

D A T E L I N E M E I

No. 47

Thursday, 20 June 2013

Monarch Who Willingly Ceded

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Voluntary abdication in favour of the next generation? It is a rarity among monarchies, and even after six decades, Queen Elizabeth is in no mood to hand over the reins to the longest serving heir-apparent, Prince Charles. But like King Jigme Singye Wanchuk of Bhutan, the Emir of Qatar is different. In a region where even republican leaders either die in office or are forced out of power, Emir Hamad bin-Khalifa al-Thani is seeking a smooth succession in favour of his fourth son, Prince Tamim. Emir Hamad, who forcibly took power from his father in 1995, wants to prepare for a power transfer that would ensure the growing wealth and influence of Qatar.

Along with the expected abdication of the Emir, it is widely believed that Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani (widely known among diplomatic circles as HBT) would also leave office before the leadership change. Sheikh Hamad has been the Foreign Minister of Qatar since January 1992 and Prime Minister since April 2007. Hence, he has been a key figure in the growing Qatari desire to seek influence both within and outside the Persian Gulf region.

Thus, Prince Tamim, who has been the heir apparent since 2003 when he replaced his elder brother, would have to follow the footsteps of his father Emir Hamad as well as Prime Minister HBT. It would be a tall order for anyone. It is widely believed that among others the health condition of the Emir who underwent a kidney transplant in 1997 is the reason for this expected move.

The challenges facing Prince Tamim are truly monumental. Unlike its neighbours, Qatar has not seen popular upheavals that upset, challenged and in some cases overthrew Arab leaders. Indeed, Qatar still remains the only Arab country which escaped from the Arab Spring while its neighbours including Saudi Arabia witnessed popular protests and dissent. With a per capita income of \$102,000, Qatar is the richest country in the world, and by the judicious use of its

wealth, the Emir has avoided the kind of social and political protests that beset many of his neighbours, the rich and powerful alike.

During the past two decades, the Emir has managed to wield influence far beyond Qatar's geographical and demographic size. Nearly 60 per cent of its two million residents are expatriates. But the Emir has successfully and prudently exploited his country's huge oil and natural gas wealth. Some might say it is diplomatic overreach of a tiny emirate, but Qatar has been seeking, if not playing, a prominent role in a number of conflicts in the Middle East.

In May 2008, for example, the Emir used his personal influence to bear on and bring warring factions of Lebanon, especially the Hezbollah, to the negotiating table. He paved the way for the election of former Army Chief Michael Suleiman as President.

Earlier in 1999, when Jordan had problems with the Hamas, Qatar was ready to host some of its leaders including Khalid Masha'al who was the target of an Israeli assassination attempt in September 1997. Despite regional opposition, until the Gaza war of 2008-2009, it even maintained political contacts with Israel and publicly hosted Israeli leaders, including then Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni. In recent years, Qatar is also trying to bring about political unity between the Fatah and the Hamas, a pre-condition for any meaningful progress towards Palestinian statehood. When the West and International Monetary Fund were haggling with post-Mubarak Egypt over far reaching economic reforms, without much conditions the Emir offered more than five billion dollars worth of loans to President Mohamed Morsi of Egypt.

Since the outbreak of popular protests in Syria, Qatar has emerged as the principle figure in support of the Syrian Opposition. With the backing of the Emir, the Arab League not only suspended Syria's membership but also recognized the Syrian Opposition. It is public knowledge that Qatar provides political, financial, military and, above all, media support to the Syrian rebels. Some observers blame the civil war partly on the so-called negative role played by Qatar. At the same time, Qatar has not joined other Arab countries in raising the ante against Iran.

The regional influence of Qatar has partly been helped by the growing influence of *Al Jazeera*. Ever since its launch in November 1996, the satellite channel founded and funded by the Emir has emerged as the most popular Arab media outlet in the Middle East and beyond. Not all Arab rulers are happy with its coverage and many commentators have reservations over its partisan reporting of the Syrian civil war. None, however, can deny its very wide reach and popularity and its emergence as the manifestation of the Qatari soft power.

The decision to abdicate in favour of his son is yet another example of Emir Hamad setting a new trend in the Middle East. Many of his fellow monarchs are older and have more serious health issues. But they are extremely reluctant to change. For instance, part of the problem in Bahrain can be blamed on the tensions between the reform-minded crown Prince Salman al-Khalifa and the more conservative Prime Minister Khalifa al-Khalifa, who has been at the helm of affairs since December 1971, shortly after Bahrain became independent. The succession issue looms larger in Saudi Arabia where King Abdullah is in his late 80s and crown Prince Salman has serious health concerns. Uncertainty faces Oman where the ruler has no children and

succession line is not clear. If these were not sufficient the Arab Spring removed rulers in some countries and undermined the stability of many others.

Thus, when Arab monarchs and republican leaders refuse to prepare for the next generation, Emir Hamad wants an orderly transfer of power. Moreover, he is handing over the reins of a wealthy and influential country to his son. His actual post-abdication role is not certain but the indications are he would emulate the role played by the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, something that has remained alien to many countries in the Middle East.

Will the Emir's gamble work and will Prince Tamim rise to the benchmark set by his father? Or will the Emir be forced out of his retirement *a la* NR Narayana Murthy, and asked to steward the Qatari ship again? Only time will tell. Meanwhile, keep watching the happenings in this Emirate.

Note: This article was earlier published in **The Pioneer** on 20 June 2013. Web Link: <http://www.dailypioneer.com/columnists/oped/monarch-who-willingly-ceded.html>

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