

Virulent reform virus infects sleepy, liberal Oman

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Abstract

Sultan Qaboos is, like many of his fellow rulers in the ministates of the Gulf coast, an absolute monarch who also serves as his own prime minister, foreign minister, defence minister, finance minister and governor of the central bank.

Full Text

It is a measure of the virulence of the pro-reform virus infecting the Middle East that the latest country to fall victim to the fever is the usually quiet and contented sultanate of Oman.

There have been continuous demonstrations for the last three days in the industrial port city of Sohar.

At least two people have died in clashes with the police and some reports put the death toll as high as six.

But unlike other scenes of unrest in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya, where the protesters' purpose has been to remove a hated despot, there is as yet no desire to oust Oman's ruler of 40 years, Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said.

The demands of the protesters focus on lack of jobs for the average 35,000 high school graduates who enter the workforce each year. And those local people who do have jobs are paid only half the wages given to expatriate workers.

Of Oman's 3.1 million people, 1.5 million are imported foreign workers.

Sultan Qaboos is, like many of his fellow rulers in the ministates of the Gulf coast, an absolute monarch who also serves as his own prime minister, foreign minister, defence minister, finance minister and governor of the central bank.

But by the standards of this region he is a paragon of liberalism.

Qaboos has introduced parliamentary elections, in which women not only have the vote, but can run as candidates. He has also created an elected advisory council.

But there is no escaping that both these bodies have no real authority. They are merely part of the consensus-building style of leadership that Qaboos has adopted since he came to power in a palace coup that ousted his father in 1970.

The events leading up to and following that coup 40 years ago say much about Qaboos and Oman, which has only moderate reserves of oil by Gulf standards and is not a member of the oil producers' cartel, OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries).

Qaboos was the only son of Sultan Said bin Taimur, the 13th-generation descendant of the family dynasty that for about 250 years has ruled Oman, which sits in the southeast corner of the Arabian Peninsula, from where it controls the entrance to the highly strategic Strait of Hormuz.

As a boy, Qaboos was sent to private school in England and at age 20 he went to Sandhurst, the Royal Military Academy.

When he qualified as an officer he joined the Scottish infantry regiment, the Cameronians, serving with them in Germany and later working as a staff officer in the British Army.

When Qaboos returned to what was then called Muscat and Oman he fell afoul of his father, a man violently opposed to any acts of modernization such as building roads, hospitals or schools.

Qaboos was kept under what amounted to house arrest for six years.

But the British came to his aid.

The British Secret Intelligence Service, MI6, with the help of the Special Air Service, the SAS Regiment, had been helping Qaboos' father fight off Communist insurgents operating out of neighbouring Yemen.

The British spies despaired of Sultan Said showing the necessary gumption to defeat the rebels, so they engineered his ouster in favour of his son, a man whose qualities and training they knew well.

As sultan, Qaboos did not disappoint and the now unfettered campaign by the SAS and MI6 to eradicate the Communist rebels in Oman's mountains was one of London's last semisecret and successful imperial wars.

Since then the sultanate, now renamed simply Oman, has made steady but unspectacular progress toward modernity from the medieval principality Qaboos inherited.

In Middle Eastern terms, it is an open and tolerant society where there are no constraints on women, independent media are allowed, and the government spends a good deal of its oil revenues on health and education.

But what has been made clear to Sultan Qaboos on the streets in the last few days is that having a youthful, well-educated population is a danger unless there are opportunities for them to employ their skills and envisage a better life.

He has offered to make 50,000 jobs available as soon as is practical, but he will also need to contemplate fundamental reform of the system.

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