Royal family feud B Y M A H I R A L I | 3/11/2020

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| T HE coronavirus threat has persuaded the Saudi authorities to halt umrah for foreign pilgrims, suspend travel arrangements with several countries including several neighbours, shut down schools and universities, and to lock down the Qatif region, home to much of the nation`s Shia population. Furthermore, the price of oil has suddenly dipped by 30 per cent, and Saudi Arabia is at the centre of a price war, with plans to ramp up production after Russia refused to cut back.One would have thought all these measures and their implications might have sufficed to concentrate minds in Riyadh. But no, the kingdom`s crown prince and de facto ruler, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), took time out to incarcerate some of his closest relatives, including his father`s only surviving full brother, Ahmed bin Abdul Aziz, as well as his predecessor as heir apparent, Mohammed bin Nayef.Inevitably, the move sparked speculation that it was a possible precursor to MBS`s formal accession to the throne. The Saudi authorities responded by releasing pictures of King Salman bin Abdul Aziz attending to his royal duties, alongside the information that the potentate had personally signed the arrest warrants.The 84-year-old king is said to be keen on sticking around at least until the G20 summit, scheduled to be held in Riyadh in November.Reports suggest that although no charges have thus far been laid, the imprisoned princes have been accused of treason.That`s serious, given that so many ostensibly milder crimes entail the death penalty in Saudi Arabia. There have been rumours that MBS acted to pre-empt a palace coup.On the other hand, it could be just an intimidatory tactic aimed at reminding all and sundry within the sprawling House of Saud that the crown prince will brook no dissent. Following the unspeakably ruthless evisceration of the journalist and one-time royal family insider Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, there were suggestions that the king would clip his favourite son`s wings. If there was any such attempt, it has clearly failed and MBS remains determined to ensure that his supremacy is uncontested.Family feuds are nothing new in the House of Saud, of course. Almost 60 years ago, another reformist-minded prince successfully manoeuvred to oust his elder half-brother.King Faisal`s concessions to modernity included the advent of television in the kingdom, which was vociferously opposed by some family members. One of the king`s nephews, Khalid bin Musaid, was shot dead by police during an attack on a television station in 1966.Nine years later, Khalid`s brother Faisal binMusaid assassinatedhisenthronedname-salce during a palace majlis. The assassin was publicly beheaded shortly thereafter.Two years after that, one of the king`s brothers sanctioned the public execution of his 19-year-old granddaughter, Princess Mishaal, for adultery. The sordid tale was turned into a television docudrama, Death of a Princess, which sparked a controversy as not just the Saudi authorities but Western governments and oil conglomerates sought to bury it. The Saudis expelled the UK ambassador after failing to obtain the cancellation of its British broadcast.Four decades later, the Saudis seem to have rather more clout. The Dissident, a documentary about Khashoggi, received a standing ovation at the Sundance film festival in the US, and was hailed by critics, with a reviewer describing it as `an eye-opening thriller brew of corruption, cover-up and real-world courage`. Director Bryan Fogel expressed the hope that `in my dream of dreams, distributors will stand up to Saudi Arabia`. So far, noTV or streaming network has shown much interest.Meanwhile, in a new biography, Ben Hubbard, The New York Times` Beirut bureau chief, places MBS in a global context. `As more of the world`s wealth was concentrated in fewer hands,` he writes, `populist authoritari-ans used nationalist rhetoric to rally their people while shutting down outlets for opposition ... MBS saw no need for checks on his power and crushed all threats to it.Underlining the prince`s zeal for untrammelled power, Hubbard claims that at one point MBS even locked away his mother and two sisters in a palace in order to silence them. By that standard, uncles and cousins are easy prey although there can be little doubt that they are detained in relative luxury, unlike women`s rights activists such as Loujain al-Hathoul, who has faced torture for advocating some of the goals that MBS himself purportedly supports, let alone the members of civil society secretly tried by the Specialised Criminal Court and sentenced, according to Amnest y International, to long terms in prison or execution.Pop concerts and fake wrestling matches may be a novelty for the kingdom, but it won`t ever truly be liberated until the House of Saud crumbles. On the bright side, the crown prince`s potential for precipitating such an outcome should not be underestimated. m mahir.dawn@gmail.com  |