

# MOROCCO

## The Forecast, 2020

- Prime Minister **Saadeddine Othmani** is going to have a difficult year and the government will come under increasing strain. His position has been significantly weakened by the recent government reshuffle which resulted in a reduction in the number of Parti de la justice et du développement (PJD) ministers. It has also left the PJD ruling in coalition with four other parties who are hostile to it. These parties – whose eyes are already on the 2021 legislative elections – will continue to do their utmost to undermine the prime minister and to demonstrate that the PJD is unfit for office. Othmani will therefore be heading a government whose components will take credit for any political successes, but squarely point the finger of blame at the PJD for any failings. This indicates that the party will continue to lose both credibility and popularity.
- The domestic political scene will be heavily dominated by the upcoming 2021 elections, with various personalities seeking to propel themselves to the fore. This includes former premier **Abdelilah Benkirane**, who will continue to undermine Othmani with a view to returning as the PJD's General Secretary. He will move increasingly to the centre stage in a bid to launch his political comeback to try to save the PJD from itself.
- **Aziz Akhannouch**, the leader of the Rassemblement National des Indépendants (RNI), will be another figure to watch. Unlike Othmani he is charismatic and gaining in popularity, and was skilful in holding onto the RNI's ministerial posts in the recent reshuffle. He will build on this to try to position himself ahead of the elections by keeping one foot with the government and the other with the opposition. He is therefore likely to grow in popularity and influence.
- Morocco will continue to be blighted by social problems and will see further protests erupting throughout 2020, including by teachers and health workers. The Rif region will remain a running sore with further unrest possible. This rising social discontent will increasingly find an outlet of expression at sporting events, especially football matches, where crowds are already holding up banners and slogans against the government. Although this social unrest is unlikely to reach the point of toppling the government, it will continue to hamper it and to serve as a major irritant.
- Despite the very real and biting social problems, the Monarchy will retain its popularity and will continue to provide a sense of stability in the face of mounting political and social pressures.
- Morocco will remain vigilante on the counter-terrorism front and will uphold its pre-emptive approach. Next year will see further arrests and terrorist cells being dismantled. The possibility of further terrorist attacks should not, however be discounted and especially given the return of Moroccans from Syria and Iraq.
- Bilateral relations with Algeria are unlikely to significantly improve. While the election of a new Algerian president – albeit it one who has little or no domestic credibility because the election was rigged like all of the previous ones – may open the way for the start of discussions on the possibility of re-opening the border, the Western Sahara will remain a key point of contention that will not be overcome in the medium term at the very least. The Western Sahara issue will remain unresolved and tensions could increase in the short term because of Polisario's recent more emboldened stance.
- Rabat will maintain its broadly pro-Western outlook although will still balk at any hint of normalising relations with Israel at the behest of Washington.
- Although the economy has shown resilience, growth is expected to slow in 2020. The central Bank of Morocco's governor predicted a growth rate of 3.7% in 2020 but this may be optimistic. The IMF has predicted that the fiscal deficit – which is projected to remain at 3.7% of GDP in 2019 – will decline and stabilise to around 3% of GDP after 2020. Although the fund believes that Morocco's debt is sustainable, there is concern among certain local economists and political figures that rising external debt levels will create serious future problems for the country, and especially because the government is using much of the money it is borrowing for operational costs rather than for investment.

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