

Governance and Democracy in Oman

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The Omani History

"The Sultanat of Oman is a country in Southwest Asia, on the southeast coast of the Arabian Peninsula. It borders on the United Arab Emirates in the Northwest, Saudi Arabia in the West and Yemen in the Southwest. The coast is formed by the Arabian Sea in the South and East, and the Gulf of Oman in the Northeast. The country also has an enclave enclosed by the United Arab Emirates." (wikipedia.org)

Early History

Until the revelation of Islam, Persian rulers shaped and determined the cultural and trading environments of Oman (Kechichian, 1995: 20). The first Arab settlers entered in the second century AD. Others followed those first migration from Western Arabia (Kechichian, 1995: 21). In 600 AD the interior population belonged mainly to the mountain Bedouins. On the coast the Arabs settled and became fishermen, sailors, and traders (Kechichian, 1995: 22). The approaching of Islam resulted in the eviction of the Persians from Oman and the transfer of power to the Arabs (Kechichian, 1995: 22).

The First Imamate

The First Imamate unified Oman as a nation by the Ibadhi¹ theology (Kechichian, 1995: 24). The period between the 9th and the 17th century brought a development in which the interior was literally cut off from the wealth of the coast (Kechichian, 1995: 27). From interior isolation unique introspection qualities were developed that further shaped the Omani national character (Kechichian, 1995: 27). It is important to mention that tribal alienation occurred during this period that confirmed interior isolation. Tribes of the United Arabian Emirates, Qatar, and Bahrain sought political independence from the British while refusing to adhere to the historical Omani community (Kechichian, 1995: 27). Oman disintegrated as the Portuguese fortified their presence along the coast (Kechichian, 1995: 28).

The Imperial Age

The period of political decay was capped by the Iranian occupation of Muscat and Sohar in 1743 (Kechichian, 1995: 29). The occupation resulted in the rising of the remarkable Leader Ahmad bin Sa'id. His objectives: independence of Oman, restoration of empire and supremacy in the Persian Gulf, to reassert the realm's unity (Kechichian, 1995: 29). Having expelled the Persians and brought an end to bitter civil war, his authority was based on widespread support. As a result he achieved a greater measure of unity than the country had ever known (Kechichian, 1995: 29). As Imam Ahmad he imposed unity on Oman using whatever methods he deemed appropriate to achieve his objectives. Having consolidated his dominance within the country, he carried on his successful struggle to restore Oman's dominance in the Persian Gulf. By the time of his death in 1783, Ahmad had reached all his objectives (Kechichian, 1995: 29).

Under his rule, Muscat prospered. Upon his death, the Imam's second son, Sultan bin Sa'id, was elected Imam. He moved the capital from Rustaq to Muscat, where he ruled using the title "Sayyid"². The name of the country was changed from "Oman" to "Muscat and Oman," thereby

¹ Dominant form of Islam in Oman. Founded less than 50 years after the death of Muhammed (wikipedia.org)

² The word means literally "master" ; the closest English equivalent would be "sir" or "lord". (wikipedia.org)

planting the seeds of another future division of the country, between traders and traditionalists (Kechichian, 1995: 30).

Because it lacked in strong leadership and military strength Oman fell prey to two invasions between 1803 and 1807, both originating in the Najd, what is today Saudi Arabia. Were it not for an internal feud, resulting in the assassination of the Saudi Leader, Oman might well have fallen under Saudi Arabian rule (Kechichian, 1995: 31).

Sultan bin Sa'id encouraged the spread of Arab influence along the East African coast, where Oman had colonies, and developed one of the most lucrative trading axes in Asia. French and especially British interferences would have eventually clipped Sa'id bin Sultan's wings but at the time, Oman was a significant economic power (Kechichian, 1995: 31). The architect of the Omani Empire died in 1856, his realm was divided into an Asian and an African domain, each under the rule of a rival son. Grievances and foreign interferences compounded the hostility that arose between the two brothers. Further ambitions of tribal leaders led to open warfare (Kechichian, 1995: 31).

The Second Imamate

Faysal bin Turki was the first Al Bu Sa'id ruler to mount his throne peacefully in 1888. The young man wanted to be the monarch of a united Oman truly independent of foreign influence, especially of excessive British authority (Kechichian, 1995: 31). In 1895, the tribes of the interior launched a major attack on Muscat. Because of his anti-British tone, the Sultan was denied military help. Tribal forces captured the city. But the Sultan bought off the rebels from his enemies and his upgraded forces recaptured Muscat (Kechichian, 1995: 31).

The British supported tribal efforts to revive the Imamate. The tribes united and a new Imam, Shaykh Salim bin Rashid Al-Kharusi, was elected (Kechichian, 1995: 32). Sultan Faysal died later in 1913 and his son Taymur bin Faysal received messages of loyalty from a number of tribal leaders in the interior (Kechichian, 1995: 32). But in January 1915 they attacked the capital another time. Thanks to British assistance, the new Sultan was able to repel the attack but unable to oblige his will on the tribal leaders (Kechichian, 1995: 32).

What developed served British interests quiet well. The Sultan ruled Muscat and the Imam controlled the interior. In July 1920, a disgruntled Al-Wahibah tribesman assassinated Imam Salim bin Kashid Al-Kharusi (Kechichian, 1995: 33). The then newly elected Imam Al-Khalili signed a peace agreement in September 1920 at Seeb. The country enjoyed relative peace and stability for the next three decades. The Sultan ruled the coast from Muscat, whereas the Imam ruled the interior from Nizwa. Two powerful rulers dominated the nation and worked and cooperated closely whenever needed (Kechichian, 1995: 33).

Short on resources and mired in internal challenges, Taymur bin Faysal abdicated in favor of his son in 1932 and moved to India (Kechichian, 1995: 34). The new sultan Sayyid Sa'id bin Taymur realized that the prime reason for the erosion of Oman's independence was its chronic insolvency and consequent dependence on financial support from outside powers, especially Britain (Kechichian, 1995: 35). He was eager to become economically independent, which led him to search for oil. In 1937 the first concession was granted. But a full development was prevented by lack of delineated borders between Oman, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia (Kechichian, 1995: 35). The Sultan had failed to consult the Imam before granting the concessions, knowing well that the exploration would be carried out in areas of the Imam's influence. Muscat had calculated that the Imam's death would come sooner than the oil. The new Imam in charge Ali bin Hilal Al Hinai cancelled the oil concessions granted by the sultan and with Saudi support declared his independence. He launched a mayor political opposition to Sayyid Sa'id bin Taymur by establishing the Oman Liberation Army (Kechichian, 1995: 35).

The Broken Rule of Sayyid Sa'id bin Taymur

Sayyid Sa'id lost sight of his earlier objective, to make Oman's independence. Circumstances required that he welcomed the British Royal Air Force (RAF) and the Special Air Service (SAS) to help him keep the country united (Kechichian, 1995: 35). London snatched several concessions from the dependent Sultan, including a lease agreement of Masirah Island to establish an airbase near the strategic Arabian Peninsula. After having defeated the rebels, Sayyid Sa'id moved to Salalah, from where he ruled in most disinterested fashion. The isolated ruler grew tired of his responsibilities and left his country's governance to British officers serving him on secondment. The throne was occupied even if its authority was unrecognizable (Kechichian, 1995: 36).

The Modern Omani State

Domestic Policy

The Overthrow

Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id dispossessed his father Taymur in July 1970. His determination was to open the country to the world and to rejuvenate Omani society through the policy of openness and modernisation. These were difficult tasks, though, for what was then a rather fragmented country without any governmental structures in place (Informationsministerium, 1992: 172).

After being in power Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id immediately remained as an absolute monarch and was surrounded at that time by British and US advisors (Owtram, 2004: 141). This was due to the fact that these allies helped the Sultan in the coup against his father. Later in the 1970s, however, and against British objection, Qaboos brought in several Arab advisors with the result that British influence over Oman diminished gradually (Kechichian, 1995: 50). In the meantime, Sultan Qaboos created several ministries, while he himself kept bearing key posts, such as internal security, defence, finance and oil affairs (Kechichian, 1995: 50). By the mid-70s, however, there was less political progress made than expected and Oman did not have a written constitution or a parliament and political parties were not even allowed (Kechichian, 1995: 50).

The State Consultative Council

It took Oman until 1981 to establish its first State Consultative Council (SCC). This council had originally 43 members and for the first time in Omani history members were guaranteed freedom of speech during their meetings, but it was not allowed, however, to discuss any issue outside the Council (Manea, 2001: 101). At the SCC first session, Qaboos defined the Council as a continuation of the policy to achieve a greater range for citizens to participate in the efforts of the government (Kechichian, 1995: 52).

The Oman Council

In 1991, the new Consultative Council (Majlis al-Shura), replaced the former State Consultative Council (Manea, 2001: 102). The Consultative Council is nowadays one of the two chambers within Omani's bicameral system, the Oman Council (Majlis Oman). The Consultative Council today counts 82 elected members from all the provinces (wilayats) of Oman and according to Owtram, the council now provides an element of increased political participation (Owtram, 2004: 180). Members are elected every three years (<http://www.omanet.om>). Although the council seems to be more democratic than other forms of governance in Omani history, one has to bear in mind, that the council has no legislature power and does only assist the sultan in questions about economic, social and developmental issues (Rippenburg, 1998: 104). The sultan, in contrast, still remains the absolute monarch in Oman, and he holds the most

important posts, such as Head of State, Prime Minister, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Defence and Finance (Manea, 2001: 101).

The other institution within the Council of Oman is the State Council (Majlis al Dawla), which acts as an upper chamber and was established in 1997 (www.omanet.om). The State Council has currently 53 members, including five women. Its function is to prepare studies on Omani development and solving problems; it further promotes cohesion and unity, but as the Consultative Council it has not any legislature power. In contrast to the Consultative Council, members of the State Council are chosen for their knowledge and seniority and appointed by Royal Decree (www.omanet.om).

Administrative Divisions

As already mentioned above Oman is divided in several provinces and today there are 59 of these so-called wilayats (www.omanet.om). These provinces are actually sub-divisions of nine governorates and regions within Omani territory.

Foreign Policy

Diplomacy

Before 1970, there were hardly any diplomatic relations with other nations. This had its origin in the fact that Sultan Sa'id bin Taymur had chosen to conduct all foreign relations through London (Kechichian, 1995: 47). Soon after Sultan Qaboos came into power in 1970, he then started immediately diplomatic relations with Arab nations with the result that Oman became a member of the Arab League of Nations in 1971. Soon after in the same year Oman became also a member of the United Nations (Kechichian, 1995: 48). Ten years after, in 1981, Oman was one of the six countries, which established the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Objectives of the GCC are formulating regulations in fields such as economy, finance, trade and legislation, setting up joint ventures and strengthening ties between their peoples and to live in peace (www.wikipedia.org).

Regional Security

One important issue in seeking peace and security for Oman was boarder demarcation with its neighbours. Thus agreements of borderlines were signed in the 1990s with Saudi Arabia, Yemen, the UAE and in 2001 the maritime border with Pakistan. Another important Omani foreign policy objective was and still is to maintain and strengthen its control over the strategic Straits of Hormuz (Kechichian, 1995: 113). For Oman the Straits of Hormuz symbolise unique strategic and political opportunities, because they are tremendously important for the industrialised world, due to the fact that currently $\frac{1}{4}$ of the world crude oil production is shipped through the 24 miles wide waterway (Owtram, 2004: 147).

The importance of the strategic geographical position of Oman for the West is also reflected in the military support for Oman. Mainly in 1980s and 1990s Oman purchased military hardware, such as strike aircrafts and missiles from Britain and the US (Kechichian, 1995: 133). In addition to this, Britain and the US also performed several military trainings together with the Omani Armed Forces in the Omani desert. This was of particular interest for the allies in 1991 during the operation Desert Storm (Kechichian, 1995: 133).

Conclusions

After we have examined the earlier and the contemporary Omani history, the latest Omani development after 1970 seems almost like a fairytale. Since Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id is in power many things have changed in a positive way: The state has reinvigorated its diplomatic relations

with foreign countries and is nowadays an important player in the Arab world. As far as domestic policy is concerned, Oman has developed tremendously, too, despite the fact that there does not exist a powerful legislation and Oman is still a constitutional monarchy with its Sultan as the only executive.

Concerns could be made, however, over some Human Rights issues. According to Amnesty International (AI), the death penalty is still in use in Oman. Furthermore, AI mentions that Omani laws and common practices continued to discriminate women. These discriminations include the personal status of women, their possibilities of employment and their overall participation in public life (<http://web.amnesty.org>).

Another concern could be made over the future of the Omani nation, because there is no succession of the Sultan, due to the fact that he has no children, so far, and the Sultan has to come from the ruling dynasty (Allen, 1987: 121). Thus, further positive development might be at stake at some point in the future for the Omani state.

References

References listed below cover a wide range of subjects dealing with Omani history and its modern state. Even if not quoted in the text above, all were consulted. The idea behind was to offer other fellow students a more complete bibliography to facilitate their own research.

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