

Saudi Arabia: the coming royal succession

By Stig Stenslie

■ Executive summary

Who will succeed 'Abd Allah as ruler of Saudi Arabia? What are the likely implications of the coming royal succession for the House of Sa'ud's stability? Saudi Arabia's king is 89 years old and his health is weakening. In 2012 Salman was appointed crown prince and Muqrin was made second deputy prime minister the following year – a post bestowed on the third prince in the line of succession. It is, however, uncertain whether either will inherit the throne. Salman might be disqualified for health reasons and Muqrin due to his maternal ancestry. This might set the stage for the third-generation princes to come to the fore. The generation shift will test the unity among the royals and, hence, the royal family's grip on power. The third-generation princes are more numerous and less close, and might find it much more difficult to remain united than their fathers. The major concern is that 'Abd al-'Aziz's many grandsons might prove unable to forge an orderly succession. Further, the absence of unity could result in weaker leadership, which would undermine the House of Sa'ud's ability to effectively address the grave threats that it faces.

Introduction

Saudi Arabia's King 'Abd Allah is 89 years old and his health is weakening. He has ruled the kingdom for almost 20 years (as de facto ruler since 1995 and king from 2005), and what will happen after the aging monarch dies is a hot topic for speculation. Most royals know as little as non-royal observers; and those few who do know hold their cards close to their chests. Those who speak do not know; those who know do not speak. Nevertheless, it is possible to make some assessments based on knowledge of Saudi royal family politics.

This policy brief discusses two questions: who will succeed 'Abd Allah and what are the likely implications of the coming royal succession for the House of Sa'ud's stability?

Rules of succession

The Saudi succession rules were first formalised by the Basic Law of Government, a constitution-like document adopted by royal decree by then-King Fahd in 1992. Article 5 (B) of the document establishes that "Rule passes to the

sons of the founding king, 'Abd al-'Aziz bin 'Abd al-Rahman al-Faysal al-Sa'ud, and to their children's children."

Further, according to Article 5 (C): "The King chooses the heir apparent and relieves him of his duties by royal order."

Besides the few surviving sons of the founding king, whom Saudi watchers often refer to as the "second-generation princes", the law also makes it possible for the 200 or so "third-generation princes" to claim the right to be king.

The Allegiance Council Law, adopted by royal decree by King 'Abd Allah in 2006, stipulates the establishment of the Allegiance Council, consisting exclusively of male heirs of King 'Abd al-'Aziz. Its members include 15 of the founding king's surviving sons, as well as 19 of his grandsons. The new law prescribes that as soon as the king becomes too ill to do his job, a newly formed medical committee will submit a report to the Allegiance Council on his health. If he is diagnosed as being permanently incapacitated, the crown prince steps in. If the council finds that both the king and the crown prince are permanently incapable of

exercising their powers for health reasons, the Transitory Ruling Council, consisting of five members of the Allegiance Council, will temporarily assume administration of the affairs of state and oversee the country in the interests of the people. Then, within a maximum of one week, the council members will select by vote a suitable candidate from among the sons or grandsons of King 'Abd al-'Aziz and call on the one chosen to take over as king. In theory, the new law means that the decision to choose future heads of state will no longer be in the hands of one person alone – the king – but a collective of princes.

It is important to note that the Allegiance Council Law does not apply to the current king.

In addition to these laws, there are informal rules that further reduce the pool of likely heirs to the throne. Within the royal family, the likelihood of a prince reaching the top is determined by factors such as family branch kinship, matrimonial descent, age, personal qualities and relevant experience.

The sons

So far, five of the sons of 'Abd al-'Aziz, the modern kingdom's founder, have followed their father as king: Sa'ud, Faysal, Khalid, Fahd and 'Abd Allah.

Besides appointing the heirs apparent, Saudi kings have appointed second deputy prime ministers since 1967, a post that has been bestowed on the third prince in the line of succession. Upon ascending to the throne, King Khalid named Fahd crown prince and nominated 'Abd Allah to be second deputy prime minister. Following this tradition, King Fahd made his brother Sultan second deputy prime minister in 1982. King 'Abd Allah followed this pattern by naming Sultan crown prince in 2005 and Nayif second deputy prime minister in 2009. When Sultan died in 2011 Nayif was appointed crown prince, and when Nayif died the following year he was replaced by his brother, Salman. In February 2013 King 'Abd Allah named Muqrin as second deputy prime minister, the fifth royal to hold this position.

Salman is, in other words, 'Abd Allah's successor, provided that two conditions are met: firstly, he must survive the incumbent king. Salman is 79 years old and 'Abd Allah has already outlived two of his crown princes – Sultan and Nayif. Secondly, according to the Allegiance Council Law, Salman must pass a health test confirming his medical suitability for the throne, which will be submitted to the Allegiance Council by a medical committee. It is known that the crown prince has undergone spinal surgery, has had one stroke, and there are indications that he is suffering from dementia.

Muqrin is somewhat younger – 69 – and apparently in relatively good health. Although his appointment as second deputy prime minister makes him a strong candidate for

accession to the throne, his maternal ancestry might disqualify him. Salman's mother was a Yemeni and it is not clear that 'Abd al-'Aziz was ever married to her. However, it is possible that the family could ignore this troublesome fact and give their allegiance to Muqrin to postpone the power transfer from the second- to the third-generation princes.

No other of 'Abd al-'Aziz's surviving sons are likely candidates for the throne.

The grandsons

According to the Basic Law, one of the grandsons of 'Abd al-'Aziz can succeed the current king if Salman is disqualified for health reasons and Muqrin due to his maternal ancestry or other reasons. Regardless, it is very likely that one of the third-generation princes either becomes crown prince or the next in line. Among the numerous third-generation princes there is no shortage of political ambition, and power is the key to unimaginable wealth.

On the basis of the formal and informal rules of succession, Mitab bin 'Abd Allah currently stands out as the strongest candidate. At 62, Mitab is among the oldest of the third-generation princes. He has extensive experience and possesses his own power base in the National Guard. He has served as minister of the guard since May 2013 and was its commander from 2010 to 2013. Not least, he is the son of the reigning king. In Riyadh rumours say that 'Abd Allah and Muqrin have made a deal: 'Abd Allah will ensure that Muqrin becomes king, while Muqrin will make Mitab crown prince. It is not known whether this is true or not, but it cannot be ruled out that such an understanding in fact exists.

Besides Mitab, King 'Abd Allah's sons are present across the government. They are governor of Mecca, deputy governor of Riyadh, deputy foreign minister and president of the Saudi Red Crescent. The sons of Crown Prince Salman have also become high-profile public figures and have risen in the ranks. Muhammad bin Nayif, the son of the late Crown Prince Nayif, is probably Mitab's strongest competitor among the third-generation princes. Although Muhammad – who was appointed interior minister in 2012 – is considered very competent and the regime's strongman in charge of internal security, he probably has a weaker claim than Mitab, who is the son of the current king.

The sons of past kings are, by contrast, systematically marginalised politically. In December 2013 King 'Abd Allah sidelined Khalid Al Faysal, the son of the late King Faysal, by transferring him from the governorship of Mecca to the Ministry of Education. Earlier the same year Muhammad bin Fahd, the eldest surviving son of King Fahd, was relieved of his position as governor of the Eastern Province.

Implications

The question of who will take power in Saudi Arabia is particularly timely because it might affect the kingdom's stability.

The generation shift will test the unity among the royals and hence the royal family's grip on power. Under 'Abd al-'Aziz's sons – despite internal disputes – the House of Sa'ud has remained intact. It is an open question whether the third-generation princes share the older generation's norms of political behaviour, agree on legitimate decision-making processes and understand the importance of remaining united. Although it is too early to suggest a fragmentation of the royal family as such, there has for years been a tendency for senior royals to establish their own subdynasties within the Sa'ud dynasty. As the younger generation comes to power, this fragmentation is likely to

speed up. Compared to their fathers, the third-generation princes are more in number, are less close, and therefore might find it much more difficult to remain united. The major concern is that 'Abd al-'Aziz's many grandsons might prove unable to forge an orderly succession. There might still be some truth in the old Arab proverb: "I against my brothers; I and my brothers against my cousins; I and my brothers and my cousins against the world."

Ultimately, the absence of unity among the top echelons of the family could cause weaker leadership. This would undermine the House of Sa'ud's ability to effectively address the series of grave threats that it is facing, including rapidly growing unemployment, tremendous economic disparities among the people, sectarian divides, extremism, oil dependency, regional rivalry with Iran, and signs of a rift with the U.S. ■

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