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Morocco Islamists struggle with coalition rule



After just over a year in power, Morocco's Islamist-led government is struggling to fulfill the high hopes brought on by its election in 2011 on promises to fight corruption, provide for the needy and reform the country. Working within a coalition of often reluctant allies, the moderate Islamists of the Justice and Development Party have found many of their initiatives blocked by an establishment with close ties to the royal palace that still wields ultimate power in this North African kingdom of 32 million. Like the Islamist parties in Tunisia and Egypt, the PJD, as the Moroccan party is known, capitalized on the pro-reform demonstrations of the Arab Spring and swept into power through the ballot box. But also like their sister parties in the region they are finding ruling to be much more difficult than being in the opposition. Morocco gained notice internationally for its swift response to defuse Arab Spring-inspired demonstrations in 2011, pledging reform and greater democracy. The constitution was quickly amended and early elections were held, resulting in a coalition of Islamists along with leftist and conservative parties that pledged to tackle some of the deep seated problems that had brought people into the streets by the tens of thousands. The coalition, however, has shown signs of strain, with some members threatening to quit amid accusations that the Islamists are trying to monopolize power. Meanwhile there has been little headway in confronting Morocco's severe economic woes. During recent by-elections, Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane, who leads the PJD, campaigned less on his record than on attacks against forces "plotting" his downfall. In January, he said at a conference that he wasn't sure he would be allowed to finish his five-year term. The opposition, however, has said that such talk is just a way of covering up for the government's failures. In its first year, it has achieved relatively little, passing only five of the 20 laws meant to implement the democratic reforms of the new constitution. Abdallah Bouanou, the head of the Islamists' parliamentary delegation, told The Associated Press that there are powerful forces in the administration, business world and opposition parties that oppose the government's ambitious reform agenda and want to undo Morocco's Arab Spring, which began on Feb. 20, 2011 - something he warned that could spark renewed popular demonstrations. "There are people who benefited from the despotism and corruption before Feb. 20," he said Wednesday. "They want to go back to before Feb. 20 and they don't respect the law or the (new) constitution." He warned that if they succeeded the people, as well as his own party, would return to the streets. "If necessary the PJD would not hesitate to also go into the streets to protect the reforms and defend the constitution," he said. The squabbles within the coalition and without come against a backdrop of an increasingly serious economic situation. Official unemployment has risen to 9 percent and the deficit last year reached a higher-than-expected 7.1 percent of GDP. International ratings agencies Moody's and Standard & Poor recently downgraded the country's outlook from stable to negative because of the worsening fiscal crisis, citing in particular the lack of progress on reforming a system of subsidies for fuel and food staples that costs the country \$6.5 billion a year. The government announced that it would reform the massively expensive program taking up 6 percent of GDP by June and replace across the board subsidies with targeted aid to the most needy. Moody's noted that the country only had \$15 billion in hard currency reserves, just enough to cover four months of imports. Morocco received help from the International Monetary Fund in August with a \$6.2 billion precautionary credit line - but the assistance comes on the condition that the subsidies and pensions system are reformed. Paradoxically, some of the fiercest opposition to the PJD has come from its main coalition partner, the Istiqlal (Independence) Party, which has been a relentless critic of the Islamists since it elected a new leader, Hamid Chabat, in September. In December, Chabat sent a memo to Benkirane demanding a Cabinet reshuffle and a greater role in decision-making for his party or he would pull out of the coalition. He accused the PJD of seeking to "Egyptianize" Morocco and