

## Research Article

### Analysis of the Role of the *Union Generale Tunisienne Du Travail (UGTT)* in the Democratization Transition In Tunisia

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#### Abstract

*This research aims to analyze the position of the Union Generale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT) which is a combination of trade unions and labor unions in Tunisia in influencing the country's political stability during the time of the Arab revolution or what is known as the Arab Spring. This research analysis uses the concept of civil society to see the role of trade unions in Tunisia in building their political power. This research uses a qualitative method with library research which is classified and grouped based on several collections of written materials from various sources of books, scientific articles, and the internet. The results of the study show that the UGTT has two roles in achieving the goals of Tunisia's democratization, firstly as a power intermediary, where the UGTT functions in uniting the population and the government by chairing dialogue and guiding decision making during an unstable period. Second, the UGTT also plays a role as a key mediator in the democratization transition process by participating in the policy-making process, namely working with members of parliament in drafting a new constitution.*

**Keywords:** Arab Spring, civil society, Union Generale Tunisienne du Travail, UGTT

## I. Introduction

The wave of revolutions in the Middle East that started and marked this period in 2010 was important for the opposition groups present in the region to fight for a broader and more open political system and government. On the contrary, what happened during the unprecedented wave of democratization was a good positive response from all governments towards the democratization efforts. What happened in the Middle East region, there is almost no regime that avoids making democracy its country's political system. In addition to acceptance or positive reactions to this democratic political system, several opposition groups have made democratization changes through various means such as coups against authoritarian leaders. In connection with the expression of the ideals of the struggle for a democratic government system, political turmoil occurred in the Middle East region which is also known as the "Arab Revolution" or often referred to in the Western media as the Arab Spring (Kartini, 2016).

The Arab Spring is a popular political strategy in international politics, especially in Arab countries such as Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia since the end of December 2010. According to some scientists who define the Arab Spring as a form of mass protest (revolution) whose purpose is to overthrow, degrade, overthrow and coup state leaders who act dictatorial, authoritarian, corrupt and eliminate their people in their government (Rahmanda, 2022). In the history of Tunisia, since the founding of the state until the Arab Spring, NGOs and civil society have played a very significant position in the country. At a time when Tunisia was situated on the basis of

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a French protectorate, the emergence of civil society also stimulated mass mobilization, culminating in the 1956 revolution that succeeded in gaining Tunisia's independence from France.

The social order in Tunisian society is that most of them are ethnic Arabs as much as 98% of the population in Tunisia, Berbers and Turks. While ethnic Arabs are Muslim, most of the Muslims in Tunisia are Sunni Maliki schools of thought, but there are a small number of Ibadi (Khawarij) in whom there are still Berber followers on Jerba Island. At the end of the 70-80s, the Bourguiba government came under the onslaught of sharp criticism from 4 elements of public power. Inside there are groups of believers or ethnic Arabs who believe in Islam as an anti-Bourguiba regime action. At first the rumors raised by this group of believers were a criticism of policies that were viewed as anti-Islam, but in 1978, this group's criticism continued to grow stronger by linking socio-political and religious reasons in rallying the masses to attack rulers who were suspected of being tyrants, followers foreign authorities and exploiters of the people. Then, in the end, some of Bourguiba's inner circle, who had been sidelined, also voiced antithesis and founded the party. One of them is the MUP of the Communist party and the Democratic Socialist Party (MDS) (Sukandi, 2016). Then the socialist movement that wanted a modern and independent Tunisia was born, namely the Destour party which was founded around 1920 and in 1934, a branch known as the Neo-Destour Party was born which became dominant under the leadership of Habib Bourguiba (1903-2000). In line with this political movement, the UGTT trade union and labor movement was born which later worked together to bring Tunisia to its independence and was declared in 1957 with Bourguiba as the first president. The independent government carried out many social reforms

regarding education, the status of women and the economic structure. Throughout the 1960s, the government pursued socialist policies, then returned to liberalism by fortifying the country's violent associations.

In 1987 Bourguiba was in a coup d'etat for health reasons, then replaced by President Ben Ali with no changes to the authoritarian and dictatorial system. National identity at that time there was social inequality and some groups assimilated, while others eventually withdrew. It is known that none of the invasions that have taken place and the displacement of populations have left any traces in the ethnic structure of Tunisia (To-Z, n.d.).

One of the largest civil society organizations that is most influential and plays an important role in society is the Union Generale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT). Founded by Farhat Hached, UGTT was well received by Tunisians and the partnership quickly gained public support, which then mobilized to pressure France to demand more social and political rights for Tunisians as well. Strengthening the position of co-workers as an important part of the national liberation action. UGTT is a workers-based civil society in Tunisia. This movement focuses its struggle on the rights of laborers and workers. Not only that, UGTT always participates in every resistance it goes through, against the French who colonized Tunisia, as well as against the dictatorships in Tunisia. Since Tunisia's independence, the labor movement has served as a bridge between legal disputes and the UGTT being the main confederation with political power. In addition, as the most influential partnership in Tunisia, UGTT also reflects Tunisia's national interests and goals, such as:

“Building a socialist and nationalist economy, independent and free from all forms of dependency; calling for fair distribution of national wealth in a way which guarantees the aspirations of all workers and lower sections of society; defending individual and liberties, and reinforcing democracy and human rights; supporting all people struggling to reclaim their sovereignty and determine their destiny and standing in solidarity with national liberation movements across the world.” (Aduani & Ben Sedrine, 2018).

This aim was interpreted in Hached's May 16, 1947 speech to the unions in the agreement to transfer the country to the French protectorate:

“The workers struggle to improve their material and moral conditions is then tightly linked to the higher interests of the country, because such improvement requires a social change which cannot be obtained as long as the nation is subjected to the colonial system” (Omri, 2016).

Hached's ability to create a positive image for UGTT from its early presence as a reliable workers' organization and UGTT's correlation with the needs of the population made it a workers' organization that has done both during its history and its presence in Tunisia until today. The emergence of the Arab Spring in Tunisia began with the event of self-immolation by the Tunisian fruit seller Mohammed Bouzizi at the Regional Council Court. The self-immolation incident then set in motion the biggest wave of democracy in the Middle East that has ever existed. For months, protesters have been demanding an end to the old government, which they see as corrupt. Continuing grievances in various countries then challenged the West's way of looking at the Middle East. The social action that took

part in the revolution was intimately connected with the arrival of religious values. Islamic groups in the Middle East combine religious values, rituals and applications while carrying out revolutions in one social action. There are contrasting opinions about the ties between religion and politics in the Arab Spring. On the other hand, the Arab Spring emerged as an event driven by secular liberties who needed democracy, not a theocracy. Elsewhere, groups of protesters gathered at the center of the celebrations to push for the overthrow of the authoritative government, using religious edicts as encouragement and houses of worship as gathering places for protesters before taking to the streets. (Elnanda, 2015).

News of the suicide spread throughout the country. Finally, after the death of Mohammed Bouazizi, the people organized a social protest. The social grievances were led by the UGTT group, which later escalated into demonstrations demanding the suspension of state leader Ben Ali who was then sovereign for 24 years (Musada, 2013). The existence of corruption and nepotism is seen as a denigration of the value of the community's resistance rate for a more positive life, as happened in society, namely increasing unemployment, then also the high cost of living sacrificed by the Tunisian people who emerged from the recession. The wave of protests by the Tunisian people against the accusations of impeachment of the country's leader ultimately ended on January 14, 2011, Ben Ali officially resigned as president. After the Tunisian people succeeded in overthrowing Ben Ali, when the Arab Spring event saw a very important role in the presence of civil society, where civil society is one of the most important elements in preserving democracy, it shows that civil society exists. Community participation or involvement in social clubs. The existence of

the labor movement in Tunisia is a strength of civil society and the basis for building a revolutionary system towards a successful democracy (Arieff, 2011).

UGTT conducted a national dialogue to discuss holding general elections which fell in October 2011, where this process is an illustration of one of the desired stages of the democratization process (Jatmika, 2011). Tunisia thus became the first country to successfully go through the democratization process in the Middle East. Thanks to the presence of the UGTT, the process of democratization of Tunisia is also going strong. So from the discussion that has been described above, the authors are interested in examining how the role of UGTT as the largest and most influential civil society in Tunisia in assisting the democratization transition process in Tunisia.

## **II. Method**

This research uses a qualitative method with library research which is classified and grouped based on several collections of written materials from various sources of books, journals, news and the internet. Then in this article the researcher also uses the concept of civil society which will be used in looking at the role of the social movement groups or the UGTT labor movement in the process of democratization in Tunisia (Sri Agustin Sutrisnowati, 2013). This type of research refers to qualitative research procedures that describe, analyze and define. Qualitative procedures describe procedures that focus on in-depth review. Therefore, the use of qualitative methods in research can make analysis based on a more extensive event. Qualitative research that looks at humanism or individual people and individual attitudes describes a response to the understanding if all

the effects of individual action are carried over to the corners of personal households. Inner views are similar to beliefs, political views, and the social context of the related person. There are also qualitative procedures that place more emphasis on reviewing events and observing the substance of the meaning of the incident. The analysis and intensity of qualitative research are heavily influenced by speech capacity and the words used.

For the purposes of research, observers used the method of collecting information by means of literature review which was categorized and combined from various sources of literature from novels, newsletters, posts and the internet. The combined information consists of main and subordinate information. The main information covers archives and novels, magazines and other origins that are directly tied to the position of the general population and democracy in Tunisia. Subordinate information shares supporting data to enrich this research analysis (Musaddad, 2014).

## **III. Concept of Civil Society**

Civil society concept was first born in Ancient Greece. The roots of its development stem from Cicero (106-43 BC) then Aristotle (384-322 BC). Regarding the meaning of the word civil society, Cicero was the first scientist to use this term in his political ideology, which means that civil society is similar to the word state or a community that dominates another community. Meanwhile, Aristotle did not use the term civil society, but *Koininie Politike* is a political community where citizens of the country can participate directly in making decisions. However, in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, this term underwent a change in meaning. After that, the state and civil society were known as two entities that were in conflict with

the process of social creation and changes in political forms in Europe as a result of the era of enlightenment and renewal which was very useful in overthrowing absolute regimes. Then the meaning of the term civil society was born from Thomas Hobbes and John Locke where for Hobbes civil society is obliged to have absolute authority so that it can reduce conflict within society and be able to fully control the pattern of interaction of the people of the country. On the other hand, for John Locke, the arrival of civil society was aimed at being able to maintain independence and the property rights of the people of the country. Then, along with the development of the times, the term civil society emerged according to Adam Ferguson (1967) for Hobbes, civil society must have absolute authority so that it can reduce conflict within society and be able to fully control the pattern of interaction of the people of the country. On the other hand, for John Locke, the arrival of civil society was aimed at being able to maintain independence and the property rights of the people of the country. Then from the development of the term carried out by Adam Ferguson, Ernest Gellner also developed the term civil society which was quoted from the work of Adi Surya Culla, saying that in tracing the source of this opinion to the past period through the history of western (European and American) civilization which became his concern namely when this draft was disseminated by a Scottish thinker, Adam Ferguson in his classic creation "An Essay of Civil Society", it has an important meaning for a democratic country because the position of civil society in creating a democratic structure in the country is a commitment to the contribution of citizens in the method of voting for provisions. country. The concept of civil society basically contains various difficulties in its implementation, this interpretation and understanding can change from time to time, where the changes are not only in the perspective of the times, but the

interpretation interpreted by the term is different from various contemporary experts in the past (Sutrisnowati, 2013).

The presence of the UGTT which supports the democracy movement in many countries also refers to a group of people who are members of a non-profit organization which is the controlling arm of the government. Therefore the author uses the concept of civil society according to Ernest Gellner because in its application to the analysis carried out by researchers it is more dominant than the term civil society according to other experts. As Ernest Gellner (Gellner, 1995) has said, western writers say that civil society is a society consisting of various non-governmental institutions that are autonomous and strong enough to counterbalance the power of the state. In addition, civil society is also seen as a "tool" that can be used by the public to convey their wishes to the state. In the structure of the Arab world, where the traditional social order prevails, civil society can refer to a human community whose life takes place in communal bonds. Where they usually have difficulty meeting public needs, they do not play a real role in the country's development in the democratic arena. Forming civil society in Middle Eastern countries, in fact because of the end of Western colonialism, people have not succeeded in forming civil society, countries in the Middle East region have their countries ruled by private elites where those in power use their power only for themselves and their families, what's worse is corruption, the conspiracy of the rulers and with the development of nepotism, conversely the people do not have enough power to balance the country or control the country (Umam, 2017).

#### **IV. Democratization in Tunisia**

Tunisia was declared independent from 20 March 1956 (French Protectorate Independence Day) to 25 July 1957 (Republic Day). Habib Bourguiba was elected as the first President of Tunisia who later became a central figure in the Tunisian independence movement through the Neo-Destour movement, but at that time the Tunisian people were still worried because President Bourguiba led Tunisia with radical politics that could lead to authoritarian leadership. Based on the fact that he made a policy from socialism to liberalism which disappointed the Tunisian workers because it was clear that it would only benefit the owners of capital. The workers are very concerned about this policy, which will have a negative impact on the workers, and trade unions affiliated with the UGTT (Tunisian General Labor Union) have spoken out to fight for the interests of the workers. and against authoritarian politics (Rosdiawan, 2010).

When Habib Bourguiba was finally in a peaceful coup for health reasons on November 7, 1987, Ben Ali continued his leadership message as the second president of Tunisia. Instead of getting a president who could bring about better changes, Ben Ali's regime was exactly the same as its predecessor and became a president who led in an authoritarian and dictatorial manner. The President acts as the head of state and head of government who is responsible for all state administration both at the central and regional levels, such as decision-making power over the Council of Ministers and civil positions such as governor and mayor. Additionally, presidential powers can only be impeached by death, resignation or health. Following Habib Bourguiba's leadership style, the Tunisian era under President Ben Ali also continued its commitment to Western liberal values.

However, the UGTT labor movement is known as a movement that strongly opposes authoritarian regimes. After all, the relationship between the UGTT and the ruling government was not always good. The worst period between the two was recorded between 1978 and 1985, when Tunisia was on the verge of increasing economic pressure, as the UGTT openly opposed the government's economic policies, particularly wage inflation and floor prices, and engaged in several series of hostilities. UGTT carried out several series of demonstrations and mass strikes throughout the country, where demonstrations faced very repressive state actions with the arrest and imprisonment of the Secretary General of the UGTT at that time (Musada, 2013).

#### **V. UGTT as Civil Society**

UGTT is a social movement originating from a combination of trade unions and laborers in Tunisia. This movement focuses its struggle on the rights of workers and laborers in Tunisia. Not only focusing on welfare for trade unions, UGTT also took part in every resistance that began when Tunisia was colonized by France and always appealed the authoritarian regime that ruled Tunisia. Not only meritorious in delivering freedom, UGTT as a controlling authority that plays an efficient role as the antithesis of rulers from outside the system (Sukandi, 2016). UGTT was historically founded by Fahred Hached in 1946 who was a former member of the Confederation Generale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (CGTT) for 15 years (Arieff, 2011), at which time Tunisia was still under the French protectorate, UGTT became a social movement which was also active in implementing action against France in demanding Tunisia to be given better social and political rights, then followed by Tunisian independence which was agreed in 1956.

Starting from Tunisia's independence, UGTT as a social movement has become a bridge for people in channeling opinions and UGTT has also become the first trade union to exert much influence in political power in Tunisia.

The membership of the UGTT has spread widely from village to city which reaches 5% of the total population in Tunisia and makes it the most influential and largest social movement in Tunisia (Chayes, 2014). During the two terms of the authoritarian President's leadership, the government has taken various ways to bring down the UGTT to continue to fight by demonstrating the people's voice against the state's repressive attitude. At its peak, the UGTT as a trade union organization succeeded in overthrowing the authoritarian regime led by Ben Ali.

## **VI. The Role of UGTT in the Process of Democratic Transition**

In its history, the UGTT succeeded in realizing the resistance of the Tunisian people to the coup against state leader Ben Ali, making the UGTT a national actor and the main Tunisian key who had experienced the Arab Spring in Tunisia. Not only that, the role of the UGTT in achieving the goals of the revolution did not end there, the UGTT as a social movement continued to act as a power intermediary and the main intermediary in the revolutionary process of the democratic transition in Tunisia. UGTT as the most influential trade union movement and the largest social movement in Tunisia has a dual role in supporting the transition towards democratization, namely:

1) As a power mediator, UGTT's position in uniting the population and the authorities is also carried out through debate, guiding

decision making in times of uncertainty. At the same time, UGTT has used its influence to secure historic wins for its members and workers in general, including the agreement of permanent contracts for 140,000 temporary workers and salary increases for several fields, including teachers. (Rosdiawan, 2010).

The appeal of the Tunisian people since the beginning of the change was to always be open to community cooperation. This matter can also be seen in the application submitted to the Constituent Assembly to examine the demands of the community and public participation in the formation of the new constitution is also valuable for the victory of change. Where this happened through a series of UGTT positions and also through several informal meetings held throughout Tunisia. After the fall of Ben Ali's government in Tunisia, the UGTT, as the most influential group of people in Tunisia, assumed responsibility for planning to achieve the goals of the revolution, in particular, to change the population. Other groups of citizens and political institutions also played a valuable role in this way. The increasing involvement and encouragement of public citizens in conclusion has a very important effect on the outcome of such a causal transition of public citizens in Tunisia (Arieff, 2011). Meanwhile, the role of the Constituent Assembly is to become a legislative body tasked with changing the structure of the only Tunisian party that will later take part in elections and draft a new constitution.

The leadership at the start of the transitional period following Ben Ali's fall from Tunisia was seen by the militants who were largely exiled by Ben Ali's regime. By that time, the leadership had drifted away from the desired direction of the revolution, and in the end indicated that it would retain the institutions of the previous regime. Where this

was also experienced by UGTT during the 60th anniversary of the assassination of the founder of the UGTT alliance, Farhat Hached, where he was attacked by the League of Guards Revolution (Umam, 2017), where this tournament also emerged from a resident organization in the city of Tunisia which intends to maintain discipline and security after the fall of the Ben Ali regime which was later disbanded and dominated by Muslim groups. Through this incident it shows that the government has allowed this to happen and created a feeling that for a while it is trying to suppress civil society with the aim of restraining community action so that it does not carry out protests after a series of revolutionary events. In this regard, a caretaker government was also formed following the signing of an agreement between the Constituent Assembly and the UGTT, the aim of which was to empower Fouad Mebazaa, who is the president of the Tunisian National Assembly, to lead the caretaker government as president on February 8, 2011. Mebazaa won the trust of the Constituent Assembly and the UGTT to lead a provisional government that would later form the Tunisian People's Democratic Party after the fall of Ben Ali's Tunisian People's Democratic Party, especially the general elections (Musada, 2013).

Meanwhile, the position of Prime Minister of Tunisia is still held by Mohammed Ghannouchi. However, the character of Mohammed Ghannouchi faced opposition from the UGTT coalition, where the UGTT considered Ghannouchi to be a Ben Ali loyalist and while in power he would continue to turn Tunisia into the era of Ben Ali's dictatorship. Furthermore, under Ghannouchi, there were still nineteen ministers loyal to Ben Ali. There is a negative impact because the government is not representative to fulfill the aspirations of the majority of the population. Ultimately, however, under popular pressure, Ghannouchi

resigned and was replaced by Béji Caïd el Sebsi on 27 February 2011. Fearing that the elite would overthrow these revolutionary intentions, Tunisian civil society groups and even the UGTT took to the streets to push for far-reaching political reforms, and this is achieved. The pressure they exerted eventually led to the dissolution of political institutions, changes in the composition of the government, and a completely new draft of the constitution drafted by the Constituent Assembly (Arieff, 2011).

At the initiative of the UGTT, a committee was formed to organize the transition to the 23 October elections and the interim government at that time as the holder of the transfer right also authorized it on behalf of the High Commission for Political Reform in general also known as "The Ben Achour Commission" which chaired by Yadh Ben Achour. Where the committee will then hold the first elections to elect members of the Constituent Assembly after the fall of Ben Ali and the main task of the Achour committee is to develop a constitution as the basis for an electoral system that will be used later and will form a provisional government. The presence of the Achour Committee helped prepare the first post-revolutionary elections successfully. Where the desire of the people to avoid the return of dictatorship power has also been concretized by the Achour committee by prohibiting the leadership of the RCD from becoming the main candidate in this election. To ensure that all competing parties have confidence in the fairness of the election results, the Achour Commission decided to establish the first independent election commission in Tunisia (Kartini, 2016).

The October 2011 general election brought together four political parties and made An-Nahdah the winner with 41% of the vote or 89 out of 217 seats in the Constituent



Assembly while second place went to the Congress for the Republic (CPR) with 29 parliamentary seats. In an effort to strengthen the government and position in the Constituent Assembly, An-Nahdah formed an alliance called the Troika with the CPR and Ettakol (Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties) parties. Meanwhile, the Constituent Assembly elected Hamadi Jebali, general secretary of the An-Nahdah party as Prime Minister, Moncef Marzouki, chairman of the CPR party, as president and Mustapha Ben Jafar as chairman of the Constituent Assembly (Elnanda, 2015). During the three years of transition, UGTT has become an organization to provide public aspirations and balance the power of political elites. The UGTT uses two ways to influence policy making in this transitional period, namely working directly with members of parliament to draft and determine the words in the constitution and negotiating with political parties when the process is deadlocked.

2) The presence of UGTT also acts as a mediator. The arrival of the UGTT as a national actor in Tunisia after the fall of Ben Ali was also demonstrated through its position as a bridge between various political parties, through a series of country talks on the basis of the UGTT initiative to help mitigate emergency political disputes in Tunisia during the era of change. This political crisis also occurred when the development momentum around the new constitution that was to be used did not develop. This is also reflected in the slowness of the Constituent Assembly in announcing and approving the draft of the new constitution. The dynamics of the process of drafting a new constitution goes through various stages to reach consensus among all groups. In this case it is mainly related to sharia which is the basis of the constitution and state law, considering that the constitution has stated that the majority religion in Tunisia is Islam. Backed by

radical Salafi and Islamic groups, the two groups also lobbied An-Nahdah to include Sharia law in the new constitution.

However, An-Nahdah has decided not to regard Sharia as the source of all state law. In this case it was decided that An-Nahdah was an Islamic party, but there was no program to include Sharia in the new constitution and focused more on social issues such as economic equality, freedom of speech and expression of women's rights (Kartini, 2016). In the end, the current conflict has led to ups and downs in the process of collecting provisions regarding the current constitution which could not be completed within one year since the formation of the government and the new Constituent Assembly. During this conflict, the UGTT was at the forefront of decision-making held through national consultations, the Tunisian Association of Human Rights, the National Orders of Lawyers and the Tunisian Union of Trade and Industry, where this dialogue is to create a space for compromise with the Constituent Assembly.

In this dialogue, the UGTT presents a "roadmap" which explains certain steps to overcome the political impasse that has hit the country. These steps included agreeing on constitutional discussions, a technocratic caretaker government, and the establishment of an independent election commission. Civil society efforts in the UGTT labor movement played an important role in holding democratic elections after the fall of the dictatorship and upholding democratic principles in forming a transitional government with the arrival of the An-Nahdah party as its chairman. winner in the election. Not only that, the UGTT also put pressure on other public citizen bodies to participate in the development of the latest constitution as a democratic foundation in Tunisia (Ibad & Muta'ali, 2021).

## VII. Conclusion

The Arab Spring incident that attacked Tunisia brought the structure of people's life to the latest round. The democracy that existed in Tunisia prior to the Arab Spring was limited to popular tactics, that is, democracy was only used as an instrument of justification for long-term government, while the wishes of the people were ignored. However, this situation was exacerbated by emerging economic disparities, which further fueled people's desire to change the country. Since independence, Tunisia has been ruled by an authoritarian ruler who was able to be overthrown by the power of civil society, especially the activities of the workers who were able to become the main force of the population in overthrowing the Ben Ali government.

UGTT is present as the most influential trade union movement and has the largest membership in Tunisia as a civil society. The presence of the UGTT provides two very influential roles, namely acting as a power intermediary, where the UGTT in this case has conducted many demonstrations against the ruling authoritarian regime. Then it is shown with the fall of Ben Ali at that time. The second is acting as a mediator for other political parties by carrying out a series of national dialogues, where the UGTT also provides a "road map" idea about a number of steps to be able to find solutions to the political problems that hit Tunisia. The presence of UGTT as a civil society in Tunisia gave a very satisfying impact and influence on the development of democratic life, especially because Tunisia was also in a transitional period of democratization at that time. Where the UGTT is also a force that can balance the country outside the regime when a tyrannical government reigns.

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