

D A T E L I N E M E I

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Will Generation-Next Takeover Saudi Arabia?

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The death of Crown Prince Sultan will undoubtedly hasten reforms in the Saudi succession process. Once the three-day mourning period ended, King Abdullah swiftly named his half brother and Second Deputy Prime Minister Prince Naif as the new Crown Prince who will also retain the powerful Interior Ministry. However, the succession saga is far from over. All eyes are on the nomination of the Second Deputy Prime Minister who would also be the third in the line of succession.

Prince Sultan, the only Crown Prince to die in office without becoming the King, was appointed the Second Deputy Prime Minister soon after Fahd became the King in August 1982. While Sultan became the Crown Prince, when Abdullah became the King in August 2005, the latter choose to keep the office of the Second Deputy Prime Minister vacant. Prince Naif was named to that position only in March 2009 or nearly four years after Abdullah became King.

The delayed nomination was largely seen as Abdullah's hesitation vis-à-vis Naif, especially over issues such as reforms. The latter is seen more of a conservative even by the Saudi standards. For example, earlier this year he publically admonished Saudi women who were demanding the right to drive.

The eventual naming of Prince Naif as the third in the line of succession was also forced by circumstances. The then Crown Prince Sultan was unwell and following his surgery in February 2009, he was on a long convalesce in Morocco. The King also needed someone to be in charge

during his foreign travels. It was under these circumstances that Naif became the third in the line of succession.

What will King Abdullah do this time around? King's half brother and Naif's younger brother Prince Salman is the next in line. He is also a surviving member of the powerful Sudari Seven, the sons of founder King Abdul Aziz who share the same mother. Going by the past practice, Prince Salman could be named as the Second Deputy Prime Minister and hence third in the line of succession. However, the Governor of Riyadh is not keeping well.

In some ways, the current Saudi situation is reminiscent of the dying days of the Soviet Union when the average age of the members of the CPSU was 70 plus. This is largely because Saudi Arabia has seen only its founder King Abdul Aziz and his sons as rulers. Through multiple, often political marriages, Abdul Aziz fathered at least 36 sons and 21 daughters. Since 1953, five of his sons have been the rulers of Saudi Arabia and the ruling family is aging. For example, Muhammad bin al-Saud, the eldest politically active grandson of the founder and Governor of Baha Province was born in 1934. The long-term survival of the al-Saud demands a smooth transition to the Generation Next.

The issue is not confined to the line of succession. Until he relinquished that position in favour of his son Mitab last November, the current King was the commander of the National Guard since 1963. Likewise, Prince Sultan also remained the country's Defence Minister since he assumed that office in 1962. The same holds true for the Foreign Ministry which is under the control of Saud al-Faisal since 1975. Except for a brief interlude during 1961, Prince Salman has been the Governor of Riyadh since 1954. The new Crown Prince Naif would continue to retain the Interior Ministry, a post he holds since 1975. The story is same for a number of senior positions in the government and security establishment. In some cases, sons are appointed as deputies in ministries headed by powerful Princes. The deputy Governor of the troublesome Eastern Province, which has periodically witnessed protests from the minority Shia community, is the son of the new Crown Prince.

For the past two decades, the Saudi rulers have been gingerly changing rules of succession. In March 1992, King Fahd introduced a law whereby "rulers of the country shall be from among the sons of the founder King Abdul Aziz ... and their descendants" and that "the most upright among them shall receive allegiance" from the members of the al-Saud family. In short, the succession is moving from the horizontal to the vertical line, and seniority alone will not suffice. The demand of such a person being "upright" implies his acceptance to the wider royal household.

Taking this move forward, in October 2006, King Abdullah formed a new institution: *hay'at al-bay'ah* or the Allegiance Council. Chaired by the oldest surviving son of the founder, it includes sons and grandsons of Abdul Aziz and would have a say in the selection of future kings. It even

has contingency plans if the monarch or his heir apparent were unable to rule. While the extent is not clear, the 35-member Council is involved in the naming of Prince Naif as the Crown Prince.

Sooner or later, the ruling family cannot escape the inevitable and will have to introduce reforms in the succession process. There are a few possible options before King Abdullah.

- It would be ideal to appoint someone from the Generation Next as the Second Deputy Prime Minister and the third in the line of succession. This may not be possible immediately and hence he might name Prince Salman as the third in the line of succession with the provision that Generation-Next would succeed him. Though part of the Sudari Seven, Prince Salman is seen as an ally of the King, especially on the reform front. Taking the former on board would strengthen Abdullah's bid for reforming the al-Saud.
- Besides finding a replacement at the Defence Ministry, long-held by Prince Sultan, the King might consider replacing his Foreign Minister. There are suggestions that Saud Faisal has been contemplating retirement in favour of a younger member of his family. Other Ministries also need similar overhaul and freshness.
- Instituting one-prince-one-position norm would remove aging and unhealthy princes and open the avenue for others. Crown Prince Naif, for example, is also the country's Second Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister.
- Putting a fixed tenure or age of retirement would bring in fresh blood. Some of the Ministers and Governors are holding the same office for over four decades.

Whatever King Abdullah chooses, al-Saud is racing against time. The King's own health is precarious and he underwent a major surgery in the US earlier this year. While pursuing his reform agenda, King Abdullah would have to balance reforms with balancing within the al-Saud family. Timing his succession moves and loyalty of the others are the key to his success.

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