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11 Imaginaries of social change in Algeria

Nonviolent acts of citizenship of the autonomous trade union activists

Karim Maïche

Introduction

Before the spread of COVID-19 in 2020, the world at large witnessed political uprisings from Chile to Hong Kong, from Lebanon to France and from Sudan to Iran. In Algeria, millions of demonstrators occupied the streets in multiple cities and villages around the country since February 2019 organising regular massive marches every Tuesday and Friday. Mass protests prevented the fifth mandate of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and finally forced the aging president to step down. While there is a growing amount of literature related to the 2019 HIRAK uprisings, only few studies approach political acts, mobilisations, and social contestations of the social movements, especially the struggle of the autonomous trade unions before 2019. This chapter aims to contribute to this gap in the literature. Contrary to other countries in the region, the popular uprisings in the North Africa and Middle East – often termed as the “Arab Spring” – did not instigate a large popular protest wave in Algeria in 2011. Nevertheless, oppositional autonomous trade unions have a decades long tradition of protesting activities in Algeria, and they have been able to challenge the state authorities often more importantly than the oppositional political parties.

Their functioning dates back already to the 1970s but gained wider and more structured performances since the 1989 constitutional reform. In 1990, dozens of autonomous trade unions were established officially using practices of political activism generating from labour related grievances and forming a heterogeneous oppositional political body with other political parties and other civil society organisations. Since the early 1990s, the autonomous trade union movement has had different stages of intensity although, towards the end of the 2010s, the trend could be considered downward and increasingly marginal phenomena.

In general, the Algerian autonomous trade union movement consists of dozens of unions that function in different social frameworks such as public, political and to a lesser extent economic, and they operate through various professional sectors such as educational, health, and transportation, to mention only a few.¹ Within these unions, activists have aimed to challenge

the state authorities and their political decision-making processes in order to politicise workers' rights. Through multiple acts what can be defined as "manifest political engagements" (Ekman and Amnå 2012), their aim has been legitimising their own functioning through delegitimising the state authorities and, especially, the governmental trade union The General Union of Algerian Workers (Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens, UGTA). They promoted acts that they claimed as independent or autonomous from the state and challenged UGTA for its congruent connection to state authorities, who consider the latter as the sole representative of the workers.

Due to asymmetric power relations regarding the state, autonomous trade unions have organised nonviolent civic acts such as demonstrations, sit-ins, petitions, and hunger strikes. These acts, or manifest political engagements, often take place in urban public spaces such as squares in Algiers (capital of Algeria), Oran, Sétif, Tizi-Ouzou, Mostaganem, Ouargla, Touggourt, and other cities around the country or in front of the various ministries and official compounds depending on the content and aim of the protest. Several thousand protests have been organised around the country per year. In addition, autonomous trade unions gained visibility in the well-known oppositional newspapers such as *El Watan*, *Liberté*, *Le Soir*, *El Khabar*, and *Echorouk* only few to mention. As for the activists, they were strongly present in Facebook and their motivation sprang from the surrounding social conditions and their growing political consciousness to acquire their equal citizenship rights, or the actualisation of their full citizenship as guaranteed in the 1989 constitution.

In this chapter, I explore the acts of citizenship (Isin and Nielsen 2008) in this context and inquire how the autonomous unions have aimed for social change through political imaginaries related to a more democratic Algeria where citizenship rights are more equally distributed. I will also discuss the ways in which the state authorities and other security services controlled the public protesting activities in order to prevent wide-scale social spillover of the protests, forcing activists to operate within hegemonic and asymmetric social conditions. According to the activists,² as we shall see, state authorities responded to their protests through restrictions, arrests, negotiations and cloning of the unions. These phenomena are approached through construction of antagonistic discourses that produce subjective understanding of the citizenship rights expressed by the activists themselves (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002; Laclau and Mouffe 2001).

In what follows, this chapter explores, firstly, how the citizenship rights demanded by autonomous union activists are expressed in connection to political imaginaries through nonviolent acts of citizenship in the constrained urban civil society spaces before the *Hirak* uprisings in 2019. Secondly, it reflects how the social conditions and spatial restrictions of state authorities are connected to these acts of citizenship in the context of contestation of different autonomous trade unions. Finally, this chapter approaches individual activists through the theoretical framework of acts of citizenship

enabling to understand citizenship as transformation through acts instead of perceiving citizenship as an institutional status.

Acts of citizenship of the autonomous trade unions

According to Marnia Lazreg, citizenship should be separated as *status* and as *practice*: “formal citizenship precludes the emergence of substantive citizenship, which includes the protection of civil and social rights” (Lazreg 2000, 60). She highlights that autonomy and agency play a central role within the realisation of substantive citizenship, meaning more institutional understanding of citizenship. I approach the manifest political engagements of the autonomous trade unions in the public space within the theory of “acts of citizenship” of Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielsen, who describe citizenship as a phenomenon, which is neither status nor practice. By this, they mean that citizenship is not a static status or state, but something that exists and is shaped through motion and experience. They shift the focus of citizenship from the institutional understandings toward individual agency, acts of citizenship, where “acts are not passively given, nor do they emerge from a natural order” (Isin and Nielsen 2008, 2).

For Isin, the term “theorising acts” means “an assemblage of acts, actions and actors in a historically and geographically concrete situation, creating a scene or state of affairs” (Isin 2008, 24). By theorising acts one must “focus the rupture that enables the actor (that the act creates) to remain at the scene rather than fleeing it”. Isin also differentiates “activist citizens” and “active citizens”. For him “activist citizens engage in writing scripts and creating the scene” while “active citizens follow scripts and participate in scenes that are already created” (Isin 2008, 24). To act is to engage in the creation of a scene through creation of oneself. The observation and exploring of citizenship should take place in acts, not practices or institutions. According to Isin (2008, 38) “acts cannot happen without motives, purposes, or reasons”, and they cannot be reduced only to calculability, intentionality, or responsibility. In similar vein, Sidney G. Tarrow (2011, 28–29) argues that, for social movements, “people engage in contentious politics when patterns of political opportunities and constraints change, and then by strategically employing a repertoire of collective action, creating new opportunities, which are used by others in widening cycles of contention”.

In order to explore the acts of citizenship by autonomous trade unions further, it is necessary to reflect their official emergence and development of democratic practices in Algeria in the late 1980s. Autonomous trade unions were officially created in the country one after another since the enactment of Freedom of association, collective bargaining and industrial laws 90-14 and 90-02 in 1990. At the background were the so-called October uprisings in 1988 that forced the authoritarian government of President Chadli Bendjedid for the liberalisation of the political rights, political pluralism, and constitutional change.³ The National Autonomous Union of Public Administration

Staff (Syndicat National Autonome des Personelles de l'Administration Publique, SNAPAP) was officially the first autonomous trade union established in 1990. With its nation-wide network of multiple sub-sections, SNAPAP was the most active and visible actor in the public sector especially since the early 2000s. The figures that depict the amount of its membership are in many ways political and controversial, but SNAPAP claimed in the early 2010s to comprise 300,000–500,000 members, of which 40,000–50,000 were contributive members.⁴

Autonomous unions played a visible role demanding political reforms and opposing Islamists, who were gaining strength after winning local governmental elections due to the establishment of the multiparty system. Islamist political party Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamique du Salut, FIS) had strong autonomous trade union Islamic Trade Union of Work (Syndicat Islamique du Travail, SIT), which gained a lot of popular support during 1990–1993, though it was never formally authorised. When the electoral process was halted, the armed Islamist groups started civil war against the state authorities (Lowi 2009, 126–128; Werenfels 2007, 48).

During the civil war (1992–2002), the political reforms were halted and the activities of the autonomous trade union movement diminished, although some major demonstrations and rallies, organised especially by the National Council for Higher Education Professors (Conseil National des Professeurs du Supérieur, CNES), took place in the education and healthcare sectors. After the war gradually came to an end in the beginning of the 2000s, fierce struggles took place between autonomous unions and state authorities. This phase can be considered the most ferocious period of contestation, because during 2011 the popular support of the unions started to gradually weaken.

The autonomous trade unions emerged in the first place due to various socio-economic challenges that workers faced in their daily lives. Their social imaginaries were in direct connection with democratic principles and citizenship rights, when they criticised state authorities for being corrupted actors of foreign capital owners who stole Algerian national wealth. Neoliberalist economic policies started to spread increasingly during the presidency of Bendjedid Chadli in the 1980s and were strengthened in the 1990s due to the economic structural adjustment program (SAP) orchestrated by International Monetary Fund (IMF) during the civil war (Liverani 2008, 24; Werenfels 2007, 49). Since the 1990s, autonomous trade union activists organised public demonstrations with the aim of communicating their political imaginaries into larger audiences through production of space.

According to Craig Browne and Paula Diehl, in order “to understand substantial changes in politics and society, a conceptualization of the political imaginary is necessary” (Browne and Diehl 2019, 394). They define political imaginary vaguely as “a collective structure that organises the imagination and the symbolism of the political, and therefore organises the instituting process of the political as well” (Browne and Diehl 2019, 394). While I conceive the “political” here as constantly transforming phenomena,

the collective and individual experiences that shape the activists' political imaginaries should be understood as a process. Union activists in Algeria aspired to instigate the interest of their fellow citizens to join for the common struggle for a better and more democratic Algeria. They often argued how their acts and action aimed at increasing their citizenship rights in connection to aforementioned political imaginaries. They constructed discourses that underlined their patriotism, considering themselves as the representatives of the authentic independence fighters who fought for Algerian independence against the French during 1954–1962. They demanded more equal distribution of the national wealth, possibilities for every citizen to construct satisfying living conditions and freedom to express their political and social aspirations. In order to achieve these goals, they claimed the need to strengthen democratic processes in Algeria.

Young Algerian autonomous union activists blamed the state authorities for their economic discomfort. They connected democratic principles to citizenship rights and accused the officials of not fulfilling their guaranteed constitutional rights. Their political acts as part of trade union activism aimed at transforming Algerian state into democratic society, as young SNAPAP activist Madjid Ferras explained when he recounted how and why he joined SNAPAP:

The article 55 states that every Algerian citizen has a right to work and live in dignity. Therefore, I applied status of the probation [pre-employee]. I worked three years under a contract which revealed to be non-renewable. I struggle with the salary of 120 euros per month. I work as the permanent worker paid 300 euros per month, and I am after all graduated from the university, while others may be from other educational institutes. We may have diplomas, but we do not have a chance to work as permanent workers. Therefore, I entered the SNAPAP to ask for my rights; to have a job.

The probation contract policy was implemented in Algeria decades ago. The intention was to offer temporary jobs to graduates of universities, institutes, and public schools paid for by the state before they could achieve a permanent job. For the young SNAPAP activist, Ferras, and many others pre-employed contracts meant precarity and deficit in regards to their citizenship rights. They were not paid according to their educational status; in fact, it was less than the official minimum salary, and their working contracts were temporary. Similarly, another young activist of SNAPAP, Mustapha Larbi, explained his participation in SNAPAP as follows:

I was on probation [*beneficiate de pré-emploie*] with a miserable salary. I could not find anybody who could help us to integrate into the workplace. In the end, we only found SNAPAP who took over the topic of probation [*pré-emploie*].

Later on, in July 2022, the decision of Algerian government to waive degrees in exchange for the guarantee of permanent jobs instigated mixed reactions among the youth: Why should young graduate workers give up their degrees, get rid of their achieved social status and accept jobs beneath their qualifications to acquire secured jobs? (Mazzouzi 2022). Apparently, the government tried to get rid of the pre-employed program, which was considered expensive and inefficient.

According to Charles Tilly (2002, 115), political actors typically give individualised accounts of their participation, though they could be seen to be bounded as collective actors through communities, classes, armed forces, firms, unions, interest groups, or social movements. Young SNAPAP activist Mustapha Larbi connected rights of decent employments to other citizenship rights related to political agency and democracy:

Work is our right, but today we speak about other things such as dignity (*karama*). We are against the indignity (*hogra*) ... There is no right to unionise or to participate on strike. You cannot even have the basic rights regarding the work. They say we are not contractual. What are we then? ... It is a clear message that we are not considered as workers, but as modern slaves. That is why I chose SNAPAP, because it gave us possibilities and helped us to fight for a contract.

Larbi depicted his position with references to modern slavery. He had to accept working contracts, which are below his educational qualification, meanwhile he had no possibilities to organise resistance within traditional trade unionism. For this reason, he chose SNAPAP, which was for him the only trade union that offered context and platform for the young pre-employed workers to struggle. Similarly, another young SNAPAP activist Samir Baroud described the beginnings of his activism related to social grievances that he faced, but moved to instruction and the importance of collectivity:

I finished my studies in 2010, so the first thing that I was interested in was the working place. I found myself in a situation where I had a contract for three years. I worked from 8.00h to 17.00h with the salary of 15,000 dinars [about 170 euros]. I tried to demand after the worker's rights such as an increase of the salary. I searched Facebook and I found one autonomous trade union, SNAPAP. I went there and we created a committee, which was affiliated with the union.

Many activists, especially the younger ones whom I interviewed, explained that they found the autonomous trade unions through internet. After joining the union, they explained how they were trained to understand their constitutional rights and to demand their citizenship rights through organising themselves. They learned how to mobilise and to organise sit-ins,

demonstrations, and to create union committees. As Tarrow (2011, 29) depicts within Social Movements Theory, the young activist generation learned the practices of the political activism from the older generation through instruction and obtained knowledge of particular routines of action. Unions organise training on trade union practices to increase awareness of workers' rights.

Activist citizens

Malika Rebai Maamri (2014) has stressed that Algeria is one of the few states in the Southern Mediterranean area that possesses the preconditions for a transition to democracy: economic and social background conditions; consensus to desire democracy; conflict and resolution mechanisms; and politicians that can be committed to democratic transformation. Mass demonstrations during 2019–2020 strengthened this argument. Mustapha Medjahdi (2012), who has studied the educational aspect of citizenship in the Algerian press, stressed that citizenship constitutes a two-pronged meaning in the country.⁵ The pro-governmental newspapers stressed the responsibility aspect of the citizens towards the state, while the critical oppositional media highlighted the rights and responsibility of the state towards the citizens. It is obvious that the activists of these autonomous unions stressed the latter related to their argument about the performances of nonviolent acts of citizenship.

During the interviews, the role of the state policies and the action conducted by the state authorities was often raised. Middle-aged activist and responsible of the public communications of the pre-employed section of SNAPAP, Idriss Mekideche, explained how offering precarious work was a better choice for the authorities because if you are unemployed, you have more time to create problems:

[T]he life of the workers in Algeria is catastrophic. For example, I am not permanent, I am contractual. There are violations against the law because precarious work is a very dangerous phenomenon, even more dangerous than unemployment. When you are unemployed, the state is afraid because you have time. You can create problems. But when you are a precarious worker and you work every day from 8.00 to 16.00 while your salary is derisory and miserable, you are always preoccupied with taking care of your basic needs.

This narrative insight is common among activists, when they explain how state authorities function and what are the premises for their decision-making processes. However, behind their vigour for activism often spring from concrete examples related to hardship of surrounding conditions and deficits to construct meaningful everyday life and future. As Malika Rebai Maamri (2014, 17) highlights, citizenship is not only a “legal status, but also

as a way of life". According to Mekideche, the working conditions did not allow young people to construct meaningful life which pushed him to join SNAPAP in the first place:

You cannot get married, live, or rent an [apartment] so the majority of precarious workers gain 12,000 to 17,000 dinars and the rent is 20,000 dinars or more. With your monthly income you cannot even rent a home. How can someone live? So being aware of all these problems I did some research on the internet if there is something that takes care of these [issues] ... There is only SNAPAP that looks after these unemployed, precarious workers, pre-employs, unemployed graduates, and so forth. It creates committees for these branches in the society ... Within the SNAPAP, there are the committees of the women, the youth, the pre-employed, the unemployed graduates etc. It creates committees trying to integrate marginalised people. Therefore, I did the research on the internet and found that there is one committee of the pre-employed within SNAPAP and I found a telephone number. I called them and I joined them.

Young and middle-aged activists explained their experiences how they realised deficits of their surrounding conditions and how SNAPAP was the only organised actor that enabled them to protest these social deficits. SNAPAP offered the framework for establishing committees, such as The Committee for the Defense of the Rights of the Unemployed (Comité National pour la Défense des Droits des Chômeurs – CNDDC), which was created separately because SNAPAP did not have right to unionise in the field of unemployed according to the legislation. Similarly, these young activists also formed the important body, The National Workers' Committee on Pre-employment and Social Safety Net (Le comité national des travailleurs de pré-emploi et du filet social), within the larger structures of the union as distinct organ gathering mostly young people.

Restrictions in the public space

Obviously, the landscape of employment policies in Algeria is much wider than union activists argue. General employment policies organised by the state include various programs that aim to decrease poverty and precariousness of workers.⁶ The policies consist of tripartite negotiations between UGTA, employers and the government. However, in order to protest these conditions, SNAPAP activists felt that autonomous trade unions were the only ones that offered opportunities to challenge the state practices. Therefore, autonomous trade unions wanted to challenge the position of the UGTA as the only accepted partner of the state in tripartite arrangements. They accused the state of marginalising the autonomous trade union movement. Likewise, they accused UGTA of representing more the state and its interests at the expense of workers' rights.

Acts of citizenship of the autonomous trade unions are connected to spatial dimension and therefore struggle for the public space. Unions used public space to spread their demands and increase future mobilisations. When they organise activities, such as demonstrations, sit-ins and strikes, they gather in visible public spaces. Demonstrations have been organised in front of official compounds in the capital Algiers to demand better working conditions, sustainable salaries, higher minimum wage or to condemn state corruption. In general, these demonstrations gather from 50–200 activists. They hope to communicate with other citizens, who are passive but who could be potentially interested in joining the future acts. However, the state of emergency, which was set due to the civil war in the 1990s, prohibited public gatherings and was extremely severely monitored in Algiers. Activists were rapidly arrested, and the demonstration dismantled when it was organised in the centre of the capital. There was more space to demonstrate in the peripheries, smaller towns, and villages. The state of emergency was dissolved in the capital of Algiers only after Hirak mass protests filled the streets in 2019. Until then, any possibilities to organise demonstrations were categorically blocked by the police and security forces. Regardless of the closure of the public space, autonomous trade unions continued actively filling the streets around the country, as young SNAPAP activist Baroud explained: “Because the media is closed, dialogue is closed, [and] there are only the streets left to invest so that people can hear our demands”.

According to longstanding SNAPAP activist Salim Mecheri: “In Algeria, the public space is defined as the street (*la rue*). That is the public space.” According to autonomous trade unions and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Euromed Rights, the state authorities restricted the functioning of the autonomous unions and committed human rights violations when preventing the demonstrations.⁷ Especially since the beginning of 2000s, when the civil war started to calm down, state officials hardened their position on autonomous trade union movement. Unions, simultaneously, started to demand more determinedly civic liberties guaranteed in the constitutional reform before the war. Preventing demonstrations, arrests and denying authorisation of the new movements were efficient tools to weaken and disperse civil society organisations including the autonomous trade unions. Activists insisted that authorities have promoted internal struggles in order to create parallel unions, or “the clones”, that use similar names than the original unions but work in cooperation with the authorities. However, it seems that all the discrepancies among the key figure activists were not the result of successful state interventions. In addition, with the power displays, the state authorities have conducted negotiations with the autonomous trade unions since the 1990s, although, according to the autonomous unions, results have been modest.

Idriss Mekideche, in charge of communications within the Pre-Employed section in SNAPAP, explained how the state authorities controlled the public

space and prevent any oppositional activities, unless the streets are occupied by small group of demonstrators:

In Algeria, the Algerians need to reappropriate the public space. Because it is closed ... We have conducted maybe 50 different actions or more, especially since 2011. We organised them in Algiers and elsewhere. Every time we were repressed and arrested. Maybe there were a few occasions in some places, where they left us untroubled for a while, when they saw that we were only 20 to 50 participants. In general, they stop us quickly and the, interrogate us. Even when they leave us untroubled, they make some arrests further away to prevent some demonstrators from participating. That is for sure. So regarding the public space, the Algerians are prevented from expressing themselves in the streets and in the public space.

Well-known activist within SNAPAP, Meriem Maârouf, was highly appreciated teacher and activist among other SNAPAP members due to her contribution related to the hunger strike and demonstration organised in the capital of Algiers in 2008. She stated how the state authorities pressured activists to halt protests:

I started in 2008 by creating a teachers' contractual office, affiliated to SNAPAP that aims for permanent working contracts for teachers. First, we started in two *wilayas* [administrative division or governorate in Algeria], Algiers and Blida, and then it spread into 33 *wilayas*. The first act we did was the hunger strike for 40 days. After that, the Minister of Education started negotiations which, however, did not respond to demands and lead into a real solution. Unfortunately, after hunger strikes, many teachers had health problems. The Ministry of Education had not given any reply and those involved in the sit-ins organised opposite to the presidential palace, because it is near to the Ministry of Education where the sit-ins were conducted, were prevented from organising protests. However, protests were organised every week. After the protests, there was intimidation by the police. We did 18 PV [Process-verbal] ... They took the protesters for the whole day and asked: "Why do you protest, you must stop, you must stay at home?" Therefore, there were finally so many problems that it was not possible to continue the protests and continue claiming the rights. However, even after these intimidations I was not afraid.

Asef Bayat (2013, 12) sees the street as a central space in urban settings for contestation and political struggle. He has coined the concept of "street politics" to analyse how urban public space is used as space to communicate the discontent and to mobilise citizens for political action. Therefore, as Don Mitchell (2003, 13) suggests, an uncontrolled public space can instigate fear

as well. Contested public space as a site of resistance for oppositional groups and movements generate fear or concern by those who are in power. Young SNAPAP activist Hamid Derradji also argued pessimistically:

In reality, public space does not exist in Algeria. Everything is squatted by the power (*pouvoir*) ... How many of our activists are in prison? How many of our workers have been fired? How many students have been excluded? Therefore, they have really invested on the ground so that they stay in power.

Various surveys (Moulai-Hadj 2011; Robbins 2014) indicate that political passivity, in the sense of manifest political engagement, was widespread before the 2019 uprisings especially among the youth, while politicisation of the youth can be considered more constitutive within environments of sports, including football stadiums, and various genres of music and arts. Therefore, participation within formal channels of politics, such as voting or taking part in party politics, may not illustrate the whole picture but indicate rather the process of politicisation itself. Asef Bayat (2013, 11) argued as follows in the context of the 2011 uprisings:

[T]he discontent subaltern groups – the poor, the youths, women, and the politically marginalized – do not sit around passively obeying the dictates of their police states, nor did they tie their luck to the verdict of destiny. Rather, they were always engaged, albeit in mostly dispersed and disparate struggles in the immediate domains of their everyday life – in the neighbourhoods, places of work, street corners, courthouses, communities, and in the private realms of taste, personal freedom, and preserving dignity.

Similarly, Daho Djerbal, a well-known scholar and editor of critical Algerian academic journal *Naqd* (Criticism), described in an interview (Davis, 2012) how multiple non-formal political mobilisations take constantly place in public space in Algeria:

One occupies the street, sets up barricades, stops traffic. Sometimes these contests point to a social struggle, but sometimes they are for more general demands – such as the demand for housing. The young generation who are coming of age want housing, employment, a legitimate future. Since the unions, political parties, and parliament no longer play their role, protests and riots have become the most common mode of negotiation between various groups and the state.

Finally, there are also those who deny the existence of public space in Algeria in the first place. Trade union and human rights activist Kaddour Chouicha, who is well-known especially for his activism within CNES during the 1990s,

considered the public space in Algeria rather as “governmental space”, at least in its form of political space:

Public space [in Algeria] is not a public space. It is governmental space in reality. Nothing is permitted in the public space if you do not have accordance from the authorities. We do not have a real notion of public space, because normally the society has the right to use this space. Of course, according to the conditions that are defined by the space itself. We have totalitarian space that does not leave us even a margin of it to exercise.

Essentially, it is important to stress here that political, organised manifest political engagement was in many ways marginal phenomena in Algeria before the 2019 *hirak* uprisings. Being an activist in Algeria, whether a female or male, young, or old, was simultaneously reserved for the marginalised, and SNAPAP and other autonomous trade unions, created institutions for them through unionism. Within the SNAPAP, it was possible to engage within the committees of the women, the youth, the pre-employed, the unemployed, the unemployed graduates, and so forth. The SNAPAP created these frameworks in order to integrate marginalised people. Experienced injustices and societal grievances, such as working hours, the lack of housing, unemployment, corruption, oppression, marginalisation, and lack of prospects pushed many young to engage and they found autonomous trade unions instead of political parties or different state-affiliated platforms.

In consequence, the concept of citizenship was largely perceived as a link between an individual and the state, as well as between the ideas of democracy and the rule of law. Citizenship was, therefore, understood as a complex web of rights and responsibilities that contingently as every state, and according to Isin (2008, 15), “exists in social, political or economic integration and is implicated in varying degrees of influence and autonomy”.

Meanwhile, when I discussed with the members of the state-affiliated trade union UGTA in Oran, they were directly critical of SNAPAP and other autonomous unions and claimed themselves as the ones who protected workers and their citizenship rights. The following excerpts from these discussions are illuminating in this respect:

How are autonomous trade unions able to defend Algerian workers while they are not even able to defend themselves?

UGTA defends the state whoever is the president. This is what UGTA has done since the founder Aïssat Idir [Revolutionary figure and trade unionist during the independence war and before].

Autonomous trade unions only speak in the cafés trying to turn people against the state. They lack plan and responsibility. Some of them are even manipulated by the foreigners. UGTA defends Algeria.

UGTA has rules and responsibility. UGTA is revolutionary and the only credible trade union in Algeria. UGTA trains the workers for syndicalism. Autonomous trade unions are “parasite” unions. They do not represent neither Algeria, nor workers. They are marginal. They are politicised and do not defend Algerian workers. Malaoui [Rachid Malaoui is the president of SNAPAP] speaks in cafés and does not even live in Algeria.

These quotations are from my field notes because I was not allowed to record our discussions. It was explicitly clear how activists of autonomous unions and members of UGTA constructed antagonistic discourses regarding each other’s activities. Both claimed to represent the authentic trade unionists in the country and were working for the national interest accusing the other being “manipulated” by external actors. Often unionists constructed opposite symbolism and discourses related to patriotism, independence, and stability. Both claimed to function in order to conserve the stability accusing the other for causing instability.

Similarly, aforementioned quotes show the asymmetric power relations between UGTA and the state on the one hand, and SNAPAP and autonomous trade unions, on the other: “How autonomous trade unions are able to defend Algerian workers while they are not even able to defend themselves”. The state authorities had all the machinery of power behind from police to army and they had monopoly of coercion in case it was needed. This, of course, is one reason, why autonomous unions used tactics of nonviolence, as young SNAPAP activist Hamid Derradji explained:

If you speak politics in the cafe, you are being arrested. In the bar, as well. Therefore, when you go out to the street with demands in the sign, you risk a lot. Unfortunately, they have managed to depoliticise our society. This means that to speak politics in Algeria has become a taboo or something very sensitive. The people do not get mixed up; they disengage from everything. People have lost their solidarity. People are afraid to engage into dynamics of demands and claims, because our power (*pouvoir*) is known. How many of our activists are in prison? How many of our workers have been fired? How many students have been excluded?

Through acts and actions conducted within visible urban public spaces activists aimed at communicating with the Algerian people hoping to sensitise them to realise deficits within the state apparatus. Their objective was to mobilise more participants in contestation to demand the actualisation of the citizenship rights guaranteed in the 1990 constitutional reform. Through acts of citizenship potential participants would transform into actors of change motivated through stated but undetermined political imaginaries. However, these conditions changed simultaneously the conditions for their acts in the

sense that the autonomous trade union transformed from protection of workers' rights more towards a political movement that concentrated more on general societal questions, such as democracy, human rights, and equal treatment, during demonstrations in public space.

According to Malika Rahal (2013), features of nonviolent resistance in Algeria can be traced to the popular resistance of the French colonial period (1830–1954). The nonviolent acts of autonomous trade unions in post-civil war Algeria also stemmed from the fatigue of violence experienced in the 1990s, which also characterised the Hirak movement in 2019. Autonomous unions used pragmatic, normative, expressive, and communicative techniques to gain attention in the oppositional media, social media, and streets. Organising strikes in the public sector enabled to open discussion channels to negotiate with authorities at the ministerial level, though, according to activists, negotiations never provided any concrete results. Rather, the state authorities were able to use the negotiations for their own benefit by putting pressure on, and trying to break the unity of, the different unions.

Finally, the autonomous trade union movement attempted to internationalise the conflict between the authorities contacting international bodies such as the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and other international human rights organisations. State authorities then accused them of working as “foreign agents” enabling the destabilisation of the country. It was then possible to accuse autonomous trade union activists as unpatriotic actors, who did not work for the benefit of the national state. In this context, it is also relevant to remind that, under asymmetric relations, nonviolence, and internationalisation of the conflict are often the only possibilities left in order to continue the struggle.

In 2023, the autonomous trade unions continue to challenge the current government led by President Abdelmadjid Tebboune. In January 2023, unions called International Labour Organization (ILO) to prevent state authorities to submit planned amendments to aforementioned Freedom of association, collective bargaining and industrial law 90-14. They claimed that autonomous unions were not consulted about the amendments while they have serious impacts on their rights to get organised with political parties, to register new unions, to invest for their real estates and to affiliate with international organisations (IndustriALL 2023).

Conclusion

Based on above, it is clear that autonomous trade union activists and state authorities have viewed the societal environment from dissenting perspectives, in some contexts even from the opposite discourses. Both blamed each other for social destabilisation, political manoeuvres, and unpatriotic actions. Meanwhile, they both represented themselves as the nationalist protector of Algerian independence and freedom of citizenship rights.

In the early 2020s, there were expectations that Algeria would be in the process of constructing the second republic. By this it was expected that the first republic, born after the 1962 independence, had reached its end by the 2019 uprisings and the so-called Hirak movement, which gathered hundreds of thousands of Algerians demanding profound socio-political change. Hirak movement stayed pacific until its gradual deterioration. However, its vast demonstrations around the country surprised academics, political activists, and Algerian citizens themselves. As if overnight, the whole nation transformed from active citizens into activist citizens.

It seems that COVID-19 and the escalating crackdown of civil society has led autonomous trade unions again alone to struggle for citizenship rights. In the Algerian autonomous trade union context, this can be interpreted in the way that union activists are not satisfied by settling only for state led political processes, including voting and participating in elections, paying taxes, and developing society as civilian family members. They want more liberties and their voice heard in political decision making. They want to organise themselves as responsible actors and act through their own individual premises in order to have an impact on the national conduct of policies. They are ready to act within the moments of uncertainty even though it can mean for them drifting into confrontation with the state authorities. This could mean being arrested, being fired from work, and losing achieved social status.

In the past, activists have used protests, non-cooperation, interventions, and civil disobedience as tools to pressure the government to reach their set demands without knowing the outcome. They were ready to change the conditions according to their political imaginaries, which comprise democratic development of the state, civic liberties, and autonomous activities. Citizenship rights could only be achieved by changing the structures and agency. Through these acts of citizenship, they fulfilled their experienced social responsibilities and by transformation into activist citizens. These acts had a meaning: to struggle for a better society for everyone.

Today many argue that the achievements related to the 2019 uprisings, the formation of the Hirak Movement and the expected transformation of the political conduct of the state affairs, are lost. Therefore, the autonomous trade union movement needs to adapt for the new situation and the changing international world political order, where argumentation on democratic benefits seems to get more intractable around the world. In the near future, autonomous unions need to invent new ways to continue their struggle in order to justify their existence.

Notes

- 1 In 2018, 66 trade unions existed officially in Algeria (Babouche 2018). However, it is challenging to state exact number of the trade unions and especially autonomous trade unions because many existing unions that are functioning are not officially recognised while some of those that exist officially may not function in practice.

- 2 I have created the pseudonyms for all the young activists interviewed in this chapter. However, those interviewees who had more than decade long experience and were well-known figures within the movement are expressing themselves with their own identities.
- 3 The October uprisings, also called the “October riots” or “bread riots”, erupted 4–10 October 1988, showing the depth of the discontent among the youth. The army fired on the demonstrators leading to the deaths of hundreds and imposed the state of emergency for the first time since the end of Algerian War of Independence (Liverani 2008, 27, 71; Volpi 2003, 38–45). I prefer to define the incidents of 1988 with the term October uprisings, which is, I believe, a more neutral concept regarding for the events.
- 4 Data from www.maisondessyndicats-dz.com/historique.php (accessed 7 February 2012; website does not function anymore).
- 5 Medjahdi has studied the discussions related to the concept of citizenship in the newspaper *El Khabar* established in the wake of October uprisings in 1988 and governmental newspaper *El Moudjahid*, closely linked to the government.
- 6 The four main programs are: the National Unemployment Insurance Fund (CNAC), the Social Development Agency (ADS), National Youth Employment Support Agency (ANSEJ), and the National Agency for the Management of Microcredit (ANGEM).
- 7 Amnesty International (2018), Human Rights Watch (2013), and EuroMed Rights (2014) have regularly published several critical reports on trade union rights in Algeria since 2010s.

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