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Broadening Political Participation in Oman. Basic Facts

Oman has a relatively liberal environment, although the sultanate is an absolute monarchy with no political parties¹. All matters are subject to the Sultan's interpretation and decrees. He has a complete authority over all decision-making. The Sultan is both the head of the state and the prime minister, as well as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces; moreover, he controls the portfolios of defense and foreign affairs. But at the same time, Sultan Qaboos is a fair-minded, liberal ruler who tries to maximize the support base for his policies by taking advice from as broad a spectrum of people as possible, but especially tribal leaders, in accordance with Omani tradition and cultural norms. His gradual approach to democratization of the country and political reforms has often been praised in the Gulf as the best possible way to do so. In the 1990s Oman made several strides towards broadening of the political participation; this happened on the sole initiative of the ruler, without any demands from the public (since late 1970's, there has been practically no opposition in Oman²).

¹ "Oman – Ruling Structure", *APS Review Gas Market Trends*, 23rd February 2004; J. E. Peterson, "Oman: Three and a half decades of change and developments", *Middle East Policy*, 2 (Summer 2004), pp. 125-37.

² Only in 1994, approx. 200 people were detained in connection with an alleged plot to destabilize the country. See Calvin Allen Jr. and W. Lynn Rigsbee II, *Oman under*

First, in 1991, Sultan Qaboos established the new Consultative Council (*Majlis al-Shura*), replacing the old State Consultative Council (*al-Majlis al-Istishari lil-Dawla*) existing since 1981. The 59-seat Council was granted the right to debate on economic, social and development issues, review laws, evaluate government plans and question ministers, and hold joint meetings with the government twice a year. At the same time, it has no right to be heard in Oman's foreign, defense and security policies. The Sultan's decree provided that elders, prominent businessman and intellectuals from each of Oman's 59 provinces choose two potential assembly members and the Sultan appoints one of those two nominees to represent that province. Today there are 24 provinces with two representatives and 35 with one.

The president of the Council is appointed by a Royal Decree, while his two deputies are elected by the members of the Council in a secret ballot.

After the end of the first three-year term, in 1994, the Council was expanded to 80 seats, giving the Sultan a chance to nominate more people to it, especially former government officials. In a groundbreaking decision, the Sultan appointed the first two woman members of the Council. It was the first case for women to be allowed to participate in a political process of any kind in all GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) states³.

Membership of the Council was expanded to 82 persons in 1997, and to 83 in the year 2000 because of the increase in the country's population. Moreover, the Sultan allowed women to stand for election and to vote for candidates to the Council. Over 20 women were among the several hun-

Qaboos: From Coup to Constitution. 1970-1996 (Londres/Portland, Frank Cass Publ., 2000), pp. 61-62. Some people were also arrested in January 2005 for alleged plotting to carry on terrorist attacks during the Muscat Festival.

³ Abdullah Juma Alhaj, "The politics of participation in the Gulf Cooperation Council States: The Omani Consultative Council", *Middle East Journal*, No.4 (1996), pp. 560-71.

dred nominees in the 1997 elections, and the Council had eventually two women members. In 1997, Sultan Qaboos established a new 41-seat consultative body, the all nominated State Council (*Majlis al-Dawla*). This Council, akin to an upper house, reviews the proposals of the *Majlis al-Shura* and forwards those it deems important to the government or to Sultan Qaboos; it can also deal with more important political matters. *Majlis al-Shura* and *Majlis al-Dawla* comprise together the *Majlis Oman*, or Council of Oman⁴.

One of the reasons to establish new council was to give the Sultan a chance to accommodate those who were unsuccessful in the elections to the *Majlis al-Shura* and to eliminate potential tensions between rival clans, tribes, and businessmen that the election results caused. This was clearly visible in the formation of the first *Majlis al-Dawla*, whose nominated members became former ministers, undersecretaries, ambassadors, judges or retired officers. Five women were selected to it as well.

Sultan Qaboos, further supporting the idea of introducing women to the country's political life, appointed in 1998-1999 the first woman ambassador and named three women deputy ministers (undersecretaries) in the cabinet. He also included the first woman to the board of directors of the Omani Chamber of Commerce. In March 2003 he appointed a women to become President of the Public Authority for Craft Industries at the rank of a minister. Finally in 2004, he appointed three other women to a Cabinet, leading the Higher Education, Tourism, and Social Development Ministries.

Oman's experience was followed by other Gulf countries. Today, women are allowed to participate in parliamentary elections in Bahrain, Qatar and Oman. In Saudi Arabia they were allowed to participate in the Chamber of Commerce

⁴ Abdullah Juma Alhaj, "The political elite and the introduction of political participation in Oman", *Middle East Policy*, No. 3 (June 2000), pp. 97-110.

elections and they probably will be allowed to participate in the elections in the United Arab Emirates shortly. Women also held the Cabinet portfolios in all the GCC states (except Saudi Arabia where there is only one woman undersecretary in the Ministry of Education).

The electoral body in Oman has been steadily expanded; in the September 2000 elections to *Majlis al-Shura* the electorate was raised to 175,000 people, a quarter of Omani adults, with women accounting for approximately 30 per cent of the participants (as compared to only 51,000 in 1997 elections, about 3 per cent of the population, and 5,000 in 1991). Voters were chosen by tribal councils selected by the *walis* or governors and their representatives in the country's 59 *wilayats*. Out of their number, 114,567 (65 per cent) registered for voting, with 87.8 per cent actually casting their ballots. Total of 541 candidates, including 21 women, were in the fray (but only two women were successful, both from the Muscat governorate). In a move towards the goal of having the whole *Majlis al-Shura* elected directly, in 2000, candidates with the highest numbers of votes were for the first time automatically given seats on the Council, rather than being picked from among the top scores by the Sultan.

In the 2003 elections, for the first time all Omani citizens who have attained the age of 21 (approximately 822,000), both men and women, were eligible to vote. Nevertheless, only 262,000 (i.e. 32 per cent) registered, and only 74 per cent of the registered, that is around 194,000 actually cast their votes on 2nd October. The elections did not bring much change in the composition of the *Majlis al-Shura*. Only 15 women stood for election, out of 506 candidates, and, as before, only two (actually the same as during the previous term) were elected, despite even the fact that a third of registered voters (95,000) were women.

Consultative councils quickly started to play an important role in the country's political life. They met regularly, debated important social and economic matters, reviewed new

laws, questioned government's officials. Certain hearings at the *Majlis al-Shura* have been broadcasted live on television. At the same time, the traditional element of "direct democracy", the Sultan's so-called "meet-the-people-tour", or "the open parliament", has continued. This event organized by Sultan Qaboos since 1975 allows him to meet his subjects and listen to their grievance and petitions; the government ministries accompanying him must on the spot respond to the issues raised by the people.

Another action of crucial importance for the development of democracy in Oman, was the introduction of the Basic Law – the first *de facto* constitution – on 6th November 1996⁵. It promulgated the principles governing the Sultanate, highlighted the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and, above all, defined the powers and duties of the executive. It provided for an independent judiciary, due process of law, freedom of press and of assembly, and prohibition of discrimination of any kind. It states that the governance in the country is based on justice, *shura* (consultations), and equality. Freedoms are, however, limited by a clause stating that they are granted within the limits of the law, many of which are undefined. The Basic Law clarifies also the issue of the royal succession, especially important in the country having no Crown Prince.

⁵ The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Oman Country Report 2001*, p. 6.

