



THE QABOOS-STATE UNDER THE TEST OF THE 'OMANI SPRING': ARE THE REGIME'S ANSWERS UP TO EXPECTATIONS?

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In February 2011, the death of several Omani protesters¹ shot by security forces in the Northern town of Sohar caught many observers by surprise. Was that conceivable that the wind of protests blowing on the region could affect the supposed 'sleepy Sultanate,'² commonly presented as an island of peaceful development under the "visionary leadership" of the "father of the nation,"³ Qaboos bin Sa'id, on the throne since July 1970?

Between February and mid-May 2011, strikes and demonstrations for better salaries and more participation in corporate decisions mushroomed all over the country. In the same time, the depth of the social malaise in the country was illustrated by a series of two month-long peaceful sit-ins (at Sohar's Globe Roundabout, on Muscat-Dubai motorway; in front of the Governor's office in Salalah; in front of the Consultative Council in Muscat) and by sustained mobilisations after Friday prayers calling for political reforms. The extreme variety of the demands, the lack of coordination between these social and political movements and the

¹ The total death toll is still disputed: at least three protesters were killed in Sohar between the end of February and the beginning of April.

² S. Kerr, 'Protests Awaken Sleepy Sultanate of Oman,' *The Financial Times* (London), February 28, 2011.

³ A. al-Riyami, '90m-Long Message of Gratitude for 41st Renaissance Day,' *Oman Observer* (Muscat), July 21, 2011.

clumsiness of some of the means of actions should not overshadow the shared aspiration for substantial changes. Activists announced in July 2011 their intention to suspend their action during Ramadan but to resume protests when the fasting month is over. In the perspective of this coming busy Autumn, during which the Consultative Council elections will take place, it seems fruitful to focus on the key dimensions of the 2011 'Omani Spring' and on the new light these events have shed on the Omani socio-political dynamics.

THE ROOTS OF THE PROTESTS

Despite the obvious impact of regional dynamics on the events that have been shaking the Sultanate since January 2011, one has to keep in mind the series of challenges calling into question the socio-political order established in Oman in the 1970s. The Omani population is one of the youngest in the world, with 48 per cent being under 20. The limited results of the *Omanisation* policies, favouring nationals for private sector jobs, and the slowness of the process of diversifying sources of revenue are illustrated by dramatic social inequalities and endemic unemployment and poverty.⁴ Moreover, the personal involvement of most cabinet members in business has fuelled the widespread perception of a corrupted elite, busy in safeguarding their privileges and in silencing questions about the conflict of interest between the nation's general interests they have been supposed to promote and the particular interests they defend as businessmen. Hence the recurring demands expressed in Sohar, Ja'alan Bani Bu 'Ali, 'Ibri or Salalah for higher wages, job opportunities and pro-active measures to curb rising prices and inequalities,⁵ but also calling the Sultan to personally intervene to fight corruption among top officials and to prosecute them.⁶

⁴ In March 2011, the proportion of Omanis employed in the private sector and earning less than the official monthly minimum wage (200 Omani Rials [OR]; 1OR = 1.80€) was 70 per cent (Ministry of National Economy, www.moneoman.gov.om/book/mb/mar2011/T15.pdf, checked on August 17, 2011).

⁵ 'We want to see the benefit of our oil wealth distributed evenly to the population,' chanted protesters in Sohar in March.

⁶ 'We will not be silenced; we beg the Sultan to look into our two-month-old demand to sack people who have been embezzling government funds for years' (Salalah, May 2011).

Political grievances have developed in a fertile ground too, with a short but significant history of political action. In 2005, waves of arrests involved senior military and civil officials, and led to sentences of more than seventy people on the accusation of being members of a secret organisation attempting to overthrow the regime. These events were a first overt sign that growing sectors of the society were reluctant to guarantee the perpetuation of a system excluding them from political and economic decisions. In Summer 2010, intellectuals and human rights activists took the opportunity of the 40th anniversary of Qaboos's accession to the throne to submit an online petition to the ruler, calling for widescale reforms – such as the promulgation of a 'new constitution' leading to a parliamentary monarchy, or measures against corruption among top political incumbents. These various expressions of political awareness foreshadowed the 2011 protests. In Muscat, the sit-in led by intellectuals and human rights activists in front of the Consultative Council, as a symbolic refusal to endorse an elected body without real power, called for the promulgation of a constitution replacing the current Basic Law, and a parliamentary monarchy. It also echoed the mass abstention observed during the 2007 Consultation Council elections⁷ expressing the popular disillusionment towards current institutions.

Through a well-proven technique, the government has described the protesters as being under foreign influence, in order to discredit them and their demands. Rumors flourished in February, about a supposed Emirati involvement in the organisation of Sohar and Shinas protests, on the aftermath of the announcement of the disclosure of an Emirati-backed spy network targeting the Omani leadership.⁸ Similarly, the protesters in Ja'alan and Dhofar were said to be supported by Saudis, because of local population's Sunni affiliation. Behind these labellings, the growing visibility of a series of local socio-political forces that develop an Omani agenda of reforms can not be denied – the Ibadi and Sunni Islamists, who have managed to temporarily silence their disagreements and made a united stand in Muscat and Sohar, along with a significant number of young secular intellectuals. Today these currents of

⁷ Only 28 per cent of Omanis eligible to vote actually participated in the elections.

⁸ 'Official Security Source – Spy Network Unveils,' *Oman News Agency* (Muscat), January 30, 2011.

thought agree on the need for more freedom of expression and institutional reforms, but their ideological divergences are so deep that there is no evidence that they will manage to do so later. What is clear though is that the development of these dissonant voices and trends can rely on young but already deep roots. Their influence in the national debates will not cease rising in months and years to come.

THE FEAR FACTOR

In the vast majority of the cases, the Sultan has not been the target of the protesters. The allegiance to the ruler was frequently repeated. For years, it has been common to hear Omanis complaining that government had given too much latitude to ministers, allowing them to pursue their personal interests and leaving the ruler unaware of the current situation. Moreover self-censorship is still very strong, not only in the population but also in the media. Nevertheless, embryos of civil society, composed of young Omanis with high educational and intellectual capital legitimizing their involvement in the decision-making process, have been developing since 2007. New Internet forums have opened, where most of the participants have chosen to appear in the discussions with their real name, even when tackling sensitive issues, with the declared aim of promoting new social and political debates in the Omani society. Despite systematic harrassment and arrests of online activists -such as freelance journalist 'Ali al-Zuwaidi, caught for giving evidence of corruption by Cabinet members in 2009- the online account of fraudulent practices by key figures of the regime (the ruler excepted, of course) has become common. In 2011, for the first time, expression of alternative ideas and informed criticism on ongoing policies, through slogans openly asking for structural reform ('Yes to a new Oman,' 'We need freedom' or 'You may restrict our hands but you can not restrict our dreams in a better life'), intruded in the streets. The 'fear barrier' in Oman, which had already started cracking in recent years, has suffered a serious additional blow since January 2011. The now famous 'The people wants the fall of the regime' (*al-sha'ab yurid isqat al-nizam*) was re-appropriated in Oman and diverted into 'The

people wants the reform (*islah*) of the regime' or 'The people wants the fall of the corruption,' (*isqat al-fasad*) while in Salalah, protesters went as far as questioning the ruler's responsibility in economic mismanagement ('If you didn't know [the malpractices], it is a disaster ; but if you did know, it is an even bigger disaster') or threatening him in veiled terms, by referring to the Dhofar war ('The one who forgets the 1970s should think of the grand-children of the free men').

RELUCTANCE TO ENGAGE INTO SUBSTANTIAL REFORM

The combination of relentless crackdowns and arbitrary gestures of goodwill to quell protests and buy off social peace proved to be unsuccessful in 2011, despite the clear political will to show benevolence signs. The increase of the minimum salary by 43 per cent in Mid-February 2011, but also the Sultan's orders, the day after the first deaths in Sohar, to establish a monthly allowance for individuals registered as job seekers and to create 50,000 new public sector jobs, preceded an extensive reshuffle of the Cabinet in early March. This led to the integration of seven members of the Consultative Council and the removal of long-serving ministers widely perceived as embodying corruption and obstacles to reform – such as 'Ali al-Ma'amari, the Minister for the Royal Office; Ahmed Makki, the Minister for National Economy; and Maqbool al-Sultan, the Minister for Commerce and Industry. These decisions were intended to publicly reaffirm the Sultan's centrality when it comes to embodying both national unity and struggle against corruption, but also to emphasize his attentiveness to people's aspirations. However they have done little to dull the protesters' resoluteness – in the same way as the gestures towards Islamists, like the Sultan's approval to establish Islamic banks in May, in order to wheedle them and divide the protests. Similarly, the Ministry of Interior tried to involve tribal sheikhs to appease the troubles on several occasions. This mediation was blatantly turned down by the protesters, as a clear illustration of the actual level of prestige enjoyed by the tribal leaders among the young generations.

After Qaboos's royal decree announcing his intention to grant the Council of Oman greater legislative and regulatory powers, which coincided with Saudi forces' entry in Bahrain on March 14, it became clear that the ruler did not intend to go beyond what he fundamentally considers the red line, i.e. the centre of political power (combining the executive and the legislative power) remaining his prerogative closed off contestation. The months of April and May showed that repression remains an active strategy to choke off dissenting voices: several hundreds of protesters were arrested; repeated intimidations and arrests of journalists and human rights activists occurred; Internet discussion forums were closed and a creeping militarisation of the territory was decided, as shown by the transformation of Sohar into a fortified city and the drastic increase of police controls on roads to the UAE. The repeated labelling of the protesters as 'delinquents' and 'vandals' by senior officials and the sentence to jail of more than one hundred individuals across the country (on charges of 'possessing material with the intention of making explosives to spread terror' or 'sabotaging and destroying public and private properties') are evidences of two of numerous dignitaries' incapacities: to consider another answer than a securitarian one; and to accept the legitimacy of the expression of alternative opinions (without accusing them of breaching the public order). Also revealing has been Qaboos's absence of media intervention or personal meeting with protesters since January 2011 – a clear illustration of his unwillingness to challenge his recognised image as arbiter above mundane political debate and take the risk of denting his prestige by having to face overt popular criticism.

The first months of 2011 have definitely marked the formation of embryos of an Omani civil society, composed of young educated Omanis who no longer agree to be politically incapacitated, nor to abdicate their right to take part in national debates—as their parents did in the name of social welfare, of the requirement of national unity behind the ruler or of the threat of *fitna*.

Just like their Gulf counterparts, the Omani elites have come to understand in 2011 that the long-experienced 'buying-off' technique intended to prevent any social claim or the emergence of alternative discourses has lost their efficiency. Without question, the sultan

remains the only 'natural' candidate for power and virtually nobody questions his legitimacy to rule. Yet people have become aware of the symbolic centrality of the person of Qaboos, who has been a reassuring paternal figure for forty years. At the same time, they are well aware that sooner or later, the Sultanate will have to find its own way without its protector. And the answers given by the regime since February have been far from altering the widespread anxiety concerning the perceived lack of economic and political long-term vision – as the dismantling of the Ministry of National Economy (and the uncertainties that accompany it) illustrates, as well as the sultan's unwillingness to share some of his multiple prerogatives⁹ or to allow questions of how the country will fare after him. Activists involved in the protests, who were convinced by the ruler's belief in reform, have expressed in private discussions their deep disillusion in the regime's answers to the demands and in its reluctance to break the taboo on key issues.

From this perspective, despite the huge number of candidates and the new possibility for them to conduct public campaign meetings, the next Consultative Council elections in October do not look promising. Recurrent problems of vote-buying since 2003 have already resurfaced in 2011.¹⁰ Moreover, despite the insistent rumours about a committee of experts appointed by the Sultan to study the practical implementation in the Basic Law of his promise to grant the Council of Oman wider legislative and regulatory powers, no announcement has been made yet and enforcement may take longer than expected.

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⁹ The ruler concurrently holds the positions of Prime Minister, commander in chief of the armed forces, Minister of Defence, Minister of Foreign Affairs and chairman of the Central Bank.

¹⁰ See for instance S. Vaidya, 'Putting a Price on Votes,' *Gulf News* (Dubai), July 23, 2011.