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Democracy in Slow Motion: Oman Goes to the Polls

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Tomorrow, around 400,000 Omani men and women are expected to vote in elections for eighty-five seats on the nation's Majlis al-Shura, or Consultative Council. Among the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf region, Oman -- a key U.S. ally and exporter of oil and gas, strategically positioned opposite Iran -- is often considered to be the most politically progressive, perhaps even evolving slowly toward a constitutional monarchy. But the country remains dominated by its ruler, Sultan Qaboos bin Said, and for now, the council is limited to advice on public services and infrastructure.

Modernizing the Electoral Process . . .

Established in 1991, the council has been nominally elected in one manner or another since 1994, with the government attempting to improve the process and expand suffrage with each successive election. In early caucus-style elections, the government and tribal leaders selected the voters. In 1997, for instance, tribal leaders chose 50,000 citizens to participate, and in 2000, the number grew to 114,000. Some of these "selectors" were women, who were given the right to participate in 1994 and permitted to run for office in 1997. It was not until 2003, however, that universal suffrage was instituted. Today, any adult over the age of twenty-one who is not a member of the security or armed forces is eligible to vote -- around 850,000 citizens this year. In addition, Qaboos has conceded his right to annul elections or remove elected members. Expatriate Omanis have also been accommodated and will be able to vote in eleven regional embassies.

When the polls close, the votes will be tabulated using the most modern scanning technology, ensuring that the outcome will be known within hours. Although proud of its efficiency, the Omani government is displaying its usual shyness: the ministry of interior stated that international observers do not need to witness the event because the process will be so transparent.

Another evolutionary change this election is candidates' ability to actually campaign. Until now, posters, banners, and paid media were prohibited. Although rallies and other gatherings are still prohibited, candidates are now able to buy newspaper ads and put up posters. These new regulations will not usher in dramatic changes, however, since political parties are still banned under Omani law. Moreover, candidates can speak about their background and experience, but not their ideas. For the most part, the 833 candidates -- 808 men and 25 women -- battling for the eighty-five council seats will rely primarily on word of mouth and tribal connections to get their message out.

. . . But Not the Political System

Although Oman has progressed quickly on certain fronts, its government remains autocratic. The signs of progress are clear -- for example, before Qaboos overthrew his father with British help in 1970, there were only three primary schools and one hospital in the country, and cars could not be driven at night in the capital, Muscat, without written permission. But the reins of power have not changed hands: the sultan makes all of the important decisions and holds the positions of prime minister, defense minister, finance minister, foreign minister, and governor of the central bank.

Oman is regarded as well administered, with a good economy and a stable domestic society. And with prosperity and stability comes a liberalizing impulse. Experimentation with consultative mechanisms has increased, but nothing near a democratic level. Advice to the ruler, when sought, comes from a variety of sources: his own family (although he has no children and therefore no nominated heir), the upper house (which he appoints), members of the cabinet (whom he also appoints), and the elected Consultative Council.

Therein lies the challenge for Oman as it continues its movement from autocracy to democracy. As with other regional monarchies and sheikhdoms that have embarked on democratic change, it faces the difficult prospect of substantive constitutional reform now that the more cosmetic procedural changes have been largely completed. Despite their direct election, council representatives have no real power in Muscat and are therefore unable to demonstrate their usefulness to their constituencies. As voters realize they have little to gain from the process, interest will wane and turnout will continue to drop. This trend has most recently been evidenced in Morocco, where many citizens chose not to vote in last month's parliamentary elections despite the transparency of the process itself.

What the Future Holds

The government seems to have recognized the challenge and has launched a broad voter campaign urging citizens to participate. Perhaps as a signal that he is prepared for more change, Qaboos reshuffled the cabinet and named a new Consultative Council chairman in September -- the first such change since the council was originally appointed in 1991. More will have to be done, however.

According to a recent report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, council members are frustrated because the government rarely follows their advice and does not credit them for the few ideas it accepts. A former female member argued that the council has actually lost power over time, and that it is informed rather than consulted. She urged that the council be given political and financial independence.

There can be no question that Oman's quiet effort to liberalize and modernize has come a long way since the 1970s. Nevertheless, this weekend's elections do not give Omani citizens the ability to truly change their government. If the experiment in directly electing the country's proto-parliament is to mean anything at all, the Consultative Council must be given real power in the years to come. Otherwise, the sultanate will likely find it difficult to retain citizens' interest in a process that does not visibly enhance their ability to shape policy and improve their lives.

Regional Context

Although Oman technically lies outside the Persian Gulf, it is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and is not immune from tensions found in other GCC states. For example, most Omanis are adherents of the conservative Ibadi Muslim sect, which under Sultan Qaboos practices in a nonpoliticized way. In 2005, however, some one hundred Islamists seeking to implement "true Ibadism" were arrested in connection with a plot to overthrow the government. Moreover, current oil and gas prices may have boosted government revenues, but the country's wealth is nothing compared to that of neighboring Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates. Qaboos seems to prefer the cultural caution of these two countries -- laggards in the movement toward greater political participation -- rather than the examples of Kuwait (whose parliament played a crucial role in choosing the new ruler in 2006) and Bahrain (which had a lively election campaign earlier this year). This weekend, the people of Oman will indicate their own preference.

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