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Oman, Ten Years After the Arab Spring: The Evolution of State-Society Relations

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The Sultanate of Oman is often portrayed as an “oasis of peace” where the regime is immune to dissidence,¹ does not face direct criticism,² or successfully contains opposition because it is supposedly more legitimate than in other countries.³ These claims, in addition to being oversimplifications,⁴ present a distorted, top-down view of state-society relations in the sultanate that is skewed towards the state.

This brief aims to shift this perspective by providing a more discerning analysis of the relationship between the regime and the actors that contest it. Considering the state as the space for power contestation between rulers and society, it highlights the importance of opposition actors – such as youth groups, industrial workers, and intellectuals – and their encounters with the regime. It first overviews the Omani political context, highlights the major episodes of Arab Spring and post-Arab Spring contestation faced by the regime, and examines how actors on both sides interacted during these episodes and how the regime successfully contained them.

This brief posits that the regime-opposition interrelationship in Oman is governed by the regime’s perception of threat during episodes of contestation which, in turn, is tied to the potential power loss of each episode. The regime does not automatically concede or repress. Instead, it considers the level of threat posed by the contestation as well as the demands and potential reactions of the actors involved, and accordingly employs a varying combination of tools- repression, monetary accommodation, and/or political concession.

Over the last decade, the Omani regime faced two major contestation events: Arab Spring-related protests in 2011 and unemployment protests in 2018 and 2019. In the Arab Spring-related protests, the actors involved included industrial workers in Sohar who sought socio-economic reforms, intellectuals in Muscat who asked the sultan for political opening (such as an elected assembly with greater legislative powers and the removal of corrupt officials), and educated working-class protesters across the country who wanted socioeconomic and political change. In



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the 2018 and 2019 protests, the actors involved included unemployed youths and recent graduates in cities like Muscat, Sur, and Salalah; they protested against high unemployment rates and austerity measures and sought economic reform, including more public sector jobs. In both events, the actors involved sought economic and/or political reform. Neither, however, sought to destabilize the regime. As a result, the regime's reaction was nuanced; some concessions were granted to appease some of the protesters, and repression was used to ensure that unsatisfied protesters accept the concessions so that escalation is avoided.

The type of contestation which the Omani regime faced over the last decade is different from the type it faced earlier during its modern history, such as regional insurgent movements with Marxist ideologies in Dhofar seeking regime overthrow and secessionist movements supporting the establishment of an Imamate regime in the interior region.⁵ These events represented a higher threat to the Omani regime than recent protests, and the regime's response to them was more brutal and involved fewer (if any) concessions.⁶ By comparison, recent protests were reform-oriented, thus less threatening to the regime; they were met with a degree of promised and actual concession and repression (to deter further opposition).

The Omani political context

Oman is ruled by an absolute monarchy; the sultan is both head of state and head of government, as well as the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. Compared to other monarchs in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA region), Oman's sultan is in a uniquely powerful position. He is neither encumbered by the restrictions which monarchs that implemented democracy-oriented reforms face – such as in Morocco or Jordan – nor is he constrained by a politically powerful royal family like in other Gulf monarchies. Furthermore, while he was in power, Sultan Qaboos (1970-2020) was the only ruler that many Omanis knew,⁷ and, therefore, enjoyed significant primacy as he was not viewed as a successor.

While the sultan does not share power, he seeks counsel from a bicameral parliament, the Council of Oman. The Council's lower house, the Consultative Assembly (*Majlis al-Shura*), is the country's only legislative body and all its 86 members are democratically elected to represent the eleven Omani provinces



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(*Wilayat*).⁸ The upper house, the Council of State (*Majlis ad-Dawla*), consists of 83 members all appointed by the sultan.⁹ The Council meets at the sultan's request and makes decisions on issues he raises by majority vote, but it bears no law-making powers.¹⁰ Oman also has a constitution, called the Basic Law, which was introduced and enacted by Sultan Qaboos in 1996 and provides a legal framework and improved civil liberties (by ensuring equality, medical care, education, and religious tolerance).¹¹

What does this mean for state-society relations in Oman? Despite positive steps towards liberalization over the last three decades, the country's constrained political climate creates a power imbalance in favour of the state, making it difficult for contestation to take place as political freedoms remain limited.¹² In fact, there is little avenue for political participation; political parties and associations are not allowed and union laws are restrictive. Civil freedoms are also curtailed. While the Basic Law ensures freedom of expression, this is gagged in practice.¹³ Public expression is limited, local print and broadcast media are restricted, and censorship is prevalent (and overseen by government agencies).¹⁴ Furthermore, the rules on freedom of association are vague; constitutionally, Omanis are allowed to form associations but must obtain the authorities' permission in writing prior to doing so and cannot criticize the regime.

Similarly, civil society in Oman holds little power. It mainly consists of groups founded by or under the purview of the government; they cannot openly oppose the government and thus cannot achieve significant change in the public sphere. Such groups include the Omani Woman's Association, the Oman Society for Petroleum Services, and professional societies (e.g., for doctors, engineers, etc.). However, there are small and still-developing groups of young, educated Omanis that have been established since 2007 and seek to influence the public sphere through online activism on issues such as the need for political and socio-economic reform.¹⁵ These may eventually gain more traction and represent a greater challenge to the regime than the existing forms of civil society.

Recent contestation in Oman

If we consider the state as the space for power contestation between rulers and



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society, then regime robustness and responses to opposition in Oman is significant; it can be indicative of where power lies and what challenges it. Although Oman is sometimes portrayed as a country that has been immune to opposition, the Omani regime has in fact been confronted to dissidence several times throughout its modern history: mainly tribal rebellions, protests triggered by economic hardship, and reform-seeking contestation. This last category is the one which the regime faced most recently, in 2011 Arab Spring-related protests and 2018 and 2019 unemployment protests which sought socioeconomic and/or political reform (instead of regime overthrow or secession).

The 2011 protests started in Muscat in January 2011 and spread to the industrial city of Sohar in February, to Salalah in the south, and to peripheral regions. In Sohar, thousands of industrial workers mobilized to demand socio-economic reforms, such as higher living wages, price cuts, and a solution to unemployment. In Muscat, intellectuals collaborated and organized a petition wherein they asked the sultan for political reforms – namely, the removal of corrupt officials and a more open political sphere. This last demand involved reforming the Basic Law and giving legislative power to the elected assembly (*Majliss al-Shura*). There were also thousands of educated and mostly working-class protesters who took to the streets, including students and ministry workers.¹⁶ Overall, the movement was largely peaceful (including sit-ins, petitions, riots, and demonstrations) except on a few occasions, notably in Sohar, where protesters set fire to the Indian-owned Lulu hypermarket and threw stones at security forces.

After ignoring the initial, smaller-scale protests in Muscat, the regime reacted with a combination of monetary concessions, political reforms, and repression to appease protesters while deterring further protests. First, starting 26 February (a month after the first protests in Muscat) the sultan reshuffled his cabinet, fired targeted personalities, dissolved the Ministry of National Economy which was perceived as being corrupt, and promised that the public prosecutor would have independence. He also proposed new reforms to the 1996 Basic Law that did not limit his vast powers but presented important civil reforms such as setting up an independent consumer protection authority. Monetary concessions included the creation of 50,000 new jobs in the public sector; new monthly unemployment benefits of USD390; the reduction of pension contribution rates for civil servants;



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an increase to private sector minimum wage; higher allowances for students living far away from home; stipends to cover the living costs of military and security personnel; a 100% rise in pensions for people registered at the Social Development Ministry; and a pledge to raise expenditures by 26% to provide more welfare benefits.¹⁷

Repression was also used at the start of the protests in Sohar protests and afterwards. In Sohar, security forces broke up protests, using force, rubber bullets, and tear gas. Dozens of protesters were arrested, and two were killed.¹⁸ In the following months, protesters who marched or organized sit-ins in Muscat, Sur, Sohar, and Salalah were repressed and/or arrested. On 1 and 28 March, the army used live ammunition and military tanks; Sohar was then placed under military control for one week. When a demonstration calling for more jobs and higher pay cropped up in Salalah on 14 May, the army intervened and the authorities cut off the internet. In June 2011, over a dozen arrested protesters received prison sentences on charges of blocking roads, humiliating on-duty civil servants, and shutting down work at a government organization; these sentences ranged from six months to five years.¹⁹ People who were critical of the regime but did not actively protest it were also targeted. In September 2011, for example, a newspaper editor who had accused the Ministry of Justice of being corrupt was arrested and sentenced to five months in prison.²⁰ A month later, a Royal Decree was issued which restricted freedom of expression.²¹ With this strategy, the regime contained the immediate event and deterred further contestation down the line. The contestation had died down by mid-April 2011, though some smaller-scale protests renewed in 2012 and 2013 and were repressed.²²

Nationwide protests, riots, strikes, and rallies against economic hardship erupted in January 2018, December 2018, and January 2019. These events reached several cities including Muscat, Sohar, Sur, and Salalah; thousands of recent graduates and unemployed youths were involved. They protested high unemployment rates and austerity measures adopted by the regime in January 2017 to compensate for decreasing oil prices and for its overspending to contain the 2011 uprisings. These measures involved cutting government spending on subsidies by over OMR500 million (approx. USD1.3m) in 2015-2016. Unemployment is a significant issue in the Sultanate, with the national rate estimated at 15% nationally and over 30% for



young people in 2017.²³

The regime contained these protests by targeting the wider population with financial incentives while repressing continued opposition in the short and long-term. The regime capped the price of regular petrol; diesel and super petrol remained linked to international crude oil prices.²⁴ The regime also promised to create jobs in a six-month timeframe, to restrict the employment of foreign workers in 2018, and to establish a national center for unemployment in 2019.²⁵ It also repressed protesters, who remained unsatisfied and unconvinced by these promises. In southern cities, protesters were arrested immediately upon their arrival to the protest sites; and it is not clear whether and when they were released.²⁶ Others faced riot police brutality. According to Amnesty International, at least 30 people protesting unemployment were arrested and later released in 2018.²⁷ In January 2019, police forces detained two radio journalists who were covering an unemployment protest in Muscat and reportedly forced social media users at the protest to delete the photos and videos which they had taken.²⁸ These protests ended in January 2019.

Outlook: state-society relations after 2011

In the post-Arab Spring period, state-society relations have changed as the wider population – especially young people – has become more disillusioned with the regime, especially in terms of promises of political opening and job creation. In fact, the last legislative elections in 2015 had a turnout of 57% (compared to 76% in 2011) suggesting that Omanis are more disillusioned with the promises of political change than they were in 2011.²⁹

Ten years after the 2011 uprisings, it has become clear that the limited reforms made by the regime were not meant as a step towards transition; instead, they were part of a strategy aiming to appease protesters and contain the threat of protests. The repeated arrests of protesters and activists and constraint on freedom of expression in 2011 and 2012 show the regime's refusal to relinquish its monopoly over power (by sharing it with the legislative body or by opening the political sphere) to any extent. The regime's repression of protesters in 2018 and



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2019, combined with unfulfilled promises of job creation, point to a major issue: state-society relations in Oman continue to be governed by a pseudo-rentier state model which the regime cannot afford to maintain. Without the funds to buy off protesters, the regime may find itself resorting to increased repression.

Going forward, the regime will face heightened discontent triggered by socio-economic hardship, especially as the state has adopted a strategy to reduce public spending since 2014 and will be forced to adopt austerity measures due to low oil prices and the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic. It will also likely face growing popular disillusionment with the unfulfilled promises for reform since 2011. The key contestation actors will not be tribal chiefs, religious leaders, military officers, or business elites – all of which will aim to maintain the status quo. Instead, contestation will come from young, educated, and working-class Omanis. The regime must adapt its strategy to catch up with the transformations its population is undergoing. Along with diversifying the economy,³⁰ the regime must open the political sphere, stop repressing free speech, and rely less on repressive strategies such as arresting protesters and targeting activists.



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4. Indeed, lack of direct criticism does not equate to legitimacy; in highly repressive states, it is difficult to express anti-regime sentiments, and Oman has lèse-majesté laws (Sultanate of Oman, *Omani Penal Code*, Article 126, 1974). Furthermore, dissidence does in fact take place in Oman (as discussed below), and there have been at least 13 events of active opposition in the sultanate from 1900 to 2018.
5. Modern history here refers to the period starting in the 1950s, after the decline of British control over the Gulf.
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