

The Moroccan King Dismisses an Islamist Prime Minister

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Articles & Testimony

Given the PJD's popularity, the king's decision is surprising and seemingly risky, but the Islamist party may choose to accept the compromise and move forward.

On Wednesday, March 15, the King of Morocco, Mohamed VI, dismissed Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane of the leading legal Islamist party, the Justice and Development Party (PJD) from his post. The dismissal comes after five months of stalled talks on the new coalition government since the PJD's sweeping victory in the October 2016 legislative elections. Morocco's electoral system and laws are designed such that no one party can win an absolute majority in the parliament, necessitating the formation of coalition governments.

The king today received PJD's president of the national council, and former foreign minister, Saadeddine Othmani at the royal palace of Casablanca, and named him as the new head of government -- in keeping with the king's original pledge to name another member of the PJD to replace Benkirane and form a government. The Islamist party is in a corner. Benkirane has been an important figure in the PJD; his leadership style, speeches, and his way with party devotees have been partly credited for the party's campaign and electoral success. Othmani has a softer reputation within the party, differing from the more militant party cadres, understood as somewhat of a "rival" to Benkirane, and reputed to be more accommodating than his colleagues. Unlike Benkirane, Othmani is known less for his demagoguery than his religious scholarship, and is a founding member of the PJD's religious wing, Tawhid wal Islah.

The king's move is surprising, and seemingly risky, given the PJD's popularity. We will know soon enough the PJD's next moves and whether the party will accept the new terms. While developments still unfold, what is sure is that the king still holds ultimate veto, and has been emboldened to use it.

They Had It Coming?

In 2011, Morocco saw milder "Arab spring"-influenced protests where pro-democracy movements called for greater power to be devolved to parliament. The king quickly responded with a constitutional reform referendum

which would allow for direct election of the lower chamber, where the PM would be drawn from the majority party. The king appointed Benkirane as PM after his party's resounding victory in the parliamentary elections later that year. The country saw its first elected (and first Islamist) Prime Minister, which also gave the PJD an unprecedented chance to head a coalition government.

While the PJD victory was therefore momentous, the [2011 reforms \(http://www.fpri.org/article/2016/09/taking-stock-u-s-policy-options-algeria-morocco-tunisia/\)](http://www.fpri.org/article/2016/09/taking-stock-u-s-policy-options-algeria-morocco-tunisia/) did not otherwise attenuate the king's hold on the economy, the judiciary, the armed forces, and certainly not on parliament. In fact, the introduction of cosmetically democratic institutions cemented Mohammed VI's public approval, provided him a scapegoat, and suspended further democratic shifts.

Over the course of the PJD's tenure, the party has been in silent dispute with the Palace and its circle of loyalist parties. In contending with the limited tools in his formal arsenal, Benkirane has employed an unconventional practice of publicly disclosing tensions with the Palace, discreetly highlighting to the polity the Palace's '*tahakoum*' -- or the extent to which it maintains a hold on governance and politics -- thus the limitations on parliament, on its own governing coalition, and even on the party's ability to enact more "Islamist" legislation. It also works to bring attention to the Palace's lack of accountability.

Benkirane's speeches were often more accessible than those of other politicians, using the Moroccan dialect (known as Darija), a simpler vocabulary, and a jocund demeanor with which the population could identify. This discourse has worked to erode the consensus around the king's enigma, thereby demystifying him. While Benkirane often reveled in this iconoclastic role, he would however often backpedal, qualifying his statements if he sensed that he had pushed his limits, underlining his role as the king's subject, or reassuring that his words had been misunderstood. This cycle has fed Benkirane's, and the PJD's, experimentation with the sorts of new and changing boundaries in Moroccan politics.

King's Veto

The Palace and the PJD have needed each other as mutually-legitimizing forces, and the king's "alliance" with a genuinely popular party has worked, to a degree, to maintain the country's political stability; the Palace has therefore been careful about efforts to weaken or to delegitimize the Islamists being obvious or heavy-handed. Still, the last thing the Palace wanted was this *de facto* power-sharing situation with a party like the PJD, and prefers to be in such an arrangement with an actor it can better control.

Indeed, the PJD in January 2017 paused negotiations due to their inability to come to an agreement with Aziz Akhanouch of the National Rally of Independents (RNI) -- a monarchist party formed in 1978 by the brother-in-law of then-King Hassan II. Indeed, Othmani is reputed to have a better working relationship with Akhanouch than Benkirane. Akhanouch's sudden appearance on the political scene and seemingly out-of-nowhere election to the RNI just around the October elections was widely seen as a way for the Palace to counter the Islamists within a future coalition, and to paint a picture of PJD culpability in the stalled talks.

This impasse has been complicated by the fact that the Moroccan constitution does not seem to plainly delineate protocol in such a contingency, where the head of government is unable to form a government, leaving the king to adjudicate on the text. He had three options in this regard. First, he could intervene to demand that negotiations resume under Benkirane's direction, lest the king appoint an interim PM from outside the party. A second less likely option was to call for another round of elections with a new prime minister, which would have been risky given the PJD's past electoral success and popular support. The least costly option has thus been to "compromise" by removing Benkirane, but remaining within the (albeit hazy) constitutional confines by keeping the party itself in "power."

This move has kept risks to political stability and costs to the monarch at bay, but it is more tenuous for the Islamist party. On Saturday, March 18, the party **will decide** (<https://www.facebook.com/PJD.central/videos/1323172454416555/>) how to respond to the king's communicate. In a less likely scenario, it can refuse the dismissal (and Othmani's appointment) and return to the opposition, which risks further marginalization, defections by pro-participation members, intra-party divisions, and an uncertain political trajectory thereafter. Or, it can accept, which also imposes costs: it may erode the party's legitimacy among ranks and sympathizers, weaken its standing in the future coalition, and leave it standing enfeebled under a less charismatic, if consensus-minded, figurehead.

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