

Morocco's Governing Islamists Remain Vulnerable

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Brief Analysis

The Islamists who lead Morocco's current government remain in power only by the skin of their teeth, and recent events indicate they may be vulnerable in the future.

Editor's note: This piece has been updated since publication to reflect facts that were not available at the time of writing.

On September 6, Morocco's governing Islamist faction, the Justice and Development Party (PJD), responded to months of pressure by securing assurance of a coalition settlement with the National Rally of Independents (RNI), a centrist opposition party. The agreement will likely maintain PJD leader Abdelilah Benkirane as prime minister and should preclude early elections. The two parties are now discussing how they will install various RNI members in key foreign affairs, commerce, and education posts. Most important, Moroccan media sources believe that RNI head Salah Eddine Mezouar will most likely be named finance minister, though this is contested. The country's ruler, King Muhammad VI, will decide whether to approve the position changes later this week, when he will have to consider popular complaints regarding Mezouar's personal use of public funds.

In line with Morocco's political culture of late, the king did not take official steps to build pressure on the PJD, since the Islamists were unlikely to be ousted by force or decree. Instead, several factors have combined to weaken the party and potentially remove it from office, including the departure of a coalition ally earlier this summer, laggard progress on reform, and a domino effect moving westward from Tunisia (where the governing Islamist party has been weakened and discredited) and Egypt.

SUMMER PRESSURES

Two of the variables that have been pressuring the PJD are old news, but they served as prime catalysts for its latest predicament. First, when the Istiqlal (Independence) Party announced that it would withdraw from the ruling coalition in May, it was certainly a roadblock, but few believed the move would lead the PJD to its current point

of desperation. Following the announcement, however, Istiqlal gradually removed its members from various ministry posts throughout the summer, on the grounds that Benkirane was unwilling to share power with coalition partners and had failed to adequately address Morocco's lingering economic and social issues (e.g., pension reform, corruption, unemployment, education). This not only left the PJD scrambling to find a new coalition partner, but also further distracted it from reform efforts. And as the party appeared increasingly isolated and directionless, public opinion began to turn against it.

Second, when Tamarod Maroc -- a copycat of the Egyptian Tamarod (rebellion) movement that led to Muhammad Morsi's July ouster -- took root in Morocco, its goal was to unseat the PJD through parliamentary means, not force. Yet as the summer unfolded, the palace seemed to signal that it envisioned the PJD either stepping down or holding early elections. The Tamarod's following was weak, but the movement has served another purpose of late: that of a bandwagon for secular opposition parties. Istiqlal's withdrawal coincided with the Tamarod's rise, leading many to believe that they are collaborating. And other opposition factions such as the Party of Authenticity and Modernity and the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) have begun overtly cooperating with the movement. Meanwhile, the *makhzen* (i.e., the king and his circle) continue to use their allied parties -- which are reticent to share power with an Islamist government, however moderate and willing to yield to royal primacy it may be -- and the Tamarod to weaken popular support for the PJD.

BUMPY TALKS TAKE A TOLL

When Istiqlal left the coalition, the PJD turned to the RNI, another centrist, monarchist party. Yet talks between the two factions have gone far from smoothly. RNI accused Benkirane of intentional fastidiousness by asking Mezouar to submit a written outline of his vision for the next coalition government, and then asking for even greater detail on how exactly he would go about remedying unemployment, increasing the gross domestic product growth rate, and curtailing inflation. Even before entering coalition talks, the RNI had already stated its preconditions for redesigning government programs the PJD had originally hoped to champion, so Benkirane's request seemed like mere posturing.

After four failed negotiations over the past month, the prospects for a coalition appeared to dim. Several PJD officials expressed concern over the impasse. And while both sides were to blame for the delay, the PJD's other coalition partners -- the Popular Movement and the Party for Progress and Socialism -- pressured Benkirane alone to either speed up negotiations or accept defeat and activate other options available in the constitution.

Moroccan media speculated that the RNI was delaying the process in order to discredit and embarrass the PJD. After all, the RNI was formed by relatives of, and politicians favored by, the palace; its original function was as a counterweight to parties critical of the monarchy. It may be no coincidence, then, that Mezouar echoed Istiqlal head Hamid Chabat in expressing concerns about Benkirane's proposed economic policies.

Although the talks accelerated dramatically last week, the PJD seemed unlikely to emerge as head of the new coalition. If the reported ministerial appointments are approved -- including Mezouar being named finance minister -- it will represent a significant concession to the RNI. Ever since Istiqlal relinquished the strategically crucial finance post this summer, the PJD had been vying for it in the hope of asserting greater control over the country's economic policies.

IN THE KING'S HANDS

Amid denunciations from Mezouar, Chabat, and others, the PJD received a biting public critique of its performance from the palace itself. In an August 20 speech, the king censured the state of Moroccan education as "worse now than twenty years ago," citing the PJD's ineffectuality as the cause. Yet a cursory glance at World Bank or UN Development Programme data shows marked improvement over the past two decades, as well as little change

in either direction from 2010 to 2012 (the PJD took office in 2011).

To be sure, one would have to control for many factors to get a true picture of the party's effect on education after only two years in office. Yet efforts to blame the PJD alone for the perceived lack of improvement in that sector indicate a purely political agenda; after all, dramatic change in such a short time would have been unrealistic. The National Charter for Education and Training -- implemented in 1999, just as the king was ascending to the throne -- has been subject to failures, party politics, and redrafts since its inception. And never has one party been singled out as the sole culprit for these problems and hit with the type of scathing criticisms that abounded in the August 20 royal speech. Yet the king, conveniently above party politics, also stated, "What we do not need are disgraceful disputes that lead nowhere, except to settling scores, defamation, and calumny. Such disputes only complicate problems instead of solving them."

In response to these pressures, Benkirane expressed hope that the palace would settle the dispute between the RNI and the PJD, in what appeared to be an ultimate show of defeat. Yet unlike past royal interventions to help prime ministers -- such as Abbas al-Fassi (Istiqlal) or Abderrahman Youssufi (USFP) -- fix their discordant coalitions, the king was not inclined to pull strings for his ideological opposite, Benkirane.

In contrast to other recently weakened Islamist governments in the region, the PJD appeared to decide that it would go out without a fight -- a testament to its deference to Morocco's true power-wielders. Even as it muddled through negotiations, it was poised for defeat by the sweeping force of popular anti-Islamists, monarchist political parties, and the king. Tellingly, Benkirane told supporters at the party's recent annual National Youth Forum to be ready for the possibility of a new government and early elections.

None of the conditions precipitating the PJD's bind would have been possible without the king's tacit approval. Despite emerging as the "king's Islamists" in 2011, the party will exit the political showdown as a weaker player -- with a despondent constituency, diminished bargaining power, and, gravest of all, the king's apparent eagerness to curb Islamism. The palace was almost certainly involved in Istiqlal's departure from the PJD's coalition in May, so there is little reason to believe the new coalition will have a different outcome. In all likelihood, then, this latest hiccup for the PJD is just one of many to come.

Vish Sakthivel is a Next Generation Fellow at The Washington Institute. She would like to thank research assistant Jeremy Brinster for his help with this article. ❖

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