

J E Peterson describes the background to the recent uprisings in Oman



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The year of Oman's discontents

One hears little of Oman in the international media. Mention is most likely to be found in the travel pages as it has grown as an attraction for tourism. The country is commonly described as calm, peaceful and hospitable; a Danish journalist once likened it to an 'Islamic California.' But perceptions shifted slightly in 2011 as Omanis followed the example elsewhere in the Arab world and inaugurated their own activism. That this should have happened in quiet Oman should not have been a surprise.

Oman began its efforts towards political and socioeconomic development only in 1970, when the present Sultan, Qabus bin Said, overthrew his isolationist father. Not surprisingly, the early stages were tentative and rather rocky. Development required expertise, infrastructure, and planning, which was difficult to come by in the early years. Progress in development was also impacted by the emergence of an entirely new and narrowly based political structure.

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The new Sultan unquestionably presided at the apex of authority without challenge, and with little need of approval from his family (unlike elsewhere in the Gulf) or from politically powerful religious figures, tribal leaders, or military commanders. At the same time, Sultan Qabus was inexperienced, having spent the six years after his Western education in near-seclusion in Salalah in the south of the country. As a consequence, consultation and advice were confined to a small circle of advisers, most of them non-Omanis.

While these advisers may have benefitted the country with their expertise and contacts, all too often their principal interest was in building their own fortunes. As more Omanis took up high positions and acquired influence with the sultan, the pattern of combining public service with personal aggrandisement became institutionalised. The Sultan rarely acted against individuals unless they were seen as particularly egregious.

It is striking that this system with all its faults has still produced an enviable record and evidence of socioeconomic development. But Oman still faces enormous problems. Oil production has generally been dropping in recent years. While exports of liquefied natural gas have bolstered the government's income stream, they will never be as profitable as oil. Furthermore, an increasing amount of gas is required for domestic use.

Meanwhile, Oman's population has exploded since 1970. Thousands of secondary-school graduates enter a stagnant jobs market every year. The sultanate is one of the relative 'have-nots' of the Gulf Cooperation Council and there is a wide disparity in wealth between the prosperous middle-class enclaves of Muscat – not to mention the palatial estates of the elite – and the average Omani.

Perhaps as many as 80 per cent of all Omanis were not yet born in 1970. They have no idea of what life was like before that seminal year, and therefore do not feel the same loyalty and gratitude to Sultan Qabus that their elders did. Instead, many have discreetly criticised the waste and favoritism for years. The state brooks no dissent,

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civil society is weak, and the only forums for discussion have been the sometimes tolerated blogs.

With all this in mind, it is therefore not surprising that young, disaffected Omanis should follow the example of their fellow Arabs and gather in protest in early 2011. The first protest march took place in Muscat in mid-January with demands for better wages and controls on rising prices. But as the protests continued, there were also political demands for expansion of the powers of the elected consultative body, the Majlis al-Shura, and the replacement of long-serving ministers.

The protests soon spread elsewhere in Oman, especially to Salalah in the south and in the Batinah to the west of Muscat – as well as in Ibri in the northwest and Sur in the far east. Suhar, the major town in the Batinah, was particularly significant since it is the nexus of government plans for a major industrial base for the country. Private companies, including the national oil company and the national telecommunications company, were also hit by strikes.

The government's initial response was to raise the salaries of civil servants and security forces, increase pensions, and announce the creation of 50,000 jobs. But this did not stem the protests. Eventually, the Sultan replaced a number of his ministers – including the minister of finance, the minister of the Royal Office, and the head of the police – with a number of Majlis al-Shura members. He also promised more powers to the elected Majlis al-Shura and its appointed companion house.

At the same time, however, the government reacted forcefully against repeat demonstrations. One or more persons were killed by rubber bullets in Suhar in late February, and a number of others were injured. The Globe Roundabout at the main entrance to Suhar was only re-opened after a month of occupation by protesters, but a subsequent demonstration saw another protester killed by a rubber bullet.

Instead of subsiding, strikes spread to other commercial entities, as well as the Rusayl industrial complex, and protesters demanded trials for the dismissed ministers and other government officials on charges of corruption. More than two hundred protesters who had been arrested earlier were pardoned in mid-April while another 27 were put on trial. More arrests followed in May, although most of the protesters were released afterwards.

In contrast, a wave of convictions followed in June: 21 men were sentenced to jail in Ibri on charges of arson while a further 15 were sentenced to jail a week later. Another 55 were convicted in Jalan Bani Bu Ali in eastern Oman and 13 more in Suhar later in the month. An additional dozen were sentenced in Suhar in July, prompting a new round of mass protests against the arrests and convictions.

What is most striking about the agitation in Oman is not so much that it happened but that it has been so prolonged. There is no doubt that the Sultanate of Oman has made great strides in its development since 1970. But political institutionalisation and economic constraints have not kept pace with the progress in development.

Essentially, the political system remains little changed since those early days of the 1970s. It remains heavily dependent on a

single personality, Sultan Qabus. While he has justifiably earned respect for setting the nation on the road to relative prosperity (and in carving out a remarkably viable foreign policy), he has tolerated many abuses of the public trust by his officials and maintained a certain distance from his people. July 2011 marked the 41st anniversary of his taking power and, given his age (71) and lack of a son and heir, there are continuing concerns over the succession.

The events of this year unequivocally demonstrate that increasing numbers of Omanis seek a voice in the decision-making process, but the paternalistic nature of the political system continues unabated. Without significant change, this year's relatively mild pressures may well be transformed into active dissidence and more insistent demands in following years.

J E Peterson is a historian and political analyst. His recent books include Oman's Insurgencies: the Sultanate's Struggle for Supremacy (2007), and Historical Muscat: an Illustrated Guide and Gazetteer (2006)

(Opposite) Masked Omani protesters jump in front of burning vehicles during a demonstration in Sohar, more than 200 kms (125 miles) northwest of Muscat, on February 27, 2011

(Right) View of Muscat from Riyam Pass



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