Sultan's Death Tests Saudi Succession Mechanisms

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Brief Analysis

In the wake of Sultan's death, Prince Nayef is almost certain to insist that he be chosen as the next heir apparent.

Tomorrow, October 25, Riyadh will hold a funeral for Crown Prince Sultan of Saudi Arabia, who died in a New York City hospital on Friday. Although his death was not unexpected -- he had suffered from colon cancer and dementia -- his passing will test the kingdom's opaque political structures at a particularly challenging time.

Theoretically, the Allegiance Council, a body established by King Abdullah in 2006, will choose the next crown prince. Although the body's notional purpose is to formalize the system of succession, its creation had an important political context, well known but not publicly announced -- it was Abdullah's attempt to outflank the so-called Sudairi Seven, the largest group of full brothers among the more than thirty sons of Ibn Saud, the kingdom's founder, who have dominated the government for the past forty years. Indeed, there has been little love lost between Abdullah and his Sudairi half-brothers, namely, King Fahd (who died in 2005), Sultan (who was the long-serving minister of defense and aviation as well as deputy prime minister and crown prince), Abdulrahman (the vice minister of defense and aviation), Nayef (the minister of interior and second deputy prime minister), Turki (who has lived in semi-exile in Cairo), Salman (the governor of Riyadh province), and Ahmed (the vice minister of interior).

One of the few sons of Ibn Saud without full brothers, Abdullah has long believed that the Sudairis question his ability and seniority in the royal family. Sultan wanted to be made crown prince in 1982 when Fahd became king, but other princes challenged this and supported Abdullah. In the end, Sultan had to settle for being made second deputy prime minister and being perceived as crown-prince-in-waiting. In 1992, King Fahd announced the Basic Law of Governance, which included the line, "The King chooses the heir apparent and relieves him [of his duties] by royal order." Abdullah saw this clause as threatening his right to the throne.

Indeed, after Fahd suffered a debilitating stroke in 1995, the Sudairis blocked many of Abdullah's initiatives and allowed him to hold the title of regent only briefly, in 1996. When he became king upon Fahd's death in 2005,

Abdullah took his revenge by refusing to allow Nayef to become second deputy prime minister, arguing that the prince's then uncertain health justified the decision. He eventually relented, however, appointing Nayef to the post in 2009.

Notionally, both the Allegiance Council Law and the composition of the council itself (i.e., the king's half-brothers and the senior sons of deceased half-brothers) allow Abdullah to nominate rival candidates for crown prince, followed by secret deliberations and some sort of vote (for details on both the law and the council, see pages 30-34 of ***After King Abdullah: Succession in Saudi Arabia (/templateC04.php?CID=315)***). Yet Nayef is almost certain to insist that he be chosen. He has years of administrative experience and, now with better health, appears fitter than any older rival.

Given Abdullah's own weak health -- he is eighty-eight and had yet another back operation earlier this month -- Nayef already appears to be the day-to-day ruler and future king. Notably hardline on social issues such as allowing women to vote and drive, which Abdullah supports, Nayef seems to agree with the king on the threats posed by Iran and Saudi Arabia's Shiite minority.

Given these factors, Nayef's formal elevation should become clear within a few days. In addition to the announcement of a new defense minister -- likely Sultan's brother Abdulrahman rather than his son Khaled -- there may well be other important ministerial appointments. Yet the official news releases will probably not tell the full story, or perhaps even the true one. For example, the obituary of Prince Sultan published by the state-run Saudi Press Agency declared that he was born in 1931. In a 2005 release, however, it reported that he was born in 1930. And most analysts believe the true date was 1924.

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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