

SHEIKH MOHAMMED NAMED UAE PRESIDENT

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Rise of a prince: Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, in this file photo. APAP

Rulers in the United Arab Emirates on Saturday unanimously appointed Abu Dhabi's Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan as the West Asian nation's President, signalling both unity and stability in this key energy-rich country that hosts Western militaries.

The ascension of Sheikh Mohammed, 61, had been expected after the death on Friday of his half-brother and the UAE's President, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, at the age of 73. The transition of power marks only the third time the nation of seven sheikhdoms has selected a President since becoming an independent nation in 1971.

Projecting power

Under Sheikh Mohammed, who has been the nation's de facto leader since Sheikh Khalifa suffered a stroke in 2014, the UAE had tried to project power militarily across the wider region as it joined a Saudi-led war in Yemen.

But since the lockdowns of the pandemic, Sheikh Mohammed and the wider UAE has tried to recalibrate its approach by largely pulling out of the war and seeking diplomatic detentes with rivals. The UAE also diplomatically recognised Israel, which shares Sheikh Mohammed's longstanding suspicion of Iran. However, ties to the U.S. have strained in recent years.

The state-run WAM news agency described the vote at Al-Mushrif Palace in Abu Dhabi as unanimous among the rulers of the country's hereditarily ruled sheikhdoms, which includes the skyscraper-studded city of Dubai.

"We congratulate him, and we pledge allegiance to him, and our people pledge allegiance to him," Dubai's ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, said on Twitter. "The whole country is led by him to take it on the paths of glory and honour, God willing."

The UAE is observing a three-day mourning period, which will see businesses shut across the country and performances halted in Sheikh Khalifa's honor.

Sheikh Mohammed had been serving as the UAE's de facto President since a 2014 stroke saw Sheikh Khalifa disappear from public view.

Known by the acronym MbZ, Sheikh Mohammed cultivated ties with the West that proved valuable for Abu Dhabi, the capital of the UAE that commands tens of billions of dollars in wealth funds from its oil and gas deposits.

West's ally

A U.S. diplomatic cable from 2004 released by WikiLeaks referred to him as "charismatic, savvy and very comfortable in the West." He hosted then-President George W. Bush in 2008 at his desert estate, a visit complete with Bedouin tents and falcons.

The country hosts some 3,500 U.S. troops, many at Abu Dhabi's Al-Dhafra Air Base, from where drones and fighter jets flew missions combating the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria. Dubai

also is the U.S. Navy's busiest port of call abroad. Both France and South Korea also maintained a military presence here.

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