

# Morocco 2013: A Year of Crises

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The second year of the government led by the Islamist Abdelilah Benkirane in Morocco was a tough one, according to data published by the newspaper *Al Massae* on 20 March 2014, marked by a drop of more than 60% in foreign investment, compounded by falling phosphate revenues, dwindling remittances from Moroccan emigrants, and an increased trade deficit. According to the newspaper, all of these factors have put the Benkirane government in a tight spot, despite the positive assessment offered by the government spokesman, who, at about the same time, was announcing that the country had registered 4.8% growth in 2013, up from 2.7% the year before.

## **Government and Opposition: Unclear Roles**

For its part, the Moroccan opposition has written off 2013 as a “wasted year” due to the various crises that afflicted the country throughout it. The crisis within the governing majority and the crisis in the relationship with the country’s great ally, the United States, both occurred within the framework of the economic crisis with its associated burden of a growing public debt that, according to the Office of the High Commissioner for Planning, the government agency responsible for forecasts and statistics, rose from 71.2% of GDP in 2012 to 77.4% in 2013 and is expected to continue to rise to 83.7% in 2014. In the view of Ahmed Lahlimi, head of the agency, all of these figures are “disturbing.”

However, it must not be forgotten that, in Morocco, the government and the opposition sometimes seem to swap roles. Since its constitution in January 2012, the government has been embroiled in an unspoken war with those who seek to discredit it by hindering its actions, including more than a few of the country’s de facto powers. Tensions between ministers and the Moroccan business community (the most striking being the boycott by the members of the CGEM employers federation of the meeting between Moroccan and Turkish businessmen during Erdogan’s visit to Morocco in June 2013) and the common front formed by the main trade unions against government policy and, in particular, against the Prime Minister himself, are just a few examples of this war.

However, the subtlest part of this situation is that playing out between the country’s highest authority and the Head of Government, who holds only a portion of the power and whose area of shared and poorly demarcated competences is often encroached upon. The appointments of walis and ambassadors are a good example of this. Nevertheless, Benkirane has been notoriously resistant to implementing policies imposed from above, especially when compared to his predecessor, Abbas El Fassi, who never hid the fact that his own policy was simply to carry out His Majesty’s orders. This resistance has been particularly visible in his defence of the Compensation Fund for oil products, gas and sugar, which in his view remains one of the key mechanisms for ensuring social cohesion and solidarity, despite pressure from the IMF.

## **The Long Crisis of the Government**

However, the most striking aspect of 2013 was the fact that this war was also being waged at the heart

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of the governing coalition itself. The government's internal crisis began on 3 January with the "Memorandum" submitted to the Chief Executive by Hamid Chabat, leader of the Istiqlal Party, the coalition government's main partner, demanding cabinet changes and greater representation for his party. The crisis was the result of an earlier crisis in his own party, which had been settled a few months earlier, on 23 September 2012, with the election of Chabat himself as Secretary General. Chabat's faction had defeated that of his predecessor, the former Prime Minister Abbas El Fassi, which had dominated the party to date and was represented by the party's six ministers in the Benkirane cabinet.

This bold move, it was initially thought, would culminate in tough negotiations to impose his candidates on the new government and make the desired adjustments to it. However, against all odds, the process was long and dragged on for six months, bringing the government to a virtual standstill. In May, the leader of Istiqlal turned to Mohammed VI to request arbitration, pursuant to Article 42 of the new constitution, which provides that the King shall be the supreme arbiter of all state institutions.

While the sovereign refused to play the role of mediator, he did receive Chabat for a brief hearing. The hearing came on the heels of the resignation, accepted by the King, of five Istiqlal ministers on 9 July, an extremely rare turn of events in the annals of Moroccan history. Bizarrely, the sixth Istiqlal minister refused to leave the government and, thus, had to leave his party instead. Following the crisis, Mohammed El Ouafa, who, as Minister of Education, had received very bad press and achieved equally poor results, was tapped to be the Minister of General Affairs in the new "Benkirane II" cabinet.

The government crisis did not end there. The loss of the support of the 61 MPs from the outgoing party meant that replacements had to be sought from

amongst one or more other political forces to achieve the parliamentary majority of 198 MPs needed to avoid a minority government. It was not easy to find new partners for the government amongst the other parties with a significant representation in Parliament. In some cases, such as the National Rally of Independents (RNI) or the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM), the parties had participated in the electoral front formed against the Justice and Development Party (PJD) in the November 2011 elections known as the "G8," an eclectic group made up of eight, mostly liberal political formations, including minor socialist, green and even Islamist factions. In others, such as the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), it was because they had openly declared their willingness to engage in opposition following thirteen years of being worn down in the government.

### The New "Benkirane II" Cabinet

Ultimately, it was the RNI, led by Salaheddine Mezouar, that agreed, after two months of negotiations, to form a new majority, leading to a major cabinet reshuffle. Mezouar, who had, with the Palace's blessing, been Benkirane's rival for Prime Minister in the November 2011 elections, accepted the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs in the "Benkirane II" cabinet, formed on 10 October 2013. The new cabinet included eight ministers from his party – nearly as many as from the PJD itself – including Mohammed Boussaid, the former wali of Greater Casablanca, appointed Minister of Economy and Finance, and Moulay Hafid Elalamy, former president of the CGEM, appointed Minister of Industry and Trade. Several of these new ministers were suggested by the Palace, and, together with the so-called sovereign ministries (Interior, Religious Affairs, Secretariat General of the Government, and Agriculture), form the largest bloc in the current government.

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The Ministry of the Interior, which, in the previous Benkirane cabinet, had, for the first time in Moroccan history, been headed up by a party man, Mohand Laenser, leader of the Popular Movement, was restored to the Palace through the figure of Mohamed Hassad, a former minister in the 1990s and wali, under the new King, of Marrakesh and Tangier.

### **The American Scare and the Sahara**

The crisis opened in April with the United States on the issue of the Sahara was of a different nature entirely. The tension with the United Nations from the year before due to the Moroccan rejection of the Secretary General's personal representative for the Sahara, Christopher Ross, who was ultimately re-accepted by Morocco thanks only to Ban Ki-Moon's staunch support, had barely been overcome when a new problem arose when it was learned that the US had submitted a draft resolution to the Security Council in favour of broadening the mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) in the sphere of human rights in the Sahara.

Morocco reacted immediately, cancelling all joint manoeuvres for Operation African Lion planned for the month in the country. Although the US withdrew the draft, after France and Spain submitted an alternative that did not include a broader mandate, the crisis was not entirely resolved, but rather lasted until the Moroccan monarch's trip to Washington in November 2013 and his interview with President Obama. There, he managed to convince an American administration, for the first time, to consider the Moroccan proposal of autonomy as "serious, realistic and credible" and as a possible approach to fulfilling the aspirations of the people of the Western Sahara and to allowing them to settle their own affairs in peace and dignity.

What came to be known as the "Danielgate" affair can also be considered a crisis. On the occasion of Throne Day, a royal pardon was granted to a Spanish paedophile of Iraqi origin who had been imprisoned in Morocco after having been sentenced to 30 years of prison by a Kenitra court in May 2011. Apparently, the pardon was due to a series of misunderstandings and mistakes following a visit from King Juan Carlos I to Morocco in July 2013, in which

the Spanish monarch inquired about a different Spaniard being held in custody. The result was the freeing of various Spanish prisoners, including, inadvertently, Daniel Fina Galván. Hamid Krairi, the lawyer of three families of victims of the pardoned prisoner, used social media to sound the alarm, triggering an unprecedented popular mobilisation, as the protest called into question – for the first time in Moroccan history – an action taken by the King. The King had no choice but to acknowledge his mistake and, exceptionally, to revoke the pardon.

The crisis of the Istiqlal party, which affected the government's own crisis, cannot be viewed as an isolated incident, but rather must be understood as indicative of the widespread crisis affecting the country's political parties, which the 2004 Parties Act failed to quash. There is a visible crisis in the main party of the left, the USFP, whose Secretary General, Driss Lachgar, elected at the congress held in December 2012, is questioned by the faction led by Ahmed Zaidi, the opponent he defeated. This confrontation was maintained throughout 2013 and has yet to be resolved, despite the attempts by other leaders to mediate and the Secretary General's (successful) efforts to draw two splinter groups of the party – the Socialist Party (PS) and the Workers' Party (PT) – back into the fold.

**Morocco's main parties are led by a new generation of populist politicians. It is a generation marked more by political pragmatism than by ideologies derived from the struggle for independence**

Today, Morocco's main parties are led by a new generation of populist politicians. It is a generation marked more by political pragmatism than by ideologies derived from the struggle for independence that characterised Moroccan political life for many years. This is true of Chabat and Lachgar, of Istiqlal and the USFP, respectively, the "national movement" parties. However, it is also true of more recently founded parties, such as Benkirane's own PJD, and of PAM leaders, such as that party's founder, Fouad Ali El Himma, or Ilyas El Omari.

### Conclusion: The Actual Epicentre

On another level, 2013 was an especially African year for Morocco, signifying a certain return to a continent from which the country had remained all too absent since its withdrawal from the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1984. In March, Mohammed VI took a royal tour of Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon on a trip described as "religious and economic diplomacy." Morocco is trying to leverage the large presence in these countries of members of the Tijani brotherhood, whose main *zaouia*, or shrine, is in Fez, to develop its investments in them. In September, on the occasion of the investiture of the new president of Mali, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, Mohammed VI travelled to Bamako, making much of his role as "Commander of the Faithful" and ambassador of a "moderate Islam." His involvement in that country's internal conflict increased when he received the Secretary General of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad on 31 January 2014, a move viewed with suspicion by Algiers.

Just as his father once did, Mohammed VI, the "epicentre of general attention," as the monarch was

called in a recent book by the journalist Souleiman Bencheikh, *Le dilemme du Roi ou la monarchie marocaine à l'épreuve* (Casa-Express, Rabat 2013), has used some of his speeches to sound the alarm on key issues. In his speech on the 60th anniversary of the Revolution of the King and the People in August, he called attention to the country's deteriorated education system, offering a highly critical view of the situation. At the opening of the most recent session of Parliament, the King harshly criticised the governance of Casablanca, one of the country's most important cities, causing a veritable institutional tsunami in the kingdom's economic capital. Likewise, he used his speech on the anniversary of the Green March to report on a new development-oriented approach to Saharan policy by means of the Economic, Social and Environmental Council.

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