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The End of an Era?

With Farrakhan III, the Nation of Islam Prepares for Change

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Nearly 30 years after Louis Farrakhan seized control of the Nation of Islam, the organization is preparing for a change at the top. The controversial minister is battling what he has described as a "life-threatening" illness -- painful swelling of the prostate that has left him more than 30 pounds underweight, dehydrated, anemic and unwilling to eat.

Farrakhan, 73, recently relinquished his duties and turned control over to an executive panel of trusted lieutenants, exhorting them to move the Nation of Islam forward and prove that it is more than the charisma and influence of one man.

"The minister has good days. He has bad days," said Ishmael Muhammad, who leads the organization's flagship Mosque Maryam in Chicago and sits on the executive board. "The doctors are meeting to talk about what steps they can take to help him . . . so that he does not have to suffer through the pain he's constantly in."

Muhammad said the board runs the Nation of Islam's day-to-day responsibilities. It includes Abdul-Alim Muhammad, Farrakhan's medical adviser; Leonard Muhammad, the chief of staff; and Mustafa Farrakhan, one of the leader's sons.

Although they are considered equals, each board member is poised to take over the organization if Louis Farrakhan fails to fully recover.

Power struggles are nothing new within the deeply insular Nation of Islam. After leader Elijah Muhammad died in 1975, Farrakhan split with Wallace D. Mohammed, the son who replaced him, and started his own following.

Wallace Mohammed angered some members by renouncing his father's unorthodox teachings and seeking to convert the Nation to orthodox Sunni Islam. But Farrakhan, a former calypso singer, followed Elijah Muhammad's doctrine almost to the letter, mesmerizing black audiences with messages of social liberation and empowerment that culminated with the Million Man March in 1995, one of the largest African American gatherings in history.

"Minister Farrakhan has been one of the strongest voices in our community in terms of his critique against racism in the black community, and that voice has been important," said Ronald Walters, a University of Maryland professor of political science who teaches a course in black leadership.

But Farrakhan failed to follow through on his promises to unify black men, create jobs and make black communities self-sufficient, Walters said.

"It didn't go anywhere," he said. "He didn't lend himself to implementation. He went off into the desert, and we couldn't get the implementation and administration started."

A change in leadership could allow the Nation to move away from a controversial mythology. Followers are taught that the group's founder, Wallace Fard, was an incarnation of God and that a scientist named Yacub created white people, notions that are dismissed by orthodox Muslims.

Eight years ago, as he fought prostate cancer, Farrakhan softened his tone and sought to burnish an image that had been improving since the Million Man March. He said reports that he had called Judaism a "gutter religion" misquoted him, and he said he did not mean to offend.

But recently, Farrakhan returned to anti-Semitic statements. During a speech at the group's Savior's Day ceremony in February, he was quoted as saying that "false Jews promote the filth of Hollywood," including homosexuality. "You may not like me," he said, "but I don't give a damn. I'm throwing down the gauntlet today."

Such comments by the Nation of Islam leader are "offensive not only to Jews, but it hurts their credibility as an organization trying to lift up blacks," said Deborah Lauter, director of civil rights for the Anti-Defamation League, a Jewish organization. "Promoting hatred of Jews and whites diminishes the positive messages they're trying to send. The Jewish people will not sit at the table with hate groups, whether they are black or white."

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Earlier this year, Farrakhan began experiencing pain that he says was a result of the radiation treatment he received for his bout with prostate cancer in 1998.

"As you know, I have been suffering from the after-effects of an extremely high dose of radiated seed," Farrakhan wrote in a statement last month. "Over time, these seeds have done severe internal damage."

He continued, "I am postponing indefinitely all engagements, meetings and appointments so that I can concentrate, with Allah's (God's) Help, to bring myself back to a state where I may be able to continue to serve the rise of our people."

Speaking more directly to his followers, he wrote, "I know that you (the Believers) will accept the challenge to move our Nation forward, being ever watchful for any smart, crooked deceiver and hypocrite who would create confusion over my present condition."

In Washington, Abdul-Alim Muhammad said the Nation of Islam will thrive with or without Farrakhan. "As we go forward, it will not be wise to think that we are going to produce someone like him," he said.

Although Farrakhan vowed to come back strong, "so that I can continue to serve because I do not believe that my earthly work is done," some followers, in private conversations, seemed uncertain about his future.

Benjamin Muhammad, who once ran the NAACP under the name Benjamin F. Chavis Jr., wished Farrakhan well and said he is in his prayers. But he said the illness is a difficult challenge to overcome.

Ishmael Muhammad said speculation about life without Farrakhan "is premature when the man is still yet present among us." He said the Nation of Islam would continue to fight oppression through its members worldwide.

"We never discuss actual membership," he said. Critics have said the number of Nation of Islam followers has fallen greatly as black Americans convert to orthodox Islam.

Others outside the organization wondered whether it could last without Farrakhan's charismatic influence.

"My guess is that the NOI will be around in some form for the indefinite future," said Ibrahim Abdil-Mu'id Ramey, director of human and civil rights for the Muslim American Society's Freedom Foundation.

"It will not in my opinion be as large or vital as it is now. I think an analogy that might be appropriate is the analogy of the Garvey Movement."

When Marcus Garvey died in 1940, his Universal Negro Improvement Association faded almost to nothing. There are people today who keep its memory alive, Ramey said, "but it is no longer an organization at the forefront of the African American struggle."

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