

Tunisians Turn to Everyday Matters

By THOMAS FULLER

TUNIS — Bakers have threatened to stop making baguettes unless their salaries are increased. Lawyers demanding judicial independence protested outside the Justice Ministry. Unemployed miners slept in the halls of the headquarters of a phosphate mining company, demanding more jobs.

A month after Tunisians toppled their authoritarian president, sending shock waves across the Arab world, many are discovering that may have been the easy part.

With restrictions on the media lifted and freedom of speech flourishing, the cork has popped on years of bottled-up demands over salaries, working conditions and other grievances.

Tunisians seem torn between a desire to fully eradicate the remnants of the previous government and a pining for stability.

Even as a fragile caretaker government begins the daunting task of rewriting the Constitution and preparing for elections still months away, it faces a crush of immediate demands for jobs, economic improvement and security. The challenges of balancing revolutionary ideals with bread-and-butter issues may provide a glimpse of what lies ahead for Egyptians as their political transition unfolds.

“We are only starting now to think about the future,” said Mahmoud Ben Romdhane, a former university professor who heads the [Mouvement Ettajdid](#), or Renewal Movement, a left-leaning political party. The danger, he said, is that “the revolutionary dynamic can go on forever.”

On Sunday, as sanitation workers cleaned up fetid piles of garbage that had accumulated during several days of strikes, Foreign Minister Ahmed Ounaiss resigned after his staff refused to work with him. Mr. Ounaiss “was not worthy of the revolution,” one Foreign Ministry official was quoted as saying.

Among other perceived transgressions, Mr. Ounaiss had reportedly refused to refer to last month’s events as a “revolution.”

As those events recede into history, the political battles here have turned to defining the past as much as creating a future.

At least 219 people were killed during the protests that led to [the ouster of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, a United Nations](#) investigation found. Before he fled into exile in Saudi Arabia on Jan. 14, he had ruled for 23 years.

“We don’t want power ever to be that centralized again,” Mr. Ben Romdhane said.

But a consensus on where to go from here is still far off. Politicians banned under the old government, many of them Islamists, have been steadily arriving from European capitals where they lived in exile. The role of Islamism in the new order remains an open question in what has been a relatively secular society.

The government has appointed a commission to draft a constitution and says it expects to hold elections in five or six months.

Dreams of a more inclusive political system are intertwined with the desire for more and better jobs, a difficult wish to fulfill at the best of times, let alone during a tumultuous political transition.

The same groups of young people who last month swarmed the streets shouting, "Get Out!" gathered Saturday evening with a new chant: "Unemployed!"

"The unemployed gained nothing from the revolution," said Hamdi Tarek, 29, who works sporadically hawking vegetables and clothing on the streets of Tunis, the capital. "We're still waiting. We are waiting for work."

The Tunisian economy has been one of the most competitive in the Arab world and [Tunisia's](#) finances are relatively sound. The official unemployment rate is 14 percent but it is estimated to be as high as 30 percent in the impoverished and restive hinterland, where the upheaval began with [the self-immolation of a fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi](#), after a fight with a local official.

His suicide, the symbol of daily humiliations and petty corruption by low-level officials, was the catalyst for protests that spread from the countryside to the capital and then on to Egypt and across the Arab world.

Today, the caretaker government is facing a power vacuum in the less-developed areas inland. Governors from the old government were fired, but new ones have yet to be appointed.

In Tunis, too, fears of the lack of government have taken hold. The police force is understaffed because officers are refusing to show up, in some cases out of fear of popular resentment of their role as guardians of the previous government.

"This is not democracy; this is disorder," said Hamdouni, a saleswoman at a cellphone shop who gave only one name. "We are all waiting for the return of order."

The shop, like many businesses in Tunis, closes early these days out of fears of insecurity.

About 11,000 inmates were reported to have escaped or been released from prisons during the turmoil, a statistic often cited here by those who say they are more fearful of crime. Many inmates have since returned to prison and a nighttime curfew officially starts at midnight, but streets are empty well before then.

In the weeks since Mr. Ben Ali fled, protesters have clashed with the police in several provincial cities, leaving at least two people dead.

The Tunisian news media have reported that some of the violence was provoked by elements of the ancien régime seeking to undermine the new government and justify a return to dictatorship. Last week the government [called up military reservists](#) to help maintain order.