

## Interview with Mohamed Al-Yahyai

# Freedom of Expression

**Elections Today:** How would you assess the health of civil society in Oman today?

**Mohamed Al-Yahyai:** In the West, I believe the concept of “civil society” emerged after a long-standing struggle between religion (represented by church leaders and feudal lords) and the people (represented by community leaders). In contrast, Arab societies were shaped by Islam as both a religion and a way of life. Civil society in the Islamic world grew in harmony with religious principles, rather than against them, as it did in the West. These Islamic principals encouraged people to build a system of charity, which is, I think, one of the main features of civil society anywhere. It is necessary to understand this history in order to understand Arab societies and politics in general, as well as the concepts of civil society, democracy and human rights as they are understood in the Western world.

Before assessing the health of civil society in Oman, we have to ask whether or not civil society exists there. The answer seems to be both yes and no.



In order to fulfill the requirements of a modern state, the government has, of course, recently allowed the establishment of a sort of civil association, such as a society of doctors (headed by the minister of health), and there are ongoing efforts to launch a society of writers, again represented by an official from the Ministry of Information. In other words, there is what can be described a “civil-governmental” society in Oman and elsewhere in the Arab world.

**ET:** What challenges do CSOs in Oman face with respect to freedom of expression?

**MY:** CSOs have no right to organize activities without written approval from the Ministry of Social Development. As a result, these associations have no ability to express themselves. All forms of media in Oman, except the Internet, are completely controlled by the government.

**ET:** Do you think the Internet can play an important role in building the knowledgeable civil society advocated by the UNDP’s 2003 Arab Human Development Report?

**MY:** Yes. As a global, uncontrollable channel of information, the Internet can play an important role in building a “knowledgeable society.” A more important question is how the Internet can be used as a tool for building such a society.

In Oman, Internet use, especially among university students, is increasing, as are cyberforums, most notably Al Omania Net ([www.omania.net](http://www.omania.net)). There are also some great indications that Omanis are using the Internet to raise issues that the traditional media cannot broach, such as governmental corruption.

However, the Omani government can monitor Internet users since the single Internet provider there is government-controlled. In the past three years, there have been at least two cases in which Internet users were arrested and questioned by the government with regard to their Internet use. So while the government allows people to use the Internet, it puts many obstacles in the way of using it as a tool for democratization and political change.

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On one hand, civil society exists in Oman because religious institutions and society work together. In addition, Oman’s unique form of Islam, Ibadism, insists that civil society be independent from the state and must influence the policy of the state. This social and political function of civil society was practiced in Oman as early as the seventh century A.D.

On the other hand, there is no civil society now in Oman if “civil society” means that people have the right to participate in their nation’s interests, to know what is going on in their country and to establish whatever associations they need without official restrictions. Currently, to establish any professional association in Oman, a person must follow a complicated set of rules and promise that he or she will not practice any sort of politics.