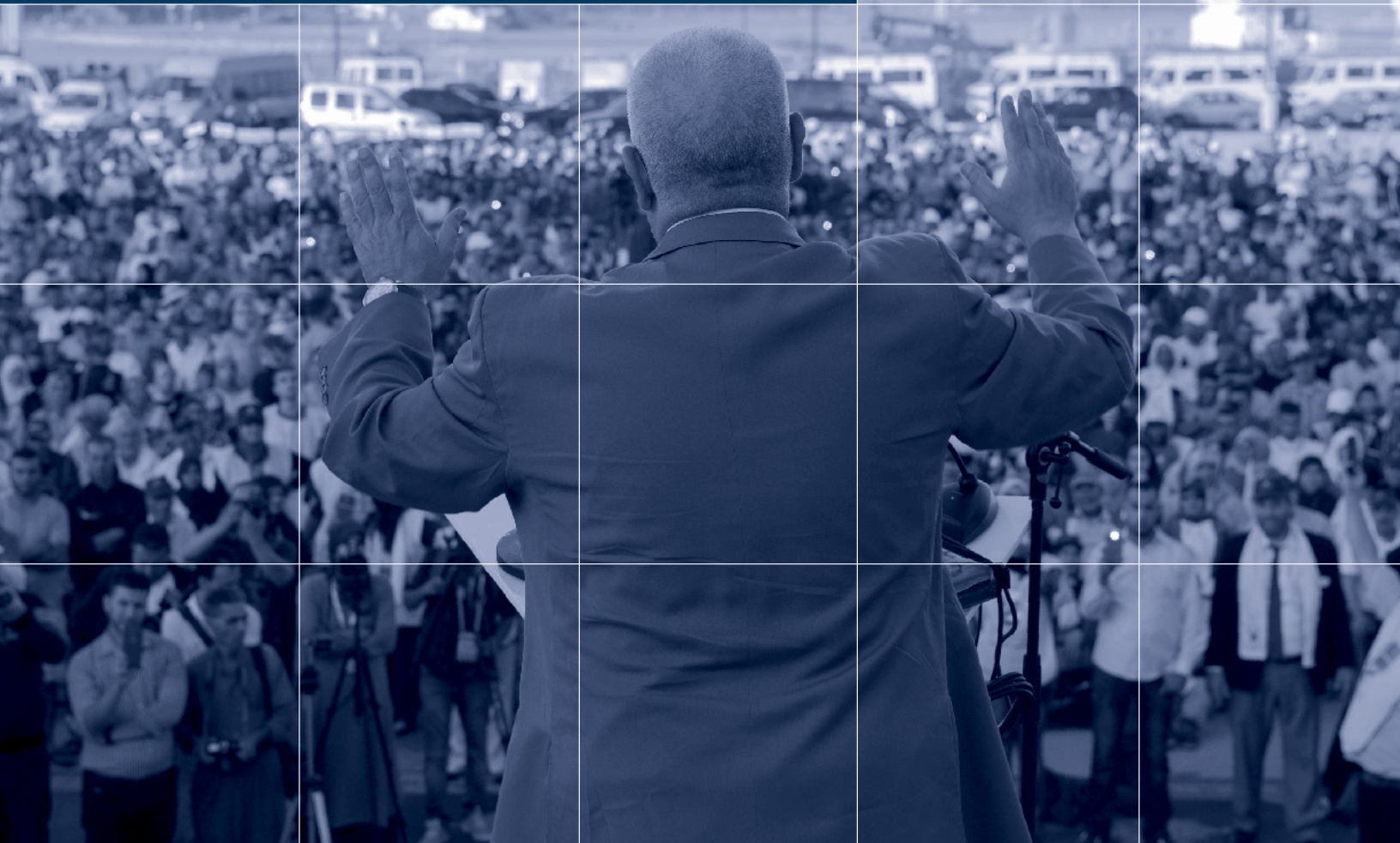




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MOROCCO'S ISLAMIST PARTY

Redefining Politics Under Pressure

Intissar Fakir

DECEMBER 2017



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About the Author

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Summary

Following constitutional revisions in 2011, Morocco's Party of Justice and Development (PJD) led the government through a period of reform and greater political engagement. In doing so, the party sought to redefine the relationships among political parties, the palace, and the populace. The fact that it secured a historic second term affirmed the importance of connecting directly with the people.

However, the palace—to protect its dominant political position—has responded by disrupting the formation of a second PJD-led government; neutralizing the party's leader, Abdelilah Benkirane; and reasserting its role in the country's political management. On the surface, these actions indicate an end to the post-2011 political opening, but the PJD, while weakened, maintains support at the local and regional levels and still has the chance to improve local governance.

Further, the palace's interventions paradoxically run the risk of stripping the monarchy of the very buffer provided by elected institutions and politicians. By undermining the government, the palace leaves itself exposed to criticism, anger, and, potentially, accountability.

A Mark of Change

- The most important legacy of the PJD's tenure from 2012 to 2016 is its effort to negotiate a greater role for the government. The PJD's then leader and prime minister, Benkirane, was able to treat the monarchy as both an obstacle and a source of validation—thus revealing the palace's red lines and showing his ability to play within the confines of the political system.
- Although the PJD's reform record has been mixed—particularly related to anticorruption, the judiciary, and the structural economy—the party has managed to convince citizens of its ability to govern, evidenced by its successes in local and regional elections and its decisive win in the 2016 national election.

An Uncertain Future

- The PJD recognizes the challenges in both appeasing the palace and governing effectively. Its efforts to date have exposed the inherent incongruities and costs of simultaneously pursuing the two tasks.
- The party's eighth congress, in December 2017, ended its divisive debate on leadership by rejecting Benkirane's bid for a third term as secretary-general. But the party remains the leader of a large, diluted coalition that is being undermined by the palace's interference in public administration.
- However, if the PJD manages to effectively communicate to the public the increased limitations it faces, it could overcome the fallout from the past few months.
- The PJD's experience has demonstrated that an alternative, albeit risky, approach exists for Morocco's political parties if they are willing to take it.

Introduction

King Mohammed VI's constitutional reforms in response to the 2011 protests promised more dynamism for Morocco's predictable politics and an opportunity for its discredited political class. However, recent events indicate that the story is taking a turn. The constitutional reforms opened up the political space and provided an opportunity for parties to play a bigger role in governing the country. This paved the way for Morocco's Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) to carve a larger role for the government between 2012 and 2016. After making some notable progress in key reform areas, the party, led by then incumbent prime minister Abdelilah Benkirane, went on to win a plurality of seats in the October 2016 parliamentary elections—largely because the populace perceived the PJD as capable of governing. But the palace soon began to view the party's success as a threat.

After the PJD's second historic electoral win, the palace, through political manipulations of opposition parties and former partners, maneuvered to block Benkirane from forming a second coalition—arguably to counterbalance the party's popularity and protect its own political and economic interests.

By March 2017, the king called for Benkirane to be replaced, naming the more subdued PJD figure Saadeddine Othmani as prime minister. And during its eighth congress on December 9 and 10, the PJD elected Othamni as secretary-general, putting an end to Benkirane's leadership aspirations.

By neutralizing Benkirane and pressuring the party to be part of a large coalition, the palace created the conditions for a weaker PJD-led government, leaving the party internally divided and unable to capitalize on its electoral win and reform successes. Understanding the palace's intervention against the PJD and the broader implications for the country moving forward requires close examination of the party's experience in power, its testing of the palace's red lines while remaining loyal, and its direct linkages to the Moroccan people. The palace and other political actors either underestimated or failed to foresee that any political party could take advantage of the constitutional openings and translate them into electoral success and greater outreach to the population. Only Benkirane and the PJD seemed to fully grasp

The palace created the conditions for a weaker PJD-led government, leaving the party internally divided.

the opportunities around greater citizen interest in politics and the post-2011 feeling of political agency.

The PJD's post-2011 achievements—and their implications for the broader exercise of power in Morocco—should not be diminished. The main legacy of the PJD's experience in leading the government from 2012 to 2016 was its efforts to negotiate a greater role and independence for the government and, by extension, for the party. While this furtive progress is coming to a halt, the PJD's experience remains an important case study for how a political actor created an alternative governing approach and attempted to redefine its relationship with the palace. For the palace, the PJD's experience—powerful enough to cause a backlash—risked dispelling the notion that political actors are ineffectual.

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The monarchy's response to the PJD seeking a greater role for the parliament and for political parties, as mandated by Morocco's 2011 constitution, has been to retract the brief political opening and once again heavily manipulate politics and political parties. However, the monarchy's reassertion of control in such a heavy-handed manner has the potential to generate popular anger. One lasting legacy of the 2011 protest wave is citizens' interest in their political fate and future. The unrest in the central northern Rif region that went on for months is one example of how Moroccans are increasingly taking an interest in and ownership of the country's politics and development—demanding better governance, greater transparency, increased economic opportunities, and more respect for their basic rights.

Morocco provided an alternative to the post-2011 political trajectories across the region. By avoiding a revolution, the palace maintained stability and peace, and by offering some political space, it allowed its people to hope for more prosperity and a stake in the country's politics. Yet the palace today is pushing for greater economic and security stability, even as it shuts down political engagement and independence. However, greater economic prosperity and development will depend on the strength of the country's institutions—which are overruled, heavily controlled, and often made obsolete by the king. As long as the monarchy resists allowing these institutions to become strong and independent, the country's long-term social and economic development will be limited and the potential for instability will be considerable.

The Palace's Sharing of Power

In contrast to other Arab monarchies, Morocco has a history of diverse and dynamic political parties and elections. However, prior to 2011, these parties rarely exercised any genuine power separate from the palace. In fact, the monarchy promoted a multiparty system to ensure that no single party could dominate politics and weaken its authority.¹

There are currently thirty-three official political parties in Morocco, which span the spectrum of political ideologies from communist to Islamist.² They vary in size and relevance, with the most notable being the PJD; the center-right Istiqlal Party, Morocco's oldest, with a storied history as leader of the movement for independence; and the center-left Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), which was the torchbearer of opposition during the repressive years of King Hassan II. There is also an array of parties closely connected to the palace, including the National Rally of Independents (RNI); the Constitutional Union (UC); the Popular Movement (MP); and a relative newcomer to Moroccan politics, the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM), which was founded in 2008 by Fouad Ali El Himma, a close friend and adviser to King Mohammed VI and whose dislike of the Islamists is well known.

When Mohammed VI ascended to the throne in 1999, he inherited from his father, Hassan II, a system that generates and exploits unruly party politics to fragment and discredit the political class, helping the king to cement his monopoly over power.³ Frequent infighting within Moroccan parties, as well as their disorganization, aided this strategy.⁴ King Mohammed VI went on to cement the tradition of a political party deriving its power more from its proximity to the palace than the appeal of its ideology or program. Over time, the distinction between opposition and loyalist parties became harder to discern, as all parties, by choice or necessity, inched closer to the monarchy to ensure their political survival.⁵ In that way, they increasingly lost their connection to voters, adding to Moroccans' disillusionment with their political elite. This was reflected by citizens' general apathy toward the political process, low voter turnout in elections, and mistrust of politicians, especially among youth.⁶

The so-called Government of Change (Gouvernement d'Alternance) in the late 1990s was illustrative of the challenges faced by Moroccan political parties. After the November 1997 elections, the palace invited leftists in the opposition, including the USFP, to form a government as part of a supposed reform plan. In March 1998, the USFP formed a coalition with six other parties, and though this government was severely checked by the palace, it raised expectations for reform. Ultimately, however, reform efforts were stymied by the palace's interventions and internal and intra-party discord, which proved insurmountable.⁷

Much like the PJD-led government, the USFP-led government in 1998 came into office following constitutional changes that granted expanded powers to the government and parliament; however, it struggled to determine a role for itself in the face of a powerful monarchy. While the USFP had an official role in government, its inability to tackle important social welfare projects discredited the party.⁸ The USFP-led government had to contend with the presence of palace-aligned ministers who arguably stymied its work—most notably, at the

Over time, the distinction between opposition and loyalist parties became harder to discern.

start, the all-powerful minister of interior and Hassan II's right hand, Driss Basri. Once the new king came to the throne, items the government either prioritized or sought to tackle—such as human rights issues, women's empowerment, and other social and economic initiatives—were overtaken by the king. The government appeared completely overshadowed and grew useless in the eyes of Moroccans.⁹ By appearing to give such parties a stake in the system while still tightly controlling them, the monarchy ensured that they would fail in the eyes of the public, dispelling any notion that they might become effective partners or alternatives to the monarchy.

As public perceptions of political parties sank, the palace was once again highlighted as the actor most able to address popular concerns. Especially early in his reign, King Mohammed VI fostered a reputation for being compassionate and kind, which created a sense that a new era of palace-driven openness and prosperity was coming. This further sidelined the political parties. The king acknowledged past human rights violations and sought to address the country's dire poverty and development issues. Most significant among these efforts were the 2004 reforms of the Moudawana (family status code), which legislated significant improvements in women's rights. Also in 2004, the king established the Equity and Reconciliation Commission to address past human rights abuses and, in 2005, launched a number of economic and social devel-

opment programs, including the National Initiative for Human Development.¹⁰ This was in addition to personal charity initiatives, such as the Mohammed V Foundation for Solidarity that he established in 1999.¹¹

Domestically, the king's popularity was high. A poll conducted in 2009 found that 91 percent of Moroccans judged his ten-year reign to be positive.¹² The international community was particularly impressed by his efforts; while

viewed through a comparative lens, they rightly stood out against his father's oppressive rule.¹³ At home, the king's reforms and initiatives, while welcomed by the population, also reinforced traditional political dynamics in the country. The king was the effective governing authority, while political parties were ineffective and even counterproductive when it came to Morocco's progress. Though the population was comforted in the knowledge that the most repressive of Hassan II's years were over, the enthusiasm over Mohammed IV's reign and what it could achieve gradually subsided; it became clear that attempts at reforms were largely symbolic and fell short of providing the needed economic, political, and social change.

In this context, the popular protests of 2011 resonated in Morocco. In early 2011, King Mohammed VI sought to get ahead of the antigovernment narratives sweeping the region. By March 2011, protests had effectively brought down the entrenched regimes of president Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and plunged Libya into civil war.

At home, the king's reforms and initiatives, while welcomed by the population, also reinforced traditional political dynamics in the country.

Morocco's protests, labeled the February 20 Movement, brought together Moroccans across the ideological, religious, social, and political spectrums. The protests gathered momentum across Moroccan towns, with protesters calling for solutions to the country's urgent economic and social issues but particularly the country's persistent political issues: lack of accountability, corruption, nepotism, and inefficiency of government institutions, among others.

In response, on March 9, 2011, only two and a half weeks into Morocco's protest movement, the king made a televised speech promising constitutional changes.¹⁴ The February 20 Movement gradually faded, largely because the king's response took the wind out of its sails and the population was appeased by his response and its promise. The movement also lacked a strong organizational structure that could hold it together, and, eventually, the variety of views and perspectives that gave it its initial strength contributed to its weakness. There are also allegations that it was infiltrated by government loyalists who sought to weaken it from within. But the movement's main contribution was that it helped bring on the constitutional revision, which, in turn, provided a greater role for government institutions. The movement showed the extent to which citizens were willing to engage when they perceive change to be possible—and potentially help bring about that change.

During the referendum of July 1, 2011, the new constitution passed with a 98 percent majority. About 73 percent of registered voters participated, greatly surpassing the turnout in most previous elections and underlining the popular expectation for change.¹⁵ Although the constitutional changes fell short of what many hoped to see, they did expand mandates for the prime minister, the government, and the parliament to allow them a greater role in the legislative and governing processes while preserving the king's role.¹⁶

In principle, the constitutional changes would have allowed parties some opportunities for greater engagement. However, all but the Islamists found themselves unable to capitalize on that potential.¹⁷ As in other Arab countries that faced uprisings in 2011, Islamists, notably the PJD, were better positioned than the traditional political forces to benefit from the new political environment. While they were understood to be a part of the same political establishment that Moroccans were unhappy with, the PJD maintained a degree of comparative credibility that translated into more votes in the polls. Although the party had distanced itself from the February 20 Movement protests, the political openings allowed it to take advantage of its reputation as a relatively less corrupt political actor. Its clear platform, more democratic internal organization, strong grassroots connections, and reputation for relative independence appealed to the populace.¹⁸ Also, its limited government experience was an advantage in this case, given the public's skepticism about traditional political forces. The party, which has been participating in elections since 1997 when

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it won eight seats, has gradually increased its shares of parliamentary seats but remained in the opposition until 2011.¹⁹

Prior to 2011, the PJD was not seen as having accomplished much as part of the political process, but the party's parliamentarians were more competent than their peers and not entirely driven by self-interest.²⁰ At that time, the PJD was focused on enhancing its governance credentials while strengthening its local presence and grassroots outreach. It is active on campuses and schools through civil society—namely the Movement of Unity and Reform (MUR), a large charity and educational (including preaching, or *da'wa*) institution with a presence across the kingdom—and further supported by an external network of loosely affiliated schools, health centers, and other professional organizations. The MUR is often considered the religious arm of the PJD and an ideological influencer. The two entities' histories are intertwined and they still draw from the same pool of talent: members of the PJD leadership. Ministers or former ministers have a role in the MUR, and they also maintain strong communication and organization channels. Although the MUR members and the PJD members deny any interference in the party's affairs and the two entities insist on boundaries, the links between them remain strong and have been characterized as “strategic cooperation.”²¹

The PJD's links to the MUR, with its religious proselytizing, only add to debate about the broader question of the exact nature of the religious versus political character of the party. As it evolved and its political participation increased, the PJD became increasingly less reflective of the traditional framework of Islamist parties. This has been especially true since it came to power

In practice, and certainly during its time in government, the PJD has largely operated as any secular party.

in 2011. With respect to the role of religion and how it defined the PJD's political engagement, a decade earlier the 2003 terrorist attacks in Casablanca and the ensuing scrutiny of political Islam drove the party to emphasize its similarities with other political parties in Morocco. And as its engagement in national politics grew, it had to temper and play down its religious character. In practice, and certainly during its time in government, the PJD has largely operated as any secular party. The socially conservative elements of its agenda had already been toned down significantly. Benkirane, previously seen as a hard-line figure, realized that pursuing a religious—meaning a socially conservative—agenda would further pigeonhole the PJD and prevent it from gaining wide support. In 2011, as prime minister-designate, Benkirane declared that once he headed a government, “I will never be interested in the private life of people. Allah created mankind free. I will never ask if a woman is wearing a short skirt or a long skirt.”²² From then on, there was little in the party's tone and focus that distinguished it from nonreligious parties.

Like other Islamist movements across the region, the PJD's connection to the population has been an important character and asset. Politically, the party's gradual and low-profile approaches to participation, together with its clear support for the monarchy's political and religious role, reassured the king that the party did not constitute a threat to the political order.²³ This deference to the monarchy—a requirement to remain in the political game—and gradual participation in elections amounted to a more pragmatic agenda that mostly stayed away from divisive religious or dogmatic issues, especially after 2003. The combination of the PJD's experience and the post-2011 mood in Morocco created an ideal situation for the party. Not too close to the palace to be seen as co-opted but close enough to be able to participate in politics, the party signaled it would focus on serving the Moroccan people. This message resonated in the November 2011 parliamentary elections, when the PJD came in first with 107 seats out of 395 in the lower house, followed by the Istiqlal Party with 60 seats.²⁴ On November 29, in line with the new constitution, the king asked Abdelilah Benkirane, the PJD's leader, to form a government. About a month later, Benkirane formed a coalition that included Istiqlal, the MP, and the Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS).²⁵

The PJD in Power Between 2011 and 2016

The PJD was in new territory. Not only was it leading a ruling coalition and working with former political opponents but, in a broader sense, it was implementing a new constitution, which involved working closely with the palace.²⁶ To what extent, then, was the PJD free to introduce constitutional reforms and thereby potentially alter the basis of Moroccan politics? Perhaps inevitably, the answer was equivocal.

The PJD's first government evolved over three distinct phases. Between January 2012 and July 2013, the party was still learning to navigate a new political system in which it had no ruling experience. This somewhat unsuccessful phase ended when the Istiqlal Party—which had increasingly become more loyal to the palace—withdrawed from the government, obliging the PJD to form a new coalition. This brought on a second phase in which the party began implementing its agenda with more ease. In the third phase, starting in the fall of 2015, the party focused on two important electoral cycles: the 2015 local and regional elections and the 2016 national election.

Once in power, the PJD had an opportunity to secure a more robust role for the parliament and the government. The party communicated a certain hope that it could navigate the palace's red lines, despite the reported tensions between the new Islamist-led government and the palace.²⁷ Overall, the media coverage portrayed the PJD as slowly coming to grips with the intricacies and limitations of the country's governance model.²⁸

Learning to Coexist (2012-2013)

Initially, the PJD had to focus on establishing its place within the new power structure (especially vis-à-vis the palace) and determining where the opportunities and limitations lie. So in that sense, the composition of its first government, which the king approved on January 3, 2012, was important to the PJD. The party sought to gain as much influence as it could and to set a precedent for how a leading party could balance its interests against those of the palace. Not surprisingly, in turn, the palace aimed to ensure that it did not cede any more power than it needed to under the new constitutional amendments.

During this period, the PJD was careful to demonstrate its commitment to change while it avoided alarming the monarchy.²⁹ It was also able to gain control over key ministerial posts despite pushback from the palace. These included the Ministry of Justice under Mustapha Ramid and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation under Saadeddine Othmani.³⁰

The palace maintained some oversight through its advisers, who are collectively seen as a shadow government that wields significant power. They included the former foreign minister Taieb Fassi Fihri and the king's close friend and notable adversary of the PJD, Fouad Ali El Himma.³¹

Not surprisingly, the PJD soon faced tensions with the monarchy and its advisers over the approach and scope of various reforms related to, for example, judicial independence, subsidies, and anticorruption. This showed the public that, in contrast to other party leaders, Benkirane had the

ability and willingness to push back against the palace. The prime minister never overtly challenged the king, but neither did he shy away from pointing out the restrictions the palace placed on the government's ability to act in accordance with the constitution.

The occasional disharmony helped Benkirane insulate himself from popular discontent should he and the PJD face criticism for particular failures.³² It also emphasized the widely known but rarely highlighted extent of the palace's control over politics in Morocco. Altogether, this allowed Benkirane to claim that he was fighting the status quo to better serve Moroccan citizens. He managed to transform the tension between the PJD-led government and the palace into a political gain, without jeopardizing his standing or his party's chances of staying in power. This dual use of the monarchy as both an obstacle and a source of validation was no contradiction but rather illustrated the prime minister's ability to play within the confines of the political system.

Throughout this first year, and to a lesser extent the rest of the PJD's mandate, tensions over the scope of the government's and the prime minister's mandate and power continued with the monarchy. For instance, in 2013, PJD parliamentarians fought to determine the details of the investigative committees that would serve as watchdogs over the government per the constitution;³³

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the parliament was supposed to draft the law regulating the committees' work, but the legislature's secretariat-general—a body that reports to the palace—ultimately took control and drafted it.³⁴ This frustrated the PJD bloc in the parliament and highlighted the palace's effort to minimize the impact of constitutional reforms and safeguard its monopoly over power.³⁵

Earlier, in September 2012, Abdelali Hamieddine, a prominent and outspoken young member of the PJD, wrote an op-ed to emphasize the importance of the new constitution and rule of law. He criticized a royal order that had called for an investigation of and disciplinary action against customs officials accused of misconduct.³⁶ Hamieddine argued that the order was unconstitutional because it hijacked the administrative prerogatives of the government and the prime minister. This bold argument went to the heart of the debate over the palace's political role and how it fit in within the new political system. It also dovetailed with the PJD's emerging strategy of explaining the importance of this debate to the public. This was partly to shield the party from potential criticism—on the grounds that it was not fully accountable for any shortcomings given its limited room for action. However, it also worked to demystify the rules of political engagement in Moroccan politics and identify the red lines drawn by the palace.

In response to increased popular interest in domestic politics and in light of the new context—a new constitutional framework and, for the first time, a leading Islamist party—the media reported extensively on political developments, including the details of the government formation negotiations, and even brought a sense of what was happening behind the scenes to the public. Benkirane took advantage of the increased curiosity spurred by the media coverage to explain the tension between the palace and the party and to increasingly draw attention to the palace's involvement. Its role, while always understood, had not been previously highlighted in such a way.

Also novel was Benkirane's propensity to speak publicly about tensions with the palace in the early days. His approach, which might have seemed potentially dangerous, as it could draw the ire of the palace, was a point of pride for Benkirane himself. He often remarked that he would always be candid with the people, including about the challenges he faced. However, whenever he was critical of the palace, he often emphasized his devotion to the monarch and affirmed that he served at his pleasure. He even at times accused the press and other politicians of seeking to muddy the waters between him and the palace.³⁷ Meanwhile, other PJD members acknowledged that building a new political culture requires a stronger relationship with the monarchy as well as the opposition.³⁸

In maintaining a careful balance with the palace, the PJD also had to navigate significant tensions with notable political parties such as the USFP, the PAM, and its own coalition partner, Istiqlal. Benkirane was vehement when

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facing the opposition's attacks, particularly those of the PAM.³⁹ His speeches and parliamentary question-and-answer sessions were caustic and spared no one. The prime minister lamented the obstructionism preventing his government from developing a legal framework for constitutional reforms and moving forward with an ambitious program. Benkirane mainly blamed Istiqlal's leader, Hamid Chabat, who had become a virulent critic of Benkirane and the Islamists and led some to refer to him as the "real opposition."⁴⁰ By early 2013, the animosity between Benkirane and Chabat had grown, taking on a personal quality.⁴¹ Officially, Istiqlal's spokesman, Adil Benhamza, said his party was disenchanted with Benkirane's partisanship and specifically highlighted its disagreement with the PJD's subsidy reform plans, which the Istiqlal Party felt would have had an outsized impact on the poor.⁴² Chabat also claimed that the PJD was overshadowing his party and that the government's program no longer represented the agreed-upon vision.

Two events in 2013 altered the political context in Morocco: the July coup that removed Egypt's president Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood from power and the decision of Tunisia's Islamist Ennahda Party to withdraw from government to facilitate national dialogue and reconciliation. Both developments created an opening for the PJD's adversaries, who assumed that the turning tide against Islamists elsewhere would lead to a shift in public perception against the PJD. Along with the palace, Chabat and other political actors saw an opportunity to weaken the PJD or even bring down its government. It was also rumored that Morocco's Gulf allies and donors, particularly the United Arab Emirates, had been displeased to see the Islamist party in power and may have indicated that it should be kept in check.⁴³ Although the PJD was founded on a moderate Islamist platform that emphasized participation in the political process and shunned violence, its Islamist character seemed too convenient a target.

Beyond his own opposition to the PJD, Chabat was a willing instrument through which the palace could weaken the PJD-led government.⁴⁴ In a blow to the PJD, the Istiqlal Party's ministers announced in May 2013 that they would resign from the government. The party then officially withdrew from the coalition on July 8, 2013, halting implementation of the PJD's program.⁴⁵ To minimize damage to himself and the party, Benkirane played up his confidence in the palace's protection. With Islamists under pressure across the region and the lack of political support for the PJD among other parties, if the palace had wanted to drive the PJD out of office, this would have been a good moment to do so. However, Benkirane was still a pragmatic politician who emphasized his submission to the palace; his party was still popular; and, at that moment, the PJD was viewed as a victim of the opposition's maneuvering and gained more sympathy as a consequence. So the palace demurred.

The palace likely calculated that a weakened PJD in government was preferable to an empowered and aggrieved one in opposition—and to the political disruption and potential popular anger that a collapse in government might cause. In the end, the palace helped facilitate Benkirane’s efforts to form a new coalition. Nonetheless, this episode demonstrated that the PJD’s hold on power was tenuous and needed the palace’s backing. Yet, to a certain extent, it also showed that the PJD’s subtle balancing strategy with regard to the palace and its electorate was a source of resilience.

Benkirane was both humbled and emboldened by the experience—humbled in his approach to the palace and emboldened in his dealing with the opposition. Subsequently, party members underlined the need to improve their relationship with the palace; for example, one party member spoke about “securing a democratic transition [and] making sure big structural reforms [that] take place can only happen in cooperation with the palace.”⁴⁶ In terms of his relationship with other political parties, however, Benkirane remained combative and played up his image as a disrupter of the status quo. In one of his often-entertaining parliamentary question-and-answer sessions, Benkirane stressed that “we do not have a crisis of government now, we have a crisis of opposition.”⁴⁷

Istiqlal’s departure and the drawn-out process of forming another coalition tested the PJD, but the party and Benkirane quickly recovered and the latter emerged as a skilled politician on the national stage. Even his more combative performances as prime minister garnered goodwill in various political circles that quietly supported his approach.⁴⁸ Certainly, Benkirane had and still has many critics and detractors, but by the fall of 2013, having recovered from the collapse of his first coalition, his position as prime minister, at least with the palace, was improving and his new government stood ready to push forward programs that had come to a halt or had yet to start.

Delivering on Its Promises (2013–2016)

With the Istiqlal Party out, the RNI joined the government coalition, allowing program implementation to begin in earnest. In this second phase of the PJD’s experience, the party still grappled with pushback from the opposition and the palace, but it was able to focus more on governing and delivering on its electoral promises.

During its campaign in 2011, the PJD promised ambitious reforms and solutions to address the broad problems facing Morocco’s public administration. The party emphasized cutting unemployment and poverty rates, “recovering the macroeconomic indicators,” restoring the trust of citizens in their administration, and improving service delivery.⁴⁹

Assessing what the party did and did not accomplish helps to shed light on its ability to convince voters that it could expand the roles of government and

the parliament despite the heavy hand of the palace. Examining the fate of the PJD's reform efforts also shows the extent to which the monarchy remained entrenched bureaucratically and how, at times, the party was unable or unwilling to exert enough political will to actualize the reforms. Three particular areas demonstrate the party's mixed record: anticorruption, judicial independence, and structural economic reforms.

Fighting Corruption: The PJD's most resonant campaign promise was fighting corruption. The use of politics and power for financial gain and the divide

The use of politics and power for financial gain and the divide between a rich elite and the rest of the country were at the very heart of the 2011 protests.

between a rich elite and the rest of the country were at the very heart of the 2011 protests. Some of the protesters' most powerful slogans were directed against those who had used their proximity to the palace to amass wealth, as well as against the palace's well-known control over significant portions of the economy. With the exception of a minor improvement in 2014, Morocco's rankings in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index have been consistently low since 2012. In 2016, Morocco ranked 90 out of 176. Even without the reminder of these international rankings, Moroccans are all too aware of the prevalence and cost of corruption.

Not surprisingly, then, given the PJD's reputation for internal discipline and transparency, its promises to fight corruption galvanized voters and set expectations for change. However, their hopes were soon dashed, when the PJD essentially gave up on its anticorruption drive. Whether because of a lack of political will or the strength of vested interests, this became one of the party's biggest failures in the eyes of voters.

In a televised debate at the end of 2014, Minister of Justice Mustapha Ramid discussed his government's plans to address corruption.⁵⁰ He highlighted fifteen projects as examples of its efforts so far, as well as laws to improve financial oversight and disclosures and administrative, investigative, and prosecutorial practices. Other early efforts were largely symbolic measures, such as awareness-raising campaigns that included the distribution of anticorruption children's books in schools and the setting up of a toll-free number to report abuse.⁵¹

At the institutional level and per the new constitution of 2011, the government announced, in 2014, plans to reform the Central Body for the Prevention of Corruption, renaming it the National Body for Integrity, Prevention, and the Fight Against Corruption (INPPPLC). The government gave it a new mandate that strengthened its independence—for example, by removing it from the oversight of the government—and gave it a more active role in investigating instances of corruption before the start of the judicial process.⁵² The body is composed of twelve members other than the president; four are appointed by royal decree, two by the speaker of parliament, two by the president of the

house of councilors, and four by decree of the prime minister.⁵³ Civil society activists criticized the body for falling short of what the constitution allows in terms of mandate; they especially called into question whether the body would be empowered to initiate investigations and provide feedback on relevant legislation. They also lamented the lack of civil society representation in the new body, unlike the previous one, which was composed of one-third civil society representatives.⁵⁴ Prior to its passage, the law to establish the INPPLC proved divisive in the parliament—even between majority and government—some actors wanted to grant the body self-referral to ensure the anonymity of plaintiffs and to allow it to create branches across the country.⁵⁵ Once passed, the law did not grant plaintiffs anonymity nor did it allow the body to create branches or independently pursue investigations. Civil society blasted it as a body to “elaborate studies and play a consultative role,” highlighting that its members are all to be appointed by government or the palace and that it has even less independence, financial or otherwise, than the entity it is replacing.⁵⁶ This was seen as a significant backpedaling on the government’s part as anti-corruption efforts go.⁵⁷ The law was adopted in June 2015, but as of November 2017, the body’s president and members have yet to be named.⁵⁸

In May 2016, the government also launched the National Anticorruption Strategy. The comprehensive plan included 239 detailed projects within ten different categories to be completed by 2025. Each category will be coordinated by a particular ministry, with one under the oversight of the General Confederation of Moroccan Enterprises (CGEM), the country’s largest private sector representative.⁵⁹ However, delays have also plagued the National Anticorruption Strategy; the committee to implement it, the National Anticorruption Committee (CNAC), was not created until June 2017 after Othmani came into office.⁶⁰ According to the cabinet’s decree, CNAC’s members were to be ministers and the committee would have a budget of 1.8 billion Moroccan dirhams (about \$190 million). The committee’s permanent secretariat would meet four times a year to assess implementation of the strategy.⁶¹ After a critical open letter from Transparency Maroc,⁶² the local branch of Transparency International, the government agreed to allocate two committee seats for nongovernmental organizations.⁶³ The decree was made law in October 2017.⁶⁴

The government planned, drafted, or passed a number of laws to improve financial disclosure and oversight, increase access to information, and ensure protection for whistleblowers.⁶⁵ But the perception—and reality—remained that these laws made no discernable difference in the lives of the people. Even as his government was preparing its comprehensive anticorruption strategy, Benkirane recognized the futility of the fight. He famously said on January 13, 2015, during a parliamentary session: “I don’t fight corruption, corruption fights me”⁶⁶—a reference to the entrenched interests that were impeding his

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government's policies.⁶⁷ Beyond showing effort, his government's attempts to improve transparency achieved little. In one notable attempt from 2012, the Ministry of Transportation published a list of beneficiaries of transportation agreements—similar to and including taxi medallions. Though it is not clear how these agreements are granted or procured, the list did include some well-known political and cultural figures and it is presumed that some were received as favors.⁶⁸ The move generated intense debate, came at a relatively low political cost to the party, and demonstrated to the public that the government had the capacity to be more transparent. However, the overall campaign was not one the PJD could win against the palace, linked economic interests, and establishment political actors. The sort of sweeping change the party had promised as part of their election program was not to be.

Judicial Reforms: Morocco's judicial system has long been at the nexus of corruption and inefficiency, leaving citizens frustrated and distrustful.⁶⁹ In the 2016 Transparency International survey of nine countries in the Middle East and North Africa, 49 percent of Moroccans reported paying bribes in courts, with higher percentages coming from only Egypt and Yemen.⁷⁰ For years, there have been calls for judicial reforms, even from within the judiciary itself, and Benkirane's government also identified it as a priority.⁷¹ Here, too, the PJD experienced both opportunities and limitations. The new constitution mandated changes that would give the judiciary increased independence and make it more efficient—while still maintaining the king's control over it. Yet the opportunity proved difficult to seize, and the stalled reform process ultimately produced few tangible changes.

The constitutional reforms of 2011 included replacing the Higher Council of the Judiciary with the Higher Council of Judicial Power and granting it an expanded mandate and greater financial independence. The new council—formed in April 2017 after a lengthy process—still has the king as its president, but its vice president is the president of the Court of Cassation rather than the minister of justice—a career judicial official rather than a political appointee. The council, which had previously served mostly to advise the Ministry of Justice on judges' careers and conduct, is still not fully independent, but the proportion of judges nominated by other judges to serve is now higher compared to those appointed by the executive.⁷²

More significantly, the constitution also mandated the creation of a constitutional court. Previously, the Constitutional Council reviewed draft laws and regulations before they were approved to determine their constitutionality and validate elections and referendum results. The Constitutional Court, inaugurated in April 2017—with half of its twelve members appointed by the king—is now empowered to decide on the constitutionality of laws even after they have been promulgated.⁷³ While these and other changes, including the establishment of a new statute for judges, are mandated in the constitution,

the government and the parliament has to pass specific laws, known as organic laws, to define their details.

Minister of Justice Mustapha Ramid, a lawyer by training and a former president of the Karama Forum for Human Rights, had a reputation for integrity, piety, and fairness.⁷⁴ Part of Ramid's task was to introduce greater judicial independence as the constitution had mandated. In May 2012, the king launched the forty-member Higher Commission for Dialogue on Judicial Reform at the royal palace to determine the scope of the ministry's reforms.⁷⁵ The symbolism of the king doing this at the palace highlighted the difficulty the PJD-led government faced in owning the judicial reform process. As news reports at the time pointed out, the king had called for judicial reforms in 2009, prior to the new constitution and the PJD's appointment to lead the government.⁷⁶

After roughly a year of consultations, in September 2013, Ramid unveiled a judicial reform charter. The charter included 353 detailed draft recommendations, such as passing specific laws or adjusting budgets.⁷⁷ For example, the charter specified an annual budget for the Higher Council of Judicial Power and designated a building in which to carry out its meetings. Previously, it had neither. The International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) lauded the efforts to grant the Higher Council of Judicial Power institutional, administrative, and financial independence and described the selection process for members as "fair, transparent and consistent with the provisions of the law."⁷⁸

By November 2016, Ramid asserted that 78 percent of the objectives outlined in the charter had been fulfilled.⁷⁹ And ahead of the October 2016 parliamentary elections, the PJD's communications team released a campaign video that explained what the government had done in its nearly five years in power. Ramid summarized the main judicial reforms, particularly those directly affecting the population. He explained that judges had been given a raise to improve their pay so that they would be less susceptible to bribery, and any judges who could not explain a significant and sudden increase in their wealth would face disciplinary action. Ramid also emphasized that courtrooms had been modernized and trial waits had decreased. He also indicated that there had been no incidents of forced disappearances since January 2012, that the use of torture was decreasing, and that all claims of torture were investigated to enforce accountability. Likewise, the ministry had begun to review all cases of alleged corruption and had transferred a comparatively larger number of corruption cases to the courts.⁸⁰

However, not everyone agreed with the minister's upbeat assessment. The Association of Judicial Journalists, a local Moroccan group, highlighted many of the shortcomings of the reform project—including delays in passing the reform laws, many of which did not guarantee greater judicial independence and were not always fully implemented. For example, the draft law to establish the Higher Council of Judicial Power was supposed to be passed in 2014, but the parliament did not pass it until 2016,⁸¹ and the council did not begin work

until the king appointed its members in April 2017.⁸² As of October 7, 2017, the council will also oversee the public prosecutor's office, which had previously been under the oversight of the Ministry of Justice, in a move meant to limit political influence in public prosecution.⁸³ The association also argued that increasing judges' pay was not a sure way to prevent bribery. There was still little accountability and transparency within the system—for example, with regard to the disciplinary process for judges.⁸⁴ The ICJ echoed these concerns, noting that “the disciplinary system was not fully in line with international standards, in particular because it provided for some disciplinary offences that undermine the right of judges to freedom of expression, association and assembly.”⁸⁵ Regarding the Constitutional Court, the ICJ observed that the member selection process, done through the parliament, was “far from ideal, or merit based,” noting that it was driven by political interests and was a “missed opportunity to break up with past practices and to ensure that the election of the court members is based on transparent, merit-based, and gender-represented procedures.”⁸⁶

So while on paper the reforms have sought to grant the judiciary greater independence, in practice, the judiciary remains linked to entrenched political interests—be that of particular groups who oppose new regulations or other actors reluctant to relinquish control of the judiciary, particularly the palace. The grave issue of judicial corruption remains as prevalent as ever. Although the ICJ has lauded the presence of “enough safeguards in the current system”

to promote accountability and combat corruption, the political will to implement them and properly combat corruption is not present.⁸⁷

Although international observers have deemed many of these reform efforts positive, it is not clear whether they will significantly improve the judicial system; in many

cases, their implementation has fallen short. And it is also not clear whether the PJD will benefit politically from the long-term impact of these reforms. Benkirane's comment about the barriers of corruption and vested interests also applies to judiciary reforms. And in this case, too, the PJD managed to claim credit for the process of passing these reforms, even if in outcome they amounted to little.

In practice, the judiciary remains linked to entrenched political interests.

Structural Economic Reforms: Among the economic priorities the PJD vowed to tackle were Morocco's public finances and inflated budget, which the country was under pressure to address from international lenders, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank.⁸⁸

According to World Bank figures, by 2012, the cost of subsidies had reached 6.6 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and had contributed to driving public debt up by 12 percentage points from 2008 to 2012, when it reached 60 percent of GDP.⁸⁹ However, the aftermath of the 2011 protests complicated subsidy reform plans. Reforming subsidies often has

negative repercussions, which risk undermining public support and causing social unrest. But the PJD mitigated this risk by taking a gradual approach and first targeting energy subsidies, which constituted the bulk of the subsidy spending program known as the Compensation Fund. Together with an effective communications strategy and a bit of luck (such as a drop in global oil prices), this approach ensured the government's success—for which it received international praise.⁹⁰

As early as June 2012, the government began to gradually increase fuel prices.⁹¹ In 2013, it increased the price of gasoline and diesel at different percentages, relying on a “partial indexation mechanism.” In January 2014, gasoline and industrial fuel subsidies were lifted,⁹² and by early 2015, subsidies on all remaining fuels had been removed. The government helped mitigate the rise in fuel costs by monetarily supporting urban transport, especially taxis.⁹³

The PJD and Benkirane worked tirelessly to prepare the population for the difficult but necessary set of measures.⁹⁴ The government—including Benkirane, Minister of Economy and Finance Mohamed Boussaid, Minister of General Affairs and Governance Mohammed El Ouafa, and Director of the Compensation Fund Salima Bennani—effectively communicated the details and process of the reforms. They also stressed that they were economically necessary and that the fuel subsidies targeted primarily benefited companies (only 15 percent of those subsidies were helping individuals).⁹⁵

The party gained credit for initiating the reform process without major disruptions or unrest, but the potentially more politically sensitive portion of the reforms—lifting subsidies on cooking gas, flour, and sugar—has yet to begin. The cutting of butane gas subsidies was supposed to occur in 2016, but the government delayed it until 2017 to avoid a backlash ahead of the parliamentary elections, and it has since been postponed again.⁹⁶ Even so, according to local newspaper reports, spending under the Compensation Fund decreased from 40 billion dirhams (\$4.2 billion) in 2013 to 25 billion dirhams (\$2.6 billion) in 2014 and was forecasted to lower further to 10 billion dirhams (\$1.1 billion) in 2015.⁹⁷

Among party officials, there was an undeniable sense of pride at having tackled even just a portion of the subsidy reforms and of ownership for having improved macroeconomic indicators, at least for the time being. According to the Ministry of Communications, the PJD-led government effectively reduced the budget deficit from 7.2 percent of GDP in 2012 to 3.5 percent in 2016.⁹⁸ Further, the government's reforms helped to achieve a growth rate of 3.7 percent between 2012 and 2015.⁹⁹ The IMF projects a higher growth rate of 4.5 percent in 2017 and a lower budget deficit of 3.5 percent of GDP, as reforms continue to be implemented.¹⁰⁰ Overall, the IMF has lauded these structural reforms. In July 2016, the institution approved another \$3.47 billion for Morocco under the Precautionary and Liquidity Line, following two previous two-year agreements.¹⁰¹ The IMF cited the subsidy and banking reforms

in justifying its decision, as well as the expansion of programs supporting the poorer segments of society.¹⁰²

Other efforts to stabilize macroeconomic indicators came toward the end of the PJD's first term. Following contentious negotiations with unions and syndicates, and despite these organizations' opposition, the parliament passed a pension reform bill in summer 2016.¹⁰³ The bill, focused on improving public finances, increased the retirement age from sixty to sixty-three (to be raised gradually) and increased worker and employer contributions to the fund.¹⁰⁴ Other important structural reforms remain unimplemented. The World Bank and IMF have long called on Morocco to liberalize its currency. However, because this move could devalue the dirham and potentially increase inflation, the government fears that it could generate instability.¹⁰⁵ Thus, the reform has once again been put off.

The palace was likely content to have a political party own the minutia-driven structural reform process, given a potential for unrest—which is in keeping with its approach of publicly distancing itself from the governance process while keeping a close eye on how it is unfolding. Although potentially more painful reforms are yet to come, party leaders have downplayed their risks. The party sees its ability to manage these sensitive economic reforms as evidence of its capacity to govern. Benkirane, in particular, was credited with effectively implementing a socially risky program. This both bolstered the PJD's governance credentials and proved its usefulness to the palace.

During the reelection campaign, the party highlighted these reform successes as well as the expansion of medical coverage for the poor and the establishment of a fund to support widows and single mothers. The PJD saw its experience in government as a success. This perception became especially clear when contrasted with the subsequent but weaker PJD-led government's image as struggling.¹⁰⁶ Although the party's performance was mixed and, more importantly, not enough to significantly change people's lives, the party leaders' belief in the effectiveness of their performance in government—and, to some degree, their own surprise at what they viewed as tremendous accomplishments—was at the heart of their reelection message.

Securing an Electoral Win (2015-2016)

Ahead of the two electoral cycles, the party largely focused on ensuring that its achievements would translate into electoral success. The PJD wanted to prove that a political party's performance (in other words, its record in tangible governance) could be a determinant of its success and popularity. In effect, the party wanted to contrast itself against others that have grown popular purely through their links to the palace (notably the PAM and other loyalist parties before it). Evidenced by the PJD's successes in local and regional elections in 2015 and again in parliamentary elections in 2016, the party was able to convince the population that this approach was sound. The PJD demonstrated an

ability to expand and maintain connections to its base, setting it apart from other Moroccan parties. It also revealed its effectiveness in selecting and preparing ideal candidates for each seat—rather than relying solely on candidates with patronage links in certain areas.

The party's communications strategy especially contributed to its electoral gains by packaging the narrative of success in a way that was clear and easy to deliver. An important factor is that, early on, PJD leaders invested in strengthening the party's ties to the broader public and gave it additional attention after 2011.¹⁰⁷ Regardless of whether the PJD's reforms have borne significant improvements for the population or achieved the sort of fundamental change that people seek, the party communicated a sense of possibility.¹⁰⁸ Benkirane and other party officials are accessible to the press. The PJD itself has an effective presence on the internet, including through social media, specifically Facebook. This "permanent campaigning" approach has gone a long way toward generating enthusiastic public support.¹⁰⁹ And through its communications, which often highlight the challenges the party faces, the PJD conveys a strong sense of accomplishment, using language that is accessible even to those who are not politically minded.¹¹⁰

A few months ahead of local and regional elections, Abdelhak El Arabi, a member of the party's secretariat general and head of its elections commission, explained in an interview with local media outlets that the PJD did not regard preparing for the elections as a "seasonal" endeavor, thereby expressing a similar idea to the concept of permanent campaigning presented by other party officials. But for these elections specifically, the party had crafted the slogan "let the reforms continue."¹¹¹

By the time local elections drew near in 2015, the party could sum up its accomplishments fairly effectively. The prime minister galvanized voters through campaign stops, especially in cities, focusing on what his government had achieved and its future intended policies.¹¹² A recurring theme was the PJD's commitment to completing the reforms it initiated. Party members armed their election campaigns with some tangible accomplishments and Benkirane's status as a popular "political phenomenon." The party had hoped for a positive election cycle, at the local and regional levels and also at the national level, but the extent of their win stunned them.

The PJD scored an important electoral victory when, for the first time, on September 4, 2015, Moroccans directly elected both regional and local council representatives. In the local elections, the PJD was able to take 5,018 seats out of 31,482, coming in third behind the PAM (6,662) and the Istiqlal Party (5,083).¹¹³ In the regional elections, the PJD came in first, winning 173 regional council seats out of 678.¹¹⁴ This was an important achievement for the party because its significantly increased presence at the local and regional

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levels allowed it to compete with palace-aligned parties that had hitherto dominated these councils. Prior to the 2011 constitutional referendum, only local council members were elected by popular vote while members of regional councils were elected by the incoming local councilors. The previous round of local elections in 2009 was dominated by the PAM, which had only been formed a year earlier.¹¹⁵ The PAM, the PJD's fiercest critic and challenger, has benefited from its closeness to the palace and risen quickly through the ranks ever since.¹¹⁶ Back in 2009, the PJD came in sixth, with about 1,513 local council seats out of 27,795.¹¹⁷

The consensus after the 2015 elections was that the party's win in major urban centers reflected its expanded appeal to areas previously dominated by older parties such as Istiqlal, the USFP, the RNI, and the Popular Movement.¹¹⁸ The PJD's ability to gain ground where it previously had not—including in some rural areas where historically people voted overwhelmingly for pro-palace parties strongly connected to local communities through local notables—gained attention despite that PAM came in first.¹¹⁹ The rivalry between the two parties only grew after these elections and in the lead up to the parliamentary elections the following year.

For months, Moroccans witnessed a protracted political campaign between the two parties that had little precedent in modern Moroccan history.

Internally, the PJD's performance in local and regional elections was seen as strongly validating its disciplined approach and record in government.¹²⁰ Members declared, prematurely, that the win was a loss for the PAM and other opposition parties and that the "era of manipulation [in Moroccan politics] was over"¹²¹—a reference to the role played by the palace. The 2015 elections solidified the PJD's rise in Moroccan politics and its status as the dominant political party.

Following the 2015 elections, and prior to the 2016 parliamentary elections, the political polarization between the government and opposition intensified. Underlying the rivalry between the PJD and the PAM was the palace's wariness of the former's rise. The polarized and contentious environment gave way to attacks in the press, leaks implicating one party or another in perceived wrongdoing, rousing speeches, and even a march—which the PJD alleges was backed by the PAM and the Ministry of Interior—denouncing the "Islamization of society."¹²² For months, Moroccans witnessed a protracted political campaign between the two parties that had little precedent in modern Moroccan history. PAM leader Ilyas El Omari ramped up attacks on the PJD and its leader for their performance in government and their Islamist ideology, comparing it to that of the self-proclaimed Islamic State.¹²³ PJD leaders, in turn, implied that El Omari is implicated in improper financial dealings.¹²⁴

Notably, the palace was publicly dragged into the mudslinging as politicians increasingly spoke about *tabakoum* (manipulations or control); Benkirane used the term to allude to efforts by the king's advisers to manipulate and influence

politics and governance. Perhaps concerned that the notion had become too widespread, the king condemned any mention of such manipulations and issued a statement in defense of the PAM's founder and his own adviser, Fouad Ali El Himma—whom one of the party's allies, Minister of Housing and Urbanism Nabil Benabdellah, had mentioned as one of these “manipulators.”¹²⁵

In this polarized environment, Moroccans went to vote for a new parliament on October 7, 2016. The PJD came in first, with a historic total of 125 out of 395 parliamentary seats, topping its previous record of 107 seats in 2011. The PAM emerged as the PJD's main rival, coming in second with 102 seats, compared to the forty-seven seats it had won in 2011.¹²⁶ There is no doubt that the political atmosphere of 2016 was different from that of 2011, but the PAM's rise validated the view that Moroccan politics was increasingly turning into a two-party model, with the PAM being the palace's response to the Islamists' rise. But though the PJD won, in many regards it proved to be a Pyrrhic victory. After protracted negotiations to form a government, Benkirane was forced to step down and the weak government the PJD subsequently agreed to lead has proved to be a setback for the party.

Moroccan politics was increasingly turning into a two-party model, with the PAM being the palace's response to the Islamists' rise.

The Consequences of Success

Benkirane's growing popularity inside and outside the party and the PJD's consecutive successes in elections turned the party and its leader into a target. Worried, the palace and traditional power brokers in Morocco worked to hamper Benkirane's efforts to form a second government and ultimately ensure he stayed out of party leadership.

For a party to form a government on its own, it needs a majority of 198 seats in the parliament. This has never happened in Morocco, given the country's multiplicity of parties and election laws designed to prevent any single party from dominating the system. Therefore, the PJD needed to form a coalition, but this time, the palace actively worked to undermine the PJD. Employing parties that viewed the PJD's rise as a challenge to their interests as proxies in the political process, the palace sought to weaken the PJD and rid it of its most valuable asset: Benkirane.

Self-assured from the PJD's electoral victory, Benkirane believed, wrongly, that he had the luxury of choice. The prime minister-designate first looked to his former coalition partners—the PPS, RNI, and MP—to form a government, but the latter two did not want to join unless they were part of a bloc of like-minded parties. The seats that both the PJD and the PAM had won were at the expense of other parties, including the PJD's coalition partners—the RNI won a total of thirty-seven parliamentary seats compared to fifty-two in 2011, and the MP won twenty-seven seats, down from thirty-two in 2011.¹²⁷ With

fewer seats and less negotiating power, these smaller palace-aligned parties saw little benefit in joining Benkirane's new government individually, as this would have diluted their influence even further. Therefore, the RNI, whose leader Salaheddine Mezouar resigned in reaction to his party's poor performance, created a bloc with the MP and the UC, and later the USFP, to gain more negotiating power.¹²⁸

However, Benkirane refused to invite the entire bloc into his government because it was dominated by parties long loyal to the palace, including the USFP, a party Benkirane had initially invited but then adamantly rejected as a partner on the grounds that its leader had been an obstacle.¹²⁹ Moreover, as he saw it, accommodating the entire bloc into the coalition would have diluted his own party's share of portfolios and influence.

At the same time, Benkirane began looking toward the Istiqlal Party, whose leader—Hamid Chabat, previously an avowed political enemy—had emerged as an unlikely ally. In interviews, PJD members spoke of an alleged meeting that happened shortly after the election that, they claim, was an effort to undermine the PJD's second government.¹³⁰ According to these accounts, during the meeting, leaders from various parties—including the PAM, RNI, and MP—discussed ways of sabotaging Benkirane, while Chabat refused to be part of what was akin to a political coup. The purported meeting highlighted the reversal in relations between Chabat and Benkirane. Regardless, the Istiqlal Party was soon plunged into a leadership crisis of

its own, which some PJD members believed the palace had orchestrated to undermine Chabat for growing too independent and too sympathetic to the PJD. The king also was presumably unhappy with the prospect of a coalition with diminished pro-palace influence—especially as the Istiqlal Party's loyalty to the palace was in question.¹³¹

Negotiations were at a standstill by December 2016. The Istiqlal Party was no longer in consideration; Benkirane was still rejecting the RNI-led bloc; and the RNI's leader, Aziz Akhannouch—now a key player in negotiations and referred to as “the king's new friend” by the press (usually a reference to Fouad Ali El Himma)—was out of the country.¹³² As weeks turned into months, debate grew in Moroccan political circles and within the PJD about the viability of Benkirane's approach. Finally, on March 15, 2017, the king asked Benkirane to step down and allow another PJD leader to establish a new government.

The king's decision seemed prompted by Benkirane's inability to make any progress. Benkirane had calculated that if the party was not satisfied with the composition of the new coalition—especially one that diluted its electoral win—he could wait for other political actors to come around. Alternatively, if the party was not able to form a coalition, Benkirane seemed to view being in

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the opposition a better option, as the party would at least maintain its strength. Benkirane and the party accepted the king's decision, but his dismissal was a shock.¹³³ The king appointed Saadeddine Othmani, a former secretary-general of the party and former minister of foreign affairs from 2012 to 2013, as the next prime minister-designate.

Under pressure, Othmani had formed a coalition within a week with the partners that Benkirane had rejected. As Benkirane had feared, the coalition of six parties—the PJD, USFP, PPS, RNI, MP, and UC—effectively diluted the PJD's influence (the previous government had four parties), blunting the impact of its significant electoral victory. The composition of Othmani's government led to major disagreements and polarization within the PJD. The party's rank and file wondered what had changed the PJD's previously intractable position between March 15 and March 25, when the coalition was approved. Members wanted to understand why Othmani had backtracked on the party's position, but they received no clear answers from their leadership.¹³⁴

Within the party, there was talk of betrayal, revolt, and mass resignations over the way Benkirane had been disposed of and Othmani had formed his government. The base was angered by those within the leadership who seemingly accepted the imposed compromise—including several members of the party's secretariat general—and by the decision to integrate the entire RNI-MP-USFP-UC bloc into the government. Those within the PJD who favored a more collaborative approach with the palace were increasingly seen as co-opted and as having been intimidated into “siding with the ruling establishment, not the people,”¹³⁵ jeopardizing the party's relative independence.

Similarly, the faction within the PJD leadership that rejected Othmani's approach, particularly the youth, resented the strategy for being unnecessarily deferential to the palace. It felt the democratic process, which had brought the party to power, should not be subverted, especially in the post-2011 environment of heightened political awareness.

There was also a sense in the PJD that the new government would damage the party's reputation. As part of a weak coalition, the PJD would inevitably be forced to validate—and be seen as complicit in—its own political regression. This would cost the PJD internal unity and credibility. Even as Othmani forged ahead, seeking to make up for months of deadlock, internal discussion about how to mitigate the damage continued. Without any workable options, the debate subsided, but even PJD members in the parliament displayed disunity and opposition to the government.¹³⁶

Once the dust of the government formation settled, Benkirane began quietly angling for a way to remain relevant and guide the party's direction by winning a third term as secretary-general. Benkirane, however, often denied his interest and stressed that he would accept whatever the party asked of him—to

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serve as secretary-general or to step aside once and for all. Benkirane's ambition for a third term further divided the party in the run up to its national congress and threatened to create a bifurcated leadership. But the party's national council, ahead of its eighth congress, voted against an amendment of its bylaws that would have allowed Benkirane to be named for a third term.¹³⁷ In doing so,

the party, once again, put its pragmatism on full display. There was a sense among party members that the amendment of the bylaws was almost assured—whether or not he would get the votes was another question. While keeping the two-term limit on leadership goes to the heart of the party's democratic principles and the emphasis that the institution is larger than any one individual, many felt these were exceptional times and that the precious progress the party made required such sacrifices as changing the bylaws.¹³⁸ It is also likely that the pragmatists within the

party—who understood the palace's growing unease with Benkirane and its desire to see him out of leadership—did not want to send the palace signals of defiance by reelecting Benkirane as secretary-general for a third time. So, during the party's congress on December 9 and 10, Othmani was voted secretary-general, ending Benkirane's leadership role.

After all, just last September, Morocco had witnessed the excruciating end of a public leadership crisis—one that affected the Istiqlal Party for months. The Istiqlal Party was bitterly divided over whether Chabat should remain or go. This fight—which became physical on several occasions during meetings between those who supported him and those who wanted a more predictable, palace-approved leader—culminated in what became locally known as the congress of the flying plates.¹³⁹ During the congress, proponents and opponents of Chabat threw plates at each other, in one of the most degrading instances in the history of a once-revered party. In the end, the Istiqlal Party elected a palace-approved figure, Nizar Baraka, and Chabat became somewhat of a political pariah. The public leadership struggle the Istiqlal Party went through—which one of its members characterized as a fight for the party's soul—serves as a cautionary tale to other parties not to push against the monarchy.¹⁴⁰

The PJD is much too disciplined to risk such an erosive display of division on a national scale. Also, for the moment, the party seems to have weathered the question of a split that many, including Benkirane, had feared. Still, Othmani has the difficult task of managing a government that is already perceived as inefficient and weak. This perception has been driven in part by the inadequate way the Othmani government has dealt with the unrest in Al-Hoceima and the central northern Rif region. Protests in Al-Hoceima were ignited in October 2016 following the death of a local fish vendor, who was crushed in a garbage compressor while trying to retrieve fish confiscated by the local authorities. The incident brought to light many of the profound social and economic problems

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facing the country and reflected human rights and governance deficiencies. The unrest has worsened with the state's crackdown on protesters, mass arrests, violence, and the censorship of journalists covering the events.¹⁴¹

The king, who had been reluctant to respond directly to the Rif protests, soon used the issue as an opportunity to once again scapegoat politicians and bureaucrats. Using the Rif protests specifically and the overall state of Morocco's social and economic challenges, the king blamed politicians and technocrats in an unusually harsh Throne Day speech on July 31, 2017.¹⁴² The speech was followed by another on October 13 during the opening session of the parliament, in which he promised a "political earthquake" to fix the country's many governance issues—and, in particular, as a belated and indirect response to the Rif crisis.¹⁴³ In the speech, he also called for the creation of a minister delegate for African affairs (within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and the creation of two departments for follow up within the ministries of interior and finance. He also called for an expedited process for administrative decentralization to go along with Morocco's advanced regionalization program, which has long been in the works and has so far failed to come to fruition.¹⁴⁴

The "earthquake" came on October 24, with the sacking of ministers and high-ranking government officials and bureaucrats. They included the minister of education and higher learning (and former minister of interior in Benkirane's government), Mohammed Hassad; the minister of housing, Nabil Benabdellah; and the minister of health, El Houssaine Louardi. These sackings were meant to provide a sense of accountability to the people of the Rif and show the king's interest in fixing public administration.¹⁴⁵ The move reinforced the monarchy's image as an arbiter of politics and undermined the government. It also called into question the previous government's record and its narrative of success—and reaffirmed the king's predominance.

Conclusion

The PJD's two electoral victories and its ability to pursue a more independent stance with regard to the palace—in which the party was neither defiant nor submissive—created a new approach in Moroccan politics. This approach proved successful and raised the alarm of a palace wary of independent politics. While Benkirane was prevented from forming a government in 2016—due to the palace's determination to push back and reassert its control of the political space—the PJD has nonetheless shown that it is possible, and popular with voters, for a party to adopt a more independent line with regard to politics and governance. Although the party's reforms were modest, the way its approach resonated with many voters is noteworthy in terms of Morocco's outlook. In many ways, the PJD's experience is more consequential than any specific policies it pursued.

The PJD has shown that investing in direct linkages to the people is effective when it comes to achieving electoral success. Its experience demonstrated

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that voters matter just as much as the palace. More significantly, it implicitly showed that the interests of the voters and the palace are not always aligned. The push and pull that the PJD faced—between submission to the king and duty to the voters—has further exposed other parties' distance from the electorate. In response, the palace closed the door on political openings that it had reluctantly given. However, in backing Othmani into a weak government and gradually marginalizing Benkirane within the party, the palace, in a way, validated the brief success of the PJD.

The palace's reaction to the PJD, summed up as a resurgent king looking to overshadow and marginalize political parties, has once again fallen back on familiar tools. The palace first pressured the PJD—after its strong electoral showing—to accept and work within the confines of a weak government. To achieve this, the palace granted other parties influence far larger than their electoral strength, as was the case when it used the RNI to stymie the government-formation process after the 2016 elections. The second blow was Benkirane's removal, which shed light on the palace's propensity to intervene in internal party dynamics.

What has transpired for the party over the past few months is indeed similar to the process of de-legitimization that other parties have gone through. But although weakened, the party is still strong at the local administration level. And its experience in government cannot be completely taken back. The PJD ran an effective government that tried to maintain some independence, undertook some reforms in earnest, and showed a desire—and to some extent an ability—to serve the people.

While the palace's approach here is not new, the king's heavy-handed intervention could have potentially profound implications for the palace. It now has to contend with a greater popular understanding of the consequences of its political manipulations and resistance to reforms. The current royal maneuvers are not taking place in a vacuum; Moroccans are more interested in politics, and the willingness to speak out and mobilize remains (as the Rif protests have shown, albeit on a regional level).

Although the national and regional contexts are different than in 2011, the need for credible political actors independent of the monarchy remains. Without viable political actors enjoying a degree of independence, the palace alone could struggle to meet the higher political expectations of Moroccans. And with such disempowered political actors, public dissatisfaction may well turn toward the palace.

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