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Rights and Politics: Human Rights Action and Socio-economic Struggles in Tunisia

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Tunisians demanding jobs and shouting slogans during the celebration to mark the sixth anniversary of the uprising Tunis January 2017 © Mohamed Messara/EPA



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This paper examines the changing position of human rights actors in Tunisian civil society with regard to economic and social rights, especially after the fall of the regime of former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011. The paper addresses the relationship of these organizations to protest movements demanding economic development and employment opportunities, namely the Union of Unemployed Graduates (UDC),¹ the mining basin protest movement and the Jemna oasis and Al Kamour protests².

The period following the January 2011 revolution in Tunisia was marked by the prominent role played by civil society organizations, some of which became main actors on the political front, obliging and pressuring the state to commit to rebuilding political life and economic policies on a democratic basis, in which human rights constitute fundamental principles. Human rights activists contributed to the process of building democracy, especially through the Higher Authority for Realization of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform and Democratic Transition, during the first transitional stage, which lasted until 23 October 2011, the date of the elections of the National Constituent Assembly. The role of civil society continued during the drafting of the Constitution through public debate over the various rights and freedoms to be included in the document.³

Civil society represents a space of contention for social forces over the system of governance and distribution of resources and values.⁴ These forces include numerous and interconnected networks of various actors in the form of non-governmental and non-profit groups that represent the essence of civil action to find and advocate solutions to problems of public interest.⁵ Civil society is not a homogenous assembly that can be represented in a unified voice and, at the same time, it is not a group of citizens who defend their personal interests in an isolated way from each other.⁶

In view of the evisceration of political life that Tunisia had suffered almost often since independence until the 2011 revolution, human rights activism of associations and groups focused on defending political and civil rights systematically violated by state repression and domination and the crackdown on political and human rights activists alike. Economic and social rights were less represented in the struggles of these actors in view of the state's adoption of



cautious social policies, in which the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) was an important partner of the ruling elite of the State.

After the revolution, civil society witnessed several changes, foremost the change in the legal organization of associations by issuing the 24 September 2011 law,⁷ which granted in its first chapter the “freedom of forming, joining and action within associations... supporting the role and development of civil society organizations, and protection of their independence.” Associations were able to register according to a much easier system, based on the right to organize.⁸ In 2016, the number of associations exceeded 18,000 according to the minister in charge of the relationship with constitutional bodies, civil society and human rights, and almost reached 20 thousand in 2017.⁹ Those included developmental, women, charitable, religious, scientific, cultural and human rights organizations. The number of human rights organizations exceeded 400 organizations.¹⁰

The issue of economic and social rights emerged with the mining basin movement beginning in 2008 under the UGTT auspices. This uprising took place in an area living on the margins of power and wealth in Tunisia, in an attempt to rebalance the distribution of Tunisia’s natural wealth; however, its success was more political than economic and social. After the 2011 revolution, the Alkamour protests and the issue of management of the Jemna oases reinstated economic and social rights high on the national agenda after becoming a focus of sustained and high-profile social public struggle. There was a clear change in strategy in managing political contention without the patronage of human rights organizations, as happened to varying degrees in the mining basin movement. The UDC became a backbone in the struggle for the right to work in light of the burgeoning unemployment rates before and after the 2011 revolution.

I. Protest movements around economic and social rights

After decades of stressing civil and political rights, it seemed that economic and social rights started to occupy a significant space in civil society through a social protest movement that was mainly centered on unemployment. The decreasing number of available jobs was clearly the result of failed economic and educational



policies associated with repeated crises in the global economic system. The rate of unemployment rose from 13% in 2010 (491,000 unemployed) to 15.3% in 2017 (625,000 unemployed)¹¹.

The mining basin events, which broke out on 5 January 2008, drew the attention of civil society to a deteriorating social and economic reality in marginalized areas. At the same time, it revealed neglect by civil society (e.g. labor unions, student unions and human rights organizations), which had been absorbed in the struggle for civil and political rights.¹² The protests exposed the huge gap between union leaders and their constituencies, and the fact that those leaders and upper echelons neglected the rights of the marginalized, subjecting them to its own delicate balancing act with the authorities.¹³

The unequitable and failing development policy was not one of the concerns of civil society organizations and institutions. Those organizations were structurally and procedurally unable of predicting or framing social movements and protest actions. In addition, these organization suffered from a parochial view of public interests when they approached state social policies. The UGTT, for example, preferred reformist and short term solutions. In a way, several CSOs were involved in “besieging” the mining basin protests, especially since they erupted shortly before the 2009 presidential elections.

In the context of this failure, the success of the protest movements for employment and development stands out, led by the UDC. This movement was on the frontline of the wider movement that began in the marginalized and poor areas on 17 December 2010.

1. The UDC

a. Beginnings

The policies of the Ben Ali regime produced political crises in the 1990s as the ruling regime moved towards a more liberal economy while attempting to maintain a relatively stable middle class. The high rate of unemployment, and the right-to-work issue as a whole, was among those crises, where the state failed to achieve progress and could not even reform the educational system to better serve



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development and job creation requirements. While the economic structure and the labor market changed for various reasons, including government policy choices, educational institutions did not evolve. Graduates became one of the largest sectors among the unemployed, because their diplomas did not provide them with the skills demanded in the labor market or because the market was unable, in view of regime policies, to create enough jobs in certain fields.¹⁴ According to official data, more than 30% of degree holders were unemployed despite the fact the general unemployment rate was only 15.3%.

The country's conflicted economic policies failed to provide the required minimum number of jobs. The state continued protectionist policies while trying to open up the economy to the private sector; the development gap deepened between the different regions, and protectionism as well as administrative and political corruption constrained the private sector.¹⁵ Adding insult to injury was the spread of nepotism and favoritism, and the state capture by the president's family and cronies.¹⁶ These conditions drove young Tunisian university graduates to protest in the streets in defense of their rights as citizens to employment, being the essential means for a dignified living.

The unemployed graduates had honed their political struggle skills and tactics in active Tunisian campuses. These skills enabled them to engage with several governments which resorted to procrastination and/or repression. Unemployed graduates networked with other actors in the community and established local and regional coordination committees starting in 2006 in order to raise awareness of their cause, contextualize their struggles and organize their ranks.

b. Origins

Despite the continued struggle of committees and coordination structures, and with the increasing number of unemployed graduates and the inability of the state to provide effective solutions, the work of the committees did not achieve an important breakthrough. Internal problems resulting from differing political loyalties within the UDC, and the shift of the struggle from a socioeconomic to a political one, where opposition parties took advantage of the opportunity to challenge Ben Ali's repressive regime. All these conditions and practices contributed to weaken the committees of the unemployed graduates.



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A need for organization emerged at the national level to structure decision-making, better frame the movement and build a front that would be able to achieve some of its demands or, at the very least, raise awareness of the issue of unemployment, which have become a nightmare for young Tunisians graduating from university. In 2006, the committees and coordinating bodies announced the formation of a National Union (UDC) whose primary purpose was to address the inability of the system to provide solutions to the problem of unemployment it has caused.¹⁷ The UDC networked with organizations concerned with economic and social rights, including the General Union of Tunisian Students (UGET), the UGTT and the Tunisian League for the Defense of Human Rights (LTDH).

c. Mechanisms of struggle on the ground

The UDC structure at the national level contributed to increasing the impact of its struggle. Regional structures adapted their working methods according to their regional particularities, which resulted in the deployment of various tactics in remote areas as well as on the national level. The existence of a national entity with regional branches deepened and enriched the formulation of economic and social demands, where branches contributed, for example, to challenging the misleading use by the ruling regime of statistics and programs. Also, members of regional branches contributed to a lot of research that highlighted the shortcomings of the state economic plan to create job.¹⁸

Before the revolution, it was politically useful, and even inevitable, that UDC members in some constituencies engage in alliances with various components of civil society, whether political parties or associations, to spread information about their cause, despite their full awareness that they might be used as a tool of pressure on authorities by those allies. Supporters of this kind of networking in and outside Tunisia believed that they would, at least, be able to raise public awareness of the issue of graduate unemployment. These alliances and relations suffered from the clashing priorities and different fields of expertise between the UDC members, particularly those from the marginalized interior regions of Tunisia, who are focused on economic and social rights on the one hand, and the urban-based human rights organizations that are more concerned with civil and political rights, on the other. This also meant that UDC members were engaged in street confrontations with repressive security forces, while urban human rights



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defenders were primarily involved in areas of support, advocacy, framing, and representation.

For example, the UGET played an important role in raising the awareness of university students who went on to form the main UDC foundations after graduation. Also, networking with UGET provided a common vision for the disagreements with the educational system (Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research), which were incapable of reform in order to reduce unemployment rates. Finally, UGET made its offices available for UDC, after the government refused to register the latter.

The LTDH provided legal support to UDC, but the differing political currents within the human rights organization were a major factor in shaping its position and relationship with the union. The League was a stage for political conflict among its founding factions that belonged to various political ideologies,¹⁹ the most important of which were a group of Social Democrats, which split from the ruling party in 1978, and a number of independent leftists, Arab nationalists and members of the Constitutional Socialist Party. Later, in the early eighties, affiliates of the Islamic Trend movement joined LTDH. This conflict became apparent during the drafting of the LTDH charter and, later, during election of its governing board. But in the end, it was Social Democrats who dominated the board and worked to establish regional branches for LTDH.

LTDH became a fundamental supporter of the UDC movement. It adopted their causes and helped in the formulation and articulation of economic and social demands through their branches. It also contributed to shining a light on their cause through public statements, as it did when it publicized the action of unemployed activists in the state of Sidi Bouzid, who went on a hunger strike to protest their deteriorating socioeconomic conditions. A number of other human rights actors, notably recently, the Tunisian Forum on Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), cooperated.²⁰

On the other hand, for decades, the UGTT has been the only space to defend economic and social rights by virtue of its structure, functions and ability to confront the regime, based in part on its historical legacy of nationalist activism for the independence of Tunisia. The UGTT helped build the post-independence



Arab Reform Initiative

state in Tunisia and actively intervened in opposition or in support during major economic policy transformations such as abandoning of cooperative socialism in the late 1960s and moving towards economic liberalism in the early 1970s.

The fact that the UGTT had offices and infrastructure throughout the country helped support the UDC work and activities. The majority of UGTT leaders belonged to the Socialist Constitutional Party until 1978, when they took a distance from the regime and relatively opposed government economic policies that negatively affected the working class.²¹ In the era of Ben Ali, and with the economic open door policy of the regime, the UGTT entered into a semi-partnership with the regime under which it periodically negotiated on behalf of workers. The UGTT had finally embraced a contradictory position but seemed to defend its clashing parts. Since it has supported the National Charter signed by the various political and civil forces in the country in November 1988, it stood for an equitable distribution of wealth among the various regions and social groups, and improving the living standard of wage laborers and employees in the public service sector. On the other hand, it supported the neoliberal regime of Ben Ali. Seen from another angle, the UGTT became a partner of the regime in order to move forward with the unavoidable trade liberalization while maintain social stability.²²

The UGTT worked to contain and calm down disgruntled parties, trying to find compromises, which made its relationship with the UDC stronger in the regional and sectoral offices which enjoy a relative margin of independence compared to the central leadership, which played the role of the only negotiator between protest movements and the regime.²³ This explains why UGTT positions and actions regarding economic and social rights issues had a negative impact and were probably useless in marginalized areas, such as the mining basin, where protests broke out in 2008.

The movement of the unemployed graduates did not seek bilateral links with each different association but rather networked among them, leading to collective actions such as issuing statements supporting the movement and collecting signatures from all associations and other actors who are in solidarity with them.

2. The Mining Basin Movement



a. Did UGTT fail?

The mining basin movement reflected the failure of state employment policies and the corruption of a number of trade union leaders, who played the role of mediator with the state as well as supervised the implementation of the state's employment policy in the basin mining area²⁴ to ensure respect of their employment quota in the phosphate mines, a quota system that was marred by favoritism and corruption.²⁵ Some of those close to the authority, including Ammara Al-Abbasi, a member of Parliament and the General Secretary of UGTT branch of Gafsa at the time, controlled those appointments under the protection of regional and national authorities and the central trade union leadership.²⁶

The announcement of the appointment results in the Gafsa phosphate company on 4 January 2008, which UGTT insisted on approving despite demands for reconsideration by the candidates for those jobs, was the last straw for residents of the mining basin who suffered previous grievances, foremost among which the continuous elimination of jobs in the phosphate complex that brought the work force down from 14,000 in the late 1980s to 5,300 workers in 2008. People took to the streets.²⁷

A political class at the national level benefited from these protests, but the effort did not lead to significant results in terms of economic and social rights in the mining basin itself. Employment procedures at the phosphate complex remained subject to quotas divided between the ruling party and the regional UGTT branch, with the latter quota further dependent on family and clan affiliations. Demands by tribal minorities to increase their share of the UGTT branch's quota were a major reason for the escalation of the protest, especially since the dominant majority of the Gafsa UGTT branch refused those demands.²⁸ Did UGTT fail to manage this crisis? Or was it successful in defending its narrow interests and continuing its client role of managing the crisis in favor of the upper echelons of the ruling elite as well as in favor of containing expectations of marginalized groups and allocating resources (jobs) based on favoritism and tribal affiliations?

b. State and society: Conflict between center and periphery, tribe and citizenship

At face value, the right to work was the essence of the protest in the mining basin. However, the main conflict was about how vacancies are filled up or, in other



Arab Reform Initiative

words, how the state distributed gifts to the people of the region with the mediation of the UGTT. These “gifts” or this “favoritism” was the state mechanism to absorb and divert the course of any protest movement that might trigger a real debate over economic and employment policies, which resulted in a recurrent crises and subsequent conflicts, including tribal squabbling, in which the state rallied behind its supporters represented by the controlling majority within the UGTT and the ruling party. These latter actors relied on and fueled larger tribes to suppress the protest movement of the minority (whether a minority within modern institutions such as unions or parties, or traditional minorities that were greatly affected by modernity, such as marginal tribes).

The mining basin marginal minorities defended themselves and blocked the railway²⁹ in a sit-in led by Adnan al-Haaji³⁰ to stop the shipment of phosphates, thus disrupting production and forcing the state to consider their demands. The UDC formed a cell in Radeef, west of Gafsa, and added their demands to those of the people of the region and decided to defend members of the minority tribes.³¹

For its part, the tribal majority organized a sit-in at the UGTT Gafsa branch demanding an increase in their job quota, and rejecting the principle of equality with tribal minorities. They demanded that the ruling party lift its hand off party and union quotas.³²

The state repressive machine targeted both parties after the favoritism mechanism of the ruling elite appeared to be collapsing in Gafsa, a situation that could have required the deployment of violent means to impose the elite’s solutions to the controversial issue of employment. However, the UGTT, without entirely leaving the scene to the tools of stark repression, managed to impose a solution that did not affect the general economic policies. One aspect of the solution was to revive the region’s agriculture and environment state enterprise to accommodate a number of job seekers without going into the core of the crisis, which is the inability of the state-run system to create jobs and implement effective development plans. Thus, the whole employment issue remained subject to clientelism and favoritism between the ruling elite and citizens, in which the latter stayed the weaker party especially those belonging to marginalized groups.

3. How the revolution affect the protest movements of UDC and the Mining Basin:

The 2011 revolution opened new paths for several political and social forces to formulate and translate their demands to reform the state's political system. Political forces were able to enshrine and protect political and civil rights, while economic and social rights received lesser attention. The most influential political forces got involved in a struggle over power, as well as securing the rules of pluralism and power-sharing. Some of those forces were in favor of neoliberalism, inherited from the authoritarian regime, as an option also supported by international actors and the global neoliberal system.

The UDC was able to bypass tribal and political obstacles and focus more on its struggle using several approaches, including the establishment of a research center on economic and social rights and restructuring itself through the convening of a founding conference in 2013, when it was possible to overcome political differences, especially among various leftist factions, and network with various civil society actors, as well as negotiate with the state without a mediator imposing its demands and priorities.³³

The situation in the Mining Basin did not change much. The new system-in-the-making failed to provide economic and social solutions. The anniversary of the Mining Basin uprising continued to be a reminder of issues of fair development and equitable employment.³⁴ The Basin movement in 2008 was one of the sparks of the 2011 revolution that erupted from within the same region.

The country has not seen an improvement in the management of unemployment, almost stabilizing at a high rate since 2011, and exacerbated by the absence of even cosmetic and palliative solutions, which were the normal course of the authoritarian regime before the revolution. Frustration in the Mining Basin remains subject to tribal dynamics affecting mobilization and organization.³⁵ The only difference in that scene is the remarkable presence of FTDES activists, who continue to work and network in the region, defending the protest movement and its activists.³⁶



The FTDES formally joined the rights community in 2011 when the freedom of association became really protected and respected.³⁷ The Forum played a key role in framing protest movements but at the same time it strongly competed with the UGTT over who would play the mediation role with the authorities, a competition which compounded the ineffectiveness and fragmentation of protest movements in the Mining Basin in particular and the protest momentum in the country in general. Several political movements and activists saw in UGTT and FTDES two political mediators, rather than allies, where the former was preoccupied with political reaction towards recurrent crises in Tunisia, and the latter attempting to undermine the former's status in social and economic circles.

The FTDES tried to organize protest movements through a single network called the Coordinating Body of Social Movements, but the project did not achieve much success during its first conference in March 2017.³⁸ Some conference participants claimed that one of its objectives was to transform social protest movements in most Tunisian regions into party branches later on.³⁹

II. Reshaping protest consciousness and methods of struggle

The 2011 revolution enshrined political and civil rights in state institutions and in the public space, which allowed a number of human rights activists to focus their efforts more on defending economic and social rights, while enjoying their rights to organize, protest and assemble. Protest and social mobility in Elkamour and the Jemna oases were an expression of this transformation. In other words, the 2011 revolution opened the way for social forces in Tunisia to struggle openly and collectively for economic and social rights and to act on the ground without turning every action into a central political conflict.

1. Jemna Oases movement

Jemna is a village in the Kebli province in southern Tunisia with a population of 7,194 people.⁴⁰ The Jemna agricultural project extends over an area of approximately 400 hectares⁴¹ which the state appropriated after independence.



Arab Reform Initiative

After the revolution, residents of the area occupied and farmed the land, especially since only 200 hectares were used for palm trees.⁴² They succeeded in managing those lands through the formation of an association to protect the oases of Jemna.

a. Bypassing political and ideological logic

The experience of the Jemna association provided an example of the success of a participatory economic cooperative that transcended political and ideological dimensions, which were the cause of failure of other forms of economic and social rights protest movements in Tunisia. Despite the diversity and even antagonistic political affiliations of members,⁴³ they were able to reach consensus on objectives that enabled them to establish a new and successful model according to the results achieved by the project.

The association succeeded in reclaiming land, cultivating it and investing the proceeds of sale of crop in the development of the area, both in terms of infrastructure and job creation for residents. However, the state did not remain absent for long, and after relative ‘stability’ returned following the 2014 elections, the state demanded control over the land, driving managers of the association to organize general and public protests.

b. Mechanisms of struggle

The state warning that it would use force in order to claim its “rights” from citizens “encroaching” on its property constituted a threat for the new project. Despite political connections of members of the project, they adopted defensive mechanisms, mainly using the media and networking with various CSOs.

The association prepared a file of research documents on the project and organized press conferences to highlight the difference between the misconduct of the state and the success of the association in managing the land, with the aim to gain social solidarity and refute state “fallacious propaganda”. It also provided information to local and Arab researchers, who raised public awareness about the success of the project in national and regional forums,⁴⁴ especially among those interested in cooperative social economy.⁴⁵

The project leaders relied on networking and on securing the support of important



Arab Reform Initiative

CSOs and political parties. The political composition of the group helped them resist the threat by the authorities to seize the land back. The political diversity of the group enabled them to use several channels of communication and pressure, including working with the LTDH, the FTDES and various political parties including Nahda.⁴⁶ The group utilized occasions such as contracting for the sale of the crop to organize events of solidarity attended by CSOs and national and foreign media. In October 2016, solidarity trips were organized from the capital and various regions in the country to attend the sale and to express solidarity of political and rights groups with the project. A project support committee was established and helped protect and support the struggle on the ground and the state partial withdrawal away from a position that claimed to be in the interest of public property. In one of the stages of that struggle, and after the state stubbornly insisted on claim the proceeds of selling the crop, residents organized a collective move to withdraw their money from banks in the region, expressing their rejection of the state's attempt to freeze the association funds.⁴⁷

Some commentators dismissed the Jemna experience as an attempt to act as a state within the state. However, the experience itself established and supported the value of the struggle for economic, social and cultural rights (since belonging to the land is a strong cultural trait in these communities deeply rooted in the collective consciousness in Jemna). The working methods within the association itself were characterized by democracy, integration and activism of members, as well as the development of a consciousness that values coexistence in the region. When the situation became complicated in the middle of 2017, the management of the association decided to consult with the residents to undertake whatever steps they deemed appropriate, either by re-electing a new board or by continuing the struggle⁴⁸ against the state and the official position insisting on an economic model that does not represent them, but rather works to expel them and to empower investors, whose main purpose, through state structures, was to make profits, without a clear development vision that takes into account the area, its residents and their needs and views.⁴⁹

The Jemna association entered into an agreement with the Tunisian “I Watch” organization, granting it access to financial documents to demonstrate its efficiency and transparency and to refute any misconduct allegations.⁵⁰ The



association developed various techniques of struggle including the use of the Jemna cultural festival, which became a gathering to express the plight of the region and how to fix it through various artistic and cultural performances.⁵¹

2. Elkamour movement

Elkamour movement was another example of success of the struggles for economic and social rights by a localized social movement. It clearly differed from other protests, both organizationally and functionally, with regard to the distribution of roles and the consideration of political balances of power as well as specific tribal affiliations within the community.

The reasons for the protest movement in Tataouine were similar to other protests in Tunisia. Residents wanted more development projects in the region and more jobs for its people. However, it mainly stemmed from an awareness of the importance of struggle to seize economic, social and cultural rights from a political authority that has long procrastinated and had been always obsessed with national political challenges while ignoring vertical relationships to the peripheries (geographically and in terms of access to economic resources). This lack of development and these growing inequalities were the most important drivers of the revolutionary movement in Tunisia since 17 December 2010.

This awareness in Elkamour evolved through a painstaking diagnosis of the reality of the region and the richness of its resources, as well as the extent to which it benefitted its residents after several years of the revolution in Tunisia. Protests initially took place in front of the office of the municipality as the highest authority representing the state. However, protesters soon realized the irrelevance of these protest mechanisms.⁵² Local officials resorted to procrastination and security solutions, and provoked protesters to drive them to the use of physical violence,⁵³ which could have resulted in the loss of sympathy of human rights organizations and the Tunisian society in general. Spontaneous protests developed into well-organized events through the development of organizational mechanisms capable of leaving the authorities with lesser options. They also helped secure a certain kind of support of human rights organizations, some of which sought to frame the movement as a rights-based protest, and to keep away other groups which sought



to politically exploit the protests.

The choice of the sit-in area blocking the railways had an important significance since Elkamour lies along the path used by oil companies to transport their products. To block that strategic transport route was a warning shot from the protesters that they were gradually and peacefully escalating their struggle by zeroing in on the source of the region's wealth. The territorial specificity of the region, both socially and politically, constituted the backbone of the structure through which protesters worked. The coordination body of the protest included members who took into consideration the political⁵⁴ and tribal⁵⁵ balances in the area. The protesters were also divided over tents, each representing one of the area delegations.⁵⁶

In order to make the sit-in more effective, CSOs from outside the region took part. Most political parties organized periodic visits to the coordination committee, attended press conferences held at the sit-in, issued statements and organized vigils in the capital⁵⁷ and abroad,⁵⁸ as well as provided financial support for the protesters.

Conclusion

Despite the support given to the protest movements in Tunisia by human rights organizations, it did not amount to the level of networking and positive interaction that are necessary to achieve practical outcomes. Cooperation was limited to solidarity with the protests through the release of statements, solidarity vigils, and visits to the protesters.

Protest movements largely relied on their own capacities, conscious of the inability of human rights organizations to provide effective support, either because of their limited capabilities and/or their political affiliations. The UGTT and FTDES entered an intense struggle on the social and trade union scene over who was to be the main mediator with the state. The LTDH maintained a rather distant position limited to public support through statements.

The protest movements demanding economic, social and cultural rights in Tunisia have evolved and developed greatly and became more aware of the huge



structural changes that affect mechanisms and ways of struggle and the choice of allies.

All this created a need to review options of mobilization, organization and protest tactics in order to ensure acceptable gains without falling into the traps of mediators whose agenda could overlap but are rarely identical to those struggling for their rights. Alkamour and Jemna represented a stage for training on gaining rights without mediation, after similar social movements in the past had relied on intermediaries to express their demands and tailor them to the existing political and social institutions. This raises important challenges for human rights actors about their mechanisms of work on economic and social rights issues, and the nature of their relationships and cooperation with social movements and whether they would remain at a fast eroding mediation level or could explore other avenues that can finally address the complex issues of representation and brokerage between human rights actors and the bearers of these very rights themselves who are busy developing new ways of defending their own rights.



Endnotes

1. An independent organization open to every Tunisian with a graduation certificate but deprived of the right to work
2. Located in the south west of Tunisia, the mining basin is a rich phosphate site that has had wide protests since 2008 because of public domestic objections to the mines' employment policy. Jemna oases lie in the Kibli state in the south west of Tunisia and includes state-owned agricultural lands known for its date palm trees, which were seized and farmed by residents after 2011 despite government opposition. Alkamour, an area rich in oil and gas fields, lies in Tataouine state in southeastern Tunisia, was the scene of large sit-ins because of unemployment.
3. Hamadi Redissi and Rihab Boukhayatia, "The National Constituent Assembly of Tunisia and Civil Society Dynamics", *Euspring Citizenship Report*, No. 1, July 2015, available at [bit.ly](#)
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5. Jürgen Habermas, *Droit et Démocratie, entre Faits et Normes*, Paris : Gallimard, 1997, p.394.
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7. Law no. 88 issued on 24 September 2011 on the formation of associations, published in the official gazette, issue no. 74, 30 September 2011, pp. 1996.
8. An association is formed after mailing a file to the government chief of cabinet with all necessary documents, which had been reviewed by a judicial officer to ensure it is duly complete. The association is considered formed since the date of mailing the file. However, it does not enjoy legal status except after being announced in the official gazette.
9. "Kamal Jendoubi: Number of associations in Tunisia has exceeded 18 thousand associations", Express FM, 5 February 2016, available at [radioexpressfm.com](#)
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14. Aljazeera net, "Unemployment in Tunisia continues at high levels", 21 November 2014, available at [is.gd](#)
15. Aljazeera net, "Unemployment in Tunisia (see footnote 14).
16. Bob Rijkers, Caroline Freund, and Antonio Nucifora, "All in the Family: State Capture in Tunisia", The World Bank: Policy Research Working Paper, 2014, p. 42.
17. "Common Grounds Document", UDC, May 2006.
18. Interview with Hatem Tlili, a UDC researcher and a former UGET activist, 16 May 2017.
19. Souhayr Belhassen, "La LTDH ou la gestion des paradoxes", *Confluences Méditerranée*, Vol. 4 No.51, 2004, p. 105)Souhayr Belhassen: La LTDH



Arab Reform Initiative

- human rights organizations in 2010 (undated but available at [is.gd](#)). The hunger strike took place in various municipalities of the central province in April and May 2010, and was later seen as precursor for the 2011 uprising. See: Assim Ghabry, “Sidi Bouzeid: A wave of Hunger Strikes Hits Several Municipalities”, *Elsabah*, 16 May 2010, available at [is.gd](#)
20. “A Solidarity Statement with the Social Movements and Feminist Struggle in Sidi Bouzid”, issued by nine Tunisian
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 22. Yousfi Hèla: L’UGTT, p. 49.
 23. Interview with Alsagheer Alshamekh, former UGET member and mining basin activist, 13 May 2017.
 24. The mining basin is situated in southwestern Tunisia, between the municipalities of Bouzid and Gafsa, and is known for its phosphate complex which is considered an important state resource.
 25. Salah Eldin Elghourchi, “Tunisia: Mutiny of the Mining Basin Residents Strongly Foregrounds Social Issue”, *Swissinfo*, 18 April 2008, available at [is.gd](#)
 26. Ammar Amrouseya, The mining basin uprising.
 27. Ammar Amrouseya, The mining basin uprising.
 28. Interview with Alsagheer Alshamekh.
 29. Obstructing the railway in Radeef blocked transport of phosphate to the chemical factory in Qabes (southeast Tunisia).
 30. Haaji was a member of UGTT office in Radeef, which is affiliated to the regional UGTT branch in Gafsa.
 31. Interview with coordinators of the Radeef railway strike, Omar Alsharaity and Gamal Alsharaity, 18 May 2017.
 32. Interview with Alsagheer Alshamekh.
 33. Interview with Salem Alayary, national coordinator of UDC, 16 May 2017.
 34. Ramzi Afdal, “Movements in Tunisia: Gafsa Rises in the Anniversary of the Mining Basin Protest”, *Alaraby AlJadid*, 26 January 2016, available in Arabic at [is.gd](#)
 35. Interview with Alsagheer Alshamekh.
 36. “Interview with Masoud Romdani, Chair of FTDES”, *Alsabab*, 11 October 2017, available in Arabic at [is.gd](#)
 37. From approximately 9,000 associations before the January 2011 revolution, the number of CSOs rose to 16,187 in 2014, then to 19,915 in February 2017. For numbers and more information see: [ifeda.org.tn PDF](#)
 38. Euromed Tunisia, “First National Conference of Social Movements”, 29 March 2017, available at [bit.ly](#)
 39. Interview with Alsagheer Alshamekh (he also took part in the conference).
 40. “Kebli in the General Population and Housing Census of 2017”, National Institute of statistics, available at [census.ins.tn PDF](#)



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- in 1964.
41. There had been a debate regarding the land ownership in Jemna oases. The land was initially settled by local tribes
 42. ~~with the Arab Front Movement. Alfdredge by "Popular Solidarity" performance, an example of Agritudo accepted the land under the legal system. The plot in Amal is a legal ground of the land and turned into state property by law~~
 43. Members of the association are affiliated to the following political parties and currents: Nahda, Nidaa Tunis, People's Movement, and the Popular Front.
 44. Laila Alraiahy, "Beginnings of cultural, economic and organizational alternatives in Tunisia", In *Alternative Economy in the Arab Region: Concepts and Issues*, Cairo: The Arab Forum for Alternatives, 2016, available at bit.ly
 45. Nasr Eldin Ben Hadid, "Returning to Jemna", *Jadal*, 8 October 2016, available in Arabic at bit.ly, goo.gl
 46. "Jemna Oases Association Appeals to Rachid Ghannouchi to Return Lands", Babnet Tunisia, 24 September 2016, available in Arabic at babnet.net
 47. Haifaa Mansoury, "Jemna : a Successful Development experience", Jameiyati, 11 October 2016, available in Arabic at bit.ly
 48. Karem Yehia, "A new Tunisia. Jemna , An Experience of Solidarity at a Crossroads", Alhewar Almotamaden, 8 April 2017, available in Arabic at ahewar.org
 49. Alsabab, "Consultative Meeting in Jemna Concerning the Date Harvest in the Still Farm between the Supervising Committee and Residents", 16 June 2017, available in Arabic at bit.ly
 50. See announcement of the signing of the agreement on the website of the association iwatch.tn
 51. Video are available of some of these performances at bit.ly
 52. Interview with Alaa Alwanesi, member of the coordinating committee of Alkamour sit-in, 14 May 2017.
 53. Interview with Alsagheer Alshamekh.
 54. Political parties and groups present in the sit-in included Nahda, People's movement (Arab nationalists), and Tunisia Project (leftist).
 55. The chosen official spokesperson of the sit-in was born to parents who belonged to the largest two tribes in the region.
 56. Interview with Alaa Alwanesi.
 57. "Press coverage of Solidarity Vigils with Alkamour Sit-in", Mosaic FM, 22 May 2017, available at bit.ly
 58. "Protest Vigil in Support of Alkamour Sit-in", Anbaa Tunis Kapitalis, 8 April 2017, available at bit.ly



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