

## **political elite and the introduction of political participation in Oman, The**

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This study focuses on the role of the Omani traditional political elite (the elite) in the introduction of political participation in Oman. Elite analysis is one of the best methodologies for the study of political processes in the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. In considering the role of the Omani elite in the introduction of political participation to the Omani people, it is important to remember how powerful the elite in Oman is. As a guarantor of stability, security and socioeconomic rewards to its people it has a monopoly of legitimate forces, including not only military, police and economic resources, but also a wide range of power to intervene in the lives of its citizens. Sultan Qaboos, the heart of the Omani elite, initiated, implemented and enhanced the current level of Omani political participation.

Within its role as the determinant of Oman's national interest, economically, socially and politically, the elite has used a range of policy tools to accomplish tasks of its own choosing without being subject to periodic influence from the citizens it rules. The majority of Omanis accepted these static conditions until the Omani elite itself initiated change by introducing a special form of political participation. As far as the relationship between change and stability is concerned, no one has ever maintained that the only stable political systems in existence are those which are entirely static. Indeed, most political and social scientists agree that political stability does not preclude considerable social and political change. Rather, they recognize that stability consists of the relative absence of certain types of destabilizing political events, whether changes in government, or peaceful or even violent challenges either to the elite or to the structure of political authority itself.<sup>1</sup>

This study examines two sets of questions. The first is primarily definitional. What is meant by the term "Omani political elite," and who is the sultan, whom we described as its heart? What has been the Omani political participation experience, and how has it evolved? What is the state Consultative Council? the Omani Consultative Council? the Oman Council? The second set is more directly empirical. What is the relationship between modernity and political participation, and how can one initiate an assessment of the political participation process? In attempting to address these questions, a descriptive-- analytical approach is adopted, and the various issues involved are examined at both the theoretical and the empirical levels.

### DEFINITIONS

#### The Sultan

Even though our discussion is based principally on the existence of a traditional political elite, Oman is an autocracy in which the sultan retains the ultimate authority on all important foreign and domestic issues.<sup>2</sup> The country has no formal democratic institutions similar to those existing in the Western world, and its citizens do not have the legal means to peacefully change their leaders or political system. Therefore, it is important to understand the personality of the current sultan.

Qaboos Bin Said Bin Taymour Al Bu Said was born in Salalah in Dhofar on November 18, 1940. He is the only son of the late Sultan Said bin Taymour and eighth in the direct line of the Al Bu Said dynasty, founded by Imam Ahmed bin Said in 1744. Imam Ahmed came to power after a period of political unrest and civil war that led to the collapse of the state of alYariba.<sup>3</sup> Sultan Qaboos is a direct descendant of the nineteenth-century ruler Said bin Sultan. When Qaboos assumed the throne, he took over a country in stagnation and conflict, but his early life gave no hint of what was to come. Qaboos spent his childhood in Salalah, where he received his primary education. At the age of 16, his father sent him to a private school in Britain. In 1960, he was admitted to the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst as an officer cadet. Upon graduation, he joined a British infantry battalion on operational duty in Germany for one year. He also held a staff appointment with the British Army. After his military service, Qaboos studied local government in England and went on a world tour before returning to Oman. Upon his

return, his father sent him to Salalah, where he remained for six years. During that time Qaboos concentrated his efforts on studying Islam, history and the situation of his country and people, which provided him with deeper insights about the backwardness of the country and led him to make dramatic changes.<sup>4</sup>

Qaboos assumed the Omani throne on July 24, 1970, in a palace coup directed against his father, who later died in exile in London. He inherited an old, autocratic-- patriarchal Arabic system of power in which the sultan holds all the power. People come directly to him for advice and resolution of their problems, demands and requests. Such a political system can only work adequately for every citizen if the sultan is fair, wise, educated, committed and responsive to his people's needs - and his people are not too numerous.<sup>5</sup> However, the new sultan was confronted with insurgency in a country plagued by endemic disease, illiteracy and poverty. One of Qaboos's first measures was to abolish many of the pointless regulations that had caused thousands of Omanis to leave the country, and to offer amnesty to opponents of the late sultan, many of whom returned to Oman. He also established a modern government structure, launched a major development program to upgrade educational and health facilities, built a modern infrastructure and developed the country's resources.<sup>6</sup> On August 9, 1970, Qaboos made his first address to the Omanis. In that address he launched his vision for his country's future and his people's wellbeing.<sup>7</sup>

One of the interesting procedures that Qaboos launched and has kept alive as a part of his method of administering Oman is his annual meet-the-people tour around the country. This month-long tour is unique in the Arab states. No other Arab head of state - except perhaps Shaikh Zaid Bin Sultan Al Nahayan, the president of the UAE - has made such a tour. It takes place normally in March and, over the years, has included every corner of the country. The sultan is accompanied by his ministers, advisers and other responsible officials.<sup>8</sup> According to official literature, the philosophy behind the tour is that the members of the government should not be alienated too much from the simple standard of living of the ordinary people. In even the loneliest and most remote places a reception is held for the sultan. Every citizen has the right to present his problems, express his complaints and make his suggestions face to face with the sultan. Members of the government are drawn in, and everything possible is settled on the spot.<sup>9</sup>

The sultan promulgated Oman's de facto basic law in November 1996. Although it went into force immediately, regulations to implement its provisions are to be phased in by 2000. While the law does not provide for direct elections or political organizations like parties or labor unions, citizens have indirect access to senior officials through the traditional practices of petitioning prominent figures, usually the local governor or wali, or the tribal shaikh, for redress of grievances (all governors are appointed by the sultan). Successful redress depends to an extent on the effectiveness of the prominent figure's access to appropriate decision makers.<sup>10</sup>

#### Other Components of the Elite

A political elite may be defined as the few individuals who occupy the formal positions of political authority, or as those individuals who actually make decisions.<sup>11</sup> Lacking clear information regarding just who does make decisions, one might define a political elite as those individuals possessing a reputation for making decisions. In Oman's case, however, changes have taken place in the structure of the political elite as a result of the massive economic and social development of the last few decades. Prior to the oil era, Omani society was divided into four major groups. First were the traditional political elite consisting only of the ruling family with the sultan himself at the top. Second was the upper strata consisting of the merchant families of Muscat and the other major towns, the tribal nobility, the landlords in the major towns and villages, the warriors of the major Nomadic Bedouin tribes, and the Ulama (religious shaikhs), particularly those of Ibadhism. The Ibadhi imams of Oman have exercised significant influence in political affairs throughout the history of the country.<sup>12</sup>

Third were the traditional middleincome groups composed of small businessmen, traders, ship owners, regular civil servants in Muscat, and the mosque imams of the lower religious circles. Fourth were the lower social groups: workers and fishermen in Muscat and other major towns such as Nizwa, Salalah, Sohar and Sohar; the peasants and small farmers in the town fringes and the hinterland oases; and landless tenants,<sup>13</sup> fishermen, divers and cargo-ship crews along the eastern and southern coasts;

and the members of non-warrior nomadic tribes (mainly sheep and goat herders).

After the discovery of oil, and the utilization of its revenues in social and economic development, the composition of the political elite somehow shifted. The traditional political elite, represented by the sultan, started to recruit certain individuals from the lower strata and admit them to the higher circles. Thus, the post-oil Omani political elite consists of the sultan, the entire ruling family of the Al-Bu Said dynasty, the Council of Ministers, and the members of "elected-appointed" or consultative councils. Besides these elite groups, it is appropriate to consider parts of the modern educated groups as newcomers to the elite arena. At the same time, old social groups remain and continue to exercise significant influence within such a context. Leading merchant family members of Muscat, the tribal shaikhs of interior Oman, and some prominent religious figures still informally maintain important roles. However, the latter are more appropriately studied through their presence in the Council of Ministers and in the representative councils.<sup>14</sup>

It is appropriate to consider the introduction of Western-style forms of institutions as contributing significantly to political change in both the system of government and the composition of the political elite. In fact, the introduction of consultative councils in Oman has enabled representatives of certain social groups with little or no power, such as Bedouin tribal members and emergent middle-income individuals, to gain some elite status.<sup>15</sup> Individuals who occupy membership in representative councils seem pleased by their participation in the political process and by the rewards those positions bring. In fact, even the most vocal opposition groups led by radical political activists have chosen to work within the system rather than advocate radical changes.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, with the development of the oil industry, new social forces and institutions, or old institutions that had taken on new meanings, began to exercise pressure on the authority system. The oil economy had created visible collective inequalities which, when combined with Arab nationalistic or Islamic religious trends, produced several acts challenging the legitimacy of the traditional political elite and the policies of the government.<sup>17</sup> The emerging social, economic and political forces created by the oil market worked to modernize the composition of the Omani political elite.

#### INTRODUCTION OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

In the (GCC) states, including Oman, there is a gap between the rapid economic and social transformation and the level of modernity and the official conservative attitude to preserve and protect the traditional internal characteristics of the political system. This has resulted in a situation where the political institutions and processes are underdeveloped and need dramatic transformation.<sup>18</sup> In any society, modern political institutions can be established if four basic criteria exist. First, there must be a legal structure capable of transforming the public will into activities in harmony with general policy. Second, the public must be involved in the political process and enriched by its participation. Third, the elite must want to achieve national integration through the systematic accommodation of cultural, religious, ethnic and tribal structures. Fourth, there must be a convergence between the administrative knowledge, responsibility and rationality of the elite and the public desire for participation, subject to a neutrally executed justice system.<sup>19</sup>

Besides this, a contemporary state that seeks to be modern should adhere to three basic authorities: the legislative, the executive and the judicial. These authorities should cooperate with each other and share responsibilities. Each authority must not exceed the limits of its responsibilities and must not involve itself in the responsibilities of the other authorities. However, in Oman, as in other GCC states, there is an overlap between the functions of these authorities sufficient to create serious problems. While the elite is willing to change its policies in the fields of public social services and wealth distribution, it is evident also that the elite is reluctant to fully accept new methods in political affairs, especially those concerned with political participation and decision-making processes.<sup>20</sup> The Omani elite is tenacious in preserving the old political order, and the state it rules is characterized by the presence of traditional political structures.

It has been observed that, after the discovery of oil, the Omani elite was committed to achievement and performance and was legitimized by its success. But at the same time, it is strongly connected to traditional legitimization, including the utopian vision of tribalist cohesion and supremacy, the struggle for the preservation of Oman's independence, its historical territories

and the heritage of the people. Thus, the Omani elite's perception of Oman is based on age-old and proven principles that shape many of its policies, with its declared national principles maintaining the country's integrity and the population's dignity. The elite recalled the Omani empires of the past and imagined a new renaissance that would ensure a better life for the people. The elite drew inspiration from Oman's history, integrated properly in the present and looking forward to the future, making sure that Omanis shared the same aspiration. During the first decade of the Qaboos regime, the elite achieved many of its goals for the development of the country. In order to harmonize its social and economic efforts with political activities, the elite worked toward modernizing the government, gradually introducing specially designed political participation.<sup>21</sup> But why did the Omani elite voluntarily choose to introduce political participation?

Despite the existence of modern state structures, contemporary Omani society continues to be run by a tribal mentality. Thus, it seems that the elite realized that the most immediate internal-security problem it faced stemmed from a reluctance to introduce political reforms based on political participation. A look at the history of Oman will reveal that the relationship between the stability of the elite and political participation is an old, crucial, complex and constant issue that goes back to the early days of Ibadhlism,<sup>22</sup> but it has never been explored or discussed in depth. In part, this is due to the lack of any form of public participation in contemporary Oman in the selection of national leadership, as well as in the formation, planning and implementation of national development policies. The situation has tended to isolate the elite from the public both politically and economically. The elite realized that since there are no participation processes or clear channels for transmitting public dissatisfaction to them, the situation could be ripe for underground political activities or even armed struggle. Oman has witnessed two major armed struggles since the early 1950s. The first was the Imamate rebellion of interior Oman from 1952 to 1964; the second was the Dhofari movement from 1969 to 1975.<sup>23</sup>

Forces generated by oil wealth have created a new educated social group and a more broadly educated and politically aware public. Within the process of modernization, it has been necessary for the Omani elite to encourage the emergence of new institutions and social groups. The most important new element is the educated group, where emergence is producing professionals whose social origins and political affiliations are heterogeneous. The new Western-secular educated Omani citizens are increasingly accumulating a first-hand knowledge of social structures, the mechanisms of producing manufactured goods, and capital investment related to development and modernization. They share the perception of not belonging to the traditional political elite and forming a new, distinguished social group placed near or within the circles of power but without any possibility of attaining genuine elite membership.<sup>24</sup>

It is essential to emphasize that the situation does not rule out the existence of variations in the support of these newcomers for the traditional political elite. Political observers and scholars have different views on this issue. Some believe that the deadlocks reached at different points by the elite will eventually lead to political satisfaction among the educated. Others believe that the future of the educated groups and its members' dissatisfactions are linked to the directions of national developments, which, under different labels and with the amorphous confusion of ideas and policies characteristic of economic, social and even political development, provide a common denominator for all forces of change. A third group has concentrated on the use to be made of the means which the outside world is placing at the disposal of their country.<sup>25</sup>

The common nature of their preoccupation and of their political roles categorizes them as potential second- and third-tier political elites but not a traditional political elite. The allusion made increasingly to "Islamization of the state" corresponds both to fear of a new force to be reckoned with and to hope among several educated groups favorably inclined to reforms that all or part of this new management can be recruited to their cause.<sup>26</sup> To foresee whether they will become instruments or will constitute a new opposing power is not easy, and under the present conditions would be closer to guesswork than to reasoned prediction. What is certain, however, is that the educated groups are present in the modernization of Oman. Justifiably so, because of modern education, several ordinary citizens have occupied important governmental positions. This has led to domestic policy formation being divided between the autocratic elite and emerging, politically aware non-elites. The new situation should force the traditional political elite to reconsider its position and take steps to modify traditional political

structures.

The elite has understood that its static position vis-a-vis political participation is a factor that has caused the backwardness of the country's administration. This has led to a delay in the formation of civil society in Oman. Indeed, while the Omani society harvested the benefits of social and economic development, it has continued to suffer from the old political culture, which is relatively in conflict with the modern norms of civil society. As a result, Omani society seems to be hampered. While it has absorbed most of the inputs of modern life resulting from socioeconomic development, it has remained politically dominated by the inputs of the traditional tribal society.<sup>27</sup>

## PARTICIPATORY STRUCTURES

The recent political participation experience of Oman has passed through three stages. The first took the form of the State Consultative Council (SCC), the second, Oman's Consultative Council (OCC), and the third, introduced recently, the Oman Council or Majlis Oman.

### The State Consultative Council

The Omani political elite established the SCC in November 1981 according to a royal decree issued by Sultan Qaboos. In his speech at the opening ceremony, Sultan Qaboos declared that the aim of the SCC was to prepare Omanis to voice their opinions regarding the government's efforts to implement development policies and to encourage the government to follow through with its proposed policies.<sup>28</sup> The SCC originally comprised 45 members including the chairman, who was appointed separately. The membership of the SCC included 17 representing the government, 17 representing the Omani Wilayat and 11 representing the private business sector. All members were appointed by the sultan personally, via royal decree. The SCC was established to devise and recommend economic and social development policies, to then be submitted by the chairman of the SCC directly to the sultan.

Although the SCC was primarily an advisory mechanism, established by the sultan to assist him and his cabinet to develop new policies consonant with the changing times, it also presented a definite transformational step away from absolute authoritarian tribal rule. Even though the SCC's functions were limited to submitting recommendations, its membership represented a broad spectrum of Omani society. In 1983, the Omani elite decided to increase the number of SCC members to 55, and the sultan issued a decree confirming the decision. Accordingly, the Wilayat representatives increased to 25, the government representatives to 18 and the business community representatives to 12. Eleven of the government representatives were nominated because of their official positions as undersecretaries of various ministries, such as education, health, social affairs, economy, industry and housing, the functions of which were related to the work of the SCC. The Omani Chamber of Commerce nominated the representatives of the business community, and the Walis nominated the representatives of their provinces. The sultan, however, had to confirm all nominations. The government provided the SCC with its budget, a general secretariat, an executive bureau and a number of committees.<sup>29</sup> The members were expected to give their opinions on affairs of state and to advise the government on domestic policies when asked.<sup>30</sup> They could not, however, involve themselves in any executive or judiciary matter.

Until late 1990, the decision-making processes of the Omani government remained unchanged despite the existence of the SCC for almost a decade. The situation appears to have worried Qaboos and the members of the elite close to him, who questioned whether this traditional system of rule was in the longterm interest of Oman.

When the elite established the SCC, the wheels of change were turned to yet another dramatic transformation. When he addressed the Council in its first session, the sultan said that it was a continuation of policy aimed at achieving a greater scope for citizens to participate in the efforts of the government to implement its economic and social projects through the formulation of opinion and advice. Despite these expressed goals, the SCC's members could only advise the sultan and his ministers because the Council's powers and authority were almost non-existent. Few Omanis were aware of the SCC's purpose.

The government at the time had failed to explain the SCC's functions as an advisory council similar to what is known in the Omani traditional political culture as the Siblih (a public gathering to discuss policy issues), and each member represented all of Oman rather than a specific region. However, given the sultanate's complex tribal relations, this may be understandable, as it is difficult to try and classify each delegate's own constituency. Furthermore, in the absence of an official census, proportional representation remained an impractical option. The lack of communication between Omanis further hampered potential progress within the SCC. Because of its limited scope, the SCC was not meant to be a permanent fixture on the political scene, and whether the Omani elite had a complete set of institutions in mind by then was far less important than its willingness to pursue policies that gradually introduced them. The elite also realized that their country's long-term interests could only be achieved through an evolutionary approach that recognized both its strengths and weaknesses.

Accordingly, the elite aimed at gradual change, especially on domestic issues.<sup>31</sup> It then decided to reform the SCC, give it more power and authority, involve it in a wider range of activities, and include ordinary citizens in order to enable it to play a more significant role in the political, economic and social development of the country.<sup>32</sup> Nine years after its establishment, the SCC was dissolved, and in November 1990 Sultan Qaboos announced that a Majlis Al-Shura (Oman Consultative Council) would replace the SCC.

### The Omani Consultative Council

In 1991, the Majlis Al-Shura (OCC) replaced the 10-year-old SCC in an effort to systematize and broaden public participation in government. On November 18, 1990, in a speech Qaboos gave to mark his twentieth anniversary on the throne, he announced that a new council was to be set up within a year. By November 25, 1991, the new council had been established and its powers and operating framework had been defined by the royal decree of November 12, 1991, which became effective on December 1, 1991.<sup>33</sup>

In its first formation, the new OCC represented the 59 Wilayat of Oman and had 59 members and a chairman. Even though the decree stated that the members of the OCC were to be elected, the reality turned out to be somewhat different. Each member was chosen by the deputy prime minister for legal affairs from a list of three candidates indirectly selected in caucuses held in the Wilayat in which hundreds of prominent citizens participated.<sup>34</sup> These citizens included local dignitaries and people of valued opinion and experience. The names of the candidates were then submitted to the deputy prime minister for legal affairs, who chose one member for each Wilayat and then submitted a list with the proposed names to the sultan. The final choice was made by Qaboos, who picked 59 of the 60 members from the list of proposed names submitted to him and also appointed the chairman. In contrast to the SCC, no serving government official was eligible for OCC membership.<sup>35</sup>

In the short time since its establishment, the OCC has met four times a year in full session as decreed by Sultan Qaboos, while the Council's Committees have met virtually every week. There were four committees specializing in legal, economic, health and social welfare, educational and cultural matters and a fifth focusing on local communities. Organizationally, the OCC referred whatever proposals it received from Omani citizens on public issues to the concerned committees. The committees in turn prepared reports on agenda items for full council consideration. All members and the chairman served a three-year term during which they were empowered to discuss and advise on socioeconomic affairs. Members of the Council of Ministers were allowed to attend the OCC sessions.

In November 1994, the elite decided to implement more reforms. It expanded the number of council seats to 79 plus a chairman. The new council assumed its duties in December 1994. According to the new regulations, each Wilayat with a population of less than 30,000 had to elect two representatives, one of whom was then nominated to the membership of the OCC. The Wilayat with more than 30,000 citizens elected four representatives, of whom two were nominated as members of the Council. Thus, while each Wilayat had one representative in the OCC of 1991, the OCC of 1994 doubled the number of representatives for all the Wilayats with more than 30,000 citizens. This change added an element of greater representation to the Council. The number of representatives for each area in the 1994 OCC (an area consists of several Wilayats) was as follows: 11 members represented

the Muscat area, which comprises six Wilayats (two of the 11 members were women); 20 members represented the Al-Batinah area, which comprises 12 Wilayat; 14 members represented the Al-Shargiyyah area, which comprises 11 Wilayats; six members represented the Al-Dhabira area, which comprises five Wilayats; four members represented the Dhofar area, which comprises ten Wilayats; and four members represented the Musandam area, which comprises four Wilayats.<sup>36</sup>

Due to the 1994-97 population increase, the number of seats was further expanded to 82 for the October 1998 elections. In the October 1998 elections over 50,000 Omani men and women (3 percent of the total population) were eligible to vote in all districts throughout the country. These voters (or electra ) had volunteered for the position, their police records were checked by the government, and they were subject to government approval. In some cases nominees with the most votes might not win appointment to the OCC if the sultan decided not to appoint them.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the fact that the OCC has no formal legislative powers and that its role is consultative, its members remain partly responsible for the development decisions taken by the sultan and his government. Prior to the final approval and implementation of any social or economic plan, a draft of the law is sent to the OCC for revision.

#### The Oman Council

Article 58 of the Basic Statute of the state deals with the Oman Council or Majlis Oman. It reads, "The Oman Council shall consist of (1) the Shura Council and (2) the state council. The law shall specify the jurisdiction of each, its term, sessions and rules of procedure.

Also the law shall determine the number of its members, the conditions they should satisfy, the way they are selected or appointed, the reasons for their dismissal and other regulatory provisions."<sup>38</sup> In accordance with the article, the elite announced the State Council Majlis alDawla. By this the two pillars of Omani shura were launched, permanently altering the political fabric of Omani society. On December 16, 1997, Sultan Qaboos announced the appointment of 41 members to the new SC. However, it seems that the SC is a form of representative body established to match the British House of Lords or the U.S. Senate. The SC members are selected by the sultan from former employees such as ministers, ministry secretary-generals, former ambassadors, former senior judges, retired senior officers and individuals with expertise in science, the arts and culture as well as academicians. Council regulations indicate that dignitaries and businessmen as well as prominent Omani citizens who have given distinguished service to the country, or anyone else whom the sultan considers fit to appoint, qualifies as well. Observers consider this upper house a reservoir of talent from former senior Omani Officials and citizens. Since no SC member is allowed to hold any other public office; the aim was to free these individuals to serve the country as a whole rather than promote a narrow constituency.<sup>39</sup>

Even though the precise responsibilities of the SC and its relationship to the existing OCC remain to be clarified, building on the experience of the OCC, the Omani government has called on the SC to prepare studies on the following: (1) solving economic and social problems, (2) encouraging investment in different sectors of the economy, (3) implementing administrative reforms and improving performance, (4) drafting laws prepared by ministers and government institutions and proposing draft amendments before steps are taken for their promulgation and after they have been referred to the OCC, and (5) reviewing and critiquing subjects serving the public interest that have been referred to it by the sultan or the Council of Ministers.

The SC members' term in office is limited to three years, subject to a single renewal. Sultan decree 6/97 limits service for any one individual to a maximum of six years unless that individual is a government official.<sup>40</sup> By such a decision, the elite wanted to block influence peddling and place permanent obstacles to such behavior by equipping the country with transparent institutions. Speaking at the inauguration of the SC, Qaboos declared that the SC and the OCC conventions fulfilled his wishes to establish solid foundations for a genuine consultative experience based on the Islamic Shura, the nation's heritage, and the history of Oman, which takes pride in its past while adopting the best that the modern world has to offer. From what the sultan said at that ceremony, it has become evident that the Omani elite is eager for closer cooperation between the two councils and that all members need to express their views clearly without fear or favor.

## An Assessment

From the kind of political participation introduced to the people of Oman, it is clear that the Omani elite has emphasized the potentially disruptive consequences of unrestricted political participation, as it was aware that an effective democratic system could only exist when Omanis matured politically and exercised their rights in a more responsible way. While introducing a special form of political participation, exclusively designed for Oman,<sup>41</sup> the elite was acknowledging that effective public participation is indeed restricted and emphasized that this reality was necessitated by the overriding importance of national resilience, expressed in slogans of political cohesion, economic development, social harmony, social solidarity<sup>42</sup> and a sense of Omani national aspirations. It is suggested, then, that the elite believed that Oman can only achieve its goals in a political environment characterized by stability and continuity. Thus, comprehensive Western-style political participation was considered an expensive experience which Oman could not afford. It was believed that full democracy in an illiterate society is fundamentally divisive, and thus destabilizing, and could deflect natural energy and resources from the crucial task of building national resilience.<sup>43</sup>

The political-participation functions introduced to the Omani people have been geared toward formalizing the existing political system based on traditional rule and legitimizing the regime both domestically and internationally rather than providing effective popular discussion and evaluation of government policies. Therefore, political participation in Oman has so far not offered the whole content of democracy. The methods and procedures introduced to organize the comprehensive aspects of the two Councils have not provided a system of roles, behaviors, ideologies and institutions enabling Omani citizens to regularly scrutinize, evaluate and influence official policy decisions and official definitions of reality. The elite has not extended effective political power beyond the boundaries of the traditional circle, nor did they intend to.<sup>44</sup> Yet politics in Oman is fundamentally sultanistic rather than ideological or institutional. In fact, this is the case for all the GCC states, perhaps excepting Kuwait, and it is especially important in Oman, where the polity's structurally derived tendencies toward personalistic political behavior are further reinforced and magnified by certain traditional political, cultural and religious values.<sup>45</sup> Thus, whether it is at the level of the Tamimah (sub-tribe) or the Qabilah (tribe) or the highest level of government bureaucracy in Muscat, the primary loyalties in Omani politics are not to abstract ideologies and institutions, but to the sultan himself. In a traditional political culture such as that of Oman, power emanates from the top of the social hierarchy and grows weaker as it moves down. Proximity to power thus becomes the source of power.<sup>46</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The critics of the Omani elite voiced their opposition to its alleged heavyhandedness in setting the tone of debate in the sultanate because Oman was an autocracy. The elite, who felt that Oman's literacy rate had reached a reasonable level, embarked on one of the most important political reformulations in the history of Oman by introducing political participation. During the period before introducing political participation, the elite faced a dilemma. On the one hand, if the rate of change is too rapid, serious splits with traditional values will result, causing counter-modernization movements in which dissatisfied groups rebel and demand a return to religious fundamentalism, similar to what occurred in Iran. On the other hand, if the rate of change is too slow, expectations generated by new economic progress cannot be fulfilled, similar to what is taking place in other third-world oilproducing nations. Thus, one would predict that disillusionment is inevitable, and new opponents may arise calling for rapid modernization by more drastic methods. The Dhofari armed struggle of the late 1960s to mid-1970s is well remembered by the Omani elite. Therefore, the tensions between the demands of modernization and traditional views have resulted in new beliefs. These beliefs are likely to be given a voice by groups such as the new ranks of the bureaucracy, the educated or the new emerging middle-income social groups in general. Although ambitious, zealous and impatient, they actually are sensitive to resistance to change.

Furthermore, there is another constraint on the rate of change. With economic development comes new social differentiation, mainly occupational groups. These seek political participation as an expression of their social status. Where modernization is too rapid, high expectations are fostered by the mobility of these groups. This may impel them to become autonomous centers

of power. Besides that, if change is too slow, traditional elements may be intransigent in their resistance to the new differentiation. Finally, a dilemma rotates around the exclusiveness or inclusiveness of the Omani political elite. An expansion of elite membership may diminish control and extend the range of conflict. Yet being too restrictive can deny proper representation to the elite. In either case, the elite must opt for the new differentiations, allowing new groups to have representation. However, if individuals from the new strata are not permitted entry into elite positions, efforts at collective mobility may result.

On the other hand, if such groups with their extreme anti-traditional outlooks are too rapidly absorbed into power positions, dissension may result. All these variables led the elite to introduce this form of "balanced" political participation to the Omani people at this transitional stage of Oman's history.

<sup>1</sup>David Sanders, *Patterns of Political Instability* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1981), p. X111.

<sup>2</sup>The sultan could be considered the heart of the Omani political elite. For an explanation of what is meant by "inner core," see chart one in Abdulla Juma Alhaj, "A Gulf Citizen's Viewpoint of the Gulf Cooperation Council: A Critique," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. XX 11, No. 4, Summer 1999, pp. 49-72.

<sup>3</sup>Aysha Ali Al-Sayar, *The State of Al-Yaribah in Oman and East Africa between 1624-1741* (in Arabic) (Beriut: Dar Al-Qouds, 1975).

<sup>4</sup>HIS Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said Al Said, [www.omanet.com](http://www.omanet.com), pp. 1-6.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1997* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998), pp. 1544-51.

<sup>7</sup>Sultan Qaboos addressing the Omani people, Muscat, August 1970, in al-Notig al-Sami [The prominent speech] (Muscat: Ministry of Information and Culture, 1986), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup>[www.omanet.com](http://www.omanet.com), op. cit., p. 4.

Oman Ministry of Information, *Building of the Modern State* (Muscat: Ministry of Information, 1995), p. 84.

<sup>10</sup>Sultanate of Oman, *The Basic Statute of the State* (Muscat: Diwan of the Royal Court, N.D., p. 23); [www.omanet.com/basiclaw.htm](http://www.omanet.com/basiclaw.htm), p. 1.

<sup>11</sup>Omar I. El-Fathaly and Monte Palmer, *Political Development and Social Change in Libya* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books [C. Heath and Company], 1980), p. 41; Monte Palmer and William Thompson, *The Comparative Analysis of Politics* (Itasca: F.E. Peacock, 1978), chapter 4.

<sup>12</sup>Paula Casey-vine, ed., *Oman in History* (London: Immel Publishing, 1995), pp. 223-48.

<sup>13</sup>Abdulkarim Homoud al-Dakheel, "Political Modernization in Oman" (in Arabic), *Journal of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies*, Vol. XX1, No. 82, 1996, pp. 271-2.

<sup>14</sup>Such an approach for identifying the elites of the GCC states has been utilized in recent years by GCC states' political studies students. See as an example Ahmed Abdulla Saad Baz, *Political Elite and Political Development in Kuwait*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, George Washington University, 1981; Abdulla Juma Alhaj, *The Formation of the Political Elite of the United Arab Emirates*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Reading, 1989.

<sup>15</sup>Abdulla Juma Alhaj, "The Politics of Participation in the Gulf Cooperation Council States: The Omani Consultative

Council," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 4, Autumn 1996, pp. 564.

16 Ian Skeet, *Oman. Politics and Development* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 33. "Abdulkarim Homoud Al-Dakheel, p. 274.

'R Abdulla Juma Alhaj, "The Gulf Political Elites After the Second Crisis," *Social Affairs (UAE)*, No. 33, 1992, pp. 199-210.

11 Ralph Braibanti, "Administrative Modernization" in *Modernization: The Dynamics of Growth*, ed. Myon Weiner (New York and London: Basic Books, 1966), pp. 166-7.

2" Alhaj ( 1992), p. 204.

11 Joseph A. Kechichian, "Oman, A Council," *Arabies Trends*, No. 19, April 1999, p. 2406. 22 Paula Casey-Vine, p. 248.

" University of Basrah, *Reality and Expectations of Oman's Revolution* (in Arabic) (Basrah: Arab Gulf Studies Center, 1978) (Special Series, No. 8, Restricted Distribution).

24 For a similar situation, see Alhaj ( 1989), p. 251.

21 Author's interview with a former member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG), Dubai, December 15, 1997.

11 Ibid.

27 These observations are based on author's interviews with Omani citizens from the educated group in Muscat and Sohar between August 2 and August 15, 1991.

zA The Prominent Speech, p. 116. 29 Ian Skeet, p. 120.

" Sultanistic Decree No. 86/81 covering the by-laws of SCC The Official Gazette of Oman (Muscat: Ministry of Information, November 1, 1981 ), No. 228.

" Kechichian, p. 25.

'z Hadi Hassan Hammoudi, *Omani Political Thought* (in Arabic) (London: Riyadh Al-Rayis Books, 1993), p. 3000.

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"U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1997* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998), p. 1544.

31 Alhaj ( 1996), p. 562,

16 Al-Bayan UAE (Dubai), November 21, 1994, and Al-Khaleej, UAE (Sharjah), Novermber 21, 1994. " Kechichian, p. 25.

3R Sultanate of Oman, *The Basic Statute of the State* (Muscat: Diwan of the Royal Court, Non Dated), p. 23. See also, p. 11.

Kechichian, p..26. ..

40 The Official Gazette of Oman, decree No. 6/97 .( 1997).

Alhaj (1996), pp. 569-71.

42 The speech of Sultan Qaboos in the opening ceremony of the Oman Consultative Council of 1997 (a collection of Sultan Qaboos' speeches in various ceremonies), Muscat, December 1997.

43 Al Itihad newspaper (UAE, Abu,Dhabi), December 16, 1997.

44 Abdulla Juma Alhaj, "An Inquiry into the Politics of Elitism in the GCC states: The Security Dilemma," Arab Journal for the Humanities, No. 57, Winter,1997, p. 337.

11 Jbid., p. 338.

46 Author's Interview, Muscat, August 10, 1997.

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