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### **Saudi king loses power to choose his successor**

By Hugh Miles

SAUDI ARABIA has significantly reduced the powers of its absolute monarchy by quietly removing the king's authority to choose his own successor.

This landmark constitutional reform, enacted by royal order last October but only disclosed this week, fundamentally changes the way the desert kingdom - which controls 25 per cent of the world's oil - is governed.

Until now, the king alone has selected his successor, known as the crown prince, from among the sons and grandsons of King Abdul-Aziz, the founding leader of Saudi Arabia, better known as Ibn Saud.

In future, a committee consisting of senior members of the royal family, called the Bay'ah Council, will vote for the crown prince from three candidates named by the king.

The council is empowered to reject the king's choice and can even impose a crown prince against the monarch's will. It can also declare the king or crown prince incapable of ruling.

"What makes this change important is that, in addition to taking the final decision about who rules out of the king's hands and institutionalising it, it brings stability to the succession process," said Prince Turki al-Faisal, the former Saudi ambassador to London and Washington.

Disclosing the reform in a lecture at St Anthony's College, Oxford, Prince Turki added: "The council, which will be chaired by the oldest son of the kingdom's founder, will make decisions by majority vote on a secret ballot."

Prince Turki said the monarchy had "opened the door for more participatory values in Saudi Arabia, in areas such as shared decision-making, and checks and balances".

All 21 surviving sons of King Abdul-Aziz, plus representatives of sons deceased or incapable, will sit on the council. Women are excluded from governance in Saudi Arabia.

The new selection process is expected to be used only after the current crown prince, Sultan, who has served as defence minister for almost 45 years, has become king.

The reigning King Abdullah is probably 84 years old and Crown Prince Sultan is about 83,

although their exact dates of birth are uncertain.

Until now, the interior minister, Prince Nayef, had been expected to become king after Sultan. This will almost certainly not happen. Prince Nayef, who is about 74, is a deeply conservative figure regarded as one of the principal obstacles to reform.

Under the new system, if Abdullah dies before Sultan, Sultan will still succeed him, but the next crown prince will be selected by the new procedure.

King Abdullah established the new council by royal order on Oct 20 last year. Under the new system, Prince Turki himself, who was Saudi Arabia's intelligence chief before his ambassadorial appointments, is a credible candidate for crown prince.

He resigned abruptly from his post as ambassador in Washington last year for unexplained reasons.

Other possible candidates for the throne from the younger generation include Prince Muhammad bin Fahd, governor of the oil-rich Eastern Province, and Prince Khalid bin Sultan, son of the defence minister.

