent press:** The majority of journalists were not working in independent and stable media outlets. Over time, the few non-partisan television, radio, and newspaper stations disappeared, allowing media outlets affiliated with political parties and figures to become all the more powerful. These state-affiliated media outlets draw strength from their abundant financial resources and the stability of their employees, which made them reluctant to engage in unionist disputes with the official Syndicate.

- **Corruption and lack of transparency:** Many founding members mentioned that in several cases, they were unaware of the amount of donations or grants and gifts provided by international organizations or donors. Some even mentioned that devious and illegal methods were adopted to obtain grants from international organizations because the Union is not officially registered.[30] The mismanagement, lack of transparency, and the absence of a supervisory committee appointed by the General Assembly of the Syndicate also fuelled accusations of corruption. This led to the targeting of some members of the Union's council, as heated statements and posts about embezzlement or administrative corruption in the Union were published on social media.

- **A union or a civil society organization?** One of the paradoxes facing the National Union of Journalists is that its activities now entirely revolve around training programs and awareness, which makes it more akin to a civil society organization. The Union has abandoned the task of monitoring, advocating, and raising its voice in support of individual and public freedoms. As mentioned above,

this was the result of journalists' lack of motivation to join the new Union on the one hand, and the inability of the new entity to carry out its duties without financial support on the other, which led it to engage in partnerships with international organizations. These organizations did not support the Union for its work, but rather funded specific activities that were more NGO-focused than unionist.

- **Funding issues**: Funding is perhaps the Union's main problem, as many of the Union's 1,227 members today have not committed to paying their annual subscription fees, and the Union has not been able to find stable and sustainable sources of funding. This has undermined the Union's ability to provide even basic requirements such as a headquarters, membership cards, employees, and others.[31]

- **Legal issues:** Despite the constitutional justification for its existence, the constituent congress of the National Union of Journalists faced numerous challenges because of the lack of a legal foundation for the Union's establishment. This led the Union to defend a draft law entitled "Law on Trade and Professional Unions" submitted in 2014 by some deputies and specialized committees to Parliament. The law supported the existence of multiple unions for the same profession, in line with the spirit of the Constitution. However, the law was set aside after preliminary deliberations, as it seems that many official unions – such as the Bar Association, Engineers Association, Medical Association, and many others were opposed to it – in an attempt to maintain their unilateral hold on union action in their fields, rather than have to deal with a variety of unions.

Endnotes

1 Dr. Hamdan Abdul Majeed al-Kubaisi, "The Industry," Iraqi Civilization, Part 5 (Baghdad, Dar Al Hurriya Publishers, 1985), pp. 295-301.

2 Dr. Imad Abdessalam Raouf, "Social Organizations", ibid., pp. 129-158.

3 See, Ottoman Law Collection, translated by Arif Effendi Ramadan, J.S., (Beirut: Scientific Press, 1928).

4 Dr. Ibrahim Khalil Ahmad, "Organizations and Clubs", Civilization of Iraq, idib., Volume 13, p. 145.

5 Interview with the United States Ambassador to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Iraq, Joseph Kocsian, in Baghdad on 12/1/2012.

6 Rima Majed and Janan Aljabiri, Contemporary social movements in Iraq: mapping the labour movement and the 2015 mobilizations, (Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, Berlin, 2020), pp. 29-33.

7 We referred earlier to the classification of organizations in terms of size and funding in an article published on Al-Monitor website. For more information, see: Ali Taher, "Civil Society Organizations in Iraq... Illusion or Reality?", Al-Monitor website: http://www.al-monitor.com.

8 The Council of Ministers, Department of Non-Governmental Organizations, February 2015 Report, published on the official website of the Department: http://www.ngoao.gov.iq/ .

9 Information Center for Research and Development, 2013 NGO Handbook for Iraq, (Baghdad and Amman, Information Center for Research and Development, 2014), pp. 8-9.

10 Media and Communications Commission, Annual Report of the Media and Communications Commission, 2004-2005 (Baghdad, no date), p. 41.

11 Media and Communications Commission, Radios, Satellite and Local TV Channels Licensed for 2014, pp. 1-10.

12 Ministry of Planning and the House of Wisdom, National Report on Human Development 2008, (Baghdad, 2009), p. 99.

13 Interview with Hamed Al-Sayed, founding member of the National Union of Journalists and alternate member of the Union Council (first session).

14 Arresting, beating or threatening a journalist was enough for their colleagues to dedicate TV programs and newspaper columns or even to organize protests for them. The most prominent example were the mass protests organized by journalists to condemn the Imam of Buratha Mosque, Sheikh Jalal Al-Din Al-Saghir, who insulted journalist Ahmad Abdul Hussein, who had written about the distribution of donations to citizens to vote in favor of a certain electoral list before the 2010 elections.

15 Interview with Qais Al-Ajrash.

16 Interview with Hamid Al-Sayed.

17 Interview with Mustafa Nasser, president of the Association for the Defense of Journalists and founding member of the National Union of Journalists.

18 Many of those we interviewed during this study mentioned this.

19 Interview with Hamid Al-Sayed.

20 Interview with Hamid Al-Sayed.

21 Interview with Amal Saqr, member of the Union Council (third session).

22 Interview with Hamed El-Sayed.

23 Interview with Qais Al-Ajrash, founding member of the National Union of Journalists and member of the Union Council (first session).

24 Interview with Hamid Al-Sayed.

25 Interview with Amal Saqr.

26 Interview with Yasser Al-Salem, president of the National Union of Journalists (third session).

27 Interview with Hamid Al-Sayed.

28 Interview with Qais Al-Ajrash.

29 Interview with Yasser Al-Salem.

30 Interview with Amal Saqr.

31 Interview with Yasser Al-Salem.

60

Independent Trade Unions in Egypt 2004-2015:

Between Political Developments and Internal Factors

Shimaa El Sharkawy
Mohamed El Agati

Introduction

Egypt has had a long history of trade union action and labour movements, even long before the January 2011 Revolution. It dates back to several periods during the 19th and early 20th centuries and is marked by mass and diverse union movements, despite various attempts by the State to quell it. However, the movement at times did indeed succumb to the wide control of the State through an institutional framework. As such, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) was founded in 1957 and was followed by long and significant periods of struggle.[1]

It is also important to note that the Center for Trade Union and Workers' Services (CTUWS) was founded in 1990 by labour leaders who strongly believed in the independence of trade unions. These leaders were born out of the Egyptian Labour Movement, which prospered in the late 1980s outside of the official trade union structure, following the 1986 railway workers strike, and the 1989 iron and steelworkers strike.[2]

This paper aims to highlight the internal problems that face independent trade unions. It is primarily referring to the trade unions independent from the state-controlled ETUF and explores their activity from 2004 up until 2015. This contemporary period also includes major milestones that have affected independent unions in the Arab world's most populous country.

Period of New Foundations: Pre-January 2011

The rise of independent trade unions in Egypt was not linked to the January 2011 Revolution as some might think. They emerged long before that. In 2009, the first independent trade union was founded for workers of the Real Estate Tax Authority (IGURETA) by civil servants in that sector, based on the ILO convention enshrining workers' freedom of association. Three other unions were founded later before the January 2011 Revolution, for pensioners, healthcare technicians, and teachers. In addition to the first trade union, these were the largest, most influential unions. However, most independent unions were founded after the January Revolution, which exposed once again the rampant corruption and submission to power in the general union space pre-January 2011. This was the case of the (official) Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), which condemned workers' strikes during the 18 days of the nationwide sit-in that remove Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak from his three-decade rule by on 11 February 2011. Independent unions now amount to 1,500 unions with five federations. ETUF includes 23 general federations as of the 2006-2011 union session, and around 1,809 union committees.[3]

Since its establishment in 1957, ETUF has been the sole legal trade union in Egypt. It was granted official status under Law no. 35 of 1976. Despite undergoing radical changes in socioeconomic policy since the 1950s, ETUF was also a tool of the State. Almost all ETUF members work in the public or governmental sectors. Therefore, the ETUF structure relies on the public sector. Its mission was to control workers as much as it was to represent them. However, it could not stop the mobilization of independent workers towards the end of Mubarak's mandate. Between 2000 and 2010, more than 2 million, maybe even 4 million Egyptian workers participated in 3,400-4,000 strikes.

In 2003, ETUF opposed the promulgation of the standardized Labour Law, yet came around eventually.[4] The law contributed to changing prevailing practices by granting workers permanent employment following a probationary period. Establishments were allowed to employ workers indefinitely via fixed term "temporary" contracts, then dismiss them upon terminating the contracts at their discretion. Nonetheless, these aspects of the law were poorly enforced. In 2004, ETUF did not object to the formation of what is now known as the "Businessmen Government" headed by Prime Minister Ahmad Nazif. However, not all ETUF bases followed suit. The action escalated after the Nazif government took over power directly.

In 2004, 265 collective activities were organized – 70% of which occurred after the Nazif government took over in July 2004.[5] The textile industry witnessed the most activity, having been targeted heavily by privatization. By 2007, the movement had expanded to include all industries, public services, transportation, civil services, and professionals. Even though ETUF could not restrain the growing protests, it remained nominally the dominant player over all organized action. On the eve of the fall of Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011, only 3 independent unions were not under the direct control of the regime. This may be due to their cohesive nature since inception, as well as the political context that allowed them to exist under the regime's control over ETUF. The movement, which paved the way for an independent union in 2007, was launched when the workers from the Real Estate Tax Authority formed a national committee. They did this so that they could organize a strike and lead a coordinated

campaign to advance their demands for wage parity with tax workers from the Ministry of Finance, who were paid much more. The disparity arose due to a bureaucratic reorganization process that happened several years earlier. This restructure had created a group of poorly paid clerical workers employed by local authorities with fewer resources than the central government.[6] The campaign culminated in an 11-day sit-in in front of the offices of the Cabinet in downtown Cairo. Some 8,000 workers and their families resolved to remain until the demand for wage parity was met. Astonishingly, Minister of Finance Yusif Boutrus Ghali yielded, and the Real Estate Tax Authority workers won a 325 percent wage increase.[7]

Building on the momentum of this achievement, the strike committee spent the following year organizing an independent union. By December 2008, over 30,000 of some 50,000 clerical workers employed by local authorities throughout Egypt joined the new union. The Ministry of Manpower and Migration unexpectedly and – technically – illegally recognized the new union in April 2009, the first trade union independent of the regime in over half a century. Independent unions of healthcare technicians and teachers were also founded before the end of 2010.[8]

To a great extent, workers became the biggest element of a thriving protest culture in the first decade of the second millennium. They greatly undermined the legitimacy of the Mubarak regime, although they gained less media coverage compared to pro-democratic middle-class movements, such as Kefaya. This could be traced back to the nature of worker movements characterized by more specific demands, rather than general movements. As a result, they attracted less media interest unless their protests develop into something bigger, or they engaged with partisan or political powers. However, until 2010, only a small minority of workers called for democratic transformation as a strategic objective. Workers on strike or in protests would usually invite Mubarak or his ministers to visit them to appeal to the regime's power, rather than challenge it outright. The 22,000 workers of the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company who went on strike in September 2007 created for the movement another turning point. Building on their success, the strike committee of company workers called for a strike on 6 April 2008, demanding the establishment of a national monthly minimum wage of 1,200 Egyptian pounds. Nonetheless, security forces suppressed the strike using a combination of polarization and violent oppression. As such, the regime had drawn a line in the sand between local grievances and national policy. While the regime succeeded in doing this for some time, workers kept fighting for better wages to satisfy living requirements. A lawsuit was filed and resulted in a verdict in March 2010 urging the government to institute a "fair" minimum wage. On 1 May 2010, hundreds of workers and supporters gathered in front of parliament demanding that the government implement the court order and set a minimum basic monthly wage of EGP 1,200—a figure popularized since the aborted 2008 Ghazl al-Mahalla strike. They chanted, "A fair minimum wage, or let this government go home" and "Down with Mubarak and all those who raise prices!"[9]

Due to a combination of repression and the limited capacities of local networks that enabled collective action at the workplace level, explicitly political demands emerged only episodically late between 2008 and 2010. This prevented the workers' movement from developing a national leadership or political program. Because workers typically mistrusted the opposition intelligentsia and saw them as outsiders who sought to impose their own agenda, there were only fragile and intermittent linkages between these two forces.[10]

Period of Great Explosion: The January 2011 Revolution

When the uprising began on 25 January 2011, and despite their inability to take initiative, workers quickly mobilized to take part in toppling Hosni Mubarak. The main achievement was the establishment of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), the first association born from the revolution.

EFITU was announced on 30 January 2011 at a press conference that took place in Cairo's Tahrir Square, the epicentre of the popular movement seeking to topple Mubarak. Since the foundation of EFITU broke the state monopoly of ETUF over union associations, this revolutionary action made the legal breach a basis for new legitimacy.

IGURETA and the independent unions of healthcare technicians and teachers initiated a new federation with support from the Center for Trade Union and Workers' Services (CTUWS) – a grassroots NGO focused on labour issues established in 1990. They were also joined by the recently established retirees' association and representatives of textile, pharmaceutical, chemical, iron and steel, and automotive workers from industrial zones in Cairo, Helwan, Mahalla al-Kubra, Tenth of Ramadan City, and Sadat City. This collective group had 8.5 million members.

Although the labour movement made great strides during this period, new unions still face structural issues and challenges – namely funding.[11] Funding new unions also poses problems. Independent unions must collect dues from every individual member each month, while ETUF still receives dues by an automatic deduction from wages, even from those who have expressly resigned their membership. The central ETUF bureaucracy controls the social funds of its constituent unions, which provide pensions and other valuable benefits. New, independent unions have no access to these funds, even if all or most of their membership consists of former members of ETUF-affiliated unions, as is the case with the Real Estate Tax Authority clerical workers, Cairo Transport Authority workers, teachers, postal workers, and others.

Facilitated by the government's closure of all workplaces in early February 2011, many workers participated in the popular uprising as individuals. On 6 February, they returned to their jobs. Just two days later, EFITU called for a general strike demanding that Hosni Mubarak relinquish power. Tens of thousands of workers—including those employed at large and strategic workplaces like the Cairo Public Transport Authority, Egyptian State Railways, the subsidiary companies of the Suez Canal Authority, the state electrical company, and Ghazl al-Mahalla—answered the call. They then engaged in some 60 strikes and protests in the final days before Mubarak's fall on 11 February. One of the important steps of this revolution was taken when workers began to protest, giving the revolution an economic and social slant besides political demands. The economic paralysis created by this strike "was one of the most important factors leading to the rapidity of Mubarak's decision to leave."[12]

Nonetheless, it did not prevent the internal rifts among the trade union movement due to the lack of clear structures within unions, as well as the lack of internal regulations and decision-making processes. Another issue is the dominance of some figures over movements, which were affected by their absence or changing stances later on.

Period of Decline: 2012-2015

After the toppling of Mubarak, workers continued to protest. No less than 150,000 of them participated in 489 strikes in addition to other activities in February 2011. The EFITU leaders and labour activists used this momentum to advocate for real democracy and not the mere change of the face of the regime. As such, 40 of them convened in February 2011 and adopted the "Workers Demands for the Revolution" Declaration, including the right to found independent unions, the right to strike, and the dissolution of the ETUF.[13]

Independent unionists carried on their action. In March 2011, EFITU leaders convened a conference entitled "What Workers Want from the Revolution." One of their key demands—rescinding the Supreme Council of Armed Force (SCAF's) appointment of ETUF treasurer as Interim Minister of Manpower and Migration—was met within two weeks. They proposed instead Ahmad Hasan al-Bura'i, a professor of labour law at Cairo University who had been publicly advocating trade union pluralism. Thus, al-Bura'i recognized the EFITU and tens of instituted independent labour unions founded afterwards. On the other hand, the SCAF – de facto ruler of the country at the time – responded to the surge of workers' collective action by issuing Military Decree 34 on 24 March 2011. This decree imposed a fine of up to EGP 50,000 for anyone participating in, or encouraging others to join a sit-in or any other activity that "prevents, delays or disrupts the work of public institutions or public authorities."[14]

As such, the regime focused on the EFITU, which represented a wide host of non-governmental labour unions. It strove to place these independent unions once again under the auspices of the state-controlled ETUF, and to dwarf the expectations of unionists and workers of securing their rights.

Thus, the hopes of Mahalla al-Kubra workers were decimated following the institutionalization of their labour action and independent committees within factories, given their weak structures, and the prevailing political and legal factors. The continued protests, however, did not prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from acceding to power. In the period between February and March 2013, around 350 to 461 strikes and workers' protests were taking place daily in Egypt. This new wave of strikes toward the end of Mohamed Morsi's presidency was used by political elites to bring down the Brotherhood by attending meetings of the EFITU, the CTUWS, and other opposition groups, in an attempt to put their activities under strict state control.[15]

Following Morsi's departure, the State maintained capitalist policies, ignoring demands for social justice. The government carried on negotiations with the International Monetary Fund. All of these measures encountered the opposition of large groups in the labour movement. On 28 April 2015, the High Administrative Court prohibited workers from exercising their right to strike and forced many labour officials to retire by accusing them of partaking in protests. In this context, the wide surge of worker protests was noteworthy following the fall of Morsi and the military taking full control over the reins of power. They were organized between August and September 2015, in parallel with the issuance of the first draft of the Civil Service Law.

The government's targeting of the EFITU and its members had prevented the union from "evolving into a more structured organization." However, the EFITU still maintains support at the local level and continues to organize new strikes, as it did with a set of strikes beginning in January 2014 at Suez Steel Company factories and the Menoufiya and Mahalla al-Kubra textile factories. However, increased governmental control today is hindering the independence of those trade unions, transforming their activities from anti-regime social workers' movements to NGOs defending labour rights and maintaining an almost irrelevant difference with more governmental organizations.[16]

The coordination and worker solidarity while using strikes as a tool may have been the ingredient for this union movement's success. Another factual ingredient is the regime's engagement in negotiations with workers in an attempt to restrict the movement, rather than looking for solutions. Every time workers sit down to negotiate with the Minister of Manpower and Migration, they are blind-sided by the Minister of Investment's withdrawal from the deal. This has undermined trust in the very process of negotiating with the government, which has resorted to populist rhetoric calling on workers and the poor to be patient and make sacrifices for the good of the nation.[17] This situation rippled through the structure of independent unions, which have started to disagree on various action processes and are suffering

from internal divisions given the lack of governing structures.

Egyptian Case: Deducing Case-Specific Issues

While one could say that independent trade unions must rely on the principles of independence and diversity, the Egyptian experience reveals that organizers of these unions were too focused on unifying the entity to which they belong under the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Union. This factor has had a major impact on their action and has brought to light several avoidable internal crises. One could mention conflicts over leaderships, to be discussed below. Independent unionists were not opposed to the ETUF only as a general entity pretending to represent Egyptian workers; they also opposed the ETUF's poor representation of their demands and members alike. Therefore, when given the opportunity, they founded a parallel entity that does not reflect independence and diversity.

Conflicts over leadership, especially in the post-Revolution period

Following Mubarak's departure in February 2011, two trends emerged for how to deal with the political situation. IGURETA President Kamal Abu Eita, who was elected to a full term as EFITU president in January 2012, represents one trend. He and his followers sought to rapidly position themselves as spokespersons for as many workers as possible. They believed that this would enable EFITU to deal with the SCAF and other political forces from a position of power, while the political situation remained fluid and open to promoting workers' interests. Given EFITU's limited staff and resources, setting this priority meant devoting less time to building up the strength of the enterprise-level unions comprising EFITU or training their leaderships.

The second trend is represented by Kamal Abbas and the CTUWS staff. They focused on slowly educating workers in democratic trade unionism from the bottom up, rather than high politics. Abbas and the CTUWS believe that this approach is the only long-term guarantee of a democratic regime. Consequently, they prioritized that task over entering the parliamentary political arena. Ever since he was dismissed from the Helwan Iron and Steel Company for leading two strikes in 1989, Abbas had not been a member of any union. On that basis, some argued that Abbas should have no decision-making role in EFITU, despite his two decades of work to make its creation possible. They also maintained that since the CTUWS is an NGO, not a union, it should not be a member of EFITU. Thus, Abbas, the CTUWS, and others who shared their vision withdrew from the EFITU.[18]

Each approach has its limitations. While Abbas may be faulted for insufficiently appreciating the possibilities of the post-Mubarak moment, Abu Eita was perhaps too quick to imagine that the arena of national politics was the key to securing workers' interests. In principle, there is no reason why the high political and the bottom-up approaches could not be pursued in tandem. But, the combination of limited personnel and resources, the rapidly changing political environment, and personal rivalry between two strong and charismatic leaders resulted in an organizational split.[19]

Reconciling protests with political action

Here we focus on the example of Kamal Abu Eita, IGURETA President, who decided to go into politics following the fall of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, thinking it would help him better represent workers. For years, Abu Eita had been a leading member of the Nasserist Karama (Dignity) Party, which was not recognized by the Mubarak regime. In the 2011 parliamentary elections, Karama joined the Muslim Brotherhood-led Democratic Alliance, and Abu-Eita won a parliamentary seat.[20]

In 2013, Kamal Abu-Eita was selected as Minister of Manpower in the Hazem al-Bablawi Cabinet following the June 2013 military takeover. In both instances, Abu-Eita failed to represent workers and advance their demands, such as the promulgation of union freedoms and a fair labour law. Not only did he side with employers, but he also opposed workers' protests after becoming minister and called on workers to cease protests.[21] This highlighted the problem with reconciling political action with protest action, which requires a different set of skills and negotiation capacities.

Another important issue is the matter of public representation. Representation here refers to independent trade union leaders speaking on behalf of groups of workers whom they do not represent, instead of making efforts to organize workers and build their cadres. Workers are members of these entities and have not given them complete authority to speak on their behalf.[22] This issue is evident in independent unions, especially during the post-January Revolution phase. Workers had been empowered to make their own decisions and organize their ranks without referring back to union leaders. Following the toppling of Mubarak and the start of a new era in union action, workers only wanted union leaders to help them build their cadres. They wanted help in organizing their ranks so that they could voice their own demands and work collectively towards achieving them, rather than having a union leader speaking and negotiating on their behalf without so much consulting them.

Conclusion: What Can We Learn from the Egyptian Trade Union Experience?

Independent trade unions are facing several internal issues that have kept them from fulfilling their required roles. These obstacles include a lack of expertise, funding problems, lack of internal regulations and decision-making processes, and a host of specific elements related to leadership.

Marginalization and a lack of organizational skills have led to poor expertise even among senior leadership. Structural factors have also played a key role. Independent trade unions have faced numerous challenges during their establishment, namely the issue of deducting contributions and transferring contributions from ETUF to EFITU. This situation resulted in limited financial resources, preventing some from supporting members under difficult circumstances and securing headquarters.

Most general assembly members expect the union to prove its struggle and advocacy for workers' rights before paying contributions. This reflects a distrust in official union associations that had been accustomed to collecting contributions yet failing to provide adequate representation and benefits for their members.

These weaknesses do not mean that independent unions did not struggle or have not waged many battles over the last few years since the declaration of union freedoms in 2011. However, most trade unions have become weak and uninspired. They often do not represent workers due to their lack of organizational expertise. Trade unions have attempted several democratic decision-making methods during their inception; however, recent months have exposed several problems within unions in terms of corrupt administrative boards, internal divisions, as well as personal disagreements on action plans and negotiations. This experience, like others, has revealed gaps in the organizational regulations and structures of independent unions when seeking accountability for administrative boards.

Many of these issues could be explained by the newness of independent trade unions and their (sometimes) rushed inception. As such, general lessons to draw from the Egyptian experience for future independent trade unions include: first and foremost, building their capacity to organize themselves internally; drafting solid regulations and processes for various decision-making; relying on good governance and transparency; and moving away from personal disagreements in unions. The truest test for the effectiveness of trade unions is how well they advocate for their members and how much they represent their rights and interests.[23]

Endnotes

1 Chapter 2: Labour Movement and Evolution of Egyptian Unions, Egyptian Trade Unions - A Revolutionary Vision. Al- Ishtiraki Portal, https://bit.ly/39eKQSI

2 Centre for Trade Union and Workers Services website, https://bit.ly/3nTxQ97

3 Khalil, Hiba and Moussa, Dalia. Independent Unions in Egypt: New Beginning? As-Safir Al-Arabi. 18 December 2013. https://bit.ly/2HYu9iJ

4 Beinin, Joel. The Rise of Egypt's Workers. Carnegie Middle East Center. 28 June 2012, https://carnegie-mec.org/2012/06/28/ar-pub-48864

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Acconcia, Giuseppe. The Shrinking Independence of Egypt's Labour Union. Carnegie Middle East Center, 20 September 2016. https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/64636

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Acconcia, Giuseppe. The Shrinking Independence of Egypt's Labour Union. Carnegie Middle East Center, 20 September 2016, https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/64636

17 Basyouni, Mostafa. Egypt: Workers' Strikes Contrasting with a Polarizing Landscape. As-Safir Al-Arabi, 12 March 2014, https://bit.ly/3oLPPzD

18 Beinin, Joel. The Rise of Egypt's Workers. Carnergie Middle East Center. 28 June 2012.https://carnegie-mec.org/2012/06/28/ar-pub-48864

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 For more information on the Kamal Abu A'yta experience, visit: Fouad, Hisham. Abu A'yta: The Rise into the Abyss. Ishtiraki Portal. 30 September 2013. https://bit.ly/2W3l38u. And: Matar, Sarah. Abu A'yta: A Lost Rebel. The New Arab. 1 May 2014. https://bit.ly/372cDEz

22 Shahine, Yara. Impossible Dilemmas: Internal Governance Issues in Egyptian Rights Organizations. Ibid.

23 Khalil, Hiba; Moussa, Dalia. Independent Unions in Egypt: New Beginning? As-Safir Al-Arabi. 18 December 2013.https://bit.ly/2HYu9iJ

Contributors

Abdel Moneim Sayed Ahmed — Assistant and field researcher.

Ali Taher Alhammood — Managing Director of Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, Iraq.

Jamil Mouawad — Senior Fellow at the Arab Reform Initiative (Beirut).

Mohamed El Agati — Director of the Arab Forum for Alternative Studies (AFA) in Lebanon and a social sciences researcher.

Nacer Djabi — Professor of sociology at the University of Algiers II and researcher at the Centre de recherche en économie appliquée et développement (CREAD).

Omar Samir — Independent Researcher.

Shimaa El Sharkawy — Researcher and project manager at the Arab Forum for Alternative Studies in Lebanon.

Zeinab Srour - Assistant researcher.

About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.

contact@arab-reform.net
Paris - Beirut - Tunis