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Mohammed Bin Salman: The Remaking of the Foundations of Saudi Monarchy?

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Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia during a meeting, September 2016 © Yuri Kochetkov / EPA-EFE



The meteoric rise to power of Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) has effectively ended the dynastic model of the Saudi monarchy that the kingdom's founder, Ibn Saud, conceived in 1932. Hoisted to the summit of state power by his father through the elimination of numerous senior princes in the race for succession, MBS – the favourite son of King Salman, who ascended the throne in January 2015 – has been consolidating personal power through the acquisition of key state portfolios and the exclusion of potential rivals. Yet, just as importantly, MBS has promoted his "Vision 2030" for the social and economic transformation of Saudi Arabia. This project ostensibly aims to modernize the kingdom and to shape the foundations of the future Saudi nation around the individual person of MBS. In addressing directly technocrats, the country's youth, and women, MBS's project puts forth a neo-patriarchal ideal of a "sultanic" nation in which loyalty is directed to the future king himself.

The Prince's Vision

As early as April 2015, MBS's elevation to the position of deputy crown prince, in addition to his portfolio at the Defence Ministry, was met with the general stupor of senior princes. Creating and presiding over the Council for Economic and Development Affairs, MBS also set up a government composed of 90% technocrats, thus starting the first wave of exclusion of influential princes. Throughout 2016, he also promoted his Vision 2030 for socio-economic modernization, elaborated with the McKinsey & Company, a global management consulting firm. These actions were accompanied by public pledges made to the country's youth and women, whom he sought to consolidate as the base of his popular legitimacy by introducing liberalizing social measures.

A Strategic Relation with Saudi Youth

The strategic interest of directly addressing youth (including women) – an age group representing two-thirds of the Saudi population – had been ascertained by MBS as early as 2011, through his experience as the head of the MiSK Foundation, whose mission is to promote the talents and professional leadership of those aged between 18 and 35. He has relied on this base in order to impose himself as the



necessary reformer of the kingdom – a self-appointed position that no one among the country’s elite and the royal family, with the exception of his father, expected.

In embodying the aspirations of his generation, the prince has asserted his role as a modernizer of a society suffocating under the inherited archaism of the pact between the royal family and the Wahabi establishment. This pact, which has been in place since 1744, was abruptly halted by King Salman and his son. The prince is both secularizing Saudi society through containment of the role of religious authorities and expunging Wahabi rigour, while nonetheless leaving religion in place as a pillar of his nation-building project.

A Final Push for Personal Power

The consolidation of MBS’s personal power began in earnest in June 2017 with the surprise eviction of his cousin, Mohammed Bin Nayef from the position of crown prince and his role at the Interior Ministry. This process was radically reinforced in September and October 2017 with the wave of arrests of around 80 intellectuals (including popular clerics not belonging to the religious establishment) who openly worried about the concentration of the prince’s power and the hardening of his foreign policy, including the blockade on Qatar.

The unprecedented purge on 4 November 2017 of 201 key figures of Saudi’s elite, arrested on charges of corruption, successfully bequeathed to MBS the ensemble of levers of power. Prince Mitaeb Bin Abdallah, minister of the National Guard and the last serious contender capable of disputing MBS’s ascension to the throne, was also arrested. The future king usurped control of the military-security apparatus, which had always been shared between the clans of princes Sultan, Nayef, or Abdallah. And in going after the country’s richest businessmen, including two moguls of private media empires, Walid Bin Talal of the Rotana Group and the Al-Ibrahim brothers (in-laws of former King Fahd) of MBC and ART (al-‘Arabiyya TV), MBS wrested control over information.

A Revolutionary Move?

Barring an unpredictable change in circumstances, MBS is overseeing the



emergence of a new Saudi state. On the basis of his Vision 2030, he is attempting to build the foundations of a Saudi nation that does not yet exist, embodied in his person, that technocrats, as well as his generational peers and the educated youth of the middle classes, will be keen to serve. Extending beyond tribal loyalties and identification with the royal family, this national project is unfolding around loyalty to MBS himself. As a vision for an efficient new nation, MBS's project is hardly revolutionary and certainly not democratic, but rather "sultanic" and Islamic in its archetypal template.



About the author

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