

Global Labor and the Arab Uprisings: Picking Winners in Tunisia and Egypt



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International institutions, including the transnational advocacy network for labor and workers' issues, can influence labor institutions during transitions to and from democracy. Through rhetorical and material support, these institutions can shape labor's relationship to the state. This article addresses the activities of "global labor" in the recent transitions in Tunisia and Egypt, arguing that divergent strategies shaped incentives, expectations, and outcomes among workers and labor unions in each country. KEYWORDS: labor, unions, democratization.

HOW CAN INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AFFECT DOMESTIC LABOR MOVEMENTS in transitioning regimes? An understudied area of international influence is the network of organizations focused on labor and worker issues. How and when this network is politically salient is an open question; however, recent findings from Egypt and Tunisia suggest that it can influence the domestic strategies of trade unions with a major impact on transitional regimes. Formal institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are recognized as exerting a strong influence on domestic policies. More distributed forms of international institutions, such as transnational advocacy networks, can also diffuse norms and influence domestic policy.¹ I argue that, by varying rhetoric and material support to Tunisia and Egypt, the transnational network I call "global labor" incentivized different sets of behaviors in each country with an impact on the strength of labor following revolution. Global labor, as used here, extends beyond one particular international institution such as the International Labour Organization (ILO). The components of global labor are not homogenous but, from the evidence presented here, support (rhetorical and material) tends to move consistently. The salient components of global labor in the case of Egypt and Tunisia includes, but is not limited to, the ILO, International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), Solidarity Center, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), and a set of local trade union and worker activists on the ground in each country. In this article, I draw on over 150 interviews conducted in Egypt, Tunisia, the United States, Belgium, Switzerland, and Lebanon focusing on the role of trade unions and international institutions before, during, and after the uprisings in the Arab Middle East.

The Egyptian case suggests that when global labor focuses on trade union pluralism and freedom of association in a given country, it can lower the costs of defecting from the established trade union federation and give competing unionists a domestic and international discourse to latch on to. The Tunisian case suggests that a focus on capacity building and trade union cohesion, including continued international legitimacy, can raise the cost of defection, leaving more trade unionists affiliated with the legacy union.²

Each of these outcomes has less-recognized policy implications, despite global labor's underestimation of its own capacity to make a difference in quasi-authoritarian contexts.³ Trade union pluralism and the freedom of association may produce more internal democracy and the flourishing of new workers' organizations. It may also fracture the movement such that it cannot advocate for its members. Union cohesion, capacity building, and international legitimacy may help sustain authoritarian unions that suppress workers. However, they may also allow unions the internal cohesion to seize new opportunities, initiate reforms, and weather national crises.

While the concept of "democracy promotion" has become contentious in academic literature in recent years, it remains a touchstone of US and EU foreign policy.⁴ Both rhetorical and material support that flowed from global labor into trade unions in Egypt and Tunisia came from funds earmarked for democracy promotion. As I address in this article, incentivizing trade union behavior can influence the transition to democracy, but not always in predictable ways. In addition to highlighting an important set of cases for scholars of global labor, Egypt and Tunisia may serve as cautionary tales for policymakers interested in using trade unionism as a mechanism for democratization.

Existing Theory

Researchers have debated the importance of international institutions in empowering local activists. Early research focused on the impact of international institutions on cooperation among states.⁵ An alternative track explored the role and reach of international "regimes," those sets of rules that structured and guided segments of international and domestic policy. Finally, a research program on transnational advocacy networks, those groups "organized to promote causes, principled ideas, and norms," addressed how these regimes were built.⁶ Labor relations is understudied in the international relations literature. Even those scholars who have taken a normative position in favor of transnational advocacy and the emergence of labor relations regimes state that "no fully effective system has emerged."⁷ Where an international labor regime has emerged, it has been tied specifically to trade agreements.⁸ Trade agreements have been a widely contested and weak method of forming a labor standard regime.⁹ A second effort has