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The Politics of Oman

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Introduction

Oman, situated on the southeastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, stands as a unique political entity in the region. It is a testament to a system of governance deeply rooted in centuries of tradition, yet dynamically adapting to the demands of modern statehood. Known for its striking landscapes—deserts, mountains, and an extensive coastline—Oman's true distinctiveness lies not only in its geography but also in its political life. The hereditary sultanate, ruled by the Al Said dynasty for over two and a half centuries, remains a symbol of continuity, sovereignty, and national cohesion.

The politics of Oman are determined by a blend of absolute monarchy and participatory elements, with power predominantly centralized in the hands of the Sultan. The evolution of the Omani political system has been shaped by challenges and reforms, particularly since the promulgation of the Basic Statute of the State, which serves as the country's constitution. Modernization efforts slowly made headway during the reign of Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Said and continue under his successor, Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, whose tenure marks a new chapter in succession dynamics and governance.

Despite significant changes and the introduction of governance reforms in recent decades, Oman's political structure is often misunderstood or oversimplified by external observers. Political parties remain prohibited, and much of the political dialogue unfolds within informal networks or selected consultative institutions. Elections for the Consultative Assembly (Majlis al-Shura) and municipal councils have fostered citizen participation, even as ultimate authority rests with the Sultan. These structures reflect an Omani model of decision-making based on consultation (Shura), consensus, and gradual institutional refinement.

At the core of the state's legitimacy is the interplay between tradition and modernity. The Council of Ministers, a bicameral legislature, and an evolving judiciary coexist with local institutions headed by walis and rooted in customary leadership. The centralization of power is balanced, albeit imperfectly, by avenues for consultative governance and localized administration. However, issues such as gender inequality, the treatment of migrant workers, and restrictions on civil liberties remain contentious topics for reform advocates, both within and outside Oman.

Oman's role in the regional and international arena is another vital feature of its political landscape. The Sultanate has long pursued a foreign policy characterized by pragmatism, neutrality, and mediation, enabling it to maintain stable relations with diverse actors in a tumultuous region. Its participation in organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council, Arab League, and the United Nations further illustrate

Oman's status as a steadfast and independent player on the global stage.

This book offers a comprehensive guide to the political system of Oman, examining both its formal institutions and informal dynamics. By tracing Omani politics from its historical roots to its present complexities, this volume aims to provide scholars, policymakers, and general readers with a nuanced understanding of how power is constructed, negotiated, and exercised in the Sultanate of Oman.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Foundations of Omani Politics

The political landscape of Oman, as it exists today, is a tapestry woven from threads of ancient civilizations, tribal structures, religious movements, and external influences. To understand the contemporary Omani political system, one must first delve into the depths of its long and complex history, recognizing that the past is not merely a prelude but an enduring force shaping the present. Oman's history is not a simple linear progression, but rather a dynamic interplay of forces that have molded its unique identity and governance.

Evidence of human habitation in Oman stretches back over 100,000 years, with archaeological sites revealing Stone Age tools and early settlements. Some of the oldest known settlements date back as far as the 3rd millennium BCE. These early inhabitants, including those of the Umm an-Nar period, engaged in agriculture and trade, establishing the foundation for Oman's future as a commercial hub. The strategic location of Oman, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, naturally positioned it as a crossroads for trade routes connecting East and West.

The arrival of Arab tribes from Yemen around the 2nd century CE significantly influenced Omani society and its political development. These tribes, such as the Azd, became prominent, contributing to the demographic and social fabric of the region. Before the advent of Islam, Oman was not politically unified, with various tribal leaderships and regional divisions, including a distinction between Arab groups in the interior and Persian influence on the coast.

A pivotal moment in Omani history was the adoption of Islam in the 7th century. This event played a crucial role in unifying the diverse tribes under a common faith. Oman embraced Islam freely, a fact noted in historical accounts. Following the spread of Islam, Oman became a center of the Ibadi sect, a distinct branch of Islam. The Ibadis developed a system of governance known as the Imamate, where the ruler, the Imam, was elected by religious leaders and tribal heads. This elective system, based on Islamic law (Sharia), emphasized a social contract and the idea that the Imam's authority was subject to oversight by the community's religious elites. The Imamate was established in Oman in the mid-8th century, although it would experience periods of waxing and waning power throughout history.

The Imamate system, with its emphasis on elected leadership and shared power, contrasted with later hereditary rule and reflected the strong tribal traditions of Omani society. While the Imam was considered the head of the community, the decentralized

nature of Omani society, influenced by tribalism, encouraged a distribution of power with local governors (Walis) representing the Imamate in different regions. This historical tension between centralized and decentralized authority, and between elected and hereditary rule, would continue to shape Omani politics for centuries.

Oman's strategic coastal location also made it a target for external powers seeking control of lucrative trade routes. The Portuguese arrived in the early 16th century, attacking and controlling key coastal cities like Muscat. For over a century, the Portuguese exerted influence, building forts and attempting to control trade, but they never fully controlled the Omani interior.

The 17th century saw the rise of the Yaruba dynasty, an indigenous Ibadi movement that successfully expelled the Portuguese from Muscat and other coastal strongholds by 1650. The Yaruba imams unified the country and embarked on a period of significant expansion, creating a maritime empire that extended its influence to East Africa and parts of the Persian Gulf. This era marked a shift from the elective imamate towards a more dynastic succession within the Yaruba family. The Yaruba dynasty fostered trade, improved agriculture, and built a powerful navy, solidifying Oman's position as a regional power.

However, internal power struggles and civil war within the Yaruba dynasty in the early 18th century weakened the state, leading to Persian invasions. It was in this turbulent period that the Al Said dynasty emerged. Ahmad bin Said Al Busaidi, the governor of Sohar, rallied Omani forces, expelled the Persians, and was elected Imam in 1749, establishing the Al Said dynasty that continues to rule Oman today.

The early Al Said rulers consolidated their power, though the relationship between the coastal Sultanate, often centered in Muscat and focused on maritime trade and external relations, and the interior Imamate, which maintained the Ibadi tradition of elected leadership and tribal autonomy from its base in Nizwa or Rustaq, remained a recurring theme in Omani history. This historical duality between the coast and the interior, and the differing political structures associated with each, provides essential context for understanding the evolution of Omani governance.

The Al Said dynasty continued Oman's maritime legacy, expanding its influence in East Africa, with Zanzibar eventually becoming a significant center of Omani power. This period saw Oman engage in extensive trade networks across the Indian Ocean. However, the 19th century brought increasing British influence, as Britain sought to secure its trade routes to India. While never formally colonized, Oman entered into treaties with Britain, and British support played a role in maintaining the Al Said dynasty's authority, particularly against challenges from the interior imamate.

The tension between the Sultanate on the coast and the Imamate in the interior persisted into the 20th century. Agreements were reached, such as the Treaty of Seeb

in 1920, which acknowledged the autonomy of the interior imamate under the Sultan's sovereignty. However, this arrangement was not always stable, and clashes occurred, with the Sultanate eventually reasserting full control over the interior in 1959 with British assistance, effectively ending the last Ibadi Imamate.

The historical trajectory of Oman reveals a persistent interplay of tribal loyalties, religious identity (particularly Ibadi Islam), a strong maritime tradition, and the influence of external powers. These historical foundations have profoundly shaped the political culture and structures of modern Oman. The legacy of the Imamate, with its consultative elements and emphasis on community, and the enduring importance of tribal relationships, continue to resonate within the contemporary political system, even under the centralized authority of the Sultanate. Understanding this complex historical backdrop is crucial for appreciating the nuances of Omani politics today.

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