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# TRADE UNIONS AS A CIVIL SOCIETY ACTOR IN ALGERIA

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## About the Author

Fatiha Zamamouche is an Algerian researcher with a PhD in media and communication sciences. Her work originally focused on social and political transformations and their relationship with media in Algeria, expanding to the wider region from 2010. Fatiha is also interested in other aspects of Algerian society and current affairs, which she includes in her current work as a journalist in national and international media.

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Cover photo: Algeria - September 16, 2022: Che Guevara Boulevard Street Road, Wilaya headquarters building. (c) C.M.S

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# Introduction

While the unions did not explicitly champion political slogans, their participation in January 2011 short-lived protests carried latent political intentions. Since then, the social mobility in Algeria witnessed an ebb and flow, particularly under the leadership of independent unions, and more specifically in the sectors of education, healthcare, and public administration. These unions played a significant role in organizing strikes, a majority of which resulted in the fulfillment of professional demands related to wage increases, and other issues related to career advancement. They also maintained a noteworthy presence, primarily associated with tactical and protest-oriented activities.

Between 2012 and 2019, independent unions evolved into a compelling force of protest and a perceived threat to those in positions of authority. This led the authorities to swiftly constrain any expressions of protest or labor strikes. In turn, independent unions partially rejuvenated union activism and consolidated the legitimacy of unions amongst a working class that is new to demand-driven activism.<sup>1</sup> They successfully incorporated significant numbers of employees into their local and national structures, largely thanks to their efforts in enhancing the conditions of numerous professional segments by securing reasonable wage hikes. They operated independently from the General Union of Algerian Workers, which, although still in existence, exerted limited influence within these sectors and its role shifted more towards aligning itself with the strategies of the political regime and executing its agenda.

The widespread momentum witnessed in Algeria in 2019 prompted some figures in the political sphere to contemplate enacting legislation that would regulate political, media, and union freedoms.<sup>2</sup> Securing individual and collective freedoms, including union freedoms, relies on the genuine

independence of union activities.<sup>3</sup> This paper examines the state of unions in the context of the political openness experienced in Algeria in 1990, leading to the emergence of independent unions and their status in light of the new Union Organization Law of 2023. It also explores the civil society function undertaken by these unions, their capacity to confront significant challenges, and the effectiveness of union efforts in impacting change.

## 1. Unions as Civil Society Actors: From Openness to Restriction

Algeria's social and economic landscape has provided fertile ground for the emergence of great social disparities. Over the years, the country has witnessed waves of protests with varying demands, including those centered on social concerns. The protests, which emerged following 5 October 1988,<sup>4</sup> triggered a series of reforms, including the constitutional amendment of 23 February 1989, and the adoption of a multi-party political system through the Political Parties Law, enacted in July 1989. Article 40 of the law recognized

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3 Abdulaziz Rahabi, a diplomat and former Minister of Information, is one of the prominent national figures who took part in numerous seminars and meetings organized by the Coordination for Change during the Democratic Transition of 2014. He also actively participated in seminars related to the democratic transition in 2019.

4 Protests erupted in Algeria during the tenure of President Chadli Bendjedid (1979-1992). Citizens across various Algerian regions took to the streets, with some labeling it the "bread revolution" due to its emergence as a popular response to challenging socio-economic conditions, particularly following the plummeting oil prices in 1986. These demonstrations targeted state symbols and the headquarters of the ruling party, the "National Liberation Front." Subsequently, the army was deployed to quell the protesters, leading President Bendjedid to announce comprehensive reforms. For more detailed information, readers can refer to Nasser Djabi's publication, "Why was the Algerian Spring Delayed?" released by Shehab Publications in Algeria in 2012 (pp. 142-146). These events also marked the public manifestation of an underlying conflict within the Algerian government dating back to the early 1980s. Historians and politicians regard this period as a transition from one-party rule under the "National Liberation Front" to a more diverse political and media landscape. This transformation was formalized with the adoption of the initial pluralistic constitution on February 23, 1989. For a deeper exploration of this topic, readers can consult Mohamed Lounissi's book, "The Phenomenon of Political Violence in Algeria (1988-1999)," published by Dar El Hadab Publishing in Algeria in 2007 (pp. 165-178).

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1 Elias Mrabet, President of the National Union of Health Workers, stated in an exclusive interview in 2023: "Independent unions played a significant role in supporting the popular movement in 2019. They promptly and officially engaged with it during the meeting on February 28, 2019, which concluded with a statement issued on the same day. In this statement, the Confederation of Algerian Trade Unions (under establishment) expressed unwavering support for the movement, and encouraged its members to actively participate in its marches. This support came with an understanding regarding postponing and temporarily setting aside professional and social demands, as the top priority had become the nationwide popular demands."

2 See Mahmoud Belhimer, "Democratic Transition in Algeria", an unpublished doctoral thesis, Faculty of Political Science and International Relations, University of Algiers III, 2017.

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“the right to establish associations of a political nature.” However, during the security crisis that engulfed Algeria in the 1990s, the authorities refrained from legally recognizing unions, confining their activities to sectoral demands related to salary increases and better work conditions. It was not until the January 2011 protests, often referred to in Algerian media as the “oil and sugar events”,<sup>5</sup> that the unions engaged in protests and subsequently participated in various political meetings and initiatives.

These unions came to the forefront in 2014 when they openly opposed the extension of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s fourth term (1999-2019). However, their calls were quelled as Bouteflika continued his rule, prompting them to resort to strikes again. Tensions continued to simmer until Bouteflika announced his bid for a fifth presidential term in 2019, an announcement that ignited peaceful marches, with thousands of Algerians demanding his resignation. The unions played an active role in this movement, aligning their voice with that of the people.

Independent unions in Algeria actively participated in a series of coordination meetings alongside political parties and various civil society organizations to navigate the ongoing crisis as the protests continued. One of the most noteworthy gatherings was the “Dialogue Forum,” which took place on 6 July 2019, at “Ain al-Bunyan” in the Algerian capital to discuss strategies to address issues related to the representation of the popular movement, shaping its presence in the streets, and defining its demands, on the one hand. On the other hand, it also served to confront the policies of the then-existing authorities.

Independent unions also orchestrated protest movements in several provinces, particularly in industrial zones such as Oran in the western part of the country, Bejaia, Tizi Ouzou, Annaba, and Bouarreirij Tower in the east. These gatherings called strongly for the release of individuals who had been detained because of their involvement in protests. Masoud Boudiba, the national secretary in charge of information at the Independent National Council for Education, the largest union organization in Algeria’s education sector, stated, “The labor protest movement emerges within the framework of expressing support for the demands of the Algerian people, which have been articulated since February 2019 and rejects

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5 On January 5, 2011, Algeria experienced significant events, coinciding with the wave of what was referred to as the “Arab Spring,” a series of uprisings in various Arab countries. During this time, several Algerian cities, including the largest popular neighborhood in the capital, “Bab El Oued,” saw acts of vandalism and unrest. These actions were a response from various segments of the population to the government’s decision to increase prices for essential commodities, particularly oil and sugar. The violence that erupted resulted in the loss of six lives. For further details, readers can refer to the report of the Algerian Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry titled “The Scarcity and High Prices of Some Foodstuffs with Wide Consumption in the Algerian National Market,” presented to the National People’s Assembly in October 2011.

attempts to circumvent them by imposing solutions that lack consensus among all Algerians.” He emphasized that primary among these demands is the need to uphold political rights and remove restrictions on freedoms.<sup>6</sup>

Independent unions have thus actively engaged in political affairs, often aligning themselves with the demands of the political opposition and, in some cases, implicitly assuming the role of the opposition. This alignment was particularly notable given that many of their previous movements, predating the popular uprising, primarily focused on addressing social demands, with a key emphasis on improving professional and social conditions. However, the presence of some union representatives at the inaugural “Democratic Transition” symposiums in 2014 and 2016<sup>7</sup> served as clear evidence of their involvement in political activities. These symposiums convened a range of political and union actors, alongside prominent national figures, facilitating a dialogue that spanned from 2014 to 2017. The culmination of this dialogue was the pressing need to establish a democratic transition, mirroring similar processes in neighboring countries, and expanding the influence of unionists in democratic transition and political mobilization.

These developments are in harmony with the objectives of the unions calling for various social demands for better wages and the right to engage in union activities. This have often culminated in protests and strikes. Although both trade unions and non-trade union actors were able to evade the government’s grip during this period, some of them still hesitated to engage in social movements. While some of them eventually mobilized, their reluctance contributed to the sluggish pace of union activities, which often translated into nominal representation by a few unionists in the National People’s Assembly (the lower chamber of parliament), with some making frequent media appearances.

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6 Interview conducted as part of an extensive research project examining political and trade union activities in Algeria, marking the fourth anniversary of the popular movement in 2019. This interview took place on January 14, 2023.

7 On June 10, 2014, a symposium known as “Mazafran I” was organized by the “Follow-up and Consultation Authority of the Opposition.” The event featured the participation of several political parties and prominent national figures who were part of a coalition established in 2013. The coalition’s primary objective was to advocate for a peaceful and orderly transition of power in Algeria.

From this event emerged the “Mazafran” document, which outlined key demands for a “democratic transition in the country, the separation of powers, the reform of the judiciary, and the establishment of an independent body to oversee presidential elections.” <https://youtu.be/pafadKcBHTg> Furthermore, during the “Mazafran II” symposium on March 30, 2016, various opposition forces participated under the banner of the “Coordination of Freedoms and Democratic Transition.” The symposium concluded with a renewed call for a “smooth and peaceful” democratic transition in Algeria and reiterated the demand for the creation of an independent body responsible for organizing elections to ensure their transparency and integrity.

## Dynamics of Engagement and Disengagement with Authority

In 2019, Algeria witnessed waves of mass mobilization, marked by increased engagement with the electoral process. This phenomenon unfolded in two consecutive phases: first, on 4 April, following the resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika on 2 April; and second, when the Algerian authorities attempted to hold presidential elections on 4 July. These elections were ultimately canceled due to the persistent resistance from protesters across the country and the notable abstention of prominent political and national figures from entering the presidential race. This pushed the regime to reschedule the presidential elections for 12 December 2019, which led to the victory of Abdelmadjid Tebboune (2019-2024).

On the ground, independent unions declared a comprehensive strike on 29 October 2019, accompanied by organized marches across various regions. These actions were strategically deployed to exert pressure on the regime to stop the planned elections. When examining the trajectory of the Algerian Hirak, it becomes evident that independent unions were inclined to secure both popular and legal legitimacy, positioning themselves as representatives of the disgruntled public, while capitalizing on the ongoing protest movement. Independent unions were successful in asserting their role as a mobilizing force and executing a series of strikes, particularly within the education, healthcare, public administration, and transportation sectors.

Considering the post-2019 political landscape in Algeria, the viability of the independent union model, as embraced by certain unionists, hinges on the potential for a successful democratic transition characterized by greater transparency and civic engagement. The acceptance of democratic transition remains a key determinant, despite resistance from the official ruling elites in the country. Such resistance is clear in the authorities' political and media rhetoric, despite occasional acknowledgments of the systemic issues plaguing the political apparatus.<sup>8</sup>

As a top priority, civil society in Algeria remains committed to the establishment of regulatory frameworks that would enable their active participation in the formulation of and engagement with public policies, as well as the administration of citizens' affairs. This includes the ability to influence decision-making processes and safeguard public interests. It

is essential to recognize that improvement in union freedoms is inseparable from the effective freedoms and independence of the context in which they operate to be able to achieve meaningful change.<sup>9</sup>

As a result, independent unions in Algeria have functioned as social entities and succeeded in effectively asserting their influence in numerous sectors, including healthcare, education across various levels, and public administration. This achievement has been made possible by the significant membership of numerous employees in independent union structures, both at the local and national levels.

the General Union of Algerian Workers saw a notable decline in its membership and personnel within the healthcare, education, and administrative sectors because of its engagement in political roles, exposing it to an internal competition that it had not traditionally encountered, and divisions among its cadres. Dissident factions also emerged from the largest union force in Algeria, contributing to the notable rise in independent unions over the past decade.

According to researcher Eid al-Karim Saray,<sup>10</sup> although not entirely independent, these unions have succeeded in functioning outside the boundaries established by the government. They have evolved into the cornerstone of the daily routines of professionals and workers in sectors encompassing millions while maintaining a degree of autonomy from direct control by the regime.

It is important to highlight that the series of strikes, and protest movements initiated by unions, along with their participation in shaping political initiatives, played a pivotal role in paving the way for the 2019 Hirak. Unions have actively been a part of the heart of the popular protests since the initial demonstrations broke out on 22 February 2019. This involvement has been "sluggish" and driven by three primary factors: Firstly, the coexistence of multiple unions within a single sector, or the emergence of diverse and occasionally conflicting union entities negotiating with the authorities on labor issues; secondly, the challenge of adapting to the country's ever-changing political and economic landscape; and thirdly, the presence of parallel unions aligned with the government's agenda.

Unions, therefore, left a substantial imprint through their involvement in the popular protests as well as through

8 See Mahmoud Belhimer, "Democratic Transition in Algeria", an unpublished doctoral thesis, Faculty of Political Science and International Relations, University of Algiers III, 2017.

9 Abdulaziz Rahabi, a diplomat and former Minister of Information, is a prominent national figure who took part in numerous seminars and gatherings organized by the Coordination for Change and Democratic Transition in 2014. He also played a role in the democratic transition seminars held in 2019.

10 Researcher in political sociology at the University of Algiers. The meeting occurred during a scholarly symposium on professional policies in Algeria and the prospects of management at the University of Blida, May 2023.

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their meaningful contributions to media dialogues on the democratic transition and notable presence at meetings convened by opposition forces in March 2019, and the subsequent conference at “Ain al-Bunyan” in July of the same year.<sup>11</sup>

# 2. Effectiveness of Union Activity Amid Change: Balancing Action and Reaction

Before the 2019 Hirak, unions have assumed for the past decades various roles in galvanizing public mobilization. The unions have a longer history of activism with roots going back to 2001-2002, a period when Algeria emerged from the grip of a decade of terrorism. During this time, Algerians sought to improve their living standards, and the independent unions played a pivotal role in this regard. These early demonstrations were primarily focused on grievances related to the deteriorating living standards, weakened purchasing power, and the erosion of labor benefits, particularly in the public sector. At the same time, some unions aligned with the government adopted a conciliatory stance and offered support for the policies of successive administrations. This divergence led to conflicts between the independent unions and the government, which limited their influence despite their robust representation and extensive networks across various sectors.

In addition, the government’s exclusion of unions from consultation and dialogue processes, along with their absence from participation in pension-related issues, and the June 2016 tripartite decision involving the government, employers, and the General Union of Algerian Workers,

which aimed to abolish the right to relative retirement and retirement without age requirements, directly spurred the unity of numerous unions spanning various sectors.

Government attempts to impose restrictions on these unions were met with unwavering resistance. This determination ensured unions’ continued relevance among Algerians, and bolstered their visibility in the media, making them a potent force for exerting pressure on the government and uniting the grassroots and ordinary citizens. In doing so, they established a balanced pressure dynamic, offering a potential avenue for mass mobilization that could play a significant role in shaping decision-making.

It is, therefore, important to recognize the contributions of these unions in championing freedom and democracy before 2019. They placed a strong emphasis on the importance of fostering independent and diverse union practices, while also advocating for freedom of expression through raising public awareness about rights and freedoms, both within the labor and professional spheres and across the wider community.

Therefore, union actions have significantly contributed to the grassroots popular movement. Independent unions have thrown their support behind the Hirak from its inception in February 2019. This was clear in their official engagement, including the meeting held on 28 February 2019, which resulted in a statement endorsing the movement and its marches. In doing so, they temporarily set aside their professional and social demands, recognizing the paramount importance of the overarching national demand.

Politically, the independent unions refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of Abdelkader Bensalah, who assumed temporary presidential responsibilities on 3 April 2019, in accordance with Article 102 of the Constitution. This article mandates that the Speaker of the National Assembly (the second chamber of parliament) temporarily assumes the presidency for a 90-day period, during which presidential elections are conducted, and the interim president is barred from running in those elections. Additionally, they withheld recognition from the government led by Noureddine Badaoui.

Following Bouteflika’s resignation, the unions intensified their position by boycotting events associated with his representatives in specific sectors and ministries. They called for wide-scale strikes in sectors such as education, health, and higher education and took the initiative to propose solutions to the crisis, presenting a draft roadmap for discussion with political forces representing the actors in the popular movement. An example of this proactive approach was evident on 15 June 2019, during a meeting of civil society and its influencers, as well as in the meeting at “Ain al-Bunyan” in July 2019. Throughout August 2019, several meetings brought together various segments of civil society, unions, and political parties at the SAFEX Exhibition Palace in the Algerian capital. The Algerian Confederation of Independent Unions

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11 The “National Dialogue Forum,” held in two phases in March and July 2019 in the vicinity of “Ain al-Bunyan,” located to the west of the Algerian capital, yielded a final document containing proposals to navigate the political crisis that ensued following the resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. The key recommendations included the establishment of an independent national entity tasked with organizing and overseeing elections, emphasizing its need for political, administrative, and financial independence. Additionally, the document called for the replacement of individuals associated with the previous regime who still held positions within state institutions with consensus-driven figures. It also urged the appointment of a capable government to facilitate the preparation of free and transparent presidential elections, allowing the Algerian people to express their opinions freely within a reasonable timeframe.

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played a crucial role in facilitating productive dialogue, bridging differences between parties, such as the Democratic Pole and Forces of Democratic Change, and key individuals to find common ground for the success of the Hirak movement.<sup>12</sup>

The unions actively participated in the National Forum for Dialogue, collaborating with a substantial coalition of political parties, civil society entities, and prominent national figures. Following the “Ain al-Bunyan” meetings, this collaboration led to the formation of a “National Dialogue Committee.” The process culminated in the creation of the “Ain al-Bunyan Meetings Document” of July 2019, where a consensus was reached to maintain the presidency of the country as a transitional phase, until conditions for conducting presidential elections could be established. Additionally, an independent national body was proposed to oversee and organize these elections.

Despite opposition, the authorities pressed ahead with presidential elections as planned in De 2019. President Tebboune pledged to initiate dialogues with all unions and stakeholders, urging unions to “act responsibly while considering the country’s economic and health challenges.” In June 2020, he stressed as a top priority the prompt review of fundamental laws concerning members of the education and higher education sectors, encompassing teachers and professors from primary school to university levels. This urgency underscores the need to avoid exploiting the challenging social situation for political purposes, which could jeopardize the stability of the country, and instill fear among citizens who have yet to regain full confidence in restoring what was lost over the preceding decades.<sup>13</sup>

As the institutions stabilized following the constitutional referendum held on 1 November 2020, the legislative elections conducted on 12 June 2021, and the local elections on 27 November 2021, President Tebboune initiated an extensive dialogue process involving unions and constitutional bodies to formulate a new draft legislation governing the practice of union activities and the freedoms associated with them, while also ensuring the separation of union functions from political parties and involvement in politics. This initiative aimed to “put an end to the infiltration of the unions, and their exploitation in electoral entitlements.”

Despite independent union opposition to the draft law, it was approved by the Algerian parliament (law No. 23-02) with a majority vote in April 2023. The law pertained to the exercise of union rights, and the right to strike. Independent unions have strongly criticized this law and called for the withdrawal

of its provisions, labeling it a “crime against workers and the union movement.”<sup>14</sup> Their concerns arise from the absence of their participation in the discussions surrounding its drafting. In addition, there are apprehensions among 20 unions representing various sectors, regarding the underlying motivations that the government may rely upon when dealing with them in the future. These concerns are compounded by the government’s continued imposition of restrictions on union activists.<sup>15</sup>

When interpreting the provisions of this law, some leaders within education unions see it as a calculated response by the government to the developments unfolding on the ground and an effort to manage and temper the activities of union activists, especially considering their participation in the popular protests. These leaders acknowledge that the unions have effectively established themselves as influential mobilizing entities, primarily through their repeated strikes in sectors such as transportation, education, healthcare, and postal services, which have caused significant nationwide disruptions. The government’s decision to enact these laws also reflects its concerns regarding the increasing influence of independent unions within these pivotal segments of the workforce.

Through the provisions of this law, the government has taken steps to address some social and professional demands. Notably, it has eliminated the requirement for unions to secure at least 20% representation among workers and employees in a sector to be recognized as a union capable of negotiating professional matters and social demands with authorities. However, independent unions contend that these measures are insufficient and advocate for a more comprehensive response, calling for the enhancement of workers’ established rights and the protection of union representatives against arbitrary dismissals. They also call for amendments that strengthen union freedoms, reevaluate the process of union representation, and allow the formation of federations, confederations, and additional unions.<sup>16</sup>

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14 On May 1, 2023, a protest took place in the heart of the Algerian capital, organized by 20 independent unions representing various sectors, including education, health, administration, training, religious affairs, and solidarity. Notably, this marked the first union protest movement since the popular movement of 2019.

15 Elias Mrabet, President of the National Union of Health Workers, stated in an exclusive interview in 2023: “The draft laws put forth by the government, in their stated objectives, run counter to the essence of the Constitution. They stand in contradiction to the prevailing political discourse and are also at odds with international conventions set by the International Labour Office (specifically Conventions 87 and 98). These proposed laws are designed with the intent to restrict union activities and to impede the exercise of the right to strike in extensive sectors that will be determined by the organization at a later stage.”

16 Masoud Amrawi, leading member of the National Union of Education Workers Union, 2022.

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12 See Al-Bilad newspaper’s coverage of the consultative meetings to resolve the political crisis, entitled: “Civil Society Actors Adhere to the Principles of Ain al-Bunyan” on 24-08-2019: <https://www.elbilad.net/national>

13 See President Abdelmadjid Tebboune’s interview with local media, on 12 June 2020, on the official page of the Algerian Presidency Foundation, <https://facebook.com/AlgerianPresidency>

### 3. Challenges and Prospects

Unions and union activism face numerous challenges, including those newly imposed by the 2023 legislation, which seeks to separate union activism from political engagement and places limitations on the roles unions can play in exerting pressure on the government. The law also outlines the specific functions of unions within government and private entities to curb protests and strikes. Such changes have implications for how workers and employees perceive the role of unions.

The persistence of union activism on the ground does not seem to deter the government's efforts to undermine their legitimacy. The government is actively working to control union activities by putting legal constraints affecting the political, media, and public spheres.

The new law has in effect abolished most of the longstanding provisions that have been governing union activities for over 33 years and redefined key concepts to realign union activities with current conditions. Some political parties see these changes as an attempt to prevent them from exerting influence within union organizations and as a clear effort to separate unions from their traditional national role in key national issues and decisions.<sup>17</sup> In this regard, it is important to note that 30 independent unions have rejected the articles on the exercise of union rights, the prohibition of collective conflicts at work, and the right to strike.<sup>18</sup>

This did not, however, translate into tangible actions on the ground as independent unions could not transfer their opposition into street mobilization but limited their activism to responses to these new legislations within the confines of union activities as well as to coordination meetings and explanatory statements. Such endeavors aimed to underscore the incompatibility of these legislations with the Algerian context and their detrimental impact on union practices and freedoms in Algeria as well as highlight the degree of regression in the gains made within this framework and the need for amendments of the new legislation.

Contrary to its historical support for the authorities, the General Union of Algerian Workers also opposed the

provisions of the new legislation because it was excluded by the government from consultations on the law's text, and the fact that some clauses within the law restrict the union activity. While independent unions objected to the law because it violated union freedoms, the General Union's objection was based on the new law's cancellation of union memberships and the banning of unionists from engaging in full-time union work. This provision eliminates many of the privileges that unionists have traditionally enjoyed and directly impacts their interests. Therefore, the General Union sees the new law as directly affecting union interests and privileges rather than altering the actual activities of unions. Governmental pressure on the General Union resulted in the resignation of Secretary-General Salim Labatcha on 4 March 2023. A labor conference was then convened, resulting in the election of Omar Taggot as the new Secretary-General of the General Union, for a five-year term, on 23 July 2023.

Notably, union organizations operate independently of political parties. This independence is entrenched in their foundational laws as safeguards to ensure union work remains free from ideological controversies and partisan politics.<sup>19</sup> The Secretary-General of the Workers' Party, Louisa Hanoune, emphasized that the act of separating union activities and political ones is "undemocratic", arguing that the two are inherently interconnected, and raising questions about the rationale behind barring a leader in a political party from also serving as a union representative, or preventing a union leader from holding a political party position. She questioned whether union leaders should "forfeit their political rights and be deprived of engaging with national affairs, solely because of their union role."<sup>20</sup>

The new law on union organization, however, raises a unique question: Do the Algerian authorities intend to solely prohibit unions from expressing dissenting political stances or abstaining from political activism, initiatives, or any expressions related to political matters, such as liberties and freedom of expression? Is there a selective approach being used, where the authorities overlook the political positions of unions when they align with those in power?

17 Statements by unionists made during meetings involving over 16 independent unions in the health and education sectors, alongside the presentation of draft labor laws in 2023.

18 The National Union of Public Health Practitioners issued a statement characterizing the provisions of the two laws as "perilous." They emphasized that "in addition to directly curtailing the freedom of union activities through a new proposed law outlining the conditions for trade union work, there exists another proposed law that is equally concerning, as it encroaches upon a fundamental constitutional right of citizens—the right to strike."

19 Elias Mrabet, President of the National Union of Health Workers, stated in an exclusive interview in 2023: "First and foremost, it is imperative to establish clear and precise definitions that demarcate the boundaries between union activities and partisan political engagement. Additionally, due consideration must be given to a critical aspect, namely, ensuring the alignment of the Republic's laws with the provisions of the 2020 Constitution and the international treaties and agreements ratified by our nation. These international agreements do not preclude the simultaneous pursuit of both activities. Interference in the internal affairs of trade unions and political parties alike, as well as the dissemination of such matters, should be entrusted to these entities themselves, under the purview of their regulatory bodies and their respective affiliates. This should occur without external directives or pressures from authorities."

20 Statements made during a meeting of the General Secretariat of the Party, in December 2022.

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Although the 2023 law prohibits unions from engaging in any politics and restricts their activities to union and labor issues, several unions participated in a political initiative focused on “promoting cohesion and securing the future.”<sup>21</sup> However, a majority of the unions involved in this initiative maintain close ties with the government and endorse the policies of President Abdel Majid Tebboune. They justified their participation by emphasizing their role as unions in this national effort and argued that President Tebboune’s policies, such as raising wages, stimulating the economy, and creating jobs, were in the best interests of the working class. While some objected to the participation of unions in this politically oriented initiative, as it contravenes the union law, the authorities, who are tasked with upholding the law, did not issue any warnings to the participant regarding what could be construed as a “breach” of the union law. This

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21 An initiative spearheaded by the “National Building Movement” was geared towards bolstering the domestic front and safeguarding the nation against regional tensions. It sought to lend support to state institutions and endorse the policies advanced by the government. This initiative witnessed active participation from the majority of the five parties comprising the government coalition, which includes the National Building Movement, the National Liberation Front, the National Democratic Rally, the Future Front, and the Voice of the People. Additionally, several parties aligned with the ruling authorities took part, including New Dawn, Karama, the Algerian Hope Gathering, the Republican Alliance, and the New Algeria Front. Notably, the initiative also encompassed trade unions, with prominent involvement from the General Union of Algerian Workers, independent unions, and national organizations such as veterans of the revolution (mujahideen), descendants of martyrs of the revolution, Islamic scouts, and various civil society entities.

may be due to the congruence of positions between some participants and the authorities.

As a result, the Algerian authorities appear reluctant to address such breaches as they align with and bolster government policies. This makes the application of the law tainted with political considerations. This seems to show that the political position of the unions does not necessarily pose an issue as long as they are aligned with that of the authorities. However, if the positions diverge or take a critical stance against the authority, the latter might resort to legal measures against the unions.

## Conclusion

Unions in Algeria grapple with challenges related to their perceived ineffectiveness in the political arena and their fragmentation across a significant number of sectors. This division makes them easier to control by the authorities and diminishes their influence on the ground, which prompts them to increase their coordination and unite their objectives.

Despite the constraints imposed by the government, union work remains lawful. Nevertheless, its continuation as well as its influence depends on the ability of its leaders to take positions that can bolster unions’ effectiveness and resilience on the ground. Such positions should also be able to address the concerns of workers, professionals, and social employees, while at the same time being able to confront political power.

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## About the Arab Reform Initiative

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

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