

Saudi replaces Labour Minister

A handout image provided by United Arab Emirates News Agency (WAM) on December 3, 2016, shows Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz (C-L) and Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces (C-R), arriving for a reception at the Presidential Airport in Abu Dhabi.

Reshuffles religious and Shura councils

King Salman bin Abdulaziz has replaced Saudi Arabia's labour minister, state media reported on Friday.

In a royal decree read on state television, the king also reshuffled the country's top religious body, the Council of Senior Scholars, and the Shura Council, which advises the government.

The changes come as the kingdom prepares to implement reforms proposed by its Vision 2030, which aims to reduce dependence on oil, attract foreign investments and promote more cultural openness.

State television said King Salman had appointed Ali bin Nasser al-Ghafis as labour minister to replace Mufrej al-Haqbani.

Ghafis is currently head of the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation, a network of colleges set up to train young Saudis in the trades.

The programme had long been regarded as ineffective but received a new lease on life under former labour minister Adel Fakieh, who is now a leading figure in the kingdom's initiative to transform its oil-dependent economy.

The king also changed the head of the country's consultative Shura Council and replaced several members of the assembly.

Some members of the council have recently come under fire on social media for proposing or supporting cuts to some social benefits and the raising of prices of some basic services.

LABOUR WOES

Haqbani faced a slew of challenges in his time at the helm of the Labour Ministry, as a sharp drop in crude prices slashed government revenues



Ali bin Nasser al-Ghafis and took a toll on economic growth.

Job creation dried up this year amid severe cuts to public spending and delays in state payments to contractors, despite reforms geared toward creating jobs for Saudis.

The unemployment rate rose to 12.1 per cent in the third quarter, up from 11.6pc the previous quarter.

The kingdom's economic reform plan, led by Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has set targets to cut the jobless rate to 7pc by 2030 and raise women's participation in the labour force to 30pc from 22pc.

The appointment of more modern-thinking clerics to the Council of Senior Scholars also appears to support the reform plan.

New members include Mohammed al-Issa, a previous

minister of justice and former member of the council often cited by liberals as the sort of moderate Wahhabi cleric that reformers in the royal family want to promote.

Another new member, Sulaiman Aba al-Khail, was formerly head of the religiously-oriented Imam bin Saud University and described by Saudi Twitter users as liberal.

Aba al-Khail was quoted in an interview with *al-Watan* newspaper last month as saying that some scholars have corrupted the minds of young Saudis. (Reuters)

Fatah picks party officials

Ramallah
Palestinian president
Mahmud Abbas's Fatah party yesterday held a vote for members of its ruling bodies that could give clues to a possible successor to the ageing leader.

Fatah, the oldest Palestinian party, is holding its first congress in seven years at a time when Abbas is seeking to quell dissent in the face of internal rivalries.

Casting his ballot on Saturday afternoon, Abbas called the process "democratic and transparent".

The 1,400 delegates voted at Abbas's Ramallah headquarters in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and also in the Gaza Strip.

They are to choose 18 members of the party's Central Committee, its highest body. Abbas will appoint another four. (AFP)

Egypt court rules protest law unconstitutional

Cairo
Egypt's top court has struck down part of a law that allowed the interior ministry to ban all but officially sanctioned protests, a court official said yesterday.

The 2013 law, which has been used to jail activists for up to two years, required demonstrators to inform the interior ministry that they were planning a protest.

The ministry could then refuse permission.

The Supreme Constitutional Court ruled that the article was unconstitutional, barrister Tareq Shibel said.

The court said in a statement that the constitution guaranteed freedom of association and the right to peaceful protest.

The authorities have deployed this law to prevent anti-government protests, but groups of people would be able to attend pro-authorities rallies

during the same period.

The constitutional court's verdict is final and cannot be appealed. However, Saturday's ruling does not mean the law will be scrapped in its entirety, said two court officials who did not wish to be identified.

The verdict is "a partial victory that has granted us a political victory" against the government, Tareq al-Awady, one of the lawyers who challenged the law's constitutionality, said.

"We were hoping the court would accept our appeal against the two articles that criminalise and set the punishment, so imprisoned young people could be freed," he said.

Following the verdict, "as long as the interior ministry is notified" about a protest it cannot ban it, Awady said.

The law was passed months after Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who was army

chief at the time, overthrew his Islamist predecessor Mohamed Morsi. In October, Sisi said

his government would look into revising the law, shortly after pardoning 82 detainees

imprisoned on political grounds or over freedom of expression. (AFP)



An Egyptian policeman standing guard outside the Supreme Constitutional Court in Cairo