

Morocco Chooses New All-Secular Cabinet

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RABAT, Morocco (AP) - After nearly a month of tough negotiations, Moroccan leaders formed a new government Monday that includes seven women but no one from the Islamic party that placed second in September's parliamentary elections.

Eight of the 34 Cabinet ministers are from the secular Istiqlal party of Prime Minister Abbas El Fassi, who was named to the post in mid-September, while seven come from the Socialist Union of Popular Forces.

There were no major surprises among the most sensitive appointments, such as that of foreign minister, who is traditionally chosen by King Mohamed VI.

Longtime Foreign Minister Mohamed Benaissa was replaced by his deputy, 49-year-old Taieb Fassi Fihri - part of a bid to open the door to a new generation. Interior Minister Chakib Benmoussa retained his post.

The appointment of seven women ministers - up from two in the previous government - underscored the moderate North African kingdom's efforts to modernize. Morocco's 44-year-old monarch, who took the throne in 1999, had said the new government must work for democratization and development.

The position of sports minister went to Nawal el Moutawakil, a woman who won the gold medal in the 400-meter intermediate hurdles at the 1984 Olympics. Amina Benkhadra will head the energy, water and environment ministry.

The naming of the new government follows Sept. 7 elections in which the secular Istiqlal led the voting and won 52 of the 325 seats. The Justice and Development Party, an Islamic party, finished second with 46 seats but got no Cabinet posts.

El Fassi, who led the negotiations, had made clear after his appointment that the new Cabinet would mimic the makeup of the former government, which was led by a coalition including Istiqlal and the Socialist Union of Popular Forces - leaving no room for the Islamic party.

The Justice and Development Party has gained strength in recent years, worrying its secular rivals. However, some in the party see a role in the opposition as being more advantageous than being part of a governing coalition.