Mapping Algerian Trade Unions in the Time of Mass Mobilization: Current Dynamics and Future Challenges

Nacer Djabi
Algeria has a long and rich history of trade union activism, which has evolved in a context where the State has played a prominent role as employer and in particular since independence in 1962. Over this time, trade unions have interacted closely with both official political actors and institutions. However, with the emergence of the Algerian Hirak in early 2019, unions have also participated in organizing and coordinating events in support of the protest movement, with prominent union figures taking part in marches. Yet, despite opening up to the protest movement and adopting the shared demand for regime change, trade unions have achieved only limited success in mobilizing their base. This is ironic, for if the Hirak’s demands are fulfilled, they will contribute to deepening the roots of trade unions activism and supporting union independence.

This paper explores the historical evolution of trade unions in Algeria and highlights their strengths and weaknesses, as well as the factors that precluded their full participation in the popular Hirak uprising. It reveals the need for renewal of the current norms and culture prevalent among trade unions if they are to play a social and national role in the democratic transition that goes beyond their narrow unionist demands.

**Historical introduction**

Algerian workers were first introduced to trade union activism in the diaspora after their early migration to France, before WWI, along with the colonial experience of unionism in various sectors (transportation, health, manufacturing and mining industries). This activism took place mostly in the left-wing General Confederation of Labour (CGT), as the primary unionism school for Algerian peasant-workers in France, and in sectors that were mostly industrial, like mechanics and mining. This gave Algerian trade unionism a clear labour perspective. Over time, both in Algeria and in France, this experience produced a group of trade union elites that allowed the nationalist movement to later consider forming an independent union for Algerian workers, similar to what happened in Morocco and Tunisia.

This closeness to the nationalist movement, including its parties and ideologies, explains the negative influence the 1946 crisis had on trade union activism. At the time, the announcement of the creation of a trade union representing Algerian
workers under the leadership of union activist Eissat Aidir was pending. This announcement, however, was postponed until 1956, a year that witnessed the formation of three unions\(^1\) representing three political trends present at the time both within the diaspora and inside Algeria (Communists, Masalians, and Front loyalists). The unions, in fact, represented the same base of workers in Algeria and those in the diaspora in France.

Of the three syndicates, only the General Algerian Syndicates Union (UGSA) carried on and explicitly adopted the demands of national liberation under the leadership of the Liberation Front. After independence, UGSA represented a single-union experiment not dissimilar from what happened in other developing countries until 1988, under a model that relied on the public industrial sector and the economic role of the State under the one-party system.

It was not until 1989, when the 23 February Constitution provided for freedom to form trade unions, the right to labour strikes, and the right to form political parties, that independent unions appeared in sectors such as healthcare, education, and public administration. The industrial sector, however, remained largely under the control of the UGSA, despite major weaknesses it suffered as a result of the critical economic, political, and security situation in the early 1990s. At that time, cultural and religious political debates proliferated as a result of the strong presence of Islamists. Yet, this prominence in the political scene did not translate into strong Islamist union activism: the Islamic Workers Union (SIT), announced by Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), was quickly dissolved,\(^2\) echoing the experience of the Ihsan Movement (affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood), which disappeared after a fleeting existence. These examples are indicative of the difficulty of intersecting political movements with union activism in Algeria.

The main features of the new unions’ movement

The emergence and development of independent trade unions
The formation of independent unions in the 1990s occurred within a context of political and financial difficulties that prevented them from actively fulfilling their role as a social actor. This would only start to change in the early 2000s, with improvements to the financial and security situation of Algeria. During these early years, the unions relied mostly on a sectoral reading of the economic and financial situation, but also of the socio-political power structures, which pushed them sometimes into prolonged strikes at a time when the workplace environment at the national level witnessed no major events. This was the case, for example, of the higher education teachers’ union in the mid-1990s, which was among the first independent unions to be recognized. These strikes translated a feeling of injustice and alienation among public service workers and qualified members as the UGSA focused in its activism and demands on a workers-centred strategy, anchored in its unionist culture. This led to the emergence of dozens of unions inside the same sector to represent various groups inside the same workplace, as in the case of healthcare and education workers. These new unions, however, relied mostly on the same old structures as those used under the centralized union model, with its politicized culture, which had evolved little since its formation.

These independent unions organized long and repeated strikes driven by their sectoral demands, and in some cases even before the unions were legally recognized. Their demands revolved around wages in most cases, once they felt that the financial situation of their employer (the State) had improved. The strikes remained peaceful, as was always the case with Algerian union movements, and evolved to span many groups, leading later to the creation of the National Confederation of Independent Unions in November 2018, which included 13 new unions that appeared after union activism was legally recognized.

While the creation of the Confederation marked a new phase of independent union activism, it nonetheless encountered rejection and clear hostility by the authorities for several years, who denied it legal recognition and refused to deal with it as a social partner in national negotiations. Indeed, the authorities only came to accept the Confederation years later, though only within the sectors in which it is active, at the level of ministries such as health and education. This adversarial relationship reflects the position of political and government elites and the broader atmosphere dominated by neoliberal ideals, marked by a rejection of
independent collective social actors even when they are legally permitted. The experience of the centralized union also alienated young generations from union activism, even after the announcement of plurality and despite promising signs of independence from official politics shown in positions by the Bar Association, and - to a lesser extent - the Judges Union. If such trends can be consolidated in the future, they can contribute to strengthening union activism and supporting various related groups, as part of the political reforms the Hirak uprising has demanded.

Among the strengths of the independent unions that should be supported and promoted are:

- Legitimate representation of sectoral and group demands;
- Strong focus on clear demands that led to material gains, including wages, following strikes. This might not be repeated soon because of the economic and financial situation in the country;
- Representative union leaders with a strong presence in the national media;
- Democratic and group-sensitive approaches to administration and decision-making, which allowed the transfer of power inside the unions;
- Intellectual and political diversity among leaders and in the grassroots;
- Broad social acceptance and welcome of union demands among citizens, even during strikes in sensitive sectors like education, healthcare, and public transportation, that can negatively impact daily life;
- Ability to contribute to enhancing the socio-economic situation of those involved in strikes and protests over these years, facilitated by a good national and financial context aided by strong oil prices.

On the other hand, many weaknesses need to be tackled and gradually addressed:

- Dominance of group-interests approach that does not take into account the fact that the world of labour in Algeria and worldwide is going through a defensive stage on the macro level. This crisis does not allow the labour movement to fully deploy its strategy of imposing demands, even if part of the movement represented by the independent unions.
(public employees) possess the means to defend themselves and gain financial benefits and better economic conditions;

- Reliance on an old doctrine with nationalistic and politicized roots and little attempts at intellectual innovation;
- Weak presence of women in leadership positions inside unions in professional sectors where women are very present as mostly skilled workers;
- Weakness of collective work and coordination between independent unions, especially at the grassroots level and across regions;
- Little interest in training and capacity building and in the documentation of experiences and lessons learned since their early establishment in the 1970s;
- Lack of material and human resources, including headquarters buildings, and steering and management personnel;
- Weak international outreach, both in the Arab region and Africa, which prevents exposure to other good union practices;
- Low-level openness to changes currently witnessed by labour and union activism worldwide;
- A tendency to split over internal conflict and discord among union elites, as witnessed by many unions in their early years, which later negatively influenced relationships among individuals and unions.

The Official Union

In addition to these independent unions, the central union - formed even before the emergence of the nation-state itself - continued to perform its traditional role as an official union with politicized functions (and namely, recruitment for the benefit of the regime), while nonetheless experiencing great competition from independent unions within many sectors, including the public employment sector. This competition might later spill over to the industrial sector, as indicated by what is happening in the electricity and power sector, where independent trade unions were formed and can develop if workers continue to complain about official union activism and the mismanagement of its elites, accused of corruption. This may be further exacerbated if the chaotic political situation of the regime
continues, as the latter is the sponsor of this official unionism that is essentially part of the State-party institutions.

The official union has enjoyed a presence in the public industrial sector despite the decrease in its employment capacity as a result of privatization and the difficulties it has faced since the early 1990s as a result of the rentier approach to its management. Yet as oil revenues have shrunk since the mid-1980s, the private sector has expanded, and the official union has failed to have any presence or leverage. This failure can be attributed to its culture of working inside public sector institutions owned by the state, but also to the private sector employers’ opposition to any union activism in a sector characterized by smaller production units, fewer workers, and the dominance of the logic of the unofficial economy (absence/weakness of social protection and precarious work contracts). Contrary to this, the official union has continued to be relatively strongly active in industrial sectors that were not impacted by the financial crisis (such as oil, gas, electricity, and state-owned banks). In these sectors, workers enjoy social and legal protection as those in other public sector institutions lost comparable protection. As such, Algeria is seeing a plurality of union activism across sectors, with different dynamics at play. These include:

- The official union keeps performing its role in the industrial public sector in particular. However, it is not able to adapt to its new social and political environment, deepening the crisis as a result of its bureaucratic and undemocratic management. Its activities at the regional and local structures (including regional unions and sectoral units) were also paralyzed because of façade elections, akin to appointments, and the shrinking of its workers base, the shadow of corruption and mismanagement that hovers over its leaders seen as part of the ruling elite. This situation was sustained until the start of the popular Hirak uprising, which forced its Secretary-General, Abdulmajid Sidi Alsaid, to step down from the leadership of the union after 22 years (1997-2019). He was known for his strong ties to President Bouteflika and the parties loyal to him. As such, he lost his position at the helm of the union after it passed through a period of instability with Bouteflika’s resignation.
- A near-total absence of any sort of union activism inside the unofficial
and official private sectors, including in particular absence from small private sector enterprises that now hold great leverage via small companies owned by private individuals. This effectively means the loss of both union and social protection for most young workers, including women, who joined the unofficial private sector over the last years.

• The independent trade unions’ control of the public sector gave employees a privileged position in terms of wages, work conditions, and social protection as well as strong bargaining capabilities vis-à-vis the employer, the State, who gained better revenues with the rise in oil prices. (This is the inverse of the current situation, which suggests greater difficulties ahead over the short and medium terms, especially after the severe deterioration of oil prices with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020).

Trade unions and political activism in Algeria

With the improvement of the financial situation in Algeria and the security and political stability witnessed at the end of Bouteflika’s first term (1999-2002), independent trade unions became the central actor in the social arena. To a lesser extent, this is the same role played by some UGSA branches and regional structures in some governorates known for their higher levels of political activism, including in Algiers, Tizi Ouzou, and Bejaia in the Kabylie region, where, unlike the rest of the country, UGSA structures are strongly influenced by local dynamics.

During this period, the independent workers’ movement focused on economic and social demands (wages and benefits) without much discussion about other political causes, except those related to participation in the Social Dialogue and to the general social and political debates that accompany parliamentary elections (2012/2017) and presidential elections (2009/2014). Meanwhile, it should be noted that successive governments refused to include independent unions in the National Tripartite Social Dialogue between unions, government, and employers, in which workers’ representation was limited to UGSA while that of employers was more diverse and included more than one confederation. This deepened feelings of injustice among independent unions.
This period also saw the emergence of political opposition as a unified force, through the Democratic Transition Coordination Coalition which was set up by a group of some 13 opposition parties from a wide spectrum of political affiliations as well as national figures, including some union activists representing independent trade unions. In June 2014, the Coalition signed the “Mazafran Accord” which presented a roadmap for a consensual political transition with the participation of the government. The project, however, did not hold: the different parties failed to reach an agreement over conditions for participation in the elections (2014 presidential or 2017 legislative) as a result of conflicting interests. Moreover, the authorities refused the Mazafran initiative, as they always did over these years, despite the favourable political and economic environment for achieving consensus. Instead of entering into agreements with the different political and social actors to reform the system, the regime used oil revenues to buy a vulnerable social peace that proved ephemeral, as shown by the popular Hirak uprising in 2019.

The unprecedented political debates triggered during this period continued in the parliament, as some union activists from independent trade unions were elected to represent groups from different political ideologies. These activists quickly became prominent political and media figures known to the public as new TV channels were allowed to operate – a repercussion of the 2011 Arab Spring. More broadly, the regime adapted to the Arab Spring by announcing reforms relaxing the legal framework for the creation and work of associations and accepted the formation of new political parties that were already in the making for years. However, promises to reform the Constitution made then were postponed until 2016.

The role of independent trade unions gained prominence with the start of the popular Hirak uprising in 2019. The Hirak radically changed the political landscape with the rise of new social actors, like the youth and women, in major and medium-sized cities where most Algerians live (around 67% of the population). The involvement of these new actors, known for eschewing politics and their lack of interest in public affairs before 2019, encouraged the trade unions to participate. Through the National Confederation of Independent Unions, they participated in many events that were organized in coordination with grassroots and youth
groups and other social movements, as well as with the political and social figures who emerged during the uprising.

The participation of unions and political party leaders from across the spectrum in several events held during the Hirak, including on 15 March, 6 June, and 26 August 2019, marked the formation of a new political movement in Algeria, a country where women and young generations have traditionally stayed away from partisan politics. This time, discussions of the demands of the Hirak and how to mainstream its role in creating political change took place, and initiatives calling for the organization of a national movement advocating for change continued unabated even after the presidential election in December 2019. Indeed, this continued until the first anniversary of the Hirak on 22 February 2020, when the authorities refused to grant permission for marches because of the Covid-19 situation.

In addition to the participation of leaders and cadres in weekly marches, the Confederation called for a general strike on 29 October 2019, in support for the popular uprising’s demands and for the release of the Hirak detainees before the date of the announcement that the presidential elections were to be held in December 2019. The call to strike failed to garner much support, neither in the capital nor in other governorates, except for the governorates of the Kabylie region, traditionally known for their strong political activism and deeply rooted party politics. The failure to rally to the support of the general strike shows the weaknesses in the mobilization capabilities of unions as they lack strong presence among workers in big industrial groupings, who could have been easily mobilized at a time when so many Algerians took to the streets with unprecedented political demands.

The call to a general strike also showed the weak grassroots base of unions representing employees from across so many professions and workplaces (unlike industrial sector workers), and the limited culture of union activism that has not yet broken free from the employer (the State) with which it was traditionally close ideologically and politically. These are also the same workers who - until recently under the one-party system – were the hands of the regime to promote its election campaigns and the official discourse, as was the case with other groups of “petite bourgeoisie” in Nasserism, Baathism and other Arab political experiences. In fact,
teachers, professors, and the low-ranking civil servants constituted the most important social and political base and supporters of the system, until the State abandoned them for other social groups that emerged with the economic and social changes brought about by new state policies over the last few decades. These new social groups include many from the private sectors. With their big financial and media resources (newspapers and TV stations), they forced out the traditional groups, who turned to opposition parties and new union demand-driven activism whose tools and methods of strikes and demonstrations were all new to them.

This showed clearly later, when leaders of these independent trade unions faced pressures from the regime, as well as from within the unions themselves, to have less presence in the Hirak’s events. This led some union leaders to distance themselves from coordinating with the Hirak, until demonstrations ceased as a result of the Covid-19 situation in March 2020. Likewise, while some union leaders joined projects to form new political entities based on some Hirak groups, these were also halted with the rise of the Covid-19 crisis.

Furthermore, during the period of the Hirak 2019-2020, decision-making processes inside independent unions became somehow slow, which did not allow the union leaders to quickly adapt to unfolding events. The bureaucracy inside these unions and the sensitivities resulting from a plurality of ideologies and political beliefs, both at leadership and grassroots levels, rendered it harder to make decisions, especially concerning new political demands in a delicate situation where consensus around demands is lacking.

The relative failure of the general strike also showed that the unions’ base does not always keep up with new protest movements in the context of a wider popular uprising with clear political demands calling for the radical change of the regime. The position of the unions was also expressed by citizens, including those who participated in protests but did not fully support the general strike’s demand partisan and youth movements from within the Hirak called for. The support was only clear in the Kabylie region known for its long partisan tradition and union activism against the regime. It should be noted that this difference between levels of popular mobilization (between the Kabylie region and other big cities like the capital and other regions in Algeria) led sometimes to a wrong reading of the
political moment, which negatively influenced the levels of political coherence and unity within the protest movement, and led to misunderstandings and conflicts between the grassroots level and various leaders of the protests.

**Conclusions**

Algeria is endowed with a deeply rooted and historical union activism that has evolved, yet where the State as the main employer has been heavily present in most of its stages. This remains the case today, even with the new independent unions.

This union experience is unfolding at a time when the place of the State as an employer is shrinking, while the role of the private sector (national and international) is increasing. However, a unionist culture that adapts to these new variables did not develop, even with the rise of independent trade unions, which did not succeed in renewing doctrines as was needed. As such, these independent trade unions stayed away from shifts happening in labour and unionism worldwide, preventing them from acquiring the capacity to “read”, understand and foresee upcoming changes. They also failed to adapt to what is happening in the workplace, with a strong presence of women workers in sectors where independent unions are active, including education, healthcare, and public administration. This has led to an absence of women in union leadership positions. Bolstering the ability of unions to adapt to external and internal changes is critical in any future projects that seek to support the diverse unions present in Algeria. Support is also strongly needed to strengthen democratic practices and coalition-building capacity to overcome the state of fragmentation, particularly after the formation of the National Confederation of Independent Unions and pending changes inside the regime-affiliated UGSA.

The fact that different actors within the independent unions’ movement do things differently will certainly remain a point of weakness, if the movement does not overcome its sectoral “reading” of power structures and its strong focus on economic sectoral demands, with little consideration to solidarity with others. These weaknesses need to be more urgently addressed now that there is increasing evidence the State will no longer be the main employer, over the short
and medium terms, and as such will not be able to fulfil the demands of these unions. This is especially so today given the bad economic situation resulting from the severe drop in oil prices, and the failure to modernize and diversify a national economy that was for too long sustained by oil rent distribution. More importantly, change in the social doctrines of the State means that the conventional popular base, where the middle class occupies a distinguished position, will soon be overturned. The State will instead focus on getting closer to new categories and groups, including private-sector employers.

The independent trade unions will need to adopt a broader understanding that takes into consideration the transformations unfolding in national politics, with the popular Hirak uprising as a major actor given its strong ability to mobilize the grassroots. This could lead to the formation of a historical bloc that could lead to real regime change. Without such a success, it is difficult to imagine a positive change in union activism in Algeria, given the strong historical links between union activism and political activism. This bloc could be made of the Hirak and its critical mass that relies on broad popular coalitions. It could also enjoy the support of unions whose leaders enjoy popular acceptance, and political parties that believe in change, as well as other political actors including youth movements and student groups that managed to stay peaceful for more than a year while demanding political change for building a civil/secular state. We are putting forth a project that heavily relies on individual and collective freedoms, independence of the judiciary and media, and fair elections that will contribute in producing more legitimate institutions and elites to lead the political change demanded by the great majority of Algerians.
Endnotes

1. Two unions were declared in February 1956 by national political movements: UGSA (the General Algerian Syndicates Union (UGSA), which was formed by merging union branches active in Algeria under the umbrella of CGT since late 1955, and USTA, which was later declared. UGTA was the last national union to be declared, on 24 of the same month.

2. That union was dissolved in 1992 after declaring the disbanding of the FIS, and with Algeria entering a phase of political and security disorder that went on for a whole decade.

3. Around 60 unions were declared mostly by public sector employees, and some of the workers in the industrial sector who stayed part of the UGSA.

4. Algerian unions activism adopted, historically, group economic demands, asking for increase in pay to all workers. It was easy to negotiate with the State, as the main employer, and given the equality-centered thinking of the union, which preferred to see workers as a homogenous group.

5. Lawyers and, to a lesser extent, judges organized many protests through their national and regional unions to demand better work conditions, the independence of justice, and to defend various freedoms. Protests included marches and strikes that stopped work at courts of law, as it happened on 29 October 2019.

6. More than 61% of those employed work in the private sector. On the international level, this sector will develop further in the future because of the current liberal economic policies that have been widely adopted by leaders.

7. Most leaders at the national level of these parties were removed because of corruption accusations, after Bouteflika was banned from running for a fifth period in office in April 2019.

8. Algeria witnessed during that period a new financial situation. Citizens managed, given the new context, to call for socioeconomic demands, which the State was more open and able to fulfilling, while keeping distance from cultural and ideological approaches that make it harder to conduct political negotiations over demands.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nacer Djabi
Professor of sociology at the University of Algiers II

ABOUT ARAB REFORM INITIATIVE

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

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

arab-reform.net  contact@arab-reform.net

© 2018 by the Arab Reform Initiative.
To view a copy of this licence, click here