

# A Change of Power: Morocco after Benkirane's Ouster

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Brief Analysis

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In mid-March, the Moroccan King Mohammed VI invoked Article Forty-Seven of the 2011 Constitution to remove President Abdelilah Benkirane from his post. The king asked the career politician from relatively modest means in Rabat-Salé to step down despite appointing him for a second term, his party winning the popular vote, and the king's commitment to democratic reforms during Morocco's 2011 Arab Spring. The purpose was to remove an impediment to the Justice and Development Party's (PJD) negotiations of a coalition government. However, questions remain over why the monarch did not employ a tactic that might be perceived abroad and at home to be less of an affront to democratic ideals. In this analysis, I seek answers in the internal circumstances and forces surrounding the event and examine the likelihood of Morocco remaining a stable partner in an unstable region.

Aziz Akhannouch, a pro-business friend of King Mohammed VI, was the instrument of Benkirane's demise. Despite Akhannouch's National Rally of Independents Party (RNI) not winning a popular mandate, he blocked Benkirane's new coalition after destroying another previously agreed-upon one. Following the October 2016 election, Benkirane negotiated the inclusion of the RNI and Popular Movement (MP) but refused the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), whom Akhannouch preferred rather than the Progress and Socialism Party (PPS). Siding with the RNI were the USFP, the Constitutional Union (UC), and the MP. What is not clear is why Akhannouch commanded so much power considering the RNI did not have the votes. It may be because of his close relationship to royal authority commonly described as the Makhzen.

The PJD's and RNI's leaders are from opposite ends of the political spectrum. Benkirane's and the relatively moderate Islamic PJD party's platform is based on religiously-guided principles, transparency, anti-nepotism, and anti-corruption. Both internal and external critics, including the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, and the United States Department of State, have investigated and continue to monitor Morocco's problems with corruption and lack of transparency in the administration, security forces, and judiciary. The problems provoked anti-government demonstrations during Morocco's Arab Spring and its constitutional referendum. Though ultimately constrained by the power distribution in the 2011 Constitution, the PJD is democratically elected, and virtually the only political party in the Moroccan Parliament popularly believed to be relatively independent of the Makhzen. The PJD has also been able to evade major corruption complaints, unlike many of its rivals. Their win of the popular vote

consistently since 2011 suggests the Moroccan public's interest in reform and equitable distribution of funding and opportunities outside of the ages-old circles of the politically privileged.

However, the PJD and Benkirane may have lost some political ground since 2011 thanks to certain policies and their leader's behavior. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) forced the PJD and Benkirane into balancing the budget. Austerity measures included decreased education funding, government workers' retirement, and cuts in subventions on staples like flour and petrol, which King Mohammed VI maintained or enacted to placate his populace. The PJD also annoyed some women's rights groups and has disappointed oppositional organizations like February 20. Finally, Benkirane has had a testy relationship with Moroccan Amazigh minority groups thanks to what were perceived as insulting statements about Berber culture and language. The loss of political popularity or, at least the media images thereof, may have emboldened Benkirane's opposition.

Perhaps the final nails in his political coffin were hammered down as Benkirane repeatedly embarrassed King Mohammed VI. Benkirane criticized Russia for its actions in Syria only months after the monarch courted Russian investment and tourism. Benkirane spoke against China during the same year that the king finalized the Chinese government-backed Cité Mohammed VI Tanger Tech. Benkirane spoke out of turn again as Morocco negotiated German financing for Noor Ouarzazate IV, the solar power plant in the Drâa-Tafilalet.

The RNI, on the other hand, is resolutely secular and aligned with the Makhzen's pro-development approach, though they have been implicated in corruption scandals. The RNI is a center-right, royalist political party founded in the late 1970s by Ahmed Osman, the brother-in-law of King Mohammed VI's father, King Hassan II. Akhannouch took over from Salaheddine Mezouar, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and former Minister of Finance and the Economy known for large bonuses he gave to himself and Nouredine Bensouda, the Moroccan General Treasurer, in 2012.

Akhannouch is an elite with close ties to the throne. According to the website for the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, of which Akhannouch is the minister, he is a member of the Tafraout Municipal Council and former President of the Souss-Massa Draâ Regional Council. Akhannouch is also the CEO of the Akwa Holding Group, a Moroccan conglomerate with approximately fifty companies and profits stemming from the oil, gas, telecommunications, tourism, hotels, and real estate industries and sectors. He is a director of the BMCE Bank, a former director of the Bank Al Maghrib, and a former Chairman of the Petroleum Group of Morocco (GPM). Akhannouch's connections to the Makhzen stretch back to the 1990s. In 1999 he was a member of the Reflection Group, a type of think tank of future royal advisors formed under the late King Hassan II. The group is commonly known as the G14 and it includes scions of elite families who were charged with modernizing and reforming the Moroccan economy.

Development runs in the family. Akhannouch is married to Salwa Idrissi, the CEO of Aksal Holding Group with stakes in the Casablanca Morocco Mall, among other commercial centers. Aksal holds exclusive Moroccan franchises for clothing and accessory stores like the Gap, Zara, and Galeries Lafayette. Wessel Capital, a private equity investment fund between the Moroccan government and the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, created a joint-venture company with Aksal to build another mall near the Bouregreg River in Rabat. In late 2015, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and its Plan Maroc Vert (Green Morocco Plan) were implicated in a corruption scandal that included officials or inspectors taking bribes to avoid inspections or to turn a blind eye towards violations. Akhannouch ordered a full investigation. However, it is difficult to find the results and how, if any, penalties were imposed. The particulars of the violations are underreported and one wonders if food security and environmental laws were compromised. In short, rather than reform, Akhannouch and the RNI represent a pre-2011 business-as-usual approach.

Benkirane's removal serves several purposes. It concretely demonstrates the Makhzen's control over domestic and international audiences. The removal also finalizes Benkirane's scapegoat status for the austerity measures and

paves the way for a pro-business coalition that may be less concerned with human and environmental rights.

If this is the case, then the new coalition may get more than they wish. Undermining the democratic process and a party believed to check corruption may encourage further discontent, like that surrounding the gruesome death of fishmonger Mouhcine Fikri in al Hoceima, especially if jobs or an equitable dispersal of them do not materialize and only the elite benefit from the government's new direction. Moroccans protested in the streets after Fikri was crushed by a trash compactor in October 2016 and videos and representations of his death went viral on the Internet.

Dissatisfaction and resistance may be expressed in another more devastating way. According to a November 2014 Telquel article and 2015 Soufan Group and 2014 Northern Observatory of Human Rights (ONERDH) studies, thousands of Moroccans, reportedly for financial reasons, joined Islamic State fighters in Middle Eastern territories, including at least some Moroccans from Tangier and Al Hociema. In February of this year, Telquel also published an article describing the dismantling of what are described as terrorist cells, including in El Jadida about eleven miles from the Jorf Lasfar port and its oil and phosphates storage. If the Moroccan government at its highest levels encourages cronyism and subversion of the democratic process, then the base searching for human rights and dignity may move out from under it. ❖

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