

Oman: Preference of Stability and Economic Modernization over Political Development



Mohammad Mohsin Hamidi

Assistant Professor of Politics, Department of Law and Administrative Sciences, Birjand Branch, Islamic Azad University, Iran

SUMMARY: Oman, an Arab country in Persian Gulf, right on the southern part, has a long history with traditional customs. Oil has opened new opportunities for development. In an area with rash political changes and many political world-wide waves, it has been a nearly stable country. The author shows in this article, that the governors of Oman, how preferred stability over rapid democratic changes.

1. PROBLEMATIQUE

Oman an old territory in the southern part of the Persian Gulf, which is called the first Arab independent state, was the last Arab country which gained a Basic law. In spite of many instances of riot and revolutions in neighbor and Middle East states, after Dhozar leftist movement in early 1971, there was almost no insurgent movement in Oman. In economic sphere there was some remarkable progress and also in social arena it is seen some signs of social changes. So, it seems that Oman has been a state in which stability and economic progress versus political development, was the priority of the state, and so far it has been succeeded. This issue is considered in the present article, in addition to the possible impact of social change on political sphere.

2. THEORETICAL APPROACH

After many controversial debates on the development theory during more than last century in social and political sciences (See: SN Eisenstadt and HJ Helle (Editors), 1981), about the priorities and the path of development, for example about the priority of economic development or political development, now its clear that there is no single path, and we can speak of different paths that are appropriate to diverse countries. Here I will clear that if Oman continue its developmental plan successfully and review it constantly, it may reach nearly its goals, even it takes longer that we expect firstly.

3. A SHORT HISTORY

The territory which is called Oman, has a long history. Before Islamic period, it was a part of Iranian Sassanid, and when the region became a part of Islamic Caliphate territory (The Umayyad and Abassid Caliphate, then we see a kind of Imam al-Muslimin, known Ibadi Imammate, by Azd clan leaders. There was civil wars there, and this territory was ruled by different groups as the Qarmatians, the Persian Buyyid dynasty (893-1470). At 1650 Portuguese captured Muscat, they expelled Persian garrison, Hussain bin Said. Then during 1853, 1856 Bandar-e Abbas and a coastal line of 150 km in Persian Gulf was reoccupied by Persian (Iranian) Forces. From 1937 UK had a clear power on the parts like Khuriya Muriya (Kuria Muria). UK has a main role in separation of Zanzibar from Muscat in 15 May 1861. From 1965-1975, in Zafar (Dhofar), was 4 rigorous efforts by secessionist groups, which Iran dispatched military assistance, at demand of Oman government, and they overcame this movement (See: World Statesmen).

There was strong relations with Britain during 18th century, and the first of "friendship treaties" was signed in the region in Muscat. Qaboos Bin Said Al-Said overthrew his father in 1970, and ruled a long period till 11 January 2020. He hasn't a child and his cousin, Haytham Bin Tariq Bin Taimour Al-Said, former minister of Heritage and culture, was sworn as new sultan. Qaboos established a moderate foreign policy, which brought good relations with the neighbors and also USA and UK. He also started a modernizing economic policy (See: CIA World fact book, WFB).

Haythim, after the death of Qaboos in January 2020, was chosen by royal family, as the new Sultan. HE appointed his son, current ministry of culture, youth and sports as the Crown prince, the action which was different from the era of Qaboos, that the successor was not clear.

Some observer emphasis that Oman is the oldest independent state in the Arab world (See: US News, Oman-Ranking).

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4. AN OUTLOOK OF OMAN

Oman is located on southern part of Persian Gulf in western Asia. Its neighbors are: Iran, Pakistan (maritime borders) and Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen (land borders). It's coastal lines is on the Oman Sea and Persian Gulf. Oman capital is Muscat.

According to the report of World Bank, I gathered this data for 2020 situations of Oman:

Life expectancy at birth, total (years)	78
Population, total	5,106,622
Population growth	2.6
Net migration	43700
Human capital index	0.6
GDP	73.97(Billion)
GDP, per capita(current Us \$)	14,485.4
GDP growth (annual %)	-3.2

Unemployment (%)	3.1
Inflation, consumer prices (annual%)	1.5
Personnel remittances, received (% of GDP)	0.1
Forest area (% f land area)	0.0
Access to electricity (% of population)	100.0

(See: Oman World Bank Data).

5. ECONOMIC MODERNIZATION

Main trade partners of Oman are: china (mostly oil), UAE, South Korea, Japan, India, United States, Saudi Arabia (See: CIA World Fact-Book, Economy's Intelligence Unit).

GDP	& 190.1 billion (2017)
Exports	& 1030.3 billion (2017)
Imports	&14.1 billion (2017)

(See: Worldstatesmen)

According the website of [Persian] Gulf Council, these facts are as bellow:

Per capita gross domestic product	16.8 one thousand dollars
Gross domestic product	69.8 million dollar
Total foreign trade	63.9 billion dollar
Exports	29 billion dollar
Oil revenues	5.2 Billion barrels
Gas resources	931 A billion cube feet

(See: Persian Gulf Website).

On January 1, 2009, an agreement between USA and Oman on free trade entered into force, which declared economic reform and openness as it's providing export opportunities for goods and services, improvement of liberalization of trade and investment of Oman and also protection of intellectual property rights, as it's goals. As pursuing a part of this agreement, the parties of the contract hold meeting to cooperate on labor and environment issues (See: Website of office of the United States Trade Representative, Executive Office of the president).

From 9 November 2000, Oman has been come to membership of World Trade Organization (World Trade Organization website).

Oil and gas revenue has provided a good base for economic reconstruction in Arab countries , in Persian Gulf, including Oman.

In addition to oil and gas revenue, Oman has attracted foreign investment. For example foreign investment in Dhofar region has been increasing, and "high purchasing power, a big market size and low cost of doing business in the region has been reported to be very desirable." The government also has proposed some good incentives and reviewed it's regulations as lower tax ratio, and establishment of free zone (See: Alexandrina Maria Pauceanu, 2016).

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6. SOCIAL CHANGE

As technology and modernizing factors is affecting, some social aspects of society in Oman are changing. For example, modernization, educational development of women and their becoming a part of labor force, may be the most affecting factors which has changed the life style and so has decreased the rate of fertility in Oman from 7.6 birth per woman in 1988 to 3.3 births per woman in 2008, which means a decrease rate of %62 within a short period of 20 years (See: M. Mazharul Islam).

In many traditional societies which started modernization process in recent history, the cleavages including gender, religious, ethnic divisions, was one of the crucial factors affecting the fate of the countries. In some Middle East states like Iran, this factor was most influential on the occurrence of the revolution.

In Arab states, some critic analysts, analyze the problems, even problems like Covid-19 pandemic management, from a gender viewpoint. Some of them see success in tackling this challenge in countries like Denmark, Finland, Germany, Taiwan, Iceland, and New Zealand, because their leadership was by female leaders, but in the Middle East it was by men . An analyst with this point of view sees Oman as " a critical, yet surprisingly under-observed case given the sheer speed of it's transformation from tradition to modernity over the past half century". According to them, Oman is a kind of fast, safe, and stable transition, in spite of it's gender equality policy, the country is confronting some challenges including youth unemployment(See: Zeinab Hussein and Leon Gold Smith, 2020).

While there is like most of Persian Gulf Arab states, no political parties in Oman, but in social sphere the issue is somewhat different, for example labor forces can unit and form labor unions and enjoy the right of bargaining and even strike (except in the oil and gas industry), and the law says the employers can fire or penalt employees for this. For foreigners who work in Oman, the subject is nearly different, and a foreign worker who wants to change his/her job, should obtain a "no-objection" certificate from the current employer (See: op.cit. ken , p.10).

Changes in social sphere is not so fast that can changes whole traditional formation , as we can see in Oman, like adjacent countries like Arab United Emirates and Kuwait, what people participate in ritual and ceremonies like Eid-Al azha, or Hajj, you can see texts on media about reviving old folk (See: Oman Daily Observer, and Gulf News).

A main factor that helps states like Arab United Emirates and Oman, in their new modernization programs, is that they has reached an envision for been tolerant towards social issues like nationality and residence certificate, so can absorb talented humans for succeeding in their programs. Oman after the first phase is expanding it's investor residence plans to include creators, innovators, programmers, and giving them long term residence (See: Gulf News, "talented experts can soon apply for long-term residence visa in Oman").

Better financial situations has provided new facilities to new technologies and methods for development in different fields of life, one of them is scientific information.

Also we can see some consequences of oil and gas revenue in increasing of food and nutrition in Oman. Some studies shows that there are some good and weak points (See: Ayoub Al-jawaldeh, Salima Almamary and others).

Some factors has promoted tourism in recent years around the world, including increasing of per-capita revenue, leisure time, better technology in transportation and communication. According an estimation by WYO in 2000, about 2020 tourism, the number was 1602 million and the income was &200 billion. This recent 2-3 years with Corona Virus was not a good time for tourism, but it seems that these inappropriate days are going away. Tourism can bring good opportunities for increasing income, but also has negative aspects on some spheres of life for example in rural areas. So, countries are trying to make plans for sustainable development .An study shows that Oman is trying to be aware of these different aspects (See: Ahmed Hamed Al-Rabani).

7. ANTI CRIME AND SECURITY COOPERATION

Anybody who trace international crimes like piracy or slave trade during last nineteenth century and first decades of twentieth century and first decades of twentieth century and reads these items in international law books, can find that the strategic location of Oman, in southern part of Hormuz strait in Persian Gulf, had engaged this territory in this problems.

Nowadays, also this strategic location, which is a cross-roads of Asia, the Middle East and Africa, has some attractive factors for crime groups who are active in smuggling drugs, firearms, fake goods and cybercrime. So, Interpol has established a national Central Bureau (NCB) for national, regional and international cooperation. This office, which has 15 staff, man and women, is operating in headquarter of Muscat police, and exchanges information with national, regional and world intelligence institutions to prevent and investigate crime (See; Interpol website, Entrance Oman).

8. NUCLEAR FACILITIES

In Middle East, the regions which many factors like regional and religious disputes may cause countries to try for accessing nuclear military weapons, Oman has chosen a peaceful nuclear strategy.

Oman submitted the instruments of accession to the Convention on Nuclear Safety to the International Atomic Energy Agency on 28 May 2013 and then this convention came into force for this country on 26 August, 2018. The National Report of the

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Sultanate was not prepared at that time and then 7 April 2017 was prepared and deposited with the International Atomic Agency (in which 52 users of radioactive sources are distributed in 6 categories as below: 1. Oil exploration, 13 users; 2. Industrial radiography, 13 users; 4. Cement and steel industries, 3 users)(See: The Sultanate of Oman, The Convention on Nuclear Safety,2017).

9. MEMBERSHIP IN INTERNATIONAL REGULATIONS AND TREATIES

Some formal and official tasks shows that Oman is trying to join increasingly to international treaties in economy and international relations, for example in a region which its large neighbor, Iran has not yet joined to world intellectual property organization, Oman in 1996 came to accession which came in force in 1997. Oman signed WIP treaties like Brussels convention at 2007, Hague Agreements in 2009, Madrid Protocol in 2007, Paris Convention in 1999, Patent law treaty in 2007, UPOV Convention in 2009 and WIPO Copyright treaty in 2005(See: WIPO Website).

Oman has entered into the membership of IMF at December 23, 1971, and now at 2022 has a special Drawing Rights (SDR) rate of 672.01 million, and Quota (SDR) 5444.4 million. According to IMF Report, Real GDP Growth of Oman for 2022 was 5.6 percent, and its inflation rate, average consumer prices, Annual Percent Change-3.7 (See: Oman and IMF).

Oman, at a glance, in 2022, amongst countries, has the ranking number of: 70 economy in terms of GDP, 62 in total exports, 67 in total imports, 57 economy in terms of GDP per capita and 73 most complex economy according complexity index (ECI). About Oman's exports we can say, are crude petroleum (&73.38). Petroleum Gas (&4.448), Refined petroleum (& 2.39 B), Semi finisher Iron (&1.03 B), And Nitrogenous Fertilizers (& 957M), exporting mostly to china (& 13.8B), India (\$2.77B), South Korea (&1.93B), United Arab Emirates (&1.75B), and Saudi Arabia (&1.57B) (See: OEC).

Oman tries to improve its investment on port, in order to become a Persian Gulf gateway, and a major center in west India Ocean. This logistics could employ 300,000 people in Oman by 2020 (See: Sebastian Castelier, 2021).

10. POLITICAL SPHERE

Qaboos bin Said Al Said was on the throne since July 23, 1970 until 2021. In other words he had been monarch of the country for more than 50 years, which is a record on the world. In this ranking, he was after Hassanl Bolkihah, the sultan of Brunei, and Elizabeth II, The queen of Britain (Chris Leadbeater,2017).He didn't have any son, and he appointed his brother, as his successor in last year of his life. Haitham bin Tariq.The current Sultan, has issued on January 10, 2021, a Royal Decree No. 6/2021, about the Basic law, and determined a new mechanism for crown prince's appointment and abolished Royal Decree No. 6/101. According to that the crown prince will be fixed in his eldest son line (See: Oman: New Basic law issued greeting a mechanism for appointing a crown prince).

Oman's Constitution was issued following a decree of Sultan Qaboos and was amended through 2011, so it's a kind of constitution which may be called, a donated constitution; it means that the monarch has donated it to people, and it hasn't appeared following a socio-political movement.

In Article 1, stipulates that it's a sultanate, Arab, Islamic and Independent (sovereign) state. In Article 2, Islam is mentioned as the state's religion, and "Sharia" is called as the foundation of legislation, but since there is differences between Islamic religions, even in Sunni world, it can be asked that which branch of Sunni religions in contradictory issues can be referred and decisive. Some major points of sovereignty is determined in Article 5 that stipulates the structure of power as sultani and hereditary in the male descendents. Article 6 says that the Royal Family Council, within three days, after "throne falling vacant", should determine "The successor to the throne", and if they are not able to determines a council of official according to Sultan's letter to the Royal Family Council will determine the next sultan.

There was in "inner" Oman (1913-1955), a kind of theocracy, "Ibadi Imamat", and then it has changed into a rule of a dynasty. Ibadi's structure of Imamat was based on choosing an Imam, the spiritual and temporal leader of Islamic community, through consensus of religious, learning and notable men. This notion is different from that of a dynastic rule, which then is sustaining in Oman, and a sultan is in the center of power (See: Dale F. Ejeckelman).

Qaboos began, in 2011, some political and economic reforms, and so granted bicameral legislative body, more authority and authorized direct elections for the lower house.

Qaboos, also ordered to increase unemployment benefits, and in August 2012 a royal directive was issued which mandated the speedy implementation of a national job creation plan. The first municipal council election was held in December 2012, these councils have the power to advise the Royal court on the needs of local districts across eleven governorates (See: WFB, CIA world Fact Book).

Sultan Qaboos was simultaneously prime minister, ministers of defense, foreign affairs, and finance and the governor of Central Bank.

Qaboos in 1996, issued a decree for basic law, which authorizing an appointed council of state (Majles al Dula) and an elected consultative council for four year terms, but the latter has no legislation powers and can only recommend changes to new laws. The election of this was held in 2012 for 86 seats, and also sultan appointed 86 members of council of state including 15 women,

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for a four-year term. Also, in 2012, there was an election to elect 202 seats on the 11 municipal councils. All citizens over the age of 21 can vote, unless they are in military or security forces, but it is only applied to municipal councils and advisory bodies. No political party exists there. The constitutional system bans the possibility of change in government through election. In Oman there is a large minority about 44 percent of the population, who have no political rights citizenship stems from Omani father, and foreigner must have a 20 years record of residence in Oman to qualify for citizenship, or 15 and 10 years for foreign husbands and wives of Omani citizens, if they have a son (See: Freedom house website).

There was some critics about human rights status in Oman, mainly by international Non-governmental organizations. For example, "Amnesty International" in its report for 2021 about Oman mentioned government continuance to detain and prosecute critics, activities and peaceful demonstrations. Also it asserts exploitations against migrant workers, and discrimination in law and practice against women, and remaining of death penalty there (See: Amnesty International Report, Oman 2021, in: <https://www.amnesty.org>).

Regarding this critics, we must consider some points, for example, women situations in law and practice which is considered discriminative, nearly is like most of Muslim countries that women's rights is different from men in some categories like heritage, veil and so on; and against freedom of assembly, in May and June, protests against unemployment and deteriorating economic situations. About death penalty, although reports say that the courts continued to their former decisions, but "no executions were reported" (Ibid).

About foreign workers, it's need to be considered that those went to Oman, mostly because they don't have business opportunity in their homeland, and it's an ideal point that we expect equal situations for native and foreigner workers. In freedom of speech it seems that critics is more true and realistic. As an instance, four environmental activists, who wrote critical comments on twitter on governmental activists, who wrote critical comments on Twitter on a governmental decision which banned camel grazing in the plain of Dhofar, as prologue of construction, were sentenced to prison and fine. Another case was blocking club house, a social media which reached a popular status during lockdown, the pretext was "lack of proper license." Also, arresting and use of coercive tasks (Ibid).

Even there was a limited domain of power for the Oman council, that limited even by another approval - was limited, and a power was granted to the executive branch, government, to reject any proposal it doesn't see appropriate and also can propose bills which it wants to council.law, No.7/2021 approved these limiting points on it's power (See: "Rafinth Al Talai, 2021).

According to Basic Law, Article 2, Oman has religion of state, Islam and Islamic Law, Sharia is announced as the basis for all legislations (See: Oman's Constitution of 1996 with Amendments through 2031; in: constitueproject.org). So among different kinds of relationship between religion and state, Oman has an official religion, but it is not called a religious government as in Islamic Republic of Iran, since there is a separation between politics and religion. Article 5 stipulate the kind of governance as "Sultani, hereditary", and since a big problem accrues when a ruler passes away; Article 6 emphasizes that a "Royal family council" shall determine within three days the new Sultan, and if they don't come to a decision, a council consisting of Defense council alongside chairman of Majlis Al Dawla, the chairman of Majlis Al shura, and the chairman of the supreme court alongside two of his most senior deputies, "shall instate the person whom the last Sultan mentioned in his letter to the Royal family council".

Article 9, which speaks about the oath of new Sultan, emphasizes several items which he should observe: The Basic structure of the state, interests and freedom of citizens, and independent and territorial integrity of the country. This emphasis can be a foundation for freedom of citizens, if it is not limited in other articles.

There are some laws issued after the Basic Law, which pave the way for a better social circumstances, one of them is labor law at 2003, that assumes better rights for labor force (See: Labor Law).

A United Nations report after promulgation of the Basic Law, says some positive points about human rights like this that calls the judiciary system of Oman as "well-structured, with clear delineation of roles and responsibilities, and also affirms that the Sultanate has ruled several laws of the human rights concerning women and children (See; Human Rights Council, Unicef ...).

11. FOREIGN POLICY

During the long governance period of Sultan Qaboos, a stable and neutral foreign policy developed, which helped stability and development of the country. It seems that he had taken a pragmatic foreign policy, which had let him to accept diversity of political structures in the region and outside, and make use of existing opportunities to improve economic relations and cooperation for security and stability. We can mention evidences for this, specially the relations with two countries which are in conflict with each other, Iran and USA, and Oman has good relations with both. Oman had good relations with Shah of Iran, and during the riots of 1970s, Shah has deployed military assistance to combat against leftist groups in Zofar region. After Islamic revolution, there has been nearly good relations between two countries, and Oman has played the role of mediator in some disputes between Iran and other states. It is right that there is no state in the region of Persian Gulf currently have warm relations with Iran since 1970, except Oman. Some observers called this Oman's government strategy as "strategy hedging", which aims at

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maintenance of relationship, security and political stability (See: Mohammed bin Huwaidain, P.1). In other words, Oman foreign policy is peaceful and, Omanis consider themselves as "friends to all and enemies to none" (James Worrall, p.1).

Also its relations with Israel, I can refer to Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, visit to Muscat on October 26th, 2018 (See: Economist).

The new Sultane hasn't changed Oman foreign policy, and " many Omanis are now proud of a policy that" has brought for their country stability and progress."The Sultan charted an independent foreign policy: fond of Britain, willing to host Israeli prime ministers, but also happy to meet Iranian Ayatollahs and Chinese businessmen" (Economist, The new Sultane...).

Haythim hasn't changed yet Qaboos's policy in regional and international field. Oman, as the first Persian Gulf state signed an agreement with the U.S.A military that allowed the use of its facilities, and then foreign forces were deployed in Oman's territory and operated in the region for their so-called counter-terrorism operations. While some members of the [Persian] Gulf Council intervened in Yemen, Oman refused it, and tried for mediation. Also, in spite of some disagreements between Iran and some of the Council, Oman signed economic agreements with Iran, during Iran's president, Ibrahim Raisi visit, on May 2022. In addition to that, Oman has played the role of a mediator between Iran and west powers in subjects like nuclear program and mutual cases, as was between Iran and Uk on releasing of Nazanin Zaghari and Iranian blocked funds (See: Congressional research service).

We can trace the relations between Oman and United States of America to a friendship and navigation treaty in 1833, which was replaced by another treaty on Amity, Economic relations and consular rights in 1958. The official diplomatic relations was established in 1972. Then a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was signed in 2009, that has goals including increase in mutual trade, bilateral opportunities for businesses, and attracting investment and diversifying of economy for Oman (See: U.S. Relations with Oman, U.S. EPARTMENT of State, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, May 12, 2022; in : <https://www.state.gov>).

12. CONCLUSION

In modernization theory and history of modernization, there has been some differences about: where do we start modernization? Some emphasized this process should be concentrated on individual, while some emphasize on collective plans. Also, some started their way with plans on political development, and some others stats with economic program and internally and internationally goes away from political programs.

The new history of Oman shows that Qaboos concentrated on his developing programs with keeping stability along with implementation of economic modernization. Although each country has a special category, but it seems that Oman's model of developing, at least, in economic sphere has attained acceptable attainment and stability of the country, in a critical period has kept.

In foreign policy, Oman has chosen a friendship relation diplomacy with all of the states, specially neighboring and west countries.

Also Oman has joined gradually to international regulations and treaties, especially in trade, economic and security areas, in spite of some neighboring countries like Iran, who has challenged some international regulations.

Now, a main question is that the attainments of economic modernization how will affect on social sphere and political spheres. It seems that gradually social sector of life in Oman is changing and a combinative culture is forming, and through it, political attitudes of people are evolving to a new formation that globalization of culture and economic will bring new demands for democratization. But the main point is that now, in attitudes of people in Oman, economic welfare and security is more important than democratic systems. Meanwhile the government is becoming more tolerate about social freedoms and it can ask political demands, in a lagged status. Crisis management during modernization is a main factor in success of a development plan, and many countries, like Iran in the era of Shah, a main factor which he couldn't do manage these crisis and revolutions erupted during the process of modernization.

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