

Shaikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan 1918-2004

Courage, courtesy and shrewdness

The principal architect of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and ruler of Abu Dhabi Shaikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, 86, died on 2 November 2004 after a long illness; he had a kidney transplant in 2000. He was a quintessential traditional Arab ruler who helped transform seven disparate shaikhdoms into a model of cooperation, economic development and a leading financial and banking centre. And his philanthropy touched the lives of Muslims worldwide.

Shaikh Zayed was born in 1918 into the Bani Yas tribe, the ruling family of Abu Dhabi for some 300 years. Following a coup by Britain in August 1966 Shaikh Zayed, the youngest of four brothers but governor of the eastern province of Al-'Ain (1946-66), was nominated by the family to succeed **Shaikh Shakhbut** (d.1989) who had ruled the state since 1928.

Until 2 December 1971 when Britain ended its special treaty relationship, Abu Dhabi, like the rest of the so-called Trucial States, was forbidden by the Exclusive Agreement of 1892 from dealing with other foreign powers without the permission of Britain. But despite remaining a British colonial territory for a century and quarter, progress and development had bypassed the shaikhdoms, which subsisted on pearl diving and fishing.

However, Abu Dhabi the largest was to become the richest of the seven states, blessed as it was with a vast reservoir of petroleum and gas that was discovered in 1958 and commercially exploited in 1962; the first oil export was from Umm Shaif offshore field. As a dedicated ruler of Abu Dhabi for 38 years and president of the UAE for 33 – and **Shaikh Maktoum** of Dubai as vice president of UAE – Abu Dhabi became the hub of the rich, prosperous federation. Today the UAE has one of the highest annual per capita GDP: \$20,000, equal to that of the United States.

Even as governor of Al-'Ain long before he was set to be a multi-billionaire, Shaikh Zayed was known for his generosity and keen personal interest in the welfare of his people. He restored old and built new underground canals and dug thousands of wells to help farmers, and encouraged education that enabled Abu Dhabi to catch up with the educational level attained by Dubai and Sharjah. The first school in Al-'Ain was set up in the 1950s out of his own pocket.

Burgeoning economic development and wide ranging reforms, from administration and infrastructure to



schools and public service projects, marked Shaikh Zayed's rule. Within three years of the UAE's formation Abu Dhabi was contributing 90% of the federal budget, that changed the landscape and quality of life of the citizens of UAE.

A keen hunter and falconer as well as a sportsman, Shaikh Zayed gave up hunting with the gun when he was only 25 to become an equally passionate conservationist. He wrote a book, *Falconry: Our Arab Heritage*, in 1977.

Though a firm advocate of modern education, he believed in the maintenance of traditional and Islamic values. In February 1994, murder, adultery, theft and drug offences were among a whole range of crimes ordered to be tried in Shari'ah courts instead of in civil courts. And he tried to ensure that 'Islamic conventions' were observed in planning housing for tribesmen as well.

More than 50 Asian and African countries benefited from his generosity: he contributed to more than 240 development projects. He helped build mosques and hospitals, and funded charity organisations and social welfare projects and had a soft spot for Pakistan.

No surprise, therefore, when the late Pakistani banker **Agha Hasan Abedi** founded the BCCI, the world's largest Muslim private bank, in 1972, Shaikh Zayed extended more than official patronage: since 1990 his family and

government owned 77% of it. This involvement was to cause him much anguish and embarrassment, besides loss of some seven billion pounds, to when the Bank of England took action to close the Bank of Credit and Commerce International in July 1991, alleging fraud and money laundering.

Those who had dealings with Shaikh Zayed testify to his courage, courtesy, shrewdness and personal incorruptibility. He showed as much integrity in tackling the rather mysterious BCCI scandal as he had some 40 years earlier when he was the provincial governor of a poor shaikhdom facing a rich and powerful Saudi Arabia in the Buraimi oasis dispute in 1952: he rejected a questionable offer of £30 million in return for allowing oil exploration there.

A traditional ruler with absolute powers and pro-West and modernising leanings, Shaikh Zayed was no fan of the western brand of democracy which post-9/11 world order was committed to spread. During his state visit (July 1989) to Britain as guest of **Queen Elizabeth** he insisted on seeing the adviser to the late Palestinian leader **Yasir Arafat** and helped alleviate Iraqi people's sufferings during sanctions.

But Abu Dhabi – like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen – was under US pressure. In the Gulf War I in 1990 he had allowed the American-led forces to make use of facilities in the UAE, but not when Iraq was invaded again in 2003, and occupied. One of the only three countries (Pakistan and Saudi Arabia being the other two) which had recognised Afghanistan's Taliban regime, the UAE was the first to withdraw recognition on 22 September 2002. A day before he passed away, Shaikh Zayed carried out his first cabinet reshuffle in 27 years when the first woman minister Shaikha **Lubna al-Qasimi** was appointed.

Shaikh Zayed is survived by 21 sons and a number of daughters and wife Shaikha **Fatima bint Mubarak**. The Crown Prince **Shaikh Khalifa** succeeded his father on 3 November 2004.

■ Anwar H Chowdhury