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Oman succession unlikely to jeopardise stability

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Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Bu-Said lacks a direct heir and refuses to groom a successor. As he approaches his 72nd birthday, he appears to be in good health. However, uncertainty over who will succeed him raises questions about Oman's political stability and its relations with Gulf neighbours.

What next

The succession will probably take place smoothly, with one of Qaboos's three cousins becoming the next ruler. Oman's fundamental domestic and international orientations are set to remain unchanged. However, it is less certain that the makeshift political system will serve a successor as well. Over time the next sultan may institute significant, but incremental changes to suit his own interests.

Analysis

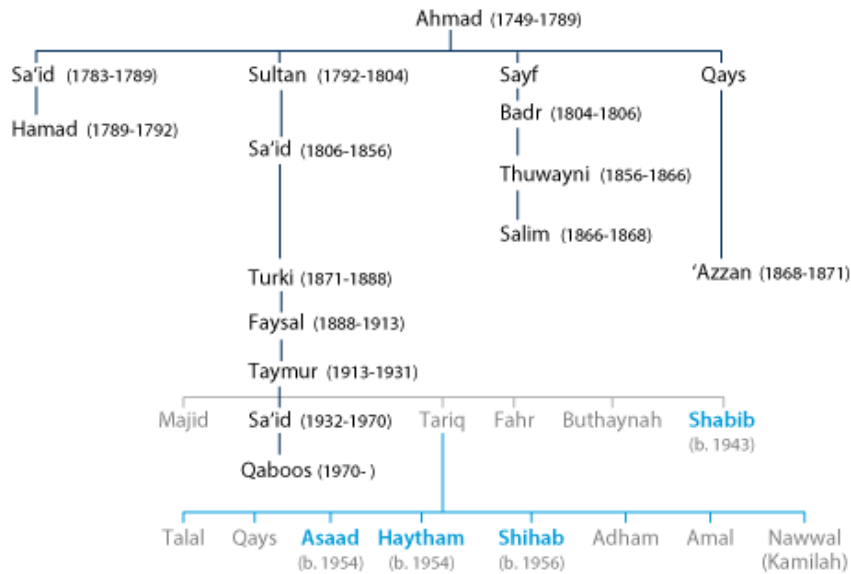
The formal process of selecting a successor is complicated and possibly unworkable. According to the amended Basic Law of 1996, the ruling family has three days to choose a successor before an expanded Defence Council appoints the choice of the previous sultan as contained in a written letter. It is likely that the ruling family will agree on a successor well before the deadline, thus avoiding the potentially unstable situation of the Defence Council assuming responsibility for the decision.

No clear successors

The ruling family is weak and thoroughly under Qaboos's control. Few of the sultan's contemporaries within the family can be considered potential successors. The sole remaining uncle of the sultan, Shabib bin Taymur, does not have the temperament or apparently the interest to succeed him. His cousin, Fahd bin Mahmud, presently deputy prime minister for the Council of Ministers, is unpopular and too old. The most likely successor will be one of three sons of the late Tariq bin Taymur, Qaboos's uncle: Asaad, Haytham or Shihab.

Impact

- Any changes made by a new sultan would involve the replacement of key individuals rather than changes to the nature of the regime.
- Succession in Oman is unlikely to affect relations with Western and Gulf states.
- The same is true of country's stance on the economy, finance and business.



The Al Bu Sa'id Dynasty
 Note: Dates for earlier rulers are only approximate.
 Source: Oxford Analytica

The ruling family's ability to choose within the three-day window depends on:

- it having reached prior consensus that succession will be drawn from one of these three sons of Tariq; and
- agreement among the three candidates on which of them will succeed.

Successions scenarios

The main scenarios, in order of likelihood, are as follows:

Royal family appoint successor

The three candidates are likely to have reached agreement already, perhaps outlining the process of succession down the lines of the three brothers rather than moving to the next generation. Asaad presumably has the edge as he is the eldest. The ruling family would endorse any agreement among the three.

Military appoint successor

Possibilities grow more complicated should the three brothers and family not be able to reach agreement. The Defence Council is not obliged to abide by the previous sultan's wishes. The security forces have been completely loyal to Qaboos and there is little question that they will assert the same loyalty to his successor. Yet they could decide to appoint a successor of their own choice. This possibility is why Qaboos has publicly said that he has left copies of his written order in different locations, and is perhaps why the Basic Law was amended to include key civilians in making the appointment along with the Defence Council.

Agreement among the frontrunners will be key to a smooth succession

Non-royal successor

The possibility of a ruler from outside the Al Bu-Said family is very slim. Many of the prominent members of government are of Muscat origins and are not considered acceptable for ethnic or sectarian reasons, or because they have non-Omani origins.

The appointment of any member of an Omani tribe as ruler is likely to raise the opposition of other tribes. Equally unlikely is the possibility of a religious leader taking power. Oman is not a theocracy-minded entity and there is no one of suitable stature to assume the reins of an Ibadi imam, even if popular opinion wished a return to this form of government, which prevailed for centuries before 1955.

Limited risk of instability

Public participation in the succession process has not been a factor. It can be assumed that the great majority of Omanis believe in the sultanate as the proper institution of authority and accept that the selection of sultan is a matter for the ruling family to decide. The protests and demonstrations of the past 18 months seem to indicate that even activists do not wish to replace the system, but to reform it (see OMAN: Sultan weighs options but is safe - April 25, 2011).

There is no popular appetite to replace the current system

There is very little likelihood of any popular unrest or elite infighting over the succession. Any successor chosen by the family will be acclaimed by elites and the general citizenry without visible dissension. If there are unforeseeable shortcomings associated with the new sultan, these are not likely to pose any political problems for the first year or longer (see GULF STATES: Regimes will weather Arab uprisings - December 19, 2011).

The economic situation is not likely to play any role in succession issues. The production of oil and gas should not be affected and the same should hold true for normal economic activity throughout the country.

External intervention unlikely

Any outside role in the succession is very unlikely. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have no significant history of interfering in the ruling family affairs of their neighbours. The only, very slight, possibility might be if Abu Dhabi decides to influence the selection. If this is the intention of the Al Nahyan, presumably they would have taken steps already to identify their choice and to carry out quiet support for his candidacy.

Any Western intervention would be regarded as unjustifiable interference by all Omanis, but is in any case unlikely since any successor is likely to continue close relations with the West and the GCC.

Post-Qaboos Oman

Domestic and foreign policies would be little changed. All three of the leading candidates are fully integrated into the present system and have stakes in its continuation. Over time, the successor would presumably make minor alterations and new appointments of senior government officials. There are few individuals in positions of power or influence who have any stake in regime change.

Any successor will be less familiar with governing and political manipulation than Qaboos, who has been careful to keep potential rivals from centres of power and administration. Similarly, any successor will be less known to his people as he will not have played any key policy-making role prior to succession.

Changes to the political system will be incremental

The recent articulation of economic grievances (including complaints about corruption) will not end, but it can be presumed that any successor will be the recipient of a honeymoon period during which his responsiveness to popular demands will be judged.

Word Count (approx): 1135