

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HISTORY FOR CONTEMPORARY OMAN

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Much has happened in Oman since 1970 and it is today a vastly changed place. The accomplishments and progress are both tremendous and obvious. Given this, why should we be concerned with the past?

We should be concerned, first of all, because the extent and depth of the transformation has been directly dependent on what constraints and opportunities the past presented: in other words, we are where we are now because of where we were.

Second, we should be concerned because the direction of development in the last half-century is determined both consciously and unconsciously by the nature or structure of Oman's society, economy, and politics over more than a millennium: that is, what we were, guides as to where we are going.

Finally, we should be concerned because an appreciation of where future change may lead depends upon an understanding of what has transpired in the past and has established the pattern for change that

continues into the present and into the future: we are going where our past tells us it is right to go.

Nearly 50 years may seem like a long time but it is but a brief moment in Oman's long history. Despite all the glitz of change, development and modernism, there are more fundamental factors that determine the course of Oman's modern history, as well shed insight on its future. The following paragraphs explore some of the factors of the past that help explain contemporary Oman.

POLITICAL SYSTEM

Clearly, Oman is a monarchy with an authoritarian government. This is simply to say that the monarch, Sultan Qaboos, is the principal and final decision-maker. The system is not something imposed from outside or based on a seizure of power. Instead, the ruling family emerged out of the tribal framework. The ruler acts as father of his country, in similar manner to the shaykh who serves as father of his tribe, just as the head of the family is the father. This provides social legitimacy for the regime. But the present system is also a legacy in a broader sense of the Ibadi imamate and this provides a moral (religious) legitimacy as well.

But the monarch of today is far different from the ruler of yesterday. Previous rulers were financially dependent on merchants (and often were themselves merchants) as well as on British Indian subsidies. Relevant here is the complaint of Sultan Sa'id b. Taymur (r. 1932-1970) that he did not have enough money to administer the state. As a consequence, he sold the Gwadar enclave on Pakistan's Mekran coast in 1958 and held the proceeds in reserve against the rising expenses produced by his unification of the country



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in the 1950s. His poverty generated his excuse for not developing the country until he had enough oil money in his treasury to pay entirely for specific projects. As a result of oil income, suddenly the ruler controlled the purse-strings. This provided more independence for the ruler and greater control over the country. It also permitted the creation and maintenance, in a limited way, of patronage networks.

As a consequence, this development gave rise to a new kind of political legitimacy where the state is expected to provide for its people. Inevitably this type of legitimacy gradually comes to depend upon accountability and some degree of popular participation. This point draws us back to older, more traditional, forms of political organisation, particularly the ideal of egalitarianism within the tribe and the principle of the election of imams.

Equally important, the era of oil income has produced concentration of political power in a central government and with it the deepening development of a state apparatus. The state exercises greater control over the economy and of benefits from that economy. It becomes the predominant employer, both in the civil service and the security forces. The state assumes enhanced influence over people's behaviour and activities and takes on a role of guidance of society. There is an increased role and visibility for the ruling family, leading to privileges for members of the family and family members being placed in charge of vital state organs. In the end, the ruler emerges with an unchallenged adoption of a singular vision.

ECONOMY

Before 1970, Oman was characterised by extreme poverty. The mostly subsistence economy depended on such traditional activities as farming (especially date cultivation), herding, fishing and small-scale trade. There was no pearling as in other Gulf states. Extensive labour migration to East Africa and later to the Gulf (when oil income was generated in other Gulf states) was a long-standing and necessary measure.

The emergence of the oil era spelled the destruction of the old economy. For one thing, it marked the rise of concept of



salaried occupations, first by a few years in the army and then in the oil industry. This was followed by the introduction of a structured civilian government and later by employment in private companies.

The result was the creation of a 'new' oil-fuelled economy in which the state necessarily had to take the initiative in distributing oil income. A first priority was to create social benefits such as housing, education, and health care. A government bureaucracy was instituted and it deepened over the years. Government purchases injected money into the economy and the proceeds were distributed widely through a multiplier effect. As the government grew more sophisticated, the state found itself directing development planning to achieve discrete goals. Even the more recent objective of privatisation demonstrates the heavy hand of government.

LONG-TERM ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

Oman still exhibits a transitional economy, albeit one that is not now – if ever – strictly speaking a rentier economy. The dependency on hydrocarbons continues unabated. There are three principal economic themes in Oman's long history: subsistence agriculture, subsistence fishing, and the accumulation of wealth from overseas activities. Oman's paucity of resources before oil meant that wealth could not really be generated within the country and that there were severe restraints on population size. In times past, overseas activities included conquest, long-distance trade throughout the western Indian Ocean, and a relationship with East Africa that depended on widespread trade, the migration of Omanis to the Swahili coast and inland where some generations

of Omanis settled and other Omanis simply spent a few years or decades there before returning home. Another source of wealth in the twentieth century was of labour migration to the Gulf in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

What has happened since 1970? Now agriculture and fishing support only a tiny minority of the population. The last five decades have seen an immense population growth from less than ½ million in 1970 to some 3 million now, of which approximately 1.8 million are Omani citizens. The land and the sea cannot support that size of population without income from outside. In contemporary Oman, the injection of wealth in the economy is from another type of overseas activity: the export of oil and gas. Furthermore, Oman's economy, like its politics, has become heavily dominated by the state, which in turn is heavily dependent on hydrocarbon income. It is by-and-large a dirigiste economy where the creation and distribution of wealth is more heavily than ever the domain of the state.

SOCIAL CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

When we look at Oman and its people today, we see considerable mobility, a government based on providing services equally to all its people, and freedom of employment, residence, education and so forth. But this does not mean that Oman is copying Western society. Rather, it has its own distinctive social structure.

Oman is fundamentally a tribal society – not unlike elsewhere in the Gulf. It is one of

the great myths held about the region that Arabia was only bedouin. While bedouin ethos and tribal identity informs much of Gulf society, Oman is different. The great majority of Omanis have a *hadar* (settled) heritage; there are only a few *badu* (bedouin) tribes.

Prior to 1970 or even the 1960s, much of Oman was only tangentially tied to rulers. Until the late 1950s, the sultans exercised limited authority over Muscat and the Batinah Coast. Meanwhile, the imams exercised most moral authority over the interior but had limited practical control. The most significant unit of identity and political affiliation for most Omanis was the tribe. Outside of the capital, sultans tended to rely on the support of key tribal shaykhs while the imams were even more dependent on shaykhs.

This illustrates the primacy of tribes before 1970. Tribes protected their own territory and interests from neighboring tribes. They formed alliances with other tribes in their area and the two great tribal moitiés emerged: Hinawi and Ghafiri. Beginning in the 1960s, the tribes gradually became fully subordinate to the central government. Their political role was greatly reduced and tribal shaykhs were incorporated into the government system. But the tribes did not disappear from the scene. They remain a key component of identity, particularly self-identification. Omanis are classified by the government according to which tribe they belong, a criterion that also includes creating tribal recognition to non-tribal groups. Finally, tribes and tribal membership form a key

component in social cohesion, personal bonds, marriage patterns, and an attachment to home settlements.

GLOBALISED PROCESS OF URBANISATION OF OMAN

Like most developing countries, Oman has experienced rapid urbanisation. Oman was notable for its settlements where the civilisation was predominantly *hadar* and only *badu* on the fringes. Many of Oman's main towns sprang up to service an agricultural hinterland, such as Nizwa, Bahla, Izki, 'Ibri, Ibra and al-Rustaq. At the same time, there were a number of port towns, based on local trade, fishing, long-distance trade and shipbuilding. These various settlements have been transformed and repurposed into the new cities, particularly Muscat, Salalah, Suhar and Nizwa.

But what kind of cities? The characteristics of urbanisation in Oman and the Gulf is far different from elsewhere in the Middle East. These are more 'world' cities, rather than being similar to Cairo or Damascus. Traditional markets are missing, as are crowded lanes and intimately jumbled housing. A look back at Oman's only two pre-oil 'cities' shows that both Muscat and Matrah were divided into quarters, identified by ethnic group or occupation. Today, rather than neighbourhood restaurants and coffee shops, Omani cities are characterised by chain restaurants and Starbucks or Costa. Residential patterns are not arranged into traditional quarters based on tribal, confessional, ethnic, or occupational grounds.



The port at Salalah.

Instead, these cities display a propensity for high-rise buildings and single-family housing in villas. The cities are built around the automobile, much like cities in the United States and Australia. Residential patterns feature no distinct 'quarters'. Omanis mix together in the city regardless of tribe or region of origin, and residential areas feature a mixture of nationals and expatriates.

THE EXPATRIATE CONUNDRUM

Like most of the other Gulf States, Oman has huge numbers of expatriates and the proportion of expatriate to national population continues to grow. In essence, this is a logical consequence of a small population and the influx of oil income. In 1970 and the following years, indigenous education and expertise were lacking, thus forcing a dependence on expatriates to organise and staff the government. This was not unusual throughout the colonial or developing world. Meanwhile, in the private sector, business concerns expanded, also requiring more and more workers. Personal incomes grew, permitting the hiring of domestic help. Before long, Oman was importing expatriates to do the sorts of jobs that Omanis had done in the Gulf.

But what is the cost of the dependence on expatriates? In short, it is both financial and cultural. At some point, Omanis will need to take back many of the jobs that have gone to expatriates – a trend that is already happening, for example, in the hospitality industry.

But is the status of expatriates in Oman an open-and-shut case of 'we' and 'they'? The numbers of expatriates may be a new development but their cultural presence is not. Much depends on how we define expatriate or foreigner. It will be easily recalled that Muscat and other coastal settlements, as well as the interior, bear evidence of interaction and influence from the Indian subcontinent and East Africa existing for a very long time.

Indeed, it may be fair to say that the Omanis exhibit a mix of populations in terms of culture, ethnicity, sect and language – with even more differences appearing only recently (for example, educated vs. uneducated). We tend to think

of the Gulf divided into an Arab side and an Iranian side (as exemplified in the acrimony over the name of the body of water separating them). But in fact, the communities on both sides of the Gulf form a *mélange*. There have long been communities of Arabs on the Persian littoral and Persians on the Arab littoral. Some are Sunni, some are Shi'ah – sectarian affiliation is not defined by the Arab-Persian ethnic distinction.

As a country with a long coast and history of trade with much of the Indian Ocean, this *mélange* should not be surprising. The British political agent in Muscat at the beginning of the twentieth century remarked that 14 languages could be heard regularly in the Muscat suq. Most of them – and quite a few others – can be heard around the capital today. The numbers of Persians in Oman is relatively small but the Baluch number perhaps several hundred thousand. Communities of Indian origin, whether Hindu or Liwatiyah, have been merchants in Oman for centuries. Omanis of African extraction are found everywhere.

In the past, they all constituted harmonious communities with only small differences. This harmony continues to exist today. But at the same time, new distinctions in society are emerging along lines of educational attainment, occupation, wealth and so on. Some of these distinctions are overlaid onto older distinctions, such as *hadar-badu* and pure blood or not. And even in Oman, where Ibadis, Sunnis, and Shi'ah have co-existed harmoniously for centuries, slightly more consciousness of sectarian differences has emerged. Still, this has not fundamentally altered Oman's noted balance and tolerance, a quality that extends into its conduct of international relations.

ISLAND OF STABILITY IN A SEA OF INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT AND DOMESTIC ERUPTIONS

The long isolation of Oman meant that before 1970 relationships with neighbours were minimal at best. There was a long history of enmity with what became Saudi Arabia while the rulers of the smaller Gulf states were looked upon as subordinates

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on the level of Omani shaykhs. Since then, relations with Gulf neighbours have been strengthened through the Gulf Cooperation Council – yet Oman is still an outlier in this grouping and intra-GCC tensions have never disappeared.

With regard to Iran, there are long memories of occupation and lost Omani outposts. Traditionally, Iranian states were adversaries. This pattern was not broken until the establishment of an alliance between the shah and Sultan Qaboos at the Persepolis celebrations in 1971 – the immediate impact was Iranian assistance for prosecuting the Dhufar War. Somewhat surprisingly, the two countries have maintained unbroken relations after the Iranian revolution, a tie that has produced benefits for the region and beyond.

There has been little contact with Yemen in the modern era apart from Dhufari-Yemeni historical ties. The emergence of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen brought cross-border conflict as the South Yemeni state provided vital support for the insurrection in Dhufar. The denouement of the war and painstaking negotiations leading to an agreement on the Omani-South Yemeni border inculcated a wary interaction with Aden. But there still has been no strong connection with the north of Yemen, the old Yemen Arab Republic, or its leaders. This has resulted in sympathy for the south in Yemen's 1994 civil war and probably a major factor in Oman's decision to stay outside the Saudi-led Arab coalition in the civil war that broke out in 2015.

There is plenty of reason to ponder how the past has shaped – and continues to shape – Oman's present and future. The year 1970 marked a bold break with Oman's political and economic past but it did not erase a thousand or more years of historical continuity or end the impact of past experience on present policy, society and actions. ■



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Oman Through My Eyes
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