SoftBank's founder reverses retirement plans, says heir apparent 'victim'

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The boss of SoftBank Group on Wednesday admitted his desire to hang on to power a little longer had pushed away the former Google executive seen as his heir apparent.

Masayoshi Son told an annual shareholders meeting he had changed his mind about the timeline for stepping down to make way for right-hand man Nikesh Arora.

The India-born executive quit the telecoms corporation Tuesday, just two years after being plucked from a high-profile job at the US tech giant, with SoftBank saying a "difference of expected timelines" for succession was behind the decision.

Both men said it was an amicable split, and Arora would stay on as SoftBank advisor.

But the 48-year-old Arora's departure raises questions about succession plans at a company that made global headlines in 2013 for its nearly $22 billion takeover of US wireless carrier Sprint—among a string of acquisitions directed by SoftBank's billionaire founder.

Son described Arora an "absolutely extraordinary person" who was a "victim" of his desire to hang on to power a little bit longer.

SoftBank's 58-year-old founder had initially talked about stepping aside when he turned 60, but said he later decided he might have another

decade left in him.

"Every month I visit Silicon Valley, as always. If you say that you're 60 years old, it's like you're a fossil," Son jokingly told investors Wednesday.

"I want to stay on a little bit longer as chairman."

The news came just days after SoftBank said an independent group of board members had cleared Arora of misconduct.

In April, an investor group called for Arora's ouster over potential conflicts of interest tied to his role as an adviser to a private equity firm.

Analysts said the direction of SoftBank's Internet strategy—a job left to Arora—was now an open question.

"We will be interested to see the time required to retool the investment strategy for the Internet business," Nomura telecom analyst Daisaku Masuno said in a commentary.

'Too early'

SoftBank's whopping debt load has been another area of concern.

On Tuesday, the mobile carrier announced it had agreed to sell a $8.6 billion stake in Finnish game-maker Supercell Oy, creator of "Clash of Clans", to China's Tencent, as it looks to pay down debt.

The company has also said it will sell as much as $10 billion worth of its stake in Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba.

Some investors expressed shock at the resignation, but SoftBank's Tokyo-

listed shares bucked a market downturn, finishing 2.5 percent higher at 5,994 yen ($57).

Arora's salary made headlines last year with reports saying SoftBank was paying him $135 million. Later, Arora said he would buy over $480 million in SoftBank shares to show his confidence in its prospects.

"Their opinions (about SoftBank's future) must have differed a little bit," said an 85-year-old investor who gave his name as Takeru.

"If he wants to stay on for 10 more years, it will be better to give him the chance to do it. It's too early for (Son) to retire."

Arora seemed to echo that view.

"This is a decision I respect and even support because (Son) is too young in his heart and his mind to not continue and leave this great company," he told investors.

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