

Tunisian Phosphates and the Politics of the Periphery

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The Arab Uprisings started in December 2010 in Tunisia, a country that until then had been hailed as a role model of economic development and resources management by European governments and international institutions like the IMF and the World Bank.¹ Cracks below the surface escaped the attention of these development planners. The Ben Ali regime combined economic liberalization and export orientation with an increasingly suppressive state apparatus.² While Tunisia achieved robust macro growth rates, wealth only trickled down unevenly to the general population and at the time the periphery faced neglect.³ Unemployment rates in the disadvantaged regions in the West and South were almost double the fifteen percent, which characterise the capital Tunis and the coastal areas.⁴ It was here that the vegetable vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself ablaze and the Tunisian revolt started. Similar social unrest before, such as the bread riots of 1984 and the revolts in Tunisia's phosphate mines in 2008, had also started in the Tunisian hinterland. A successful transition in Tunisia can only be achieved if the economically disenfranchised population in peripheral areas gets a fairer deal—which, crucially, implies developing an alternative social contract and restructuring the socio-ecological formations that have generated prosperity for a transnational elite while causing extensive environmental degradation.

¹ Karen Pfeifer, "How Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan and even Egypt Became IMF 'Success Stories' in the 1990s," *Middle East Report* 210 (1999).

² Beatrice Hibou, *La Force De L'obéissance: Economie Politique De La Répression En Tunisie* (Découverte: Paris, 2006).

³ Hamed El-Said and Jane Harrigan, "Economic Reform, Social Welfare, and Instability: Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, 1983–2004," *Middle East Journal* 68, no. 1 (2014).

⁴ International Monetary Fund, *Tunisia: Staff Report for the 2012 Article IV Consultation* (2012), <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/sr/2012/cr12255.pdf>.

The phosphate mines around Metlaoui have played a pivotal role in the economic development of Tunisia's periphery and have been a bone of contention in social protests and trade union politics. In what is otherwise an arid region of high plateaux, the discovery of phosphate ore in the late nineteenth century brought undreamt wealth for a few. During the colonial period, these few were the phosphate companies that developed the mines, and the colonial authorities for whom phosphate was a precious source of tax income. Tunisia's independence in 1956 and the subsequent development strategy of import substituting industrialization (ISI) saw further expansion of phosphate mining, which was used to provide the finance for any number of infrastructure projects outside the region. Tunisian leaders decided to develop the coast first, where levels of education and infrastructure were better than inland, then they hoped to leverage that development to shift the policy inland. That shift, however, failed to materialize in the 1970s and 1980s. Neglect of the hinterland was entrenched and accelerated during the economic liberalization of the Ben Ali years.

After 2011, production of phosphates and fertilizers, one of Tunisia's key exports, collapsed in the wake of successive occupations of the plant entrances by job seekers who pretended to be strike pickets and refused to let bona fide workers in.⁵ New social actors and semi-autonomous groups such as young people who connected via social media emerged from the structures of a partly liberalized autocracy and launched the Tunisian revolt.⁶ On the one hand, Tunisia has had a tradition of autonomous expression and constitutionalism that Ben Ali could not suppress. On the other hand, he left the army marginalized in order to control it and prioritized the police and internal security apparatuses. These were used to suppress the lower classes and the peasantry

⁵ Interview of Francis Ghilès with a former CEO of Compagnie des Phosphates de Gafsa, anonymity requested Tunis, December 1, 2015.

⁶ George Joffé, "The Arab Spring in North Africa: Origins and Prospects," *The Journal of North African Studies* 16, no. 4 (2011).

who—unlike the middle classes—were not offered avenues to prosperity in a liberalized economy. The isolated position of the army within the regime and its broad-based non-sectarian recruitment brought with it a mixture of professionalism and relatively low levels of loyalty towards the leadership. This would prove crucial during the uprisings when the army refused to shoot demonstrators and turned against the police and security services. Only partly corporatized and with a degree of leeway, the country's trade union, Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT), became an important actor in the country's democratic transition when it manifested itself as a voice of secularism against the autocratic aspirations of emergent Islamist groups. Under Ben Ali's presidency from 1987 to 2011, the leaders of UGTT were increasingly co-opted into power, but the local branches remained restive. They did not initiate the December 2010 revolt but played an active part in supporting it when it was underway.

Using underexplored grey literature and personal interviews with officials, experts, and businessmen, this article discusses the constitutive role of phosphate mining and trade unions in the politics of the periphery in Tunisia—politics that have been crucially affected by post-independence development agendas, the transformation of national elites in the crony capitalism of the Ben Ali era and its interplay with international donor and development institutions. First, the chapter gives an historic overview of Tunisian phosphate mining and its role in regional development. Second, it analyzes the politics of Tunisia's periphery, UGTT's role within it and the emergence of new social actors. Third, it takes a detailed look at how such conflicts played out during the strikes in the phosphate mines in 2008 and after 2011. It concludes with an outlook on possible future developments.

Tunisian Phosphate Mining and Development

Colonialism

A French army officer, who made incursions from neighboring French Algeria, discovered phosphate ore in Tunisia in the 1870s. The mines were put into production in 1897, sixteen years after the French occupied Tunisia. Metlaoui became a model company town, imagined as an outpost of civilization, benevolently planted in a harsh environment, to tame nature and natives alike.⁷ It lies in a spectacular lunar landscape in the rugged mountains north of Gafsa, the capital of the Djerid region. The Djerid has been famous for its *deglet nour* dates, but the mountains round Metlaoui were desperately poor. A centralized colonial power structure that was run by civil servants seriously upset the traditional tribal confederations, which had held sway until the French arrived in 1881. Their allegiance to the Bey of Tunis traditionally took the form of levying taxes, but conflicts between the people, the tax farming tribes, and the ruler in Tunis were frequent, particularly during times of drought, when harvests failed but fiscal pressures remained.⁸

Authority and privilege in Metlaoui were allocated along ethnically segmented lines in order to control the workforce, very much like in other settlements associated with extractive industries worldwide.⁹ Workers from as far away as Morocco, Algeria and

⁷ For examples of other model towns in the world that have been tied to extractive industries see John Higginson, "Disputing the Machines: Scientific Management and the Transformation of the Work Routine at the Union Minière du Haut-Katanga, 1918-1930," *African Economic History* 17 (1988): 1-21; John Higginson, *A Working Class in the Making: Belgian Colonial Labor Policy, Private Enterprise, and the African Mineworker, 1907-1951* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); Jane Parpart, "The 'Labor Aristocracy' Debate in Africa: The Copperbelt Case, 1924-1967," *African Economic History* 13 (1984): 171-91; Samuël Coghe, "Reordering Colonial Society: Model Villages and Social Planning in Rural Angola, 1920-45," *Journal of Contemporary History* 52, no. 1 (2016); Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City*, 1st ed. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009).

⁸ Françoise Auvray and Francis Auvray, "Le gisement des phosphates de Gafsa, Tunisie, Historique de la Découverte et de l'exploitation des phosphates de Gafsa" (Saga Information, no. 325, Mars 2013), http://www.saga-geol.asso.fr/Documents/Saga_325_Phosphates_Gafsa_Tunisie.pdf; History of Compagnie des Phosphates de Gafsa, <http://www.gct.com.tn>.

⁹ Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

Libya sought employment in the mines. To the members of the Ouley Bouyahia tribe, who lived around Metlaoui, were added members of tribes from the Djerid region. Meanwhile, all the engineers and managers were Europeans, mainly French and Italians, the latter being the largest European group in colonial Tunisia. Workers from the Maghreb were usually single, while engineers and managers often had their families with them. This produced a typical colonial society with any number of social and class distinction: Metlaoui boasted a swimming pool, tennis courts, and celebrations for the French National Day, the 14 Juillet, which attracted the colonial upper crust from Tunis. French officials would travel with their wives once a year in what was an exotic outing into the unknown and slightly dangerous south and quaff vintage wines—a civilian form of Beau Geste.

Phosphate mining became coterminous with prosperity and even civilization itself. Phosphate companies owned the houses, the local general store, and the pharmacy, and provided free electricity, water, and medical care to the managers and engineers. Working conditions for the miners, by contrast, were harsh, but after independence, they were also provided with the same range of free services. Proper homes for them were built from the 1960s onward, and a decade later they were all decently housed. Throughout these years, a job in the mines was very sought after because of relatively high wages and no other alternatives aside from herding. Metlaoui and its satellite mining towns remained quintessentially company towns in which the government and regional authorities hardly intervened. There were some local police to provide broader security, and even they would get their petrol for free from the local pump, courtesy of the phosphate companies.

The colonial period saw infrastructure decisions that would foreshadow the later development path of Tunisian phosphate mining. A railway line was built in the late

nineteenth century to ship the ore to the eastern port of Sfax from where it was exported—hence one of the most important mining companies was known as La Compagnie des Phosphates et du Chemin de Fer Sfax-Gafsa. After the Second World War, the first large fertilizer plant was built in Sfax. Others were added after independence in the late 1960s and 1970s further down the coast in Gabès. Between the two ports, a third export center was built at La Skhirra in 1985, where an oil export terminal had already been built in the 1950s, initially for oil from French Algeria and later from the El Borma field in the south of Tunisia.

Independence, Import Substituting Industrialization (ISI) and its Crisis

By the time Tunisia achieved independence, phosphate mining was well established as a major source of revenue for the state. From 200,000 tons in 1900, production rose to 3.5 million tons by 1976 when all companies in the sector were brought under the same umbrella, the Compagnie des Phosphates de Gafsa (CPG).¹⁰ In the first two decades after independence, phosphates were an important source of income, long before oil production, which only started in the second half of the 1960s, saw dramatic revenue growth during the oil boom of the 1970s before peaking in the early 1990s.¹¹

Like many other developing countries Tunisia embarked on a course of import substituting industrialization (ISI) during its post-independence period. During the time of state-led inward growth from 1961–1969, the state was relatively autonomous.

¹⁰ Brahmi, M., Zouari, S., “Indicateurs statistiques de performance économique et du positionnement mondial de l'industrie minière en Tunisie (1990-2010): Regard avant la révolution 2011”. *Association Tunisienne des Économistes, Forum Annuel* 2013, <http://www.asectu.org/forum-annuel/forum2013/forum-asectu-2013/164-indicateurs-statistiques-de-performance-%C3%A9conomique-et-du-positionnement-mondial-de-l%E2%80%99industrie-mini%C3%A8re-en-tunisie-1990-2010-regard-avant-la-r%C3%A9volution-2011>

¹¹ British Petroleum, “Statistical Review of World Energy 2015,” <https://www.bp.com/content/dam/bp/pdf/energy-economics/statistical-review-2015/bp-statistical-review-of-world-energy-2015-full-report.pdf>.

However, most of the party leadership came from Tunis and other cities along the coast. A tradition of populist authoritarianism and patronage was established. During the early beginnings of the labor movement in the 1920s, unions were too weak to form an independent political force because of the limited size of the working class.¹² Now, urban workers of the formal sector belonged to the winners of the ISI development strategy.¹³

This also applied to the workers in the phosphate sector, which was nationalized five years after independence. The income of those employed by the CPG was four to five times the minimum wage.¹⁴ Employment by the company was seen as a ticket to a decent life in an otherwise harsh environment. The two main sources of labor were tribal groups around Metlaoui and others further south around Gafsa. Balancing the claims from both groups required a deft political hand. CEOs who came from the region, such as Mohammed Fadhel Khalil or Kais Daly, understood the complex ties of family and tribe, which helped them manage the company successfully. Some of the CEOs who hailed from Tunis or the coastal region, however, showed contempt for southerners and ignorance of the complexities of local politics. Many of those who had graduated from the Grandes Écoles in Paris thought of themselves as quasi-Europeans. They viewed the phosphate region as the back of beyond.

By the early 1970s, like in so many post-colonial states, the shortcomings of ISI became apparent. The infant industries of ISI never matured and merely shifted import dependence from manufactured goods to capital goods. The inefficiencies of the founded industries led to an increasing balance of payments crisis. As a result, the Minister of Planning, Ben Salah, was ousted in 1969 and there was a subsequent shift to

¹² Eqbal Ahmad and Stuart Schaar, "M'hamed Ali and the Tunisian Labour Movement," *Race and Class* 19, no. 3 (1978).

¹³ Stephen J. King, *Liberalization Against Democracy: The Local Politics of Economic Reform in Tunisia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 23.

¹⁴ Interview with Kais Daly, former CEO of CPG and GCT, interview by Francis Ghilès, Tunis, November 25, 2015.

liberalization.¹⁵ The government adopted a more liberal economic policy that welcomed foreign investment in newly set up manufacturing units, mostly textiles. The head of the Central Bank, Hedi Nouria, was appointed to implement the new policy.

Initially gradual, the policy of liberalization accelerated under Hedi Nouria's successors, especially after 1986 when the IMF assisted in a formal Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). It became a cornerstone of economic policies during the reign of President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali (1987–2011), the former Minister of Interior who came to power in a bloodless coup against the aging and incapacitated the founding father of modern Tunisia Habib Bourguiba (1957–87).¹⁶ Economic liberalization in Tunisia achieved appealing GDP growth on a macro level with inflation adjusted 4.6% on average between 1987 and 2010.¹⁷ In contrast to other countries in the region such as Jordan, Egypt, and Morocco, the Tunisian government did not disengage as much from social provisioning. Poverty rates declined from 9.6% in 1985 to 4.1% in 2000 on average.¹⁸ Yet, unemployment remained stubbornly high, around fifteen percent, and inequality manifested itself along geographic lines: the peripheral regions of Tunisia's interior where the phosphate mines lay, and others along Tunisia's frontiers with Algeria to the west and Libya to the south were neglected at the expense of the capital and other coastal regions.

Most of Tunisia's manufacturing and tourist industry created wealth along a narrow coastal strip around Tunis. By the late 1980s, even among regime insiders, the

¹⁵ King, *Liberalization Against Democracy*, 28.

¹⁶ Zine el Abidine Ben Ali established Tunisia's military security department and in 1984 became director general of national security. He was appointed Minister of Interior in 1986 and Prime Minister in October 1987, a few weeks ahead of ousting Bourguiba. Throughout the 1980s, Bourguiba's poor health and refusal to anoint a successor allowed Ben Ali to build a strong base of supporters within the system on which he was able to rely at the time of his bloodless coup d'état. Gana Nowri, *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁷ International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Dataset* (Washington, DC: 2016), <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2016/01/weodata/index.aspx>.

¹⁸ Jane Harrigan and Hamed El-Said, *Globalisation, Democratisation and Radicalisation in the Arab World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

feeling was growing that, despite a rise in salaries, too much of the wealth of the region was accruing to the coast where the phosphoric acid and fertilizer plants were based.¹⁹ As the population in the phosphate basin increased, jobs became more scarce and competition for them ferocious. Some CEOs were quite happy to play tribal politics with recruitment, which made matters worse. After all, phosphate mining accounted for seventy percent of added value in the region.²⁰ The vast majority of young people were forced to leave Metlaoui and surrounding towns to seek jobs on the coast or in Tunis.

Restructuring and Environmental Impact

Until the late 1970s, mining was carried out in galleries dug into the hills. Open pit mining was introduced in 1978 at Kef Schafaier and was subsequently started in nine other locations. More modern methods of extracting ore resulted in a rapid rise in production and exports. Production more than doubled from three million tons in 1970 to 6.3 million tons in 1990. Phosphate exports as a share of total exports mostly ranged between 6–11% between 1995 and 2007, reaching a peak of 13.9% in 2008, and declining thereafter to 5–6% after the revolt of 2011.²¹ By the turn of the century, Tunisia was the fifth largest producer in the world after the United States, Morocco, China and the USSR; its phosphoric acid and fertilizers were recognized as being of excellent quality. However, Tunisia has slipped to the eighth rank since 2011 and could slip further if production levels fail to rise in the years ahead—this is worrying and could compromise growth perspectives in the post-revolutionary transition of the country.²²

¹⁹ Interviews with state officials and private businessmen, interview by Francis Ghilès, Tunis, November and December 2015.

²⁰ Kais Daly, former CEO of CPG and GCT, interviewed by Francis Ghilès Tunis, November 25, 2015.

²¹ Mohsen Brahmi, Campus Zarruk, Sonia Zaouari, “Indicateurs statistiques de performance économique et du positionnement mondial de l’industrie minière en Tunisie (1990-2010): Regard avant la révolution 2011” working paper Forum des Economistes, Hammamet, May 26-28, 2016, <http://www.asectu.org/forum-annuel/forum2013/forum-asectu-2013/164-indicateurs-statistiques-de-performance-%C3%A9conomique-et-du-positionnement-mondial-de-l%E2%80%99industrie-mini%C3%A8re-en-tunisie-1990-2010-regard-avant-la-r%C3%A9volution-2011>; Informal conversations with CPG senior engineers, interview by Francis Ghilès, Tunis, December 4, 2015.

²² Interviews with former GCT officials, interviewed by Francis Ghilès, Tunis, December 2, 2015.

In 1994, the upstream and downstream sectors were merged to build a stronger overall strategy for the whole sector. In the process, fertilizer industries based on the coast became more important in phosphate value chains compared to the mines in the hinterland. The Groupe Chimique Tunisien (GCT), which in the late 1970s had been put in charge of downstream activities such as the production of phosphoric acid and fertilizers, was put together with the CPG under the same CEO and board of directors. Investment in downstream activities was concentrated on the coast in the ports of Sfax, where plants had already been built in 1952 and 1964, and later on in Gabes and La Skhirra. This left inhabitants of the mining area with the impression that their wealth was being siphoned off, a perception reinforced in the 1990s when prices of ore rose sharply while jobs in the mines were cut as the introduction of open pit mining increased mechanization and reduced the need for labor.²³ Only one plant was built in the phosphate basin, at M'dilla in the early 1980s. This appeasing gesture was possibly prompted by a preceding attempt to take over the regional capital of Gafsa in January 1980 by dissident Tunisians backed by the Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi and hard-line elements within the Algerian secret service. This necessitated help from King Hassan of Morocco, the American sixth fleet and the French military to control the situation.²⁴

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the CEO of the GCT and CPG, Ali Boukhris, brought in Kuwaiti, Abu Dhabi, and French equity partners. The range of products increased to include fertilizers and aluminum fluoride. Tunisian patents to make phosphoric acid were (and still are) used in China and Romania. Some of these equity

²³ Kais Daly, former CEO of CPG and GCT in the 1990s and 2000s, interview by Francis Ghilès, Tunis, November 25, 2015; and with Mohamed Fadhel Khalil, former CEO of CPG in the 1980s, interview by Francis Ghilès, Tunis, December 3, 2015.

²⁴ Sophie Bessis and Souhayr Belhassen, *Bourguiba* (Tunis: Elyzad, 1990). Besides a general posture of deterrence, the military help of Morocco, the US, and France included reconnaissance flights and transportation of Tunisian troops. The sangfroid of Tunisian President Bourguiba, who was on holiday in Nefta—one hundred kilometers west of Gafsa—was exemplified by his decision to go to Gafsa only forty-eight hours after the coup, where he was triumphantly received.

partners remain today but do not play as active a role as hitherto. Meanwhile, *Khaleeji* investors rather turned to tourism, property, banking and telecommunications; sectors that were also more in line with regime preferences.²⁵ In the 2000s the Tunisian phosphate sector teamed up again with foreign partners to modernize its production, this time from India. Tunisia's main export markets are India, Iran, and Indonesia.²⁶ Two Indian companies, which were long-standing customers, emerged after 2000 and took a thirty percent share in the \$500 million investment to produce phosphoric acid in a plant opened at La Skhirra in 2013.²⁷ The two Indian partners undertook to buy the plant's entire output at world-market prices for thirty years, thus guaranteeing the long-term viability of the project.

Increased impact of pollution from open pit mining and the CPG's neglect of the environment added to the grievances. Health risks incurred by the miners include silicosis and cancer. Before the phosphate rock is moved to Sfax and La Skhirra it is washed. Agriculture accounts for eighty percent of freshwater withdrawal in Tunisia, followed by municipal (15%) and industrial uses (5%). With 20 million cubic meters of water a year, phosphate mining has a share of about fourteen percent of the country's industrial water withdrawal.²⁸ This is considerable in a predominantly arid area. Some of the water is pumped from deep fossil aquifers of non-renewable water and then disposed of partially treated. It was only in 1995 that the first sludge storage ponds were built. Until then, mud

²⁵ *Khaleeji* is a term used to refer to people of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Mahieddine Raoui, "Investissements pays du Golfe dans le Maghreb," in *Transitions in North Africa in Times of Scarcity: Finance, Employment, Energy, and Food* (Barcelona: CIDOB, 2012), http://www.cidob.org/en/content/download/31710/514747/file/m_MULTIPOLARWORLD_2011.pdf.

²⁶ Mohamed Fadhel Khalil, former CEO of CPG in the 1980s; and Ali Boukhris, former CEO of GCT in the early 1980s, interview by Francis Ghilès, Tunis, May 21, 2016.

²⁷ Swati Rathori, "Coromandel phosphoric acid Tunisian joint venture goes on stream", *Times of India*, July 13, 2013, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/Coromandel-phosphoric-acid-Tunisian-joint-venture-goes-on-stream/articleshow/21054873.cms>.

²⁸ Hervé Gaboriau and Abdellah Chik, "Integrated Water Management of Mediterranean Phosphate Mining and Local Agricultural Systems: The El'Maa Project," AFA Eighteenth International Annual Technical Conference and Exhibition, July 5-7, 2005, Casablanca, http://elmaa.brgm.fr/Results_public_en.asp and <http://www.fao.org/nr/water/aquastat/data/query/results.html>.

sludges from washing plants invaded dry riverbeds. Sheep grazing the sparse grass would get hurt or stuck, no minor inconvenience in a region where semi-nomadic lifestyles can still be found and where many families engage in sheep rearing as part of their livelihood strategies. Even with storage ponds, there are reports of muddy water seeping into depressions on the northern edge of the palm groves further south around the oases of Nefta and Tozeur, putting tourism and the date industry at risk.²⁹ A century of negligence will take both time and money to clear up.

Fluor has contaminated large areas, the worst of which are around M'dilla, putting paid to any hope of developing agriculture. In the words of Lakdar Souid, a journalist who knew the region well and felt passionately that its inhabitants deserved a better deal, "For the past 115 years, the CPG has acted as a milk cow which leaves its dung in Gafsa, whose milk goes elsewhere, and which allows its calves to go hungry."³⁰ Besides the miners, the dust from the phosphates has affected the health of the inhabitants badly for decades.

The Ben Ali Liberalization

In the 1980s the phosphate sector was liberalized at an increased pace with negative consequences for the local population. In 1986 the World Bank assisted in a restructuring plan for Tunisia's economy. The CPG had already started a program of early retirement on full pay, with the idea that new employment would be found for them with the help of regional development projects. This brought the number of employees down from 14,000 to less than half in 2006.³¹ The challenge, however, was to find new employment, not only for those who had been retired, but also for others in a region where birth rates remained above those on the coast. Tourism developed around Gafsa in the 1980s and

²⁹ Kais Daly, former CEO of CPG and GCT, interview by Francis Ghilès, Tunis, November 15, 2015.

³⁰ Lakhdar Souid, "Gafsa or the Forgotten Land," *Maghreb Magazine*, July-August 2012.

³¹ Larbi Chouika and Éric Gobe, "La Tunisie entre la 'révolte du bassin minier de Gafsa' et l'échéance électorale de 2009," *L'Année du Maghreb V* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2009).

1990s, but other new jobs were not forthcoming, as the state never produced a serious development plan for the region and failed to deliver badly needed public infrastructures. The early retirement schemes soon fell prey to complicated bargaining between the management, the unions, and local tribal clans. Unemployment continued to rise inexorably and reached 38.5% in some mining towns, way above the national average of around fifteen percent.³²

The mid-1980s also witnessed the growth of sub-contracting companies whose workers did not enjoy the security of employment, social advantages, and levels of pay of the CPG workers, whose privileges were deeply resented. By the time the phosphate region rose in revolt against the regime in January 2008, the secretary general of the regional union of UGTT, Amara Abbassi, owned several of these sub-contracting companies, employing eight hundred workers. He was both a deputy and a member of the ruling party's Rassemblement Constitutionnel Democratique central committee (the RDC had replaced the Socialist Destour Party in 1989). He had been hired by the CPG as a trade union representative for a managerial position in the early 1990s.³³

By 2008, the Tunisian political system had “effectively confiscated all the rights of the population: the right to express its choices, the right to decide about its environment, and the right to decide about its future generations.”³⁴ As the Ben Ali regime became harsher and more predatory, Tunisians were ever less able to speak out and voice different opinions from the prevailing orthodoxy. Tunisia was hailed as a role model by international institutions. Together with Morocco, Jordan, and Egypt, it was seen as a possible alternative to past state-led import-substituting industrialization in the

³² Éric Gobe, “The Gafsa Mining Basin,” *L'Année du Maghreb V* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2009).

³³ Éric Gobe, “The Gafsa Mining Basin between Riots and a Social Movement: Meaning and Significance of a Protest Movement in Ben Ali's Tunisia,” working paper, January 2010, HAL archives-ouvertes, 6, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/hals-00557826>.

³⁴ Walid Belhadj Amor, “Can Southern Tunisia Draw Profit from its Phosphates?” in *Transitions in North Africa in Times of Scarcity: Finance, Employment, Energy and Food*, ed. Francesc Baida i Dalmases, seminar papers by CIDOB and OCP, November 11-12, 2012, Barcelona, (CIDOB: Barcelona, 2013).

Middle East.³⁵ The cheerleading by the World Bank and western aid donors of the Tunisian “example” made it even more difficult for the periphery to articulate its demands, as Gilbert Achcar has pointed out.³⁶ Only in recent years, the Bank has modified its stance. A policy research paper published three years after Ben Ali’s fall noted, “The World Economic Forum repeatedly ranked Tunisia as the most competitive economy in Africa, and the IMF as well as The World Bank heralded Tunisia as a role model for other developing countries. Yet the Tunisian model had serious flaws; unemployment and corruption were high over the period and contributed to Ben Ali’s downfall.”³⁷

The Politics of Rural Neglect

The liberalization policies of the Ben Ali era happened in a broader context of rural neglect and wealth stratification along geographical lines. The eleven provinces of inland Tunisia account for seventy percent of the country’s landmass and one-third of Tunisia’s ten million population. They hold fifty percent of the country’s oil, gas and water resources, support seventy percent of durum wheat production, and fifty percent of olive oil and fruit output.³⁸ Yet these regions are disadvantaged, average income is only one-third of the national average, and their inhabitants have accumulated very little capital since independence. Youth either despair or are driven away, eighty percent of internal labor migrants are coming from the hinterland. Even the local elites have moved

³⁵ Pfeifer, “How Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan and even Egypt became IMF ‘Success Stories’ in the 1990s;” El-Said and Harrigan, “Economic Reform, Social Welfare, and Instability.”

³⁶ Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* (London: Saqi Books, 2013).

³⁷ Bob Rijkers, Caroline Freund, and Antonio Nucifora, “All in the Family, State Capture in Tunisia,” (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2014); World Bank, “The Unfinished Revolution: Bringing Opportunity, Good Jobs, and Greater Wealth to All Tunisians,” (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2014).

³⁸ Kais Daly, “Quels mécanismes de relance pour le développement régional?” *Forum Atuge* (Association Tunisiennes des Grandes Ecoles), Tunis, September 18, 2014. As a former CEO of CPG and GCT, the author is well acquainted with the issues; the statistics are drawn from this conference paper.

to the coastal towns, which has hollowed out regional decision-making capacity and reduced the weight of the periphery in national political processes even further.³⁹

The development strategy of the regime prioritized tourism and offshore manufacturing along the coast, which enjoyed privileged access to finance.⁴⁰ Many hotel projects have been disguised land and property speculation. The result of such cronyism is a debt hangover of the tourist sector that has increased the cost of credit to every other sector, which is particularly discouraging for small- and medium-size enterprises; bad loans amount to 20–24% of GDP and Tunisia ranks 96th among 103 countries worldwide for nonperforming loans.⁴¹ Yet a reform of the Tunisian banking system is impeded by the strength of the tourist lobby. The tourism sector was used for decades to burnish the image of “an open country” and that of Ben Ali as a benevolent dictator.⁴² No government dares to shut down any state bank behemoth, force speculators to take their losses, and redirect the funds to the eleven poorer provinces. Half of the country’s hotels are closed, but the hotel lobby carries a lot of weight.

In contrast, nobody advocates for the hinterland. Over the past twenty years, no effort has been made to set up a regional bank, promote irrigation, build a cement plant, or set up teleworking. International phosphate prices spiked almost tenfold in 2007–2008 before falling back to levels that were much reduced, but still well above long-term

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Waleed Hazbun offers an in-depth analysis of how the tourist sector hijacked the economy and was used by Ben Ali to buttress the image of Tunisia as an open country in “Images of Openness, Spaces of Control: The Politics of Tourism Development in Tunisia,” *Arab Studies Journal* 15/16, no. 1/2 (2007/2008): 11-35; Abderrazak Lejri, “Les hoteliers et la prédation de l’argent public,” *Kapitalis* 26 (2015).

⁴¹ Mahmoud Ben Romdhane provides one of the most thorough analyses of the country’s economy over half a century in “Tunisie, Etat, Economie et Societé,” (Tunis: Sud Editions, 2011); see page 190 for an analysis of the banking system. Habib Karaouli, CEO of Banque d’Affaires de Tunisie, “Redimensionner l’apport des banques et des assurances,” *La Presse*, May 28, 2014; and “Réformer nécessite une vision stratégique jusque-là absente,” *L’Economiste Maghrébin*, April 30, 2015, <http://www.leconomistemaghrebin.com/2015/04/30/reformer-necessite-une-vision-strategique-jusque-la-absente/>. A respected banker, he is not shy to criticise his country’s economic failings. Francis Ghilès, “Tunisia’s Dangerous Drift,” *OpenDemocracy*, July 1, 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/francis-ghil%C3%A8s/tunisia-s-dangerous-drift>.

⁴² Hazbun, “Images of Openness.”

averages.⁴³ This sent profits of CPG and GCT soaring, but few of these profits were re-invested in a region where the rates of literacy and the number of young people going to university were among the lowest in Tunisia. Tunis never stopped promising investment to alleviate the rising rate of unemployment, which reached 38.5 percent in some mining towns, but nothing ever came of such talk.⁴⁴ Nor has anything been done since the revolt of 2011; the problem is very deeply structural, not just the offspring of one particular government or regime.

This leaves the people of the region, especially its youth, with few options. They can either migrate, move into the informal sector or they can join the smuggling networks of the region, which have become a serious challenge to the authority of the state and a threat to its security. The mining towns of Metlaoui, Moulares, Oum Laarayes, and Redeyef, lie close to the country's southwestern border with Algeria, a region which has since the downfall of Ben Ali and Gaddafi seen both a boom and a diversification in smuggling. To cheaper (subsidized) Algerian coffee and sugar, have been added petrol (also subsidized) and cannabis. Worse, the collapse of state authority in Libya following the civil war and fall of the *ancien régime* there have opened the gates to a flow of modern weapons, synthetic drugs, and manufactured goods from Asia that are pushing Tunisian industries out of business. Until 2011, smugglers were known to the boarder police who turned a blind eye as this activity provided desperately-needed employment to younger people. Today's gangs running this trade are heavily armed, equipped with four-wheel drives, and communicate by satellite telephones. Some mutate from smugglers to Islamist rebels all the more easily as tribal and family connections bestride Tunisia's frontiers with both its neighbors. The security threat they pose to the state—as

⁴³ Indexmundi, Rock Phosphate Monthly Price, <http://www.indexmundi.com/commodities/?commodity=rock-phosphate&months=180>.

⁴⁴ Gobe, "The Gafsa Mining Basin."

witnessed when they attacked the town of Ben Guerdane close to the Libyan boarder in March 2016—is far more serious than that posed by the smugglers of old.⁴⁵

The Tunisian armed forces, strongly supported by the watchful and well-resourced Algerian army, are engaged in a tough fight against hard-line *salafi* groups, which have dug into the Jebel Chambi Mountains north of Gafsa. The situation is even more fraught around Medenine on Tunisia's boarder with Libya, which was closed in November 2015 following a terrorist attack in Tunis. This black economy presents a challenge to the traditional power of Tunis as many local people in these traditionally poor regions are determined to get their own back on what they consider as decades of neglect by the richer north and coastal towns.

The Politics of the Periphery and the UGTT

Trade unions have been stepchildren of political economy analysis in the Middle East, yet in some countries, such as Egypt and Tunisia, they have carried considerable weight in political contestation, either as corporatized institutions with a degree to maneuver or in the form of independent protest movements when the corporatized institutions have not been able to channel and suppress discontent.⁴⁶ The UGTT has played a key role in Tunisian politics since it was founded in 1949, a few years before independence. Trade

⁴⁵ On the changing nature of smuggling and security at the frontiers see International Crisis Group, "La Tunisie des Frontières: jihad et contrebande," *Rapport Moyen Orient/Afrique du Nord* 148, November 28, 2013; Francis Ghilès "Tunisia Should escape becoming a bazaar economy," *Notes Internacionales* 82, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB) and "Las Fronteras norteafricanas," *La Vanguardia*, January 27, 2014.

⁴⁶ Marsha Pripstein Posusney, *Labor and the State in Egypt: Workers, Unions, and Economic Restructuring* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Joel Beinin and Marie Duboc, "'A Workers' Social Movement on the Margin of the Global Neoliberal Order, Egypt 2004-2012,'" in *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Joel Beinin and Frédéric Vairel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 205-27; Eckart Woertz, "Die Krise Der Arbeitsgesellschaft als Krise von Gewerkschaften: Die unabhängige Gewerkschaftsbewegung in Ägypten," (PhD thesis, University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, 1999); Ahmad and Schaar, "M'hamed Ali and the Tunisian Labour Movement;" Joel Beinin, "Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East," in *The Contemporary Middle East 2*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam, and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882-1954* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Joel Beinin, *Workers and Thieves: Labor Movements and Popular Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

union activists were closely involved with Tunisian nationalism.⁴⁷ Tunisia has the second oldest trade union movement in Africa, which boasts more than 500,000 members today and has acted either in unison or in competition with the Neo Destour Party and its renamed successor parties, which dominated Tunisian politics from the 1930s until 2011.⁴⁸

UGTT Secretary General, Ferhat Hached, was murdered in 1952 by the French right-wing Main Rouge underground special forces during the fight for independence. Since 1956, the UGTT has held an ambivalent position with regard to social conflicts in Tunisia. On the one hand, it has acted as the strong arm of authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, it channels workers' demands for better working conditions and higher salaries. Miners have been among its key constituents, along with teachers, dockers, and railway workers. Many leaders of the UGTT hail from the Gafsa region. In many ways it has represented a labor aristocracy of steadily employed workers, but never farm workers or part-time workers, whose ranks have grown steadily and who represent a majority of the working class today. In the mining basin, where unemployment rates have been about twice the national average, this has resulted in UGTT losing credibility and authority. The informal sector represents about half of Tunisia's economic activity. Those who work in it neither articulate their demands as a group nor pay taxes.⁴⁹

UGTT's relation with the ruling PSD—and from 1989 the RCD Party—has fluctuated between co-optation and contestation. Leading UGTT officials have been members of the ruling party and of parliament, and its higher ranks were offered opportunities to participate in the crony capitalism of the Ben Ali era. Until the revolution of 2011, the UGTT also enjoyed the endowment with captive membership fees that came

⁴⁷ Ahmad and Schaar, "M'hamed Ali and the Tunisian Labour Movement."

⁴⁸ In 1964 it was renamed the Socialist Destour Party (PSD), and in 1989 the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD).

⁴⁹ Francis Ghilès, "Something is Rotten in the State of Tunisia," *Notes Internacionals* 139 (Barcelona: CIDOB, January 2016).

with the legally-stipulated monopoly of the organization as a single trade union. The UGTT had been more autonomous before the 1980s and even led a general strike in 1978. Its local sections were more willing to articulate local grievances, whereas the headquarters in Tunis and its senior members were far more co-opted into the power structure. Yet local UGTT structures had only limited room to maneuver and could not, for instance, declare strikes by themselves, as this would have contradicted the union's internal procedures and hierarchy. UGTT has not contributed much to the debate on regional development and how to develop the periphery. That debate has only opened up since the fall of Ben Ali, but no government since has dared to put the issue center stage, where it belongs.

In the 1970s, as the populist authoritarianism of Tunisia's ISI period retreated and left its beneficiaries in the rain, the working class started to call for political reforms. The UGTT organized rank and file opposition in 1969, already gaining strength in the early 1970s. To appease the UGTT and bring it back into the government's fold, a new collective bargaining system was introduced in 1973 that made the UGTT an equal partner alongside the Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat (UTICA), and the state. The new arrangement led to higher wages and provided a number of additional benefits and bonuses, but failed to achieve the social peace the government was hoping for as social inequality rose.⁵⁰

In January 1978, the first general strike since independence resulted in riots in Tunis, which were brutally repressed by the army. The UGTT played an active role in this revolt, led by its charismatic leader, Habib Achour, who openly challenged the power of Bourguiba. At the same time, the role of Islamist opposition movements grew. By 1981, the umbrella organization Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique was established, which

⁵⁰ Stephen J. King, "Structural Adjustment and Rural Poverty in Tunisia," *Middle East Report* 210 (1999); King, *Liberalization Against Democracy*.

changed its name to the Ennahda Party in 1989. Yet the Islamists were still marginal to national politics in the 1970s and lacked the power of the UGTT and the students' organizations in terms of mobilization. To gain ground they sought common cause with the unions in 1978 and added a social agenda of labor and social rights to their demands, which hitherto had mainly focused on complaints about so-called anti-Islamic policies of the government. The ousting of the charismatic head of UGTT, Habib Achour, in 1978 made UGTT more compliant to the government. Its agenda for democratization was put on the back burner. By 1984, the UGTT had been tamed. It did not play a prominent role in bread riots during that year, which occurred after the government had doubled the price of bread. The riots started in an oasis south of the mining region in late December and spread through the Gafsa province further north before engulfing the coast and Tunis. It resulted in the measure being cancelled within a matter of days.

By the late 1980s, Islamists were the dominant opposition movement. Escalating tensions brought the country to the brink of civil war in 1987 and led to the disposal of President Bourguiba in a bloodless coup. The new head of state, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, announced a "new era" agenda that ostensibly favoured democratic transition. Islamists were the main challenge to the rebranded ruling party, the RCD. They took fourteen percent of the nationwide vote in highly managed elections in 1989.⁵¹ In large cities their support was even higher, reaching twenty-five percent and more according to estimates.⁵² Meanwhile, the economic crisis and neo-liberal reform weakened the UGTT. By 1989, it had dropped its democratization agenda and acquiesced to a new set of corporatist institutions in which it participated.⁵³ Major agreements with the UTICA were signed in

⁵¹ Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁵² King, *Liberalization Against Democracy*, 32.

⁵³ Salah Hamzaoui "Champs politique et syndicalisme en Tunisie," *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord* 38 (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1999): 369-80; Sadri Khiari "Reclassements et recompositions au sein de la bureaucratie syndicale depuis l'indépendance. La place de l'UGTT dans le système politique tunisien," (Paris: Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales, Le Kiosque, 2000).

1990 and 1992.⁵⁴ Authoritarianism hardened and alignment of the UGTT with government politics prevented the formation of socialist or social democratic parties that could have provided alternatives to the ruling party and challenge it in a multiparty system.⁵⁵

As the Ben Ali regime got harsher, public discussion of economic and social issues became more and more difficult. The UGTT leadership increasingly toed the line. Tunisia was hailed internationally as the success story in Africa and the Arab world. The regime meanwhile was becoming increasingly predatory, even as living standards for poorer Tunisians were beginning to fray. By 2008, when the mining region revolted, there were the steadily-employed workers who formed a labor aristocracy, sub-contracted workers, and a growing mass of unemployed; the two latter categories were in no way represented by the UGTT.⁵⁶

The Revolt of the Phosphate Basin in 2008

The phosphate-mining basin rose in revolt against the regime in January 2008, protesting corruption, cronyism, and lack of job opportunities. In contrast to 1984 and 2010, the revolt did not spread to other regions and the government was successful in preventing media coverage of the events. It was put down with brute force after six months of an increasingly bitter confrontation between local inhabitants and the security forces. The background of this revolt and the forms it took bare retelling because the challenges they threw up have not been answered.

⁵⁴ King, *Liberalization Against Democracy*, 5, 34; Christopher Alexander, "Labour Code Reform in Tunisia," *Mediterranean Politics* 6, no. 2 (2001).

⁵⁵ Christopher Alexander, "Authoritarianism and Civil Society in Tunisia."

⁵⁶ Gobe, "The Gafsa Mining Basin;" Larbi Chouika and Vincent Geisser, "Retour sur la révolte du bassin minier. Les cinq leçons politiques d'un conflit social inédit," *L'Année du Maghreb VI* (2010), <https://anneemaghreb.revues.org/923>; Allal Amin, "Réformes néolibérales, clientélismes et protestations en situation autoritaire. Les mouvements contestataires dans le bassin minier de Gafsa en Tunisie (2008)," *Politique Africaine* 117 (2010); Amroussia Ammar, "Le soulèvement des habitants du bassin minier: un premier bilan," (report published by the Parti communiste des ouvriers tunisiens), January 12, 2009, <http://www.inprecor.fr/article-Tunisie-Le%20soul%20vement%20des%20habitants%20du%20bassin%20minier.%20Un%20premier%20bilan?id=633>.

By the turn of the century, young Tunisians were finding it ever harder to get jobs. The unemployment rate ballooned in the three central Maghreb countries from the mid-1980s, and in Tunisia the problem was exacerbated by regional disparities for which the mining basin offered a perfect illustration. The indicators of poverty compiled by World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were “highly dubious,” according to the Arab Human Development Report 2003, the second in a series published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). It unpicked the differences in methodology, which had led the World Bank to underestimate levels of poverty, pointing to high levels of social exclusion and wealth inequality, and poor services despite ostensibly modest levels of income inequality.⁵⁷

Conspicuous consumption was abounding. Tunisia is a small country and any visitor to Tunis or the coastal resorts of Sousse and Hammamet could hardly miss the behavior of the Tunisian elites, whose new villas got bigger by the year. The arrogant behavior of the presidential family made matters worse, the sheer vulgarity of the Ben Ali clan lifestyle contrasting vividly with the traditions of the older ruling elites of Sfax and Tunis. As new plants and hotels in the coastal region and Tunis mushroomed and provided jobs there, younger people in the phosphate basin and the western uplands of Le Kef and Jendouba were finding it impossible to gain employment unless they migrated. In the mining area, frustration was further fuelled by the sharp rise in phosphate prices in 2007–2008, where the benefits did not seem to trickle down to the general population.⁵⁸ It is hardly surprising in such circumstances that the feeling of being left behind rose in a region where average unemployment rates were stuck between 26.7% and 38.5%.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ United Nations Development Programme, “Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society,” (New York: UNDP, 2003) and “Arab Human Development Report 2009: Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries,” (New York: UNDP, 2009).

⁵⁸ Mahmoud Ben Romdane and Ali Kadel, “Le bassin minier de Gafsa: le désespoir sous les trésors,” *Attariq Al Jadid*, June 8, 2008, <http://attariq.org/spip.php?article60>.

⁵⁹ Gobe, “The Gafsa Mining Basin,” 5.

Frustration reached a boiling point in January 2008, aggravated by the divisions between the haves and have-nots. The CPG was by then run by a man very close to the ruling Ben Ali family, Abdelhafidh Nessiri, who initiated a policy of early retirement among senior cadres and engineers—to the utter disbelief of all his predecessors.

The trigger of the revolt was the announcement on January 5, 2008, of the result of a hiring contest for 380 workers, technicians, and managerial staff by the CPG, which was perceived to be all the more unfair as there had been no hiring for six years, a result of CPG's policy of non-replacement of those who were retiring.⁶⁰ Starting in 1986, an agreement between the managers of the CPG and the regional leadership of UGTT had drawn up the rules, which were to preside over the hiring of new staff. In 1993 it was decided that the quota of twenty percent of all new jobs to early-retired workers would be reserved for young people from the mining towns. By 2000, this system had degenerated as the regional UGTT leader Amara Abassi and other local union leaders favored their own families. By 2008, the population could stand the system no more.⁶¹

The following day, four unemployed graduates started a hunger strike in Redeyef. They belonged to the new Regional Committee of Unemployed Graduates (RCUG) that was copied from similar committees set up in Tunisia and gained support among some UGTT members as well.⁶² Their hunger strike was followed the next day by a march and a sit-in in front of the CPG headquarters by hundreds of high school students and unemployed people. Similar marches took place in Moulaires during which the demonstrators proclaimed their right to work and denounced corruption. There was no repression from the security forces for three months, but as hunger strikes spread, a

⁶⁰ Ibid, 7.

⁶¹ For an excellent documentary film about the 2008 phosphate riots see Nomadis Images, *Maudit soit le phosphate*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=foZUwchinpY>; Karine Gantin and Omayya Seddik, "Revolte du 'people des mines' en Tunisie," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, July 2008. <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2008/07/GANTIN/16061>.

⁶² Abdelmajid Haouachi, "Gafsa: les raisons de la colère," *Réalités* 1153, January 31, 2008.

negotiating committee headed by Adnan el Hajji was set up. He was a primary school teacher and a UGTT member, but untainted by the bad reputation of the local UGTT mining officials who were perceived as corrupt because they sought to get members of their families recruited on a privileged basis by the CPG, regardless of their qualifications. El Hajji tried to get a dialogue started with the local sous-préfet. In other mining towns such as M'dhila, protests turned violent as tires were burned. An attempt was made to set fire to a service company belonging to UGTT leader Amrane Abassi. The tracks of the phosphate railway were torn up and trucks transporting ore were stopped.⁶³ As the crisis worsened, the local branch of the ruling RCD Party attempted to divide the protesters by playing on tribal allegiance, while Adnan el Hajji denounced the nepotism of the local UGTT and RCD leadership. The government cracked down on protests. As the movement gained momentum, shopkeepers and local doctors joined the strike. This prompted renewed arrests by the police, among them people who had become emblematic in the protests such as Adnan el Hajji and some of the members of the RCUG.

Faced with rising tension, the arrival of unemployed protesters from outside the mining region and the support of the Tunisian League of Human Rights (TLHR), the police retired from the center of the towns. Every time they tried to come back and intervene to disperse demonstrators, sheer numbers overwhelmed them. Women played a prominent role in this. They were present in the street demonstrations and among the tents set up outside the headquarters of the CPG:

“The Eleven Widows” tent was to become a symbol of the movement. This tent, set up by the wives of former CPG workers who had died following a work accident, became the heart of the various tent camps. They would relentlessly demand that their children be hired by the CPG.⁶⁴

⁶³ Kais Daly, former CEO of CPG and GCT, interview by Francis Ghilès, Tunis, November 25, 2015.

⁶⁴ Gobe, “The Gafsa Mining Basin,” 10.

Meanwhile, production at the mines and the washing plant were brought to a standstill and the railway line was blocked. The death of a young demonstrator by electrocution from the electric generator in the village of Tabbedit provoked revulsion and another wave of violence. Throughout June and July, the authorities regained control, but at the cost of many wounded and one demonstrator killed. A wave of arrests put dozens of leaders, not least from the Committees of Unemployed Graduates, behind bars. Heavy sentences fell on the emblematic leaders of the revolt at a trial in December 2008.⁶⁵

But as they were waving the stick, “the authorities were also waving the carrot: in order to calm the tension, President Ben Ali dismissed the governor of Gafsa and the Director General of the CPG.”⁶⁶ The president committed himself to allocate “a percentage of the income on the export of phosphate towards the construction of a new cement factory and new infrastructures.”⁶⁷ He promised to accelerate small projects linked to cleaning up the environment and hire young graduates to work on the municipal construction sites. Local people, however, felt these were empty promises.

The significance of six months of unprecedented social and labor mobilization made the position of the national and regional leadership of UGTT untenable. The union’s leadership in Tunis did not intervene with events in the mining area that were a revolt against the system that UGTT was part of. UGTT was further discredited because the education, health, and postal sections of the trade union movement remained silent. Worse, the education section of UGTT took Adnan El Hajji’s name off their list, thus easing the moves to prosecute him. Guilty silence was the only reaction of UGTT

⁶⁵ Chouika and Gobe, “La Tunisie entre la ‘révolte du bassin minier de Gafsa.’”

⁶⁶ Gobe, “The Gafsa Mining Basin,” 16.

⁶⁷ Carole Vann, “Maghreb. La région qui fait du pays le 4e producteur mondial de phosphate, est l’une des plus déshéritées du pays,” *Le Temps*, October 16, 2008, quoted in Gobe, “The Gafsa Mining Basin,” 16, see also

http://espace.tunisie.over-blog.com/pages/En_Tunisie_les_emeutes_du_bassin_minier_de_Gafsa_se_poursuivent_malgre_la_repression-791953.html.

headquarters to what were unprecedented events. The TLHR had tried to help, but the police throughout the country mercilessly harassed its members. The conflict, however, had not spread to other poor regions in Tunisia and it was hardly reported in the international media—the few exceptions being in France, not least among certain Tunisian immigrant associations. The result was that many observers misread its importance for the future of the country. Few saw it as the red warning light of further trouble to come.

Among the political conclusions, which could be drawn from these events, three stand out. First, the regime reacted by tightening the security screws ever more, which was a sign of weakness rather than strength; second, future change would come from the bottom, i.e. popular revolt; third, the internal contradictions of UGTT could act as a paradoxical lightening rod to social protest.⁶⁸

The unprecedented crisis in the mining basin underlined the limits of the corrupt patronage system. The World Bank failed to appreciate to what extent the ruling family had captured the “economic rent” as it recognized in two unusually frank reports published in 2014.⁶⁹ In the private words of one senior EIB official who asked not to be mentioned, and who knew Tunisia well, “we Europeans, not least the French, were happy to have stability and cared little for the political cost.”⁷⁰ Regional security after 9/11 was the overriding consideration, even if it came at the cost of being accomplice to a ruling clan which was ever more predatory of Tunisia’s wealth.

Back in the capital, no one alerted an ageing president, who by then was more interested in sharing Tunisian spoils among his large clan than worrying about the

⁶⁸ Larbi Chouika and Vincent Geisser, “A Reading of the Revolt in the Gafsa Mining Basin: The Five Policy Lessons of a Unique Social Conflict,” *L’Année du Maghreb VI* (2010): 415-26; Ammar Amroussi, “Le Soulèvement des habitants du bassin minier.”

⁶⁹ Rijkers, Freund, and Nucifora, “All in the Family;” World Bank, “The Unfinished Revolution.” Neither report analyzes the phosphate and fertilizer sector.

⁷⁰ Conversation with EIB executive, interviewed by Francis Ghilès, October 11, 2015, Paris.

mounting crisis in the mining area. Western leaders and members of international donor institutions averted their eyes from the looming symptoms of trouble and seldom travelled to the poorer regions.⁷¹

The Legacy of Tunisia's Revolt and the Role of the UGTT

The stage was set for an explosion, yet in the twenty-eight months before Bouazizi's suicide in 2010, troubles were limited to minor riots by unemployed graduates in La Shkirra and Ben Guerdane, but a palpable sense of fear gripped Tunisia's middle class. The situation blew up on December 17, 2010, in Sidi Bouzid after Bouazizi's self-immolation, and spread like wildfire through the poorer regions of Tunisia. Finally protests engulfed the capital at the end of the first week of January 2011. It took four weeks for the "political component of the power elite, civilian and police officials alike, as well as members of the ex-dictator's immediate entourage in the power elite's capitalist component . . . to be sacrificed."⁷² The dictator had become too great a liability and was abandoned by the power elite. This was a revolution *in*, not *of*, the system. Because there was no outside factor, nor Islamist one for that matter, the US did not interfere. Ennahda, the political party vehicle of Tunisia's Islamic Movement, only entered the picture after the fact, and when it came to power it rather ensured a piece of the pie for its clientele in terms of public sector employment and subcontracts than replacing the old elites. The oldest ally, France, was caught completely unaware. As long-standing grievances bubbled up and strikes spread, production of phosphates more than halved in 2011 and exports of phosphoric acid and fertilizers declined.⁷³ Five years later, strikes continue to bedevil the mining region north of Gafsa centred on the mining

⁷¹ Interviews with former senior Tunisian officials and western diplomats, interview by Francis Ghilès, Paris and Tunis, October to December 2015.

⁷² Achcar, "The People Want," 180; Francis Ghilès, "Una prisión al aire libre: el legado de Ben Ali," *El País*, January 15, 2011, http://elpais.com/autor/francis_ghiles/a.

⁷³ Institut National de la Statistique, Tunis, <http://www.ins.tn/fr/themes/industrie#sub-385>; interviews with Tunisian mining officials, interview by Francis Ghilès, Tunis, May 24, 2016.

town of Metlaoui. The government has failed to come up with a bold strategy to deal with Tunisia's many economic and social problems, in particular those of the mining basin.

UGTT for its part has played a much more important role politically since the fall of Ben Ali. Its relations with the Islamist Ennahda-led government, which came to power after the first free elections held in the country in December 2011, went from bad to worse. In February 2012, thousands of union members protested the Islamists' tactic of having truckloads of rubbish dumped in front of UGTT branches in an attempt to stop it from protesting against deteriorating social and economic conditions.⁷⁴ Trouble was brewing on December 4, 2012, when Ennahda militias (called the *Comités de Protection de la Révolution*) attacked the UGTT headquarters at Place Mohammed Ali in the heart of the capital as the union was celebrating the anniversary of the death of its founder, Ferhat Hached. This was symbolic of a broader incapacity of the Islamists to dialogue with key sections of civil society. A further escalation happened in 2013 when jihadist militants assassinated two prominent left-wing Members of Parliament.

UGTT and its influential leader Houcine Abassi also had to contend with the endless strikes, which followed in the wake of the fall of Ben Ali. Ever since then, local UGTT leaders have gained more power and often pay scant attention to headquarters, once again exposing the internal contradictions of the union. Many factory owners have accused it of making excessive wage claims in what has been a steadily worsening economic climate, when a number of foreign investors have closed down their operations in Tunis.⁷⁵ The UGTT also played a major role in the country's democratic transition. In the summer of 2013, it joined forces with three other organizations, the TLHR, the Tunisian Order of Lawyers and the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade, and

⁷⁴ Francis Ghilès, "Secular Social Movements Confront Radical Temptations," *Notes Internacionals* (Barcelona: CIDOB, 2012).

⁷⁵ Interviews with state officials and private businessmen, interview by Francis Ghilès Tunis, November and December 2015.

Handicrafts (UTICA) to broker a deal between the government and the opposition coalition Nidaa Tunes, at a time when Tunisia looked as if it might descend into civil war. The Quartet, as it came to be known by the time it was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015, managed to convince the government to step down in December 2013 and make way for a technocratic administration that ran the country in the run-up to its first free presidential and second free general elections in the autumn of 2014. The leader of Nidaa Tunes, Beji Caid Essebsi won against the incumbent interim president Moncef Marzouki, and his party won more seats than Ennahdha a few weeks later in the general elections. Tunisia thus preserved its options towards establishing a lasting democracy.

Conclusion and Outlook

Five years after the revolt, the country's economy has stalled; the income from two of its most important economic engines—tourism and phosphates—has fallen. The second government, led by Habib Essid since January 2015, has failed to address some of the key economic challenges Tunisia confronts, but it has improved overall security. Facing up to the complex mix of problems in the phosphate and fertilizer industries is arguably a priority for the government. Before recent production falls, phosphates contributed four percent of GDP and ten percent of Tunisia's exports in 2010.⁷⁶ In Gabes, its importance for employment cannot be understated, as it accounts for 8–12 percent of salaried jobs in various parts of the province.⁷⁷ As wages are vastly higher than in other sectors of the region, the contribution to livelihoods is even higher.

Modernizing the industry is a multifaceted challenge that faces commercial, social, and environmental exigencies that can be mutually exclusive. First, real managerial skill must be brought in and allowed to get on with running a large industry.

⁷⁶ Oxford Business Group, "Uneven Growth in Tunisia's Industrial Sector Remains a Challenge," 2016, <http://www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com/overview/forging-ahead-uneven-growth-industry-subsectors-remains-challenge>.

⁷⁷ Communication with a Tunisian mining official, interview by Francis Ghilès May 24, 2016.

Those who run the GCT and the CPG are beholden to interference by the central government and behave more like civil servants at the beck and call of the Minister of Mines than free managers of an important industry. Second, economic development and jobs within or outside the mining industry need to be part of the process as the social malaise of the hinterland continues and the absorption capacity of the coast to host labor migrants from the interior is limited for lack of opportunities and housing. Third, the long-standing environmental grievances of the phosphate basin must be addressed. That will cost money—615 million Tunisian Dinar are budgeted for depollution of the GCT's plants by 2020, according to the Ministry of Mines.⁷⁸ The fallout from pollution needs to be dealt with in a much more up-front fashion. Agricultural land has been damaged. Date palms are affected by fluoride emissions that seep into the water system. In the coastal towns of Sfax, La Skhirra, and Gabes, gypsum deposits in the shallow seawaters destroyed the fishing industry.⁷⁹ In Sfax, Tunisia's second largest city, the pollution has affected the health of many. Its inhabitants have asked for compensation from the state and are desperate to see the out-dated phosphoric acid plant of SIAPE, a subsidiary of GCT, replaced by more modern plants in the vicinity that are being built in cooperation with Indian joint-venture partners. Built in 1952, the SIAPE plant has polluted parts of the city and eighteen kilometers of coastline. Its mere presence is delaying many other investment projects. Pollution in Gabes, which is home to one of the four fertilizer plants in Tunisia, has destroyed the oasis, the once thriving fishing industry, and agriculture. In damning articles on the legacy of pollution and ill health in Gabes, Eric Goldstein of

⁷⁸ Interview with Mongi Marzoug, Minister of Mines and Energy, and his assistant, interviewed by Francis Ghilès, Tunis, May 24, 2016.

⁷⁹ Eric Goldstein, "Tunisia's Legacy of Pollution Confronts Democratic Politics," *OpenDemocracy*, May 23, 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/eric-goldstein/tunisia%E2%80%99s-legacy-of-pollution-confronts-democratic-politics.s>.

Human Rights Watch and Tunisian journalist Moez Jemai reported that the GCT continues to dump 13,000 tons of phosphogypsum into the Mediterranean every day.⁸⁰

Most of Tunisia's phosphoric acid and fertilizers are exported and serve as a precious source of hard currency for a troubled economy. Export income has been cut in half by the inability of the Tunisian government to bring the mines back to work and production back to the levels it reached on the eve of the revolt. In such a context, talk of developing new phosphate seams a classic case of putting the cart before the horse. Joint ventures could be brought in, but only after the legal framework of CPG and GCT with the government are modernized, and the companies put in the hands of a strong CEO and a board comprised of a more diversified and experienced group of people than mere civil servants.

Tunisia has fallen behind its competitor Morocco, which has more reserves and produces far greater quantities of ore; the Office Chérifien des Phosphates (OCP) is the top exporter of ore in the world today. Over the past ten years the percentage of ore that it transforms into phosphoric acid, Diammonium Phosphate (DP) , and Trisodium Phosphate (TSP), has nearly doubled, from 45% to 85%.⁸¹ It has overhauled its management methods, bringing in a number of US advisers. It has been able to do this because it has had only one CEO in the last decade who reports directly to the king. In Tunisia, CEOs come and go—four in the last five years, in a game of musical chairs—which never allows any single one of them to implement a long-term strategy.

⁸⁰ Ibid.; and Moez Jemai, "Fishermen en Route for Europe," November 27, 2015, <http://www.correspondents.org/node/7136>; Sam Kimball, "Phosphate Production Poisoning Tunisian City," *Al Monitor*, January 22, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/01/tunisia-gabes-mineral-production-employment-pollution.html>.

⁸¹ Pascal Croset, *L'ambition au coeur de la transformation. Une leçon de management venue du Sud* (Paris: Dunod, 2012); Patricia Defever-Kapferer and Tristan Gaston-Breton, *OCP: En marche pour L'avenir* (Chesnay and Casablanca: Éditions de marque, 2012).

The boards of the two companies offer a contrasting view of the two countries: in Morocco, OCP's board includes high-level representatives of different ministries, not least Foreign Affairs, Industry, and Finance—in a way it is a powerful inter-ministerial steering committee chaired by a CEO whose international experience is considerable. Tunisia became ever more bureaucratised under Ben Ali, and the Prime Minister's office sought to control the higher echelons of the civil service ever more tightly. Those who sit on the board of the GPG and GCT are often second-tier civil servants who are rewarded for their due diligence. This state of affairs is not conducive to bold and quick decision-making, the essential ingredient of a modern company whose interests are international. Back in 2000, OCP faced challenges and lost money, while the smaller CPG and the GCT seemed more efficient. Matters took a turn for the worse when Ali Boukhris was forced out in the late 1980s. Instead of letting the CPG and the GCT be managed autonomously, government ministers started interfering. Five years after the fall of Ben Ali, Tunisian leaders are grappling with an economic and security situation that remains very difficult country-wide, especially in the mining basin and a company structure, which does not allow the two companies to be nimble international players.

In this debate, the Islamist Ennahdha Party, which is in coalition with the larger Nida Tunes, has little to contribute so far. Like other parties that are linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, Ennahdha has yet to elaborate any in-depth economic thinking that addresses the complex problems of a developing economy. Whatever the solution, there is general agreement that if the fracture between poorer and richer regions is not reduced, the next crisis risks becoming a revolution *of* the system, not just *in* the system. In focus-group interviews with Tunisians, jobs and economic development were the most important expectations of constitutional reform, right after a reform of the security

sector.⁸² Tunisia has a well-educated population, constitutional traditions, a sizable middle-class and some industrial culture.⁸³ It also has a demographic window of opportunity. Its youth bulge is petering out as fertility rates have fallen below replacement level, and at the same time it has a large young population entering the workforce. Successful transition to democracy can only be assured if the disenfranchised population in peripheral areas such as the mining basin gets a fairer deal and if past excesses of crony capitalism are not repeated.

⁸² Duncan Pickard, "Challenges to Legitimate Governance in Post-Revolution Tunisia," *The Journal of North African Studies* 16, no. 4 (2011); "Researching Arab Mediterranean Youth: Towards a New Social Contract," SAHWA, <http://www.sahwa.eu/SAHWA-PROJECT>.

⁸³ Clement M. Henry, "Algeria's Agonies: Oil Rent Effects in a Bunker State," *The Journal of North African Studies* 9, no. 2 (2004).