



# Will There Be a Revolution in Saudi Arabia?

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**A**fter the January 25 revolution against Hosni Mubarak's regime just months after Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution, Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, became seized with the fear that the Arab spring protests would spread to their kingdoms. Saudi Arabia rushed to contain domestic manifestations of anger among its youth, and King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz issued a set of economic and social decrees concerning youth and disadvantaged groups. In foreign affairs, Saudi Arabia attempted to support President Mubarak until the last possible moment, though it ultimately declared its respect for the transfer of authority in Egypt. Moreover, King Abdullah immediately recognized the January 30 2013 movement toppling President Morsi and announced that Egypt would receive strong economic and political support. Now, years after the Arab revolutions began to falter, it seems that Saudi Arabia is no longer concerned about revolutionary feeling reaching its lands, especially after the change of leadership in which King Salman bin Abdulaziz came to power.

Yet recent developments in Saudi Arabia are evoking historical lessons from the not-too-distant past. The parallels with Egypt are especially noticeable – where the political rise of Mubarak's son Gamal Mubarak directly influenced the popular protests leading to the ouster of his father. Observers can see that there are signs indicating that history is repeating itself in a different way in Saudi Arabia. In fact, if Saudi Arabia follows the Egyptian model, the Kingdom may witness a revolution during the next few years.

The rapid political ascension of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, son of the current king, appears to parallel Gamal Mubarak's ascension and the unlimited support he received from his father. Moreover, Mohammad bin Salman's use of the state's capabilities for his own services and political goals similarly maps onto Gamal Mubarak's political trajectory. As a result, Gamal Mubarak became, in a few years, one of the most powerful men in Egypt, whom all circles strove to please.

As for the young Saudi prince, his appointment as deputy crown prince also came with the title of Defense Minister and control over Saudi Arabia's military capabilities. His consequent decision to enter the Yemeni civil war and fight against the Houthis has not achieved considerable results, except for the drain of Saudi resources. Nor did

Mohammad bin Salman's attention remain on the war: he suddenly launched what he called the Counter-Terrorism Islamic Alliance in mid-December 2015, to the surprise of those allies supposedly taking part in the force. The move suggested an interest in presenting himself as the strong man of the current era.

The young prince has sought economic as well as military power. His father appointed him as the Second Deputy Prime Minister and the Chairman of the Council for Economic and Development Affairs, which is currently responsible for crafting the economic policies of the Kingdom. To confirm his status and his control over the Kingdom's economy, Mohammad bin Salman launched Saudi Vision 2030 to restructure the Saudi economy.

This rise and desire to possess military power and economic control, in addition to the specific architecture of the Kingdom's external policies, have prompted Western diplomats call Prince Mohammad bin Salman "Mr. Everything." This presents a fascinating parallel to Gamal Mubarak, who played an almost identical role during the five years before the ouster of his father. He dominated economic life, surrounded himself with businessmen, and was the engineer of the privatization project in Egypt, which became marred by corruption.

Another similarity to Gamal Mubarak: Prince Mohammad bin Salman has been recently working hard to market himself through interviews with Western media outlets. Mubarak believed that the West's support—or at least acquiescence—to his role in Egypt would play a major role in facilitating his rise to power. Foreigners viewed him as an economist who would lift Egypt out of its economic crises and liberalize the economy by selling state assets and ending subsidies. But these same moves caused significant outrage among Egyptians, who eventually exploded onto the streets.

The young Saudi prince seemingly chose to be interviewed by Bloomberg based on this same reasoning. Through two distinct discussions, Bloomberg presented an image of Prince Mohammad bin Salman as the savior of the Kingdom's economy on the brink of bankruptcy. Moreover, the newspaper presented the Prince's economic plans, vision to reduce subsidies, and privatize huge Saudi economic institutions such as Aramco, as major economic reforms.

As Gamal Mubarak directed attention to youth by establishing the Future Generation Foundation, an organization designed provide training and demonstrate Mubarak's interest in young leaders, Mohammad bin Salman is adopting the same approach. He is stimulating the dreams of youth by establishing the MISK foundation, which also works to support and empower youth through partnerships with major international institutions, such as Harvard University, by developing joint programs for emerging and future leaders.

Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia's youth may call for radical change as they did in Egypt. In 2011, unemployment in Egypt reached about 12%, and youth made up approximately two-thirds of society. According to official statistics and numbers from 2014, unemployment in Saudi Arabia has exceeded 11% in a society where youth similarly make up two-thirds of its population. What underscores the seriousness of the unemployment problem was the video which was published by a Saudi doctor showing him burning his degree, which quickly turned into a campaign launched by the Saudi frustrated youth on "Twitter" under the Hastag (#Burn\_Your\_Degree\_Campaign). In addition to those similarities, there is the huge number of Saudi youth—more than 100,000—who have travelled to study in Western countries and are now beginning to return to the Kingdom after living in democratic countries that enjoy a great deal of transparency. This generation will no doubt play a role in shaping the Kingdom's future, and their years abroad may push them to work towards a society different from the current one. Also notable is that Saudi society is the fastest growing demographic on Twitter, providing another outlet to information that is shaking up political life in the region. An example was the campaign launched by the Saudi women on Twitter under a Hashtag (#Women\_Driving\_Cars), through which they demanded the right to drive, an explicit challenge to Saudi tradition and the Saudi clerics' control over society.

All of the previous indicators show that the young prince of Saudi Arabia is moving ahead, unconcerned with any parallels with Gamal Mubarak. Yet this attitude proved disastrous in Arab republics: “Mr. Everything,” in Egypt, Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh in the Yemen, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi in Libya, and Bashar al-Assad all lost either some or all of their former territories. So will the actions of a monarchy provide an outcome different from the aforementioned republics? Or is change definitely on its way? The current political and societal shifts suggest that the future, which may not be so far off as some would think, may have some surprises in store.

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