

# Morocco's Islamists: Bucking the trend?

Anouar Boukhars

»» Like their Islamist counterparts in Egypt and Tunisia, Morocco's Party of Justice and Development (PJD) rode the 2011 wave of popular protests to become the largest party in parliament (winning 107 of a total of 395 seats). That result forced an unenthusiastic King Mohammed VI to appoint the PJD's leader, Abdelillah Benkirane, to head a new government in November 2011. By summer 2013, however, Islamists' political fortunes everywhere were hitting a low ebb. From the Muslim Brotherhood's dramatic fall in Egypt to the fracturing of its affiliate in Jordan, along with the resignation of Islamist parties from governments in Libya (Justice and Construction Party) and Tunisia (Ennahda movement) in early 2014 (for very different reasons), Islamists seem to have lost the political initiative of the Arab spring. Only Benkirane is still hanging onto his job, having survived months of political deadlock after the withdrawal of the pro-palace *Istiqlal* party from the governing coalition in early July 2013.

Morocco's peculiar political realities, characterised by the persistent weakness of pro-palace political parties and the PJD's patient and non-threatening formula for political change, have so far allowed the Islamist experiment to limp along. But several major challenges loom ahead. The fragility of the Islamist-led coalition government, the absence of autonomous countervailing powers of civil society and labour unions, and a regional context hostile to democratic change, make it extremely difficult for the PJD to resist the different factions rooted in the palace

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Unlike their counterparts elsewhere Morocco's Islamist political party (PJD) has managed to remain in government, but the future of Moroccan politics remains unsettled.
- The PJD is in the midst of a drawn-out transition with no other option but to negotiate, compromise and constantly reassure the monarchy that its most vital interests are not being threatened.
- So far, the party seems to have maintained its cohesion and edge over the political opposition, but the hardest work of the democratic transition has not yet started.

»»»» and associated political and economic circles that refuse to give up the spoils of power. So far, the PJD's strategy can be succinctly summed up as: (1) preserving the party's unity; (2) empowering Benkirane to perform the role of communicator-in-chief by using a straight, folksy approach to explain his party's struggle against the enemies of change; (3) pursuing modest structural reforms that can have a cumulative impact over time; and (4) trying to improve the party's bargaining position vis-à-vis the monarchy by building a win-win relationship with the king.

Local elections in 2015 will be the first test of whether Benkirane's plea for patience and understanding will be sufficient for the urban middle class to stick with the PJD, while hoping for the benefits of slow reforms to come through.

### **MOROCCO'S TWO PILLARS OF POLITICAL POWER**

Three years after street protests challenged a political order dominated by royal prerogative, shadow politics, and technocratic managerialism, the future of Moroccan politics remains unsettled. The ruling elite of Morocco's *Makhzen* (literally: storehouse), a system of powerful social relations where political and economic interests are interwoven in shifting constellations of informal factions, continues to use its elaborate powers to circumvent constitutional rules. This regime system, firmly tied together by loyalty to the monarchy, co-exists with the formal institutions of democracy. The entanglement of these two makes it difficult at times to know where legality ends and subversion of constitutional norms starts. It is this duality that accounts for the many contradictions inherent in Morocco's political system. These contradictions have become more pronounced since the PJD's rise to power and their jockeying for position within the broader power structure.

The redistribution of power brought about by constitutional reforms in July 2011 reinforced the institutions of democracy, but came short of regulating the interaction between those

institutions and the parallel pillar of governance revolving around the monarch. Both pillars of power have their own legitimating logic and profess commitment to constitutional rules, but their interaction remains uneven and dominated by extra-constitutional practices and neo-traditional norms. Nevertheless, neither system can operate completely unhindered or independent of the other. Even the monarchy, which is active in both pillars of power and regularly infringes on the prerogatives of democratic institutions, avoids overtly undermining constitutional norms.

Depicting the dynamics of regime politics in black and white terms obscures the many grey zones where Moroccan politics is often conducted. There is no doubt that the monarchy and its associates remain the most important actors in the post-2011 constitutional structure. Senior PJD leaders told this author that the party carries limited weight in this competition between the two systems. At the same time, it is an exaggeration to portray the king as the sole pillar of rule and Benkirane as the 'puppet in chief'.

The entry of Islamists into government has provided an opportunity to test the evolutionary potential of the Moroccan political system. Democratic evolutionists dominating the PJD believe that the struggle to limit the neo-patrimonial features of Moroccan politics is arduous but eventually attainable. The PJD pushes political boundaries when it can and backtracks when it feels it must. As the Islamists see it, political change cannot be imposed against a regime that still mistrusts them and has the capacity and cohesion to undermine reform efforts. In other words, the PJD is in the midst of a drawn-out transition with no other option but to negotiate, compromise and constantly reassure the monarchy that its most vital interests would not be threatened.

### **THE POLITICS OF REASSURANCE**

For the PJD, the key to the success of Islamist politics lies in sustaining their political integrity while building a stable and cooperative

---

relationship with the monarchy. Since independence, every political force in Morocco that tried a more confrontational approach ended up being hounded, shunted aside or tamed. Plus the anti-Islamist trend in the region could have endangered the PJD's position, had the party not quickly contained the emotional wave of pro-Islamist support created by the summer 2013 overthrow of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt. Similarly to the difficult period after the Casablanca terrorist attacks in May 2003, the PJD's leadership had to restrain its younger and more fiery members, especially in the Movement of Unity and Reform, the party's *dawa* (proselytising) wing.

The PJD's strategy is influenced by the accumulated effects of history and its own political trajectory. The politics of reassurance towards King Hassan in the 1980s allowed moderate Islamists to emerge out of the shadows. Self-limiting politics

in the late 1990s and 2000s permitted them to operate legally and fend off repression. Reassurance was also the PJD's mantra in 2011 when the party stayed clear of the national protests, which it saw as a risky gamble. In

government, the PJD has not enacted any controversial appointments. Unlike their predecessors who filled the civil service and bureaucracy with their partisans, the Benkirane government, which has the right to make more than 1,000 political appointments, has so far favoured neutrals over partisans.

The party places a lot of weight on the politics of good will. This is best exemplified by Benkirane, who never misses a chance to praise the monarchy's political wisdom and strategic insight, and his political choices and priorities are strongly influenced by his desire to build personal relations with the king. This explains, for example, his

public apology to the king and his counsellors in summer 2012 after an article in the newspaper *Assabah* quoted Benkirane declaring that the lines of communication between him and the king's advisors were broken. Even when feeling wronged by the king's decisions or criticisms of his stewardship – as happened in August 2013 when the monarch blamed the Islamist-led government for the failures of an educational system the monarchy itself had failed to reform over the previous two decades – Benkirane perseveres in cultivating a reputation for principled compromise and trustworthiness.

Benkirane's desire to avoid conflict with the regime does not equal a cuddle course towards the palace. He strives to better position his party in the balance of power while forcefully pushing back against his detractors. Some previous prime ministers, such as long-time opponent of King Hassan II, Abderrahmane Youssoufi (1998-2002), succumbed in silence to the blows of the anti-reform *Makhzen* elite. In contrast, Benkirane frequently lashes out at the subterfuge of what he calls the 'ghosts' and 'crocodiles' of the invisible but powerful *Makhzenian* force. In May 2014, after the loss of his party's seat in the southern city of Sidi Ifni in a by-election, which he blamed on the use of bribes and the partiality of local authorities, he directed his fire at public television channels and the pro-palace parties of the *Istiqlal* and the *Parti Authenticité et Modernité* (PAM). He even guardedly criticised the domestic intelligence services that have him and his party under surveillance.

The problem for Benkirane is that this approach can only work if the monarchy starts to see benefits in cooperating with the PJD, and the party's political base and public opinion do not tire of his personal style of politics. Benkirane and his party recognise that good intentions and luck are not enough, hence their emphasis on their role in stabilising the system and calming street fervour. For example, the PJD claims credit for implementing some painful public subsidy reforms without causing unrest as the political opposition had warned.

## The hardest work of the democratic transition has not yet started

»»»»» **ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK**

If there is to be a peaceful transition to democracy, the monarchy and *Makhzen* moderates must be persuaded that their interests are best served by cooperating with pragmatic Islamists. Unfortunately, broadly-speaking the *Makhzen* still sees the PJD as a temporary appendage to the stability of the system whose preferences need not be taken into account. Furthermore, the palace's strategy is to deny Benkirane the right to co-decision over the strategic affairs of the state while allowing him to take unpopular decisions. In recent months, the king has even assumed the role of the opposition to Benkirane's government, criticising the slowness and ineffectiveness of national reforms.

Creating a system of mutual security with the monarchy, built on trust and reassurance, will be very difficult for the PJD. The need to win the monarchy's trust is important to advance any reform agenda, but it can also incapacitate the work of the government if it leads to excessive caution in exercising power or unwillingness to take political initiatives. Complicating matters for the PJD is that the combination of opposition obstructionism, bureaucratic contestation, elite intrigue and media hostility have bogged down the party's efforts to shape public policy and legislation.

These blockages led to several months of political crisis in 2013 that resulted in the aforementioned government reshuffle. Periods of political deadlock and constitutional stasis undermine formal political institutions, boost the power of the *Makhzen* system and shore up the virtue of technocratic governance, as reflected in Benkirane's new 2013 cabinet line-up. The fundamental logic behind the return of the technocratic elite is not the creation of a synthesis between bureaucratic managerialism and democratic principles, as the *Makhzen* elite claim, but to roll back the power of elected Islamists. The experts parachuted into the finance ministry and other strategic cabinet posts are beholden to the throne and execute the diktats of the king.

This has undermined the authority of the prime minister over a critical faction of his own cabinet and compounds policy incoherencies. Each time the political system is deadlocked, the monarchy resorts to constitutional innovation to get the show on the road. This has been a recurrent pattern since Mohammed VI ascended to the throne in July 1999.

**CLINGING ONTO POWER**

Benkirane holds up his staying in power in the face of adversity as evidence of the resilience of the PJD. So far, the party seems to have maintained its cohesion and edge over the political opposition. Its lacklustre record in government has not significantly depressed its approval ratings, at least not yet. According to an opinion poll published in March 2014 by the liberal Moroccan magazine *L'Economiste*, 58 per cent of Moroccans said that the government was on the right track. According to the same poll, if the local elections were held this year, the PJD would win 45 per cent of the vote. A plurality of Moroccans, especially those in the middle class, still seem to buy into the party's narrative that the PJD is doing everything it can to quicken the pace of reforms. The fact that Islamist officials have not abused their privileges and powers also helps the party's image.

The weakness of the political opposition is another important contributing factor. Both the *Istiqlal* (Independence) Party and *Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires* (USFP) are led by pro-palace politicians who revel in populist demagoguery. Their political opportunism has disappointed the public. Unfortunately for the process of political change, the popular denigration of broken politics practiced by *Istiqlal* and USFP also extends to all institutions of mass representation, including labour unions and civil society.

Very few associations are fully autonomous from the state or are representative of the public interest. Most engage in the same undemocratic patterns of behaviour seen in political parties, and

---

none is capable of mobilising for collective action. Instead of serving as countervailing powers and defenders of norms of representative rule, civil society organisations and labour unions perpetuate the same informal systems of patrimony and fragmented clientelism that guided political and social relations prior to the constitutional changes of 2011. Only *Adl wal Ihsane*, the illegal but tolerated Islamist opposition group, has the ability to take to the streets. But the group's capacity to seriously challenge the regime is quite limited. Since the death of its spiritual leader Sheikh Yassine in December 2012, the group has become more reticent, focusing on its traditional social agenda and shoring up its internal ranks than street activism.

The dismal state of the political opposition and civil society boosts the PJD's approval ratings, as it leaves no real alternative to the current government. But the Islamists' popular standing is more fragile than Benkirane cares to admit. A government that operates in slow motion and is unable to tackle corruption will sooner or later face voters' seething disappointment. The recent blistering attack on the PJD's impotence to bring about real political change by a respected businessman, Karim Tazi, was a reminder that patience has limits. Tazi previously stunned the liberal and secular establishment, to which he belongs, when he publicly supported the PJD in the November 2011 parliamentary election. Unless the Islamists show concrete progress on fighting corruption while increasing liberties, many of those who voted for the PJD in 2011 will switch off from politics altogether. This could take the country back to the deplorable state of the 2007 elections when a bare 20 per cent turned out to vote. As Taoufik Bouachrine, the editor of the influential daily newspaper *Akhbar Al Youm*, has described it, such a scenario would not serve the monarchy's interests as it would be dangerously exposed if the revolutionary democratic pendulum swung back.

Political disenchantment accompanied by a middle class squeeze is a recipe for political trouble. On 8

May, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Director Christine Lagarde warned in Rabat that 'the dividends of growth have too often gone to the top, leaving too many others out in the cold'. To be fair, the Benkirane government boosted funding on social programmes, took on the powerful drug lobby to lower some drug prices and launched a major public Medical Assistance Regime (RAMED) aimed at the most underprivileged while reducing the amount spent on fuel, electricity and water subsidies. He has also restored macro-economic stability and is building support for raising the retirement age, pensions contributions and boosting the professionalisation and representativeness of civil society. These are bold reforms that all previous governments shied away from. But without strengthening what Lagarde calls the 'economic middle', creating jobs for the young, improving governance and reducing corruption, the future stability of Morocco is on the line.

## CONCLUSION

The trajectory of political change in Morocco remains deeply contradictory and inconclusive.

The PJD entered the political transition determined to reassure, build confidence and avoid confrontation with the monarchy. The good news for the Islamists is that the party has accomplished the last goal and is still hanging on to power. The bad news for the democratic transition is that the PJD spent the best part of its tenure in government buffeted by internal pressures and external shocks. 2013 was particularly a difficult year for Morocco's Islamists in government. The Muslim Brotherhood's collapse in Egypt weakened the PJD and the withdrawal of a major coalition partner destabilised it for months. Even the combative Abdelilah Benkirane looked like a bruised boxer forced into a defensive crouch to fend off the punches threatening to unseat him and damage the PJD. As a result, the great expectations for combating corruption and the effective enactment of the new constitution disappeared



»»»»» onto the back burner as holding onto power and preserving party unity became goals onto themselves.

The hardest work of the democratic transition has therefore not yet started. Benkirane has managed to establish a strong media presence and to use it as a sort of bully pulpit to break through all the clutter and noise. This drive for the command of public attention can potentially rival the monarchy's pre-eminence in the public scene. But it is not enough to bring about political change. The party needs to find common ground with the monarchy on issues of shared interest, but must have the courage to confront corruption and push for the big reforms like regionalisation laws, electoral laws and the right of access to information. Otherwise, if the deadlock continues, the Benkirane government may

eventually have to resign, and would no longer buck the regional trend of Islamists losing power.

*Anouar Boukhars is associate fellow at FRIDE.*

*This Policy Brief belongs to the project 'Transitions and Geopolitics in the Arab World: links and implications for international actors', led by FRIDE and HIVOS. We acknowledge the generous support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway. For further information on this project, please contact: Kawa Hassan, Hivos (k.hassan@hivos.nl) or Kristina Kausch, FRIDE (kkausch@fride.org).*

**e-mail: [fride@fride.org](mailto:fride@fride.org)  
www.fride.org**