

OMAN: THE “FORGOTTEN” CORNER OF THE ARAB SPRING

James Worrall

Dr. Worrall is a lecturer in international security at the School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, United Kingdom¹

It should not come as a surprise that the Arab Spring in Oman has been largely ignored, overshadowed by events in Cairo’s Tahrir Square, NATO intervention in Libya and the beginnings of Syria’s slow slide into civil war — not to mention events nearer at hand in Bahrain. As analysis of the Arab uprisings develops, however, it becomes increasingly important to analyze the commonalities and differences in the drivers of protest and the consequences of these demonstrations of discontent. Oman is frequently in danger of being overlooked or portrayed as having somehow escaped the Arab Spring.² The protests in Oman did not appear to represent a threat to the regime and were largely brought under control after just four days before briefly reigniting a month later in early April 2011. Yet these protests had a profound impact on Oman and spurred Sultan Qaboos to action on a number of fronts — economic, social and political — restarting a neglected political-reform process.

This article begins by examining the extent of the protests in the sultanate, contextualizing them through allusion to both previous protests in Oman and the other Arab uprisings of 2011. The article

will then examine some of the key factors behind the protests and analyze the consequences for the sultanate. Ultimately, the paper argues that the events in Oman were more serious than the impression given in the foreign media and that they exposed continuing divisions within Omani society that need to be addressed while conditions remain benign. It concludes by assessing the prospects for the political reforms announced during 2011 and analyzing the obstacles to them. It is first necessary, however, to examine exactly what happened during the first flush of the Arab Spring.

SPRING IN OMAN

Protests in Oman began surprisingly early, with the first small-scale demonstration occurring on January 17, 2011, just a few days after Tunisian President Zine ben Ali had fled to Saudi Arabia. In this protest, some 200 people focused their attention on the rising prices of basic goods and on corruption, ending up outside the housing ministry to demand higher wages and lower prices.³ From this relatively innocuous beginning, the protests soon began to take on a life of their own, with a number of smaller protests springing

up. The authorities took a relaxed attitude, though, which may have been the spur to larger protests. Early in February, a number of teachers staged a protest against higher pension contributions and for larger allowances for water, electricity and housing, as well as for the introduction of performance-related pay and more frequent promotions. The protest soon spread, organized through text messaging in particular, leading to the closure of large numbers of schools across the country.⁴ As elsewhere, the Internet became the center of discussions and planning, with the popular Omani chat room *Sablat al Arab* playing an important role. This led, on February 8, to the first of a series of so-called Green Marches.⁵

Although Internet and Facebook penetration in Oman are relatively low, they have grown quickly in recent years, with 1,741,804 Internet users as of December 31, 2011 (57.5 percent penetration) and 362,280 Facebook users (12 percent penetration). This compares with Facebook penetration rates of 26 percent in Bahrain, 30.55 percent in Jordan and 53.8 percent in the UAE.⁶ The importance of the Internet and mobile phones to the organizing of protest in Oman has clear commonality with the rest of the region.

While these early protests were important, they were in no way unprecedented in Oman. For example, in late August 2010, around 250 qualified teachers had protested in front of the Ministry of Education in Ruwi, demanding jobs and complaining that Arabic-speaking expatriates were being hired before Omanis. The ministry, though, insisted that the Omani candidates were not “up to the mark as reflected in their entrance test results.”⁷

It was not until the resignation of Hosni Mubarak on February 11 and the

spread of the Arab Spring to Bahrain on February 14 that events in Oman began to escalate significantly. On February 18, the second Green March, organized online, took place in the middle of Muscat, again protesting outside key ministries but attracting fewer than 400 demonstrators.⁸ This second Green March culminated on February 23 with a petition delivered to the Diwan of the Royal Court for the sultan’s attention.⁹ The second Green March and the handover of the petition were characterized by demonstrations of loyalty to the sultan, with banners expressing support for him prominently displayed among those marching. In conversations about this phenomenon in August 2011, Omanis, including both old friends and recent acquaintances, expressed universal acclaim for the sultan’s handling of the protests and took care to stress that those who had turned violent had gone too far. A common theme in these conversations was that corrupt merchants and senior ministers had clearly pulled the wool over the sultan’s eyes and were taking advantage of him for their own personal aims.

The fact that the protests escalated and became more violent from the end of February, though, indicated that there were some who were clearly dissatisfied with the government, although the sheer diversity and volume of grievances being expressed could at times seem overwhelming. On February 23, after the submission of the petition to the sultan, it seemed as if the situation would begin to calm down; after all, the grievances had now been aired. But at this point, the protests started to spread from Muscat. On February 25, they reached Dhofar in the south, with a group of young protesters staging a sit-in in front of the governor’s office and issuing an appeal to Qaboos entitled the

“call to good.” The following day, larger protests erupted in the northern port city of Sohar, site of Oman’s highest concentration of industry. They were to become more serious than those up to this point. By the evening of Saturday, February 26, violence had marred a demonstration calling for employment in the city, and there had been threatening scenes as a crowd approaching 500 strong blockaded vehicles and shoppers at the town’s *Lu Lu* hypermarket.¹⁰ A protest camp was also set up at the *Kurra Ardiyah*, or Globe Roundabout.

The following day, things quickly escalated out of control with the blocking of trucks trying to enter the port and the looting and arson of the *Lu Lu* supermarket and neighbouring shops. It seemed that the protesters were settling in for the long haul, based on the examples of Tahrir Square and the Pearl Roundabout in Manama. The protesters on February 27 also targeted the governor’s office and a police station, setting fire to them and to a number of cars.¹¹ This escalation in the levels of violence and criminality and the increasing focus of the violence on the security forces brought about a more robust response. Police fired rubber bullets and tear gas at demonstrators gathered at the Globe Roundabout, which protesters had named “Reform Square,” leading to the death of at least one person.¹² There were also reports of the army’s firing live rounds into the air in an attempt to disperse the protesters.¹³

That the *Lu Lu*¹⁴ was targeted came as no surprise to those Soharis questioned on the matter. There is a simmering resentment in Sohar, in particular, but also in Muscat and elsewhere about the role that Indians and Pakistanis play in the Omani economy. For the average Omani, the perception is that, as one informant put it,

“The Indians are everywhere; they control everything.”¹⁵ Working-class Omanis feel increasingly at a disadvantage, from the sheer numbers of South Asians employed in menial jobs, to those increasingly hired in more skilled occupations and the Indian business elite at the top, whom they regard as making excessive profits at the expense of ordinary Omanis. The rising cost of food and other essentials has become divorced from globalization, oil prices and the wider economic climate and is increasingly associated with the idea of Indian profiteering, which, it is believed, the government has done nothing to control.¹⁶

There is a problem with unemployment in Sohar and more widely in the sultanate. It shares with Bahrain the highest jobless rate among the six Gulf Cooperation Council states, approximately 15 percent.¹⁷ Youth unemployment is even worse, running at 19.6 percent. The specific issue here is also partly related to issues of education and training: only 6.2 percent of Omanis have an undergraduate degree and less than 1 percent an advanced degree.¹⁸ The extensive education system put in place by the sultan is now looking increasingly outdated and in need of reform to meet the demands of a modern economy, but the teachers seem opposed to many changes. In addition, the growing belief among employers that Omani workers are not committed to their jobs and are too protected by the government means that attempts to fill positions with Omanis rather than expatriate workers, through so-called Omanization schemes, are often less than successful.¹⁹

At the same time, as the protests in Sohar were developing on February 27, one of the less eye-catching, but more interesting, developments was the growing call on social networks to organize a peaceful

sit-in outside the Shura Council in Muscat. Initially demanding an end to violence in Sohar, this gathering would later generate some of the more politically advanced demands. The sit-in in Muscat would soon be mirrored by another large gathering in Sur and a number of other smaller towns around the country. In all of these sit-ins, it was notable that the protesters had taken to aping the imagery of the square from Egypt but had cloaked it, not in terms of freedom or liberation, but of *islah* (reform). Sohar had its Reform Square, Salalah its Call-To-Good Square; Muscat went with People Square and Sur with Freedom.²⁰ The banners and placards in these and other protests continued to be largely orientated around either general economic and welfare demands or around corruption and the removal of various ministers.²¹

On Tuesday, March 1, the army moved into Sohar in small numbers to clear the blockade of the port and Globe Roundabout; there were attempts to keep journalists at bay.²² With the port itself re-opened, there remained a continuing blockade of the main industrial area’s access to it, but the roundabout was cleared of protestors.²³ The following day, with sit-ins continuing all around the sultanate, and the American²⁴ and British²⁵ embassies advising against all travel to Sohar — combined with a warning about a third Green March planned for March 4 — a strange kind of calm descended. It appeared that things had got out of hand in Sohar, while protests elsewhere remained calm and were only lightly policed.²⁶ By this stage, those in favor of the government began to stage demonstrations of loyalty, starting with a gathering of 2,000 men at a mosque in Muscat to show their support for the sultan.²⁷ It was perhaps notable that those protesting in favor of the sultan the following day (March 2) took to

their cars to do so. The BBC even carried a picture of a Lamborghini with a huge likeness of the sultan across the bonnet.²⁸ This largely summed up the differences in wealth between the two groupings. Meanwhile, the demonstrations around the country appeared to be growing in size, with even official sources suggesting that 10,000 were now protesting in Salalah and 5,000 in Sur.²⁹ With the clearing of the Globe Roundabout and the poor response to a day of action called via Facebook for March 2, and with only 50 people turning out in Sohar, where earlier crowds had peaked at around 2,000, the Omani Spring entered a new and quieter phase.³⁰

While it appeared that the violence in Sohar had spurred protests around the sultanate, for the most part the protests remained very peaceful. Indeed the grand mufti, Sheikh Ahmed bin Hamad al-Khalili, denounced the protests in Sohar but praised the actions of those in Salalah: “The youth of Dhofar have asked for their rights without attacking anyone and have organized the protests in a civilized manner.”³¹ There also seemed to be a great deal of opportunism behind some of the actions, with a degree of bandwagoning on the demands for higher wages, allowances and subsidies. In March, for example, students at the University of Nizwa blocked the main road into town, demanding higher allowances.³² One of the most interesting, and unreported, examples of this was when Omani workers in the up-market hotels in Muscat went on strike demanding higher wages, even resorting to attempts to blockade the tourists into the hotels.³³ These actions were deeply undesirable for the tourism industry, but by no means involved all Omanis working in that sector, many of whom cooperated with management to try to end the protests.

These actions were significant, however, because they simply did not fit with Oman's usual welcome to foreign guests; many Omanis were horrified when they heard of this kind of behavior. Similar sporadic strikes occurred in other industries, including aviation (Oman Air) and banking (Oman International Bank), during this quieter period of protest.³⁴ More serious strikes also occurred with the forced closure by strikers of all 150 units in the Rusayl industrial estate north of Muscat on March 17.³⁵ This was followed by strikes at the refineries in Muscat and Sohar on March 20.³⁶ Other, more formal acts of protest also took place during March, including a demonstration by a reported 7,000 people who handed over a proclamation to the public prosecutor on March 21 demanding the immediate investigation of the finances of all ministers, advisers and officials.³⁷

A small group also returned to the Globe Roundabout in Sohar and resumed the sit-in there; they were joined each evening and especially on Fridays, as elsewhere, by larger groups demanding reforms.³⁸ As March ended, despite concessions made by the sultan, which are explored in more detail below, protests were still ongoing, though not seeming to grow in size. It seemed that government patience with the protests was running low; more forceful action was then taken to put a final end to the sit-ins and to send a message that the time for protests was now over. The lack of further growth in the protests suggests that the Omani public was also losing sympathy. It was perhaps this that gave the government the confidence to act. On March 28, the army moved into the Globe Roundabout once more and cleared the 20 protestors who were still manning the sit-in.³⁹ The follow-

ing day, reports emerged that the Public Prosecutor's Office had ordered the arrest of suspects in Sohar. By this stage, it was becoming clearer just how bad things had become in the city, with reports of government branch offices having been besieged.⁴⁰

The crackdown on the residual protests in Sohar had a catalytic effect, though, galvanizing further protests after Friday prayers on April 1 with demands for the release of those arrested a few days before. What was branded as a peaceful protest very quickly got out of hand. Protestors stoned the police, who responded with force, shooting one protester dead and injuring at least six more.⁴¹ The army once again had to be deployed to restore order in the town; it remained in force there for more than a week with a particularly heavy presence for Friday prayers. Meanwhile, local tribal elders and officials worked hard to try to de-escalate tensions, and a local gang leader, Khalfan Bin Saeed Bin Mohammad Al Kabbali, was arrested, accused of fomenting violence.⁴² It was not until April 9 that a scaling down of the army presence began.⁴³

While from then on there was a de-escalation of tension in Sohar, following such a clear demonstration of force, protests continued elsewhere. In Salalah, more than 3,000 protested against corruption on April 22 and again on April 30. The sit-in in Salalah had by this point been going on for two months, with numbers peaking at times as high as 10,000.⁴⁴ Having seen the final success of the show of force in Sohar, the government ordered the army to disperse the sit-in in Salalah on May 14; this led to some violent clashes. The army used overwhelming force, including helicopters and armored personnel carriers sparking running battles with protesters on

the streets of Salalah.⁴⁵ This was accompanied by a brief blackout of the Internet and mobile-phone services throughout the south of the country.⁴⁶ Many were arrested but released the next day, although there were reports of the leaders being taken to Muscat for questioning. On the same day, the long-running sit-in outside the Majlis building in Seeb was also broken up, this time peacefully. With the release of almost all of those detained by May 22, demonstrators formally called off their sit-ins in Salalah.⁴⁷

By the end of May, the protests seemed to have run out of steam, and more and more activists called an official halt to the protests for Ramadan, due to begin around August 1. It seemed as if the Oman Spring was over. While the atmosphere remained somewhat strained even in August, people were happy to talk about what had happened but remained concerned about a revival of the protests after Eid. In late July, there were small protest gatherings in Salalah and Sohar, which ended peacefully.⁴⁸ After the end of Ramadan, there were some protests but they were minor and sporadic. Early in October, before the Majlis elections scheduled for October 15, there were protests by up to 100 teachers in Rustaq (in the mountains behind Sohar) leading to 12 arrests and the use of tear gas.⁴⁹ More recently, in February 2012, waves of protest engulfed Omani schools as students went on a rampage after poor exam results. In a recent incident, Al Khoud school near Seeb saw classrooms set ablaze by students demanding higher exam grades.⁵⁰

It is notable how many different groups in society took part in the protests, from the educated to sometimes even ministry workers, protesting outside the majlis, to the industrial workers of Sohar. One

of the key groups, though, appeared to be students and teachers, who often seemed to be driving protests, making educational reform a key challenge for the government. These continuing incidents clearly have the potential to spark further and more widespread unrest, making it all the more important for the demands of the protesters to be addressed.

THE DEMANDS

The demands issued by the various protest groupings were bewildering in their number and often in their specificity. In order to make sense of them, they need to be classified and the highly localized excluded. While the spur to continuing protest seems to have come, in part, from the crackdown and initial death in Sohar on March 1, and later from the demands for the release of those arrested during the protests, it is possible to classify the demands loosely into three categories: economic, social and political. It must also be recognized that even the highly localized grievances remain of great importance. One of these is the Muriya Project in Dhofar, destined to be a major hotel development⁵¹ for which land between Taqa and Mirbat appears to have been expropriated, leading to resentment and anger.⁵² This kind of very specific issue retains strong connections with the wider concerns raised by protestors and their specific demands designed to deal with these issues, in this case corruption and public officials' basic lack of accountability.

Economic

The issues raised under this broad banner were some of the most diverse, ranging from the reasonable to the downright unrealistic. As suggested above, one of the key drivers of the protests, especially in

Sohar, was the unemployment problem. It was therefore unsurprising that many of the demands centered around jobs. This was mirrored in the demands of the unemployed teachers at the beginning of the disturbances. Oman faces a youth bulge entering the workforce and has difficulty creating sufficient private-sector jobs to absorb these new entrants while at the same time being aware of the dangers of a bloated public sector. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) recently estimated that 45,000 new private-sector jobs need to be created each year. This is more than the total number of private-sector jobs created in the five years up to 2010. The other issue is that very large percentages of new private-sector jobs go to expatriates.⁵³

Protesters were also agitated about wages and prices, demanding higher wages and larger government subsidies, despite the fact that inflation in 2011 was running at around 4.2 percent,⁵⁴ much lower than the monthly rate of 13.24 percent during 2008 — a year that had seen bread riots in Egypt.⁵⁵ However, it was estimated in March 2011 that as many as 70 percent of Omanis in the private sector were earning less than the minimum wage (200 rials a month).⁵⁶ Coupled with the inflation figures, this helps explain why many Omanis are sympathetic to the protesters' demands for better wages. These claims of poverty by Omanis tend to get short shrift from expatriates at both ends of the spectrum. Those at the bottom do not receive anything near the Omani minimum monthly wage for nationals and indeed have no protection of a minimum wage at all.⁵⁷ Those at the top of the expatriate tree tend to make the comparison with the lot of the South Asian workers, believing that Omanis are selfish and take their benefits for granted.⁵⁸

Social

There appeared to be a strong focus on educational opportunities in this category, as well as some attempts by Islamists to add issues such as Islamic finance and alcohol-licensing issues to the agenda. The grand mufti even took the opportunity to call for regulations on gymnasiums, calling them “dens of vice.”⁵⁹ One of the most common demands appeared to center around larger numbers of university places and the opening of a second state-run university. This focus on educational opportunities is often a mixture of the real need for training alongside the increasing expectation of higher education as both a right and a status symbol among Omani families.

Political

Demands in this category initially had a strong focus on the removal of various named ministers. One of the problems, which can be traced back to the mid-1970s,⁶⁰ is that ministers had often taken advantage of their positions to make themselves wealthy. As J.E. Peterson puts it, “He [the sultan] has stuck with the same ministers for 10 or 20 years. These ministers have tended to make their ministries fiefdoms, not just professionally but commercially.”⁶¹ Specifically, the demands were for the firing of National Economy Minister Ahmad Bin Abdul Nabi Macki, who was seen as especially corrupt. The protestors gradually moved away from general talk about corruption and the sacking of individual ministers to more specific demands for investigations of all ministers and permanent anti-corruption machinery. Initially, it seemed that the protests were essentially about corruption and economic issues, but soon there were demands for a free press, an independent judiciary and a transfer of lawmaking powers to the

majlis. These much more radical demands signaled a change of tack for the protestors, and while the protests still retained a strong economic edge, the sit-in outside the majlis in Seeb articulated demands that were more political in nature.

It is instructive to look at the demands made specifically at the three key centers of protest — Muscat, Salalah and Sohar. In each of these three centers protesters had a very specific set of demands that were well articulated and shared a number of commonalities. The list below is the set of demands articulated in Salalah:

- 1) Establish an administratively and legally independent authority, from among the Majlis A’Shura members, to combat administrative and financial corruption.
- 2) Oust the government by sacking incompetent ministers and bringing them to justice through the above-mentioned authority.
- 3) Empower Majlis A’Shura committees by allowing them to revise the policies of the ministries and vote them up or down, particularly policies related to education and the economy.
- 4) Compel state officials to account for their earnings before and after appointment to government portfolios.
- 5) Set up large government factories and companies in all heavy industries to accommodate thousands of job-seekers.
- 6) Establish a fund worth billions of rials for the support of youth who serve the economy by offering interest-free loans.
- 7) Permit the establishment of Islamic banks and Islamic investment and insurance companies.
- 8) Unify the premiums of companies operating in the insurance sector and

ensure that prices are affordable to the common citizen.

- 9) Raise the pay of Social Security Scheme families, low-income groups, divorced women, widows and retired personnel to a minimum of 500 rials.
- 10) Raise the minimum salaries of employees in the government and private sectors to 700 rials, in addition to allowances.
- 11) Provide job-seekers with monthly assistance of 200 rials.
- 12) Write off the bank debts of citizens.⁶²

Clearly, some of these demands — writing off citizens’ debts and setting minimum salaries at 700 rials per month — are unrealistic, but the focus on specific measures to tackle corruption, support for employment and education, and giving the majlis the ability to make amendments to legislation, are more significant. The petition, which had been handed to the sultan on February 23, contained similar demands, but with a stronger focus on political reforms, including

- Widening the powers of the Shura (Consultative) Council
- Ensuring protection of public money
- Holding members of security services accountable
- Abolishing the exceptional powers enjoyed by many state institutions
- Strengthening the judiciary’s independence
- Founding an independent constitutional court
- Guaranteeing freedom of expression
- Ending discrimination against women
- Affirming the right to create syndicates and professional associations
- Limiting the powers of security institutions.

The following social and economic demands were also included:

- Make education compulsory up to the age of 16
- Regulate teaching and guarantee teachers the right to form syndicates
- Establish more higher-education institutes, scholarships and higher pay
- Give care and financial support to low-income families
- End rising prices
- Establish a social-support fund for young people.⁶³

The reforms are broadly reasonable and often quite specific and targeted. Because of this perhaps, in the end it seems that the government agreed to a very high percentage of them.

THE RESPONSE

Given the long list of grievances and demands issued by the various groups of protesters, it is unsurprising that the Omani government took time to respond. The initial phases of the protest, which began in January, were very lightly policed and small in number, which perhaps explains the lack of (outward) government alarm. The submission of the petition on February 23 failed to elicit a quick reaction from the state and led even the normally rather staid *Times of Oman* to publish a piece on February 26 entitled “Public Petition: People Awaiting Response.”⁶⁴ On February 27, the government finally began to respond, starting with the gesture of an exceptional emergency meeting of the Shura Council, which established a committee to study the demands made by protesters. This was followed by the more concrete action of a cabinet reshuffle, although this seemed to involve moving ministers around more

than bringing fresh blood into the cabinet. For example, Maqbool Bin Ali Bin Sultan was moved from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry to Transport. Mohammad Bin Nasser Bin Mansour Al Khusaibi, who was secretary-general at the Ministry of National Economy, took the commerce portfolio. Shaikh Mohammed Bin Abdulla Al Harthi became minister of environment and climatic affairs, the portfolio held until then by Sayyid Hamoud Bin Faisal al Busaidi, who became minister of civil service. Meanwhile, a woman, Dr. Madeeha Bint Ahmad Bin Nassir Al Shibaniyah, became minister of education, and a few other more junior positions were reshuffled.⁶⁵

The following day, measures aimed at tackling the protesters’ economic grievances were announced, with Sultan Qaboos promising 50,000 new jobs, unemployment benefits of 150 rials (\$390) a month⁶⁶ and increases in the monthly stipend for students. On March 1, the sultan announced the creation of a Public Authority for Consumer Protection to monitor prices, profiteering and quality and, in a more explicitly political concession, took prosecuting powers away from the Royal Oman Police, making the Public Prosecution Department autonomous.⁶⁷ He also announced an enquiry into the granting of legislative powers to the majlis.

After the violence in Sohar and with protests continuing throughout the sultanate, a greater response was clearly needed to meet the protesters’ demands. At the same time, though, after the burning of the *Lu Lu* and attacks on government buildings, the protesters seemed to know they had gone too far. On March 1, protesters in Sohar issued a public statement regretting the violence and publically apologizing to the sultan for the sabotage. They

also stated, “We have confidence in the sultan that he will respond to our demands.”⁶⁸ Throughout March, the sultan continued to issue a raft of royal decrees, many in direct response to the demands of the protesters. The most important was the complete abolition of the Ministry of National Economy, seen by protesters as a hotbed of corruption. A National Audit Committee was also established to tackle corruption, a second public university was created, and official investigations were initiated to look into the establishment of cooperatives. This is quite a significant potential reform in a country where associations are closely monitored and political parties banned. On March 13, the sultan announced that the majlis would be given legislative and regulatory powers.⁶⁹ Later in the month, additional allowances were given to all military and security staff, the Social Insurance Pension was raised by 100 percent and pensions were increased by 50 percent. Further, in what seemed to be an admission that the force used by police in Sohar was excessive, the inspector-general of police and customs, Lieutenant General Malik bin Suleiman Al Maamary, was forced to retire. This was especially significant given that Al Maamary had a reputation for competence and was the sultan’s personal troubleshooter.⁷⁰ When one bears in mind that all of this was in addition to the 43 percent rise in the private-sector minimum wage to 200 rials per month, announced in mid-February, the scale of the measures becomes clear.⁷¹ There were also further cabinet reshuffles, with key appointments to the all-important Diwan of the Sultan’s Court on March 5 and a larger cabinet reshuffle on March 7 in which 16 of the 29 members were replaced, including, significantly, a number of elected members of the majlis.⁷²

One of the significant responses of the sultan was to attempt to engage in direct *shura* (consultation) with the protesters by sending representatives to discuss their demands. In Salalah, for example, the sultan sent the justice minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdullah al Hinai, to talk to the protesters. While some doubted that the messages he brought came directly from the sultan, others appeared convinced. Despite these issues, the contact between the two sides was clearly of great importance in facilitating understanding.⁷³ This active engagement, alongside the concessions and the overwhelming support for the sultan himself, marked the Oman Spring as rather different from uprisings elsewhere. It is notable that there was a serious attempt to deal with the protesters’ demands and only limited use of force, after the violence in Sohar and then, in May, to break up the other sit-ins. The right combination of carrot and stick seemed to have been found, but the demands of the protesters and the concessions made by the state raise a number of questions for the sultanate’s future ability to satisfy the demands of its citizens.

THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

The social contract in Oman is clearly based on the rentier model:⁷⁴ no income taxes, reliance upon the export of oil and gas, and extensive social-welfare benefits for citizens. Many of the demands made by the protesters betrayed both a sense of entitlement and the feeling that the government really could solve every problem. In this sense, the success of Qaboos’s regime since his accession to power in 1970 has, in essence, created a problem. It will not be possible for Oman to keep on fulfilling these kinds of demands, especially with the population bulge still working its way

through the system. The population in the 2003 census was 1,781,558 Omani citizens (1,957,336 in 2010),⁷⁵ of whom 723,363 were younger than 15. This necessitates educating and providing jobs for youth in the coming decade; hence the oft-quoted 40,000 new jobs needed each year.⁷⁶ Oman has had great difficulty creating this many private-sector jobs and providing young people with the right skills and attitudes to fill them.⁷⁷ It may well be, though, that the swift agreement by the richer Gulf states early in the crisis to provide a 10-year Marshall Plan-style package worth \$20 billion to Bahrain and Oman, as well as pledges to open up Gulf labor markets to Omani and Bahraini workers, may well be a useful bridge to the period when the youth bulge begins to flatten out.⁷⁸

The social contract is also supported by a number of other pillars: the linkages between the sultanic system and the Ibadhi religious majority, the careful inclusion of tribal and regional elements and the importance of *an-nahda*, the Omani renaissance, led by Qaboos and reinforced by a complex system of invented traditions and symbols.⁷⁹ This, combined with an effective internal and external security architecture, has kept the Omani state secure for 40 years. However, with a young population that has no memory of life before Qaboos and is increasingly connected and aware, the foundations of this system are beginning to erode.⁸⁰ As Mandana E. Limbert has highlighted, this globalized and urbanized generation appears to be losing the understanding prevalent among older Omanis that the time of oil is limited.⁸¹

THE SULTAN'S ROLE

One of the most striking aspects of the protests in Oman compared to those elsewhere was the almost complete absence

of demands for the abdication of Sultan Qaboos. This anomaly, largely shared with the protests in Jordan and Morocco but not Bahrain, provides an instructive point of departure for analysis of the different nature of the protests in the sultanate. Moreover, it also tells us something about the continuing legitimacy of monarchical regimes in the region. This could be ascribed not to the personalization of rule, seen just as much in the "republican" regimes or the rentier system, but to the ability to draw upon symbolism, goodwill and a sense of continuity. Oman is a conservative society in which religion and tribal structures still play important roles, but it is also an increasingly cosmopolitan and globally connected society with a very young population.

The sultan remains universally popular, but, as he is now 71, there are deep concerns about succession. While the notion of the sultanate itself is strong, concerns are focused around the ability and compassion of a successor. Omanis know that they have been lucky to have a progressive and benign ruler and are grateful for his leadership and the development of the country. These protests, though, are about the future and the desire of Omanis to have a say in how they are governed and to have some protections in place against a less benign ruler with fewer economic resources at his disposal. The role of Qaboos in dealing with the aftermath of the protests is crucial. He has made a number of key reforms, but only he has the legitimacy to drive them through against vested interests. Given his age, the clock is ticking.

PATTERNS AND PROBLEMS

With any notion of Omani exceptionalism seemingly shattered by the events in Sohar, in particular, it becomes

important to examine the extent to which the events of 2011 in Oman arose from factors common to the uprisings across the region or from factors endogenous to Oman. Without getting too distracted by the role of new media in the protests, it is clear that they did play a role. The youth of Oman, as elsewhere, are increasingly well connected; it is rare to see Omanis more than arm’s length away from their mobile phones. There is also much greater awareness of events in the rest of the region; undoubtedly, many were inspired by the images from Bahrain, Egypt and Tunisia.

The Omani government’s increasing attempts to control debate have also alienated the youth, who chanted “We have many newspapers but only one” speaking for themselves. The attempt to silence the popular *Al Sablah* youth website in November 2006 was also ill-judged.⁸² In addition, there were clear commonalities with the anti-corruption nature of the protests elsewhere, as well as the same focus on unemployment and rising prices. While these calls dominated, the individual demands made by the protesters were specific to Oman and were frequently much less radical in nature than elsewhere. Evolutionary reform, rather than revolution, was the driving force. So, while clearly linked to the wider phenomenon of the Arab Spring, the protests in Oman not only emerged from the Omani context, but the methods of expressing demands also reflected Omani ways of doing things.

These popular protests were the first in living memory to reach Oman. While there had been protests in the past, the scale and duration were what surprised many. Challenges to Qaboos’s rule were not unprecedented, however. Underneath Oman’s calm exterior are tensions left over from its two insurgencies in the second half of the twen-

tieth century⁸³ and more recent attempts to depose the sultan. In 1994, for example, police foiled an Islamist plot, arresting 430 members of an underground party and capturing caches of weapons.⁸⁴ This was followed a decade later, in 2004-05, by a further series of crackdowns against Ibadi Islamists from Nizwa, involving the seizure of weapons and raising the spectre of a possible revival of imamate irredentism.⁸⁵ The sultan’s accession to demands for an Islamic bank after the 2011 protests was likely a sop to these elements. A clear example of the sentiment that was brewing in Oman before 2011 was also seen in early July 2010, when a document was presented to the sultan calling for the formation of a national council that would draft a formal constitution for the sultanate.⁸⁶

The scale of the May protests in Dhofar, in particular, and the extent of the violence that ensued in the attempt to break up the protests, raise questions about the level of integration of the southern province. The veiled allusions of some of the protesters’ chants, such as “the one who forgets the 1970s should think of the grandchildren of the free men,”⁸⁷ made explicit reference to the Dhofar war of the 1970s, further demonstrating the potential for trouble in what some have called the “sleepy sultanate.”⁸⁸ Indeed, it is only for the past 30 years that Oman has been at peace. The pace of change and the extent of conflict it experienced in the twentieth century should be a reminder that peace is not guaranteed.

The protests in Oman have called attention to problems that have been building for a number of years. The inability to create enough jobs and to diversify away from reliance upon oil and gas exports, despite efforts to do so, represents a major structural challenge. In addition, the lack

of in-depth reform in the education system and the need to match skills with jobs is a challenge that many countries affected by the Arab uprisings face. The events of 2011 have simply highlighted the urgency of that need. This is intimately connected with the continuing reliance upon expatriate labor and the increasing resentment it engenders among many ordinary Omanis. Oman is one of the best-integrated societies in the region, with connections to India going back many centuries and an Indian merchant elite long established in Muscat and elsewhere. The protests in Sohar in particular, though, have exposed ethnic tensions and resentment towards expatriate workers that, if left unchecked, have the potential to be enormously damaging to Omani society and to an economy that is reliant upon expatriate workers, tourists and investment from the subcontinent, particularly as India grows exponentially in the coming decades.

In addition, the experience of the protests and the reaction of the state in increasing wages have sharpened the divide between citizens and expatriates. This could have major consequences for internal security in the future.

PROSPECTS

It is easy to reshuffle the cabinet and issue decrees confirming reforms, and even easier to buy off protesters with social benefits. It will be much harder to implement real reforms that address the root causes of the protests and to abandon deeply embedded ways of ruling. Oman's difficulty creating jobs in the private sector remains one of the most worrying aspects. This, coupled with its continuing overreliance upon hydrocarbon exports, which account for around 80 percent of government revenues, has been consistently highlighted by

the government and international organizations such as the IMF.⁸⁹ It is the implementation of political reforms — especially considering the vagueness of the proposals for giving powers to the majlis, which, were only partially clarified in October — that raises questions about the prospects for Oman after the protests of 2011. Some progress has occurred, such as in making the Supreme Judicial Council independent of the executive branch of government. Although the council is, naturally, still under the control of the sultan, this change at least removes the justice minister from the equation.⁹⁰ This is progress, in that it eliminates ministers from decision making. However, the monarch is ultimately responsible for almost all decisions in the country. This is dangerous for the sultan, who would ultimately have to take the blame for poor decisions and, of course, for the protection of his people's rights. This is the long-term issue that must be dealt with. Increased and quite modest participation is what the protesters want for now; under a new sultan, they are likely to want power to be more clearly defined and restricted.

There is another potentially worrying sign: the trials and convictions of those arrested in June and July actually sparked further protests.⁹¹ Indeed, 55 were convicted in Jalan Bani Bu Ali⁹² and 21 in Ibri,⁹³ as well as smaller numbers in Sohar and elsewhere. While these cases seem to involve those directly implicated in violence, they appear to run counter to the public mood. One of the frequent uses of power and authority is the sultan's issuing of pardons to those convicted of anti-state activities. This is an important power, used to show benevolence and to gain loyalty, but it is not in keeping with the initial response to the protests: addressing grievances and

attempting to understand the protesters’ frustrations. Likewise, despite protesters’ calls for press freedom, there were many reports of journalists and human-rights activists being targeted by the security forces. In September, an Omani court convicted two senior journalists of insulting the justice minister and sentenced them to five months in prison.⁹⁴ Human Rights Watch has also documented instances of harassment of journalists and reformers.⁹⁵

In addition, while some of the officials involved in corruption have now been removed, the ability of the government to monitor and control corruption is key for the future. Corruption had gradually become part of the way things were done in Oman, seen by some as helping to cement the country’s unity by often being used to buy off opposition figures. This, combined with an aging ruler likely to become increasingly unable to control corruption himself, means that the institutionalization of anti-corruption measures is a vital, though difficult, task to ensure Oman’s economic and political prosperity. The higher wages, benefits and other concessions have simply bought the government time to implement the social and political reform that will be the bedrock of the sultanate’s stability in the coming decades.

CONCLUSION

Events in Oman during 2011 were neither entirely unprecedented nor unforeseeable. While they did not represent a threat to the state, as uprisings elsewhere in the region certainly did, the demonstrations in Oman, while relatively small in scale, were under-reported and more important than they initially appeared. The Arab Spring has shaken Oman more than many would have predicted. The sultanate is now at a crossroads and must engage in an accelerated reform process if it is to keep these kinds of protests from becoming a regular occurrence. As the Japanese ambassador to the sultanate wrote:

I felt convinced of the strong determination of His Majesty to push reforms forward . . . [S]entiment in Oman toward reform has greatly changed, as people are now more freely expressing themselves. It appears that His Majesty approves of this change. What I see is Oman steadily moving down a path toward a constitutional monarchy.⁹⁶

If this is true, it will have been the “forgotten” Oman Spring that began this process in earnest.

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