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Trade unions in Morocco: national unity, political struggle, and trade union fragmentation in the independent state, 1955-1978

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Summary

At the heart of this thesis is the question of how Moroccan trade unionism evolved in the two decades that followed the country's independence in March 1956. The research predominantly focuses on the period from the establishment of the Union Marocaine du Travail (UMT) in 1955 to the creation of Confédération Démocratique du Travail (CDT) in 1978. Except for a few scholarly works, research on Morocco's contemporary history pays very little attention to the emergence and evolution of trade unions, and the academic literature needs more extensive investigation. Existing studies tend to concentrate almost exclusively on the growth of trade unions during the colonial period, framing Morocco's labour movement in relation to the activities of the European trade union confederations and the burgeoning independence movement.

The premise of the research is that trade unions in Morocco – much like in other African countries – emerged from the colonial era with considerable political authority, demanding great space in national debates. Consequently, the research closely examines the day-to-day interactions of the UMT, the monarchy, and the political parties, contextualising the history of Morocco's trade union movement into the main political events that marked the first two decades of independence. The research provides new insights into the complex and nuanced entanglement of trade unions with other external actors, exploring the extent to which trade unionism positioned itself as a powerful force able to challenge the hegemonic ambitions of those in power – most notably the monarchy. The unions' participation in the realm of power is critical to understanding the transformation of the Moroccan trade union scene. Additionally, it contributes to re-building a narrative predominantly centred on the royal palace and the political parties, adding nuances and complexities to Morocco's broader national picture.

The thesis uses a wide range of different primary sources collected in Morocco, France, the Netherlands, the UK, Italy, the US, and Switzerland. These comprise archival documentation of Moroccan unions, international union confederations, and foreign institutions including international labour organisations and foreign diplomatic missions in Morocco. Additionally, the thesis relies on an important set of internal publications such as periodicals, booklets, pamphlets, and other printed materials produced by Moroccan trade unions. The thesis is divided into five chapters. It begins with an introduction, which includes the methodology and sources of the thesis, followed by the first chapter, that reviews the academic literature on trade union history in Africa, North Africa, and Morocco.

Chapter two addresses the question of how trade unionism evolved during the protectorate era (1912-1956). It examines primarily the history of the UMT, Morocco's first national confederation

created at a clandestine meeting in Casablanca on 20 March 1955. It shows how Morocco's unionism was largely integrated into the process of decolonisation, acquiring considerable political authority. Moroccan workers and their representative leaders were energetically engaged in anticolonial activism, embodying a nationalist and political unionism that combined the demand for labour rights with the struggle against colonialism. This chapter examines how their contribution to the pro-independence campaign secured the Istiqlal party – bourgeois and elitist in its origins – a broader reach among the working population, largely contributing to turn independence into reality. Moreover, participation in networked activism outside Morocco made them part of a multitude of actors across Africa and Asia that, aware of the transnational nature of the decolonisation process, globalised the anticolonial question through advocacy campaigns beyond their national borders.

Chapter three focuses on the expansion of Morocco's trade union movement in the early stages of independence, its involvement in party politics, and the formation of a close alliance between Morocco's union leaders and the monarchy. Drawing on theorisations on trade unionism under authoritarian regimes, it proves that the UMT's early relationship with the throne was forged and solidified through a system of benefits and inducements employed by the sovereign to secure the union's loyalty. The personal ambitions of the UMT's leaders were also central to the definition of the national role of the UMT, enabling them to climb a political ladder while gaining representational power, material advantages, and protection. The chapter also shows how Morocco's political parties started to compete for trade union representation very soon, as part of their crusade to conquer the political arena. On the one hand, the creation of the Union Générale des Travailleurs du Maroc (UGTM) in 1960 proved the ability of the Istiqlal to open new ground for opposition to the UMT while, at the same time, capitalising support where the union had less grip, especially among agricultural workers and the unemployed. On the other hand, the king's formal recognition of the UGTM showed how the palace's strategy of divide-and-rule directly invested the labour camp.

Chapter four examines the redefinition of the role of trade unionism following the dismissal of Abdallah Ibrahim's government (1960) and the accession of King Hassan II to power (1961). It further explores how the monarchy's shifting approach towards the opposition entailed a tangible transformation in the nature of the union's ties with the palace. The analysis of state-opposition relations in the early 1960s shows that the UMT was partially swept up by the wave of repression against the left. However, the chapter argues that the manoeuvres of the throne were primarily aimed at breaking the union's support for the left rather than suppressing and marginalising the labour movement per se. This had long-term implications not only for the restructuring of the opposition front but also for the internal unity of the trade union movement. The chapter also highlights that the UMT also embarked on an intense path of transnational activism on the Maghreb, Arab, and African

fronts to boost its international standing. It proves how the union maintained a pragmatic and flexible approach to its diplomatic relations offering a new voice in the anti-imperialist struggle in the spirit of both Pan-African and Pan-Arab trade union internationalism.

Finally, chapter five discusses the divorce of the UMT from the leftist opposition, which fuelled intra-party rivalries and ultimately contributed to the fragmentation of the labour movement. Morocco's trade unionism aligned itself with moderate and pragmatic positions, effectively favouring the hegemonic pretensions of the palace in its crusade against the left. The UMT no longer demanded restrictions on the powers and prerogatives of the king. This choice did not mean that the UMT could no longer raise any critical voice in Morocco's public debate, but its activities did not pose any real threat to the status quo. The chapter confirms that hierarchical structures and centralisation of power created a deep fracture between the lower and higher segments of the union pyramid, weakening the cohesion of the labour movement. It proves that membership overlaps between the UNFP and the UMT played an important role in creating new dissent within the union and the decision to avoid active political activities created a further fracture between the union leaders and those federations which closely identified with the party. In this vein, the founding of the CDT in 1978 proves that, in contrast to the dominant narrative of trade union unity and cohesion, the UMT was not monolithic, and internal divisions flared up due to ideological and strategic divergencies between the leaders and large segments of the union affiliates. The establishment of the CDT was therefore not simply a reflection of party divisions but rather an attempt by a significant portion of the trade union movement to break free from its undemocratic and overly bureaucratic leadership and reclaim greater control over union representation.