

Morocco's Islamists Rescued from Early Elections

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Brief Analysis

The governing Islamist party will emerge from recent setbacks as a much weaker player, and more obstacles are likely to come.

Today, Morocco's Islamist prime minister Abdelilah Benkirane -- elected in 2011 following mass demonstrations led by the February 20 Movement (M20F) -- experienced some relief amid a series of drawn-out, contentious coalition negotiations with the centrist opposition party, the National Rally of Independents (RNI). The resultant agreement precludes the early elections that were believed to be inevitable after another monarchist faction, the Istiqlal (Independence) Party, left the coalition months ago. It worked to somewhat settle what many thought would be the end of Benkirane's governing Justice and Development Party (PJD).

The pressure the PJD faced -- either to step down, hold early elections, or cut a deal with the opposition -- stemmed from several factors. First, events in Cairo paved the way for Morocco's secular opposition movements to draw comparisons between Egyptian president Muhammad Morsi and Benkirane, providing a rationale for Istiqlal's departure.

Second, when the Moroccan Tamarod (rebellion) movement -- a copycat of the Egyptian Tamarod that legitimized Morsi's overthrow -- was formed, King Muhammad VI still appeared to favor the PJD as a legitimizing buttress. The king presumably never wanted an Islamist government under him, but the PJD's ascension provided a way to co-opt significant Islamist opposition and create a semblance of meeting M20F's democratic demands while retaining ultimate veto power. However, after Istiqlal's move to the opposition, Morsi's ouster in Egypt, and the emergence of Morocco's own Tamarod, the king's favor for PJD visibly dissipated, and the Tamarod took on a new role: a bandwagon for the secular opposition.

Third, the king's disdain for the PJD became clear in an August 20 speech condemning the state of Moroccan education as a result of the party's lackluster governance. The fact that education reform has been fraught with party politicking and inefficacy for decades indicates that the tirade was more a political tool than anything else.

Fourth, the talks between the PJD and the RNI had been moving very slowly, upping the pressure on Benkirane. Each side accused the other of posturing and intransigence, imposing one precondition after another. Interestingly, the RNI was formed by palace favorites, with the original purpose of acting as a counterweight to groups critical of the monarchy and the *makhzen* (i.e., Morocco's "deep state," including the king, his circle, the military, and the police). This provides an interesting context for the flailing talks, not to mention the larger culmination of events that threatened to number the PJD's days in office.

At one point almost admitting defeat, Benkirane declared that he would put his faith in the king to intervene and settle the dispute. Instead, the PJD assented to the RNI installing one of its own (perhaps party secretary Salaheddine Mezouar) as finance minister -- a very influential and strategic post that had previously been held by an unaffiliated technocrat.

Following today's turn of events, two things are certain. First, none of the conditions that put the PJD in a bind would have been possible without the king's tacit assent and keenness to nip Islamism in the bud. Second, the PJD, which appeared to be the "King's Islamists" in 2011, will emerge from this series of setbacks a much weaker player, especially since more obstacles are likely to come.

Vish Sakthivel is a Next Generation Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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