

The solitary sultan and the construction of the new Oman

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On the surface, and to the casual visitor or observer, governing Oman undoubtedly would seem to be a snap. The country is so quiet that virtually no mention of Oman ever seems to reach most of the outside world—apart from glowing articles in travel pages of newspapers (one European journalist some years ago described the Sultanate as an ‘Islamic California’). The present sultan, Qaboos bin Said of the Al Said family, has ruled since 1970, benevolently and almost single-handedly.

Of course, though, there is more to Oman, to the Sultanate, and to governing the country than appears casually. Despite its present peaceful demeanour, Oman has had until recently something of a turbulent past. From early in the twentieth century until the mid-1950s, the interior was autonomous of the coast. When the present ruler’s father occupied the interior in 1955, with the help of British forces, a complex and sustained civil war ensued. Although the ruler was able to assert effective control over the interior by 1959, insurgent activities and political opposition did not cease fully until after 1970.¹

The situation in the south, the Dhufar region, was at the same time more isolated but more serious. Annexed to the Sultanate in the nineteenth century, Dhufar gave the appearance of being more attached to Yemen than Oman. Opposition to the exceedingly paternalistic rule of the region by the present sultan’s father began to emerge in the early 1960s. By the end of that decade, a full-scale rebellion was under way, led by a Marxist leadership whose goal was to overthrow all the Arab monarchies of the Gulf. It took a palace *coup d’état*, outside military help from Britain, Iran and Jordan, and years of fierce fighting and wooing of the indigenous population before an end could be declared to the Dhufar War.²

Since the declaration of an end to that war in late 1975—or, more accurately, until the last insurgents laid down their arms at the end of the decade—Oman has been at peace. In the north, i.e. Oman itself, there are no political issues between interior, coast and capital. Over the last 30 years, Dhufar has been effectively integrated into the Sultanate. Economic development and improved standards of living—modest by Western standards but decidedly superior to most of the Arab world—have occupied the focus of Omanis. Politically, the sultan’s authority has been unquestioned, apart from two small and murky episodes. Internationally, the Sultanate has employed a balancing act to remain on at least correct terms with all its neighbours.³

Thus Oman has become a model of quiet efficiency in the region over the last three decades or so. The story remains unfinished, however. Oman remains a modernizing state, not a modern one.⁴ Power and authority is concentrated heavily in the hands of the sultan and institutionalization may not have advanced sufficiently to weather the shock of a change of rulers. The elites that burst into prominence in the 1970s continue

to dominate the country, to the chagrin of many other Omanis. Governance has been quiet and effective—but is this state of affairs permanent and robust?

Means and methods of governance

Without question, Sultan Qaboos sits at the pinnacle of power in Oman.⁵ It is a vastly different situation than elsewhere in the Gulf, where large families and numerous close relatives not only vie for position but must be consulted by the ruler before any major decision is made. In Saudi Arabia, for example, decision-making falls first of all within the purview of King Abdullah with the help of his closest advisers. Generally he is obliged to consult and consider the concerns of an inner circle of Al Sa'ud princes, most notably the six surviving full-brothers of the late King Fahd. Beyond that, the consensus of the wider body of the Al Sa'ud is sought, the opinion of the religious establishment is ascertained, and eventually the views of other notables and the general population are obtained. Succession in Saudi Arabia is negotiated among the sons of King Abd al-Aziz, the founder of the present Saudi state, while elsewhere it may either move laterally to brothers or generationally to sons.

This situation does not apply in Oman. Sultan Qaboos was the only son of his father and he has no children. Succession therefore does not follow any obvious pattern and, again unlike elsewhere in the Gulf monarchies, the sultan has not proclaimed an heir apparent. His father, Said bin Taimur, ruled Oman with a firm and sole hand, delegating certain responsibilities to several loyal family members and relying on his British-created and British-officered armed forces to maintain his authority. Sultan Qaboos has inherited the mantle of singular leadership, just as he has inherited many habits of his father, who he overthrew in 1970. Qaboos never set foot in his country's capital, Muscat, before becoming sultan. He was born and raised in Dhufar and his mother is from one of the prominent tribes of the Dhufari mountains. No other member of his paternal family, the Al Said, has this connection to Dhufar. Just as importantly, it is unlikely that Qaboos ever met any of his paternal family before his initial entry into Muscat.

Therefore, the sultan is not obligated to consult his family as part of the decision-making process. His relations with them tend to be formal and distant. By all accounts, he is a private person and has few confidants. As a consequence, even major initiatives of his regime, such as the Basic Law of 1996, are abruptly announced without forewarning and with very little understanding of whose help the sultan enjoyed in formulating and drafting these initiatives. Access to the Sultan is tightly controlled, with the Minister of the Royal Office, serving as the gatekeeper. Even ministers have been known to wait months before receiving an audience. The atmosphere is made more difficult by the large amounts of time that he spends sequestered in Salalah in the south and during the drawn-out royal migrations from north to south and vice versa.

The sultan presides over a relatively efficient government built from scratch in the years and decades after 1970. The sultan chairs the council of ministers, although he often deposes his personal representative to carry out this function. Little work of government is actually carried out at council meetings, which generally are formal and heavily publicized. Instead, lines of authority are strictly hierarchical, with individual ministers responsible directly to the sultan. A significant number of supreme committees, composed usually of ministers and under-secretaries, have been formed to tackle specific issues confronting the country, such as financial affairs, water resources, and education and vocational training.

The largest number of ministries are concerned with the provision of services: water, electricity, public works, roads, ports, communications (which used to be concerned with roads and ports and more latterly concerns post and telecommunications), commerce, agriculture and fisheries, land affairs, education, higher education and social welfare. Another large bloc of ministries and equivalent agencies deal with security. The largest of these is the Ministry of Defence, which in theory exercises control over the separate military services (army, air force and navy), but in practice each service commander has a direct channel to the sultan, as does the chief of staff of the armed forces. Parallel military forces include the brigade-strength Royal Guard of Oman and the Sultan's Special Forces. The Internal Security Service handles domestic intelligence. Foreign relations are the preserve of the Foreign Ministry although the Ministry of the Interior deals with border issues in addition to supervision of the *walis* (roughly equivalent to local governors).

In most Arab states, the Ministry of Interior is one of the largest and most important government organs. However, in the sultanate many of the functions associated elsewhere with the Interior are handled by the Royal Oman Police. Its responsibilities include immigration, customs and coast guard in addition to the more usual fire-fighting, traffic police and criminal investigation. Its head, an inspector-general, also answers personally to the sultan.

Most of these ministries bear regulatory authority, such as the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, which licenses businesses. There are separate Ministries of Finance and National Economy, although one minister supervises both. Responsibility for socio-economic development has tended to vacillate between ministries and similar organs on the one hand and ministerial-level committees. The present Ministry of Development Planning is only a little more than a decade old. In the 1980s an autonomous Musandam Development Committee was created to fast-track development in the remote but strategically important Musandam Peninsula. The success of this programme led to the establishment of a similar one for al-Buraymi region, which suffered from comparison to adjacent Abu Dhabi's booming al-Ayn.

Elements of power

Oman, to a far greater degree than any of its companion states in the GCC, is governed by a single man. The personal authority of the sultan, Qaboos bin Said, is unquestioned. The sultan's accession transformed Oman from a poor, isolated corner of Arabia into a thriving, outward-looking state. Any list of accomplishments during his 40-year reign would be formidable. Furthermore, the personal mark of Sultan Qaboos on the changes is undeniable. As many Omanis in the decade of the 1970s almost invariably replied to the question of how they felt about the sultan, 'before Qaboos, there was nothing; after he became sultan, there was everything'.

Educated from an early age in Britain and passing out of Sandhurst to a brief stint in the British Army, young Qaboos returned to Salalah in 1964 to study Islamic law and familiarize himself with his own culture, as his father ordered. As the years wore on, however, Qaboos found himself becoming increasingly impatient with the restrictive practices and traditionalist outlook of his father. As a consequence, he gathered together a small group of childhood friends and British army officers to assist him in overthrowing his father. The *coup d'état* on 23 July 1970 was successful and Qaboos's wounded father was bundled off to Britain, where he died two years later.

A few weeks after the coup, Qaboos travelled to Muscat to be acclaimed as sultan. It was the first time he had ever seen his capital, but most of his countrymen were eager for the change in emphasis and welcomed their new ruler. This was not surprising, since the sultan had wasted little time in proclaiming his intentions to pursue socio-economic development (something about which his father had been laggard) and to bring the insurrection in Dhufar to an end by a combination of military means and a 'hearts and minds' campaign to redress grievances of the Dhufari population. Both of these key elements were tackled almost immediately.

A new government had to be created almost from scratch. The few educated and capable Omanis available returned from exile elsewhere in the Gulf to take up key positions at all levels. Many expatriates, both northern Arabs and Westerners, were required to staff ministries and offices. One of these, Tim Landon, was a British (although Canadian by origin) contract officer who had played an essential role in organizing the coup and served as the new sultan's most important confidant under the title of equerry. Considerable reliance was placed upon Zanzibari Omanis, a term referring to the thousands of Omanis who had lived, worked, or been born in East and Central Africa. Zanzibaris were particularly important in the early years of the new regime because many had received higher education and most spoke good English, thus permitting them to communicate easily with the heavily British element of advisers and officeholders in the government.

Development projects were quickly put in place to implement the basic infrastructure required for development. A British firm was engaged to survey the country's development needs and a number of development projects were initiated in the first few years of the new regime, such as the new seaport at Matrah, a new airport just outside the urban area, several date processing plants, a fertilizer factory, and an electricity and desalination plant for Muscat. Strong priorities were placed on roads, health clinics and schools. In 1970 10 km of asphalted road were completed but 1973 saw 300 km finished. The number of hospitals increased from five in 1970 to 15 in 1973, while clinics and dispensaries increased from 39 in 1970 to 75 in 1973. There were only three schools in 1969–70, but 110 in 1973–4.⁶

The emphasis on development and the creation of a comprehensive and relatively efficient government were crucial elements in establishing the legitimacy of the new regime. For the first time in modern Omani history, a rational process for assessing needs and dealing with those needs could be discerned. Popular involvement with the government was augmented by apportioning the appointment to key ministerial and other portfolios equally to the various regions and important tribes. In addition, the use of *wasta* persists: a citizen with a complaint or a need bypasses the local machinery and goes directly to a minister, under-secretary or director-general to whom he is related, or who belongs to the same tribe or comes from the same region.

The last factor—shared regional identity—was particularly important in the 1970s and 1980s with regard to Dhufar. Upon Sultan Qaboos's accession, an active insurrection in Dhufar had been gaining strength since emerging in 1962. The mountain tribes, *jibbalis*, were nearly aligned with the Popular Front while many men had left Salalah, the principal town of Dhufar, for work elsewhere in the Gulf and had joined the front. Gradually, *jibbalis* were encouraged to leave the front and join the *firqat*, a sort of home guard meant to defend tribal territory against the front. Eventually, only a hard core of insurrectionists remained. The sultanate's success was assured by the policy of accepting defectors and giving them positions in the government or the *firqat* while building community and

development centres across the mountains. By the latter half of the 1970s, Dhufar was thoroughly integrated with the rest of Oman, although it took time for Omanis and Dhufaris to accept each other.

The security services—Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), Royal Guard, Internal Security Service, Sultan's Special Forces, and even the Royal Oman Police—also played a noteworthy contributing role in building allegiance to the regime. They had helped to unify a long-divided country, not only between Dhufar and northern Oman but between interior and the coast in northern Oman as well. In part, this was related to establishing and maintaining law and order throughout the country, but even more importantly, the security forces were the largest employers in Oman. Enlistment not only provided an important source of income but it was an effective means of government distribution of oil income throughout the population. Even in the 1960s, the SAF had provided basic education to its recruits and after 1970 imparted skills to its ranks and military education to its officers. By and large, the security services were merit-based organs, which led to considerable socialization of its members away from identity based solely on tribe and region towards a newer national identity.

The sultan also sought to involve public participation in the government process, although on a very gradual timescale and with fundamental restrictions. Oman's experiment with political participation so far has been limited and gradual.⁷ In common with other Gulf states (and to a greater extent than some, such as Kuwait and Bahrain), rights to political participation have been conferred from the top down. Oman has been cautious in this regard, under the frequently made argument that its people are not ready for serious political change. The motivations behind the Sultan's 'top down' moves are not clear. Desire for formal participation seems to be concentrated among educated Omanis and even they are not very assertive in this regard. External pressures from Western states, particularly Britain and the USA, may also have played a role encouraging political opening, but it is likely that the Sultan has acted on his own convictions that the country must eventually adopt such changes and gradual steps are the best way to achieve them.

Civil society institutions are weak or nonexistent with the exception of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Formal political participation is limited to the establishment of consultative councils. The first such body to be established was the State Consultative Council (SCC) in 1981. As its name suggests (*al-majlis al-tashiri lil-dawlah*), it was intended to be a forum to provide advice to the government, but only when the government sought advice. In 1991 the SCC was dissolved and replaced by the *Majlis al-Shura* (Consultative Council). This was a first step in experimenting with elections, which have gradually extended the permitted electorate from a few selected individuals in each *wilayah* (district) choosing a list of nominees for the government to select, to universal suffrage for direct election.

In 1997 the *Majlis al-Dawlah* (State Council) was created. It is an appointed body that initially was made up of 41 members. It subsequently was expanded to 57. Composed largely of former senior civil servants, ex-senior security officers, retired ambassadors and prominent businessmen, the council appeared to be designed to serve as an appointed counterpoint to the elected *Majlis al-Shura*. The two bodies together form the *Majlis Oman*, the significance of which seems purely ceremonial. For example, the *Majlis Oman* convenes when the sultan opens each session. The remit of both the *Majlis al-Shura* and *Majlis al-Dawlah* is limited to discussion of issues affecting social services and excluding finances,

foreign relations, security, and the sultan and the organs supporting him. Furthermore, legislation can only be reviewed and not initiated.

There are additional, less formal, supporting factors in the regime's legitimacy. Although there has been considerable change in Oman over the past 40 years, traditional allegiances and identifications remain very strong. Among these are the tribes. While tribes have very little political role to play, they remain important in social terms. The sultan presides over a tribal system as, in part, a supra-tribal figure. The relationship between ruler and the tribes, mediated by tribal sheikhs is actively maintained and nurtured by the regime. Prominent tribes, such as the Bani Hina, al-Hirth, or Bani 'Umar, always seem to have members of sheikhly clans in ministerial or other high positions.

In addition, while the sultan's paternal family, the Al Said, have ruled Oman for two and a half centuries, his maternal family is thoroughly Dhufari. Not only that, but his mother was from the Bayt al-Ma'shani, one of the pre-eminent tribes of the Dhufari mountains. These tribes, collectively known as *jibbali* or al-Qara, speak a South Arabian language and formed the backbone of the Dhufar insurrection. The fact that the sultan is one of them means that the *jibbalis* owe him personal loyalty and nearly all the population of Dhufar regard him as their protector as a minority in the larger sultanate.

In a larger sense, the sultan and his state enjoy more than a modicum of legitimacy by adhering to the requirements of a legitimate Islamic state. The sultan invokes the strictures of Islam in his pronouncements and he conforms in his public persona to the qualities expected of an Islamic ruler. About half of the Omani population is Ibadi (most of the remainder is Sunni and a small but important percentage is Shi'a). Several decades ago, the *mufiti* (highest religious notable) of Saudi Arabia declared that al-Ibadiyah, as an outgrowth of the first sect in Islam, al-Khawarij, was a heretical belief. As a consequence, Omanis in recent years have rejected the connection between al-Ibadiyah and al-Khawarij. The sultan has been very conspicuous in affirming the legitimacy of al-Ibadiyah, even to the point of once giving the sermon during Friday prayers.

A final factor in the state's legitimacy is its guiding role in providing social and economic services while raising standards of living. As in the other GCC states, there is an implicit contract between state and people: the state promises to provide for the well-being of its people in return for their loyalty and obedience. The implied alternative is the political unrest and repression abundant in other Middle Eastern states. For most Omanis, a reluctance to 'rock the boat' assures at least their passive acceptance of the status quo.

Elements of weakness or opposition

Despite all the progress made in socio-economic development, national unity and political institutionalization over the past 40 years, the sultanate remains an authoritarian state with all real power concentrated in the hands of Sultan Qaboos. While the regime seems to be perceived as legitimate by most of its citizens, there are obviously problems still remaining to be addressed and/or overcome.

The concentration of power and authority in the hands of one man may facilitate quick and definitive decision-making in the short run, but it must also be considered a weakness in the medium-to-long term. That the sultan has acted in the best interests of his country over the years is unquestionable, but leaving all major decision-making in the hands of a single individual, particularly one who interacts regularly with only a few advisers, inevitably skews the development process. There is only a minimum of feedback

on the sultan's decisions. Even on important legislation, such as the Basic Law of 1996—effectively the constitution of the country—there was little advance warning that the law was to be promulgated and the sultan's advisers and consultants on its construction have never been identified. While the *Majlis al-Shura*, as well as its predecessor the State Consultative Council, and the *Majlis al-Dawlah* provide discussion and a limited measure of public input into the decision-making process, their remit is limited to the social services and expressly does not include the sultan's affairs, finances, security or defence.

In addition, rule by a single individual also faces the inevitable problem of what happens when that individual departs the scene. Sultan Qaboos was 70 in 2010 and he had ruled Oman for 40 years. Never close to any members of his paternal family, he had not delegated any core powers to them. It could be speculated that he inherited his aloofness and probable suspicion of family members from his father, who acted in much the same way as an unchallenged individual ruler. Sultan Qaboos has no offspring and he has refused to name an heir apparent or give any indication of who should succeed him. Indeed, in one of his few public pronouncements on the matter, he has said that his successor should be chosen in the traditional manner, i.e. the family deciding on the best candidate after the incumbent's death. This ignores more than a century of practice in which succession has gone to the eldest son of the sultan by an Arab mother.

The Basic Law contains the only official provision for succession.⁸ It stipulates that succession is restricted to a male member of the *al-Said*, i.e. the descendants of Turki bin Said bin Sultan (ruled 1871–88), whose mother is an Omani Muslim. Upon the death of the sultan, the ruling family council has three days to select a successor. If it fails to do so, the Defence Council will be convened to appoint the late sultan's nominee. This is a highly unusual approach and probably unworkable. For one thing, why should the Defence Council necessarily nominate the late sultan's choice as successor? It could easily pick a candidate of its own choice. Sultan Qaboos apparently has anticipated this possibility and let it be known that he has placed several envelopes in key locations around the country. Succession is perhaps the most obvious question regarding Oman's future, but it is not the only serious one.

In contrast to many other Arab and Muslim states, Islamism seemingly has only brushed the surface of Oman. This is perhaps explainable by Oman's isolation until 1970 and emphasis on development since then, sparing the country from an intermediate phase of modernization and secularization. Thus, the traditional nature of society was fundamentally preserved even as education, occupations and income grew more diversified. There have been only two public incidents regarding Islamists.

The first, in 1993, involved the questioning or detention of as many as a thousand Omanis. About 135 of these were tried and convicted of subversion in a special state security court. The sultan, in his National Day speech of that year, unambiguously branded the movement as Islamist and declared that the country would not accept such behaviour or beliefs. Despite the Sultan's categorization, however, considerable doubt was expressed that the people detained were part of an organized Islamist group or movement. Some were clearly not Islamists and there was no evidence of clandestine organization. Some observers have noted the large proportion of Sunnis among those arrested and contended that this was a reaction to Ibadi oppression. There is, however, no significant friction between Ibadis and Sunnis in Oman and the number of Sunnis probably reflected the greater propensity of Dhufaris and people of the far east of Oman to speak their minds compared to other Omanis.

The second, in 2005, consisted of the government's accusation that a group of 31 Ibadi activists, including some with good connections in the government and religious

establishment, were seeking to restore the Ibadi Imamate. Their arrest and trial did not, in fact, throw much light on the situation. Although there has not been an Ibadi *imam* since Sultan Qaboos's father reoccupied the interior of Oman in the 1950s, there seems to be little concern about the vacant office and even less desire to do something about it.

Another potential weakness lies in tribal identification. Despite all the change and the superimposition of a truly national government, Oman remains a tribal nation. Primary identification remains with the tribe, and tribal rivalries, although restrained by government enforcement and juridical institutions, continue to display themselves in alliance-building, accusations and occasional conflict. Every Omani is classified by the state as a member of a tribe; this is even true of such communities as the Liwatiyah that are emphatically non-tribal although clearly identifiable.

Another weakness that seems to be dissipating with time is the division between Oman and Dhufar. As mentioned above, Dhufar's integration into the sultanate began only with the latter stages of the Dhufar War. For many years, Omanis and Dhufaris expressed reservations about each other and tended to remain in their own part of the country. During and immediately after the war, Omanis complained that the Dhufaris, constituting 10 per cent of the population, received nearly one-half of government expenditure. The office of the Wali (Governor) of Dhufar in Muscat was sometimes referred to disparagingly as the Dhufari embassy. The political significance of this distinction has gradually faded as Dhufaris took up civilian government positions and entered military service and sultanate-wide business enterprises. The old suspicions of many Dhufaris, culturally and historically close to the Mahrah and Kathiri regions of neighbouring Yemen, evolved into recognition that their prosperity lay in being part of the sultanate.

A major challenge that Oman faces is the issue of corruption. Admittedly, the sultanate is far less corrupt than many other developing countries.⁹ Nevertheless, business has become increasingly dominated by the political elite who think nothing of using their official positions to nurture and sustain their private commercial concerns. Even Oman's traditional merchant families complain of unfair competition. This creates an atmosphere of resentment amongst many ordinary Omanis, who decry the ever-increasing share of the economic pie that these elites consume while their own standards of living stagnate. The sultan has acted on rare occasion to publicly rebuke ministers who have gone too far and a few prominent figures have been tried and convicted of economic crimes, but many others have never been reprimanded.

For many years after 1970, government officials declared that the people of Oman were like children and it was the duty of the government to guide and watch over them. Thus the government made all decisions without consultation. Even the institution of the *majlis*, whereby ruling family members and high government officials of the other Gulf states hold open house to hear the complaints and petitions of citizens, does not apply in Oman. As a consequence, institutions of civil society are restricted.

Perhaps the most serious of these real or potential weaknesses of the system revolve around the modest economic future of the country. Oil production is declining, with reserves variously estimated at 20–40 years. The government is still highly dependent on oil income for the greatest share of its revenues and thus oil remains the engine of Oman's economy. An aggressive programme of liquefied natural gas (LNG) production helps soften the blow of declining crude oil production, but it will not replace it. Furthermore, it is as capital-intensive as the crude oil industry, thus having only a marginal effect on Oman's growing unemployment problem. Tourism is far more effective in providing jobs, but again its economic impact is similar to that of gas. Oman's population is increasing

at a rapid pace and it is already very difficult for young Omanis to find gainful employment: the government is unable to accept but a few of those who finish secondary school and the private sector is torn between accepting government dictums on hiring Omanis and sticking to the cheaper and more malleable practice of employing expatriates.

Prognosis

Oman and Yemen display a great number of historical, social and cultural affinities, but Oman's political circumstances are diametrically opposite those of its western neighbour. If Yemen can be considered a failing state, Oman can boast of being a modest success story. Nevertheless, Oman's success as a 'modernizing' state is to a significant degree transitory. Difficult problems lie ahead.

First and foremost is the nature of the state and of the regime. It should be emphasized again that Oman is an authoritarian state based on rule by a single individual. Compared to the other Gulf monarchies, the ruling family is weak and plays a minimal supporting role in politics. Formal political participation is limited and civil society institutions are subject to tight control. While there seems to be no active discontent, a growing number of Omanis object to the paternalistic nature of the regime and to the skewing of benefits to a small elite. Furthermore, the fragility of one-man rule was graphically illustrated in 1995 when the sultan, driving his own car, was involved in a serious accident (killing one of his passengers, the deputy prime minister for economic affairs): there was a brief period of panic in the country until it became known that the sultan was unhurt.

While the process of succession is of course unknowable until it occurs, it is likely that the matter will be resolved by the Ruling Family Council. This is not because the family is a vibrant decision-making body. Instead, it seems rather clear that the next sultan will come from one of three brothers, first cousins of Sultan Qaboos. There remains the possibility that Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmoud Al Said, the Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, could succeed but most observers consider this to be unlikely.¹⁰

The sultan's late uncle, Tariq bin Taimur, spent much of his adult life in voluntary exile from Oman, returning to serve as Sultan Qaboos's first and only prime minister for less than two years before he felt it necessary to resign. Tariq had six sons and a daughter from two Omani mothers. Nawwal, the daughter, married Qaboos in March 1976 and changed her name to Kamilah. The marriage was not a success and she moved out about a year later. Of the five living sons, three are considered suitable material to reign. Sayyid As'ad, the oldest, commanded the Sultan of Oman's Armour before being summoned to Muscat in 1993 to become Secretary-General of the Higher Committee for Conferences with the rank of minister. When Sayyid Thuwayni bin Shihab became physically unable to carry out his duties as the Sultan's Personal Representative in 2002, Sayyid Asad was named the Sultan's Representative, effectively replacing Sayyid Thuwayni, although the latter kept his title. His half-brother, Sayyid Shihab, commanded the Royal Navy of Oman for many years until he, too, was retired and given the position of Adviser to the Sultan without portfolio in 2004. Sayyid Haitham, a full-brother of Sayyid Shihab, served as Under-Secretary, then Secretary-General, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs until appointed Minister of National Heritage and Culture in 2002.

Which of these three will succeed is anybody's guess. As'ad has an advantage in being the oldest, but the successful candidate will probably be the one who has made a tactical alliance with one of his brothers. A possible effect of such an alliance may be that one brother succeeds and in turn names his brother heir apparent, as has been the case in Dubai in the past and Abu

Dhabi today. No matter who becomes the next sultan, radical changes in the style and function of government are very unlikely to occur. It would seem much more likely that the new sultan will follow closely the example of his predecessor and rule single-handedly. This is partly because all the mechanics of doing so are in place already, and partly because it is appealing to rule without sharing power. The government is sufficiently institutionalized at middle and lower levels that any change would be only disruptive. The personal channels to the sultan that operate at higher levels make it easier for a capable successor to govern from the beginning. The only changes are likely to be in very close advisers, but not enough to upset continuity.

It could be said that succession refers not only to the office of sultan. Oman is in the beginning stages of a generational change from Sultan Qaboos and his cohort who have created, shaped, maintained and benefited from the post-1970 regime. The next generation of prominent political and economic elite is younger, of course, better educated, more qualified in a professional sense, and comprises a wider social base. It remains to be seen whether it will foster a more truly meritocratic regime.

Oman will also be tested by the degree and soundness of institutionalization. Certainly, there has been tremendous progress in this area, particularly when considering the very low base in 1970. Most government institutions—whether in social services, security, or finances and economic planning—have been firmly established. Nevertheless, they have been shaped to serve the interests of the present regime and a justifiable question is whether they are robust enough to survive a change in leadership and elites.

The underlying factor in all these aspects of Oman's future is the economy. Will Oman continue to display economic progress or will it fall into stagnation? Oman has not had the luxury of income surpluses that Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have experienced. It has not reached the post-oil stage of Bahrain and, despite its modest oil production compared to Saudi Arabia, it shares that kingdom's problem of too many young and unemployed. Oman is resource-poor apart from hydrocarbons and this severely limits its development options. Oman's future is perhaps sombre, but certainly not dire.

Epilogue

The aftershocks of the Arab unrest of 2011 hit Oman after the above words were penned. Protests against the lack of jobs and corruption in the government broke out in the coastal city of Suhar and the Globe Roundabout was occupied in imitation of Tahrir Square in Cairo. Other protests took place in Muscat, the interior, and Dhufar. Overthrowing the government was not a demand; instead, reform and achieving fairness in the existing system were emphasized. The sultan's response was to announce that 50,000 jobs would be created and additional financial support would be provided for those in need. He also sacked a number of ministers, including the influential minister of royal court affairs and the key minister of finance. Furthermore, he announced that there would be changes to the Majlis al-Shura to give it more political power but these had not appeared through mid-2012. Many observers were taken by surprise by the extent and persistence of the protests but, as has been explained above, the only surprise was that they had taken so long in coming. The year 2011 produced no fundamental changes in the Omani political situation but it has made concerns and problems more visible.

Notes

- 1 On the political situation in Oman prior to 1970, see Robert G. Landen, *Oman Since 1856: Disruptive Modernization in a Traditional Arab Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press,

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- 2 On Oman's internal wars during the 20th century, see J.E. Peterson, *Oman's Insurgencies* (London: Saqi, 2007).
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 - 9 Transparency International ranked Oman at 41st from the top in its annual 'Corruption Perceptions Index' for 2010. Within the GCC, that put the sultanate behind Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, but ahead of Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2010/results.
 - 10 Sayyid Fahd has at least three strikes against him: 1 he is notably aloof and has not made many allies either within the family or outside it; 2 there is a history of mental illness within his branch of the family; and 3 his wife—and the mother of his children—is French and therefore his children could not succeed. The other two candidates from the 'senior' generation who had been mentioned in the past have both died: Sayyid Thuwayni bin Shihab, a cousin and the Sultan's Personal Representative; and Sayyid Fahr bin Taimur, an uncle and Deputy Prime Minister for Security and Defence. Neither was regarded as a particularly suitable choice.

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