Has the year 2022 been a back to basics for Morocco? After a decade of counter-reforms, 2021 seemed to be the pinnacle of the “end of the cycle of opportunity,” which began with the so-called Arab Spring (Casani y Tomé, 2021). The triple elections (local, regional and national) that took place in September 2021 and the formation of a coalition government made up of pro-Palace parties, as well as the drastic crackdown on human rights that has taken place for most of the last decade, confirmed the centrality of the Palace in the management of political affairs, and the progressive weakness of the opposition to promote changes. At the same time, the growing acceptance of Morocco’s resolution plan for the Western Sahara conflict shows the success of the country’s diplomatic tactics and has contributed to strengthening the Palace’s position in the political arena.

The 2021 Elections and the Translation of the Palace’s Will

8 September 2021 witnessed an exceptional triple election, held at both local, regional and national level. Its results showed the foreseeable victory of the National Rally of Independents (RNI), led by Aziz Akhannouch, the second richest man in the country and a figure very close to the King, already present in the two previous governments, but it also showed the severe electoral decline of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD).

Despite the elections being preceded by several electoral reforms, arguably to prevent the PJD’s electoral victory, such as the abolition of the electoral threshold and the modification of the seat distribution model, the magnitude of the PJD’s loss was difficult to foresee. The party went from leading the government with 126 seats in parliament to being unable to form a parliamentary group of its own, with only 13 seats. Different reasons seem to justify the PJD’s results, including its inability to meet reform expectations, generated by the party itself, its failure to implement a moralization project, the difficulties it had reacting to the Covid-19 crisis, or the alienation of its followers following the normalization of relations with Israel in December 2020 (Allal, 2021).

Coming in second and third position were the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM) and the Istiqlal Party, both of which are seen as close to the Palace. The formation of a coalition government by the three first parties (RNI, PAM and Istiqlal), led by Akhannouch, reflects the Palace’s commitment to stability, in a context of hardship characterized by the still ongoing pandemic crisis and the need to boost the country’s economic recovery.

Ahead lies Morocco’s goals to promote a new social contract, which focuses on three axes, the extension of healthcare coverage, economic recovery and public sector reform, and to implement the ambitious Awrach programme, aimed at creating 250,000 jobs between 2022 and 2023. The search for stability was additionally reinforced by the promotion of the “New Development Model” prior to the celebration of the elections, which de facto established the main political guidelines the future government should develop, and the involvement of all political parties under a “National Pact for Development.” The need for this common political stance...
was once again stressed by King Mohammed VI in his speech to the Parliament on the occasion of the opening of the first session of the legislature.¹

**Risks and Challenges to the New Government**

This commitment to stability, however, comes at a risk. The current imbalance between forces in the Parliament shows the virtual disappearance of any opposition or feasible alternative to the government. Whereas the political parties have traditionally acted as a political shield to the King, absorbing criticism within the country, as well as any political failing, while legitimating the position of the monarch, the current concentration of pro-Palace political forces in the government and the absence of alternatives considerably reduces the regime’s capacity to absorb social unrest.

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A second dilemma is the conflict of interest that arises from the position of Akhannouch as head of government, and his own personal economic interests as one of the country’s leading businessmen. A case in point is the current fuel price hike and Akhannouch’s interests as CEO of the Akwa Group, a conglomerate primarily involved in the oil and gas industry. But beyond this, Akhannouch’s case is an example of the overlapping political and economic interests in Morocco’s political system. Both points were made clear during the popular boycott organized in 2018 against the rising prices, which targeted three companies strongly linked with the economic and political elite, including Afrique gas stations, part of Akhannouch’s business conglomerate.

As for the opposition, the electoral results attest to the fragmentation of the left, their organizational problems and their difficulties in mobilizing the Moroccan electorate (Cox, 2021). Meanwhile, the anti-establishment opposition faces an increasingly constrained scenario, marred by restrictions on freedom of expression, and the repression of leading human rights activists, as well as the restrictions on mobility imposed by the state of alarm, which is still in place. In this sense, the current health crisis opened the door to a further securitization of the country and to increasing pressure on dissenting voices. Despite this, structural problems, such as rising food and commodity prices and high unemployment figures, which have been more acute since the beginning of the pandemic, continue to be a source of social discontent and open up the possibility of greater protests in the future. The demonstrations against the imposition of health restrictions, such as the vaccine pass, or the deterioration in the quality of life, under the new Akhannouch government, attest to these challenges.

**The Success of a Harder Foreign Policy**

We might draw a parallel between the democratic backsliding experienced in domestic politics and the assertive stance and conflict-prone foreign policy developed in recent years, which stresses the central position of the King and a harder stance in the management of political affairs. The assertive foreign policy adopted by Morocco has been characterized by a political – but not economic – distancing from the European Union (Fernández-Molina, 2019), a re-orientation of its interests towards other regions, mainly Africa, and a greater tendency towards conflict to achieve its goals.

Western Sahara has been one of Morocco’s main foreign policy axes. In a context marked by the breakdown of the ceasefire with the Polisario Front in November 2020 and, especially, by the US diplomatic recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the region later that year, Morocco has adopted a more
proactive strategy for asserting its sovereignty over Western Sahara, intensifying its pressure on European diplomatic positions.

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This strategy has resulted in several diplomatic conflicts, leading to the breaking of relations with Germany, in March 2021, and Spain, in May 2021, for almost a year. At the heart of this decision was the perceived informal support to Western Sahara of both Germany and Spain (expressed in Germany’s questioning of the US unilateral recognition of Morocco’s sovereignty over the region, and the hospitalization of Polisario Front leader, Brahim Gali, in Spain).

This new foreign policy approach was stressed in King Mohammed VI’s speech on the anniversary of the Green March on 6 November 2021, when he warned European countries of Morocco’s decision not to “engage with them in any economic or commercial approach that would exclude the Moroccan Sahara.”

An Increase in Tensions with Algeria

In parallel, and with the issue of Western Sahara clearly in the background, 2021 has also been marked by a deterioration in relations with Algeria. Diplomatic relations were severed after Morocco’s permanent representative to the UN alluded to the Kabylia region’s desire for self-determination from Algeria in July 2021. Since then, tensions have increased, with a ban on the use of Algerian airspace by Moroccan military and civilian aircraft and, most notably, the decision not to renew the Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline contract. In the current context of the war between Russia and Ukraine and the rise in fuel prices, this decision will have major economic consequences for Morocco. An example of the strategy changes this will imply is the recent announcement that Spain will export liquefied natural gas to the country, to compensate for Morocco’s decrease in gas imports from Algeria.

Conflictual relations with Algeria, however, have a more complex and structural nature, framed in Algeria’s traditional support to the Polisario Front in Western Sahara, and, more broadly, in the competition between both countries to assert their influence on the region. From this perspective, the breakdown in their relations can be traced back to the recognition of Western Sahara by the United States, as well as Morocco’s strategy of Africanization and Algeria’s own internal political weakness. The latter refers to the changing relations between Morocco and Algeria depending on the perceived weakness of the other country (Hernando de Larramendi, 2019).

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Conclusions

To return to the initial question, the political regime's situation certainly reflects the closing of a decade of opportunities for change and the recovery of the monarchy's lost ground, further reinforced by its diplomatic successes regarding Western Sahara. The current balance on Morocco shows a monarchy increasingly involved in public affairs, which has overcome the already-limited restrictions imposed by the 2011 Constitution, and has bended the political opposition, establishing a coalition government made up of pro-Palace parties.

In this same vein, the diplomatic results achieved by Morocco seem to confirm the success of its harder foreign policy strategy, contributing to stressing the Palace's centrality and the political role it plays.

The commitment to stability shown by the Palace's decisions, however, entails its own risks; should the government fail to overcome the current health and economic challenges, the regime may run out of political alternatives to overturn the situation.

References


