



Arab Reform Brief

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The Omani Spring: towards the break of a new dawn

Said Sultan al Hashimi*

From February to mid May this year, an intense wave of protests swept the sultanate of Oman, and as a result, the country has undergone changes on many levels: political, social and economic. It is striking that in contrast to the revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, these protests did not call for the fall of the regime, but were restricted to demands for social justice, improved living standards, political and constitutional reforms to fight corruption, guaranteed public freedoms and the division of powers. This paper examines the reasons behind the protests and the progress of the movement from February until May 14th when the Omani authorities forcefully dispersed the demonstrators outside the Shura Council.

The Sultanate of Oman is currently ruled by Sultan Qaboos of Oman, who, according to the constitution, is the President of State and the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces¹. Since the 23rd of July 1972, he has also been the Prime Minister, and he has the power to appoint and dismiss ministers and judges, pass legislation, sign treaties and

declare a general state of emergency. The Council of Oman², that consists of two parliamentary chambers and should play the legislative authority, has limited powers that are mainly restricted to playing an advisory role. Oman's influential specialized councils, such as the Defence Council, Financial Affairs and Energy Resources Council and the Supreme Judicial Council, are headed by

¹ Article (41) of the Basic Statute of the State, The Council of Oman publications, Sultanate of Oman, 2006.

² Article (58) of the Basic Statute of the State.

***Omani Researcher and Writer.**

the Sultan alone. The government also has a divergent security apparatus that is legendary in the collective memory of Omanis since the Dhofar revolution, and also has a “special division” and “unit for special missions” in the police forces, which implement whatever the government orders. These security forces played a pivotal role during the protests.

To understand the protest movement, a general overview of the current situation in Oman is necessary.

1. Social and Economic situation:

Considerable achievements were made by the sultanate in economy and development such as having Oman listed among the top ten countries worldwide for development in the past 40 years in the fields of health, education and income according to the UN Human Development Report of 2010³. However, economic development has not provided a solution to other problems concerned with social justice and democracy.

2. Education: Statistics from the Ministry of Education show that 32% of Omanis aged between 15-17 year olds in 2007 were not enrolled in schools, and that half of those who finish high school do not have the opportunity to continue into higher education.

3. Employment: 38.1% of Oman’s unemployed are young people, and of those, the majority, 84.7%, have never previously been employed. Only 25.1% of employed young people are female. The issue of unemployment is a source of great tension among the Omani youth.

4. Political participation: Over the past four decades, great restrictions were placed on political activity and participation in public affairs. The prohibition on student associations and the absence of any criticism of the regime in the media meant that true political awareness was lacking in Oman.

³ The report is at the following link:
<http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2010>

In any society, ignoring or belittling the people’s problems by the regime can only lead to an explosion in the end. This is exactly what happened in Oman with the dawn of the Arab Spring. The Arab revolutions that have developed are primarily “social revolutions” and have revived people’s hopes against autocratic regimes, championing the freedom and dignity of the Arab citizen in face of the prevailing model of the Arab police state.

New beginnings

In Oman, as in other Arab states, the new generation has been mobilised at a historical moment to save the state from the errors of its institutions. A number of popular uprisings preceded this broad protest movement that swept the country, for example:

- On 3rd of July 2010, a document signed by 50 people was presented to the sultan, requesting the formation of a national council which would create a constitution based on a contract between the sultan and the people and affirming the ruler's status as a spiritual and symbolic force, the people as the source of his authority, the management of the country’s affairs through legislative institutions and free and fair elections, and guaranteeing values and human rights such as citizenship, justice, equality, division of powers, independent judiciary, freedom of press, and freedom of association.

- At the beginning of February 2011, a large number of teachers organized a sit-in outside the Ministry of Education asking for fair wages, improved working conditions and the establishment of a syndicate of teachers to defend their rights.

- Peaceful demonstrations were organised by groups of Omani youth; the first Green March on February 8th and the second on February 18th in the middle of Muscat, coordinated via Facebook and other forums. Then on February 23rd, they handed a petition to the Sultan outlining their demands for civil and political rights such as widening the powers of the Shura (consultative) council, better

protection of public money, holding members of security services accountable, abolishing exceptional powers enjoyed by many state institutions, strengthening the judiciary's independence, founding an independent constitutional court, guaranteeing freedom of expression, ending discrimination against women, affirming the right to create syndicates and professional associations, and limiting the powers of the security institution. They also made the following social and economic demands: reform of education laws making education compulsory up to the age of 16, issuing a law that regulates teaching and guaranteeing teachers' right to form syndicates, establishing more higher education institutes, more scholarships, better pay, better care and financial support for low income families, an end to rising prices, and the founding of a social support fund for young people.

- On 25th of February 2011, a group of young people organized a sit-in in Dhofar governorate in front of the governor's office in the city of Salalah. They issued an appeal to the sultan entitled the "call for good" which stated that it was their national duty to share and participate in decision-making showing support to the demands called for by the first and second Green marches. They also demanded the establishment of an independent financial and administrative organisation to combat administrative and financial corruption and the activation of Shura Council committees to review ministerial policies. They also made the following economic demands: founding large governmental factories and companies in different industries to create more jobs, allowing the establishment of Islamic banks, investment and insurance companies. In the social context, they asked for facilitating the foundation of civil, cultural and cooperative associations, a higher minimum wage, a monthly subsidy for the unemployed, and the establishment of more universities and colleges.

- On February 26th, a group of unemployed young people looking for work went to

review employment promises made to them in the Labour Force Office in the city of Suhar, in hope of an official response from the officials, however the police and security forces were called and violent clashes ensued.

- The same evening, more than 100 young Omanis issued a statement to the Sultan expressing "their lack of hope in a response to their demands in all areas of political, social, economic and civil life". Equally the signatories made clear in an unprecedented fashion their consternation at orders and decrees which they felt they served private agendas and interests. The statement also rejected the reshuffling of the same old faces in senior posts as a tedious chess game, unacceptable to people who were aware of their rights and had developed an independent political consciousness. They criticised decisions which relied upon public money and affected the rights of the people in their resources and wealth, a basic right conferred by free citizenship. They also rejected corruption that is "spreading like a cancer in the body of this government" and demanded regulations to be applied by state institutions in collaboration with civil society institutions, along with the formation of an anti-corruption national council to exert efforts related to reform and development of state institutions. The statement then went on to emphasise that security institutions should carry out their activities with propriety, civil consciousness and in solidarity with their sons and brothers, who took to the streets aiming at securing a dignified life for themselves and for future generations. They signed this statement with a plea to the Sultan to "bring about radical and convincing change throughout the entire political and economic structure, as a response to the popular outbursts in Suhar, Sur and Salalah before they spread to other areas of Oman.

- On February 27th a citizen, Abdullah Al Ghamlasi, was killed in the city of Suhar when the police fired rubber bullets at demonstrators demanding political reforms and more job opportunities, while the army was increasingly using force for security

reasons. The police also used tear gas to scatter the crowd which had gathered for the second consecutive day in what they called “Reform Square”⁴.

•On the evening of the same day, following calls across social media networks, the first demonstration in front of the Shura council in the capital city of Muscat took place, in a square named by the protestors as “People’s Square”, and a second simultaneous protest erupted in “Freedom Square” in Sur in east Oman. The primary goal of these protests was to demand an immediate end to violence against protestors in Suhar. There were therefore four main squares where protests were taking place across the sultanate; “Reform” square in Suhar in the north, “People” square in the capital, Muscat, “Call for Good” square in Salalah in the south, and “Freedom” square in Sur in the east, in addition to other small and medium sized protests in a number of different towns and cities. Soon, each square issued a statement announcing its reform demands, which can be summarised in: an immediate end to the use of violence against protestors, complying with their demands for reform, an official apology from the government in different media outlets to the victims' families whether killed, wounded or arrested, and a just compensation for them, the dismissal of a number of ministers and officials, launching an investigation into the police and customs for their failure to manage the crisis and for causing bloodshed, and the appointment of judges from the high court to supervise the fact-finding committee. They also demanded the formation of a competent national government at the earliest possible to review the demands which had emerged from different areas of the sultanate, with the following priorities: the formation of an economic committee consisting of Omani economic experts to create an urgent

⁴ <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/F1122D56-F8E4-4AA4-956A-365EDE76289D.htm>

economic solution in response to protestors' demands, focusing on the needs of the unemployed and the lower classes and applying radical solutions to the national economy, the creation of a committee of educational experts to review the education system including higher education and its institutions, the establishment of an independent judicial committee to examine cases of financial, administrative and security-related corruption, setting a national committee responsible for drafting the Omani constitution which would submit its proposal to a popular referendum after no more than two years, an independent constitutional court separated from the high court, and increased powers for the Shura council.

•On the same day, the Shura council held an “exceptional emergency meeting” accompanied by vigorous discussions, in which it decided to form a committee to study the protestors' demands and take quick action to find solutions with the government and end the crisis. It was decided the Council would remain in permanent consultation with the government as long as the country was in this difficult situation. Some Council members supported the protestors and their demands, conveying them to the sultan, who asked for a meeting with all the Council members on March 2nd to listen to them and the demands made by the people all over the country.

•Protests continued with demands of media personnel calling for the resignation of the Minister of Information along with his representative and the Sultan’s advisor for media affairs, activating the critical role of media, ending persecution of journalists and writers, and amending the press law. There were also protests by doctors, nurses, oil company engineers, truck drivers, employees at most private companies and governmental institutions⁵, and marginalised people

⁵ Muscat Daily, March 09-2011, "Nursing students take to the streets, p 3. Also at the same page: Protesters call for media freedom

including those with special needs, non-Omani married women, and students. Their demands were limited to improving the workers' situation, changing labour laws, more justice and fairness in employment and promotions, and finally that wages be determined according to efficiency standards .

- Around 7000 Omani citizens presented a proclamation calling for an investigation into the finances of all ministers, advisors, and officials, whether still in-charge or convicted for stealing public money and exploiting their public work to make private profits. A delegation of the protestors handed this over to the public prosecutor the morning of March 21st 2011. The letter also demanded that the wealth of ministers and advisors should be safeguarded until such time as there had been an investigation into all those who had taken risks with public money and unjustly enriched themselves, and the money has been returned back, and all land that had been taken illegally withdrawn. But the public prosecution decided within a week that the charge was too general in nature, not being directed at specific people, making it impossible for an in depth investigation, and the investigation was duly suspended. A complaint was made to the state organisation for the overseeing of finance and administration .

The response: Thanks to the young people that alerted me to my mistakes

It is clear that the Omani people's awareness of their rights and duties has deepened, along with their desire for a comprehensive programme of constitutional, economic, social, and political reform. It is not the case, as suggested by some corrupt elements , that the demands they were making were concerned merely with pay rises and job opportunities .

The proof of the importance and legitimacy of these demands was the swift and effective response of the Sultan who carried out political and economic measures to prevent the situation from getting worse, as had

happened in Libya, Syria and Yemen. His response was as follows:

Political reforms: Sultan Qaboos issued more than 40 decrees and edicts in less than a month, an unprecedented action in Oman over the past four decades, which showed his awareness of the significance of what was happening and his desire for reform and to pacify the people angry at the passing of erroneous and arbitrary policies over previous years. Perhaps the most notable of these decrees was number 39/2011 granting legislative and supervisory powers to the Council of Oman, reformulating the Cabinet headed by the Sultan, appointing a new minister to his office and a new young minister for his diwan and palace, and seven members of the Shura council as new ministers replacing those whom the people called to oust like the head of the state apparatus for financial and administrative supervision and the ministers of Trade and Industry, Transport and Communications, Social Development, Civil Service and the Environment found themselves responsible for ministries that had provoked considerable controversy on the street. The Ministry of National Economy was abolished and its minister, highly influential in economic and financial decision making, was dismissed. The powers of the state apparatus for financial supervision were widened. It was ordered that studies should be made concerning the establishment of governorates for all the regions of the sultanate, as a development in the direction of local rule. It was also decided that the ministries and government units would establish a specialist department to deal with citizens' demands, and the sultan accepted the popular demand for the public prosecutor to be independent from police and customs.

Economic reforms: On the night of Suhar events, an announcement was made immediately that there would be 50,000 new job opportunities, a raise in the minimum wage of the private sector to 200 riyals, a new independent organisation established to protect consumers, and that possibilities for

establishing cooperative associations would be studied. Then followed some swift economic remedies including an increase in monthly financial allocations for students, an “unemployment” grant of 150 Omnai riyals each month for the unemployed, freezing a plan to cut social security guarantees for families if a member had started working, Doubling the monthly allowance for families benefiting from the social security law, and an agreement to establish an Islamic bank and to allow banks already in the region to operate more freely.

As for reforms in the educational sector, the Sultan decided to establish a new governmental university, emphasizing “the importance of developing areas of education in order to progress and fulfil the country’s ambitions.” He also announced that an additional number of students would be admitted to the Sultan Qaboos university, and two thousand additional students admitted to the technical colleges.

Essential lessons

Oman has learned many important lessons from its spring which although short lived had profound effects, summarised here until further analysis from specialists and experts:

Firstly: a pessimistic reading of the protests

The absence of civil society institutions: the clear absence of civil society institutions was revealed during the period of the protests. This was not surprising, given the surveillance and restrictions to which these institutions have been subjected by the government over the past four decades, and the lack of influence of political groups on the Omani street. Hardly anything was heard of the associations that had tried to do a mark prior to the protests like associations of writers, journalists, playwrights, engineers, doctors, women’s associations or even the public union for workers, who instead of organising marches demanding rights and freedoms for workers, had competed in

issuing cables proclaiming their loyalty and recognition of the sultan and praising the government’s efforts to grant workers their rights. Perhaps the importance of civil society institutions goes without saying, since no revolution or protest movement can sustain momentum for an extended period of time unless supported by institutions to articulate its demands . History teaches us that revolutions that end before achieving a complete economic, social and cultural programme of change soon fade and things return to how they were before, and sometimes get worse. Despite the protestors’ announcement in People’s square in Muscat and Freedom Square in Sur that they were establishing an “Omani association for reform” on April 6th 2011, this association has not been licensed up to the time of writing and is no longer active as it was during the protests.

The hesitancy of the intellectual elite in giving their support: Although some of the country’s intellectuals were supportive of the protest movement and participated in demonstrations and conferences, the surprising reluctance of many others had a considerable effect. The same intellectual who supported the efforts of the people in Tunisia and Egypt was confused and conflicted in the case of his own country, often making statements in support of the government out of a desire to maintain “national unity” and out of fear that the protests would spread even further. At times they also undermined the reputation of the activists, saying that they were working for external agendas or cooperating with the West. Many other cultural and intellectual stars of Oman remained silent and observed the events from a distance, in the interest of their future safety once the storm had passed.

The weakness of the media during the protests: Protestors did not have many opportunities to voice their demands, except through social networking pages on Facebook, Twitter and some chat forums. There was also some interest from western media channels, including BBC, France 24,

and some Dutch channels prior to the Queen of the Netherlands' visit to Oman in March 2011. However, al Jazeera and Al Arabiya were conspicuously absent apart from a few reports on the Al Jazeera website posted by correspondents in Muscat, and even this "modest" interest was short-lived: two weeks later a fire wall was placed around the news on Oman so that no one would know what was happening in the country. This was exacerbated by the preoccupation of news agencies and satellite channels with what was happening in Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Yemen. Reporters Without Borders blamed two companies, OMantel (government owned) and Al Nawras (private) for disrupting attempts by protestors to communicate what was going on. Most of the protestors directed their energies into direct national discussions taking place in the squares, rather than into discussions happening in the virtual world, the distinctive feature of the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia at least. Statistics showed the limited effect of the electronic media in most sections of society in 2006-2007 as only 22.1% of individuals were using a computer, 16.7% were using a computer with internet while 61.1% were not using a computer at all. Conversely, the official media, along with some "private" newspapers, made a great organised effort to undermine the protestors. A few destructive acts at the margins of the protests were exaggerated and it was argued that these actions would damage the country's reputation and adversely affect the country's economy by discouraging foreign investment.

Lack of organisation: perhaps one of the most prominent characteristics of the revolutions that have swept the Arab world is that they have transcended all party and organisational divisions, because they are for the sake of human rights, driven by the spirit of the simple citizen who is fed up with his lack of freedom and with his marginalisation from decision making and from the determination of his fate. The protests in Oman suffered as a result of poor organisation, since the Omani youth did not

have any prior experience in leadership or in political dialogue. Although they managed to organise the protests very effectively during the first month, the energy then dwindled and direct support began to fade.

Secondly: an optimistic reading of the protests

Overcoming the fear and hesitation: The Omani citizen had reached the stage of lowering his voice to a whisper if he wanted to criticise a government official, which illustrates the state of fear that was being imposed by the regime. One of the good things achieved by the protests was that they encouraged the masses to overcome their fearful mentality, and at the demonstrations and in special councils, citizens began to speak their opinions frankly, exposing stories of corruption and theft by public figures without hesitation.

The strengthening of freedom of expression: The right to express one's opinion was a matter of debate in Oman which had preoccupied society over recent years due to the restrictions that were placed upon writers and journalists, and a number of conferences were held calling for greater freedom, especially freedom of expression. The protest movement came to emphasize this issue as one of its main priorities and as one of the causes of economic and political deterioration. The daily newspapers began to broaden the margins of opinion and to examine issues of corruption and the need for reform, subjects which they had not broached a few days before the beginning of the protests. Al-Zaman and the Muscat Daily were two of the most emancipated in their coverage and analysis of the protests, publishing the writings of intellectuals who had a vision opposed to that of the government.

Improved rights of association: until recently in Oman, meetings of more than ten people were prohibited without a license, and people found it difficult to organise conferences or lectures except in certain

places under the eye of the security services. Suddenly the people found themselves calling for peaceful marches and open demonstrations. Instead of being confronted by resistance they found that they were being listened to and that their demands were being considered. It is worth mentioning that the official media were keen from the outset to give assurances that it was a legal right to protest, and that the Sultan had ordered that the protestors should not be touched because they were practising their legal right as guaranteed by national and international law. This entrenched the importance of this right in the consciousness of the Omani people. "What began in Tahrir square in Egypt has had a deep effect on the other Arab nations, and its legacy has been a new vision for Arab society."

A reduction in the influence of tribes and religious institutions over the people: the protests included all social, economic and ideological groups and concerns about tribal and sectarian struggles evaporated as the protestors affirmed in their statements their commitment to national unity transcending tribalism, sectarianism and regionalism. The role of tribal sheikhs was very limited and the religious people loyal to the regime joined in the protests and spoke in favour of reform. The squares in which the protests took place became an important site of civilian participation where many different issues and agendas were discussed⁶.

Controversial actions committed by the Omani regime

Despite the favourable response of Sultan Qaboos to many of the constitutional, political, economic, and social demands made to him by the protestors, the picture is not quite as rosy as the media has sought to convey, both internally and abroad, exploiting the world's preoccupation with the bloody

struggles going on in Libya, Syria and Yemen. In fact, the Omani authorities, in particular the security services, used a number of inhumane methods with the protestors, including but not restricted to:

1. Killing (the deaths of at least two people killed by bullets fired by security services. Those were Abdullah Al Ghamlasi on February 27th in Sahar and Khalifah al Alawi on April 1st in Sahar).

2. Arrests and raids on the protestors' homes late at night by police and security forces (as happened to Ahmed al Shizawi and to Ishaq al Aghbari in Muscat on the night of March 29th).

3. Kidnapping, torture and death threats by the security services (Said al Hashemi and the journalist Bassma al Rajehi were victims of this on the night of April 8th).

4. Arbitrary dismissal from work (as happened to journalist Ahmed al Shizawi when he was dismissed from his newspaper Al Shabiba on April 24th following his participation in the protests).

5. Blocking internet sites and chat forums.

6. Banning talk of reforms in the media.

7. Threats and slanders.

8. Accusations of sabotage and incitement.

9. Violent beatings and bad treatment of detainees.

10. Use of teargas and firing guns into the air.

11. Changing the law, for example giving the security forces more powers in opposition to the text and spirit of the national constitution.

12. Forcing prisoners to bargain over their rights and freedoms and to sign documents under threat.

13. Arrest without charge.

⁶ <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/A1EE6678-C03E-439D-A26A-E5C12433063B.ht>

14. Contradictions between official statements and actions of the security forces.

15. Surveillance, blocking and disturbance of communications.

16. Targeting writers, poets, lawyers, academics and activists.

Until the break of a new dawn

Oman stands at a historical crossroads: the people have spoken, as best they could, and the sultan has responded as best as he could on the basis of his experience and understanding of the nature of his rule. However a new generation in Oman is watching with a critical eye, with a schedule for change, and awaiting a new dawn which will show the country how strong its constitutional, political, and economic foundations are.

The people of Oman were silent over these years out of respect, not weakness, and out of love for the man who rules them. Today the people of Oman want only life, a life with dignity. They do not want to beg for bread or for education opportunities. They want to feel secure, a true security guaranteed by legislative and supervisory institutions and transparency, based on a constitution that derives its legitimacy from the people, and that protects public freedoms, enhances their dignity, strengthens their right to express themselves, protects public money and uses its natural and human resources wisely. The people want reform of the regime now, not tomorrow, and this is their legitimate right; and during this time of Arab revolutions, and uprisings against injustice and dictatorships, this demand is nourished and granted a historical legitimacy that is impossible to deny. When the people have a will, no force can stand in their way.