

Assessing the Political Stability of Oman

By Mark N. Katz*

Oman is facing important economic and political challenges. The economic challenge it faces is that its population is rising while its oil reserves are declining. The political challenges it faces are the extreme concentration of authority in the hands of one man (Sultan Qaboos), the sultan's unwillingness to allow meaningful political participation or dialogue, political legitimacy issues concerning both Sultan Qaboos and the succession process he has set up, and sporadic but persistent signs of opposition. This article examines these problems and assesses their implications for the political stability of Oman.

Compared to neighboring Saudi Arabia, there is very little press coverage on Oman. And unlike the many stories about how bad things are in the kingdom, the little reporting done on the sultanate is generally positive. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude from Oman's glowing press coverage that all is well there. Oman, in fact, is experiencing some very difficult problems that are likely to get worse in coming years.

Oman faces challenges both on the economic and political fronts. In the economic realm, the sultanate's main problem is easy to identify: its oil reserves are decreasing while its population is increasing. Problems in the political realm, by contrast, are harder to identify and assess since obtaining information about Omani politics--especially opposition sentiment and activity--is extremely difficult. This is due to the relatively limited amount of media and academic attention devoted to Oman, the difficulty of gaining entry into the Sultanate, and the reticence of Omanis (either in Oman or elsewhere) about talking openly with foreigners about this subject. Nevertheless, there have been indications over the past decade that there is frustration and discontent not just with some of the

Sultan's policies, but also with his rule. The possibility of a succession crisis upon his death also raises the possibility of instability.

This article will examine both the economic and political problems of Oman, and assess their implications for the stability of the sultanate. It will show that while the rule of the sultan does not appear to be in any immediate danger, there is a significant possibility that Oman's problems could exceed the ability of its government to deal with them effectively. Such a development, especially combined with a succession crisis, could affect the stability and even the viability of the sultanate.

ECONOMIC PROBLEMS

In contrast to several Gulf states, Oman possesses relatively modest oil reserves. The obvious implication of this is that Oman is going to have to adjust to life without oil long before its more richly endowed neighbors. Until recently, it was believed that new discoveries of oil in Oman were not only sufficient to replace what was being produced, but even to add to Oman's reserves. In 2003, Oman's proven oil reserves were estimated at 5.7 billion barrels.(1) But while Oman's oil

reserves were reportedly rising, its production was declining from a high of 960,000 barrels per day (bpd) in 2000 to about 700,000 bpd by early 2004.(2) More ominously, it was revealed in early 2004 that Royal Dutch/Shell overstated its Omani reserves by a whopping 40 percent.(3)

Royal Dutch/Shell owns a 34 percent share of Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), which produces 90 percent of the sultanate's oil (the Omani government owns a 60 percent share).(4) Since it is unlikely that Royal Dutch/Shell and the Omani government had different estimates of PDO's oil reserves, (i.e., it is doubtful that the Omani government had a lower, more accurate estimate of PDO's reserves than Royal Dutch/Shell), the 40 percent overstatement appears to affect all of PDO's proven reserves estimates. If this is true, and assuming that the non-PDO share of Omani oil reserves has been accurately stated, then Oman's total proven oil reserves are not 5.7 billion barrels, but more like 4.2 billion barrels instead.

At current rates of production, this level of reserves would take only 16.5 years to deplete instead of 22 years (at higher production rates that Oman achieved in the recent past, its oil reserves would run out even more quickly).(5) More oil will undoubtedly be found in Oman, just as has happened before. But it will have to be found in much greater quantities than before in order to significantly push back the time frame when Oman's oil reserves are expected to run out.

Oil, though, is not Oman's only source of wealth; it also has natural gas. Oman's natural gas reserves reportedly went from 12.3 trillion cubic feet (tcf) in 1992 to almost 30 tcf in 2003, with as much as another 2 tcf expected. These figures, however, probably also need to be revised since (as the Energy Information Administration of the U.S. Department of

Energy, or DOE, noted), "Most of Oman's reserves are in PDO-owned areas" and "Most gas in Oman is associated with oil."(6) This being the case, it would appear that the downward revision of Oman's proven oil reserves would necessitate a downward revision of its gas reserves, too.

Despite this, the Omani economy has benefited from the fact that world oil prices have been relatively high. There is, of course, no guarantee that oil prices will remain this high. And even if they do, Oman will not benefit from them when its petroleum reserves finally are depleted. Omani government officials have long claimed to be preparing the sultanate for when this happens by developing the non-oil economy in areas such as agriculture, fisheries, light industry, mining, and even tourism. Progress in these areas, though, has been limited.

In June 1995, the sultanate-sponsored "Vision Conference: Oman 2020" estimated that the crude oil sector's share of Omani GDP would fall from 41 percent in 1996 to 9 percent in 2020, the gas sector's contribution would rise from 1 percent to 10 percent, and the non-oil industrial sector's contribution would rise from 7.5 percent to 29 percent.(7) In late 2003, however, the DOE estimated that oil revenues still contributed almost 40 percent of Oman's GDP as well as 75 percent of its export earnings. The Omani government has sought to increase the percentage of Omanis working in the private sector through an "Omanization" program aimed at reducing the Sultanate's dependence on immigrant labor. According to the DOE, however, Omanis now constitute only 10 percent of private sector employment.(8)

Oman's population growth was estimated at a rapid 2.2 percent in mid-2004,(9) its population growth during the 1980's and 1990's is believed to have been close to an extremely rapid 4.0 percent.(10)

From less than one million in 1970, Oman's population has grown to 2.7 million in 2004.(11) According to the Population Reference Bureau, it is expected to reach 4.0 million in 2025.(12) According to J.E. Peterson, Oman is now facing "the dilemma of what to do with the addition of well over 40,000 secondary-school graduates and drop-outs every year."(13) But if Oman's oil income declines, this task will become far more difficult and the sultanate could face a serious crisis.

The Omani government does not publish unemployment figures. According to Peterson, though, Oman is now experiencing "serious unemployment problems."(14) It appears doubtful, however, that either the declining oil sector or the small non-oil sector will be able to absorb the growing number of young Omani job seekers. Government, of course, employs a substantial number of people, including a military establishment of 41,700.(15) But with defense expenditures alone accounting for over 12 percent of Oman's GNP, the ability of the government to employ more people productively also appears limited.(16)

Given that Oman's population is growing rapidly, its petroleum reserves are much lower than previously thought, and its non-oil economy is limited, it appears that the sultanate will face a serious economic crisis in the next 10 to 15 years, or even sooner if oil prices plummet.

POLITICAL PROBLEMS

Glowing reports about increasing political participation in Oman hold out the prospect that the sultanate may be able to weather the impending economic storm it faces. But just like previous reports about Oman's petroleum reserves, these reports appear to have been greatly overstated, too. Unfortunately, Oman's political problems are so great that they are likely to severely constrain the sultanate's ability to resolve its economic problems. These problems

include: the extraordinary concentration of authority in the hands of one man (Sultan Qaboos), the sultan's unwillingness to allow meaningful political participation or dialogue, political legitimacy issues concerning both Sultan Qaboos and the succession process he has set up, and sporadic but persistent signs of opposition.

In his book All in the Family, Michael Herb argued that Middle Eastern monarchies where power has been shared among members of the royal family have survived whereas those in which the monarch has excluded his family members from governance are the ones that have been overthrown.(17) While Oman is a country where the monarchy has not been overthrown, Herb noted that "the dynasty as a ruling institution is weaker" and that Sultan Qaboos "has concentrated much power in his own hands, and shared less with his relatives than is common elsewhere in the Gulf."(18)

The number of offices that Qaboos holds himself is remarkable: he is not only sultan but also prime minister, defense minister, finance minister, foreign affairs minister, and chairman of the central bank. By contrast, the few relatives he has in his cabinet hold fairly powerless positions: Thuwayni (the son of one of his paternal grandfather's two brothers) is the Sultan's "special representative;" Fahad (a cousin) is deputy prime minister for cabinet affairs; Haythim (a cousin) is minister of national heritage and culture; and Shabib (an uncle) is special adviser for environmental affairs.(19) Furthermore, unlike the other Gulf monarchies where the successors to the throne have all been designated, Sultan Qaboos has not named an heir but has called upon the royal family to do so after his death.

Sultan Qaboos's style of governance has important implications. Elsewhere in the Gulf, several members of each country's ruling family have acquired administrative experience through holding important

cabinet positions. Upon the death or incapacity of the monarch, there are other members of the ruling family with senior-level administrative experience who can quickly step in. Herb argues that the ruling families in each of these countries serve as an important check on the monarch, since the family ultimately has the power to depose him if he undertakes a course of action seen as harmful to the continuation of the dynasty. (20)

None of this is true in Oman. Qaboos has not allowed anybody else in the al-Said family to acquire significant administrative experience. This will make the task of whoever succeeds him difficult. Unlike elsewhere in the Gulf, Oman's royal family does not appear to have the power to restrain--and certainly not to depose--Qaboos. Whereas the other Gulf monarchies are family enterprises, Oman is a sole proprietorship. The quality of Qaboos's rule, then, is crucially important for Oman's stability.

What can be said, then, about Qaboos's rule? Qaboos came to power in 1970 by overthrowing his father with the help of the British. Since the defeat of the Dhofar insurgency (which was supported by neighboring Marxist South Yemen) in 1975, Oman has been extremely stable. By this standard, Qaboos's rule so far must have been remarkably good. But even if stability is an adequate measure of the quality of his rule, there are reasons for concern.

With the passage of time, Sultan Qaboos has reportedly become increasingly reclusive--as was his father, Sultan Said, toward the end of his long reign (1932-1970). What this suggests is that Qaboos has grown out of touch with his society. This observation may appear strange considering how Qaboos has made an annual "meet the people" tour of Oman throughout his reign. According to two people I spoke to who have witnessed this

event, however, this tour is a tightly stage-managed event designed to project an image of a sultan in close contact with his people while actually "protecting" him from any such contact that has not been authorized and choreographed in advance. In addition, despite the vaunted "democratization" taking place in Oman (which will be discussed later), press freedom in Oman was rated by The Economist in 2004 as "dismal" (scoring only 1 on a 1-10 scale--worse even than in Saudi Arabia).(21) In addition to not fulfilling the critical role played by a free press in a democratic or democratizing society, the Omani press is not a source of information for the sultan about problems that are occurring which need to be addressed before they become worse.

This is a role, of course, that could be played by the Omani *Majlis al-Shura*. Beginning in 1982, this body (which has had several names) has gone from being completely appointed by the sultan, to being selected by the "notables" of various regions (with the sultan having final approval), to the lower house in October 2003 being "elected" on the basis of universal adult suffrage (the upper house is appointed by the Sultan). The authority of this "parliament," however, is strictly limited. It is not empowered to address important issues such as national security, foreign relations, or the political system. Instead, it is only allowed to deal with economic and social issues, the encouragement of investment, and administrative reform. Even then, the Majlis may not initiate legislation, but can only comment on and propose amendments to laws submitted for its consideration by the Sultan's cabinet.(22)

Finally, candidates for Majlis seats in 2003 were forbidden to use the mass media for their political campaigns. Despite the fact that these were Oman's first ever "national elections," voter turnout was

reportedly less than 25 percent. "Political analysts in Oman and the United States say the low numbers are due to the fact that most Omanis still do not feel they have a political voice," reported The Times.⁽²³⁾ Whatever the sultan's purpose in creating the Majlis al-Shura, it does not seem to be to share power since all meaningful decision-making authority remains in his hands.

Qaboos certainly has not given the Majlis any role in deciding the succession. He has no children himself and has not named any of his relatives as his heir. The succession will instead be decided only after his death in the following manner as described by Qaboos himself: "When I die, my family will meet. If they cannot agree on a candidate, the Defense Council will decide, based on a name or names submitted by the previous sultan. I have already written down two names in descending order, and put them in sealed envelopes in two different regions."⁽²⁴⁾

It is possible that this process will work smoothly. But several problems could arise: 1) the royal family might not be able to agree on a successor, or even on who among them should be in on the decision; 2) even if it cannot decide, the royal family might not be willing to let the Defense Council do so, or royal rivals might vie for allies on it; and 3) different versions of Qaboos's list of successors might suddenly be "found," thus causing greater confusion. These problems might be avoided if only the sultan would name an heir, as has been done in all the other Gulf monarchies. But since Qaboos overthrew a sultan when he himself was heir, he may well fear that any heir he named might do the same to him. The possibility of an unstable succession, though, is a high price to pay for the continued stability of Qaboos's own reign.

A contested succession, of course, could threaten the legitimacy of the sultanate. Born in 1940, Sultan Qaboos could still rule effectively for another 15 to 20 years.

If this is indeed how long he continues to rule, then Oman's succession crisis will occur at approximately the same time that it runs out of oil--thereby serving to exacerbate popular disaffection with the regime. But questions about the legitimacy of the regime may not lie dormant until the death of Sultan Qaboos. Some Omanis appear to have serious doubts about Sultan Qaboos's legitimacy and suitability as a ruler.

As is well known, Islam has two main branches: Sunni and Shi'a. Oman, though, is one of the few Muslim countries where adherents of a third branch--Ibadiism--are prevalent. (Ibadiism is the only extant branch of Kharijism, Islam's earliest schism. Ibadiism is conservative, but tolerant of other forms of Islam. A traditional belief of the Ibadhis is that their Imam should be the most worthy person of the Ibadhi community, that he was to be chosen by the community's notables, and that he could be removed from office if he proved himself unworthy of it.)⁽²⁵⁾ Further, Oman is the only Muslim country where the rulers--including Sultan Qaboos--have traditionally been Ibadhis. According to the CIA, 75 percent of the Omani population is Ibadhi while the remaining 25 percent is either Sunni, Shi'a, or Hindu.⁽²⁶⁾ This suggests that while Oman is not a democracy, Sultan Qaboos hails from the majority community within Oman. Other sources indicate, however, that the Ibadhis form a much smaller percentage of the population. According to J.E. Peterson--one of the foremost Western scholars on Oman--the indigenous population of the Sultanate is 45 percent Ibadhi, 50 percent Sunni, and less than 5 percent Shi'a and Hindu.⁽²⁷⁾ Dale Eickelman--also one of the foremost Western scholars on Oman--estimated that, "Roughly 50-55 percent of its citizen population is Sunni, 40-45 percent is Ibadhi, and less than 2 percent is Shi'a."⁽²⁸⁾

If these two scholars' estimates are correct, then the sultan does not hail from the majority community within Oman, but from a minority (albeit a large one that has been traditionally dominant). Sunnis elsewhere--especially in Saudi Arabia--have an extremely negative view of Ibadhism.(29) It is not clear whether the Sunnis of Oman share this view. It is highly probable, though, that the majority Sunnis resent being ruled by the Ibadhi minority. One account of the arrest in 1994 of hundreds of regime opponents said that "Most of them were Sunni Muslims,"(30) suggesting the presence of just such resentment in this community.

Resentment of Sultan Qaboos, though, may even be present in the Ibadhi community. According to John C. Wilkinson, temporal and spiritual authority in Oman was traditionally exercised by an Ibadhi Imam. The Ibadhi imamate was, at least in theory, elected by the faithful on the basis of his personal qualifications. Many elections to the Imamate in the past, though, had not been regarded as legitimate, and this led to civil wars among the Ibadhis. Ibadhi political theory allowed for an imam to be deposed by the faithful if he became incapacitated or acted against the precepts of Islam, and some have indeed been deposed. Ibadhi political theory "rigorously excluded... any notion of a hereditary imamate," though it tended to be dominated by different families in different periods. (31)

According to Wilkinson, the imamate has experienced repeated historical cycles in which it has "always declined into dynastic power, but equally inevitably re-emerged as the national ideology reuniting the state."(32) At times, Wilkinson records, the imamate has disappeared altogether due to defeat by foreign or non-imamate Omani forces, but its memory has always remained among the Omanis who have restored it whenever the opportunity arose.

From the 1850s until the 1950s, there existed two power centers in Oman: the imamate in the interior of the country and the sultanate on the coast which was backed by the British. There were several clashes between the two in which the sultanate would have been defeated completely had it not been for the intervention of British forces. In the mid-twentieth century, however, oil was discovered in interior Oman. The sultan's British-backed forces overran the imamate in 1955. With Saudi support, the imamate leadership regrouped and launched a rebellion in 1957 which took the British two years to crush. The imamate then came to an end. (33)

Memory of the imamate tradition, however, may well have survived. If so, Sultan Qaboos is vulnerable on three counts: 1) he was not elected by the Ibadhi faithful (or anybody else); 2) the imamate tradition allows for a leader to be deposed if he becomes incapacitated or acts against the precepts of Islam; and 3) many Omanis (Ibadhis, Sunnis, and Shi'as) believe that Qaboos has indeed acted against the precepts of Islam in one important respect. Sultan Qaboos has been reported by several sources to be a homosexual, which would not be judged favorably by his subjects if they were to believe this claim, whether or not it was true.

What Omanis think about this issue is hard to determine. Although I have been following Omani affairs for over two decades, only three Omanis have discussed this subject with me openly.(34) Although such a tiny number may not be representative of an entire society's opinion, their statements on this matter indicate that it has wider political implications:

- All three agreed that the Sultan is generally believed to be homosexual by Omanis;

- All three agreed that Omanis only discuss this subject with trusted relatives and friends since more open discussion of it could result in negative consequences (including imprisonment);
- All three agreed that all Omanis whom they have discussed this subject with believe that the Sultan's alleged homosexuality raises serious doubts as to his legitimacy as a ruler.

One of the three-- a young Western-educated male related to one of those arrested in 1994--stated vehemently that Qaboos's alleged homosexuality is utterly shameful, that it reflects badly on Oman as a whole, and that it completely undermines Qaboos's legitimacy as sultan. The second--a young Western-educated female--saw the Sultan's alleged homosexuality as causing Omanis both to see him as ridiculous and to discount or disregard much of what he has done that has benefited the country. The third--an older Middle Eastern-educated male--indicated that the sultan is widely believed to spend an inordinate amount of Oman's scarce resources on his reputedly numerous paramours and on projects favored by them.

If these views are at all representative, then the sultan's alleged homosexuality could become an important political factor in the event of a regime crisis, or in aggravating events that might lead to a regime crisis. How likely, though, is this?

Oman has experienced two rebellions within living memory: the imamate rebellion from 1957 to 1959 and the Dhofar rebellion from 1965 to 1975. The former, though, took place during the reign of the sultan's father. While the latter gained strength during Sultan Said's final years, it lost strength and was finally defeated under Sultan Qaboos. While there has been no rebellion on this scale since the 1970s,

opposition activity has occurred in Oman since the mid-1990s. And unlike the two earlier rebellions, this more recent activity has been aimed directly at Sultan Qaboos. This activity includes:

- The arrest in May 1994 of hundreds of "opponents" of the regime. It appears that those arrested did not advocate the overthrow of the Sultanate, but its reform instead. Those arrested included a number of high-ranking officials and members of prominent families. Most appear to have been Sunnis. Those arrested were treated quite harshly. According to Omani sources, the public did not see these people as a threat, but saw the government's treatment of them as unfair. All those arrested were later reported to have been released. (35) Far from an act of forgiveness on the part of the sultan, however, their release was seen as belated acknowledgement that there was no need to have arrested them in the first place. Instead of quelling opposition, the sultanate's actions in this instance appear to have led to resentment against what many Omanis saw as the regime's arbitrariness.

- In September 1995, Sultan Qaboos survived an automobile accident in which his finance minister, Qays al-Zawawi, was killed. (36) According to one Omani source, the sultan used to drive around at night by himself or with a friend "incognito." According to this same source, the car crash Qaboos survived was not an accident but a deliberate assassination attempt, and that many arrests were made following it.

- Since 1996, according to Dale Eickelman, Oman has experienced "public expressions of discontent in the form of occasional student demonstrations, anonymous leaflets, and other rather creative forms of

public communication. Only in Oman has the occasional donkey...been used as a mobile billboard to express anti-regime sentiments. There is no way in which police can maintain dignity in seizing and destroying a donkey on whose flank a political message has been inscribed."(37)

- In 1997, a few Shi'as (apparently thought to be opponents of the regime) were arrested.(38)

- Since September 11, 2001, there have been a number of demonstrations in which police have employed force to control protesters and have detained some of them.(39) Although the demonstrators were ostensibly protesting against American foreign policy, their actions could be (and undoubtedly were) seen as an implicit criticism of Sultan Qaboos's policy of close ties to Washington.

- Finally, an alleged al-Qa'ida cell was broken up in 2002.(40)

CONCLUSION

While political discontent is obviously present in Oman, the sultan's regime does not appear to be in any immediate danger. While Omani oil production has fallen and its level of reserves is lower than was believed, the current high price of oil has provided a welcome economic cushion for Oman. And so long as the government is able to provide a decent standard of living, most Omanis seem prepared to tolerate Sultan Qaboos's rule even if they question his legitimacy and see the "democratization" process he has begun as largely meaningless.

Oman, though, will face serious economic problems if the price of oil falls and stays low, Oman's petroleum reserves become depleted, or both. Indeed, it appears almost inevitable that Oman will face such a crisis before too long. Dealing successfully with it will be all the more

difficult as a result of the sultan's relative isolation and his unwillingness to share power either within the royal family or with the Majlis, and to name an heir. If, however, Omani living standards decline significantly, Sultan Qaboos's governance and "un-Islamic" lifestyle could well become rallying points for opposition against him. A contested succession, especially under conditions of economic decline, could also lead to political instability. Finally, while the political opposition in Oman is not strong now, this could change if Oman faces economic and political crises simultaneously. While Oman is arguably better off than most states in the Middle East, it also appears to have a much more limited political capacity for dealing with a severe economic crisis than many of these other countries where a state of crisis is the norm.

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NOTES

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14. Ibid.
15. International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance, 2003-2004 (London: Oxford University Press/IISS, 2003), pp. 118-19.
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18. Ibid., p. 180.
19. Ibid., pp. 153-4; CIA, "Chiefs of State and Cabinet members of Foreign Governments" <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/chiefs/chiefs134.html> (updated September 10, 2004), and personal correspondence.
20. Herb, All in the Family, p. 238.
21. "Arab Democracy: Freedom Calls, at Last?" The Economist, April 3, 2004, p. 48. The unusual exceptions to Oman's bland media norm are the English language FM radio programs broadcast by one of the Sultan's female cousins, Zawan Al-Said. Since most Omanis do not speak English, however, the impact of her programs appears limited. Mark Wallace, "Oman's Shock Jock," The Times, January 15, 2004,
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33. Ibid., pp. 299-328.

34. Several Americans and Saudis familiar with Oman have also discussed this topic with me, but their views are not being examined here.

35. For reporting on these events, see "Unusual Human Rights Abuses in the Unusually Quiet Sultanate of Oman," Solidarity International for Human Rights, September 30, 1994; Salem Abdullah, "Omani Islamism: An Unexpected Confrontation with the Government," United Association for Studies and Research (Occasional Papers Series, No. 8), September 1995; and Al-Haj, "The Politics of Participation in the Gulf Cooperation Council States," pp. 566-8.

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38. Peterson, "Oman: Three and a Half Decades of Change and Development," p. 135.

39. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2003: Oman," February 25, 2004 <<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003/27935pf.htm>>.

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