

The Limits of Morocco's "Exceptional" Stability: Post-election Deadlock, Contestation on the Periphery and Foreign Policy Dilemmas

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Moroccan politics in 2016 were marked at the institutional level by developments leading up to and following the 7 October legislative elections, the last quarter, therefore, seeing the year's most decisive events. The deadlock in negotiations to form a government after the country had gone to the ballot boxes coincided with another two crises with far-reaching consequences and potentially long trajectories. The first was connected with the country's territorial governance and relations between the centre and the periphery, and the second, with the balance between the two structural priorities of Rabat's foreign policy, managing the Western Sahara conflict on the international level and maintaining privileged relations with the European Union (EU). There was a certain sense of ratification about the October 2016 elections, as the second legislative elections after the region was shaken by the "Arab Spring" and the accelerated constitutional reform pushed through by King Mohammed VI in 2011 to deactivate the Moroccan version of this protest wave, led by the February 20 Movement. The previous legislative elections in November 2011 brought the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) and its leader Abdelilah Benkirane to power for the first time, a result of the new constitution's provision to assign a representative from the largest party as the head of the cabinet, together with the "spring" tide sweeping through the region at the time. Five years later, however, the winds of regional and domestic politics were blowing in a very different direction. With the Islamists ousted from power in Tunisia and Egypt, and politics in Rabat thrown into disarray

by rifts between government coalition members and Benkirane's shifting compliance with the palace, the King and his entourage felt that the PJD had served its subordinate function – to help contain political discontent by staging change – and reached the end of its line. It was now time for life to settle back to normal with an election victory for the official Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM), which had lagged behind the PJD in second place in the September 2015 local and regional elections.

Bipolarization and Unintended Consequences

From the end of 2015, political debate had been dominated by the idea – or rather the question or attempted self-fulfilling prophecy – of the "bipolarization" of Morocco's historically crowded party system, in light of the PJD and PAM's growing dominance over the other parties. Most pundits connected this bipolarization with political fractures regarding territory (cities vs the rural world) and ideology (conservatism vs social, not economic, liberalism), the PJD and PAM embodying the first and second of these two poles respectively. The PJD preferred to talk about bipolarization between the parties with long-established "democratic" credentials, such as itself and the successors of the old opposition (Istiqlal Party [PI], Socialist Union of Popular Forces [USFP], Party of Progress and Socialism [PPS]), and the palace-friendly "administration parties" set up at different times in history (Popular Movement [MP], National Rally of Independents [RNI]), of which the PAM would be the most recent embodiment (Desrues, 2016).

In any case, bipolarization was the premise for Morocco's different political actors ahead of the new

electoral cycle in 2016. The first and most powerful of these actors was the state administration itself, which, at the behest of the monarchy, leaned towards the PAM. For example, the extensive restructuring which saw the Interior Ministry relocate more than twenty provincial governors in March was interpreted as an attempt to favour victory for the PAM in rural areas, against the interests of the PJD and bypassing Benkirane. The organization and overseeing of the elections themselves produced tensions between the Justice and Interior Ministries, showing how the latter was now beyond the Prime Minister's control. With the campaign approaching, in mid-September, a demonstration was called against the "Islamization of the State," Benkirane and the PJD, which had all the hallmarks of being orchestrated from above (*Orient XXI*, 4/10/2016). The PJD responded to the administration's lack of neutrality launching diatribes against the so-called *at-tahakkum* (remote control), a new formula to oppose the persistent authoritarianism verging on the politically incorrect which became a rallying cry during the campaign.

However, in October, the PJD emerged victorious from the elections once again, thwarting the palace's plans as it had in 2011. Furthermore, the PJD improved its 2011 results, increasing its 22.8% share of the votes to 27.1% in local constituencies and winning 125 seats (31.6% of a total 395) in the House of Representatives (lower house), up from 107. It also took a clear lead over the PAM, which, despite doubling its representation, finished with 102 deputies. This was indeed, in relative terms, a parliamentary bipolarization, with considerable seat losses for the traditional parties such as: the PI (from 60 to 46), the RNI (from 52 to 37), the MP (from 32 to 27), the PPS (from 18 to 12) and, especially, the USFP (from 39 to 20). Nonetheless, the discursive strategy seeking the bipolarization of Moroccan politics, designed at the highest level to catapult the PAM as an anti-Islamist and "liberal" opponent to the PJD, had the unintended consequence of bolstering the latter by allowing it to present itself to its voters as the victim of *at-tahakkum*.

The PJD and Benkirane's persistent popularity still came as a surprise, however, after enduring five years at the head – although often not in control – of a subordinate and unstable government, in which it was unable to keep promises on the fight against corruption and had to push through unpopular eco-

nomic measures, such as the removal of fuel subsidies or the pension system reform. Votes and seats aside, what stood out in these elections was, yet again, the extremely low turnout, well below the official figure of 43%, misleadingly calculated from the number of voters registered on an electoral roll (15.7 million), from which roughly a third of Moroccans with a right to vote (22.9 million) were absent. The actual turnout would have been around 29.5% (López García and Hernando de Larramendi, 2017).

Sabotage in the Formation of the Government

The next episode was the troubled negotiations to form a coalition government with which the King tasked Benkirane, as the leader of the most voted party. From the outset, there were signs that the maths for reaching a majority were not going to be straightforward, as the PAM's self-exclusion and the other parties' scant parliamentary representation meant PJD had to form pacts with more members than in the previous legislature, in which its two coalitions were quadripartite (PJD-PI-MP-PPS and PJD-RNI-MP-PPS). What did not enter into Benkirane's calculations was that some of the former government members, despite having lost considerable weight in terms of seats, set him impossible conditions to revalidate their alliance. This was particularly the case of the RNI and its new leader Aziz Akhannouch, the Agriculture Minister, millionaire businessman and known confidant of Mohammed VI.

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His first demand was for the PI to be excluded from the budding coalition, a request made easier to accept by the untimely and shocking statements made by the leader of this party, Hamid Chabat, in which he made claims for the territory of neighbouring Mauritania against Morocco's official stance and any kind of diplomacy. The second and least viable

of Akhannouch's conditions, the integration of the USFP into the cabinet, which was no longer mathematically necessary and flatly rejected by the PJD, was the last straw for Benkirane, who threw in the towel in January 2017.

The widely accepted reading of events was that Akhannouch was sabotaging negotiations to form a government on behalf of the palace and that the five-month deadlock caused by his demands was nothing more than an underground "lopsided struggle" (Monjib, 2017) between the monarchy and the PJD, or at least Benkirane's PJD. The outcome of what some were quick to brand as a "white coup" (Ali Anuzla in *Al-Arabi al-Yadid*, 22/11/2016) would arrive in March 2017 from the hand of the King, who officially sacked Benkirane as head of government and replaced him with his coreligionist Saad Ed-dine el-Othmani. PJD's number two, soon revealed his more accommodating profile giving in to Akhannouch's demands and forming a six-party coalition, in the midst of a major crisis and split in his own. In perspective, the monarchy's undisguised efforts to again impose its own political rules on the government and parties pointed towards an unabashed consolidation of authoritarianism in Morocco, at a time when the official discourse was laying decreasing emphasis on the idea of the "democratic transition." The old slogan of the "Moroccan exception" was being reduced to the areas of security and stability.

Crises on the Periphery and in Foreign Policy

Meanwhile, on the country's northern periphery, political calm was thrown into disarray at the end of October 2016, sparked by an incident involving a police officer in Al Hoceima which ended with the gruesome death of a fish vendor, Mohsen Fikri, who was crushed in a rubbish compactor while trying to rescue confiscated wares. The feeling of *hogra* or humiliation at such an abuse of power triggered a wave of protests the likes of which had not been seen since the February 20 Movement protests in 2011. However, although the initial demonstrations spread to Morocco's major cities (Rabat, Marrakech, Casablanca, Tangier), the response soon adopted an Amazigh ethnic and Riffian regionalist identity. The cycle of demonstrations continued for months in the

epicentre of Al Hoceima demanding, aside from justice for this and other cases of police violence, an end to the "militarization" of the Rif, the curbing of corruption, economic development and improvements to the region's "neglected" public services. On a deeper level, the young activists questioned the role of the new Riffian elite, co-opted by the regime – overwhelmingly dominated by the presence of the PAM as a party – and the region's "reconciliation" as promised by Mohammed VI, decrying that, in reality, "this has only happened (...) with certain individuals" (interview with Nasser Zafzafi in *El Español*, 9/1/2017). They thus revealed "the Moroccan State's continuing problem to govern over the periphery and the limited changes introduced to its form of governance" (Suárez-Collado, 2017).

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Looking to the south, and the deadlocked dispute over the Western Sahara, in 2016 the authorities in Rabat gave two timid – and perhaps misleading – steps to liberalize their *domestic* management of the occupied territory, but saw their international management complicated by new diplomatic crises with the UN and EU. The advances heralded the first opening of a Sahrawi pro-independence association in Laayoune, verbally authorized the previous year, the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Gross Violations of Human Rights Committed by the Moroccan State (ASVDH) (EFE, 19/5/2016), and saw the repeal of sentences handed down by a military court to 25 Sahrawis, for incidents that took place during the 2010 Gdeim Izik protests, who would now have to be retried by a civil court. Putting an end to military trials of civilians and legalizing these kinds of Sahrawi associations were two of the three conditions laid down by the US President Barack Obama to Mohammed VI in November 2013, in exchange for not requesting the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) mandate be extended to human rights monitoring, a secret verbal

agreement that was later revealed in leaked documents (Fernández-Molina, 2016).

However, these conciliatory gestures coincided with a sharp rise in tensions with the UN, with which relations had already been thorny since 2012. In March, Morocco expelled civilian MINURSO personnel, angrily responding to statements made by the Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon during his visit to the Tindouf refugee camps in Algeria, in which he spoke of the “occupation” of the Western Sahara. But the most far-reaching external crisis in the long run was to arrive in December with the European Court of Justice's ruling that no EU-Morocco cooperation agreement could be applied to the above-mentioned non-autonomous territory. By setting a precedent and legally requiring the EU to distinguish between products and economic activities from the internationally-recognized Morocco and disputed Western Sahara, the ruling fired the starting gun for a lengthy legal battle.

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Rabat's foreign policy was about to enter uncharted territory and one plagued with dilemmas, as for the first time the two guiding roles of the State since independence as *champion of territorial integrity* and *Europe/the EU's model student* (Fernández-Molina, 2016), were in danger of colliding head-on. The un-

expected “anti-colonial” and “anti-West” turn taken in 2015-2016, at least in terms of discourse and gestures – Mohammed VI's visits to Russia, China and Sub-Saharan Africa and an official request to join the African Union – was seemingly supportive of this direction.

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