

Akhannouch's Government Engulfed in Conflict of Interest Scandals



The issue of conflict of interest has once again taken center stage in Morocco's political discourse, with fresh accusations facing Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch's government this time over the controversial import of the drug potassium chloride.

The controversy erupted after Abdellah Bouanou, a Member of Parliament from the Justice and Development Party (PJD), raised concerns over the issuance of exceptional licenses allegedly benefiting a company owned by a sitting cabinet minister, reviving longstanding questions about ethical governance.

In response, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection issued a statement denying the allegations, calling them baseless and harmful to the credibility of national efforts to secure pharmaceutical supply chains and ensure continued treatment availability in hospitals.

However, the ministry did not deny that a government minister profited from the deal making this another chapter in the growing narrative of conflicts of interest shadowing Akhannouch's administration since it took office.

Unpacking the Deal

During parliamentary discussions on the 2026 finance bill, Bouanou raised the issue of importing the drug from China under a temporary license. He noted that several hospitals had withdrawn the medication because its labeling was in an incomprehensible language.

Though Bouanou did not name the minister in question, media reports linked the matter to a company owned by Chakib Barada, the Minister of National Education.

An investigative report by Lissan Al-Maghrib magazine revealed that Barada also a member of the political bureau of the ruling National Rally of Independents (RNI) still holds a position in a pharmaceutical supply chain company despite his ministerial role.

According to the investigation, Barada remains registered as an “administrative officer” in BIP Partners, a stakeholder in the PharmaProm Group, which has come under scrutiny over its dealings with the Health Ministry, currently headed by fellow RNI member Amin Tahrawi.

This raises sharp legal questions about Barada's conduct. Moroccan law explicitly prohibits ministers from continuing to manage or operate profit-oriented private entities during their tenure.

Article 33 of the organic law mandates a complete severance from any economic or commercial activity that could pose a potential conflict of interest, save for passive financial holdings.

Barada's continued role in a company operating in a sector regulated and contracted by the government puts into question the principle of separating public office from private interests. It reignites the debate over the effectiveness of internal safeguards within the government to prevent such conflicts.

The Health Ministry, under Tahrawi's leadership, responded vaguely to the allegations, avoiding any direct acknowledgment of whether companies owned by government members had benefited.

Its official statement denied any preferential treatment or monopolies, asserting that the deal adhered to a “legal and transparent” tendering process without disclosing the names of bidding or winning companies.

This evasive response sparked criticism among civic observers, who accused the ministry of sidestepping the core issue and focusing on procedural rhetoric instead of clarifying whether a minister-owned firm was indeed a beneficiary.

Government spokesperson Mustapha Baitas added that the government's dealings with the company dated back to 2014, indirectly confirming that business ties persisted even after the minister assumed office. For many

observers, this amounted to a tacit admission of what the Health Ministry sought to downplay.

In 2014, Barada was a businessman entitled to compete for public contracts; now, he is a government official wielding regulatory power with a private hand in lucrative sectors.

Part of a Larger Pattern

The potassium chloride case follows on the heels of another high-profile scandal involving the awarding of a desalination plant contract in the Casablanca-Settat region in 2024. The deal, worth approximately 6.5 billion dirhams, was granted to a consortium that included a company owned by Prime Minister Akhannouch.

This fueled allegations that the Prime Minister used his political position for personal gain a charge that led opposition figures to brand the case a “political scandal” undermining the government’s credibility.

Despite Akhannouch’s insistence that the bidding process was transparent, suspicions persisted, especially given the accumulation of similar cases. These include reports of private firms linked to government members or their associates receiving public contracts or financial subsidies such as in the “Farrakchia” case, where 18 individuals allegedly received 13 billion dirhams in subsidies for importing livestock, with no visible impact on the soaring prices of red meat and sacrificial animals in recent years.

Such cases point to a systemic flaw in the relationship between business and government. Business elites are increasingly occupying executive roles in sensitive sectors, raising the risk of public resources being funneled into private hands in the absence of robust transparency mechanisms.

While Moroccan law grants the executive broad authority in shaping public policy, it lacks sufficient oversight to ensure a clean break between public duties and private enterprises, especially in sectors like pharmaceuticals and infrastructure. These unchecked powers render exceptions and contract processes vulnerable to exploitation by economically and politically connected elites.

As some analysts note, the Moroccan economic landscape suffers from a lack of political independence from private business interests. The current cabinet’s makeup reflects this overlap, with many ministers simultaneously serving as investors or business owners.

This convergence of public governance and private enterprise raises pressing concerns about the state’s ability to ensure fair competition and curb rent-seeking behavior.

Opposition's Response

The Moroccan opposition has responded to these issues by framing each new case as part of a broader pattern of executive overreach and insufficient separation between political power and private gain.

The Justice and Development Party (PJD), in particular, has adopted a strategy of compiling and documenting such cases as evidence of deep-rooted governance failures. It has relied on constitutional oversight tools such as parliamentary inquiries most notably in the livestock importation case and repeatedly raised the issue during government questioning sessions.

In doing so, the opposition has sought to demonstrate that the conflict of interest problem is not limited to individual actors but is symptomatic of a broader governmental structure dominated by businessmen in critical decision-making positions.

The opposition has also taken steps to articulate a legal and political critique of the government's response, which it argues is often superficial or overly technical avoiding the fundamental issue of overlapping public and private roles. It has called for a revision of the laws regulating conflict-of-interest disclosures and for ministers to fully relinquish managerial roles in private enterprises while in public office.

This approach has allowed the opposition to frame conflict-of-interest scandals as a central political issue heading into the next elections. Opposition parties are betting that the cumulative weight of these controversies will erode public trust in Akhannouch's government especially given the continued scrutiny over major contracts and a growing public perception that money and power are becoming indistinguishably entangled.

They also see an opportunity to tap into discontent among younger generations, particularly Gen Z, whom some analysts believe are increasingly disillusioned with current governance.

The opposition views this climate as fertile ground to present itself as a credible political alternative, one capable of restoring transparency and reviving oversight institutions that have been marginalized in recent years.

What Lies Ahead for the Akhannouch Government?

Observers predict that the fallout from these scandals will extend beyond media cycles and begin to strain the ruling coalition's cohesion and electoral prospects. If the opposition continues to build a sustained campaign around these issues, the government may find itself increasingly vulnerable.

Analysts suggest that the National Rally of Independents (RNI), led by Akhannouch, stands to suffer most, given that both Minister of Health Amin Tahrawi and Education Minister Chakib Barada also belong to the party.

The repetition of these allegations risks damaging the RNI's image as a whole particularly in a climate where Moroccans are growing more sensitive to issues of integrity and transparency. This could ultimately reshape the country's political landscape.

The potassium chloride import scandal is thus the latest episode in a troubling saga of the fusion between wealth and power under a government dominated by business elites.

While the Health Ministry maintains that all procedures were conducted transparently and legally, statements from government spokesperson Mustapha Baitas indicate that the company linked to Minister Barada did indeed profit from the deal.

Without evidence to dispel the allegations such as publicly available documentation or a parliamentary fact-finding commission mere denials will do little to rebuild public trust.

As the next elections approach, many observers believe these issues may seriously undermine the ruling coalition's chances of maintaining power.