

Polity IV Country Report 2010: Oman

<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 15%;">Score:</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2009</td> <td style="width: 15%;">2010</td> <td style="width: 15%;">Change</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Polity:</td> <td>-8</td> <td>-8</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Democ:</td> <td>0</td> <td>0</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Autoc:</td> <td>8</td> <td>8</td> <td>0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Durable:</td> <td></td> <td>53</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Tentative:</td> <td></td> <td>No</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Score:	2009	2010	Change	Polity:	-8	-8	0	Democ:	0	0	0	Autoc:	8	8	0	Durable:		53		Tentative:		No		
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SCODE	OMA	CCODE	698	Date of Report	1 June 2011																				
Polity IV Component Variables																									
XRREG	XRCOMP	XROPEN	XCONST	PARREG	PARCOMP																				
3	1	1	2	4	2																				
Date of Most Recent Polity Transition (3 or more point change)																									
End Date		19 July 1957		Begin Date																					
				20 July 1957																					
Polity Fragmentation: No																									
Constitution	1996																								
Executive(s)	Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Bu Said; sultan since 23 July 1970 (after overthrowing his father) and prime minister since 23 July 1972																								
Legislature	Bicameral: Consultative Council (84 members; selected by Sultan, recruited through a partially democratic process; most recent elections, 27 October 2007; only non-partisans have been elected) Council of State (70 members; appointed by Sultan)																								
Judiciary	Supreme Court																								

Narrative Description:¹

Executive Recruitment: Ascription (1)

Oman is a hereditary monarchy. The current sultan, Qaboos bin Said Al Bu Said, is a member of the ruling Al Bu Said family that has governed Oman since the mid-18th century. With his liberal views and reformist ambitions, Qaboos was arrested by his father, Said Ibn Taimur, when he returned from England in 1965. Qaboos ascended to the throne in 1970 after he overthrew his father in a bloodless palace coup. While Oman's constitution provides for a designated prime minister, since 1972 that office has been held by the Sultan himself.

Executive Constraints: Slight Limitations (2)

Until recently the only check on executive power came from the powerful tribal leaders of Oman. Effective leadership in Oman requires that the sultan seek a consensus with regional power holders on key policy

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issues. While Sultan Qaboos bin Said has shown some tolerance for democratic ideas and institutions in the past thirty years, he continues to wield near-absolute power. The dynasty as a ruling institution is much weaker than others in the Gulf region because the Sultan has concentrated power in his own hands and shared less with his relatives than is common place elsewhere in the region. Unlike other Gulf monarchies where the successor to the thrones have all been designated, Sultan Qaboos has not named an heir apparent but has called upon the royal family to do so after his death (the Sultan has no children). Unlike elsewhere in the region, Oman's royal family does not appear to have the power to control, let alone depose, the Sultan.

The Sultan currently holds the government position of prime minister in addition to the ministries of foreign affairs, defense and finance. There is no formal legislature in Oman and the courts continue to be subordinate to executive control. However, recent efforts to establish the foundations of a functioning legislature indicate his willingness to decentralize decision making. While still a long way from the Western parliamentary model, nevertheless, in 1991 the Sultan established an "elected" Consultative Council to replace the appointed one that had existed since 1981. In an effort to broaden public participation in government, local caucuses in each of the fifty-nine districts in Oman elect three nominees for membership in the Consultative Council. These individuals are then reviewed by the Sultan, who then selects eighty-three from this list of candidates to sit on this consultative body. The primary purpose of this body is to comment on draft laws. Moreover, in January 2001 the Sultan established a second legislative body, the Council of State. The Sultan directly appoints all members of the Council of State. The division of labor between these two consultative bodies is still unclear. While the Consultative Council and Council of State do not represent real checks on executive authority, nevertheless, their presence does signal the desire of the Sultan to establish a framework for a constitutional order based on horizontal accountability.

Political Participation: Restricted Competition (2)

In 1996 the Sultan decreed the Basic Charter of Oman. This document outlined the basic human rights of the citizens of Oman. Despite this democratic gesture, political participation in Oman remains highly circumscribed. No political parties are allowed to operate and human rights violations remain a persistent problem. However, in a hopeful sign for the future of democracy in Oman, in late November 2002 the Sultan extended voting rights to all citizens over the age of 21. Voters were previously chosen from among tribal leaders, intellectuals and prominent businessmen, with only about twenty-five percent of the state's population enfranchised. This new decree preceded elections for the Consultative Shura Council that were held in October 2003. Despite the expansion of political liberalization represented by these elections, the outcome of the polls did not fundamentally alter the foundations of political power in this society. There was very little change in the political make-up of the eighty-three member Council, as tribal loyalties continued to determine the success of candidates. While fifteen women stood for election (out of a field of 500), only two were elected.

Oman, unlike other Muslim countries in the Gulf region, has a third branch of Islam, Ibadhism, to rival the sociopolitical hegemony of Sunni and Shia factions. Ibadhism is a traditional belief system within Islam that posits that the Imam should be the most worthy person of the Ibadhi community and that he is to be chosen, and potentially removed if deemed unworthy, by the community's notables. Oman's rulers, including Sultan Qaboos, have traditionally been Ibadhis. While the CIA estimates that Ibadhis constitute seventy-five percent of the population, other analysts indicate that they only constitute forty-five percent (with fifty percent Sunni and five percent Shia or Hindu). If this is true, then the Sultan does not hail from the dominant ethnoreligious group in the country and may be resented by the Sunni majority. The arrest of hundreds of opposition activists in 1994, most of them Sunni, may attest to this political division. According to some regional experts, Qaboos may be vulnerable on three counts: (1) that he was not elected by the Ibadhi faithful but consolidated his power with the help of the British; (2) that the Ibadhi tradition allows for the leader to be deposed if he acts against the precepts of Islam; and (3) that many Omanis believe Qaboos to be homosexual.