



KEEPING UP WITH THE SAUDIS

By Nikola Zukalová

The al-Saud, the ruling extended family of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), has been struck by internal unrest following the steps taken by King Salman bin Abdulaziz and his son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), to sideline other family members from the country's decision-making. MbS is reforming not only Saudi Arabia's society and economy but also the country's traditional political structures. The family's rule was based on consensus making and has been long perceived as an immutable feature of the Kingdom's politics. Times have changed with new leadership and the country's decision-making is no longer a collective family matter. MbS, as a latecomer to high politics, has accumulated unprecedented powers by disrupting the established political order. This new reality disgruntled other members of the royal family. Consequently, since King Salman's accession to the throne (January 2015), there have been two calls for coups in Riyadh, mirroring the discontent among some family members over how changes are managed. So, how has the long-anchored ruling tradition of the al-Saud transformed under King Salman and Mohammed bin Salman? And, how does royal opposition impact MbS's route to the throne?

The Established Order

For over 60 years the country has been run by a King, who had below him a group of senior princes who decided on ruling matters and policies in a system based on consultations. The system of various committees had its perks and pitfalls — it kept the country stable, preventing impetuous and flawed actions, however it also made any major political or social reform difficult at best due to the slow process of decision-making and conservatism of some members. In addition, the line of succession also had a very stable rule, running only through Saudi Arabia's founder's, King Abdulaziz's, sons. However, most of the first-generation descendants of King Abdulaziz have either died or are getting very old and sick, making the reigning periods shorter and shorter, relying more on their Crown Princes for ruling matters — late king Abdullah became King at the age of 81, current King Salman at 79. The youngest living son of King Abdulaziz is 73-year-old Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz. King Salman's brother,

Prince Muqrin, was expected to become his successor and indeed, he became Crown Prince after Salman became King. But the highest political ranks were rejuvenated three months later when Muhammad bin Nayef, former Minister of Interior, was the first grandson of Abdulaziz to be named Crown Prince, before he was replaced by MbS in June 2017.

King Abdulaziz had three dozen sons with different wives from various clans, forming various branches of al-Sauds. King Salman comes from the so-called Sudairi Seven, the largest bloc of full al-Saud brothers — seven sons of King Abdulaziz and his wife Hussa Al Sudairi. The Sudairi brothers — some of them at that time in key positions: Prince Fahd as Minister of Interior, Prince Salman as Governor of Riyadh and Prince Sultan as Minister of Defence — helped Faisal bin Abdulaziz depose King Saud in 1964. The Sudairis continued to be King Faisal's allies during his reign and began to consolidate power in the country by appointing their full brothers and sons to other key positions. The empowerment of the Sudairi branch ensured the continuity of succession. However, it also encouraged other princes to form quiet alliances against them — creating tensions within the various family factions over power-sharing. Sensing the intensified infighting, the late King Abdullah, not a Sudairi himself, established the Allegiance Committee, composed of 35 Abdulaziz's living sons or sons of those deceased, to determine the successor to the throne. However, until now the Committee has acted more as a rubber-stamp for the King's decisions rather than a decision-making body.

Consolidation of Power

MbS entered the Royal Palace with his father's, King Salman's, succession to the throne in January 2015 following King Abdullah's death. MbS was a newcomer to palace politics, but he quickly acquired important posts in the senior leadership — shortly after his father became King, he was named Deputy Crown Prince, the second one in the succession line, Minister of Defence and Chair of the Council for Economic and Development Affairs, the country's main economic policymaking body.

In 2016, MbS took another step in cutting-off members of the family. He introduced a plan for economic reforms in KSA, Vision 2030, and announced that Aramco — the major Saudi state-owned oil company — was about to go public and put 5% of its shares up for an initial public offering (IPO). This would require opening the books of the company, a move that might make the lives of some royals more difficult by reducing their incomes coming from corruption and embezzlement of public finances.

On 21 June 2017 there was yet another move by King Salman to empower his son. Mohammed bin Nayef, the first in the succession line, with long-term political experiences was ostracised and MbS replaced him as Crown Prince, becoming the youngest heir apparent to the throne in Saudi Arabia's history. MbS's empowerment provided more credibility to his reforms and greater confidence in their implementation, but also fed discontent within the family. By naming MbS as Crown Prince, King Salman skipped other prominent princes, much more experienced in Saudi politics—including his older sons.

Soon came another unprecedented move. The newly established Corruption Commission, managed by MbS, carried out mass anti-corruption arrests raid in late 2017, detaining hundreds of individuals, including princes, businessmen, and other elite figures in Riyadh's luxurious Ritz-Carlton hotel. The unprecedented arrests sparked outrage within the royal family and the Kingdom's elite, which has been long perceived as untouchable. Some claimed that the move was aimed at removing political rivals to consolidate power. Among the arrested was Prince Mutaib bin Abdullah, former head of the National Guard and a favourite son of late King Abdullah, who would represent the biggest political rival to MbS; Prince Turki bin Abdullah, Riyadh's ex-governor and also late King Abdullah's son, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, a multibillionaire businessman ... among others. The detainees were released after some weeks, as some transferred their assets to the Saudi state treasury. Moreover, the purge also helped to sideline the deceased King Abdullah's faction and MbS gained even more power, i.e. over security forces, to assist with his reform packages.

Demonstration of Family Discontent

The mounting internal discontent found some avenues for channeling. Already toward the end of 2015, it became clear that royal family infighting had intensified. Two open letters calling for overthrowing King Salman, written by an anonymous senior Saudi prince, were published on 28 September 2015 on the Guardian's website. This was the first call for a palace coup in Saudi Arabia's modern history since the overthrowing of King Saud in 1964. It was clear that challenging the established order is unpopular with the majority of family members. Fast forward to the beginning of 2018, 11 princes were arrested after protesting against the government's decision to stop paying for their utility bills (re: water and electricity) in an attempt to reduce state spending.

In May 2018, there was another call for the King's overthrow, this time by Prince Khalid bin Farhan, a Saudi royal family dissident living in Germany, where he was given political asylum. The dissident stems from the Farhan branch of the

family, which is not in line to the throne and none of its members holds political office. He is a self-proclaimed member of the opposition, who has a personal grudge against King Salman from the past. The Prince defected from the al-Saud family in 2013, making a statement on the Iranian Alalam News channel, encouraging others to join him and leave the family. In his video-message from May 2018 he called on senior princes, including Ahmed bin Abdulaziz — the youngest of the Sudairi Seven — and Muqrin bin Abdulaziz — former Crown Prince and the youngest living son of King Abdulaziz — to take over the palace and depose their brother King Salman. The dissident warns the Europeans that upheaval might come to the Kingdom if King Salman and MbS stay in power. However, the al-Saud is very sensitive when it comes to Princes leaving the family and spreading disinformation about it.

Time Is an Enemy

In the cases of royal opposition, however, Mohammad bin Salman has remained largely defiant and even persevered in his initiatives to curb the influence of royals on some of the key political and economic questions. Unlike in the past, the “constituency” of the Crown Prince consists mostly of the Saudi youth, rather than members of the royal family. Still, amid the combination of his bold reforms and initiatives, cracking down on religious fundamentalism and modernising Saudi society, his accession to the throne is bound to be turbulent. For this reason, MbS has pushed these massive changes in a very short period of time, hoping to shock and awe not only his supporters but, mostly, his opponents. What lies ahead is anyone’s guess. But one thing is sure, Saudi Arabia is rapidly reforming — for the better — and King Salman and MbS have staked their legacies to the Saudi Arabia of tomorrow.