

Policy Brief

A difficult birth: Complexities and prospects for the formation of the Moroccan government

AlJazeera Centre for Studies

5 April 2017





It seems that the new Moroccan government will be formed smoothly and with great ease after the implicit agreement of its six constituent parties on the distribution of important ministerial sectors [Social Media]

Abstract

It appears from his decision to replace Abdelilah Benkirane with Saadeddine Othmani as head of the government that Moroccan King Mohammed VI does not want to deviate from the requirements of the constitution and democratic methods. He is attempting to use his constitutional powers to find an acceptable solution to end the stalemate and form a government.

Othmani has succeeded in reaching a tentative agreement to form the government and is likely to succeed in its formation and leadership. However, he will head a heterogeneous government afflicted by many contradictions, which may implode if it falls under excessive pressure. The government would then be in crisis, which it would have to overcome with a cabinet reshuffle to avoid a complete collapse, especially given the strong position of the king who wants the Justice and Development Party to continue leading the government in future.

Introduction

On Wednesday, 15 March 2017, a communiqué issued by the Moroccan Royal Court removed Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane and appointed a new prime minister from the same party, the Justice and Development Party (PJD), which won the last legislative elections in Morocco. The General Secretariat of the PJD met on Wednesday morning to announce its approval of the ouster and invited the National Assembly to meet on Saturday to take the appropriate decisions in this regard. On Friday, 17 March, King Mohammed VI received Saadeddine Othmani and commissioned him to conduct negotiations with other parties to form a government.

Several days later, Othmani announced his success in reaching an agreement with six parties to form a government, as well as the PJD Secretariat's acceptance of the proposal to include the Unified Socialist Party, a condition that had been opposed by former Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane. What are the implications of this move for the cohesion and consensus of the next government? What is the possibility of its continuation to the end of its mandate?

What are the implications of this agreement for the PJD and its internal cohesion? What is the future of its leadership on the horizon of the next conference this summer, and the future of its secretary general, Abdelilah Benkirane?

Benkirane and Othmani facing red lines

The intervention of Moroccan King Mohammed VI comes five months after he had appointed Secretary General of the Justice and Development Party, Abdelilah Benkirane, as prime minister, and after the PJD had won the 7 October 2016 elections with 125 seats (out of 395 seats in the Moroccan parliament). This was the second general election under the new constitution, which was voted for in a referendum in 2011 following the Arab Spring. The constitution provides for the appointment of a person from the winning party in the parliamentary elections to form a government, without specifying a time limit for this process, or specifying what measures should be taken in the event that the appointed prime minister fails to secure a parliamentary majority and form a government accordingly.

The political crisis erupted after the Justice and Development Party won first place in the recent legislative elections, but, with its main ally, the Party of Progress and Socialism, was unable to secure a parliamentary majority to form a government. Thus, the PJD was forced to negotiate with other parties to secure the quorum necessary for forming a government. The PJD received initial acceptance from the Independence Party, which came third in the elections, but was rejected by the second party, Authenticity and Modernity, and the last party, the Federation of the Democratic Left. However, the rest of the parties represented in parliament formed a four-part alliance led by Aziz Akhannouch, the leader of the National Rally of Independents, which objected the Independence Party's participation in the next government, potentially causing a growing crisis.

Following the comments by the leader of the Independence Party, Hamid Chabat, on Mauritania being Moroccan land and the ensuing diplomatic crisis, Benkirane decided to abandon the participation of the Independence Party. He made a new offer to Akhannouch, calling for the formation of a government comprised of the four-party alliance that formed the previous government (PJD, Progress and Socialism, the National Rally of Independents and the Popular Movement). However, Akhannouch rejected this

offer and insisted that all four parties that he negotiated on behalf of should be part of the government to ensure his dominance over it, which Benkirane strongly rejected for fear that his party would become a minority in a government that he is supposed to lead.

Faced with this troubled situation (which in Morocco is called "government blockage"), the Royal Court issued a communiqué on 15 March 2017, referring to a decision made by King Mohammed VI to remove Benkirane from the role of prime minister and appoint another person from the Justice and Development Party as an alternative to head the government in the framework of the constitutional powers granted to the king (Chapter 42 of the constitution provides that the king is the guardian of the proper functioning of state institutions and the maintenance of democratic choice). In doing so, he is respecting the Moroccan Constitution and the democratic choice of the people, expressed in previous legislative elections which ranked the Justice and Development Party first. In the text of the communiqué, "The King preferred to take this decision, among all the available options granted to him by the constitution, to embody his sincere will and lasting efforts towards the consolidation of a democratic choice, and to maintain the gains made by our country in this area."

It seems clear from the decision to remove Benkirane from the premiership of the government and to appoint Othmani in his place that King Mohammed VI does not want to deviate from the requirements of the constitution and democratic methods, where he tried to apply his constitutional powers to find an acceptable solution to end the stalemate and form a government without deviating from the text of the constitution and the popular choice expressed in the last elections.

A day after the royal palace issued the official communiqué relieving Benkirane of his duties as prime minister, it announced the appointment of a second person from the Justice and Development Party. The PJC Secretariat met and issued a statement containing a set of points, the most important of which are: accepting the royal decision, dealing with it positively, not holding Abdelilah Benkirane responsible for the failure to form a government given the impossible requirements of the other parties, and pointing out that if conditions remain the same, no prime minister will succeed in forming a government. The party's General Secretariat decided to invite the National Assembly (the party's parliament) to meet on Saturday, 18 March, to take appropriate decisions in this regard, as the highest authority in the party.

The National Assembly issued a number of decisions, the most important of which are: acceptance of the king's decision to appoint Saadeddine Othmani as the head of government, while taking responsibility for previously faltering on the requirements of the other parties. It also decided to delegate to the PJD Secretariat, headed by Abdelilah

Benkirane, the responsibility of following-up consultations to form the government, rather than delegating this issue to the new prime minister, stressing the need for such consultations "in the framework of the methodology expressed by the PJD and the outcome of the process of negotiation". This means an implicit adherence by the PJD to the same methodology that led to the removal of Benkirane from his post and the appointment of Othmani in his place.

A day prior to convening the National Assembly, King Mohammed VI received Saadeddine Othmani and appointed him as the new prime minister. The royal decision did not come from outside the three big names in the Justice and Development Party (i.e. Abdelilah Benkirane, Saadeddine Othmani and Mustafa Ramid) and respected the party's internal organisational hierarchy in appointing the second person, the president of the National Assembly, as the new head of government after the first person, the secretary general of the party, had failed in its formation. This happened although the Palace had many other options as it preferred not to confront the PJD about choosing a person who does not enjoy internal consensus (such as the Minister of Transport, Abdel Aziz Rabbah, whose name was widely circulated as one of the more popular friends of the PJD), which would open the door to the possibility of the PJD's rejection of this choice and lead to a deep crisis with the palace.

Perhaps one of the other reasons that caused the palace to choose Othmani as head of the government is that he is considered a consensus maker and is non-confrontational. There are many reasons for this, especially that he was Secretary General of the Justice and Development Party in the period known for open confrontation between the political system and the PJD, resulting in a number of arrests and judicial developments for the party leaders (e.g. Jamaa El Moatassim). This has also led to the hindrance of the PJD from managing large city councils, which has reached the level of violent security intervention (in the city of Oujda, for example) during which Othmani maintained his position of consensus and refused to collide with the state. This prompted PJD supporters to elect Abdelilah Benkirane as secretary general at the party conference in 2008 instead of his main rival, Saadeddine Othmani, considering that this period required a strong and recognisable leader to meet the challenges of the time. However, when the winds of the 2011 Arab Spring approached, all the cards in Morocco were reshuffled, and the regime was forced to conform by accepting the Justice and Development Party as head of the government. Therefore, in the first Benkirane government, Othmani took the role of Minister of Foreign Affairs but was later deposed. He remained silent on the real reasons for his departure from the government and maintained a good relationship with all political parties at all times.

Trends and implications

Perhaps the central question now is what is next for Morocco after the appointment of Othmani as the new head of government and the announcement of an agreement on the official formation of the six parties? To answer this question, there are some possible scenarios for the implications of reaching an agreement on forming a government in Morocco, whether for its future or the future of the Justice and Development Party that leads it:

First, it has been made clear by the recent resolutions by the General Secretariat of the PJD to accept the appointment of Saadeddine Othmani to form the government and then his proposal to abandon the dictates set by his predecessor, Abdelilah Benkirane, as well as the entry of the Socialist Union Party into the government, without the Independence Party, that the PJD leadership finally decided to accept the conditions of the four-party alliance led by Abdul Aziz Akhannouch. Thus, it is yielding to the storm instead of engaging in an open confrontation with the deep state (Makhzen), citing slogans of gradual reform, accumulation, and preservation of stability and gains. The repercussions of these new decisions appear to have begun with a wave of discontent among the ranks, some of whom have resigned from the PJD, and the party's loss of a public sympathy in the final stage as it faced off with the deep state (also known as makhzen, literally "the warehouse"). Although this will have negative repercussions for the PJD's popularity, largely due to these positions and the charisma of its former leader Abdelilah Benkirane, this will not lead to any significant splits within the party in the absence of sharp ideological polarisation.

In addition, Benkirane will face the dilemma of choosing between his leadership position as secretary general of the party, which forces him to defend the government, and the fulfilment of his previous positions rejecting it. He may be tempted to return to the second position to preserve his image as a solid leader who does not give up his principles in exchange for positions of power and to invest in the disgruntled constituency within the party of the current government, opening the gate for the election of Saadeddine Othmani as the new secretary general of the party. Party activists are expected to summon him again at a later stage, as they did in 2008, when he succeeded Othmani in the party leadership against the emergence of the Authenticity and Modernity Party and when the PJD entered an open confrontation with them. However, it is possible that he could remain in his leadership position of the Secretariat if he reaches an agreement with Othmani to divide the roles between themselves between a wing that is keen to promote the PJD's popularity, and another that promotes understanding and harmony with the deep state – although maintaining this balance is difficult and prone to failure. Benkirane may also choose to leave the party and form an alternative political force based on grassroots support and betting on his ability to weaken the deep state.

Second, it seems that this government will be formed smoothly and with great ease, after the implicit agreement of its six constituent parties on the distribution of important ministerial sectors, which, it seems, will not differ from the second Benkirane government apart from the entrance of the Constitutional Union and the Socialist Union parties who will share part of the previous quota of the National Rally for Liberals and the Popular Movement. Meanwhile, Akhannouch will retain control of the economic and development pillars (the Ministries of Finance, Economy, Agriculture, Industry and Trade), and the palace will maintain basic sovereignty over the Ministries of Defence, Interior, Foreign Affairs, the General Secretariat of the Government and, potentially, the Ministry of Justice. The rest of the parties will divide among themselves the remaining government positions, each according to their electoral weight.

It appears that this government will experience much conflict and instability with differences emerging early in the government programme with the start of the policies of the next government, especially regarding the removal of gas subsidies, the completion of compensation fund reform, and the offering of direct support to the poor, which is strongly contested. This is in addition to the implementation of the floating currency project and the rest of the economic and social reforms, including, for example, the rural development fund, which was the focus of a previous dispute between Akhannouch and Benkirane.

However, the government may survive, as long as it has the support of King Mohammed VI, with the possibility that it will not complete its full mandate, as was the case for the first Benkirane government. Thus, a government reshuffle may see the Independence Party joining the government if Nizar Baraka succeeds in seizing the party leadership from mid-February; or it may lead to early elections, reshaping the political landscape in Morocco.

Leadership of dissonance

Saadeddine Othmani succeeded in reaching a tentative agreement to form a government and is likely to succeed in its formation and leadership for three reasons: his consensus-building character, his success in persuading the party leadership to support him, and his abandonment of the red lines drawn by Benkirane. However, he will head a heterogeneous government afflicted by many contradictions, which may implode if it falls under excessive pressure potentially leading to a government crisis. To overcome such a crisis would require a cabinet reshuffle to avoid a complete collapse, especially given the strong position of the king, who wants the Justice and Development Party to continue leading the government in future.

Several factors support this trend, especially that the palace may not want the PJD to become the opposition, a position where it is well trained and has accumulated lengthy experience, because that would strengthen it further and render it a victim against which the forces of the deep state had conspired. The country is also embarking on a number of sensitive economic and social measures, which require a strong and popular government in order to be able to pass a number of 'unpopular' policies, such as the final lifting of subsidies on basic consumer goods, and a number of high-risk economic resolutions, such as the 'floating currency', which Morocco began gradually in the beginning of this year. In the absence of the confidence of the people in the government, these decisions may cause more social tension, threatening to take the battle back to the streets and return to the days before the new constitution.