**The monarchy in 2022**

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[Atle Hetland](https://nation.com.pk/authorpost/columnist/atle-hetland/)

Last week, when the Norwegians held a fairytale celebration of Princess Ingrid Alexandra’s 18th birthday and her age of majority, it was an elegant event for the young woman to become head of state. The royal family in the country is down-to-earth and quite ordinary, yet, with unordinary privileges and duties. If the institution still exists for more than a generation, when Princess Ingrid would ‘inherit the throne’ she would be the first woman to hold the mostly ceremonial post in many hundred years, in one of twelve monarchies in Europe. But in the meantime, her father, Crown Prince Haakon (49), has to implement his life-long term, and his father, King Harald V (84), now on the throne, said at his granddaughter’s birthday party that they had to put up with him for some more time.
It may seem out of place to Pakistanis that I write about royals in today’s article, now that the princely states are gone, too, long ago. Still, I’d like to tell some stories about the monarchies and the royals in Europe, mainly in my home country Norway. It is an outdated and undemocratic institution, yet, still somehow intact in some of the otherwise highly democratic European countries. The royals there have ceremonial tasks only, no formal power. But as symbolic leaders, they can unify the people, hold wise talks and comfort on ordinary days and in times of crisis, and place other advocacy roles for causes. The fairytale part, the rituals, and ceremonies, with pomp and pageantry, are also important, an anthropologist will tell us, and the ‘royalty light’ style of the Norwegians moderate that, and it all works well.
King Harald has many times shared philosophical words of wisdom, and his words are listened to. The late King Olav V (1903-1991) was born in Denmark and grew up with English as his mother tongue, not Norwegian, as his mother, Queen Maud, was born an English royal. He endeared himself to all immigrants, Pakistani-Norwegians and others when he said in a national day speech that he too was an immigrant. His son, King Harald, underlined further aspects of the term ‘inclusion’ when he said that Norway is a diverse country, inter alia, with girls who like girls, boys who like boys, and boys and girls who like each other; he said people believe in God or Allah, and some have no religious belief, and they together make up the tapestry of the country, with common and diverse values and traditions.
True, some royal traditions are strange, not the least the fact that the King or Queen, who have ‘inherited the throne’ and are the ceremonial head of state in eight of the twelve European monarchies. It is also strange that young royals, as they come of age and live their adult lives, have no concrete job descriptions and formal tasks. Sometimes, they wait most of their lives to ‘take over’, like in the UK, but also in Norway. I believe they should have real, defined tasks as deputies or otherwise – after all, the royals are actually civil servants.
Princess Ingrid has a younger brother, Prince Sverre Magnus (16), who is the next in line to become head of state after his sister, should she for some reason not get into the post, or should she pass away. But there seem to be no defined tasks for him even if he stays ‘just a prince’, neither for education, training, or work. He also has a half-brother, Marius (23), born to his mother Crown Princess Mette-Marit (49) before she married Crown Prince Haakon. He is formally not a royal, with no title and he receives no government salary or stipend. He has worked in fashion and acting and has a keen interest in motorcycles and mechanics. I believe he, too, could have a role as part of the country’s first family, perhaps as some sort of goodwill ambassador or spokesperson for the youth, if he would be interested and given training for such tasks. The royal families do have the power to put issues on the agenda, and people will listen to their balanced views and advocacy.
Although Norway is one of the countries scoring highest on the gender equality index, it is only since 1990 that there has been equality among the royals, so that the oldest child inherits the throne, irrespective of gender. As a matter of fact, the current crown prince is younger than his sister, Princess Märtha Louise (50), and she should have been the next in line to become head of state had there been gender equality when she was born. Instead, she runs a modest business in the fields of public speaking, publishing, and horse riding. She considers herself a ‘highly sensitive person and has authored books about that and spirituality issues.
She was for many years married to the late Ari Behn, a successful painter, and author, with three beautiful daughters now in their teens. She has recently come into the media’s limelight again because she last month engaged Durek Verrett (47), an American businessman and shaman, who in his books and statements has, like Martha, expressed opinions and beliefs that are rarely spoken about in mainstream Norway nowadays, such as believing in healing by faith and that some people have over-natural powers, including himself.
Maybe it is indeed good for the Norwegians to have Princess Märtha and Shaman Verrett talk about issues that Norwegians have become shy about? Besides, Shaman Verrett is African-American, and that is not common in the European monarchies, well, except for the UK Prince Harry (37) who married an American woman of colour, Meghan Markle (40). At the official royal photo at Princess Ingrid’s birthday party last week, with royals from all over Europe, Durek Verrett stands out as the only black person, yes, tall, good-looking, and all – and black.
Much more could have been said about the lives and times of the royals in Europe. In most countries, including Pakistan, the stories are often for gossip and entertainment, not so much about serious issues. The Bhuttos, Zardaris and Sharifs in Pakistan are dynastic families. Imran Khan broke with that political tradition and moved up on his own, well, on the shoulders of cricket, no less. It seems we people want to have some sort of lasting leaders, and yet are also keen on voting them out if we can. Reintroduction of royals, like in the British time, is no option, of course. But I believe we should honour former PMs and other top leaders more than what is done, and certainly not chase them from the country. It is important to look for the positive, not only their mistakes and advantages are taken.
Finally, it is thought-provoking that some of the world’s most democratic countries, such as the Scandinavian countries of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, still all have a king or queen as head of state. Well, not that the two other closest neighbours, Finland and Iceland, are less democratic or less successful, and they have an elected president as head of state, honoured when they are in power and when they retire.