Viewpoints
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Morocco's Islamists:
In Power Without Power

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David Ottaway is a senior scholar at the Wilson Center who has recently returned from Morocco. The following piece is an overview of his observations on Morocco's Islamists.

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Seven months after an Islamist became prime minister for the first time in Morocco's history, it remains as nebulous here as in Tunisia and Egypt what the Islamists coming to power really portends. It is a conundrum that Islamist-wary Western capitals and independent analysts are all struggling to fathom.

In Morocco, King Mohammed VI has yet to yield any real authority under a new constitution, which requires him to pick the prime minister from the winning party of parliamentary elections won last November by the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD). Its leader, Abdelilah Benkirane, now heads the government but is doing everything to avoid confrontation with the king. As a result, nothing of real substance has changed so far nor is it expected to anytime soon.

"In Morocco, everything appears to change so that nothing really changes," commented a prominent Moroccan news analyst, who asked to remain anonymous because of his current falling out with the king. In his view, Benkirane has served to "stop the Arab Spring in Morocco" and his party has played the role of the king's "shock absorber" from pressures for real political reform.

A common prediction is that Benkirane (an Islamist) will prove no more successful in turning Morocco to the right than was Abderrahmane Youssoufi (a socialist) in shifting it to the left after being called back from political exile in France by the late King Hassan to become prime minister in 1998.

If Benkirane's PJD does fail, the likely outcome is the rise of more militant Islamists already mobilizing in anticipation.

King Mohammed VI has proven the most agile of the Arab world's eight monarchs in responding to reform pressures generated by the popular uprisings of last year that toppled the three long-ruling autocratic leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. He stopped a widening protest movement in its tracks by rushing through a new constitution in four months, which was overwhelmingly approved in a referendum last July. He committed himself to appointing the prime minister from the winning party in national elections, widening parliament's powers, and creating an independent judiciary.

But the king still remains "supreme arbiter" in all spheres; he is head of the armed forces and the highest religious authority in the land bearing the title "Commander of the Faithful." Whether he is a true reformer or just a master manipulator is yet to be seen.

The new constitution requires, in theory, a lot of power-sharing between the king and prime minister; how this will work out, in practice, is the question of the day. Right now, there is a sense of calculated gamesmanship by both sides as they discuss new government appointments, Islamic measures for the media, and reform of the judiciary. Many of the constitution's provisions still require "organic laws" that both the prime minister and the king must approve to take effect.

"We are developing cooperation with the king step by step," said Benkirane's Minister of Communication Mustapha El Khalfi. "People think democracy will come as a result of conflict between the monarchy and the government. They are completely wrong. Democracy will be the result of cooperation between the two."

The PJD has a tenuous foothold in power. It holds only 107 out of 395 seats in the lower elected house of parliament and 11 out of 31 cabinet posts. The upper house, indirectly elected by municipal notables, is still dominated by the king's supporters; new local elections will not be held until 2013. The PJD is also constrained by leading a coalition government that includes both ex-communists and pro-royalists.

Still, unlike previous prime ministers, Benkirane has quickly proven a popular, telegenic figure. He makes monthly televised appearances before parliament, not only to answer questions but to defend and build support for his government, even its unpopular decisions. As a result, a recent 20 percent increase for a liter of gasoline provoked no street protests. Nor has a bill to assure amnesty to military personnel for abuses committed while on duty.

El Khalfi pointed to some early PJD accomplishments in forging cooperation with the king starting with agreement on the appointment of senior government officials. The monarch would continue to name his choices for 40-odd "strategic positions," but the PJD now has the right to fill 1,140 others. Together, they had also launched a new national health services program, benefiting 8.5 million poor Moroccans and financed by a one percent surtax on private companies' earnings. There had also been agreement on cuts in operating budgets for all ministries that would help reduce the government's deficit from 8.5 to 6 percent of GDP.

The minister made no mention, however, of one embarrassing faux pas—his own attempt to change guidelines for state TV channels requiring notification of prayer time and more programs in Arabic at the expense of French and Spanish programs. When the king heard of the proposed changes, he reproached El Khalfi by appointing a new commission headed by a leftist minister unlikely to approve such changes.

Meanwhile, more militant Islamist groups that have refused so far to participate in parliamentary elections are waiting to see this unprecedented experiment in royal-Islamist "cohabitation" fail. They are deemed by Moroccan and outside analysts a far more serious threat to the king than the youth-led, secular, pro-democracy February 20 Movement, whose widening street protests in early 2011 provoked the new constitution.

Already, the Al-Adl wal-Ihsan (Justice and Spirituality) movement that rejects the king as Commander of the Faithful and hints at a "republic" to replace the monarchy is preparing for its entry into politics. Led by the reclusive, 83-year-old Sheikh Abdul Salam Yassin, the group mixes elements of Sufi mysticism, Salafi fundamentalism, and Muslim Brotherhood-style social activism. It is widely believed to have considerably more followers than Benkirane's PJD but has eschewed any participation in the monarchy.

This may be about to change.

"We are ready. It's just a question of conditions," said Omar Iharchane, head of the movement's research center.

Though al-Adl wal-Ihsan is officially outlawed, it was already a registered "political association," according to Iharchane. It had internal structures in place ready to launch a political party and had demonstrated its political bent by quickly becoming the mainstay of the February 20 Movement. Al-Adl wal-Ihsan's political clout was made clear last December when it withdrew from the pro-democracy movement and its momentum fizzled.

Iharchane predicted Morocco was headed for a second uprising because of its "dire social and economic problems," adding "we also see problems in the implementation of the new constitution in reality." He implied that another outbreak of mass protests and PJD's failure were the "conditions" al-Adl wal-Ihsan was awaiting to make its bid for power.

Even more stridently ultra-fundamentalist Islamists, former "Salafi jihadists," have begun reappearing in public wearing their singular long beards and short white robes. Another of King Mohammed's gestures to the Arab Spring was the release from prison in April 2011 of three of their sheikhs. They had been implicated in the May 2003 bombings of five sites in Casablanca that killed 45 people, including 12 suicide bombers. Over 1,000 Salafis were subsequently arrested, and 700 are still in prison. One of the released sheikhs, Mohammed Fizazi, has talked openly of forming a Salafi party as has already happened in Egypt and Tunisia.

But Anas Haloui, spokesman for the remaining Salafi detainees, doubted such a move was imminent. He noted there was no agreement among Morocco's Salafi leaders about recognition of the king's political or religious authority. Those who followed the Wahhabi traditions of Saudi Arabia, where the king is viewed as prime protector of the religious establishment, accepted Mohammed VI as "Commander of the Faithful." Others did not, and some rejected the king in any role.

Several Moroccan analysts said the Salafis were badly fragmented into as many as six groupings. "Maybe they will form a non-governmental organization first," said Sanaa Karim, a religious affairs reporter for the PJD newspaper *Attajdid*. In any case, their numbers were only "some hundreds" and they had no hope of matching the success of Egypt's Salafis, who won a surprising 28 percent of the vote in last year's elections.

"They have no common leader and no common ground," she remarked. But this was also true of Egyptian Salafis.

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