

Ref: Saudi Arabia

The G2K discussion on the changes in the Saudi Arabian leadership and structures is highly illuminating and shows how much knowledge is out there among the list members. It seems that most of the exegesis of the decrees and changes in personnel are based on a belief that there is a power struggle at the top and that Mohamed bin Salman, with the support of his elderly father, is seeking to prepare his route to be king.

There is certainly a lot of evidence to follow this interpretation, but to make more sense of the changes I have approached them from a different angle. My general theory is that we are witnessing what one of us called a soft coup. However, it is not a royal coup, or a coup between cousins, it is a generational coup. The young folks in the Kingdom have now taken over the lever of power. They have rejected the traditional leadership by consensus, the days of long majalis before decisions are made and when most of these are taken at the lowest common denominator of society. There is a profound sense of urgency in the Kingdom, as well as in the rest of the Gulf. Jobs for the young must be found now. Saudi Arabia must show that it is a strong player in regional affairs now. It can no longer rely on the US for defense. It must build its own credible military now.

The major changes made in the past few weeks may merely seek to promote efficiency. For example:

-The naming of Adel Al Jubeir will ensure that the MoFA will at last become more professional and handle numerous issues at one time. It will allow Mohamed bin Nayef to focus on the actual management of policy and security.

-At the Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral, the present Minister Ali Al Naimi, who de facto controlled oil policy for the past 20 years, has been pushed aside. He no longer chairs his main power base, Saudi Aramco. He may be replaced upon his retirement, if he retires, by AbdelAziz Al Salman, but by taking away Saudi Aramco from the control of MoPM, AAbS has also been pushed aside. The Economics Council led by MbS decides on oil policy and therefore can be integrated into the general economic policy of the Kingdom. However, oil policy is still implemented and advised upon by Saudi Aramco, which is now chaired by a relatively young and brilliant Mr. Al Falih, well versed in energy and industrial development.

The Ministry of Health, which has been the bane of most ministers is now taken by Mr. Al Falih, along with his chairmanship of Saudi Aramco. Mr. Al Falih is known to have managed Saudi Aramco well.

At the Ministry of Defense and Aviation, Mr. AlMadi the amazing visionary who made SABIC into the second largest chemical company in the world seem to be now in charge of some of the investments and procurements of the military. This together with a commoner general of the military, rather than a Prince, shows strong efforts to

professionalize the military, which needs it very badly. [Are we getting ready to see a universal draft of young men, just like the one now implemented with great success in the UAE?]

The issue of the court of the Crown Prince being merged to the court of the King may just mean that two courts are not necessary with only one King. Both MbS, who is now removed as head of his father's court, and MbN can focus on the enormous challenges, which they are facing.

Should these efforts to build efficiency exist and continue, there may be tensions with the older groups. Some members of the royal family may grumble but will buckle under. After all, every prince and princess does depend on the handouts from the royal court, whatever their seniority. The military and security forces are firmly in the hands of MbS and MbN, and the National Guard, unlike what has been said, is still under Prince Mitaeb. In fact Prince Mitaeb is now part and parcel of the younger folks take-over. The only group that may squeal is the religious conservative element. However, this group may have been assuaged by the removal of the woman deputy minister and of a few "liberal" ministers.

In sum, it may be that the political and economical structures of the Kingdom are being ready for MbN to take over as King, who in turn is working to delegate much power to MbS to take care of some of the most urgent businesses at hand, such as creating jobs for the less than 30 crowd and professionalize the military. It is likely that the Saudi youth is quite happy to see the old guard go and the old ways of not doing business disappear.

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