

OMAN'S PROGRESS TOWARD PARTICIPATORY GOVERNMENT

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One hears a lot these days about promoting the spread of democratic institutions in the Arab world. In evaluating these efforts some observers seem to imply that the standard by which they should be judged is the degree to which practices or institutions resemble the American or other Western models. A look at more than three decades of evolution in the political institutions of Oman suggests that the steady growth of participatory government, guided by a farsighted leader, may offer a solidly grounded foundation for establishing the institutions, practices and attitudes needed for representative government, with little if any reference to Western models. Over the last 35 years, while building a modern infrastructure through the judicious use of limited petroleum resources, Oman's ruler, Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Busaid, has gradually enfranchised his people, established a bicameral advisory council, prepared the way for a supreme court to be the arbiter of the laws, and worked tirelessly to promote tolerance and understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims. The result is a peaceful and secure nation, tolerant of other religions

and customs, unthreatened by internal conflicts. Though this political and social stability would not have been achieved without the leadership of the country's ruler, much of the credit also goes to the Omani people themselves.

Oman is often thought of as a "Gulf" country; but, except for the Musandam Peninsula, it is not really on the Persian Gulf, but rather sits on the Indian Ocean, facing east. It is different in many ways from its Gulf neighbors. Oman has been an independent nation for more than 250 years, ruled by the Al Busaid family since Ahmad ibn Said Al Busaid expelled the Persians from the country in 1745. Treaties of commerce and friendship were concluded with the United Kingdom in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and with the United States in 1833, the latter negotiated by Edmund Roberts, special agent of the United States to the sultan of Muscat, in response to an invitation from the sultan to conclude such a treaty. Significant trade with the cotton mills of New England developed, to the extent that before long the Swahili word adopted to describe plain white muslin cloth was "*marekani*" (American).

In 1840, the sultan of Oman sent his

own emissary to New York City on the Omani dhow *Sultanah*.¹ After four months in the United States, the emissary returned to Oman. Though such lengthy voyages were not common, they were also not unprecedented. Omanis had for centuries been trading with the east coast of Africa, with India and even China, acquiring in the process a certain confidence in dealing with others. Unfortunately, languid and uninspired leadership in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century turned the country into a backwater.

Under the rule of Sultan Said bin Taymur, the internal and external situations began to deteriorate seriously in the 1960s. Said ruled virtually as an absolute monarch. Unwilling to spend oil revenues — just beginning then — for development, he kept the country closed to most outsiders. Omanis left the country by the thousands in search of education and employment elsewhere. A rebellion broke out in the southern province of Dhofar, supported by the communist government in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, with assistance from the Soviet Union.

In what was a fateful decision, Sultan Said had sent his son Qaboos to a private school in England in 1956, after which he acquired a military education at Sandhurst, subsequently serving a year with the British army in Germany. When he returned to Oman, Qaboos was virtually under house arrest in his father's palace for the next six years. Alarmed by the trend of events in Dhofar, the British were all too happy over the outcome of a palace coup in July 1970: Qaboos replaced his father, sending him off to retirement in England, where he lived out the rest of his life.

Qaboos found himself in charge of a stagnant, conflict-ridden country in which

there were less than ten miles of paved road and only one 12-bed hospital. Undeterred, on his first day as ruler, Qaboos promised to create a modern government for his people.

THE OMANI RENAISSANCE

Omanis today speak of the renaissance of their country, and there is probably no better word to describe what has happened in the lifetime of a single generation following the assumption of power by Qaboos. The physical transformation is what first meets the eye. Mutrah, for centuries Muscat's port, carrying commerce to the world, is now a modern city, bringing in the goods a modern nation needs, but occasional dhows anchored in the harbor show that the transition from ancient to modern is not yet complete. A curving, four-lane divided highway passes under a Portuguese fort dating from the sixteenth century (the only era in which coastal Oman was truly under European domination), going over a small pass in the ring of mountains separating Mutrah from the adjacent town of Muscat, capital of Oman and site of the ruler's palace. Muscat is small and primarily residential; it only takes a minute to drive through it to the crest of the next hill, looking eastward. When Qaboos assumed power, the view from the crest of that hill looked down on an unpaved track leading to the sleepy fishing village of Sidab. In its place today is an Omani Coast Guard facility. The stone and *barasti* (palm-frond) huts of 1970 have been replaced by a paved road making its way through a suburban collection of stuccoed houses, small shops and a mosque on the edge of this twenty-first-century settlement just over the hill from Muscat. The transformation is complete. No former

open space is now unoccupied, and no dwelling of the pre-1970 era has survived.

THE EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

Though the neatness of the physical infrastructure is what first strikes the visitor, the growth of an educated citizenry is the key to the successful renaissance. When Qaboos assumed power, there were only three primary schools in the country. He soon launched a massive program to provide an educational infrastructure as soon as practicable.

In his first address to the nation in July 1970, Qaboos invited all Omanis who had left in search of better lives to return home to help build the nation. In the early years of his rule, the country was assisted by the influx of many East African Omanis who had benefited from a good school system under British colonial rule. Some of these came because they had been rendered unwelcome in Zanzibar and Pemba by the African revolution of 1964. Others from the mainland of Tanzania or Kenya came simply in the hope of bettering their economic circumstances.

Education today is free and universal, but not compulsory. By 2003, there were 1,022 schools in Oman, including three special-education schools, with an enrollment of about 600,000 male and female pupils. (Omanis are estimated to number about 1.8 million out of a total population of 2.4 million.) The opening of Sultan Qaboos University in 1986 has enabled Oman to train many of its own senior managers and administrators. As a result, 76 percent of the sultanate's teachers and over 97 percent of the schools' administrative and supervisory staff are Omani.² In academic year 2002-03, Qaboos University had about

12,000 students in its B.A., M.A. and diploma programs. In addition, there are another 15 private colleges and universities, first allowed in 1996. New enrollments at Qaboos University are about evenly divided between men and women. In the class graduating in November 2005, 2014 graduates received BA and MA degrees. Of these, 1121 were females and 893 were males.

"Omanization is the key to our independence," said Minister of Information Hamed bin Mohammed Al Rashdi when I met with him in February 2004 to discuss the country's future. "But we don't just want to put Omanis in the job; we want to educate them first. They must show to their employers in the private sector that it's profitable to employ Omanis."

When I asked the sultan's special adviser for Economic Planning Affairs, Mohamed Al Zubair, how Oman was preparing itself for the time when oil exports could no longer sustain the economy, he replied that education was the foundation for Oman's future prosperity. "Knowledge of English is the key to being a 'global Omani'... Instead of training Omanis to do specific tasks in Oman," he said, "we must train them so that they can work anywhere in the world." By combining this with knowledge of computer programming and information technology, Omanis would become part of a global workforce. Oman would develop its capabilities as a center for financial transactions as well, Mr. Al Zubair said. As oil reserves decline, a skilled workforce will become Oman's most important resource. At Bahwan CyberTek, led by Chairperson Hind Bahwan, I saw evidence of the new Oman. Working with American, European and Indian partners,

Bahwan CyberTek now has a decade of experience in applying information-technology systems to the needs of modern business and finance. At the company's new training facility, I saw dozens of Omani men and women in co-ed classes acquiring the skills of the new information technology to meet the company's need for skilled employees. With offices in Massachusetts, California, India, the UAE and Germany, Bahwan CyberTek seems well on the way to fulfilling the vision expressed by Muhamed Al Zubair.

Elsewhere in the private sector, women are moving into positions of leadership. In June 2002, Reem bint Omar Al Zawawi was chosen to be chairperson of the Board of Directors of the Oman International Bank, the sultanate's second-largest financial institution. She had served as a member of the board since 1996.

TRANSFORMATION OF GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

Virtually none of the structures of modern government existed when Qaboos assumed power. Once the educational infrastructure began to take shape, he was able to initiate other measures to involve his subjects more in the management of the nation's affairs. One of the first signs of this intention was the beginning in 1975 of an annual tour into the countryside. These tours, lasting several weeks, offered people the opportunity to speak directly to their ruler in a kind of town-meeting setting. This was followed in 1981 by the establishment of the 45-member State Consultative Council (*al-majlis al-istishari li-dawla*), the first formal step toward participatory government. Members of this Council were appointed by Sultan Qaboos and were chosen from Oman's leading families,

with due regard to the need to balance tribal representation in a nation where tribal affiliation still claimed the first loyalties of a majority of the people. The Council was enlarged to 55 members in 1984. The role of the Council was initially limited to giving its opinion to the sultan on issues he placed before it. Over time the prerogatives of the Council have expanded. In 1990, the State Consultative Council was replaced by the Consultative Council (*majlis ash-shura*), a 59-member body comprising members chosen by the sultan from lists of candidates proposed by each district in the sultanate. Following the census of 1993, the Council was increased to 80 members for its second term, 1994-97. It included two women. As the population continued to grow, the Council was increased to 83 members for its fourth term, 2001-04. It remains at this size during its current (fifth) term, 2004-07. Its role now is to review draft legislation pertaining to economic development and social services prior to its becoming law. The Council may request ministers to appear before it to discuss issues within their competency.

The concept of *shura*, "consultation" in Arabic, has Quranic roots. Islamic scholars do not agree on whether consultation with those affected is obligatory or merely desirable (verses may be found to support either interpretation), but it is clear that Muhammad did consult with his followers on numerous occasions before making a decision. Since it is impossible to consult with the entire population, the idea of individuals being chosen to represent the views of their kinsmen or neighbors follows naturally. A former Omani ambassador to the United States, Sadek Sulaiman, points out that the change in the Consultative Councils mentioned above constituted a subtle

evolution, noticeable only to Arabic speakers:

The etymological form of *shura*, derived from the root *shawr*, or advice, means mutual consultation in its widest scope—a collective deliberation in which all parties are *exchanging* counsel. The term *shura*, as such, is to be distinguished from the term *istishara*, which means one side seeking counsel from another.... In my country, Oman, the present assembly was first named *al majlis al istishari*, and only several years later renamed as *majlis al shura*, thereby claiming a more democratic posture.³

In 1996, a restricted electorate was given the right to elect the members of the Consultative Council (*majlis ash-shura*) for its third term, 1997-2000, though victorious candidates still had to be confirmed by the sultan before assuming their seats.

Initially granted to a restricted electorate of about 100,000 Omani men and women, suffrage has been gradually increased over the years. In early 2003, the sultan granted universal suffrage to all Omanis over the age of 21. Of about 800,000 eligible to register, approximately 262,000 did so, of whom about 100,000 were women. Of these, about 194,000 (74 percent) exercised this suffrage in October 2003 to elect new members to the Consultative Council. Eighty-one men and two women (out of 506 candidates, including 15 women) were elected to four-year terms in an election deemed to be free and fair.

Any male or female citizen over 30 years of age may be a candidate. In earlier elections, candidates had first to be approved by the government, and victors had to be confirmed by the sultan before filling their seats. In the 2003 election, candidates did not require prior government approval, and the sultan declared his intention to accept the verdict in each race.

In December 1997, the sultan established a second consultative body, the State Council (*majlis ad-dawla*), to act as the upper chamber in a bicameral representative body. Initially this Council consisted of 41 members appointed by the sultan, four of whom were women. In 2005, this body

consisted of 58 members, including 9 women, all chosen by the sultan. Members must be native-born Omanis not less than 40 years old “and of good social standing and

reputation with appropriate practical experience.”⁴

Though the Consultative Council or the State Council may recommend changes to new laws proposed by ministries and government departments, neither body has legislative powers. They may, however, initiate proposals and are expected to conduct studies to help implement development plans and to find solutions to economic and social problems. Laws are drafted by government ministries and enacted when signed by the sultan. The sultan retains the right to appoint his ministers, three of whom are currently women. There are no political parties. The government must approve the estab-

In early 2003, the sultan granted universal suffrage to all Omanis over the age of 21. ...[C]andidates did not require prior government approval.

ishment of all associations. There are no political prisoners. In May of 2005, 31 “suspected Islamists” were sentenced for possession of weapons and for plotting to overthrow Sultan Qaboos, but these were subsequently pardoned by the sultan in June.

While gradually expanding the size and scope of the two advisory bodies, the sultan in November 1996 presented his people with the “Basic Statutes of the State,” effectively a written constitution for Oman. It guarantees certain rights to the people, based on Quranic and customary law, and bans cabinet ministers from being officers of private-sector companies. The Basic Statutes guarantee the right to practice non-Muslim religions but not to carry out proselytizing activities. Many Christian denominations meet regularly and openly, as does the Hindu community. The statutes also establish a procedure for selecting a successor to Sultan Qaboos, who has no children. The Basic Statutes authorize an independent judiciary, which came into being under the Judicial Authority Law on June 1, 2001. Speaking of his conception of the role of a Supreme Court in a 1997 interview with journalist Judith Miller, the sultan said,

The Supreme Court will be the guardians of the law. Without that you can't have a proper government. They are the ones to say what is right and wrong. My role is to see that the interests of the people are taken into account. It's not my role to interpret the law. Only if certain basic things go wrong would I intervene, as would any head of state. And I will appoint the judges.⁵

In addition to the steady expansion of

the people's role in institutions of government, Sultan Qaboos has continually made clear his wish that Omani women rise to a level of participation in the public and private sector commensurate with their numbers and education. In 1999, Qaboos appointed the first Omani woman ambassador (to the Netherlands). In September 2005 the sultan appointed a woman as ambassador to the United States. In March 2004 he selected the first woman to be a minister in his cabinet, following up with a second chosen in June and later a third in October. In both areas, the diplomatic service and the Council of Ministers, Oman was the first member of the Gulf Cooperation Council to appoint a woman to such a position.

The pace with which Oman's political institutions have evolved — gradually over a generation — may well be a lesson for those who would have it take place faster. As for other monarchies on the Arabian peninsula, the Omani example may serve to demonstrate that a policy of gradualism, firmly rooted in local tradition, can be implemented in a way that offers citizens an expanding role in managing the affairs of their country without opening the doors to uncontrollable political and social pressures. If anything, it would seem to have the opposite effect, by offering citizens interested in their country's political, economic and social development a variety of outlets for expressing the popular will. As for those Arab countries technically without “monarchs,” having “presidents” who serve in excess of 20 years may make them similar enough that they too can benefit from this wise example. Part of Oman's success — and possibly the most difficult element to replicate in other countries — may be attributed to its

possessing a deeper tradition of tolerance for differing ideas than do some other countries in the region. Oman's rich seafaring tradition has brought it into contact with outsiders for centuries. It is no accident that tradition holds that Sindbad the Sailor was an Omani from the port of Sohar. The result of these many foreign commercial ties is a great mixture of peoples, enriching the culture of Arab seafarers and bedu from the interior with Baluchi, Indian and African infusions. Today the net is cast even wider. One can scarcely spend a day in Oman without encountering Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, other Arabs, and a wide variety of Europeans and Americans, all helping Oman maintain its infrastructure and its network of contacts with the world.

THE GROWTH OF TOLERANCE

It wasn't always this way, especially in the interior, where lack of contact with the sea led to a less tolerant mentality. As recently as 1948, the British explorer Wilfred Thesiger, in his crossing of the Empty Quarter, was warned by his Omani guides that he had to stay hidden in the desert while they went into a town in the region of the interior capital, Nizwa, to obtain supplies. If the local tribesmen learned that a Christian was in the area, they would kill him, said the guides, who were from the southern Omani province of Dhofar and did not share this aversion to Christians — perhaps because their exposure to the seafaring trade at Sallalah had rendered them more accepting of foreign customs and practices. Over the years since his accession to power, Sultan Qaboos has used his office to promote greater tolerance and understanding. In his

message to the nation on the Eid al-Fitr (the end of Ramadan) 2001, Qaboos turned to the Quran to underline his point: "Plurality in nations is one of God's ways in creation," said the sultan, who then cited the Quranic verse, "If thy Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind one people...."⁶

Such interpretation of religious scripture illustrates that there is no separation of mosque and state in Oman. To the contrary, Sultan Qaboos, as head of state, uses the mosques as a channel of communication to his citizens. Sermons (*khutbahs*) delivered by imams in all mosques of the land deal with topics selected by the sultan months in advance. Drafts prepared by his Ministry of Religious Affairs are reviewed and edited by him personally prior to being approved for delivery. If the thrust of such messages were critical of Western, non-Muslim values or fundamentalist in nature, one might be alarmed. The fact that the message spread by the sultan calls for tolerance and understanding and speaks of the value of diversity shows us that it is the message that matters, not the principle of separation of the secular and the religious spheres. It also shows the importance of leadership.

As further evidence of the evolution in attitudes since the time of Thesiger, it is possible to visit the Sultan Qaboos mosque in Muscat, open to non-Muslims five days a week. In 2003, Oman's Ministry of Religious Affairs invited the Jewish academic Bernard Lewis, an authority on Islam and the Middle East, to participate in a series of interfaith lectures at the Sultan Qaboos mosque. This was part of the sultan's effort to ensure that all Omanis now understand and practice the tolerance the world needs in this time of cultural

tension between East and West.

It is somewhat curious, even disappointing, that the tolerance for diversity of political views has not kept up with this tolerance for religious diversity. Omani culture seems not yet fully at ease with the free expression of ideas on political and social subjects, nor with the idea that citizens may organize themselves into interest groups to work toward shared goals. Government permission is still required to form a non-governmental organization. Limits on the expression of political and social views deemed critical of the government were demonstrated by the detention of two Omanis in the summer of 2005 for overstepping the bounds of expression tolerated by Omani authorities. In the first case, Ms. Tayba Mawali, a journalist and former member of the *Majlis Ash-Shura*, was arrested and charged in June with insulting public officials via telephone and on the internet. On July 13, she was sentenced to 18 months in prison for her actions. This sentence was reduced to six months by the Omani Court of Appeal on August 7. Amnesty International believes that she may be considered a prisoner of conscience, held solely for the non-violent expression of her beliefs.⁷

The second case involved an Omani human-rights activist, poet and playwright, Abdullah Ryami. In May and June, Ryami had publicized the government's treatment of Ms. Mawali. He had also vocally criticized the government's handling of the 31 Omanis charged with plotting the overthrow of the sultan. They were held incommunicado for at least a portion of their imprisonment prior to their trial.

Ryami had also criticized what he described as the excessive use of force by Omani police against a public demonstration protesting the conviction of the 31. Twenty-four of these demonstrators were arrested and subsequently tried before the State Security Court but were pardoned by the sultan before the conclusion of their trial. Ryami was summoned for questioning on July 12 and was held without charge and without access to family or lawyers, for a week, until his release on July 19.

While the 35 years of Sultan Qaboos's rule have seen a tremendous evolution in opportunities for Omani citizens to play a role in the political processes of their state, these recent examples demonstrate that there are clearly limits to what the security authorities in the sultan's government will tolerate. Indeed, it seems ironic that citizens accused of plotting to overthrow the ruler are pardoned, while another citizen remains in jail for verbal criticisms of government officials and actions. Nevertheless, we in the West must take care not to judge progress in relation to some end point similar to our own and grow impatient when we do not see institutions or actions replicating our own models.⁸ The example of Oman shows that, with the benefit of strong and enlightened leadership, the tolerance of diversity required to ensure peace and social justice in a modern nation can be cultivated. Participatory, representative government is establishing its roots in Oman, grounded firmly in Islamic tradition. Let us hope that its slow and measured evolution will continue.

¹ Hermann F. Eilts, *The Visit of Ahmad bin Naaman to the United States, in the Year 1840* (Washington, D.C.: Embassy of Oman, 1962). Also published as "Ahmad bin Naaman's Mission to the United States in 1840: The Voyage of al-Sultanah to New York City," *Historical Collections*, Vol. 98, No.4 (Essex Institute, 1962).

² Ministry of Information, Sultanate of Oman. *Oman 2003/2004* (Muscat, Oman: 2003), pp. 133, 134, 138.

³ Sadek Jawad Sulaiman, "The Shura Principle in Islam" (Al-Hewar Center, Inc., 1999), p.2. <<http://www.alhewar.com/sadekshura.htm>>.

⁴ Ministry of Information, Sultanate of Oman, "Government," p. 1. <<http://www.omanet.com/english/government/majlis>>.

⁵ Judith Miller. "Creating Modern Oman: An Interview with Sultan Qabus." *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 1997, vol. 76, no. 3.

⁶ Sultan Qabus bin Said. "Text of Eid al-Fitr Khutbah (Sermon), 1st Shawwal 1422 A.H./16 December 2001." Distributed by the Royal Palace.

⁷ Public Amnesty International Index, MDE 20/007/2005, August 9, 2005. <<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE200072005?open>>.

⁸ For an excellent commentary on the inappropriateness of judging these issues by Western standards see Jeremy Jones and Nicholas Ridout, "Democratic Development in Oman", *The Middle East Journal*, Summer 2005, Vol. 59, #3.