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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

## The Birth of a Moroccan Ruling Coalition

Policy Analysis Unit | April 2017

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## Introduction

Former Moroccan Foreign Minister, and member of the Justice and Development Party (PJD), Saad Eddine El Othmani succeeded in creating a new cabinet in three short weeks. This follows a prolonged impasse after his predecessor and fellow PJD member Abdelilah Benkirane failed to secure a parliamentary mandate for a government following the October, 2016 elections in which their party won a plurality of parliamentary seats. El Othmani will be able to present his cabinet to King Mohammed VI, ultimately, because he accepted the Socialist Union within the ranks of the coalition. Previously, Benkirane, as head of the PJD party with no outright majority, firmly refused to allow the Socialist Union to take part. This Report explores the main features of Morocco's new government and its prospects for continued success.

## The Makeup of the New Government

El Othmani's government is more diverse than its predecessors, including cabinet ministers from six separate political parties: the PJD, the National Rally of Independents, the Popular Movement, the Party of Progress and Socialism, the Socialist Union and the Constitutional Union. In addition, a number of "Crown Ministers" act as unaligned bureaucrats who directly represent the Royal Court, or the *Makhzen*, in the cabinet. Today, the distribution of government portfolios looks as follows:

- Crown Ministers: the Ministries of the Interior; Foreign Affairs; Defense; Religious Endowments ("Awqaf") and Islamic Affairs; and the General Secretariat.
- The Justice and Development Party: The Chief of Ministers; Transportation and Logistics; Energy and Minerals; the Ministry of Family and Social Security; Human Rights; Labour and Vocational Integration; the Ministry of General Affairs and Governance; the Ministry of Government Relations with Parliament and Civil Society; the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research; the Ministry of Handicrafts and the Social Economy; and the Ministry of Sustainable Development.
- National Rally of Independents: the Ministry of Finance and the Economy; the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Forestry, Water and Rural Development; the Ministry of Justice and Freedom; the Ministry of Industry, Investment and Trade; and the Ministry of Youth and Sport.
- The Popular Movement, a "traditional conservative" grouping, in conjunction with the National Rally of Independents: The Ministry of National Education and of

Vocational Training; the Ministry of Culture and Media; and the Ministry of Rural Development.

- The Party of Progress and Socialism: the Ministries of Housing and Urban Development; and Health; and Water.
- Socialist Union: the Ministry of Administrative Reform and Public Sector Employment; the Ministry of Moroccans Living Abroad and Migration; and the Ministry of Foreign Trade.
- Finally, the Constitutional Union holds the Ministry of Investment and Trade (jointly with the National Rally of Independents).

When compared to each party's parliamentary representation, the distribution of cabinet portfolios is as follows:

|                                     |  |   |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| Justice and Development Party       | 125 seats in parliament (32% of seats) | 12 ministerial portfolios (30.7% of government seats) |
| "Crown Ministers"                   | N/A                                    | 7 portfolios (18%)                                    |
| National Rally of Independents      | 37 seats in parliament (9%)            | 7 portfolios (18%)                                    |
| The Popular Movement                | 27 seats in parliament (7%)            | 5 portfolios (13%)                                    |
| The Socialist Union                 | 20 seats in parliament (5%)            | 3 portfolios (~8%)                                    |
| The Constitutional Union            | 19 seats in parliament (~5%)           | 2 portfolios (~5%)                                    |
| The Party of Progress and Socialism | 12 seats in parliament (~3%)           | 3 portfolios (~8%)                                    |

## The PJD Loses Ground

The new cabinet shows how much ground the PJD has surrendered to other political factions. The leading parliamentary party had to concede a number of prominent portfolios, including the Ministries of Justice, Communications and the Treasury to the parties that allowed it to secure a coalition. The PJD's coalition partners have, as a result, gained a disproportionately large representation in the new coalition cabinet. Meanwhile, the PJD, while heading the government, has failed to translate the increase in the popular vote it gained during the last elections (September 2016) into a tangible increase in governmental power. The leading party has also failed to take any of the more significant service-based ministries; which are often seen as crucial vehicles to building social support through wealth redistribution. It has been left only with the Ministry of Family Affairs, which generally has a limited budget and constricted social influence.

The process of forming a ruling coalition has locked the PJD grassroots in a bitter debate with the party leadership which today faces criticism for abandoning the vision of a government that reflects the popular will. The disgruntled PJD cadres failed to appreciate that it would have been impossible for the PJD to form a ruling coalition on the terms previously attempted by Benkirane. He was forced to choose between accepting a Royal mandate for El Othmani to form a PJD government, or take his party back to the opposition benches. It is difficult to predict how these maneuvers will play out within the PJD party apparatus.

## The Resurgence of Bureaucrats and Crown Ministers

The composition of El Othmani's new cabinet reflects the resurgent role of bureaucrats. A group of (largely) politically non-aligned experts drawn from within the civil service, they are generally kept close to the *Makhzen*. As such, the Monarch has direct influence over a number of the key ministries, including the Ministries of Defense, Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs and the General Secretariat. El Othmani's cabinet also continues the tradition of keeping the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the hands of a Crown Minister, which in fact was established under Benkirane's premiership (November, 2011-April, 2017). Additionally, the *Makhzen* has kept control of the Ministry of Interior, which it had controlled during the latter phase of Benkirane's cabinet (beginning in 2013).

## Political Loyalists to the Forefront

In Moroccan political parlance, “Administrative Parties” are recently formed political groupings made up of Court loyalists. They differ in character from older political groupings which took shape during the struggle for independence and in the early post-colonial period, such as the Independence Party, the Communist Party and the Socialist Union. In general, the support base of the administrative parties tends to be made up of societal elites, and particularly local notables in rural constituencies as well as urban businessmen and high-ranking bureaucrats entrusted with the proper functioning of government apparatus.

The National Rally of Independents and the Constitutional Union are perhaps the two best known “Administrative Parties”, while the Popular Movement also serves as a vehicle for political power for local notables in the countryside, particularly in the Middle Atlas provinces. These three parties worked together during the talks to form El Othmani’s coalition. They eventually put their weight behind Aziz Akhannouch, a businessman and Head of the National Rally of Independents. Akhannouch was previously the unaligned Minister of Agriculture under Benkirane (2011-2017). Prior to this, he served the government aligned with the Popular Movement in the government led by Independence Party leader Abbas El Fassi. The National Rally of Independents will likely play a pivotal role in the new government.

## Projecting the Future of El Othmani’s New Cabinet

One remarkable fact about El Othmani’s new government is that it is a wide-ranging coalition of parties which share little by way of a common agenda: the six parties represented in the formation range from far-left to Islamist, with conservatives and liberals thrown in between. This diversity may also result in stunted policy implementation, for which the cabinet will need parliamentary approval. Indeed, the first indications of disharmony between the components of the new government can be seen in the way that Akhannouch has demanded an end to structural reforms in the country’s social security programs. Previously, these disagreements have led to the governmental impasse which prevented Benkirane from forming a second cabinet.

It is entirely possible that the discord between the various components of the coalition will forestall the implementation of a unified government program, perhaps even impacting the government’s stability and sustainability. That could be the case if the



only thing keeping these disparate groups in coalition is the desire to hold on to the reins of power, without a will to compromise. On the other hand, the strong incentive to avoid further political deadlock in Morocco could produce a coalition government which speaks with a strong, unified voice and executes a program with long-term benefits for the country.