

SUCCESSION IN THE EMIRATE OF ABU DHABI AND THE UAE: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE PLAYERS AND THE LIKELY POSSIBILITIES

By John Duke Anthony

Ruler of Abu Dhabi since 1966 and President of the United Arab Emirates since its inception in 1971, he has been around and doing great things for a long time, this man named Zayid bin Sultan Al-Nahyan. The official records put his age at eighty something. This writer puts it nearer to ninety. My sources are people who have known him practically all his life and those who have known him practically all their lives.

Succession-guessing is a growing sport with regard to the onset of the next millennium in the GCC region. To be sure, much may turn on the outcome. Financial investors, policy planners, military leaders, and a great many others have a legitimate need to know who the successor to any important GCC head of state might be. This is especially so when the leader to be succeeded is Shaikh Zayid, who is someone of almost mythical proportions in having inspired and shaped much of the economics and politics of eastern Arabia over the past half century.

THE RULERSHIP OF ABU DHABI

~~~SCENARIO ONE~~~

One scenario with which a growing number of specialists are comfortable is as follows. Either upon his demise or abdication for reasons of age or health, the rulership of Abu Dhabi Emirate is almost certain to pass to Shaikh Zayid's eldest and first-born son, Khalifa. For nearly thirty years, Khalifa, who is already a grandfather, has served as Heir Apparent or what is known in the Western world as the Crown Prince. For a majority of these years, Khalifa has also served as Deputy Supreme Commander in Chief of the UAE Armed Forces and, for a longer period, as a central figure in the Government of Abu Dhabi.

Less certain is who Khalifa would appoint as his own Heir Apparent. Some support his next younger brother, Sultan, who carries the title of Deputy Ruler of Abu Dhabi, is a graduate of the British military academy at Sandhurst, was once a Major General in the UAE Armed Forces, is a deputy Prime Minister of the UAE, and is still involved in the Government of Abu Dhabi.

Others support Zayid's third son, Shaikh Muhammad, who, as Lieutenant General, is Chief of Staff of the UAE Armed Forces, and the eldest of the single largest progeny of the most prominent of Zayid's wives, Shaikha Fatima. If Sultan were to become Heir Apparent, it is likely that Muhammad would move up to the post of Deputy Ruler.

~~~SCENARIO TWO~~~

Another possible outcome is that Khalifa would become Ruler, Sultan would remain Deputy Ruler and Deputy UAE Prime Minister, and Muhammad, not Sultan, would become Heir Apparent. There are many who favor this option. Their model is Dubai. In that Emirate, Muhammad, the third son of the late ruler,

Shaikh Rashid bin Saeed Al-Maktoum, and the UAE Minister of Defense, was appointed Heir Apparent of Dubai. His oldest brother, Maktoum, became Ruler upon Rashid's passing in 1991, and, significantly, his next eldest brother, Hamdan, the UAE's Minister of Finance, became Deputy Ruler. The Abu Dhabi version of such an arrangement is one that passes for conventional wisdom among Abu Dhabi succession-watchers.

~~~SCENARIO THREE~~~

In this scenario, Khalifa would become the Ruler, but neither of his two brothers, Sultan or Muhammad, would be appointed Heir Apparent. Instead, Khalifa would appoint his eldest son, Sultan, who heads the Office of the Heir Apparent, is a Colonel in the UAE Armed Forces, and is a graduate of Sandhurst, to the position. As to whom Khalifa might appoint as Deputy Ruler, it could be either of his two brothers, Sultan or Muhammad.

~~~SCENARIO FOUR~~~

This scenario involves the unthinkable; for that reason, some will almost certainly consider it among the first three scenarios. This scenario would involve the use of, for lack of a better phrase, an incentive package by those who are the most determined that one of these three scenarios prevails over the others. Political incentive plans in politics are as old as politics itself. They can be designed to persuade someone to seek office, and, equally, to decline such an opportunity.

In the quadrennial elections for Kuwait's National Assembly since 1963, there have always been a very large number of people who announce their candidacies in the earliest stages of the contest. As the campaign continues, however, the numbers tend to decrease, not increase. The reasons for individual candidates declining to remain in the race inevitably differ from one case to the next. While almost all have agreed to do so willingly, there are many who decide to do so because of an unwritten and perhaps even unspoken agreement to step aside. To be sure, the details of whatever produced such a decision are seldom known in full. However, it is widely assumed, and sometimes proved, that a quid pro quo of some kind was reached between a leading candidate who intends to remain in the race until the end and those who, for one reason or another, are induced to withdraw.

Something along these lines cannot be ruled out in the case of Abu Dhabi. It does not require much imagination to envision the kinds of arrangements that could be entered into between and among the likely and potential players indicated herein. Because ample means are available to quite a few of the players for this purpose, should they prove necessary, it is likely that the process would take place peacefully and behind the scenes. If so, the likelihood of there being much cheering all around when the final results are tallied would be fairly high. Up and down the length of the GCC region, there is ample precedent not only for creative financing but also creative politicking.

It is quite possible that there would be a back-up component within this scenario, to be held in reserve and used only in extremis. This would entail the implied, or in a worst case scenario actual, use of force to seal the issue. If this cannot be ruled out as a possibility, then the question becomes, "Who would most likely have the means to employ such a tactic

effectively if necessary?" Stated differently, "Who would be able to bring to bear such formidable and potentially decisive assets as control of the armed forces, police, intelligence, and information?" As matters are currently structured, the answer lies rather clearly within the data contained in the three scenarios outlined above. A glance at each scenario's lineup of people, positions, power, and patronage will indicate the one most likely to prevail should settlement of the three-fold dimension of the succession question come to this.

ANALYSIS AND PROGNOSIS

Supporters of the first scenario are comfortable with what they see and know of the players mentioned. They reason that if merit alone -- in this case, personality and leadership traits as well as energy and organizational skills -- is allowed to prevail, the succession process would most likely adhere to the scenario as described. They may be right.

Supporters of the second scenario disagree. They enlarge the arena of those who will have a say in the decision. In so doing, they introduce the names of other families and personalities who will weigh in, possibly decisively, on the decisions as to who will get the top three posts in Abu Dhabi in the post-Zayid era. The bulk of these leaders, very few of whom are known to most Westerners, are the remaining links to the Abu Dhabi of another era, pre-Zayid.

These powerful figures were never overthrown. They never abdicated. Some hold no formal governmental position of consequence. But all are important. Collectively, they were never disestablished, but rather bypassed, circumvented. Where this could not be done, they were given a sinecure and made a part of the system. It cannot be said that they're not part of the ruling family; they are, only of a different, collateral line. In dynastic terms, they form the distaff branch of the Al Bu Falah, the leading branch among a dozen different branches of the ruling Bani Yas tribe.

Within the Emirate, the tribe's roots are not, as many assume to be the case, in Abu Dhabi town, which is an island and the capital. Neither are they, as others suppose, from the oasis interior of the Emirate's Eastern Province, adjacent to the border with Oman and often referred to by the name of Al-Ain, the most prominent of its six villages on the Abu Dhabi side of the border. Rather, the tribe's ancestral moorings are located some distance to the west, in Al-Liwa, an area comprised of a band of nearly three dozen village- and hamlet-sized settlements in the middle of the desert in the heart of the region where the Emirate's onshore oil production is based. Earlier still, the Bani Yas hailed from the Najd, the central province of Saudi Arabia, and, even further back, from the Wadi Nahyan near the Marib Dam in Yemen. As such, in terms of the great genealogical divide of the Arab peoples worldwide, the Bani Yas - like their kinfolk in Dubai, but not the ruling families in any of the UAE's five northernmost Emirates -- are Southern Arabs.

The foregoing may seem unduly esoteric to the non-specialist. To the specialist, however, such information is an invaluable guide to the who's who of any GCC country. The names and status of the Bani Yas' numerous sub-tribes, moreover, may seem arcane and the notion of sub-tribes itself an anachronism to many Westerners, but this is hardly so in the eyes of the

tribes' and sub-tribes' members. This becomes evident when there is a major leadership change within one of the major branches or even, as in this case, one of its sub-branches, i.e., the Al-Nahyan branch of the Al Bu Falah branch of the Bani Yas tribe. This background and context may not be what an outside analyst would want to hear, but it is what anyone interested in the likely outcome of a succession process in a polity as important as Abu Dhabi, and on the larger scene the UAE, needs to know.

Thus, powerful and towering in influence as Shaikh Zayid's long rule has been, it is not a sure thing that the three senior-most successors to follow him will be the ones that many people have in mind.

HOW COULD THIS BE SO?

Among the most prominent of the other Bani Yas' sub-tribes are the Qubaisat, the Rumaithi, the Sudan (Suwaidi), and the Al Bu Falasah. The Al-Maktoum branch of the last-named comprise the ruling family of Dubai. The first-named are prominent not only in Abu Dhabi but also in neighboring Qatar. The chief representative of the second-named, Muhammad bin Butti Al-Rumaithi, is the head of Shaikh Zayid's Presidential Court. A member of the third-named, Ahmad Khalifa Al-Suwaidi, heads the Arab Cultural Foundation and has long been Shaikh Zayid's Personal Representative at countless international events and functions. All of these tribal branches' heads and prominent personalities will by time-honored custom and right have a say as to who succeeds Zayid.

And the ones cited are not all. Powerful clans within sub-tribes may also attempt to weigh in on the decision. When the searchlight is on this particular dynamic of ruling family politics, it is revealed that, within the Al Bu Falah branch, the Al-Nahyan branch, which is the incumbent line that Shaikh Zayid heads, is a relatively new branch in terms of emiral leadership. An older, some would say more prestigious, and for a long period of time far more numerous branch is the Bani Muhammad, also known as the Bani Khalifa, the father of Muhammad.

The progeny of this family were older and more accomplished than Zayid's own offspring when Zayid came to power in June 1996. Six brothers - all sons of Shaikh Muhammad bin Khalifa, who lived until well into the 1970s - cut an extraordinarily wide swath through Abu Dhabi officialdom until as recently as the past decade. All but one of the brothers is still alive. Suffice it to say that for years, most of the key departments in Abu Dhabi's government - Public Works, Office of the Chamberlain of the Presidential Court, Water, Electricity, the governorship of the Eastern Province, the Chairmanship of Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, the Deputy Prime Ministership, the Ministry of Interior of the UAE, even at one time the Ministry of Health -- were in the hands of these brothers.

Not only the brothers and their sisters, but also their children -- several of whom occupy major posts within the UAE and Abu Dhabi governments -- are collectively a potential force to be reckoned with in any consideration of who will rule Abu Dhabi in the future. So are the heads of the Al-Hamad and Al-Rumaithi branches of the Bani Yas, key members of whom are married to sons of Shaikh Zayid. These branches dominate the Abu Dhabi Municipality and Town Planning Department and, also, governmental affairs in the Western Province,

site of the Emirate's onshore oil fields, petrochemical industry, a refinery, and export terminals.

In weighing how these factors may affect the outcome of the rulership and the second- and third-in-command sweepstakes in Abu Dhabi, one needs to consider three additional factors. First, the present Heir Apparent, Khalifa bin Zayid, has the solid backing of the Bani Muhammad. A major reason is that Shaikh Khalifa is married to one of the six brothers' sisters. This makes all five of the surviving brothers his uncles. No such remotely comparable bonding or blood or marital links join the Bani Muhammad to any of Shaikh Zayid's other sons.

A second factor is the position and role of the main non-Bani Yas tribes that are aligned to the Bani Yas. The most important ones are the Darmaki (plu.: Daramak), Al-Dhahiri (plu.: Al-Dhawahir), and Al-Amri (plu.: Al-Awamir). Collectively, they dominate the eastern flank of the Emirate that abuts Oman and ranges southward into the Rub' Al-Khali. The most prominent leaders of each of these tribes are believed to be solidly behind the Bani Muhammad. Examples of the influential posts that some of these individuals hold are the Chairmanship of the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (Hareb bin Massaoud Al-Darmaki), Minister of Interior (Dr. Muhammad Saeed Al-Badi Al-Dhahiri), and Vice-President of the UAE National University (Dr. Hadaf Jouan Al-Dhahiri).

A third factor is Dubai. There, as noted, a branch of the Bani Yas, the Al Bu Falasah, has held sway since they seceded from Abu Dhabi in 1833. They, too, are solidly in the camp of Shaikh Khalifa. Beyond their standing in Dubai, they wield considerable clout within the UAE government. The Ruler of Dubai, Shaikh Maktoum, is the federation's Vice President. In that capacity, standing in for Shaikh Zayid who was ill, he represented the UAE at the 1996 GCC heads of state summit in Qatar. Dubai's Heir Apparent (Muhammad) chairs Dubai Petroleum Company and is UAE Minister of Defense, and its Deputy Ruler (Hamdan) is the UAE Minister of Finance.

What all this means is several things. It means that the widely acknowledged support for a future major leadership role of some kind for UAE Armed Forces Chief of Staff Lt. General Muhammad bin Zayid is significant but, in light of what is pointed out here, may not necessarily be as extensive as many have indicated. It means that even on numerical grounds, despite the fact that Muhammad and his brothers -- the sons of Shaikha Fatima who, for that reason, are sometimes referred to as the Bani Fatima, and who outnumber all other groups of siblings from different mothers within the Al-Nahyan family - are the single largest bloc of siblings, they are nonetheless in a minority in comparison to the other groupings noted herein. These other, more numerous blocs will have every bit as much a say in the succession/accession process in Abu Dhabi as the Al-Nahyan, and, should they choose to press their case, likely more.

And it means something else. It means that for all the power, privilege, and patronage at the disposal of the Bani Fatima -- in addition to the Chief of Staff of the UAE Armed Forces (Muhammad), they include the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs (Hamdan), the Head of National Intelligence and National Security (Hazza), and the Head of the Private Department (Tahnun), the Chairman of Abu Dhabi National Oil Company and the Petroleum Investment Council as well as Director of the Office of HH The President (Mansur) -- such factors alone will not guarantee that the Al-Nahyan will prevail over

the Bani Muhammad. Nor will two other of the Ruler's sons from different mothers -- Chief of Abu Dhabi Police (Saif) and the Director General of Ports (Saeed) -- likely weigh into the balance in such a way as to tip the balance one way or another.

In conclusion, it is this analyst's opinion that Shaikh Khalifa bin Zayid, backed by the Bani Muhammad bin Khalifa, in alliance with the Emirate's principal tribes and sub-tribes, will be the critical factors in determining who gets what, how, and why with regard to the leadership of Abu Dhabi in the post-Zayid generation.

THE PRESIDENCY OF THE UAE

~~~SCENARIO ONE~~~

The first scenario has Shaikh Khalifa emulating his father by serving simultaneously as Ruler of Abu Dhabi and President of the UAE. There is nothing in the UAE Constitution that would prevent this. The election process, however, is profoundly different than the one for becoming Ruler of Abu Dhabi. In this case, as in the case of President Zayid and Vice President Maktoum, the Ruler of Dubai, one would have to be elected by the heads of the six other emirates: Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras Al-Khaimah, Sharjah, and Umm al-Qaiwain. Of these six, Dubai, like Abu Dhabi (and unlike the others), has veto powers. In addition, Abu Dhabi and Dubai share responsibility for appointing the UAE's Council of Ministers.

In this scenario, Khalifa would undoubtedly stand to benefit from both his own Abu Dhabi-based support as well as the aforementioned Dubai-based support.

~~~SCENARIO TWO~~~

In this scenario, Shaikh Khalifa may for some reason elect to be Ruler of Abu Dhabi but not President of the UAE. In such an eventuality, it is possible either Dubai's Ruler, Shaikh Maktoum, or its Heir Apparent, Shaikh Muhammad, would have a strong chance to be elected President. Between these two, many believe the more dynamic and forceful personality, and the one with the more impressive record of achievements, would be Shaikh Muhammad. The latter is extraordinarily popular and regarded as the most widely effective leader in Dubai, while at the same time enjoying the confidence of many in the energy industry and of those in the field of defense.

~~~SCENARIO THREE~~~

This scenario envisions a quite different outcome in that the presidency would be assumed by neither Abu Dhabi nor Dubai, but rather by another emirate. In such an eventuality, the most likely candidate would be Sharjah. HH Dr. Shaikh Sultan bin Muhammad Al-Qasimi, Sharjah's Ruler, has at various times in the past intimated that he would not necessarily say no if ever a genuine broad-based movement were to emerge in support of his candidacy to be the UAE President. However, for this scenario to prevail, it would entail that Abu Dhabi and Dubai not only both signify their disinterest in the post, but also agree to cast their votes in support of Shaikh Sultan. It would likely also entail devising an arrangement whereby Abu Dhabi, the federation's chief financier since its inception, would agree

to continue underwriting the lion's share of the unionist experiment's expenses.

ANALYSIS AND PROGNOSIS

This analyst believes there is a strong possibility the first scenario will prevail. One reason is that the job of UAE President is an important one, to be sure, but, in some ways, more so internationally than locally. If one has any doubts, one need only compare the budgets and financial outlays for the UAE's federal institutions with those of the individual emirates' local agencies. To say that the discrepancy between the two is vast is to understate the reality.

The UAE, to date, is everything in the way of a loose confederation of states that the American republic's founding fathers - and the secessionist south's leaders half a century later - sought to achieve, but found impractical and ineffective. Here, as nowhere else in the Middle East, or for that matter anywhere else in the developing world, is a confederation that works.

The UAE may be the weakest link in the GCC countries' chain of military establishments with regard to clear lines of authority and decisiveness of command. It may also have the most porous of borders as well as the least well-implemented regulations as to who may enter, reside, and work in the country, with all the implications for domestic stability that such a situation implies. But it is also true that, despite these shortcomings, the UAE represents the longest and most successful record of regional integration in modern Arab history because its leaders have not only acknowledged but worked hard to implement the Jeffersonian principle that - on the Richter scale of legitimacy -- the best government is that government which governs least. In such a setting, it should come as no surprise that something less than the most charismatic and visionary leader will suffice for most. In any case, in nearly every GCC country, there has long been a pattern of alternating strong heads of state backed by nominal heirs apparent, followed by titular leaders backed by forceful crown princes.

The GCC region is not alone in this. Among America's nearly two-score presidents, fewer than a handful - the Washingtons, Jeffersons, Madisons, the much under-rated Polks, the Lincolns, and Roosevelts - warrant the historians' mantle of greatness. And lest one forget, perhaps the most economically and socially robust period in U.S. history in this century was the "Roaring Twenties," when the republic was led by the likes of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover, none of whom epitomized greatness and after whom few parents named their children.

Likewise in the Arabian Peninsula. The likes of Saudi Arabia's King 'Abd Al-'Aziz bin Saud and his son, King Faisal, Kuwait's Shaikhs Mubarak and Abdallah Salim, Bahrain's Shaikh Salman, and Oman's Sultan Qaboos, in the vein of Abu Dhabi's and the UAE's Shaikh Zayid, are the kinds of leaders that pass one's way maybe once or twice in a century, but seldom more frequently.

Viewed in this light, it is both unrealistic and arguably unnecessary to expect another Zayid-like figure to hold sway in the UAE in the post-Zayid generation. If it is true that the only thing longer than his shadow that a

great man can leave behind is an institution, there's no question that the survivability of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi and the UAE are likely to count as two of his foremost bequests that other leaders the world over would be hard-pressed to match.

But if Shaikh Zayid's son and Heir Apparent Shaikh Khalifa should elect not to be President of the UAE, a version of the second scenario that would have one or the other of two Dubayyan leaders at the helm should be more than acceptable, with one proviso - that Dubai assume a much larger proportion of the UAE's expenses than it has to date. This writer's opinion is that Dubai would not wish to invest more time and resources in the federation than it has thus far, which, in keeping with its self-professed image of the Middle East's most dynamic city state, has been minimal. The more likely scenario would have Dubai's Shaikh Maktoum retaining his present position as UAE Vice President.

As to the third scenario, it is true that Sharjah's Shaikh Sultan might possibly bring to the UAE Presidency a greater degree of energy and personal commitment to strengthening the federation than would Abu Dhabi or Dubai, although there are many who would debate these points. However, such attributes, by themselves, would not likely be deemed sufficient to offset Sharjah's more straightened economic circumstances and the consequent financial and political back seat it has had to take in comparison to Abu Dhabi and Dubai for the past half century. In any case, such a scenario would entail not only that Abu Dhabi and Dubai renounce their claims to the post, but also cast their votes in support of Shaikh Sultan or, possibly, someone else from Sharjah or one of the other emirates. In the view of this writer, none of these conditions is likely to be met.

Finally, there are some who see the possibility of Dubai's Shaikh Muhammad considering that it would be in Dubai's interest for him to assume the mantle of UAE leadership. Such a scenario, however, would turn on Shaikh Khalifa's decision not to stand for election to the presidency and, as a corollary, on his willingness to support Muhammad's candidacy. The latter criterion is not out of the question, especially as the two are close - Muhammad is known to support not only Khalifa's bid to become the next ruler of Abu Dhabi, but also his right to be President of the UAE as well.

Were this to come to pass, the interesting question then would be who would become the UAE's next Minister of Defense? The short answer is possibly Shaikh Muhammad bin Zayid, in the unlikely event that he did not obtain any of the aforementioned top three positions in a post-Zayid government in Abu Dhabi. But this scenario would by no means be a given, for there is nothing in the UAE Constitution that would prevent Dubai's General Shaikh Muhammad from remaining the federation's Minister of Defense, as he is at present, and simultaneously serving as the UAE's Head of State. The precedent for such an arrangement is right next door. Oman's Sultan Qaboos is not only the Sultanate's Ruler and Commander in Chief, but also its Minister of Defense, Finance, and Foreign Affairs.

On balance, the odds are that Abu Dhabi's Shaikh Khalifa will become president of the UAE in the post-Zayid era. For the foreseeable future, the answer to the question of who is most likely to win the UAE Presidential sweepstakes will matter less than the answer to the question of who will be the top three leaders most likely to run Abu Dhabi.

Lest one forget, it is Abu Dhabi, and not any of the other Emirates -- or even all of them combined -- that sits astride a tenth of the world's known oil reserves, that contains a substantial portion of the world's gas deposits, and that possesses more financial reserves than all of the rest of the emirates plus Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar together.

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