

# **State, Religion and Democracy in the Sultanate of Oman**

Sulaiman H. Al-Farsi

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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## Abstract

The extent to which the Middle East in general and the Gulf states in particular are willing and able to embrace more inclusive means of popular political participation has dominated the politics of the region for nearly two decades. Faced with contending pressures of urbanisation, demographic shifts and increasingly finite reserves of oil and gas, that social contract peculiar to the region – the rentier state – is no longer regarded as the panacea for ensuring regime stability and legitimacy. The emergence of powerful and in some cases violent Islamist opposition groups, not least in Saudi Arabia, is seen as testament to such growing socio-political anomie.

The Sultanate of Oman is not immune from such pressures. How to ensure the continued legitimacy of the political system in a post-oil era is the focus of this thesis. A traditionally tribal society noted for its adherence to the *Ibadi* school of Islam, Oman has increasingly been buffeted by the forces of globalisation, population growth, an emerging middle class, accelerating rates of urbanisation and the concomitant demands for greater political participation. Across much of the Middle East, such demands have either been bloodily repressed or, if imposed by outside intervention, have led to the emergence of fragile regimes whose legitimacy is often beholden to an uneasy alliance of otherwise competing sectarian factions.

By contrast, Oman provides a unique case study in how attempts to open up the political space in Oman have emerged from three separate but inter-connected constituencies: a top-down approach associated with the state elite; the traditional view of *Shura* linked to religious and tribal hegemony, and the bottom-up approach to democratisation, associated with an increasingly educated and urbanised middle class. All three constituencies draw upon indigenous symbols such as religion, tradition and norms to promote their view of democratisation. The thesis examines the extent to which these contending approaches to political reform employ existing forms of legitimacy and identity drawn from *Ibadi* Islam and in particular, the concept of *Shura*. The thesis explores the extent to which *Shura* is, in an Omani context, compatible with national emancipation and in so doing, challenges the extent to which this process is less a function of broader public demand, and more a response to the demands of Omani elites wishing to entrench the longevity and legitimacy of the political system in the post-oil era.

The thesis argues that all three constituencies believe that *Shura* in Oman, despite its often contested nature, forms the cornerstone for ensuring the legitimacy of any political regime. Incorporating a sense of shared identity that recognises the continued importance of tribalism in determining political allegiance, the process of *Shura* has nonetheless reached a level of maturity that now embraces the concept of popular participation. The absence of sectarian factions and other social problems in the evolution of this process serves to highlight how indigenous approaches to popular participation can determine new approaches to political reform across the Middle East.

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## Glossary

*Adnani*: One of the two main branches of Arab tribes, also known as the Northern tribes.

*Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd*: The name of the Islamic Council of Elite.

*Ameer*: Prince or a mastering sheikh above *Tamima* in ranking.

*Aqidah*: Faith.

*Asabiyyat*: Faction or kinship.

*Asnaf*: The Islamic guilds.

*Awqaf*, (sing. *Waqf*): Religious endowments.

*Azd*: The name of the main Qahtani tribe that migrated to Oman and ruled the state.

*Baitawiah*: The concept of giving priority to *Aal Al-Bait* or Ali's family in ruling the Islamic state, adopted by the *Shi'a* sect.

*Bay'a*: Pledge of allegiance.

*Bedu*: Bedouin People.

*Falaj*: (pl. *Aflaj*): An open water channel that carries water from source to the fields.

*Fiqh*: Jurisprudence.

*Ghadaf*: The old name of the Rustaq area which is regarded as the home of the Qahtani tribes.

*Hadhar*: People living in settlements.

*Hodoud*: Sanctions.

*Ibadat*: Worshipping.

*Ibadism*: An Islamic school of thought that calls for non-hereditary rule and the implementation of the *Shura*.

*Iftaa'*: Islamic advice-giving.

*Ijma'a*: Consensus.

*Ijtihad*: Deriving new legislations from the fixed texts of *Shari'a*.

*Imam*: Title of the ruler within *Ibadism* and some other Islamic sects.

*Imamah Ghaebah*: Absent Imamate.

*Imamate Kitman*: Hidden Imamate.

*Imamate Dhohor*: Explicit Imamate.

*Imamate Difaa'*: Defensive Imamate.

*Jahiliyah*: The time preceding the emergence of Islam.

*Jebel Akhdhar*: The Green Mountain located at the centre of Oman's interior.

*Khalifah (Pl. Kholafa'a)*: The title of the Islamic ruler during the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties.

*Kafir, (Pl. Koffar)*: Non-believer.

*Kofr*: Blasphemy.

*Madanee*: Civil.

*Majlis Al-Dawlah*: The State Council.

*Majlis Al-Istishary lid-Dawlah*: The State Consultative Council.

*Majlis Al-Shura*: The Shura Council.

*Majlis Al-Zira'a Wal-Asmak Was-Sina'ah*: The Agriculture, Fish and Industry's Council.

*Ma'rab*: An ancient dam in Yemen that, upon its collapse, started the great migration across Arabia.

*Mofti*: Head of the religious institutions.

*Muaamalat*: Dealings.

*Nizwa*: The centre of Imamate and the home for the Adnani tribes.

*Qahtani*: One of the two main branches of Arab tribes, also known as the Southern Tribes.

*Quraish*: The tribe of Prophet Mohammed (pbuh).

*Qurashia*: The concept of giving priority to the *Quraish* tribe in ruling the Islamic state, adopted by the Sunni sect.

*Rasheed*: A tribal ruler, below Sheikh in ranking.

*Rustaq*: The home for the *Qahtani* tribes located at the base of *Jebel Akhdar* on the *Batinah* side.

*Sablah*: Local gathering area.

*Saqifet Bani Saedah*: The name of the place where Muslims gathered, practised *Shura* and selected their first ruler after the death of the Prophet.

*Sayyid*: Lord.

*Shaff*: Inter-tribal alliance.

*Shari'a*: The Islamic law.

*Shi'a*: An Islamic sect that calls for keeping the Islamic leadership in the hands of the descendents of Ali bin Abi Talib.

*Shura*: Linguistically means 'consultation', but politically means 'a political system through which people enjoy the right of political participation'.

*Souq*: Market.

*Sunnah*: Prophet's sayings and actions.

*Sunan al-Bahr*: Sea norms.

*Sunnism*: An Islamic sect that calls for keeping the Islamic leadership in the hands of the *Quraish* tribe that Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) came from.

*Surat*: A chapter of Qur'an.

*Tamima*: Sheikh that dominates a large tribal alliance.

*Tawheed*: The oneness of God.

*Ulama*: Islamic intellectuals.

*Umma*: Nation, and in Islam means 'the combination of faith and community'.

*Wahabism*: A branch of the Hanbali sect that was established in Saudi Arabia during the last three centuries.

*Wali*: Local governor.

*Zakah*: Alms.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

This thesis examines the growing influence of democratisation and concepts of democratic power on the rentier – mainly oil-producing – states in the Middle East in general, and in Oman in particular. Over the past four decades, the legitimacy of rentier states has rested upon an implicit social contract (seen as part of an Islamic tradition called *Al-Bayá*: the pledge of allegiance) between people and regimes. In this contract, the regimes provide the people some subsidies, decent jobs in the public sector, and do so with little or no direct taxation, although it is at the expense of democratic forms of political participation. This implicit social contract has resulted in significant constraints being placed upon the development of democratic institutions and indeed upon the development of civil society itself in most rentier states. At the very least it has aided its reduction to a very artificial form of parliamentary representation wherein such parliaments have only minimal authority. At the same time, it has allowed such states, particularly in the Gulf Region, to establish and maintain the public infrastructure, to incorporate advanced technologies, to produce a larger educated class, to increase the quality of public health and, in turn, to contribute to a growing population in the region.

In some rentier states, such as in the Sultanate of Oman, oil production is now in decline due to the sharp reduction in realizable oil reserves; oil in Oman is expected to run out in a few decades<sup>1</sup>. This thesis argues that such states now face, to various degrees, an increasing pressure to meet hitherto expected living standards and some of the rentier states are likely to struggle to meet these expectations. With the number of university graduates increasing, but the ability of the public sector to absorb them becoming increasingly limited by the decrease in oil-revenues, greater dependence on the private sector to provide such employment seems inevitable, particularly because, unlike some other Gulf States, Omanis do not typically object to working in all job levels in the private sector. The consequential growth of associations, syndicates and unions, together with calls for political reforms, signal a great change in the existing

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<sup>1</sup> See Oman's Oil Yield Long in Decline, Shell Data Show cited in: <http://www.peacereading.org/Oman's%20Oil%20Yield%20Long%20in%20Decline.%20Shell%20Data%20Show.htm>. See also: <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/08/business/08OIL.html?pagewanted=1>. Last accessed on 7/4/2010.

social contract, and thus a significant challenge is currently posed to the legitimacy of some rentier states. Therefore, greater pressure for democratisation can be expected in some oil producing states, in line with the respective decline in levels of oil production, as popular demands for self-empowerment increase and governing elites seek new forms of political legitimacy.

Despite the deep-rooted history and conservatism of Oman, from the beginning of the twentieth century until Sultan Qaboos came to power in 1970, the country has witnessed a period of weakness at political, economic and cultural levels. Subsequently, many Omanis have left the country in a search for better education and employment, and many of the values that used to exist in Oman were damaged – not least the firm sense of Omani identity<sup>2</sup>.

In respect of the decline and crisis which had swept across the country at the time, the few years prior to Sultan Qaboos reign witnessed at least two important events: the conflict between the Government of the Sultanate at that time and the followers of the Imamate on the *Jebel Akhdar*; and the government's conflict with Marxist rebels in the *Dhofar* governance<sup>3</sup>. The former Sultan Said bin Taymur had been able to unify the country for the first time in modern history by the end of the 1950s. (Since the signing of *Seeb* Agreement in 1918, Oman had been divided between the Sultanate that rules the coastal areas and the Imamate that rules the interior). However, the conflict in the *Dhofar* governorate persisted until in the mid-seventies. The other, pre-eminently important event in that period was the discovery of oil in Oman, in vast commercially-significant quantities<sup>4</sup>.

The political changes which resulted from Sultan Qaboos acceding to the throne, and from the economic changes after the discovery of oil, helped to repair the ravages of the decades which preceded 1970. Omani people restored their identity and culture through the deployment of formal education, which quickly established national curricula. The curricula reminded citizens with their history, values, and traditions and

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<sup>2</sup> See Skeet, I. *Oman Before 1970: The End of An Era*. (Kent: Whitstable Litho Limited, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> Chatty, D. Rituals of Royalty and the Elaboration of Ceremony in Oman: View From the Edge. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, No. 41/1, 2009. P. 43.

<sup>4</sup> See Halliday, F. *Arabia Without Sultans*. (Manchester: The Philip Park Press, 1974).

assured them about the sovereignty of their country throughout history. Therefore, the development which took place and is still underway in Oman, this thesis contends, is not due solely to the discovery of oil reserves - as some theorists of the rentier state model have argued. It is also a function of the reformulation of the nation's history after a period of decline; the cultural and economic activities of Oman in terms of trade and industry were present throughout history and were not solely a product of the modern era.

The establishment of a modern state in Oman was embarked upon at all levels after 1970. It was therefore necessary to reformulate the political structure of Oman, but in line with its current stage of development. Oman had been opened to the world at all levels; the slogan adopted by the country was 'to start from where others have ended', and this motto was applied to education, health, and modern management systems and therefore had to be applied to the political system as well<sup>5</sup>. The Sultanate realised that the era of authoritarian political systems was over, and that an era of political pluralism based on democratic values had arrived. The Government recognised two important facts: firstly, the Omanis who had left to study and work before 1970 had become aware of the importance of political reform; and secondly, Oman was suffering from having a distinctly weak civil society (as was the case in other Arab countries).

The opening-up of the political horizon in a tribal society based mainly on tribal legitimacy, which fights any sort of centralisation of power even if it comes in a democratic form, may well serve to evoke negative reactions and results, not least to the social and political system in the State. Therefore, the intended project of political democratisation was to be exercised through a gradual opening up of the political horizon alongside progress in the development of civil society, but crucially in keeping with tradition and other historic values of the country<sup>6</sup>. As discussed in Chapter 2, it was necessary and obvious (at least to its architects) to choose the Islamic *Shura* as a model for policy making in the country, particularly since Oman is the only country which has maintained the *Shura* practice throughout its history; indeed, its demise could lead to

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<sup>5</sup> Chatty, D. 2009, p.44.

<sup>6</sup> Kishtainy, K. *Oman and the Experiment in Democracy*. (London: Elliot & Sampson: 2007), pp. 56-57.

much social upheaval in Oman as the legitimacy of any political system in the country is based on the extent to which it recognises the *Shura*.

From 1970 onwards Oman witnessed a new 'top-down' democratisation process which juxtaposed the traditional democratic practice of *Shura*, derived from Islam, with the concepts and institutional practices of modern Western democracy. Omanis were allowed to vote *en masse*, for the first time in the Sultanate's history, in 1991. This is a new political phenomenon for the *ordinary* Omani people to directly practise *Shura* at the national level, and it is a process which has been introduced from the top down. In the traditional Islamic *Shura*, participation – at the national level - was restricted to elites and notables who claimed representative legitimacy on behalf of various tribal confederations. Ordinary people in the past were restricted to providing nominal mandates once the *Shura* had been formed and decisions had been taken. Nevertheless, all Muslim people can practise *Shura* on the hierarchically-lower levels as it is regarded as a norm of living (to the extent that all have a right even to criticise the ruler if he is found wrong).

Since the 1990s, however, it would seem that a process of democratisation which embraces all segments of Omani society, including the clergy, has come to be accepted by most sections of society. Significantly, though, this process is relatively new, and some, especially the educated younger generation, feel that current democratic reforms remain insufficient in terms of addressing the challenges which Oman faces in the 21st century. By employing the resources of web sites, the media, and other open *fora*, this emerging educated and technocratic elite has begun to push the government towards making more substantive political reforms. This phenomenon represents a nucleus of 'bottom-up' democratisation approaches, reflected for example in the manner in which its agents are initiating contacts with regional and international human rights organisations.

This study therefore identifies three types of democratisation taking place in contemporary Oman: the traditional, led by the religious institutions; the top-down, led by the government; and a bottom-up process which is emerging slowly amongst a younger generation. Oman, it can be argued, is passing through a transitional period in which all three processes react against and struggle with each other in order to reach a certain compromise or settlement. The presence of this unique phenomenon offers a very

interesting opportunity to examine these democratisation processes. The following paragraphs explain the contest oriented around the concept of the rentier state and the process of democratisation in Oman - between the three different actors. This all takes place against the backdrop of *Ibadism* - a source of consistency in the Omani state and Omani society.

Oman, regardless of its limited oil reserves when compared to its neighbours, is regarded as being one of the rentier states of the Gulf region, but its declining oil reserves clearly threaten the ability of the Sultanate to continue to arrange political discourse and participation around a 'rentier state model'. The country might fail to fulfil its duties in the implicit social contract and the legitimacy of the government might well soon be affected. According to some reports, the decline in oil production rates will start within a decade<sup>7</sup>. (Some Omani officials are still optimistic, hoping that new technology will allow for the extraction of the heavy oil reserves available in big, untapped reservoirs in the country). But even if oil production rates remain at the same level or oil prices rise, some Gulf States in general and Oman in particular might not be able to continue with the rentier model as population growth outstrips oil income, and the capacity of the public sector, which employs a vast proportion of the citizenry, is hindered.

As will be detailed in subsequent chapters, Oman has been ruled for over ten centuries by *Ibadi* Imams and has never been under the sovereignty of the great *Sunni* Islamic dynasties – except for the four decades that followed the end of the First Imamate State in the eighth century - beginning with the Umayyad and ending with Ottomans<sup>8</sup>. The majority of the population have in the past followed the *Ibadi* sect which serves to determine the religious and cultural borders in terms of state and society<sup>9</sup>. *Ibadi* people suffered throughout history from continuous attacks from the different Islamic dynasties, especially from the Umayyad and the Abbasids. Attempts

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<sup>7</sup>Oman Country Monitor. June 2003. In: [http://0-web.ebscohost.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/ehost/results?vid=2&hid=111&sid=5335fdb-375c-4dab-a7be-11294b36347e%40sessionmgr114&bquery=\(JN+%22Oman+Country+Monitor%22+and+DT+20030601\)&bdata=JmRiPWJ1aCZ0eXBIPTEmc2l0ZT1laG9zdCIsaXZl](http://0-web.ebscohost.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/ehost/results?vid=2&hid=111&sid=5335fdb-375c-4dab-a7be-11294b36347e%40sessionmgr114&bquery=(JN+%22Oman+Country+Monitor%22+and+DT+20030601)&bdata=JmRiPWJ1aCZ0eXBIPTEmc2l0ZT1laG9zdCIsaXZl). Last accessed on 19/7/2010.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Maharmi, Z. K. *Al-Ibadiya: Tareekh Wa-Manhaj Wa-Mabadi'a*. (Bahla: Al-Ghubaira'a Library, 2005), pp. 3-8.

<sup>9</sup> See Al-Suhail, N. E. J. *Al-Ibadiyah Fil-Khaleej Al-Arabi Fil-Qarnain Al-Thalith Wal-Rabi'e Al-Hijri*. (Muscat: Al-Istiqaamah Bookshop, 1998).



were made to destroy the *Ibadi* state, which was seen as a threat to the hereditary rule practised by the respective dynasties.

*Ibadism's* understanding of *Shura* is different from that of other *Sunni* sects. The latter – except perhaps in the work of the Sudanese scholar Hassan al-Turabi and some of the renaissance era scholars in Egypt during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries - see *Shura* as a process that never exceeds the offering of consultation by the ruler. *Ibadi*, by contrast, take *Shura* as a political agenda in which the ruler (Imam) is elected, thereby denying legitimacy to the idea of hereditary rule. Moreover, *Ibadism* genuinely practises the Islamic principles of *Ijmaá* (consensus) and *Ijtihad* (diligence), a fact which has allowed them to adapt core Islamic values to suit a dramatically changing environment in the contemporary globalised era. This attribute of *Ibadism* exhibits its best qualities when it comes to *Ibadi* tolerance towards other religions and cultures.

Other attacks came in different forms such as in attempts to convert *Ibadi* people to the *Sunni* sect (attempts that still manifest themselves today in the proselytising of Saudi *Wahabism*). But such proselytising has met with limited success in the remote provinces of the Sultanate where levels of literacy are particularly low, which deprive people from deeply understanding the differences between *Ibadism* and *Sunnism* and hence accept the proselytising calls. *Ibadism* represented to the followers of the Imamate a locus point of opposition to Western encroachment. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the reliance of the Sultanate on formal treaties with the British - who realised the strategic importance of Oman, and of course the Trucial Coast and its significance in terms of protecting British interests in the Indian Ocean - provoked the anger of successive Imams who challenged the legitimacy of the ruling order<sup>10</sup>. According to the *Ibadi* notion the *Imamate* never dies but takes different forms which allow it to survive 'implicitly' or 'explicitly'. An *Ibadi* Imamate can be absent (*Imamah Ghaebah*) when *Ibadi* people are in a state of weakness; or hidden (*Imamate Kitman*) during times of threat or fear; or it can be explicit (*Imamate Dhohor*) during times of peace; or finally it can be defensive (*Imamate Difaá*) during times of war or conquest. With this mindset, *Ibadi* people, represented mainly

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<sup>10</sup> Rabi, U. *The Emergence of States in a Tribal Society: Oman Under Said bin Taymur 1932- 1970*. (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2007), p. 44.

by the religious scholars, jealously guard the heritage that has served to shape Omani identity - religiously, politically and culturally – throughout Islamic history<sup>11</sup>.

The current *Al-Busaidi* dynasty has been ruling Oman since 1744 when Imam Ahmed Bin Said, the founder of the *Al-Busaidi* Dynasty, was elected by Omani notables according to the *Ibadi* tradition. After his death in 1783, his son Said bin Ahmed ruled only for few years before his brother, Sultan bin Ahmed, deposed him and moved the capital from the *Rustaq* in the Interior to Muscat. Breaking with *Ibadi* traditions, Sultan bin Ahmed proclaimed himself *Sayyid* (lord). This incident marked the beginning of the period during which Oman had two ruling systems, originating from the same ruling family in Oman; *Sayyids* in Muscat and the other coastal area, and Imams throughout the interior<sup>12</sup>. In 1806, *Sayyid* Said bin Sultan became the ruler and, breaking with tradition again, dubbed the title of Sultan instead of Imam, although he used both titles at different occasions. During his time, Oman reached its greatest position in terms of economic and political power, and the Omani Empire extended from parts of Pakistan and Iran to parts of East Africa<sup>13</sup>. The Sultan managed to open the country to the outside world, and, during his time, the British and French vied for influence throughout the region. The Omani Empire had two capitals at his time, Muscat and Zanzibar.

The *Ibadi* followers of Imamate, however, feared the growing ties between the Sultan and the British in particular<sup>14</sup>, and they despaired over the agreement signed later between London and Muscat which led to Zanzibar being lost to British control. They therefore initiated a revolution in 1868 known as the Revolution of Imam Azzan bin Qais, who again came from the same *Al-Busaidi* ruling family. This incident renewed the struggle between the Sultans and the Imams. It is worth mentioning that the Sultans are also *Ibadis* and believe in the *Ibadi* principles and values, but they, in their quest to establish a modern state, established themselves as being independent from the religious intellectuals' control and concentrated on sea trade, especially before 1970<sup>15</sup>. There have

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<sup>11</sup> Muammar, A. Y. *Ibadiism: A Moderate Sect of Islam*. (Muscat: International Printing Press, 1990), pp. 16-19.

<sup>12</sup> Zahlan, R. S. *The Making of the Modern Gulf States*. (Reading: Garnet Publishing Limited, 1998), p.126. See also Rabi (2007), p.p. 26-27.

<sup>13</sup> Zahlan. 1998. p. 126.

<sup>14</sup> Ruete, R. S. *Sultanate Oman Khilafat Al-Sayyid Said bin Sultan (1791-1856)*. (Basra: Arabian Gulf Studies Publications, 1983), p. 226.

<sup>15</sup> For a full background of the current ruling family see: Ruzayq, H. M. *Al-Fateh*

been periods in Omani modern history, however, when Sultans and Imams have cooperated with each other, particularly after signing the 1918's *Seeb* Agreement<sup>16</sup>.

Most Gulf States have witnessed conflicts between those tribes who have migrated to urban areas and have tended to be better educated (*hadar*) and those living in deserts (*bedu*); and, again, between rulers and merchants<sup>17</sup>. In the case of Kuwait, for example, the *hadar* tribes benefited more from the oil boom and controlled the oil revenues with the protection of Great Britain which served the interests of the ruling families. The case of Oman, however, was slightly different, as the tension was not between *hadar* and *bedu* or rulers and merchants. It was instead a political conflict over the issue of legitimacy since the Imamate people of the interior were well educated by the traditional means and, indeed, have left behind a very rich tradition of scholarly work in theology, the Arabic language literature and history which is still widely read throughout Oman. What differences did exist between the coastal Sultanate people and the Interior Imamate can be attributed to two main factors: the respective sources of income of the two regions; and their foreign policy strategies. The Sultanate, dominating as it did the coastal areas, was dependent on seafaring as the main source of income and proved flexible and indeed cunning in its dealings with foreign states, not least in signing treaties of co-operation and friendship with the British. Whilst this implied some compromise over full sovereignty, Oman retained a degree of political independence which marked it out from what became known as other 'Trucial States', where the role of Britain was far more transparent in ensuring the survival of a particular dynastic order<sup>18</sup>. By contrast, the Imamate depended on an agrarian based economy and eschewed overt reliance on outside powers which could potentially undermine the sanctity of the *Ibadi* order. Accordingly, the Imams were ill placed to benefit from the economic boom which resulted from the discovery and exportation of oil in commercial quantities from the mid-1960s onwards<sup>19</sup>.

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*Al-Mubeen Fi Sirat Al-Sadah Al-Busaidiyeen*. (Cairo: Amoon Printings, 1984).

<sup>16</sup> See: Owtram, F. *A Modern History of Oman*. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Davidson, C. M. " From traditional to formal education in the lower Arabian Gulf, 1820–1971", *History of Education*, Vol. 37, No. 5, September 2008, 633–643.  
See also Rabi (2007), p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Rabi, (2007), p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> For the sources of income for both the Imamate and the Sultanate, see Rabi (2007), p.17.

In 1970 Sultan Qaboos came to power, three years after the discovery of oil in commercial quantities in Oman. He was born to an *Ibadi* father and a *Sunni* mother from the *Dhofar* governorate, which, from the late 1950s onwards, had been the scene of a growing insurgency, increasingly influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideology and dedicated to the overthrow of the Sultanate. His *Ibadi* background undoubtedly helped in attracting legitimacy from powerful northern tribes. Equally, the fact that his mother was from *Dhofar* gave the Sultan an appeal among *Dhofari* tribes whose initial attraction to the insurgents was driven less by their ideological message, and more by frustration at a Sultanate which had hitherto refused to address the socio-economic needs of the wider Omani society. While continuing to conduct the war against the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Arabian Gulf (PFLOAG), Sultan Qaboos set out to use the increasing rent derived from the sale of oil to modernise the Sultanate.

The aim of PFLOAG was to overthrow the dynastic order, as had been done in other Arab states such as Egypt, Iraq, and Libya, as well as South Yemen and in the process, drive out British imperialism. The Sultan dealt with the situation through two different policies: first, by strengthening the armed forces and seeking help from friendly states such as Britain, Iran and Jordan; and secondly, through developing the country which helped in pulling the carpet from underneath the PFLOAG<sup>20</sup>. The Sultan called on the PFLOAG members and the other Omanis who resided in the neighbouring states to come back to their country and participate in the process of building up the country's political and economic infrastructure. The vast majority returned to the country with some going on to play important roles in the process of state development and even reaching ministerial ranks in later years.

From 1976 through to the 1990s, it can be argued that the rentier state model enjoyed a golden era in Oman, following the successful defeat of the PFLOAG. The 1990s, however, brought other challenges, but this time from a younger generation which had benefited from the rentier state. Some of this younger, better educated generation found themselves unable to rely on the government to provide employment as world oil prices declined, and with this decline a drop occurred in rent which had until that point underpinned the social contract between ruler and ruled. Increasingly, employment opportunities could mostly be found in a small but burgeoning private

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<sup>20</sup> Zahlan. 1998. p. 132.

sector, or by working individually. Accordingly, young Omanis found themselves partly freed from the political and economic authority of the state, as their source of income came from non-governmental sectors. This process emerged simultaneously with the political reform which took place across the Sultanate in 1991.

Thus, a host of events and initiatives played a part in the formation of the new bottom up democratisation process, in which young Omani people began to push for substantive political reform; significant amongst these developments should be noted the decline in employment opportunities in the public sector; the economic diversification policies; the rapidly growing population; the decline in the oil production rate; the rise in the price of commodities; the increasing number of graduates; the technological and media revolution; growing independence in the means of living; local political reforms; and the wider context of regional and international democracy promotion.

In an attempt which was seen as a step towards the preservation of the tradition of the *Ibadi* sect, Sultan Qaboos specified, through the different five-year development plans, that part of the national income to be dedicated to preserving religious worship and to the teaching of *Ibadism*. He also preserved the *Ibadi* traditional process of *Shura*. This was institutionalised by establishing the newly introduced democratisation process (the *Shura* Experiment). In addition, the Sultan had not appointed an heir. Instead, in the Basic Statute of the State it is asserted that after the death of the Sultan the Royal Family members will meet and select from among themselves the future monarch, a process which is directly influenced by the *Ibadi* way of electing the ruler. *Ibadi* scholars have participated in both the process of building up the state and in the newly introduced top-down democratisation process.

This thesis sets out to analyse the relationship between state, religion and democracy. It examines democratisation under the rentier state model, explores ways in which the democratisation process might form an alternative model in the post-oil era, and speculates on the capacity of democratisation to enhance stability and security in Oman in the longer run. By examining competing democratisation processes in the Sultanate, the thesis examines the extent to which an indigenous political process which employs existing forms of legitimacy and identity (based around the Sultanate and *Ibadi* Islam) can emerge in the light of the pressure for more wholesale reform. Essentially

this study is motivated by the need for the Omani people to realise an effective political model which can best suit the Sultanate in the post rentier state model era.

## 1.2 Aims and Objectives

This is the first systematic study to examine the relationship between state, religion and democracy in the Sultanate of Oman, and is based on fieldwork designed to capture and critically explain how the matrix of groups, tribes and associations in Oman perceive the competing processes of democratisation. To date, there has been no systematic study with a focus upon Oman, or indeed, of the other rentier states in the Middle East. Only two studies thus far have described specific areas of the democratisation process in Oman, Al-Harthy's (2004) PhD thesis (*The political changes in Oman from 1970: transition towards democracy*) which is in essence a descriptive study of the political changes which have taken place in Oman since 1970 and Al-Kathiri's (2007) PhD thesis (*The implications of legal change and political reform for the workings of the Majlis A'Shura and Majlis A'Dawlah in Oman (1981-2003)*). Other, published, studies on Oman which played an important part in shaping the conceptualisation and design of this study are Abdullah bin Humaid Al-Salmi's book (*Tuhfat Al-A'ayan Bi Sirat Ahl Oman*), Uzi Rabi's book (*The Emergence of States in a Tribal Society: Oman Under Said bin Taymur 1932-1970*), Marc Valeri's book (*Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State*), and John Wilkinson's book (*The Imamate Tradition of Oman*).

Although these theses and books covered important parts of the socio-political aspects of Oman and the two theses in particular concentrated on *Majlis Al-Shura*, none of them discussed the relationship between rentierism and *Shura*, how the theology of *Ibadism* might facilitate or hinder the contemporary political process in Oman, how a younger generation might challenge it and to what extent this indigenous participatory process which is linked to the tradition is able to develop, evolve and be an alternative for the other well known pluralistic systems. This is important given the partial success – if not failure - of democratisation experiments in some of the Arab states. This thesis sets out to explore these issues.

This research explores the three competing models identified as: (top-down, traditional and bottom-up) in order to:

- Explicate government rationale in its adoption and initiation of top-down political process and evaluate its success in doing so;
- Describe a collective position of the religious leaders (*Ulama*) with respect to the current processes of political reform and the extent to which that position either undermines or empowers existing laws based upon *Ibadi* interpretations of *Shari'a*;
- Explore the generational shift in political expectations, analysing the aspects – political, social, and economic – which serve to define emerging patterns of political order and participation;
- Examine how these competing processes of democratisation inform the basis of political legitimacy in Oman in the post-rentier state model era;
- Explore whether and how a developed indigenous popular political process that has roots in tradition might offer a successful alternative to Western style democracies.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

Oman has witnessed a stable, secure and prosperous era under the rentier state model. Such prosperity has become an accepted staple of Omani life and is regarded as still being crucial to political stability in the post-rentier state model era. However, ensuring the legitimacy of the Sultanate is arguably contingent on a path of democratic reform which currently embraces three distinct (though not always necessarily exclusive) democratic theories and modes of participation. It is the process of bargaining between these processes which will determine the extent to which an indigenous democratisation process is able to evolve and to define the political landscape of Oman. Therefore, this study addresses the following research questions:

- In a post-rentier state model era, does a coherent democratic discourse based on three different forms of popular participation now define the political landscape in Oman?
- Why is the Omani government adopting a top-down democratisation process now, and to what extent can it be deemed successful?

- What impact has the traditional practice of *Shura* had on the recent democratisation process in Oman?
- Why has a younger generation of Omanis initiated a bottom-up democratisation process?
- To what extent might the *Shura* political process – with its traditional characteristics - offer successful participatory processes to modern Western democracies?

## 1.4 Methodology

In its analysis of the relationship between state, religion and democracy, this study examines policies, cultures, and social behaviours. Through an interpretative paradigm, the study adopts a qualitative research strategy. In addition to the methods of document analysis, the study adopts semi-structured interviews which provide contextual flexibility for the researcher and gives interviewees an opportunity to develop and elaborate their answers. In keeping with this qualitative frame, I use First Person pronominal to give my own interpretation and analysis of the data related to this thesis.

I undertook preparatory fieldwork by conducting 13 interviews during the 2007 Parliamentary Elections in Oman with a range of officials, candidates and voters. All of these were recorded, except one where the participant refused an audio record and notes were taken instead. There were some distractions during some interviews due to the high music volume in some places where meetings took place; phone calls, too, posed a slight issue especially when interviewing candidates on the election day, and secretaries were pushing to conclude as soon as possible when I was interviewing senior officials. As might be expected, the Omani public was not fully conversant in terms of the issue of democratisation, and their ability to engage was somewhat limited; consequently their participation was restricted to simplified questions, which in turn were based upon a thorough briefing I gave before the interviews commenced. Overall, the preparatory fieldwork process was beneficial as most of its problems were avoided when conducting the main interviews of the study.

For the main study, I selected a small purposive sample, consistent with a qualitative approach which seeks depth and detail. The sample was identified to elicit



responses from across perceived representatives of the top-down, traditional and bottom-up democratisation processes arguably evident in Oman. The respondents' views are not by any means representative views, and it should not be taken as if I am generalising to the populations from which each sample is drawn. What I am doing is draw on these categories of respondent to indicate broad trends from within each category to support my analysis. Respondents thus include:

- A. Government elites, which have a close relationship with the top-down political process taking place at the moment in Oman. This group is constituted by representatives from the Ministry of interior, the *Dawlah* (State) Council, the *Shura* (Consultative) Council, the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Manpower, and some other government members (see Appendix 1).
  
- B. Senior members of the religious institutions which represent the traditional model, among them key people from the *Iftaá* (Islamic advice-giving) Office, the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, and the Sultan Qaboos Institute for Islamic Culture, and some others (see Appendix 2).
  
- C. Those outside Groups A and B, who currently represent the bottom-up model, among them those responsible for some internet blogs, heads of civil society organisations, writers, and cultural activists (see Appendix 3).

For purposes of data analysis, Kvale<sup>21</sup> instances five approaches for analysing interviews: categorisation of meaning; condensation of meaning; structuring of meaning through narratives; interpretation of meaning; and *ad hoc* methods of generating meaning. Kvale reminds us that there is no 'magic tool' to dig out the key issues emerging from interview transcripts; rather, it all depends on the researcher and the quality and perception of research questions. As such, I identified the themes that are mentioned in a way or another – directly or indirectly - by at least more than one of the interviewees that have a bearing on the research question. I noted in each case what was said and analysed these responses in accordance with the research aims and questions. Sticking to the interpretive approach, I did not go for numerical analysis but of

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<sup>21</sup> Kvale, S. *Interviews: an introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. (London: Sage, 1996).

respondents' meanings. These themes were then organised in a substantive titles and subtitles in order to make the emerging narrative explicit and accessible.

As mentioned above, a number of the targeted respondents are of a senior level in society (elites), so 'particular care needs to be taken in writing up data of this type, especially if the research is concerned with the interpretation of meaning as it is constructed by respondents'<sup>22</sup>. In respect of this group, another issue is that some of the terms used to describe and inform debates over democratisation are not always welcomed by government officials; consequently, other ways had to be found to elicit views and ideas without affecting the meaning. For example, if the question is, 'In the post-rentier state model era what would be the best alternative to ensure political legitimacy in Oman, and why?', such respondents may not like to hear the phrase 'rentier' as they do not want to talk explicitly about the social contract implicit in the term. They may be unlikely to accept enquiries which question the issue of political legitimacy since it represents a 'red line' which should not, for them, be crossed. Therefore, the question instead is changed to the following form: 'In the post-oil era do you think that democracy can form the best political system in Oman and why?' Similarly, when talking to religious people one has to be careful with regard to particular phrases; instead of saying 'democracy', which can come loaded with reference to a Western political construct, one can use the terms 'political plurality' or 'political participation' or 'the *Shura*'. A list of the interviews' questions in English and Arabic is available in Appendix 8.

Each interview began by asking the person about his impressions of the *Shura* in the past, present and future in Oman. It then moved on to specific questions such as the compatibility and/or incompatibility of the old and new *Shura*, the impact of globalisation on the political process, and the level of tribal and religious influence on the *Shura*. Questions then covered the social and economic factors which affect the *Shura*, and finally interviews concluded by asking empirical questions regarding the political situation in Oman after the depletion of oil. In keeping with the qualitative nature of the study, and the semi-structured interview format, I raised other subsidiary

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<sup>22</sup> Burnham P., et al, 2004. *Research Methods in Politics*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 218.

questions in the context of individual interview, so as to draw as fully as possible on the personal/professional experience of each interviewee.

The design of the study identifies three effectively distinct categories, and each category includes ten respondents. The first category represents the top-down democratisation process, and is constituted mainly by government representatives who will be referred to in the analysis chapters as GR: (Government Respondent). The second category represents the traditional democratisation process and is mainly made up from the current religious people in important posts and others who have links with the previous Imamate system; they are referred to as RR: (Religious Respondents). The third category represents the bottom-up democratisation process and these are the young, educated people who in the context of the study are mainly drawn from the cultural media industries and civil society associations; they are referred to as YGR: (Young Generation Respondents).

The sample was purposively selected to reflect the Omani spectrum of orientation to the democratisation process as conceived in the design of the study. The sample targets people from different tribes, of both genders, of different ages, from different working sectors, and from different backgrounds and cultures. However, many of the interviewees were selected so as to serve the study from more than one angle; for example, one of the religious people interviewed is a businessman, and beside his intellectual contributions in terms of Islamic theology and *Shura*, he had enjoyed membership of the Agriculture, Fish and Industry Council during the 1970s, the State Consultative Council during the 1980s, the *Shura* Council during the 1990s, and the State Council and the GCC Advisory Committee since the mid-1990s onward. Another example is an interviewee who was a senior member in the last Imamate and was a prisoner for many years and lived after his discharge outside the country but is now working in a senior post in a non-religious ministry where the minister is a member of the Royal Family. A third example is a person who is leading one of the civil society associations. This person was a member of the *Shura* Council and is now a member in the State Council. A fourth example is a member of the State Council who, during the 1950s, was a representative of the Imamate in Yemen and later on became an ambassador for the Sultanate.

Initially, the design of the study included an interview with a senior member of the Royal Family, who according to the Basic Statute of the State is eligible to be a Sultan in the future. Perhaps significantly, he refused politely to be involved in the study because they, as a ruling family, do not want to talk about their achievements; rather, they want others to judge their performance.

Some of the selected interviewees had recently been involved in religious underground organisation to restore the Imamate and they were investigated, prosecuted and found guilty but were thereafter discharged due to a Royal pardon. Some of the interviewees came from tribes which ruled Oman during the Imamate time. I believe that this diversity in the selected sample enriches the study and adds to the validity of its results and conclusions.

The selected sample represents people mainly in relatively high professional standing formally within the three categories, with few exceptions; as such, they may be perceived to have a significantly sophisticated understanding of the political process because of their greater level of participation in the politics of Oman. However, I excluded some senior people whose positions might otherwise be seen to have direct links to the study, because – put simply - they did not show any willingness to properly participate.

Interviews were conducted in Oman between December 2008 and April 2009, and as interviewer, I faced several constraints. Until the middle of December 2008, the country was celebrating the Hajj Festival (*Eid Al-Adha*). I kept pursuing interviewees during the second half of December 2008 and managed to conduct only one interview. This is because the GCC Summit was about to take place in Muscat on the 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> of December and most targeted respondents refused to have interviews during that month; their excuses may be justified, as most of them are in senior posts and there was a call up of senior officials that time. From 4-17 January 2009 Oman had organised the GCC Football Tournament, and most people wanted to devote their attention to this event, except some of the religious people whom I managed to see.

The majority of interviews, along with their transcription into Arabic, took place between February and April 2009. In one day I agreed to conduct three interviews in three different places. The first interview took place in the morning in a ministry, the

second took place in the afternoon in a civil society organisation's office, and the third took place in the evening in my house. On another occasion I accepted to take two interviews in two nearby ministries but the time gap between the two was fifteen minutes only. Another example of challenges posed is when the respondent, due to his tight schedule, wanted to have the appointment at a late hour in my house. The interview was completed after midnight.

Interviews, particularly with religious people, had many interruptions. They do not like closed door situations, and visitors kept on knocking on the doors until the interviewees opened them. I was obliged to accept this because respondents kept on delaying the appointments and time was passing so quickly. However, I tried to keep myself focussed to the full possible extent in these circumstances in order to preserve the quality of the interviews. One of the benefits of doing more than one interview in one day, however, is that the different contributions of the earlier respondent were present in my mind during the subsequent interview. This helped to enrich the interview as far as my efforts were concerned because I managed to create some new sub-questions based on the data given in the previous interview.

Most interviews were recorded. In five cases, especially in interviews with ministers, they did not like the idea of the interview being recorded; they preferred to have a general discussion about the study. They preferred also to keep the interview questions with them in order to submit the answers after elapsed period of time. This had both a positive and negative side to it. The positive side was that the answers were carefully thought through and clearly written. The negative side is that some people will undoubtedly have asked other, more junior staff to prepare their answers. The ministers' secretaries, however, assured me – after polite probing - that the ministers had answered the questions by themselves and had typed them at home. The other negative side of keeping the interview questions is that the face-to-face, semi structured interview helps in terms of asking other lateral questions which elaborate on previous answers. This, of course, was impossible in such circumstances. The third negative effect of their keeping the questions was that the answers that were sent to me later on did not include the answers to some of the questions. This may be because the respondents were not competent regarding a specific field. This happened only in two cases. The questions

not answered were related to the economic performance of the state which is beyond the remit of knowledge of those two respondents.

In another case where the respondent kept the questions with him, he came up with some guidelines and restricted his answers to those which conformed to those guidelines. It was very difficult to push him to talk about other topics and so on. In another case where the respondent preferred to keep the questions, I discovered later on that the respondent sought assistance from third parties. In subsequent analysis I was thus able to be wary of the reliability of such responses.

Although I am a full time research student, it was always the case that I would be treated as a government man, as it were. I was therefore studious in all interviews in terms of clarifying that the interviews were only being conducted for academic purposes. This, it is proposed, helped most respondents to speak freely regarding their opinions. In a few cases there were some observations which need noting:

- In two cases the respondents advised me to be very careful in writing up the research, as the topic might be regarded as sensitive by some parties in the country. This reflects their personal caution over speaking about the subject;
- One other respondent, when his son - who attended the interview and was an ex-member of *Al-Shura* Council - wanted to comment on a certain delicate point about the effect of tribal fanaticism on the *Shura* process, ordered his son to stop and pointed to the recorder. The possible explanation for this act is either the respondent did not want his son to interrupt the interview or he was not willing to give his version of the truth, for whatever reason;
- Two very senior officials, after finishing the recording, spoke about some personal opinions related to the *Shura* process in Oman. I took notes of these expressions and opinions. This indicates that they trusted me but their official post required them to talk diplomatically while the recorder was running;

- One respondent spoke harshly about government actions. He spoke loudly although he was recorded. I discovered later on that he was under prosecution due to his revelation of a highly confidential government document in an internet blog;
- Another respondent stressed certain points which were not directly linked to the study. It was clear, unfortunately, that he had a certain racist agenda in his mind which he wanted to convey to the government. Unfortunately his agenda was against a certain group in Omani society and was not necessarily for the public good. Whilst of importance in themselves, these points were not immediately relevant to the study and are thus not reported in this text.

## 1.5 The Structure of the Thesis

This study consists of seven chapters. Following on from this introduction, Chapter Two deals with the relevant literature on issues of democratisation in the Arab World in general. This is particularly important because Oman shares some common factors with the rest of the Arab States such as a weak civil society compared to stronger states that at best adopt minor participatory systems. It is also an Islamic state, where Islam embraces the *Shura* principle, which is seen at least by some Muslims as the Islamic alternative to Western democracy. The link between tribalism and oil is another common factor that Oman shares with the rest of the Arab World.

Chapter Three deals with the Omani context in particular. It sheds light on the tribal nature of the Omani society and its political history. It also explores the social transformation process that took place in the country since 1970 and how that is challenging the contemporary political process adopted by the government from the top down and affecting the implicit social contract embracing the rentier state model. It also reviews the available literature around the Omani political process and explores the legal and administrative organisation available for the contemporary political process. This is important to reflect to what extent there is a solid base available for the sustainability and development of the political process.

The next three chapters are built on extensive empirical work gathered through interviewing different categories that represent the three democratisation processes developing in Oman. Chapter Four presents an analysis of data gathered from respondents identified with the top down model. From their contributions the thesis draws some clear insights about the basis of the contemporary political process and its chances to evolve in future and adapt with the requirements of the time. It concentrates on the reasons that made the government adopt the political process from the top-down and the challenges this process is now facing from the traditional *Shura* or from the younger generation.

Chapter Five analyses data gathered from the religious respondents. It focuses mainly on their contributions about *Shura*, its origin, practices, flexibility and adaptability. It also elaborates the Imamate system that challenges dynastic systems and explores how it might tolerate the other hereditary systems and none Islamic pluralistic systems such as democratisation processes. It pays particular attention on how they see the current political process and whether it is contradicting the traditional Islamic *Shura* and to what extent they are capable to accept the different means of modernity including globalisation and urbanisation.

Chapter Six analyses the data contributed by the younger generation respondents. It explores the younger generation's satisfaction with the contemporary *Shura* process. This group may be seen to represent the future, as they have experienced education to a high level, had access to the different means of telecommunication including the internet, and hence can give an indication about the chances for the *Shura* to survive or otherwise be replaced by another imported pluralistic system such as Western style democratisation processes. The chapter also reports their knowledge about Oman's history and tradition to see how they are linked to it and to what extent they retain and identify with the traditional understandings of the *Shura*. It also sheds lights on the improvement in the social mobilisation and civil society associations and how these engagements improve the political participation in the country.

Chapter Seven concludes the thesis. It links together the main themes of the study in relation to the research questions. It rehearses some insights derived from the thesis



and draws overall conclusions about the understandings and evaluation of the process of democratisation in Oman presented on these pages.

## 2 The Context of Democratisation in the Arab World

### 2.1 Introduction

The literature on democracy and the process of democratisation in the Arab world has, over the past two decades, been dominated by attempts to frame a causal link between these terms and the process of state legitimisation and stabilisation in the region. In particular, with what some regard as the decline of the rentier state model as a unique form of social contract in the oil producing states of the Gulf region, alternative methods of control and governance have come increasingly to shape political agendas. At one end of the spectrum, a process of deeper democratisation is now seen as crucial to ensuring the longevity of the dynastic regimes whose legitimacy should and could be embedded in particular, locally acceptable, pragmatic forms of popular participation. At the other end of the spectrum of debate, Islam is now seen as the main agency of social change, its most radical manifestation brooking little or no compromise with concepts of sovereignty derived from man, as opposed to those derived from God.

To be sure, political evolution in many of the Gulf States is uneven, with tribal practice often juxtaposed with particular interpretations of Islam providing forums of varying legislative weight. Thus in Kuwait, for example, a functioning parliamentary system which includes female participation contrasts starkly with the rather stytic mechanisms of political participation found in Saudi Arabia. What is notable however, is that such debates have tended to focus on the extent to which Islam, be it *Shi'a* or *Sunni*, is or is not compatible with the secular democratic ideal. Moreover, there is an innate assumption that such participation is, by definition, an expression of social discontent with the existing forms of governance which tend to circumscribe popular participatory politics; in short, political change has to be bottom up rather than top down.

In contrast, Oman provides a unique case study in the Arab world where the process of political reform is driven mainly from the top down, and, moreover, the relationship between religion and the state is not a function of either Sunni or *Shi'a* religious perspectives, but of *Ibadism*, a creed of Islam which has its own particular codes of religious and political behaviour. How *Ibadism* can embrace both religious conformity and popular participatory politics serves, as has been mentioned in Chapter

1, as a focus of this thesis. Even so, to fully understand this process, note must be taken of the wider process of state legitimisation, Islam and democratisation in the wider Arab world and context.

Although little has been published regarding the democratisation process in Oman, this country is part of the Arab World and shares most of its characteristics with the other Arab states, especially in terms of language, religion and culture. Therefore, what has been published about the issue of democratisation in the Arab World is to a great extent applicable to Oman. However, there is still one aspect of political science in the Arab world which has not been studied in detail: this is the *Ibadi* religious and political norms. Most scholars tend to focus on certain specific angles of the Islamic political vision. For example when they talk about Islam they look at it from the *Sunni* and *Shiá* perspectives. Similarly, when they talk about ruling regimes they concentrate mainly on dynastic systems or Republican regimes, specifically those in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia. This is because these states have regional influence and have influenced, or been direct participants in key events which have shaped the region over the past five decades, such as the Arab-Israeli Wars, the Iraq-Iran War, the Iranian Revolution and the Saudi role in successive Gulf Wars.

However, this does not negate the role that other states have played in the political development of the region and Oman remains a particular case in point. With its geostrategic position at the entrance to the Gulf, the Sultanate of Oman was itself the bloody battleground for a series of insurgencies from the 1950s through to the 1970s which had both local cause and wider international effect<sup>23</sup>. Its turbulent contemporary history aside, Oman is distinctive in so far as it is the main centre of a unique form of Islam which has its own philosophy, political norms and cultural perspectives: *Ibadism*. How *Ibadism* can accommodate a democratic process, and the limits of its ability to separate religion from state, are major themes discussed and evaluated in this thesis.

How Omani people – both policy makers and citizens - look at and evaluate democracy is crucial to understanding the current process of political reform throughout the Sultanate. But such opinions and views cannot be taken in isolation from wider debates over democracy, regime legitimacy and Islam, around which much of the

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<sup>23</sup> See: Peterson, J.E. *Oman's Insurgencies* (London: Saqi Books, 2007).

present discourse across the Middle East is configured. As such, it is necessary to investigate and explain what is understood by the term *democracy*, and it is imperative to discuss these interpretations in the light of the different circumstances which pertain in the Arab world (Chapter 3 will examine the case of Oman in more detail and how the current political system has come to be shaped by political, economic, cultural, and religious variables particular to the Sultanate). The literature review in this chapter, therefore, is divided into eight main sections following this introduction; the second section deals with the broad conceptual debates on democracy, while the third section examines the democratisation processes in the Arab world. As the Arab world is regarded as the most penetrated region of the world, the fourth section analyses the topical relationship between democracy and external intervention. Also, as most Arab regimes are considered authoritarian, the fifth section discusses the pertinent issue of democracy and its relation to authoritarian regimes. The existence of oil reserves in the area necessitates the need to examine in the sixth section the concept of the 'rentier state' and its relation to democratisation processes. The seventh covers the relationship between Islam and democracy, and the eighth section describes the ties between democratisation processes and civil society in the Arab World.

## 2.2 Democracy: A Review of the Debates

Democracy linguistically comes from the Greek word *demokratia*, wherein *demos* means *people* and *kratos* means *rule*. In this sense, unlike other systems such as monarchies and aristocracies, democracy is a political system which derives legitimacy in its purest form through the majority expression of popular will, usually within a defined geographic area and/or fixed community. Beetham and Boyle argue that a state can only be called democratic 'if its government is accountable to the people through competitive election to public office, where all adults have an equal right to vote and to stand for election, and where civil and political rights are legally guaranteed'<sup>24</sup>. Strong democratic systems should also include a functioning society, where people and civil society organisations have an influencing role in the political process. However, it should be understood that this system is not ideal since its ability to offer solutions to all social and political problems which other systems may have failed to address is often, at best, partial

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<sup>24</sup> Beetham, D. and K. Boyle. *Introducing Democracy: 80 Questions and*

*Answers.* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 2.

and piecemeal. There is no one definition for democracy as every state across the world practises the process through structures which often reflect particular, locally contextualised values. In some states, the head of state is popularly elected while in others the prime minister is selected from among those representatives of the dominant party. Moreover electoral systems themselves, as well as the electoral life of a legislature, vary from state to state. There are plural systems, the alternative vote system, the single transferable vote system, the party list system and the mixed member system.

Nevertheless, democracy remains one of few political systems which can offer some form of participatory equality to people. Democracy has developed throughout history from the simple classical form of democracy, to republicanism, then to liberal democracy and finally to direct democracy<sup>25</sup>. Practically, Western liberal democracy is practised in different ways following three main models; parliamentarianism as practised in Great Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, the American model of pure presidentialism, and European presidentialism as practised in France, Portugal, Finland, Italy, Austria and Greece<sup>26</sup>.

There are several different methodological approaches which can be adopted in explaining and applying democratic theory. The most common are: normative questions which draw attention to the value of democracy; descriptive questions which determine how societies come to be called democratic; and semantic questions that discuss the very meaning of democracy. The Greek philosopher and teacher Aristotle, for example, distinguished between the normative, descriptive, and semantic dimensions of political theories and constructed his theory of democracy around these distinctions. The nineteenth century French political writer, de Tocqueville, was more motivated by normative concerns wherein democracy becomes an ideal. Schumpeter, however, begins with a descriptive approach before reaching normative and semantic conclusions over the nature of democracy<sup>27</sup>.

According to Aristotle, government may be practised by an individual, by a few people, or by many people. Most important to him was that government and governance

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<sup>25</sup> Held, D. *Models of Democracy*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), pp. 3-8.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Sulami M. F. *The West and Islam: Western Liberal Democracy against versus the System of Shura*. (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Cunningham, F. *Theories of Democracy: A critical Introduction*. (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 6-10.

should lead to virtuous and good lives; he considered democracy as the most tolerable form of rule, and royalty with a single ruler who performs his proper function and followed by a properly functioned aristocracy as the best form of government. This does not mean that he privileges autocracy over democracy but rather that democracy is much more than a simple citizenry right to vote, and should be accompanied by other important values such as justice and equality. As for Tocqueville, he regarded democracy as a *situation of equality*, which exceeds the right to vote and hold public office, and requires equality in economic advantage and cultural capital. He posits democracy as the unavoidable outcome of the historical expansion of equality. Schumpeter is seen as a revisionist who challenges the classical understanding of democracy. He insists that societies can be called democratic not only if they are governed by the majority but also by elected officials along with non-elected bureaucratic attendants<sup>28</sup>.

Such traditional forms and theories of democracy have given way in the twentieth century to more advanced expressions in a majority of Western states. Democracy in modern history can be defined as a system which “entails the twin principles of popular control over collective decision-making and equality of rights in the exercise of that control”<sup>29</sup>. Beetham and Boyle, in their large body of work, outline the key prerequisites for a functioning democracy, alongside those factors most likely to impede its establishment. In this regard, the majority of conditions that they set could be easily fulfilled in the Arab world and of these only a few would seem to contradict Islam and its cultural norms in the Arab context.

Freedom is the first condition, as Beetham and Boyle set no limits for its expression. In short, the individual has the right to do anything so long as this does not affect adversely the freedom of other people. In Islam, freedom is guaranteed in every aspect except in the choice of God or of religion. For example, in the Holy Quran many verses stipulate that Allah is the only God who should be worshipped and that those who consciously choose a religion other than Islam are to be considered apostates. The Prophet Mohammed similarly urged people to take Allah as the only God and described

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<sup>28</sup> Cunningham, F. 2002, pp. 6-10.

<sup>29</sup> Beetham, D. and K. Boyle. *Introducing Democracy: 80 Questions and Answers*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 1.

Muslims who convert to any other religion as renegades who would face execution if they did not convert back to Islam. According to Kramer:

*The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, guarantees the freedom to choose one's religion and one's spouse. Both freedoms indisputably contradict Islamic law, which defines conversion out of Islam as a capital offence, and forbids marriage between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man. (In 1981, the leading fundamentalists met in Paris and put out an Islamic Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which omits all freedoms that contradict the shari'a)*<sup>30</sup>.

Several scholars have examined this issue of religion and political community closely. Al-Jabri<sup>31</sup> argues that according to the Quran, Muslims who change faith, betray their nation state, and join hostile armed forces, deserve to be killed. However, those simply changing their faith but without betraying their nation state should not face execution - though he conceded that his argument carries little weight with other Muslims. I do not think that many scholars in the Muslim World support Al-Jabri's argument here. In short, the ability of rulers to separate religion from the state when defining the political obligations of a community are somewhat limited since sovereignty in Islam is ultimately derived from Allah, and not from the people. Beetham and Boyle discuss the relationship between religion and the state but have not related it to freedom. They state that:

*It can be argued that a hierarchically ordered religion, in which believers accept without question the truths that are handed down from above, will be less conducive to the democratic spirit than ones whose matters of belief are subject to lively debate and interpretation among the faithful*<sup>32</sup>.

The presence of political parties is the second condition of democracy which contradicts the Arab cultural norms – if not indeed the essence of Islam - if set against the reality of politics in much of the Arab world. Islam can confer legitimacy on political parties, the only condition being that 'they do not represent particular whims, passions and interests, and remain within the framework of Islam'<sup>33</sup>. Beetham and Boyle see political parties as a necessary condition for genuine democracy; however, the social

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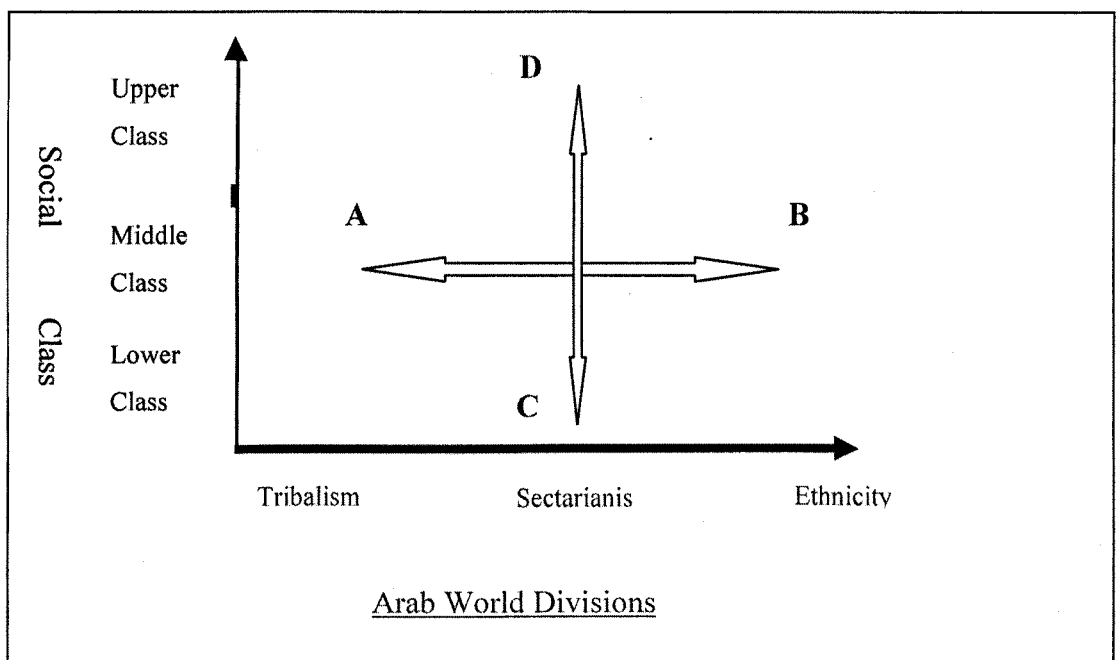
<sup>30</sup> See Martin Kramer. Islam vs. Democracy  
in: <http://www.geocities.com/martinkramerorg/IslamvsDemocracy.htm>. Last  
accessed on 12/4/2010.

<sup>31</sup> Al-Jabri, M. A. *Democracy and Human Rights*. (Beirut: Arab Unity Studies  
Press, 1994), pp.173-179.

<sup>32</sup> Beetham, D. and K. Boyle. 1995, p. 114.

<sup>33</sup> Kramer, G. "Islamist Notions of Democracy". *The Middle East Report*, No. 147 (1993), p. 7.

fabric in the Arab World is complicated in this regard<sup>34</sup>. Political parties usually work in environments based on clear horizontal divisions like social classes; in societies such as in the Arab World 'economically based social classes do not exist'<sup>35</sup>, the social divisions are *vertically* divided no matter how wealthy or poor, educated or illiterate the members of a certain community are. These divisions are complicated by the fact that they are of different types, based around ethnicity, tribalism and sectarianism. They are often in competition if not indeed in sheer conflict with each other on various levels and fronts<sup>36</sup>. Figure 2-1 illustrates the contrast between the vertical ethnic relationships in the Arab World and the horizontal classes affiliations that elsewhere form the influence if not the base for any successful democratic process.



**Figure 2-1: Social Divisions vs. Democracy**

*Diagram illustrating that the relationship between people in the Arab World are drawn vertically (C to D) and it clashes with the horizontally drawn social classes (A to B) that are necessary for any democratic experiments*

<sup>34</sup> See: King-Irani, L. Kinship, Class, and Ethnicity, in *Understanding the contemporary Middle East*, ed. Deborah J. Gerner & Jillian Schwedler. (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. 2004), pp. 299-334.

<sup>35</sup> Anderson, L. The Prospects for Democracy in the Arab World. *The Middle Eastern Lectures*, issue one, 1995. P. 69.

<sup>36</sup> Lewis, B. The Other Middle Eastern Problem. *Middle Eastern Lectures*. No.1, 1995. p. 51.



Moreover, these three divisions are often overlaid with other subdivisions, such as religious sects and sub-tribes. Tribal divisions illustrate how loyalty is given in those vertically divided divisions. Loyalty is always granted first to the family, then to other relatives, then to the branch of the tribe then finally to the main tribe. Similarly, if we consider the subdivisions of the *Sunni* sect, it is formed from the *Shafee*, *Malki*, *Hanbali* and *Hanafi* sects. Similarly, the *Shiá* sect has a number of subdivisions. Further investigation of the *Hanbali* subdivision of the *Sunni* sect reveals that it is divided into smaller parts and each subpart has its own scholars and particular viewpoints which cover a range of theological as well as theocratic interests; among those are moderate *Wahabism*, and radical *Wahabism* which supports *jihad* against what they call imperialist colonialism<sup>37</sup>. Under these conditions, political parties in these societies are likely to be based on vertical divisions. If this occurs, then arguably democratisation processes will bring backwardness to the communities rather than a modernisation of values and practices because social divisions will get a fertile soil to ignite political unrest due to the fanatic conflicts that may occur between them.

A good example of this is the ethnic and sectarian divisions which now dominate in Iraq where despite free elections, people have voted for sectarian group representatives no matter how politically qualified they are<sup>38</sup>. One might argue that in some Arab states there are political parties which are not dominated by those vertical divisions, but they exist where the ruling party dominates the whole country and no real democratisation exists. This can clearly be seen in Egypt, Syria and, previously, in Saddam's Iraq. The novel goal of democracy is to guide societies to the highest form of civilisation that includes fairness, transparency, equality, legitimacy and leads to modernity and stability. To fulfil this goal in the Arab world one needs to think carefully of other alternatives of popular participatory politics. In other words, these states need to develop forms of participatory politics that suit their societies. Beetham and Boyle admit in this sense that 'democracies today face considerable challenges from ethnic, religious and other divisions'.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> For more details see [www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers10/paper903.html](http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers10/paper903.html). Last accessed on 8/4/2010.

<sup>38</sup> Look at: Iraqi Constitution Vote Split on Ethnic and Sect Lines, cited in <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/23/international/middleeast/23iraq.html>. Last accessed on 8/4/2010.

<sup>39</sup> Beetham and Boyle. 1995, p. xiv.

Budge, another democratic theorist, examines democratic practice in general. With regard to political parties, he believes that they remain best suited to practising democracy, and that they are the only actors that can fulfil the demands of participatory policies. He also explains some of the major disadvantages of having political parties however, such as the continued dominance of a few parties in government and the influence of the party leaders on their members in parliament. The question that needs to be considered is if these problems occur in more modernised societies, what their likely impact will be in other societies where loyalty is derived through the vertical divisions outlined previously<sup>40</sup>.

Hijab discusses democracy's origins and roots and its development through different historical stages. He also highlights different types of democracies such as the direct, representative, semi-direct, liberal, social, industrial, communal and Islamic forms. Hijab admits that democracy is important, but he argues that it possesses several flaws. From a Marxist perspective, for example, only a small percentage of the whole population actually benefits from democratic practices, most notably capitalists who dominate the media and have the ability to capture and manipulate public support. He also argues that democracy has up until now appeared incapable of solving economic challenges such as inflation and unemployment. In addition, it has not fully addressed political challenges such as the fragility of public democratic awareness; the deterioration which has evidently occurred in voting rates; the occurrence of opportunistic trends in which people tend to benefit at the expense of good democratic practices; the occurrence of lobbying; and the existence of pressure groups which work in their own interests at the expense of the public interest<sup>41</sup>.

Hijab then discusses the democratisation dilemma in the Arab World which is often faced with a limited industrial base, limited capacity and organisation, illiteracy and poverty, and regional-ethnic-tribal divisions. He attributes this dilemma to the inheritance of political establishments from the colonial period and their incongruity with indigenous culture, blaming the past intervention of the superpowers in the internal

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<sup>40</sup> Budge, I. *The New Challenge of Direct Democracy*. (Cornwall: Hartnolls Ltd, 1996). P.p, 38-43.

<sup>41</sup> Hijab, M.F. "Crisis of Western Democracy and its Challenges in the Third World" in the *Democratic Issue in the Arab World*, ed. Arab Unity Studies Centre. (Beirut: Arab Unity Studies Centre Press, 2000), pp. 81-101.

affairs of those states as well as the role of indigenous religious practices. For Hijab, if democracy still encounters problems in dealing with the challenges of industrial and indeed post-industrial societies in the West, it is likely to face problems of a more intractable nature in an Arab world defined by state centralisation, institutional inefficiency and the vertical divisions of society previously outlined.<sup>42</sup>

In sum, it is clear from these contextualised commentaries that democracy has no one single definition. It has evolved over time and taken different forms according to the nature and culture of the society where it is practised. It is also clear that the Arab World in general exhibits some conditions that may hinder the practising of democratisation among them the presence of the vertical ethnic groups that contradict the horizontally divided social classes regarded as important for the success of any democratisation experiment. Democratisation processes in some Arab states such as Iraq and Lebanon are challenged by those vertical divisions because political process has not been built locally but has been imported from elsewhere without attention to the characteristic particularities of those societies. Of course the ideal and therefore successful alternative would be the development of a pluralistic political process that does not comprehensively break with tradition.

### **2.3 The Democratic Issue in the Arab World**

The Middle East in general, and the Arab world in particular, have been at the centre of different political, economic, religious and social conflicts throughout its history. The contemporary Middle East can be described as a region of lost, or at least submerged, identities, not least because great powers have been in strategic competition over this region since the 17th century<sup>43</sup>.

The great power confrontations within and over the region have resulted in tensions which continue to shape it. Most Arab countries have endured colonial rule or influence in which local identities were often subjugated by the political agenda, culture, language and ideology of the colonial power. Some of these Western states have heavily influenced the cultures of those societies and affected their social values,

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<sup>42</sup> Hijab (2000), p. 95.

<sup>43</sup> See Abdullah, T. F. *Aliyyat Al-Taghyeer Al-Deemocraty Fi Al-Watan Al-Arabi*. (Beirut: Arab Unity Studies Centre, 1997).

often leaving behind the roots of conflict which still impact upon state stability and identity to this day. The best example of this is perhaps the legacy of French rule in Algeria and the Lebanon<sup>44</sup>. They also plundered the wealth of those countries but without any concomitant investment from which a basic infrastructure could develop<sup>45</sup>.

Religiously, all three of the Abrahamic religions emerged in what today is geographically considered to be the Arab World<sup>46</sup>. As these religions spread, they gained followers and sympathisers from outside and inside the region who have played a huge role in inflaming religious conflict within the region. During the Cold War such religious competition was sometimes exploited by the superpowers which supported authoritarian regimes privileging particular social groups in such a way as to ensure their interests were met. Iraq, Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia were all, to some extent, encouraged by either Washington or Moscow to use religion in order to cement tribal or societal alliances in ways ill-disposed towards fostering wider political participation. While *Ba'athism*, for example, with its emphasis upon an ill-defined form of Arab socialism, stressed the secular nature of politics, in the case of Syria at least, it was used to camouflage an *Allawite* ascendancy over the *Sunni* majority. The direct legacy of this remains in the democratic deficit which marks popular participation levels across the Arab world<sup>47</sup>.

In addition, the major religions in the region have been sub-divided on the basis of different values which have encouraged further divisions within the region. More importantly, people across the Middle East identify strongly with the cultural, if not always the religious norms, of Islam. In the light of this strong religious belief, it would seem difficult to even begin imagining separating religion from the state, which, in a Western sense at least, is seen as an important pre-condition for democracy.

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<sup>44</sup> See: for example Migdal, J. *Strong Societies, Weak States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). Pp. 139-141.

<sup>45</sup> See: Owen, R. *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*. (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 13. See also, <sup>45</sup> Davidson, C. M. "From traditional to formal education in the lower Arabian Gulf, 1820-1971", *History of Education*, Vol. 37, No. 5, September 2008, 633-643.

<sup>46</sup> See: Esposito, J. L. Muqtedar Khan, M. A. Schwedler, J. Religion and Politics in the Middle East. In: *Understanding the contemporary Middle East*, ed. Deborah J. Gerner & Jillian Schwedler. (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. 2004), pp. 363-386.

<sup>47</sup> Kramer, M. *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival: The Politics of Ideal in the Middle East*. (London: Transaction Publishers, 1996). P. 189.

Compounding the development of democratic institutions is the social structure of much of the region, with its emphasis upon ethnic and tribal identities. Each of the Middle Eastern societies has its own complicated ethnic and tribal structure, where loyalty to those social structures is not just strong but absolute. The relationships between tribal and ethnic members are vertical - such social classes as exist in the industrial West have not been clearly formed, as people from different economic levels share strong mutual relationships on the basis of tribal loyalties (tribal legitimacy) which often take priority in the making of important decisions<sup>48</sup>. For example, in Oman, according to my knowledge, it is commonly the case that people of extremely wide wealth differentials tend to bond firmly with members of the same tribe or ethnic group, rather than with those whose affluence would in other contexts determine patterns of influence and friendship.

Such factors, the legacy of colonialism, coupled with the indigenous variables of religious, tribal and ethnic fidelity, have not only denied an effective regional voice for Arabs across the Middle East, but they continue to shape the democratisation experiments in general across the region.

Western social scientists, often influenced by the ideas of Max Weber, have made great efforts in trying to understand and explain the socio-political stagnation taking place in the Middle East in general and the Arab World in particular. They found that in such traditional societies economic growth and social change is slow because of the primitive modes of production, leading to slow economic growth and slow social change. This is compounded because the relationship between peoples was mainly hierarchical, based on kinship and religious affiliation so that the role of the individual in society is determined by the status of the family into which s/he was born. By contrast, modern societies are urban and industrial with a rapid economic growth and social change and the role of the individual is dependent on his personal capabilities. This underpins modernization theory. They also found that modern societies were 'rational, scientifically oriented, democratic and relatively egalitarian'<sup>49</sup>. Samuel Huntington argued that 'studies of modernization have shown a very high degree of

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<sup>48</sup> Khouri, R. G. *Iraq Repeats the Arab Legacy of Tribe, Religion and State*. Found in: <http://www.jordanembassyus.org/new/mep/04232003op.htm>. Last accessed on 13/4/2010.

<sup>49</sup> Lockman, Z. *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism*. (Cambridge: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2004), p. 134.

correlation among such indices as literacy, urbanization, media participation, and political participation'<sup>50</sup>.

These social scientists, therefore, used modernization theory to explain the process of transition from traditional societies to modern societies. They identified a particular character which they seen as the characteristics of tradition or modernity. For example, David McClelland believed that individuals in traditional societies did have strong tendency towards achievement. Bert Hoselitz, however, blamed underdevelopment and poverty for causing the socio-political stagnation in traditional societies. Some scientists such as Walt Whitman Rostow argued that traditional societies could achieve economic development if assisted by capitalist countries a step that could lead to social change. Most importantly, social scientists saw that traditional societies 'lack the institutions and internal dynamics which might lead to fundamental social transformation from within... Modernization theory therefore saw local elites as playing a crucial role in introducing change into their societies'<sup>51</sup>.

Daniel Lerner argued that 'social, economic and cultural changes which Middle Easterners were experiencing – urbanization, great physical mobility, the spread of mass media and so on – all helped foster the ability of individuals to shed their traditional styles of life and adopt the mobile and empathetic personality characteristic of people in modern societies'<sup>52</sup>. The modernization theory therefore may explain the process of modernization taking place in the Arab World at present and the emergence of some pressure groups and stronger civil society that may lead to real socio-political change.

## **2.4 Democracy and External Intervention**

Whilst active international involvement in the politics of the region can be traced back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was the period between the First World War and the end of the Cold War which most clearly defined the political landscape in the Arab World. The period after the First World War witnessed increased competition across the Middle

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<sup>50</sup>Huntington, S. Political Development and Political Decay. In *The Military and Modernization*, ed. Henry Bienen, (Chicago: Aldine . Atherton, Inc, 1971), p. 162. See also, Billet, B. L. *Modernization Theory and Economic Development: Discontent in the Developing World*. (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1993).

<sup>51</sup> Lockman, Z. 2004, p. 136.

<sup>52</sup>Lockman, Z. 2004, p. 137.

East following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of colonial structures. The most notable features of this period were the creation of the multi-state system, the discovery of oil, and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948<sup>53</sup>, an event which had a profound impact on the politics of region<sup>54</sup>.

In term of the geopolitics of the region, the larger part of the Arab world can be seen as relatively unchanging due to ideological factors, which are deeply rooted in the resident political culture. Since the end of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War, many Arab nations have adopted more than one ideology in the hope that each ideological shift would rescue them from the catastrophe of colonialism. They adopted pan-Arab nationalism, then socialism, then Islamism, but the overall effect has been a continued fragmentation of the Arab State order<sup>55</sup>. Difference in ideologies created what was called, during the 1960s, 'the Arab Cold War', in which some Arab States showed their eagerness to interfere in each other's internal affairs. The Arab Cold War continues to have implications up until the present time. Territorial disputes, border conflicts and the desire for expansionism such as the Syrian notion of the greater Syria, the Egyptian desire for regional leadership, and the Saudi-Iranian competition for leadership of the whole Islamic World, are all direct products of the regional geopolitics of this period<sup>56</sup>.

Furthermore, other influences have shaped the geopolitics of the region, such as the fear which exists over the relationship between strong and weak states. The vexed relationship between Syria and Lebanon is the most appropriate example where Damascus, despite lip service to Lebanese sovereignty, has continued to exercise hegemony over the external relations and internal structure of this fragmented polity. This in turn has often seen weak states turn to support from the US and other great powers to guarantee survival against their Arab brothers. Such regional competition, coupled with the fear of Israel, again hinders any successful democratisation process. This has led to the strengthening of armed forces in the Arab States, which in turn has allowed the regimes to suppress their people forcefully and to deny the political

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<sup>53</sup> Halliday, F. "The Great Powers and the Middle East". *The Middle East Report*. Vol. 151 (1988), p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> Owen, R. 2004. P. 7.

<sup>55</sup> See: Al-Hirmasi, M. A. Al-Qawmiyah Wal-Dimocratiyah fil Watan Al-Arabi. In: *Azmat Al-Dimocratiyah Fil Watan Al-Arabi*, ed. Arab Unity Studies Centre. (Beirut: Arab Unity Studies Centre, 2002).

<sup>56</sup> Bernard Lewis. 1995. pp. 46-50.

autonomy required for an independent civil society to develop. Indeed, in the case of Syria at least, there exists a powerful argument that fear of Israel has been used to deny political reforms.<sup>57</sup>

International intervention in the region has continued until the present day<sup>58</sup>, though the rationale behind such involvement has evolved from a base of colonialism to that of strategic influence and now to one of 'democracy promotion'. To be sure, the latter two should not be seen as mutually exclusive but President George W. Bush, for example, stated that the 2003 invasion of Iraq was conditioned by the stated desire to support the forces of democratisation across the region. It is doubtful if real democratisation processes can be imposed from outside and certainly not under the threat of military force. Indeed, most informed observers would agree that democratisation reforms which enjoy widespread legitimacy can only emerge in response to regional dynamics, as opposed to external force. Thus, while the invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam's regime were considered by Washington as a step towards enhancing democratisation, such hopes remain far from realised. It was hoped that establishing a more pluralistic regime in Iraq would have a knock-on effect on other countries in the region<sup>59</sup>. However, it seems that the fateful democratisation process in Iraq created more doubt about implementing democratisation in the region in one go without attention to the social vertical divisions that may hinder the process.

Indeed, some observers did write of an 'Arab Spring' where demands for greater accountability marked a new politics in the new millennium. Such hopes have yet to be realised. For Arabs, the reality on the ground shows a contradiction in Washington's policy towards democratisation processes. On the one hand, it urges Arab states to be more democratic, while on the other, continuing to support states which can be described at best as autocratic. Washington continues to enjoy close relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia where popular participation remains partial at best. Such

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<sup>57</sup> Rubin, B. "The Geopolitics of Middle East Conflict and Crisis". *The Middle East Review of the International Affairs* Vol. 2, No. 3 (1988). Found in <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/1998/issue3/jv2n3a7.html>. Last accessed on 13/4/2010.

<sup>58</sup> Tetreault, M. A. International Relations. In: *Understanding the Contemporary Middle East*, ed. Deborah J. Gerner & Jillian Schwedler. (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. 2004), pp. 131-168.

<sup>59</sup> For more information on the implications of imposing democracy by external force see: Danchev, A & Macmillan, J. *Iraq War and Democratic Politics*. (London: Routledge, 2004).



'realism' seems preferable to the possible alternative of a radical Islamist takeover.

According to Farooq:

*[E]ven though the West regularly sermonises the rest of the world about the virtue of democracy, the West or the dominant powers of the West, fundamentally remains an obstacle against the emergence of democracy in the Muslim world, because the current global domination is more compatible and safer with autocratic or despotic rulers, some of which are puppets of the West and some are kept cornered or marginalised by the West<sup>60</sup>.*

In response Pevehouse suggests that the only external forces that could, perhaps, enhance democratisation across the region are International Organisations (IOs). Characterized by their high 'democratic density', he argues they are in effect non-state actors and a high percentage of their permanent members are drawn from states whose democratic norms and institutions prevail and are strong. These organisations normally enjoy international approbation from a range of governments and peoples. The IOs which can best play this role are the human rights organisations, the World Trade Organisation and some financial organisations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Such IOs can liaise with governments and exert pressure on them to implement and uphold international standards of human rights, the result being that the perception that democracy has been enforced externally is somewhat refuted. By abiding by the norms and values set by the IOs, the hope is that principles of good governance and accountability will lend international legitimacy. At the same time, regional organisations can play a similar role, and indeed can be more effective than IOs because they tend to operate with smaller numbers and have a more attuned sense of the political landscape in a given country.<sup>61</sup> This argument by Pevehouse is to some extent questionable because there are notably few examples of IOs practising this role, and some of the non-democratic states will not typically attract IO involvement because of their healthy economic situation.

External intervention in a certain region or state, especially if the intervention is viewed as a threat, can erode moves toward democratisation. Similarly, increasing regional hostilities lower its probability. Poor economic performance, however, can lead

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<sup>60</sup> See Farooq, M. O. *Islam and Democracy: Perceptions and Misperceptions*. In <http://www.globalwebpost.com/farooqm/writings/islamic/democracy.htm>. Last accessed on 12/4/2010.

<sup>61</sup> Pevehouse, J. C. "Democracy from outside-in?: International Organisations and Democratisation". *Middle East Report*. Vol. 56, No. 3 (2002), p. 516.

to democratic transition as people tend to challenge governments over democratic grievances. This fact suggests that in rentier states, democracy is not likely to take place due to the presence of acceptable standards of living and government initiatives to adopt democratic processes from the top down seems to be the best alternative. Moreover, states which have had past experiences of participatory politics have a better chance of embracing a democratic transition<sup>62</sup>. In this regard Oman provides an interesting case study. While, as a rentier state, its economy remains strong and its population enjoys relatively high levels of affluence, oil remains a finite resource. How the Sultanate adapts to demands for new forms of legitimacy and participatory politics independent of both external and regional pressures is instructive in terms of understanding democratisation in the region.

## 2.5 Democracy versus Authoritarian Regimes

An authoritarian<sup>63</sup> system is defined by Linz as a system that adopts limited political pluralism in which one person (the leader) or a group manipulates power and exercises it without limits.<sup>64</sup> Authoritarian regimes can be of different forms: military, single party<sup>65</sup>, dominant party, personal or traditional, or a mixture of one or more of these. Heydemann argues that the authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, in their response to pressures for political reforms, have evolved their authoritarian rule, a phenomenon which he calls 'authoritarian upgrading'. He describes five key characteristics of authoritarian upgrading: 'appropriating and containing civil society organisations; managing political contestation; capturing the benefits of selective economic reforms; controlling telecommunications technologies<sup>66</sup>; and increasing

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<sup>62</sup> Pevehouse, J. C. 2002, pp. 518-539.

<sup>63</sup> Calvert, P. Authoritarianism. In: *Ideals that Shape Politics*, ed. Michael Foley. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 62-68.

<sup>64</sup> Zaki, M. Civil Society and Democratisation in the Arab World. *Ibn Khaldon Centre for Development Studies*. Annual Report 2007. Cited in:  
<http://www.eicds.org/english/publications/reports/Annual-Report-EN07.pdf>. Last accessed on 12/4/2010.

<sup>65</sup> For the single party rule in the Arab World, look at Al-Filali, M. Al-Dimocratayah Wa Tagrobat Al-Hizb Al-Wahid fil-Watan Al-Arabi. In *Azmat Al-Dimocratayah Fil Watan Al-Arabi*, ed. Arab Unity Studies Centre. (Beirut: Arab Unity Studies Centre, 2002).

<sup>66</sup> For the control over telecommunications see also Eickelman, D. F. Communication and Control in the Middle East: Publication and Its Discontents. In: *New Media in the Muslim World*, ed. Dale F. Eickelman and John W. Anderson. (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999).

international linkages between regimes'.<sup>67</sup> The empirical chapters of this study will feel the pulse of the young generations, in particular, in Oman regarding the above listed issues in order to see to what extent they are related to the Omani political context and how they might affect the democratisation process.

Authoritarian regimes in the Arab world have played a great role in suppressing democratisation moves<sup>68</sup>. These regimes have used every possible means to ensure their stability, often using the spectre of Western encroachment or Israeli threats to convince their people that the time is not yet right to discuss democratisation amid the perception of external threats. They blame 'foreigners' for many of the problems in the region or in their respective countries<sup>69</sup>, a process helped in the past by the near total grip such regimes exercise over the media. This extends to those regimes that have established some formal democratisation structures such as parliaments and elections but have not really attempted to extend genuine pluralistic practices to functioning legislatures (and Egypt is a case in point). Those who favour reforms in Arab countries are discredited by the regimes and are characterised as un-Islamic, 'Zionist puppets', and/or agents of American imperialism who are disloyal to the Arab cause<sup>70</sup>.

Furthermore, some Arab regimes, rather than face up to very real domestic challenges, find it easier to use ideological mobilisation against external enemies who, they claim, want to humiliate their people, trample their honour, humiliate their women and children, and destroy their religion. They describe democracy as a Western trick to gain control of Arab economies and drain Islam of its meaning. They also put forward the notion that the real hero is not the one who achieves material improvements and benefits for his/her people but the one who does not bend (to imperialist powers) no matter what the cost<sup>71</sup>; both Saddam Hussein and Muammar Qaddafi are perfect examples. In this respect, Arab regimes in general may be seen as coercive and

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<sup>67</sup> See Steven Heydemann. *Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World*. In: [http://www.brookings.edu/events/2007/1129\\_arab\\_world.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/events/2007/1129_arab_world.aspx) , last accessed on 12/4/2010.

<sup>68</sup> For more information about democracy and authoritarianism see: Saikal, A. *Islam and the West: Conflict or Cooperation?* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), pp. 111-129.

<sup>69</sup> Ajami, F. *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 3.

<sup>70</sup> Rubin, B. "The Triumph of the Old Middle East". *The Middle East Review of the International Affairs*. Vol.6, No. 2. (2002). Cited in: <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2002/issue2/jv6n2a6.html>. Last accessed on 13/4/2010.

<sup>71</sup> Rubin, B. 2002.

repressive, and reforms which have taken place in some states are of two main kinds. First, they can be defensive, as for example in Syria, designed to protect the current regimes. Second, they can be tactical as in Yemen, designed to convince the Western powers who are actively promoting democracy after the collapse of the *Ba'athist* regime in Iraq that they are moving in a right direction. Moreover, this form of 'democracy' is imposed from the top down<sup>72</sup> which means that it is not reflective of indigenous forces but is in fact reactive, and for the most part, defensive in protecting the *status quo*.<sup>73</sup>

Arab regimes have used a tactical approach to deal with – and in fact get around or otherwise avoid - the issue of democratisation. They pit liberals against Islamists while at the same time telling Islamists that they should support their rulers against liberals. Arab leaders have often tried to portray Arab liberals as pro Western Imperialists, or indeed, Zionists. This threat is to be countered by Arab unity and solidarity around existing regimes. Therefore, those regimes propagate the idea that democracy is not only a distracting luxury, an example of Western hypocrisy, but also an integral part of the conspiracy against the Arabs<sup>74</sup>.

Some Arab leaders challenge democratisation by 'delegitimizing the democratic oppositions by branding them as traitors and subversives'<sup>75</sup> and, ultimately, by repressing them. By playing this nefarious game, reforming groups often shift their attention from local to regional issues, and in so doing, find themselves co-opted into being allies of their regime. In fact there is no real harm if opposition groups sometimes agree with governments on certain issues so long as they serve people in a better way. Such agreements do not necessarily condone the regimes' acts of repression. Some Arab authoritarian regimes pretend to be reformers by making limited concessions and convincing others that full democratic system will be harmful and will lead to an Islamist

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<sup>72</sup>See: Sager, A. Political reform Measures from a Domestic GCC Perspective. In *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf*, ed Khalaf, A. and Giacomo Luciani. (Dubai: Gulf Research Centre, 2006), pp. 17-32. See also: Kapiszewski, A. Elections and Parliamentary Activity in the GCC States: Broadening Political Participation in the Gulf Monarchies. In *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf*, ed Khalaf, A. and Giacomo Luciani. (Dubai: Gulf Research Centre, 2006), pp. 89-132.

<sup>73</sup>Yom, S. L. "Civil Society and democratization in the Arab World". *The Middle East Review of the International Affairs*. Vol. 9, No. 4. (2005).

<sup>74</sup>Rubin, B. 2002.

<sup>75</sup>Rubin, B. "Pushback or Progress: Arab Regimes Respond to Democracy's Challenge." *Policy Focus*. Vol. 75, p. 4. (2007).

gain, a position which buttresses Islamophobia in states bordering the Middle East<sup>76</sup>. Traditional monarchies such as those found in Morocco and Saudi Arabia are also regarded authoritarian as they deny their citizens any kind of political liberties.

The question remains as to why Arab regimes in general tend to be authoritarian. It is a basic question which nonetheless requires a complex answer that invokes a matrix of political, cultural and religious factors. Politically, the Middle East has undergone great systemic convulsions, from the end of the Ottoman Empire, through Western colonisation, through to the emergence of the multi-state system. State building in the region has been an imported exercise from the West, and no matter what benefits have been derived from the adoption of Western style state enterprises, the concept remains relatively new and indeed alien. To quote Anderson, '[T]oday's Middle East states are not the result of international or regional struggles between states, but were created by European Imperialism'<sup>77</sup>. Owen argues also that 'colonial power first created the regional voice for Arabs across the [Middle Eastern] state, by giving it a centralised administration, a legal system, a flag and internationally recognised boundaries'<sup>78</sup>. Different ideologies were adopted which themselves were imported from external nations. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the region was awash with political instability as coup followed coup. The histories of Iraq and Syria in particular are proof that the concept of order and state legitimacy within defined political boundaries remained something of an anathema.

Culturally, the internal social configuration of Middle Eastern societies, including tribal, ethnic and sectarian divisions, encourages further struggle as particular groups have sought to benefit from the new state system. This struggle has encouraged the ruling elite to strengthen its authority through divide and rule policies, or through applying particular forms of social contract made with the masses in a state or region. Religiously, the new states' secular systems seem to contradict the Islamic ruling that centres on the just ruler, obedient followers and a society marked by solidarity. This rejection of a secular order, where loyalty to the state was paramount, has led Muslims to search for different forms of unity. This explains why Islamic organisations, most

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<sup>76</sup> Rubin, B. 2007. 2007.

<sup>77</sup> Lisa Anderson. 1995. p. 63.

<sup>78</sup> See Roger Owen. 2004. p. 9.

notably, but not exclusively, the Muslim Brotherhood, have formed the basis of opposition in many states across the Middle East. Such Islamic opposition in turn resulted in either coercion of Islamist movements by the state authorities or, in several notable cases such as *Hama* in February 1982, the violent suppression of such dissent<sup>79</sup>.

Nonetheless, Arab regimes across the contemporary Middle East cannot avoid multiple security challenges to their legitimacy based on increasing birth rates, continued urban growth, inadequate education systems both quantitatively and qualitatively, increasing demands over gender equality, unemployment and under-employment, the increasing number of graduates, an improving human development index, and increasing inflation rates. These are all factors that within the forthcoming decades will force authoritarian regimes either to adopt more genuine political and economic reforms if they want to stay in power, or else to anticipate violent disorder if the state fails to adapt to such circumstances<sup>80</sup>. In sum, Arab regimes have managed in the past to apply a firm grip on their people because the latter lacked the tools for a political change. However, there is clearly an emerging context for challenges to such regimes and a growing voice for genuine democratisation processes as this region as a whole becomes politicised.

## 2.6 Democracy and the Rentier State

Weber defined the state as a 'permanent organisational structure within which binding collective choices are taken and implemented over a given territory. Consisting of bureaucracies, an institutionalised legal order, and formal and informal norms, it is ultimately the sole social institution that can make decisions effective by exercising legitimate force'<sup>81</sup>. The rentier state, by contrast, 'is a description used in political science and international relations theory to classify those states which derive all or a substantial portion of their national revenues from the rent of indigenous resources to

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<sup>79</sup> See Pratt, N. *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World*. (London: the Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. 2007). Pp. 91-113.

<sup>80</sup> See Augustus, R. N. *Civil Society in the Middle East*. (The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1996).

<sup>81</sup> Karl, T. L. *The Paradox of Plenty: Oil Booms and Petro-States*. (London: University of California Press, Ltd., 1997), p. 14. Another definition of the state given by Alfred Stephan is "the state is a continuous administrative, legal, bureaucratic and coercive system that attempts not only to manage the state apparatus but to structure relations between civil and public power and to structure many crucial relations within civil and political society". See Shafer, M. *Winners and Losers: How Sectors Shape the Developmental Prospects of States*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 5.

external clients. The term is most frequently applied to states rich in highly valued natural resources such as petroleum<sup>82</sup>. The Arab world in general and the Arabian Peninsula in particular, used to have their own modes of production as in any other society. In the Arabian Peninsula the pearl industry used to be a major source of income, particularly in Kuwait where it accounted for 20% of employment for the entire population in the pre-oil period, while in the Trucial States the figure was 31% and in Qatar 48%. The pearling industry suffered after the Wall Street crash in 1929, as the world economic depression that followed this event lowered the demand for luxury items, such as pearls<sup>83</sup>.

In Oman, the major source of employment were agriculture and traditional hand crafts such as silversmithing, weaving, boat-building, seafaring, and trade in the coastal area<sup>84</sup>. During Sayyid Said bin Sultan's time (1806-56), Oman was a major seafaring nation, possessing an extensive fleet of commercial sailing vessels, which dominated trade in the Indian Ocean and reached as far afield as Marseilles and New York. However, Omani sailing vessels could not compete at later stages of the Victorian age with the European steamships, an event symbolised by the opening of the Suez Canal. As such, the discovery of oil offered some relief from the shattered economy and widespread poverty in the Arabian Peninsula after the collapse of the traditional economies. Equally, however, the discovery of oil required a technical expertise that only Western nations and in particular Britain could supply. As such, with oil concessions negotiated with Emirs and *Shaykhs* along the Gulf littoral, Britain came to exercise tight control over the area<sup>85</sup>.

The arrival of oil companies during the 1930s had a dramatic impact domestically, regionally and internationally upon the Gulf<sup>86</sup>. Domestically, the rulers felt for the first time in history financially independent of their people, while at the same time dependence on Britain was increased in order to protect such regimes externally as well

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<sup>82</sup> See the web site: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rentier\\_state](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rentier_state). Last accessed on 12/4/2010.

<sup>83</sup> Zahlan, R. S. *The Making of the Modern Gulf States*. (Reading: Garnet Publishing Limited, 1998), p.29.

<sup>84</sup> See: the Europa Regional Surveys of the World: The Middle East and North Africa 2006. (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 876.

<sup>85</sup> See: Zahlan, 1998.

<sup>86</sup> See: Tetreault, M. A. The Political Economy of Middle Eastern Oil, in *Understanding the contemporary Middle East*, ed. Deborah J. Gerner & Jillian Schwedler. (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. 2004), pp. 249-272.

as internally. The production and export of oil, however, came to redefine domestic political orders with the profit or 'rent' derived from the sale of oil used to improve standards of living, establish administrative apparatus, and build a functioning infrastructure, all the while strengthening the army and security forces.

Regionally, the discovery of oil has created a desire to extend their territorial areas among some leaders, such as Abdel Aziz bin Saud who laid claim to areas adjoining Saudi Arabia, most notably the *Buraimi* oasis in Oman, a claim based upon the suspicion that this area sat atop vast reserves of oil. It was an event that obliged the British Government's Foreign Office in London to draw borders on maps<sup>87</sup> that rarely corresponded to existing tribal groupings, unlike those borders in Europe, which were defined by either linguistic affinity or natural geographic barriers<sup>88</sup>.

The idea of a rentier state has its origins in the early 1970s when oil states enjoyed huge revenues from the profit (rent) derived from the sale of oil. This resulted in a situation wherein only a few people in these states could be described as workers and the majority simply enjoyed the new life of the 'oil era'<sup>89</sup>. The revenues were controlled by the ruling elites, who used the oil money to buy political support and loyalty in their tribal communities. They distributed wealth to their citizens and provided a modern infrastructure and modern services while imposing few or no taxes on the people. In this economically prosperous situation, the ruling elites managed to preserve their positions internally by gaining the support of the population through this particular form of social contract, and externally through gaining support from the superpowers. According to Ayubi:

*Having defeated, disarticulated and persecuted social forces, political organisations and/or ideological orientations that represent a serious challenge to the regime, they then co-opt their members (individually or in divided segments if possible) into the regime's politico-organisational set-up. Segmental incorporation is particularly useful as a defensive strategy when coercion alone cannot sustain control over groups with competing interests, aspirations or socio-cultural agendas<sup>90</sup>.*

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<sup>87</sup> See Zahlan. 1998. pp. 24-25.

<sup>88</sup> Zahlan, 1998. p. 2

<sup>89</sup> Davidson, C. M. *Dubai: The Vulnerability of Success*. (London: Hurst Publishers, 2008), pp. 151-153 and 178-182.

<sup>90</sup> Ayubi, N. *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East*. (London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1995), pp. 224-240.



The oil revenues changed the social contract in oil producing countries. Rulers, as mentioned above, became financially independent of their people, in some cases (for example, Saudi Arabia) forgoing direct taxation in return for complete political fidelity. As part of the emerging social contract, Gulf States established modern administrative governments and created attractive employment opportunities mainly in the public sector. The relationship between the rulers and the ruled became implicitly drawn through this social contract. In return for the emergence of a modern infrastructure (with its free education, public services and minimal taxation) political participation, and, the emergence of any functioning civil society worthy of the name, was for the most part prohibited<sup>91</sup>.

According to the cross-regional studies made by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the Arab world is an area where states rely least on domestic taxation; consequently, as there is no taxation, there is no substantial demand for representation<sup>92</sup>. Anderson, however, argues that 'over the long run they are going to tax their own people heavily'<sup>93</sup>, which certainly will result in a greater demands for political participation. According to Shafer, 'people are rational and self-interested ... they do their best to get what they want ... to earn more, work less, and live better; to stay in business and turn a profit, and to stay in office and win peace, prosperity, and glory'<sup>94</sup>. Whilst Shafer may appear to be trying to justify the relaxing habit of some citizens of some rentier states, he is in fact describing in an indirect way the implicit social contract between people and regimes in those states through which people tend to be dependent on the state and ignore even their rights in political participation. But this does not mean that this situation is likely to continue as the peoples demands for political participation is building up - notably the case of Oman.

Therefore, despite the continued importance placed on oil, the social contract is expected to be redefined and as it is exposed to the forces of globalisation expectations regarding participation will begin to shift, particularly among the mercantile or Middle

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<sup>91</sup> Some scholars argue that Oman does not fit the rentier pattern experienced by its near neighbours. See for example, Allen, A. And Lynn Rigsbee. *Oman Under Qaboos: From Coup to Constitution, 1970-1996*. (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2000). P. 216.

<sup>92</sup> See Lisa Anderson, 1995. Pp. 66-67.

<sup>93</sup> See Lisa Anderson, 1995. P. 70.

<sup>94</sup> Shafer, M. *Winners and Losers: How Sectors Shape the Developmental Prospects of States*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 9.

classes. Karl argues that 'dependence on a particular export commodity shapes not only social classes and regime types ... but also the very institution of the state, the framework of decision-making, and the decision calculus of the policymakers'<sup>95</sup>. Even so, people in oil producing states increasingly feel responsible over the distribution of the oil wealth and have, in the case of Kuwait, for example, pushed for more accountability and participation in decisions related to the oil industry.

The rentier state model of development has had both positive and negative implications. On the one hand, it has helped create modern state institutions, not least in health and education. The under-five mortality rate, for example, has been reduced in Oman from 200 per 1000 births in 1970 to just 12 in 2003; immunisation of one-year old children has increased from 65% in 1985 to 98% in 2003. In Bahrain average life expectancy rose from 59.9 years in 1970 to 73.2 years in 2000<sup>96</sup>. On the other hand, the rapid rise in population brought about by such comprehensive health care has resulted in a real decline in employment opportunities in the public sector, and more demand on the free public services<sup>97</sup>. Oman's population, for example, has risen from less than one million in 1970 to 2,340,815 in 2003, and school leavers have increased from just a few hundred in 1970 to 53,000 in 2003<sup>98</sup>. The number of government employees has increased in Kuwait, from 22,073 in 1966 to 145,000 in 1980, while in Saudi Arabia the number increased from a few hundred in the 1950s to 245,000 in 1980<sup>99</sup> and in Oman the number reached 139,000 in 2006<sup>100</sup>.

As a result, concern has been expressed over the levels of discontent among the younger generation of Gulf Arabs as unemployment or under-employment has begun to rise. Official adult unemployment rates in 2001 reached 3.9% in Qatar and 5.5% in Bahrain<sup>101</sup>. Following the oil price 'shocks' of the late 1980s and the dramatic rise in

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<sup>95</sup> Karl, T. L. 1997, p. 7.

<sup>96</sup> See the United Nations' Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the ESCWA Region 2005-2006, p.39.

<sup>97</sup> Moghadam, V. M. Population Growth, Urbanization, and the Challenges of Unemployment. In *Understanding the Contemporary Middle East*, ed. Deborah J. Gerner & Jillian Schwedler. (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. 2004), pp. 273-296.

<sup>98</sup> See the Europa Regional Surveys of the World: The Middle East and North Africa 2006, p. 873.

<sup>99</sup> Owen R. 2004, p. 39.

<sup>100</sup> See the Statistical Year Book. (Muscat: Information and Publication Centre in the Ministry of National Economy, 2007), p. 95.

<sup>101</sup> See the United Nations' Survey, 2006, p. 18.

populations, the rentier states feared their over-dependence on oil as the only source of income had led to a reliance on a bloated public sector. This led to poor development outcomes and became known as the 'Dutch disease'<sup>102</sup>. As such, other modes of development were considered that were centred around diversification and nationalisation policies. These encouraged small-scale private industries; in Oman, for example, such industries claimed a steadily increasing proportion of GDP, rising from 1.0% in 1981 to 8.1% in 2003. These projects related to gas-intensive industries, and included a fertilizer plant, an aluminium smelter and a petrochemicals facility.

The rentier states privatised some important state-owned utilities, such as electricity, telecommunications and in some states such as Qatar and the UAE the media sector. Foreign investment and tourism was also encouraged with revenues from tourism in Oman in 2003 totalling US \$372 million<sup>103</sup>. With regard to nationalisation policies, expatriates were banned from working in some professions but the work opportunities resulting from this policy remained unattractive to a younger generation of Gulf Arabs as the rates of pay and benefits could not easily compete with the private sector. The oil-producing states have also introduced stock exchange markets; Muscat Securities Market, for example, was opened in 1989.

Despite all the efforts made to deal with the rising populations, the oil price 'shocks' and the decline in the oil production rate, the rentier state model has not adapted easily to the scale of expectations which now marks a younger generation of more educated and certainly ambitious Gulf Arabs with some differences from one state to another. Oil remains the major source of the national income for the majority of the Gulf States. In Oman, for example, it still accounts for 70% of the national income as of 2004. Oil production rates have fallen in some rentier states such as Oman and the UAE; in Oman the annual oil production rate has fallen from 353 m. barrels in 2000 to 278 m. barrels in 2003; the income from other industrial and tourists activities cannot compensate for this deficit. The budget deficit in Oman in 2001 reached R.O. 317m.

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<sup>102</sup> Karl, T. L. 1997, p. 5. The Dutch disease is associated with the dependency of the state on one main source of income.

<sup>103</sup> Europa Regional Surveys of the World: The Middle East and North Africa 2006, p. 879.

This is equivalent to US \$ 823 m. In addition, Oman's petroleum reserves are only enough to last for a further 19 years at 2004 levels of production<sup>104</sup>.

Whilst some scholars might argue that the rise in oil prices since 2005 may compensate for the decline in the oil production rate, the fact remains that the rise in oil prices has resulted in an international wave of inflation in different commodity prices, which affects the Gulf states as much as states anywhere else. Citizens of the rentier states are used to high living standards, and have not adjusted easily to the dramatic rise in the cost of living. As such, profits that are being accrued from the rent of oil have been used to offset increased salary costs, and in the case of Oman also being invested in future projects to prepare the Sultanate for economic life in the post-oil era. Oman is planning to build five airports and sea ports and is constructing a modern fleet to transport oil, liquid gas and other commodities. Inevitably, this means that the old social contract between the ruler and the ruled is being redefined as the Omani economy opens itself up increasingly to inward investment.

The concept of the rentier state has extended to other Arab non-oil states, as the oil rent culture has allowed subsidies to be given to other regimes, most notably Jordan. Such revenue has been used to develop social contracts designed to ensure regime stability. In most instances, such subsidies have been used to benefit elite groups, such as the military, while workers' remittances have done much to ensure social stability among Palestinian refugees who would otherwise make demands for greater political accountability<sup>105</sup>.

## 2.7 Islam and Democracy

The *Shura* in political Islam is regarded as the second source of legitimacy. The first source is the *Shari'a* with its two sub-sources; the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*: Prophet's sayings and actions. The *Shura* is not only confined to consultation as linguistic meaning may suggest, rather it is a comprehensive system where *Umma*, which is a combination of faith and community, remains in full control of the political system in order to determine its destiny. *Umma* retains the power to elect, advice and

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<sup>104</sup> See the Europa Regional Surveys of the World: The Middle East and North Africa 2006, pp. 870-879.

<sup>105</sup> Beblawi, H. "The State in the Arab World" in *the Arab State*, ed. G. Luciani. (London: Mackays of Chatham, 1990). Pp. 85-98.

depose the ruler of the Islamic state. It remains politically active at all times and does not surrender to comfort after pledging allegiance to the ruler. As such, *Umma* exercises *Shura* at two levels; the legislative level and the leadership level. At the legislative level, *Umma* can interpret, through *Ijma* and *Ijtihad*, religious texts in order to cope with the requirements of time. At this level, *Umma* also retains its mission to command good and prohibit evil, a mission applicable to all issues including accountability on government's performance. Additionally, *Umma* exercises legislations in various methods such as referendum, representation through *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd* and pledging allegiance to ruler. At the leadership level however, Imamate is a contract between *Umma* and the Imam, in which the latter serves the former - but not the opposite - through implementing *Shari'a* and wisely practising his given authorities<sup>106</sup>.

There are different views regarding the compatibility or otherwise of Islam and democracy, and clearly as Esposito and Voll have it 'the relationship between Islam and democracy in the contemporary world is complex'<sup>107</sup>. The Muslim World, however, is not ideologically monolithic. It presents a broad spectrum of perspectives ranging from the extremes - those who deny a connection between Islam and democracy - to those who argue that Islam requires a democratic system. As Farooq states:

*The Muslim world is currently in a dysfunctional state, caught between the modern as well as the mundane aspirations of life on one hand and a disconnect from the past glories and transcending values - beliefs that these people identify with, on the other. Muslim world would like to progress past its problems without de-linking from Islam. The western countries, currently dominating the world, supposedly prefer that the Muslim world move forward, too, but also de-link itself from Islam except at the personal or spiritual level, and most definitely, not upset the current global status quo*<sup>108</sup>.

The Tunisian scholar Ghanoushi argues that if 'democracy' indicates a (Western) political system that preserves people's rights, gives them a wider space for political participation to choose their leaders or representatives and provides a system for the circulation of power, then there is no single text in Islam that contradicts democracy<sup>109</sup>.

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<sup>106</sup> Tamimi A.S. *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat Within Islamism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Pp 98-102.

<sup>107</sup> See John Esposito and John Voll in <http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/2001-11/islam.html>. Last accessed on 12/4/2010.

<sup>108</sup> See Farooq, M. O. *Islam and Democracy: Perceptions and Misperceptions*. In <http://www.globalwebpost.com/farooqm/writings/islamic/democracy.htm>. Last accessed on 12/4/2010.

<sup>109</sup> Tamimi A.S., 2001. Pp. 89-90.

Equally, Iran's ex-President Khatami, noted that 'the existing democracies do not necessarily follow one formula or aspect. It is possible that a democracy may lead to a liberal system. It is possible that democracy may lead to a socialist system. Or it may be a democracy with the inclusion of religious norms in the government. We have accepted the third option'<sup>110</sup>. And this is by no means a modern phenomenon: scholars such as Rifa'ah Tahtawi (1801-1873), Khairuddin Al-Tunisi (1810-1899), Jamal ad-Din Al-Afghani (1883-1897), Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), Abdurrahman Al-Kawakibi (1849-1903) and Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865-1935) believed that there is no contradiction between the *Shura* and democracy<sup>111</sup>. Therefore, it is arguably clear that there are no religious texts in Islam that contradict democracy in this sense.

What is apparent from the above argument is that democracy is not necessary antithetical to the Islamic world, but how it is practised and indeed developed cannot simply simulate Western concepts of democracy where religion is divorced from the state. Such an approach to democracy, with its apparent dilution of religious and social values integral to the very basis of Islam, would only provoke widespread political disorder. This does not mean, however, that Muslim states cannot adopt constitutional, participatory and accountable forms of governance: what matters are core beliefs and values, not labels or semantics. Despite some Muslim scholars who regard any form of popular participatory politics as an apostasy, Muslim people do view moves towards greater political participation with favour. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre for the People and the Press shows that:

*The post-war [Second Gulf War] update finds that in most Muslim populations, large majorities continue to believe that Western-style democracy can work in their countries. This is the case in predominantly Muslim countries like Kuwait (83%) and Bangladesh (57%), but also in religiously diverse countries like Nigeria (75%)<sup>112</sup>.*

Those who think that Islam and democracy are incompatible encompass both Muslims and non-Muslims. The former hold that, ultimately, the construct of sovereignty is derived from God, rather than from man. In short, the Quran is the

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<sup>110</sup> See John Esposito and John Voll in <http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/2001-11/islam.html>. Last accessed on 12/4/2010.

<sup>111</sup> Tamimi, A. S., 2001. Pp. 46-50.

<sup>112</sup> See the Survey Report: Views of a Changing World 2003: War With Iraq Further Divides the Global Publics. In: <http://people-press.org/report/185/views-of-a-changing-world-2003>. Last accessed on 19/7/2010.

constitution and human beings are the mere executors of the will of God. As such, those who do believe in some form of participatory system are regarded as *shirk* or polytheists. Those non-Muslims who argue that Islam and democracy are incompatible are afraid that a democratic setup of the Muslim world might undermine the current Western domination. It has been claimed that this group of non-Muslims suffers from Islamophobia based on a limited understanding of Islam and a rather narrow viewpoint of the western interest. According to Farooq, some non-Muslim scholars, such as Huntington for example, take a pessimistic intellectual view of the Islamic world. They argue that historically, the Muslim world has been under non-democratic rules for nearly fourteen centuries and thus a democratic culture has never really existed in the Muslim world<sup>113</sup>.

However, this deterministic view of Islam's central characteristics has been challenged, not least by scholars in the Muslim world itself. Those who believe in the compatibility of Islam and democracy turn to the roots of Islam and its pluralist heritage and claim that Islam and democracy are not just compatible but that their connection is unavoidable; this because an Islamic political system is based on *Shura* (mutual consultation), and Farooq points out that scholars such as Khaled Abou el-Fadl, Rachid Ghannoushi, Hasan Turabi, Fathi Osman and most notably, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi argue that this central tenet allows for the emergence of plural political systems across the Islamic world. Indeed, in their view it is almost a requirement. It is an interpretation of *Shura* which is also shared by non-Muslims such as Esposito and Wright<sup>114</sup>.

Hakim describes the type of State and society which Islam envisages as an ideal pattern and which as a whole does not contradict Western democratic values. His claims may be summarised thus<sup>115</sup>:

- (1) Sovereignty belongs to God alone.
- (2) Though eventually God moulds destinies, he has gifted man with free-will.
- (3) In matters of faith, God has forced nobody to believe; anyone

<sup>113</sup> See Farooq, M. O. *Islam and Democracy: Perceptions and Misperceptions*. In <http://www.globalwebpost.com/farooqm/writings/islamic/democracy.htm>. Last accessed on 12/4/2010.

<sup>114</sup> See Farooq, M. O. *Islam and Democracy: Perceptions and Misperceptions*. In <http://www.globalwebpost.com/farooqm/writings/islamic/democracy.htm>. Last accessed on 12/4/2010.

<sup>115</sup> See Khalifa Abdul Hakim. *Islam and Democracy*. In: <http://muslim-canada.org/ch19hakim.html>. Last accessed on 12/4/2010.

may believe or disbelieve and bear the cost.

- (4) An Islamic State is not theocratic but ideological.
- (5) Non-Muslims can live peacefully as citizens in a Muslim dispensation.
- (6) There should be no ethnic inequity within a Muslim realm.
- (7) All avenues of economic abuse must be blocked so that wealth does not flow only in the hands of the few.
- (8) A person should be free to earn as much as he can by legal means, without misuse or fraud. But wealth, even rightfully gained ahead of a certain minimum, should be subject to a tax on capital.
- (9) Women should enjoy an independent economic status.
- (10) A truly Islamic State cannot be a monarchical state. It must be a democratic republic in which the president is elected by a free vote of the community on the basis of his capacity and character.
- (11) A ruler should have a council of advisers and consultants for the purposes of legislation and for making major decisions.
- (12) There should be no special class of priests in an Islamic society.
- (13) There should be ideal equality of opportunity and equality before the law.
- (14) The judges should be independent of the executive authority.

Arguably, according to this account, an Islamic political system is close to democratic systems.

It is extremely important to understand the source of legislation in Islam, particularly the concept of *Shura* which is integral to an understanding of political Islam. A discussion of this principle may explain why movements toward pluralism, liberalism and democracy have been relatively weak in the Arab world. In addition, the relationship between religion and the state according to most Muslim scholars is close and cannot be separated, though some enlightened Muslim scholars suggest a separation between the state and Islam is possible. For example, the Egyptian scholar Ali Abd Al-Raziq in his book (*Islam and the Roots of Government*) claims that Mohammed was a prophet and not a statesman, that Islam is a religion and not a political movement, and that Islam therefore, should have nothing to do with politics<sup>116</sup>. Other scholars such as Ali Shariati argue that following the concept of *Tawheed* (the oneness of God) it is not

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<sup>116</sup> Kramer, G. "Islamist Notions of Democracy". *The Middle East Report*, No. 147 (1993), p. 3.



possible to separate different aspects of life into separate sections. This separation will cause a spiritual vacuum which would allow military regimes to abuse their power, as Saddam Hussein's Arab *Ba'ath* party did in Iraq. However, this concept of *Tawheed*, although preserving the sovereignty of God, also preserves the sovereignty of man as all people are equal in the presence of God. Therefore, the concept of *Tawheed* practically requires some sort of political equality between people, and accordingly a democratic regime is best placed to fulfil this goal as it denies making obedience to the rule of just one individual an acceptable norm.

The Islamic *Fiqh* (jurisprudence) is divided into four main branches: *fiqh al-Aqidah* (faith) that includes faith in God, Angels, Holy Books, All Messengers, Second Life, Good and Bad Destiny; *Fiqh al-Ibadat* (worshipping) that regulates the relationship between the individual and his creator, and which essentially forms the five pillars of Islam: the professions of faith, prayers, fasting, almsgiving and the pilgrimage; *Fiqh al-Muaamalat* (dealings) covers other aspects such as economic, political and family life; and lastly *fiqh al-Hodoud* (sanctions). The first two types are fixed, eternal and immutable and have never been revised since the death of the Prophet. The second two are flexible and can be adapted to the changing requirements of the time and locality. Islamic scholars are allowed and are in fact urged to look deeply into them and apply them in a manner that makes life easier for people by making use of the Islamic principles of *Ijtihad* (diligence) and *Ijmaa* (consensus). *Muaamalat* (dealings) is extremely important in informing the discussion over democratisation in the Arab world as much as it is flexible. *Ibadi* scholars have, throughout Islamic history, used the principles of *Ijmaa* and *Ijtihad* which have allowed them to adopt a traditional democratic agenda. Therefore, political Islam, according to Islamic legal theory, is flexible and can arguably be adapted to democratisation within the Arab world<sup>117</sup>.

Furthermore, according to the Quran and the Prophet's Instructions (*Sunnah*), many principles are found in Islam which coincide with democratic values; especially justice, mutual consultation (*Shura*), equality and freedom. However, freedom, as mentioned earlier, is guaranteed as long as it does not go against God or Islam. In relation to systems of government and authority in Islam, all people are born equal, having been installed as *Khalifah* (God's vice-regents on earth); that government exists

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<sup>117</sup> Kramer, G. 1992. P. 3.

to ensure Islamic life and enforce Islamic law; sovereignty ultimately rests with God alone, who has made the laws and defined good and evil, the licit and illicit. The authority to apply God's law has been transferred to the community as a whole, which is therefore the source of all power; and the head of the community or state is the mere representative, agent or employee of the community that elects, supervises and, if necessary, deposes him. It is clear in this sense that *Shura* is not just a theoretical principle but a practical code and it can be applied at different levels of authority; that is - at both community level and state level<sup>118</sup>.

To most non-*Ibadi* Muslim scholars the principle of *Shura* in the early history and traditions of Islam primarily involved consultation in all matters private and public. *Shura*, however, was used immediately after the death of Prophet Mohammed to select the first four Caliphs who preceded the establishment of the Umayyad Dynasty. According to Farooq<sup>119</sup>: 'Since the time of Mu'awiya<sup>120</sup>, the *Khilafat* turned into *Mulukiyaah* (hereditary monarchy). This was an important turning point, because this replacement of *Khilafat* with *Mulukiyyah* was actually a counter-revolution against the revolution of the Prophet Muhammad'. Until the Turkish reformer Kemal Ataturk abolished the Caliphate following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the political title Caliph, was used (and abused) by almost all Islamic rulers in order to gain legitimacy, not least in their claims to be the successors to the Prophet. The continued use of the title throughout twelve centuries of Islamic history made it a divine concept in people's minds<sup>121</sup>. Caliph or *Khalifah* means God's stewards, and Caliph may be any man. Adam, the father of all human beings, was described in the Holy Quran as *Khalifah*, and people are described in other verses as *Kholafaá* (plural of *Khalifah*). In the Quran, the term caliphate refers to the extensive tasks of humans as stewards of God's creation on earth. But it is also the point where democracy begins to conflate with Islam. Every person in an Islamic society enjoys the rights and powers of the caliphate of God and in this respect all individuals are equal.

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<sup>118</sup> Kramer, G. 1992.

<sup>119</sup> See Farooq, M. O. *Islam and Democracy: Perceptions and Misperceptions*. In <http://www.globalwebpost.com/farooqm/writings/islamic/democracy.htm>. Last accessed on 12/4/2010.

<sup>120</sup> Mu'awiya is the founder of the Umayyad dynasty and the one who initiated the hereditary rule in Islam. He fought with Imam Ali –the fourth successor after the Prophets death.

<sup>121</sup> Al-Sulami, M. F. *The West and Islam: Western Liberal Democracy versus the system of Shura*. (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

Similarly, *Shura* – as discussed in subsequent chapters - was practised in the same manner in Oman for more than one thousand years. Therefore, there is a valid argument that Islam can indeed accommodate political parties and ruling systems which are akin to a form of democratic representation across the region. Some scholars such as Al-Jabri, however suggest that *Shura* is not compatible with democracy, as it is only a consultative system which is not binding on any ruler. In this case, the ruler can negate the will of the people if his own opinions differ from their views. He argues that *Shura* was only practiced during the time of the second caliph Omar, whom he described as a just dictator. However, in the case of Oman, there is a strong counterargument. Although *Shura* may not have been practiced by the *Sunni* sect across the wider Middle East in any systematic way which equates practice with democratic doctrine, in Oman, the *Ibadi* at least have practiced political *Shura* for several centuries<sup>122</sup>.

Another aspect related to Islam and democracy in the recent era is the emergence of oppositional Islamic organisations in some Arab states, such as in Algeria, Lebanon and Palestine. They form the strongest opposition to the existing regimes at the present time, which has given them the opportunity to win elections if a genuine democratisation process has taken place or is ongoing<sup>123</sup>. Some examples are *Hezbollah's* parliamentary victory in the recent elections in Lebanon and that of *Hamas* in the Palestinian Territories<sup>124</sup>. It seems that the US policy regarding democratisation in the Arab world is based upon a belief that Islamic oppositions are more likely to acquire power through democratisation processes<sup>125</sup>. This may partly explain why the United States has changed its policies within the Middle Eastern Partnership Initiative (MEPI) from democracy promotion to supporting civil society and educational programs.

Accordingly, the idea that democracy can be imposed without taking into account indigenous context has been exposed by the fragility of Washington's attempts to introduce such reform in Iraq. Some scholars such as Clawson argue that the West can

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<sup>122</sup> Al-Jabri, M. A. 1994, pp. 42-45.

<sup>123</sup> Esposito, J. L. *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*. (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1992).

<sup>124</sup> elbatdnuoR A noissuciD. nI :<http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2005/issue3/jv9no3a9.htm>. Last checked on 12/4/2010.1. Last accessed on 12/4/2010.

<sup>125</sup> See Martin Kramer. Islam vs. Democracy in: <http://www.geocities.com/martinkramerorg/IslamvsDemocracy.htm>. Last accessed on 12/4/2010.

work with Islamists in power if these convincingly renounce violence. Clawson suggests that Islamists holding power generally develop in one of two directions: either they evolve to become more democratic as in Turkey or they fail as in Iran. Other scholars such as Rubin set three conditions for the transformation of Islamist movements into Islamist democratic parties: first, a split with extremism; second, a leader must be present who persuades the followers to make a break with the past; and third, a genuine change of goals and ideology must take place. It is clear that Islamic movements can work within a democratic system but they need to adapt and accept pluralism in order to be accepted by the international community<sup>126</sup>.

This summary critique suggests that democratisation process can be practised in Muslim countries, and the literature reinforces the view that Islam and democracy are compatible. Most experts regard Turkey, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Mali, and Senegal as democratic states. Other countries, such as Malaysia, Nigeria, and Iran, are nominally democratic, though their tangible commitment to civil freedoms, legitimate opposition parties and an open press – regarded as key benchmarks of a democratic and open society – remain open to some doubt. Most of the world's 47 Muslim-majority nations conduct elections; some are relatively free and fair, some are not although it is recognised that conducting elections alone is not a sufficient sign of democracy. According to many scholars, however, the Arab world is popularly viewed as a democracy-free zone; Arab nations are perceived as falling somewhere between autocracy and democracy: they may have legislatures, labour unions, and political parties, but their ruling party, president, or king exercises final control<sup>127</sup>.

## 2.8 Democracy and Civil Society

There is little agreement between scholars on what defines civil society. However, the majority of scholars seem to agree on what the main features of civil society are. These are described by Diamond thus:

*The realm of organised social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules. It is distinct from "society" in general in that it involves*

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<sup>126</sup> Kramer: <http://www.geocities.com/martinkramerorg/IslamvsDemocracy.htm>. Last accessed on 12/4/2010.

<sup>127</sup> See: Otterman, S. 2003. *The Middle East: Islam and Democracy*. In: <http://www.cfr.org/publication/7708>. Last accessed on 12/4/2010.

*citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions, and ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state and hold state officials accountable. "Civil Society" is an intermediary entity, standing between the private sphere and the state*<sup>128</sup>.

The concept of civil society is a Western notion which first appeared in the late 18th Century. The conceptualisation of civil society is rooted in Hegel's approach, in which it was posited as a manifestation of the bourgeoisie's attempt to organise and harmonise conflicting interests between state and society. While a state may function to expand its authority, civil society organisations function to prevent state hegemony over personal autonomy. Civil harmony is possible because of the ideological compatibility between the state and civil society<sup>129</sup>. Kharajah claims that the phrase 'civil society' has no existence in the Arabic language and that this reflects its socio-political understanding in the West. The linguistic definition of *civil* in Arabic is *mujtama*, which refers to the place and time where the meeting '*ijtima*' amongst society members took place. This definition does not include any reference to an interaction or interrelation that assumes civil society as an intermediary between the individual and the different organising forces of the society. Civil is equal to *madanee* in Arabic, which means change from the state of primordial to a state of modernisation and reflects the values of urban dwellers.

Civil society is also defined as the space in which a *mélange* of groups, associations, clubs, guilds, syndicates, federations, unions, and parties come together to provide a buffer between the state and the citizens; and civil society organisations must be secular in ideology, civil in their behaviour, legally recognised, and supportive of democratic reform<sup>130</sup>. These types of civil society organisations would appear to be a pre-requisite for democracy to work properly in the Arab world. The only problem here however is the expectation that such groups or syndicates are secular in nature. Where such organisations exist in the Arab world, it is often the case that many of their members, such as the lawyers' syndicates in Egypt, are also members of the Muslim

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<sup>128</sup> See: Salam, N. 2002. *Civil Society in the Arab World: The Historical and Political Dimensions*. In: <http://www.law.harvard.edu/programs/ilsp/publications/salam.pdf>. Last accessed on 12/4/2010.

<sup>129</sup> See: Tariq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael. Civil Society in the Arab World: Historical Traces, Contemporary Vestiges. *Arab Studies Quarterly*. Winter, 1997. Cited in: [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2501/is\\_n1\\_v19/ai\\_19956657/pg\\_6?tag=artBody:coll](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2501/is_n1_v19/ai_19956657/pg_6?tag=artBody:coll). Last accessed on 12/4/2010.

<sup>130</sup> Yom, S. L. "Civil Society and democratization in the Arab World". *The Middle East Review of the International Affairs*. Vol. 9, No. 4. (2005). p. 4.

Brotherhood. Some Islamic organisations have nonetheless shown a willingness to participate in the democratisation process, as discussed previously. The suspicion remains, however, that fidelity to such values is transient and may well be a secular means to securing an Islamic end<sup>131</sup>.

Hence, civil society in Arabic refers to assembling in cities in contrast to Bedouin and rural life. The term does not suggest any political meaning for this assembly such as political or social mobilisation or collective action to organise or manipulate life in the city, whereas in the West *civil* is not functionally derived from processive ‘civilization’ but rather from ‘civic’, which designates the old city in Latin. The notion is of course related to citizenship, or the individual's legal position in the state as a citizen – an active member of civil life, regardless of whether s/he lives in the city or in the village<sup>132</sup>. These differences in definitions are not the real issue, however; rather it is a misinterpretation of the apparently cognate phrases by the Arab jurists, social scholars and scholars of linguistics who are responsible for this translation. Clashes in definition can be mitigated if proper and agreed terminologies can be used instead. Ultimately, however, the main issue is perhaps one of cultural relativism: whilst the West concentrates on the individual, Muslims concentrate on the collective of *Umma* (the Islamic nation).

Salam blames Islam for the weakness of civil society in the Arab world due to what is considered to be its “despotic” character, best illustrated by Islam’s denial of any separation between the spiritual and the temporal and by its only acknowledging *divine* sovereignty. This, he argues, hinders the emergence of any independent public sphere. He acknowledges the role of Islam in the unity of the *Umma* and the principle of *Shura*, as well as the adoption of some social organisations such as *Asnaf* (the guilds) and the rights and privileges they acquired, and institutions such as *Awqaf* (the charitable trusts, religious endowments) and the important role they play in educational and social services<sup>133</sup>. In Oman, where *Ibadi* Islam has its own characteristics religiously, politically and culturally, Omanis have developed their own kinds of social

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<sup>131</sup> Yom, S. L. 2005. p. 4-8.

<sup>132</sup> See: Kharajah, S. 2007. Civil Society in the Arab World: The Missing Concept. *The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law*. Vol. 9, No. 2. (2005), in: [http://www.icnl.org/knowledge/ijnl/vol9iss2/special\\_2.htm](http://www.icnl.org/knowledge/ijnl/vol9iss2/special_2.htm). Last accessed on 12/4/2010.

<sup>133</sup> See: Salam, N. 2002.

organisations. Some organisations are derived from the tribal structure of society, in which tribes have *Sablah* (local council) where they meet and discuss various matters such as those relevant to their daily life issues. These *Sablahs* are also accompanied by charities which are used to pay for any local, regional or national financial matters, such as those that arise during crises or wars.

Other organisations are related to economic issues; for example people who live in coastal areas have what they call *Sunan Al-Bahr* (sea norms) and those in the rural areas have *Aflaj* (water channels), through which they agree on a certain system to divide the irrigation water between them, while maintaining a treasury which is used for maintaining the *Falaj* (singular). Furthermore, in each main Omani *Wilayah* (district) there is a *Souq* (a local market) which has an organising system and a treasury which is used to maintain the *Souq* itself and to sponsor local projects. The state does not intervene in these associations but supports them and backs them when necessary. Above all, the *Ibadi* political system in Oman believes in a devolved sovereignty from God to man; it believes in a participatory system even at the national level and the fair election of the ruler; and last but not least in the council system. Therefore, Salam's claim that Islam is a hindrance on civil society can, at least in the case of Oman, be questioned.

Similarly, Kharajah supports the argument that Islam *per se* cannot be held responsible for the paucity of civil society across the Middle East:

*For forty years of Prophet Mohammad's life (peace be upon him) and the rightly guided Khalifas, there was an active and influential Islamic civil society ... After his death, Muslims practiced real democracy. The civil Islamic society in the Saqifet Bani Saeda selected Abu Bakr to be the prophet Caliphate (successor), who declared that he succeeded Mohammad and was not his heir. By this, he declared that heaven will no longer interfere in affairs related to governing ... The same happened with all the four caliphates. Muslims voted and the opinions of all people were accepted, even those of women, as in the case of Ali Bin Abi Taleb. The Islamic democratic honeymoon ended when Muawiyah came to power and transferred the rule into a kingdom to be attained by the sword ... The same continued in the Abbasi era and in subsequent stages of the Islamic state, or states that claim Islam, even in the Ottoman Empire<sup>134</sup>.*

In general, civil society is not an alternative to the state, unless the state becomes authoritarian and stops offering anything in return for the society's support of its agenda.

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<sup>134</sup> Kharajah, S. 2007.

But civil society is a necessary condition for democracy; it works as an inter-medium which acts to consolidate the democratisation process. Therefore, according to Kharajah genuine civil society, anywhere, has the following characteristics:

- It enjoys an independent status with regard to the state. This does not mean a weakening of the state, but merely limiting its practices within the structure of the constitution and the law.
- It consists of institutions independent from the political authority, institutions which organise relations among individuals themselves and between individuals and the state.
- The individual is not obliged – as is the case with kinship and hereditary institutions – to affiliate with any institution; participation is voluntary.
- It has to be connected to human rights, political participation, freedom of expression, citizenship, the peaceful circulation of authority, and pluralism.

Applying all of the above in the Arab world, where most regimes are either authoritarian or adopt the rentier model, civil society has little chance of emerging in the same way as in the West. This is because the formers forcefully deny any political liberty to their citizenry and the latter apply a social contract where they become welfare states at the expense of political participation. Even if its institutions are found in some Arab states, its efficiency is limited because kinship relations will always be dominant<sup>135</sup>. Al-Najjar argues that ‘several such organisations (civil society organisations), in a number of Arab countries, are nothing but fronts for tribal, religious, ethnic or sectarian groups’<sup>136</sup>.

Abootalebi defines civil society as ‘groups contrasted to the state, regardless of purpose or character’<sup>137</sup>. The very existence of these groups is thought to deter the expansion of state power and increase prospects for democratisation. Applying this hypothesis to the Middle East, he suggests that states in the region are far more powerful than civil society movements and he suggests that even states which are willing to allow

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<sup>135</sup> See: Kharajah, S. 2007.

<sup>136</sup> See: Al-Najjar. B. S. *Civil Society in the Arab World: A Reality that Needs Reforming. Contemporary Arab Affairs*. (London: Rutledge, 2008). Cited in: <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t780786794>. Last accessed on 12/4/2010.

<sup>137</sup> Abootalebi, A. R. “Civil Society, Democracy, and the Middle East.” *The Middle East Review of the International Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1998.



genuine democratisation are faced with a weak and divided society and a fragmented opposition. As a result, there is little chance of democracy developing from the bottom up. Society can only be strong if equality is guaranteed in the distribution of such key values as income, wealth, status, knowledge and also quality of human development such as life expectancy, educational achievement, and adult literacy.

Scholars such as Abootalebi argue that the current situation in the region is not conducive to democratisation processes and that only by strengthening the roots of civil society can state power be reduced<sup>138</sup>. He emphasizes that the strength of any society is measured in particular through the level of the organisational unity of labour, which by itself is measured according to the number of trade unions, the actual number of workers unionized, the degree of government control, and the level of opportunity to strike. While the strength of the state in general is measured through its ability to tax and regulate, the particular strength of the state across the Middle East has come to be measured through oil dollars, foreign military and financial support, and the weakness of the local political opposition<sup>139</sup>. Most civil society organisations in the Arab world are controlled by the states. States have founded what are called the government non-government organisations (GONGOS); these are defined as civil from outside but are government-run from the inside<sup>140</sup>.

Despite such limited public space, Yom argues that 'vigorous civic activism can generate democratic regime change'<sup>141</sup>. He argues that a strong and active civil society can challenge the persistent authoritarianism in the region. What is needed, according to Yom, is an 'armada of international diplomatic, financial, and moral support for the civil society organisations in order to lead to the collapse of Arab autocracy'<sup>142</sup>. Moreover, the higher the number of civil society organisations found in a state, the greater the chance of challenging the existing regime. Whilst states like Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories enjoy large and active civil societies, the Gulf countries have the lowest levels of activism, and the other Arab countries fall

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<sup>138</sup> See: also Norton, A. R. *The New Media, Civic Pluralism, and the Slowly Retreating State*. In: *New Media in the Muslim World*, ed. Dale F. Eickelman and John W. Anderson. (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>139</sup> Abootalebi, A. R. 1998.

<sup>140</sup> See: Al-Najjar B. S. 2008.

<sup>141</sup> Yom, S. L. 2005. p. 1.

<sup>142</sup> Yom, S. L. 2005. p. 1.

somewhere in between<sup>143</sup>. Many factors have led to the impoverished state of civil society in the Gulf countries, including: relatively small populations, a social fabric based on tribalism, dynastic rule and the effectiveness of the rentier state model. The citizens of these states have become accustomed to such political *stasis* and are, therefore, unwilling to press for reforms with regard to the ruling dynasties, often because they see them as the embodiment of national values and unity.

Al-Jabri<sup>144</sup> also discusses the relationship between democracy and the civil society in the Arab world. He starts by asking a dual question: is it possible to have democracy in a non-democratic society, and is it possible for civil society to emerge from a non-democratic environment? He goes on to suggest that neither democracy nor civil society exists in the Arab world at present so it is necessary to consider which of them should come first. He argues that democracy as a principle or as a framework for practicing citizenship rights should come first, as practicing democratic rights, such as freedom of speech, freedom of protest, freedom to establish associations, unions, syndicates, parties, and freedom to have ownership rights and equality, all lead to the emergence of strong civil society. The only way civil society can come first is through its adoption by ruling regimes. This is an important argument that should be kept in mind when discussing the development of democracy from top down. Some scholars look at this type of democracy as extrinsic, but according to this argument it can be seen as one of the solutions for the democratic deficit in the Arab world generally, and where civil society remains fragile and fragmented.

Al-Jabri also argues that during the colonial period, the imperial powers established institutions for their own interests which enabled them to dominate the colonised state in such a way that guaranteed the continuation of their hegemony. Ismael and Ismail argue that 'colonialism imposed certain distortions on the Arab world, such as urbanisation without industrialisation, formal education without productive training, secularisation without scientification, and capitalist greed without

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<sup>143</sup> Yom, S. L. 2005. p. 3.

<sup>144</sup> Al-Jabri, M. A. "The Problem of Democracy and Civil Society in the Arab World" in the *Issue of Democracy in the Arab World*, ed. Arab Unity Studies Centre. (Beirut: Arab Unity Studies Centre Press, 2000).

capitalist discipline'<sup>145</sup>. After the withdrawal of the colonial powers, the national organisations inherited those institutions and continued to rule the states in a similar manner, so the relationship between the state and society remained the same: a dominating state and a weak society<sup>146</sup>.

Colonial powers had also frequently privileged some tribes and ethnicity in the Arab World if they were found fulfilling their interests; notable examples are to be found in the privileging of Sharif Hussein's family in Iraq, and of the minor *Alawite Shi'a* family over the *Sunni* majority in Syria.

Consequently in these cases army officers started to take power and established the soldiers' state and/or the revolutionary state. The soldiers' state was established with public support in the hope that it would be able to counter the imperialists' hegemony and its supporters in the Arab world, while also achieving social justice through building a modernised state. The failure of the revolutionary state to achieve these goals led to its collapse and left the region with new forces brandishing new slogans and different ideologies. The contemporary ruling forces in the Arab world – Al-Jabri argues – can thus be categorised as the individual's state (the one party state), tribal states, or non-democratic states which hide behind fake democratisation facades<sup>147</sup>.

Al-Jabri describes society as the victim under all those types of ruling forces. He adds that in addition to the fact that society is a victim of ruling regimes, there is another intra-societal problem in the Arab world: the organisation of the social fabric along vertical divisions (ethnicities and tribes) which hampers the emergence of civil society (discussed above). This is because whilst the development of modern civil society can facilitate peoples' social, cultural, and economic life and can be joined and withdrawn voluntarily at any time, the ethnic and tribal structures in the Arab world are compulsory and endogenous. The individual is born, brought up, and integrated into such structures; hence he/she does not have the choice of withdrawing from them. This shows how a vertical division is formed and helps explain why their members' hold

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<sup>145</sup> See: Tariq Y. Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael. *Civil Society in the Arab World: Historical Traces, Contemporary Vestiges. Arab Studies Quarterly*. Winter, 1997. Cited in: [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2501/is\\_n1\\_v19/ai\\_19956657/pg\\_6?tag=artBody:coll](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2501/is_n1_v19/ai_19956657/pg_6?tag=artBody:coll). Last accessed on 12/4/2010.

<sup>146</sup> See also: Migdal, J. 1988.

<sup>147</sup> Al-Jabri, M. A. 2000, pp. 186-187.

loyalty to the group or tribe above all else. Al-Jabri concludes that the tribal hegemony in the Arab world is still strong and dominates not only the rural areas but also the big cities and towns<sup>148</sup>.

In summary, there are few real civil society organisations in the Arab world at present, particularly in the Gulf States. Instead, there remain dominant strongly-tied vertical divisions such as those of tribalism which impede democratisation processes. By contrast, democracy from the bottom up needs a horizontally divided society with genuine civil society organisations. The case of Oman therefore offers an opportunity to examine the extent to which democratic reform can be developed 'top down', rather than 'bottom up'.

Despite all the factors mentioned above that serve to hinder the emergence of a strong and effective civil society in the Arab world, the rapid growth of urban societies in proportion to rural societies in the recent decades has not only reduced tribal and ethnic authority, but also widened people's needs, and their interests, both personal and in relation to the state have changed. This change requires consumer protection, charitable, social, entertainment, cultural, and professional organisations. This change has been accompanied by advanced communication technologies, the media, and improved levels of education; it has resulted in the growth of societal networks, in the form of organisations, unions, and coalitions<sup>149</sup>.

Civil society in the Arab world has importantly and inevitably been affected over the past two decades by the myriad aspects of globalisation, (in all the senses in which politicians, economists, anthropologists and others use the term to conceptualise pan-geo-political and cultural integrations and alignments)<sup>150</sup>. Fox *et al* defines globalisation as 'how various populations intersect with internationalisation along a scaled continuum – running from the macro or global on one end through several intermediate levels to the micro level or local on the other end; each level, such as the regional or national, has

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<sup>148</sup> Al-Jabri, M. A. 2000, p. 188. For the relationship between civil society and tribalism see Carapico, S. *Civil Society in Yemen: The Political Economy of Activism in Modern Arabia*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>149</sup> See: Kharajah, S. 2007.

<sup>150</sup> Mohammadi, A. *International Communication and Globalisation*. (London: Sage, 1997), p. 3.

its own regulatory mechanisms and symbols for organising people'<sup>151</sup>. The Gulf States in particular were not immune to this influence<sup>152</sup>, and have arguably been affected more than others because of their conservative nature and their financial capacities that facilitated accommodation of new technologies<sup>153</sup>, themselves bringing new cultural attitudes and challenges to the political and cultural *status quo*<sup>154</sup>.

In summary, the extent to which civil society in the Arab World is effective differs from one state to another and remains contingent on the political space afforded by governments, educational standards, economic well-being, and the wider participatory experience of the respective societies in what remains the most penetrated region in the world today.

## 2.9 Conclusion

This chapter showed that the problem of democratisation in Oman coincides to some extent with the problem of democratisation in the wider Arab world. However, Oman has its own political uniqueness which sets it apart from other countries. In terms of the wider Arab world, there are political, religious and social factors that affect the issue of democratisation and its development. The Arab world is regarded as one of the most penetrated regions globally due to its strategic location and its main economic resource: oil. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the beginning of the mandatory and colonial period, the Arab world witnessed a new reality which led to its political and cultural fragmentation into smaller states and nations. This situation led to an identity vacuum and to conflictual relationships between many states and nations due to differences in ideology and religious thoughts among the ruling regimes. Many of these states, under different political guises, use national revenues to exercise complete

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<sup>151</sup> Fox, J. W., Sabbah, N. M., Al-Mutawa, M. *Globalisation and the Gulf*. (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), p. 27.

<sup>152</sup> Sadik, T. The Economic Implications of Globalisation for the GCC Countries. In *Globalisation and the Middle East: Islam, Economy, Society and Politics*. Ed. Toby Dodge & Richard Higgott. (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2002), p. 83.

<sup>153</sup> Abdulla, A. The Impact of Globalisation on Arab Gulf States. In *Globalisation and the Gulf*, ed. John W. Fox, Nada Murtadha Sabbah and Mohammed Al-Mutawa. (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), pp.180-188.

<sup>154</sup> See also: Ahmed, A. *Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalisation*. (Washington: Booking Institution Press, 2007).

hegemony, manipulating the media and using the army to crush weak oppositional movements, and keeping civil society weak and fragmented.

In addition, the establishment of the State of Israel, and successive defeats at the hands of the Jewish state, as well as the growing influence of Saudi Arabia throughout the 1970s, has led to the emergence of Islamic organisations which have become very influential at the community level across the Middle East. In Iran, Egypt, and of course Palestine, they form the strongest oppositions to ruling regimes and have derived legitimacy from what has been called the 'Westoxification' of the Muslim world by the allegedly corrupt practices of the West. However, this does not mean that the presence of these Islamic organisations may hinder moves towards democratisation as there is no religious text in Islam that contradicts democracy.

This chapter also reasserts ways in which Oman shares social, religious and economic factors with other Arab states, and which affect democratic development across the Middle East generally. The next chapter will shed further light on the specific case of Oman and discover how these common factors affect contemporary political processes in the country.

## **3 The Omani Context**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores the broad phenomenon of debate over democratisation in Oman. Specifically, it examines the link between tribalism, religion and the state, and looks at how this has helped to shape contemporary political debate and agenda within the Sultanate. The chapter is divided into nine sections: following this introduction, the second section is devoted to looking at the Omani social fabric and its embedded politics in its history. The third section is devoted to an analysis of the social transformation that has taken place in Oman since 1970: this section is essential to this thesis, as it argues that the demographic changes which have resulted from the implementation of the rentier state model affect, and indeed will continue to affect, the political situation in the present and the future. The fourth section reviews the literature regarding the traditional and contemporary popular political process in Oman: most of the debates and criticism surrounding the political process in Oman are conducted and written by non-Omani scholars probably because Omani people feel that this is a sensitive issue which is better avoided for the time being. The fifth section discusses the Basic Statute of the State, so that the reader becomes familiar with the warranties provided by the constitution in Oman. Section six is devoted to looking at the Council of Oman, which describes the Omani parliamentary system. Section seven is devoted to a synopsis and analysis of the electoral principles and the electoral committees. The importance of this section is that it gives a clear picture regarding the regulations and the organisations established by the government with the intention of making the electoral process fair and successful. The eighth section speaks about the Annual Royal Tour, which is seen as an integral part of Omani political philosophy. This is followed by the conclusion in section nine.

### **3.2 The Omani Tribes: Origin and Politics**

The origin of the Omani Arab tribes can be traced back to the Prophet Ismail, the son of Prophet Abraham<sup>155</sup>. The Arab tribes emerged from his descendents, and subsequently

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<sup>155</sup> Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs. Arab Origin. In: <http://sirah.al-islam.com/Display.asp?f=rwd1014>. Last accessed on 19/7/2010.

divided into two main branches; the *Qahtani* Arabs who resided in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula (also known as the Arabs of the South) and the *Adnani* Arabs who resided in the northern part (known as the Arabs of the North). Both branches (*Qahtani* and *Adnani*) were in conflict throughout history prior to the spread of Islam<sup>156</sup>.

Before the great migration across the Arabian Peninsula, Oman was occupied by the Persians, but after the collapse of the *Ma'rab* dam in Yemen during the second century B.C. *Qahtani* Arab tribes of *Azd* under the leadership of Malik bin Fahm migrated to Oman. Other *Adnani* Arab tribes who descend from *Bani Sama* had also migrated from the northern part of the Peninsula. In order to strengthen his position and guarantee the support of the *Adnani* tribes, Malik bin Fahm sought a marriage with the *Abd Al-Qays* northern tribe. He managed to rule Oman after defeating the Persians. Since this time, the political leadership of the country has remained in the hands of the *Qahtani* tribes, in particular in the hands of those belonging to the *Shanuah* tribal group of *Azd*, such as *Awlad Shams*, *Julanda* and *Yahmed* (*Fajh* and *Kharous*)<sup>157</sup>.

The political system in Oman, from the time of Malik bin Fahm, remained dynastic and continued through the first phases of Islam until the end of the Umayyad Dynasty when the Islamic Imamate emerged for the first time in Oman's political history. For the sake of clarification, the tribal conflict which in some ways shapes the contemporary political process in Oman is summarised in terms of Oman's socio-political history in Figure 3-1 below. The table shows the political history of Oman since the rise of Islam up to the present day; it concentrates on the tribes which ruled the country at various times, the different types of political systems, and the tribal conflicts which occurred between the 'classical' enemies (the *Qahtani* and *Adnani* tribal groups). These conflicts have led to important historical turning points marked by disastrous tribal wars.

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<sup>156</sup> Carter, J. R. L. *Tribes in Oman*. (London: Peninsular Publishing, 1982), pp. 11-16.

<sup>157</sup> For more details, see figure 4 in Wilkinson, J.C. *The Imamate Tradition of Oman*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 74.



Islamic world's ruling system	Oman Ruling System			
	Ruling Tribe	Type of Rule	Details	Comments
Prophet & First Four Caliphs' Time	<i>Qahtani (Yahmad)</i>	Dynastic	<i>Julanda</i> State	
<b>Historic Turning Point: The first time for the Imamate to occur in Oman</b>				
Umayyad Dynasty (661-750)	<i>Qahtani (Yahmad)</i>	Dynastic	<i>Julanda</i> State	Oman occupied by Umayyad for 40 years
Abbasids Dynasty (750-1258)	<i>Qahtani (Yahmad)</i>	Imamate	First Imamate of <i>Julanda bin Masoud</i> (751-753)	Ended by Abbasids' Occupation
	<i>Qahtani (Yahmad)</i>	Imamate	Second Imamate State (797-900)	Ended by Abbasids' Occupation after tribal war
<b>Historic Turning Point: The first <i>Qahtani (Yamani) / Adnani (Nizari)</i> War led to foreign intervention then occupation</b>				
Ottoman Empire (1289-1923)	<i>Qahtani (Yahmad)</i>	Dynastic	<i>Nabahina</i> State (1154-1624)	a) Tyrannical rule b) Local Imams occurred simultaneously c) Portuguese during the 16th century
	<i>Qahtani (Yahmad)</i>	Imamate then Dynastic	<i>Ya'ariba</i> State (1624-1749)	a) Elected Imams at the beginning then dynastic towards the end b) Ended by Persian occupation after tribal war
	<b>Historic Turning Point: The second <i>Qahtani (Hinawi) / Adnani (Ghafri)</i> War led to foreign intervention then occupation</b>			
Multi-State System	<i>Qahtani</i>	Imamate then Dynastic	<i>Al-Busaidi</i> State (1753 onward)	a) Elected Imams at the beginning then dynastic towards the end b) Witnessed emergence of <i>Yahmad</i> Imamate in the Interior (1913-1954)

**Figure 3-1: The socio-political history of Oman since the advent of Islam**

As is clear in Figure 3-1, the *Julanda* tribe comes from the *Qahtani* tribal group which descends from *Awlad Shams* of the *Shanuah Qahtani* branch which had ruled

Oman at the time of the Prophet and his four successors. When the Prophet sent his messenger Amr bin Al-A'as to convince the Omanis to join the new religion (Islam), Oman was ruled by Jayfar and Abd (the two sons of Julanda and the Kings of Oman at this time). After their conversion to Islam, the Prophet preserved their ruling system. This was a sign (as interpreted later on by religious respondents) that Islam condoned dynastic regimes (for more details see section 5.3, below). This situation of dynastic rule continued until the time of the Umayyad when they managed to conquer Oman after defeating its King. However, the Omanis who have adopted the mores of the *Ibadi* sect since the time of the fourth Caliph Ali bin Abi-Talib managed for the first time in the Islamic history to establish the Islamic Imamate in 750 A.D. This is the same year which witnessed the end of the Umayyad dynasty.

What is striking here is that the choice of the Imam was affected by the tribal influence of the *Qahtani* tribal group who were reluctant to stick purely to the *Ibadi* notion of selecting the Imam from among the best competitors. The Omani religious scholars decided to select Julanda bin Masoud as the first Imam. He descends from the last ruling family of *Julanda* which in turn descends from the *Shanuah Qahtani* branch. Therefore, even the first Imamate was a product of the influence of tribal allegiances. However, according to Al-Hajri, 'Even religious scholars had few qualms concerning the monopoly of power exercised by one tribal group so long as peace, security and good governance could be maintained'<sup>158</sup>. And as is explained in Chapter 5, *Ibadi* jurists do not look at the *Shura* alone but they consider other factors that lead to the stability of the community.

The Second Imamate witnessed a sort of implicit socio-political contract between the *Qahtani* and *Adnani* tribal blocks, in which the Imams came from the *Qahtani* blocks, particularly that of the *Yahmad* who reside in the *Ghadaf (Rustaq)* Area on the other side of *Jebel Akhdar* (the green mountain) in the Interior. But the Imam was to be selected by the *Ulama* (scholars) of the *Adnani* block, particularly those belonging to the *Bani Sama*, the major *Nizari* tribe residing mainly in the *Nizwa* area of the Interior. These *Ulama* stipulated that the Imamate governance centre had to be in *Nizwa*, which is surrounded by *Adnani* tribes, in order to make sure that there were no shortcomings

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<sup>158</sup> Al-Hajri, M. B. *Oman: The Shura in the Political History of the Imamate Rule*. (Muscat: Al-nahdha Press, 2002), p. 84. Also see: Ruete, R. S. *Sultanate Oman Khilaf Hokm Al-Sayyid Said bin Sultan (1791-1856)*. (Basra: Arabian Gulf Studies Publications, 1983), p. 221.

when it came to protecting the Imamate rule from suffering at the hand of any malpractices<sup>159</sup>.

Nevertheless, although the Imamate system is controlled by the tribal system, and indeed Imams descend from one tribal block (the *Qahtani*) and its divisions, the system itself is not hereditary and Imams are not necessarily genealogically related<sup>160</sup>. This arrangement between the two tribal blocks was seen by jurists as important to keep the stability and security of the state, and was not seen as a flaw to the practice of the *Shura* (discussed in Chapter 5). It seems that this implicit arrangement that occurred towards the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century continues until the present time. Even the Imamate rule that occurred in 1913 had chosen both Imams from the same *Shanuah* group of the *Qahtani* tribal bloc although *Adnani* leaders such as Sulaiman bin Himyar Al-Nabhani had attended the pledge.

The choice of *Nizwa* to be the governance centre had also been selected because it offers the only possible geographical access at that time to the main Omani tribal regions. The map in Figure 3-2 below shows the location of the Imamate governance centre and the other regions that are separated by the huge *Jebel Akhdar* and the rest of the Western *Hajar* Mountains, and represents the political forces that were available during the first and second Imamate time. It clarifies why *Nizwa* had been selected to be the home for the Imamate as it provides good communications access through the Valleys cutting through the huge *Hajar* Mountains and also because it is the centre of *Bani Sama* (the *Adnani* tribal block) that supervise the performance of the *Qahtani* Imams from the *Ghadaf* (*Rustaq* Area)<sup>161</sup>.

The harmonious relationship between the *Qahtani* and *Adnani* tribal blocks did not last for long. The deposition of Imam Al-Salt bin Malik (*Yamani-Qahtani*) in 892 AD, which was exercised by his Supreme Judge Mosa bin Musa (*Nizari-Adnani*), led to

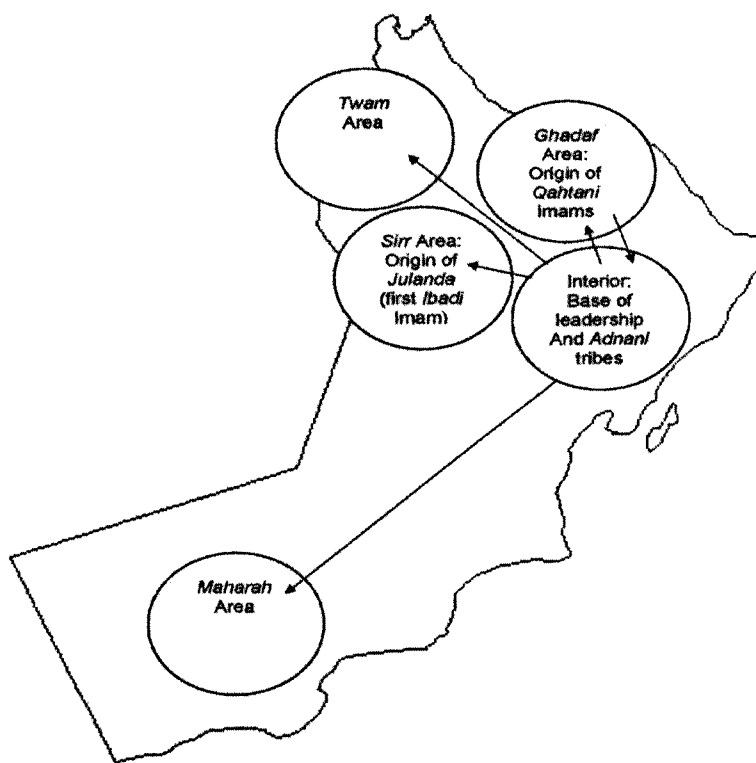
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<sup>159</sup> Rabi, U. *The Emergence of States in a Tribal Society*. (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2007), p. 24.

<sup>160</sup> Wilkinson. J C. P. 9.

<sup>161</sup> The plain mapped has been taken from the following web site: <http://www.almdares.net/vz/showthread.php?t=19371>, last accessed on 8/4/2010. But the rest of the work on it has been done by me.

the emergence of what became known as the *Nizwani* and *Rustaqi* schools of thought<sup>162</sup>. The former supported the deposition of the Imam, claiming that he was incapable of ruling the country due to his old age. The latter, however, believed that although the Imam was old he still possessed his physical and mental capabilities to a sufficient degree. They also believed that Mosa bin Mosa's pledge of allegiance to the new Imam Rashid bin Al-Nadhar was not conducted properly, as he did not liaise with the other scholars of that time, and the *Ibadi* sect requires the agreement of more than two scholars for a pledge to be legitimate. This incident created some insurgencies on the part of the followers of the deposed Imam, against the new Imam and his Supreme Judge Mosa bin Mosa. The incident led after five years to the deposition of Imam Rashid bin Al-Nadhar.



**Figure 3-2: Map of Oman**

A new Imam, Azzan bin Tamim, had been selected and he quickly got rid of the Supreme Judge Mosa bin Mosa who consequently went to his home village in *Nizar Fort* in the *Izki* area and began to call for insurgencies against Imam Azzan. The Imam, in order to maintain order in the country, sent armed forces to *Izki* and Mosa bin Mosa was killed with many of the *Nizari/Adnani* people. The minority, who managed successfully to flee

<sup>162</sup> Wilkinson. J. C. *The Imamate Tradition of Oman*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 166-168.

the massacre, sought help from the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mu'atadid, who is of *Adnani* origin. They urged him to protect the *Adnani* tribes from the *Qahtanis* and he responded by sending a considerable troop to Oman, who engaged with the Imam's forces. Imam Azzan was killed and his head carried to the Caliph in Baghdad. This incident marked the end of the second Imamate State, and the end of the *Qahtani/Adnani* implicit socio-political contract. It also signified the beginning of a long tribal conflict which lasted for around five centuries and marked a turning point in Omani political history<sup>163</sup>. This conflict was known as the *Nizari-Yemeni* conflict, though this term is in danger of diminishing the importance of the conflict, which was in fact a substantial and sustained conflict between the *Qahtani* and *Adnani* tribal blocks.

The *Yahmad* tribal group of the *Shanuah* branch of the *Qahtani* block adopted the belief, after this conflict, that an Imamate rule which fights against a centralisation of power in rule is not a valid system in tribal society, because tribalism fights against any centralisation of power for its own interests. Thus they sought to change the type of rule back to that of a monarchy. They initiated, in 1154, the *Nabahina* State, which lasted for about five centuries. Towards the end of the *Nabahina* State, the coastal areas of Oman were occupied by the Portuguese. The *Ya'ariba*, which is another family from the same *Yahmad* tribe which descended from the *Shanuah Qahtani* tribal block, took over and expelled the Portuguese from the country and the nearby territories. The *Ya'ariba* war leader, Nassir bin Murshid, had been given the pledge of allegiance by the *Ulama* at that time to initiate a new Imamate state. Towards the end of the *Ya'ariba* state the members of the ruling family fought among themselves for the Imamate crown and Sheikh Mohammed bin Nasser Al-Ghafri (*Adnani*) abrogated to himself the status and title of Imam with a support from *Nizwa's* tribes. He was opposed by Sheikh Khalaf bin Mubarak Al-Hinai (*Qahtani*), and this opposition led to another tribal war known as the *Ghafri-Hinawi* tribal war, though this was a repetition of the classical *Qahtani-Adnani* tribal war albeit in a seemingly different form<sup>164</sup>. This situation marked another historical turning point in Omani political history and led to the Persian foreign invasion<sup>165</sup>.

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<sup>163</sup> Al-Salmi, A. H. *Tuhfat Al-A'ayan Bi Sirat Ahl Oman*. (Muscat: Al-Nahdha Press, 1997), pp.194-267.

<sup>164</sup> Aashur, S. A. *Tareekh Ahl Oman*. (Muscat: Al-Sharqiyah Printer, 2005), pp. 157-177.

<sup>165</sup> Rabi, U. *The Emergence of States in a Tribal Society*. (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2007), p. 25.

Ahmed bin Said Al-Busaidi (*Qahtani*), the founder of the current ruling family, fought against the Persians and rescued the country from the tribal wars and from foreign occupation. The *Ulama* of his time agreed to pledge allegiance to him and he became an Imam in 1753 AD. The situation changed later on when his descendents called themselves *Sayyids*, then Sultans. This rule, though, continued until the beginning of the twentieth century when the *Ibadi* religious and tribal leaders decided to initiate a new Imamate in the interior. In 1913, Salim bin Rashid Al-Kharousi (*Yahmad/Shanuah/Qahtani*) was selected as an Imam, and upon his assassination Mohammed bin Abdullah Al-Khalili (*Yahmad/Shanuah/Qahtani*) was chosen as the new Imam. The Imamate continued to rule the interior up until the Imam's death in 1954, whilst the coastal areas were ruled by the Sultans.

As for the sub-divisions of the tribal system in Oman, each major tribe resided in a particular part of the country, and that part became essentially a sovereign territory for the tribe. The history of Oman at this point witnessed many tribal wars over this issue of territorial sovereignty, each tribe trying to extend its territory at the expense of others. The main reason behind this was to try and gain two important things; the geographical territory, and of course more followers, which in turn would improve the wealth of the tribal leadership and the level of its political authority. Generally speaking, throughout its history Oman can be divided into three main economic sectors: the interior, dependent on agriculture; the coast, dependent on sea trade and fisheries; and the desert, dependent on grazing. All these sectors are poor and this has led to tribal struggle aimed at securing economic security for the tribal rulers and subjects. The amount of wealth generated marked the strengths and weaknesses of the respective tribes and their tribal alliances, locally known as *Shaff*. The tribal hierarchy itself is divided into four ranks, although this depends on the strength of the tribe. It starts with *Rasheed*, then *Sheikh*, *Tamima* and finally *Ameer*. The *Rasheed* may rule a small tribe and the *Sheikh* a bigger tribe. The *Tamima* normally rules more than one tribe under the law of *Shaff* and dominates a big territory. The *Ameer*, by contrast, can dominate part or even the whole state<sup>166</sup>.

Working in the context of this tribal hierarchy, the tribes nowadays reside in the different *Wilayat* (sing. *Wilayah*, which means a district)<sup>167</sup>. However, this geographic

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<sup>166</sup> Wilkinson J. C. 1987, pp. 93-95. See also Rabi. U. 2007, pp. 9-16.

<sup>167</sup> See map 6 in Wilkinson. J. C. *The Imamate Tradition of Oman*. (Cambridge,

positionality should not be allowed to obscure the fact that tribalism in Oman depends initially and crucially on blood ties and then on the political coalitions and tribal Alliances (*Shaff*) that tribes are able to command. As Rabi puts it:

*In Oman, any presentation of the tribe as a 'descent' group, a broad group of kinsmen organised on the basis of blood ties and genealogical descent, is too simplistic; an in-depth examination of the Omani arena illustrates patently that this is not the case. The tribes in Oman (as in other regions of the Arabian Peninsula) exhibit not only various modes of existence, they also constitute diverse descent groups organised in a broader, multi-tribal political structure. The term "community group", that is, an assortment of various descent groups that maintain connections among themselves on the basis of patronage relationships, political alliances and economic cooperation, is useful in discussing the tribal fabric of Oman<sup>168</sup>.*

This form of 'tribal fabric' in Oman is the one that still serves to affect some of the national Omani policies, including the *Shura* Council's elections. It is predicted that it will influence further steps in the political process, such as in the election of the *Shura* Council's Chairman. In addition to tribalism, some scholars, such as Valeri, talk about modern fanaticisms (*Asabiyyat*) in Oman today. These result from the origin of each group. He points to the competition, indeed the hatred, which can be seen occurring between the native Omanis, the *Banyan* and *Lawatiya* of Indian origin, the *Baluchis* who came from the Baluchistan Territory in Pakistan, the *Zanzibaris* who migrated recently from East Africa, and the *Dhofari* Omanis<sup>169</sup>.

Three important summary insights emerge from the discussion in this section:

- (1) The *Ibadi* scholars, in their aim to restore security and order in the country, did not mind leaving power in the hands of a single tribal grouping or even in those of a single tribe. This is why Omani political history has witnessed different political systems.
- (2) All ruling systems throughout Omani political history were under the *Qahtani* block, and since the beginning of the second Imamate State in 797 AD, the political authority has remained largely in the hands of the *Yahmad/Shanuah* group belonging to the same *Qahtani* block. The *Adnani*

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Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 391.

<sup>168</sup> Rabi, U. *The Emergence of States in a Tribal Society*. (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2007), p. 9.

<sup>169</sup> Valeri, M. *Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State*. (London: C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, 2009), pp.241-250. Also see: Peterson, J. E. Oman's Diverse Society: Northern Oman. *Middle East Journal*. Vol. 58. No. 1. 2004.

block, by contrast, has produced the most supreme religious scholars who have worked in an expediency council which is locally known as *Majlis Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd*.

(3) The Imamate recurrently emerges as a 'national ideology' following each setback in the political situation of the country. It served each time to rescue the country from tribal wars, tyrannical ruling systems and foreign invasion<sup>170</sup>.

What can also be discerned is that although the Imamate system fights against a centralisation of power, which suits the tribal leaders' desires, Omani history did not witness at any point a genuine sort of security and prosperity, except during those rules which had created strong armed forces, in other words during those systems that centralised power. The reign of Imam Al-Muhana bin Gayfar of the second Imamate State, the reign of the first part of the *Ya'ariba* State, and Sultan Said bin Sultan's time, represent good examples of this. This may be because the maintenance of order provided a chance for the leadership to focus on economic issues. This helped to improve the living standards and pulled the rug from underneath tribal leaders. In other words, in tribal societies where tribes fight against the centralisation of power so as to serve their own interests, strong but not tyrannical ruling systems are required to maintain security and order; and thus, tribalism's anti-centralisation predisposition hinders the political process in Oman because it prioritises the tribal interest above all others - including that of the nation.

### **3.3 Social Transformation in Oman since 1970**

Oman's population has increased from being less than one million in 1970 to being at around 3.2 million in 2008. A majority of the population lives in the governorate of *Muscat* (the capital area), and on the *Batinah* coastal plain region, which is located northwest of the capital. The southern governorate of *Dhofar* is home to around 200,000, and around 30,000 live in the remote *Musandam* peninsula on the Strait of *Hormuz*. Around 550,000 expatriates live in Oman; most of them guest workers from South Asia, Egypt, Jordan and the Philippines. According to *Oman Economic Studies*<sup>171</sup> the age structure shows that those aged between 0-14 years make up 41% of the

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<sup>170</sup> Wilkinson. J. C. *The Imamate Tradition of Oman*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 4.

<sup>171</sup> See *Oman Economic Studies: The Cultural and Demographic Risks in Oman*, 2000.



population (male 508,681; female 489,453), those aged between 15-64 years make up 57% (male 856,062; female 535,123), and those aged 65 years and over make up just 2% (male 30,083; female 27,243). The population growth rate is currently at 3.45%. The birth rate is 37.98 births per every 1,000 of the population. The death rate is 4.29 deaths per 1,000 of the population. The sex ratio at birth is 1.05 male(s)/female, under 15 years it is 1.04 male(s)/female, 15-64 years it is 1.6 male(s)/female, 65 years and over it is 1.1 male(s)/female. In the total population it is 1.33 male(s)/female. The infant mortality rate is 24.71 deaths/1,000 live births, and according to UN surveys<sup>172</sup> the under-five mortality rate went even further down to 12 per 1000 births in 2003. Life expectancy at birth for the total population is 71.3 years (male: 69.31 years; female: 73.39 years). The total fertility rate is 6.11 children born/woman<sup>173</sup>.

Islam is the state religion, as indeed affirmed by the 1996 Basic Statute of the State (BSS). The 1996 BSS stipulates that *Shari'a* is the basis of the legislation and it preserves the freedom to practise religious rites, in accordance with tradition, provided that such freedom does not breach public order. Discrimination against individuals on the basis of religion or sect is prohibited. Most citizens are *Ibadi* and the *Ibadis* form around 75% of the population, again according to the Oman Economic Report<sup>174</sup>. The majority are *Sunni* Muslims, but there is also a minority of *Shi'a* Muslims. Non-Muslims are free to worship at churches and temples built upon land donated by the Sultan. There are many Christian denominations, which utilize two plots of donated land in the capital area, and two Roman Catholic and two Protestant churches have been built. Hindu temples also exist on government-provided land. Land has been made available to Catholic and Protestant missions in *Sohar* and *Salalah*. Finally, Arabic is the official language, whilst English, Baluchi, Urdu, and several other Indian dialects and languages, are widely spoken.

Since 1970, the government has given especially high priority to education. This prioritisation has been designed to develop skilled domestic work force, which the government considers to be a vital factor in the country's prospective economic and social progress. In 1986, Oman's first university, Sultan Qaboos University, opened.

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<sup>172</sup> See the United Nations' Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the ESCWA Region 2005-2006, p.39.

<sup>173</sup> See also Valeri, M. 2009, pp.183-224.

<sup>174</sup> *Oman Economic Studies: The Cultural and Demographic Risks in Oman*, 2000.

Other post-secondary institutions include technical colleges, a banking college, teacher training colleges and a health sciences institute. As many as 200 scholarships are awarded each year for study abroad. The functional literacy rate is currently 80%<sup>175</sup>. There are now 21 private universities and college - three in *Nizwa*, *Sohar*, and *Dhofar* as well as two under construction.

Since the 1970s the Omani government has worked hard to promote the rights of women. In 1970 there were no schools for girls in Oman and 85 percent of the female population was illiterate. According to the Oman Economic Studies, just over three decades later the literacy rate among females had significantly improved to approximately 73 percent. There has also been a marked increase in the number of females pursuing formal education. In fact, over 60 percent of girls in recent years were enrolled into primary, secondary and tertiary schools and institutions. In the 1997-98 school year, female students constituted approximately 50 percent of the total number of students attending state schools. Women constitute roughly half of the 5,000 students at Sultan Qaboos University. In November 2009, 600 women and 524 men received bachelor degrees.

Increased levels of female education have also translated into a greater proportional representation of women in the work force. They now make up approximately 33 percent of all civil servants. Moreover, educated women in Oman now occupy many middle- and upper-level positions in all sectors of society. In both the public and the private sectors, women are entitled to maternity leave and equal pay for equal work. They now have the right to vote and stand for election without restrictions, and have gained equal opportunities in many of the country's economic sectors. The 2003 parliamentary elections were the first in which women were allowed to participate without restriction. Whilst as few as 5,000 women were registered to vote in the 2000 election, around 95,000 were registered in 2003<sup>176</sup>.

Since the early 1970s, Oman's economy has depended mainly on oil revenues. Its economy has repeatedly fluctuated due to the rise and fall in oil prices and/or in oil

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<sup>175</sup> United Nations' Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the ESCWA Region 2005-2006, P.39.

<sup>176</sup> See Oman Country Review: Social Overview, (2008) pp. 99-120.

production rates. During the oil price drops between 1980 and 1986, Oman managed to survive by increasing its oil production rate from 283 million barrels a day to 498 million barrels a day<sup>177</sup>. The same positive production pattern occurred during the end of the 1990s, when Oman managed to increase its production rate from around 600,000 barrels to 900,000 barrels a day. Since 2004 the oil production rate has dropped dramatically from nearly one million barrels a day to 700,000 barrels. This is due to the maturity of the major oil fields. A large decline in Oman's oil output could occur at any time, given the downturn in production of recent years. Given that the annual deficit during the 1980-2001 period reached nearly one billion US dollars in some years<sup>178</sup>; the rise in oil prices since 2006 effectively rescued Oman from total economic turmoil.

Liquid gas industries, and the other non-oil industries - such as tourism, ports, industrial areas, privatised electricity, telecommunications, water, the application of indirect taxation on municipal services, health and housing, as well as foreign investment - have partly compensated for the fall in oil production rates over the last few years<sup>179</sup>. The country's proven natural gas reserves stood at 24.24 trillion cubic feet in 2004. The production of natural gas increased by 15% to 1.1 trillion cubic feet in 2006 and the value added by the gas sector grew by 16% in nominal terms. Exports of liquefied natural gas (LNG) surged ahead by 28% to 9.1 million tons in 2006. Deficits of a few hundred million Omani Riyals annually – as mentioned above - have been recorded, but recent years have seen the presence of good surpluses. The Omani government is using those surpluses to improve the efficiency of the old oil fields and to explore new oil fields, as well as using them to prepare the infrastructure for the post-oil era by constructing five airports and by developing a more diverse petrochemical industry. The use of enhanced recovery techniques is expected to arrest the oil production rate fall by 2010. In its dedication to economic diversification, the government also currently pays an increased attention to the tourism sector<sup>180</sup>: it has set an ambitious plan to increase the number of airports, and to make an enhanced use of the coastline areas by constructing more hotels.

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<sup>177</sup> See the Statistical Year Book. (Muscat: Information and Publication Centre in the Ministry of National Economy, 2007), p. 158.

<sup>178</sup> Statistical Year Book. (Muscat: Information and Publication Centre in the Ministry of National Economy, 2007), p. 290-291.

<sup>179</sup> Valeri, M. *Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State*. (London: C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, 2009), pp.213-222.

<sup>180</sup> See *Oman Economic Studies: The Economics of the Latent Demand*. (2000), pp. 22-25.

The real GDP growth has stayed at around 6% since 2006 and it went up in 2007 and 2008 before dropping slightly again. The Nominal Per Capita GDP (U.S. dollars) rose from \$12,012 in 2005 to \$16,930 in 2010. It is expected to reach \$20,488 in 2011. Oman has faced higher international prices for some non-oil commodities such as food items, along with rising import costs due to the weakening of the U.S. dollar as against other major currencies. As a result, inflation is expected to pick up in 2008, averaging about 7.6%, compared with an estimated 5.8% in 2007. A good amount of the profits which are being accrued from the rent of oil have been used to offset increased salary costs<sup>181</sup>.

The recent 'monetary easing' in the United States has increased Oman's difficulties in terms of containing price pressures. With the U.S. Federal Reserve lowering interest rates by 100 base points since September 2007, interest rates in Oman followed a similar adjustment pattern, which triggered a large influx of liquidity and ultimately resulted in higher prices for various types of assets. The asset price inflation has become an increasing concern for Oman, especially with regard to its stock market and real estate. Efforts to dampen liquidity growth have been met with only limited success and this will remain a challenge at least in the near future. The Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose by 3.2% in 2006 and has continued its upward trend during 2007, increasing by 5.3% from the 2006 levels. The heavily weighted food and housing categories, which represent more than 50% of the basket of goods and services, rose by 10.2% and 6.7% respectively<sup>182</sup>.

The Omani currency (Riyal), which has been pegged to the Dollar at 0.385 Riyals per U.S. Dollar since 1986, has come under pressure due to the recent weakness of the U.S. Dollar as against other major currencies. With the Dollar's depreciation, the Riyal (and other Gulf currencies fixed to the Dollar also) has fallen, relative to other currencies such as the Euro and the Great Britain Pound. This has resulted in rising import costs. Several Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries already face high inflation rates, stemming from the surge in growth and investment which has occurred over recent years. Expatriate workers have also witnessed the value of the remittances they send home fall. This is, again, due to the weakness of the US Dollar. This may lead Oman to rethink its policy in terms of pegging the Riyal to the Dollar. The recent credit crisis, which began in

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<sup>181</sup> Plamondon, B. *Oman Country Monitor*. (Jan. 2008), pp. 1-9.

<sup>182</sup> See also *Oman Country Review: The Economic Overview*. (2008), pp. 59-84.

October 2008, has affected the oil prices and the value of the different currencies. The crisis may negatively affect the Omani economy by lowering the oil prices whilst oil production rate in Oman is still low. It may, however, have a positive effect in so far as the value of the Omani Riyal, pegged to the US Dollar, may be strengthened, and thus the inflation rate in the country may thereby drop to its previous levels. In all cases, the unrest in the economic situation has a direct influence on the political process in Oman.

Clearly, the Omani economy is still heavily dependent on the oil revenues. And whilst the government's diversification policies are promising, they need time in order to be successful. Social indicators show much progress in the fertility and birth rates, which push up the population, whilst the economic indicators show less progress. It is not only the national revenues that need to be boosted, however, but the employment sectors need also to be widened so as to accommodate unemployed citizens in the future.

Many scholars regard the modernisation<sup>183</sup> and social transformation processes taking place in oil producing states as a direct result of the windfall of oil revenues. This is to some extent questionable, because there are oil producing states who have arguably misused oil revenues, such as Libya. There is no doubt that oil revenues have played a very significant role in improving the living standards of the citizenry in these states. This includes Oman, but this fact does not negate the notion that there is a certain political will standing behind the socio-political process. In the case of Oman, as was explained in the previous section, the presence of tribalism and its fight against the centralisation of power has required the government to undertake a certain type of strategy in order to guarantee the success of the policy of centralisation of power (during the 1970s in particular).

Oil revenues, which were not massive during the 1970s, had been used to finance the war against the rebellions in the *Dhofar* region, to establish a modern infrastructure and to improve the living standards of people via the public sector employment policy which became known as the 'implicit social contract'. This policy, on the one hand, helped to quell the rebellions and on the other hand helped to acquire the national loyalty of essentially tribal people. In this process of building national identity, the

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<sup>183</sup> For the political development and the challenge of modernisation see: Bill, J. A. & Springborg, R. *Politics in the Middle East*. (New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1994).

Sultanate followed a policy of containment – in contrast to other states of the Middle East - wherein the leaders of the opposition in *Dhofar* and the master tribal leaders (*Tamima*) were given a role in building modern Oman and were explicitly included in the process.

This containment policy, in addition to the implicit social contract and the improvement of the educational levels of the people, has helped to consolidate the national identity and reduced (to some extent) the influences of tribal fanaticism<sup>184</sup>. Urbanisation has also played a part, in the sense that territories which were under the control of major tribes were becoming urbanised and were increasingly inhabited by people belonging to different, alien tribes. In other words, the tribes have lost two important pillars and this loss has benefited the cultivation of a national identity: firstly, the territory itself, and secondly to some extent the loyalty of the people. However allegiance to the *Qahtani/Adnani* tribal blocks has not been removed and competition between the followers of the two tribal blocks is still implicitly and latently present in Omani politics and society. (It should be noted that the centralisation of power and the enforcement of the state of law forced this competition to remain implicit and latent, as the law forbade the inciting of tribal fanaticism).

Once the government had managed to control the situation in this manner, and Higher Education had started to produce a sufficient number of graduates, the policy concerning the centralisation of power started to change and the government adopted some forms of political participation. It has been observed that in the urbanised areas the levels of political participation were higher than in the rural areas. Urbanised areas are inhabited by a more cosmopolitan mixture of people from different regions and different tribes; people here are more educated and concomitantly urbanised, and less affected by the influence of tribal fanaticism. In this sense, women were able to reach the *Shura* Council in the governance of Muscat, but not in the other areas up until now.

In addition to greater improvements in education and the process of urbanisation, which are supported through an application of state law and the culture of national

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<sup>184</sup> Valeri, M. Liberalisation from Above: Political Reforms and Sultanism in Oman. In *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf*, ed Khalaf, A. And Giacomo Luciani. (Dubai: Gulf Research Centre, 2006). Pp. 189-190.

identity, globalisation has played a significant part in the improvement of the political participation process. Economically, the Sultanate's joining of the WTO and the FTA required the government to enact particular legislation, such as that which enforced labour rights and introduced labour unions which undoubtedly improved the political environment in terms of levels of participation. Culturally, globalisation, through the means of telecommunication, has enlightened Omani citizenry in terms of their awareness of their political rights; but importantly it has provided them, in addition, with the techniques to acquire those rights. This, in turn, has obliged the government to accelerate the political process in proportion to the social transformations taking place in the country.

In the light of this discussion, the next section draws on a (largely non-native) literature which examines traditional and contemporary political processes in Oman.

### **3.4 Traditional and Contemporary Political Processes in Oman**

In this section, the discourses which are critically examined are dominated by mainly non-Omani scholars. Whilst one may expect to see the political opinions of the different groups in the Sultanate in the daily newspapers or in various publications, in fact, none of this appears in Oman: publications made by the religious scholars are typically wary of trespassing the teachings of Islam, and the *Ulama* do not write about politics at all. The only thing of this sort that can be witnessed is a vague criticism of some essentially administrative issues in the media, or the responses of the younger generation (who are disguised by nicknames in websites) to particular socio-political issues. A few of them have recently begun to talk more openly on the foreign TV satellite channels, offering critiques of certain issues related to the political situation in the country. This general absence of social and political critique can be explained in different ways: it can be seen as reflecting a situation where Omani citizens are satisfied with the current political culture; or it could be assumed that they feel that there is a 'red line' which prohibits the discussion of sensitive issues; or it might more cynically be assumed that Omanis are simply apathetic and that they do not care about politics as long as the implicit social contract between the rentier state and citizens works profitably for them.

Since 1970 Oman has witnessed dramatic changes due to the discovery of oil and Sultan Qaboos's ascendance to the throne. Sultan Qaboos has benefited massively from the oil revenues and has undoubtedly managed to establish a 'modern' country with a unique political philosophy which combines both tradition and modernity. He embarked on this project by first bringing Omani citizens from different origins, sects and ideologies together, and convincing them to build a modern state. His Majesty also initiated what became known as the Annual Royal Tour, in which HM and most of the government ministers travel from the capital area to the different Omani districts. (Further details about the Annual Royal Tour are given below). The Sultan also began his rule by establishing different councils in order to allow for an extension of political participation. All of this is seen as a real practical articulation of the philosophy of *Shura*<sup>185</sup>.

As to the precedent of tradition, the conventional Omani political system (of Imamate Rule) started in the eighth century and developed over one thousand years. It is regarded as one of the oldest participatory systems in the Arab world, and is considered to be the legitimate successor of the early Islamic leadership patterns which can be witnessed historically immediately after the death of the Prophet Mohammed, wherein a group of the most respected people met and decided to choose Abu-Bakr to be the *Khalifat* (ruler). They conveyed this to the people, who supported the decision and offered allegiance (*bayá*). The Omani Imamate is predicated on three essential principles:

- The principle of authority derived from the sub-principles of consensus (*Ijmaá*), contract (*Aqd*) and the free election of the Imam;
- The principle of 'homeland', which states that for *Shura* to be practised a territory is needed; this is why the concept was formulated, embedded and realised in Omanis' culture at a very early stage;
- The principle of autonomy and sovereignty; this explains why Oman remained independent throughout the majority of her history, and why Oman did not become a composite part of the various wider Islamic dynasties.

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<sup>185</sup> See: Hamoudi, H. H. *Oman: Prosperity Today, The State and Development*. (London: De-Luxe Printers Limited, 2006).



These three principles underpinned the practice of 'Islamic political participatory system' (*Shura*) for twelve centuries<sup>186</sup>.

Within this jurisdiction, the quite particular Omani *Shura* is anchored on seven principles:

- (1) The consensus and homage to Imams;
- (2) The free election of Imams;
- (3) The written statutes;
- (4) The establishments of the Imamate (i.e. councils);
- (5) The sovereignty of law and equality;
- (6) The law of *Zakat* (alms or tax);
- (7) The disbandment of the army in peacetime.

The *Ibadi* statute was written during the seventh century and the Imamate councils were formed at the same time. These were composed of the scholars' council and the elites' council. The Imamate rule relied on the Omani tribal 'social fabric', which formed the basis of the political establishment of *Shura*; tribalism was thus also responsible for developing *mores* (custom constitution) regarding daily affairs, which has led to the view that – at least in the case of Oman - tribalism should not necessarily hinder democratisation processes but tribal fanaticism certainly does<sup>187</sup>.

The *Shiá* believe that the Imam should come from the same family as the Prophet and that the office of Imam is divine and cannot be subject to elections, while the *Sunni* believe that the successor to the Messenger should be from the same tribe (*Quraish*) but not by necessity or law from the family of the Prophet. *Ibadism*, by contrast, posits that the office of Imam is not divine but temporal and it therefore does not recognise a hereditary system as legitimate. *Ibadis* also believe that the Imam does not necessarily have to come from the same tribe or family as the Prophet, but can be any Muslim so long as people elect him as Imam through the process of *Shura*<sup>188</sup>.

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<sup>186</sup> Ghubash, H. *Oman the Islamic Democracy: Imamate Culture and the Modern Political History*. (Beirut: Dar al-Jadeed Company, 1997).

<sup>187</sup> Ghubash, H. 1996. Pp. 21-22.

<sup>188</sup> Ghubash, H. *Oman – The Islamic Democratic Tradition*. (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 31-32.

Oman is the only Arab State which is ruled by the *Ibadi* form of Islam (i.e. not *Sunni* or *Shi'a*). It is known for being a conservative sect but it is also tolerant towards others including non-Muslims. It should also be noted, especially in the contemporary era, that *Ibadism* has historically been moderate as far as war is concerned, and has been opposed to violence. Since the advent of Islam, Oman has embraced *Ibadism* and accordingly the relationship between the State and the official religion has been close, if not always harmonious.

Growing ties in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries between the Sultanate and Great Britain created tensions between the Imams and the Sultan. This conflict continued from the 1850s through to the 1950s, with the Imamate controlling the interior, particularly the surrounding area of *Jebel Akhdar*, from 1913 to 1954, and the Sultanate controlling the coastal areas supported by the British<sup>189</sup>. However, since Sultan Qaboos came into power in 1970, the religious institutions have in the main supported the government. This importantly suggests that they do not reject a combination of traditional *Shura* and the modern participatory process. People, including supporters of the Imamate, work together in the current *Shura* process, which implies that a reconciliation now defines the relationship between the Sultanate and the Imamate. It could be argued that acceptance of the Sultanate is ultimately a reflection of where real power, including a monopoly over the use of force, now resides - namely, with the state. Even so, the fact that the hinterland tribes of Oman now participate in the political process, even though this is not obligatory, suggests that a broad acceptance of 'Shura' has become a central feature of state legitimacy across Oman. As for the contemporary *Shura* process, that started in the 1970s, Cecil observes that:

*One hears a lot these days about promoting the spread of democratic institutions in the Arab World. In evaluating these efforts some observers seem to imply that the standard by which they should be judged is the degree to which practices or institutions resemble the American or other Western Models. A look at more than three decades of evolution in the political institutions of Oman suggests that the steady growth of participatory government, guided by a farsighted leader, may offer a solidly grounded foundation for establishing the institutions, practices and attitudes needed for representative government, with little if any reference to Western models*<sup>190</sup>.

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<sup>189</sup> Katz, M. N. 2007, p. 6.

<sup>190</sup> Cecil, C. O. "Oman's Progress Towards Participatory Government." *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XIII, No. 1, 2006, p. 60.

By comparison with other Gulf States, Oman has a distinctive culture. It has gained its difference 'from the historical continuity of the nation State', as well as from its social traditions and its cultural heritage. It has preserved its historical buildings and people still wear their national dress on all occasions. The conservation of culture and heritage is reflected in the Omani national identity which, while shaping political reforms, nevertheless regards the preservation of Omani culture as sacrosanct<sup>191</sup>. In *Ibadism*, unlike in the *Sunni* political ethos which dominates Gulf States, where leadership is inherited through a certain hierarchy, the leaders in Oman have to be elected according to the teaching of *Shura*, which includes the principle of *Ijtihad* (diligence). As such, *Ibadi* forms of Islam tend to be more flexible and tolerant towards other religions and cultures; in addition *Ibadism* can be said to offer a fertile ground for the implementation of a democratisation process<sup>192</sup>.

With regard to citizens' involvement in government affairs, Oman has been developing a participatory process since the 1970s, when the Council for Agriculture, Fish and Industry was established. This was followed by the establishment of the State Consultative Council. The members of the two Councils were indeed nominated by the government, but this does not negate the fact that they were given some genuine authority to discuss important issues related to development policies. The participatory process which took place within those Councils contributed to citizens' knowledge of the new forms of political participation. The Municipal Council was founded in Muscat (the capital) in the 1940s, and after 1970 a municipal council was formed in almost every district (*Wilayah*), in which citizens were involved in the conduct of government affairs. This thereby widened the level of popular participation in governmental processes<sup>193</sup>. The process of consultative participation is practiced on different levels, as *Sheikhs* (tribal leaders) in their local *Sablah* (meeting hall) discuss tribal problems and find solutions for them. At higher levels, there are other methods and practices, such as the Businessmen's Council and the Oman Chamber of Commerce.

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<sup>191</sup> Valeri, M. *Oman: Politics and Society in the Qaboos State*. (London: C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd, 2009), pp.119-140.

<sup>192</sup> Jones, J. *Negotiating Change: The New Politics of the Middle East*. (London: I. B. Tauris & Co, 2007), p. 159.

<sup>193</sup> Eickelman, D. F. "Oman's Next Generation: Challenges or Prospects." In *Crosscurrents in the Gulf: Arab Regional and Global Interests*, ed. H. R. Sindelar, III and J.E. Peterson. (London: Routledge, 1988).

The participatory process also includes the Annual Royal Tour, in which Sultan Qaboos spends more than one month a year in the different towns and villages of the Sultanate, following the progress of development, meeting his people and taking part in a process of consultation with the political community (to be discussed in detail below). The introduction of the Tour was followed by the establishment of the State Consultancy Council during the 1980s, consisting of appointed members. In the 1990s, the *Shura* Council was founded, in which all members were elected but the franchise remained limited as only some selected people were allowed to vote but not the entire people. Later on, all people over 21 years old and irrespective of gender were allowed to participate as voters or indeed candidates. In 1997 the State Council was formed with appointed members, mainly constituted of ex-senior officials who had gained extensive experience from their previous careers (both Councils are discussed in detail below). Neither council has legislative power, but they can initiate proposals, review draft laws, and conduct studies to help implement development plans. They can also suggest solutions for economic and social problems.

Considering the recent political changes in Oman, the reform process may seem to be slow in comparison with that of some other Gulf States. In fact, it is proactive, but the intimacy of Oman's people with its cultural and historical traditions serves to shape the nature of the change and often inhibits the process. Oman is implementing the *Shura* process step by step in order to avoid 'cultural shocks', and to allow sufficient time for people to adapt themselves to the emerging forms of participation. Nonetheless, there is a genuine participatory process taking place in the country, especially as compared to other states in the Gulf<sup>194</sup>. Cecil concludes that:

*The pace with which Oman's political institutions have evolved – gradually over a generation - may well be a lesson for those who would have it take place faster... the Omani example may serve to demonstrate that a policy of gradualism, firmly rooted in local tradition, can be implemented in a way that offers citizens an expanding role in managing the affairs of their country without opening the doors to uncontrollable political and social pressures*<sup>195</sup>.

Scholars such as Katz argue that *Majlis Al-Shura* (the Consultative Council) has been given an extremely limited authority and is not empowered to address issues such as defence or foreign affairs; rather, it is only allowed to discuss issues related to social and

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<sup>194</sup> Jones, J. 2007, p. 159.

<sup>195</sup> Cecil, C. O. 2006, p. 65.

economic problems. It cannot initiate legislation but can only review and comment on legislation initiated by government ministries<sup>196</sup>. This argument in fact can be challenged and this response will be developed in subsequent paragraphs of this chapter. Also, during the course of an international press conference in October 2007, Sayyid Saud bin Ibrahim Al-Busaidi, the Minister of Interior, criticised such debates when he said that Oman had a very good and peaceful relationship with the rest of the world and it holds a defensive force only to protect its territory. So even given the fact that the Sultan is the one who controls the military and the parliament, the fact that there is little Omani aggression against other states means that the need to discuss military issues in the parliament is less pressing. This is most unlike the situation in Western States. As such, there are few issues regarding foreign policy and national security that are worthy of discussion by the *Majlis Al-Shura*. The Minister may have forgotten to mention that the national five-year budget including the amount spent on defence is sent to the *Shura* Council for revision, so that the Council is in fact considering the defence budget. Whilst one may take issue with this statement, Jones suggests that the parliamentary authorities in Oman should not be judged according to Western standards, arguing that the council has been given real power even if it is not prescribed or codified in a statute<sup>197</sup>.

Katz also mentions that candidates are forbidden to use the mass media to gather political support when contesting a seat and that the voter turnout is low because Omani people still do not feel they have a real political voice<sup>198</sup>. Sayyid Saud (The Minister of Interior), however, noted that candidates were allowed to introduce themselves and their political agenda during the 2007 election via the mass media. The conditions of participation were a need for all candidates to recognise and respect alternative view points and positions and, more broadly, to ensure that their political platforms included respect for the Omani environment. In short, the participatory process cannot become a platform which could impact adversely on Omani cultural values and on Oman's environmental beauty. In other words, they do not mind seeing advertisements in newspapers or on electronic boards alongside roads, but will not tolerate their display upon walls or in road lighting columns.

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<sup>196</sup> Katz, M. N. "Assessing the Political Stability of Oman" *The Middle East Review of the International Affairs*. Vol. 8, No. 3, 2004.

<sup>197</sup> Jones, J. 2007, p. 163.

<sup>198</sup> Katz, M. N. 2004, pp. 4-5.

In respect of other aspects of the participatory process, the 'Basic Statute of the State', as mentioned above, was published in 1996. It guarantees political and human rights, including the right for non-Muslims to practice their religions, though not to carry out 'proselytizing activities'. The statute also permits the establishment of non-governmental associations and up to 2010 more than one hundred such associations have been established; these include, for example, the Writers Association, the Journalists Association, the Physicians Association, the Women's Associations and Labour Union. Lastly, the constitution codified equal rights in terms of gender. Women already have equal rights in law, work, and income side by side with men. Because of tradition, however, they still face some discrimination from a society which remains resistant to the notion of gender equality<sup>199</sup>.

Looking at Oman as a rentier state, some scholars such as Rabi argue that the improvements which have occurred in Oman since 1970 in agriculture, fisheries, industrialisation, and social services are simply the result of oil revenues<sup>200</sup>. Having said that, Rabi concludes that unlike other rentier states, the Omani government established a Chamber of Commerce in 1978 to allow greater political participation to emerge (though not at the cost of circumscribing the role of traditional elites). One of the main characteristics of the rentier state concerns the replacement of the old elites (mainly merchants and dignitaries) with a new generation that can help fulfil the social contract peculiar to the rentier state. In light of the above, it can be argued that Oman is not a typical rentier state, because the position of the old elites has not been significantly affected by the discovery of oil and the productivity of the nation is acceptable. He also mentions that unlike other monarchies in the region, members of the Omani Royal family are few compared to those of other rentier states. Moreover, being few in number has helped limit corruption among the members of the Royal Family. Their influence is not all-encompassing across Omani society, as the influence of Royal families often is in the other Gulf States.

Analysing both the *Al-Shura* and *Al-Dawla* councils (the two houses of parliament), Rabi argues that their emergence is the result of political pressure as well

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<sup>199</sup> Jones, J. 2007, pp. 170-179.

<sup>200</sup> Rabi, U. "Majlis al-Shura and Majlis al-Dawla: Weaving Old Practices and New Realities in the process of state Formation in Oman." *Middle Eastern Studies*. Vol. 38, No. 4, 2002.

as the decline in oil reserves. With oil set to run out over the next decade Oman, like other rentier states, cannot continue to financially support a growing populace by using the rent derived from oil sales. Omani officials say that the Sultanate retains big oil reserves. The national oil company in Oman (Petroleum Development Oman) has developed new technologies with the assistance of Shell, which utilizes the injection of hot steam and other chemicals to dilute the heavy oil. Using this process, oil began to be extracted in 2008. Of course, writing in 2002 Rabi could not anticipate this new technology but his argument is certainly being challenged now in its wake. Nevertheless, he argues validly that the participatory process that Oman is developing is a combination of both the royal and traditional ruling system and is different from the Western democratic tradition. In reality, what Oman is witnessing today is a concatenation of traditional *Shura* and modern participatory processes deployed under the sponsorship of the dynastic state.

With regard to Omani elections, it is easy to draw the conclusion that Omani elections and *Majlis Al-Shura* are not genuine expressions of democratisation. It would, however, be wrong to make such a judgement, based on political relativism, without understanding the local identity of the state. The Omani *Shura* practice is being built up gradually and is an experimental and open ended process, which suggests that there is genuine room for a participatory process across Oman to evolve<sup>201</sup>. The election process is discussed in detail below.

With regard to the foundation of political parties, according to article 33 of the Basic Statutes of the State they may readily be formed but must contingently manifest an open support for the status of the Royal Family and respect for the Statute that protects rights and religious freedom. Parties are forbidden from adhering to an openly theocratic platform and should remain 'open-ended', in keeping with the gradual nature of the general democratisation process<sup>202</sup>. However, given the historic legacy of political parties across the region, Omanis themselves are uncomfortable with the idea of such organisations and point to the excesses of the *Ba'ath* party in Iraq and Syria as a justification for such concerns.

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<sup>201</sup> Jones, J. 2007, p. 162.

<sup>202</sup> Jones, J. 2007, p. 166.

Islamic societies place communal interest before individual need, which is in a sense the reverse of the ethos prevalent in Western societies. Oman therefore needs to adopt a participatory process which does not contradict the vertically divided society since it is these very divisions, such as tribalism, that can help in the stabilisation of society. Given this symbiotic relationship between religion and the state, Oman provides a good case study for exploring the extent to which the notion of *Shura* offers an alternative to Western models of democracy.

In sum, the problem of democratisation in Oman coincides to some extent with the problem of democratisation in the wider Arab World. However, politically speaking, Oman has its own uniqueness which sets it apart from other countries. Religiously, Oman shares features with other Arab states that affect democratic development across the Middle East: all three Abrahamic religions emerged in the Arab region, but the dominance of Islam (which stipulates that sovereignty belongs to God and not to people) has ensured that political behaviour has never been fully separated from religious injunction. Political Islam has its own *Shura* principle which affords people some level of participation, although there is no shared vision between different Islamic sects as to how to articulate this principle in practice.

In terms of its social structure, Oman is well known for the vertical divisions which it shares with the rest of the Arab World, and which are mainly formed on the basis of ethnicity, sectarianism, and tribalism. People are socially divided according to these vertical divisions, which play the role of prioritising loyalties. A major political problem is that most Arab states contain some or all of these divisions and subdivisions<sup>203</sup>.

But whilst Oman shares these features with the other Arab States in relation to democratisation processes, it also remains unique and somewhat at an advantage. There are two main differences: (1) the distinct religious and cultural tradition of the *Ibadi* sect; and (2) a concomitantly different political history which includes a *traditional* participatory system. This difference has implications both for the behaviour of its people and for its political culture. Religiously, Oman is the only Arab country which embraces the *Ibadi* form of Islam, and this sect is the only one which believes that

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<sup>203</sup> Balkini A., Denoeux, G., Springborg, R. *Legislative Politics in the Arab World: The Resurgence of Democratic Institutions*. (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1999), pp. 79-109.



*Shura* in Islam is a practical principle which can incorporate a traditional participatory ruling system; other sects believe that it is only a consultative principle which cannot go beyond this remit. The *Ibadi* sect allows more flexibility and adaptability in terms of the practice of *Shura* in an executive form. The extent to which this flexibility can generate bottom-up approaches towards participation, or else is limited to top-down approaches towards democratisation, forms the focus of the forthcoming chapters.

Oman has practised *Shura* (traditional political participation) for more than ten centuries. This practice has helped mould the tribal social fabric to serve a political participatory practice; as such, tribalism in Oman should not be seen as necessarily anti-democratic. Moreover, Oman has been gradually implementing a participatory process since the 1970s, and this implementation has involved the Royal Annual Tour and the establishment of different councils. Oman is now witnessing a new participatory process that judiciously mixes the traditional *Shura* and the concepts of modern democracy. This has enabled ordinary people to vote for the first time in Omani history from 1991 onwards. This is a new form of popular participation for the Omani people, which has been enforced gradually from the top down, whereas in the past only elites and notables were able to participate in decision making. These newly introduced elements of the participatory process seem to be going well, especially given the fact that many diverse groups in society, among them the followers of the religious institutions, different tribes - are participants in the process.

### 3.5 The Basic Statute of the State

An examination of the Omani Basic Statute of the State (BSS), especially the articles relating to the political, economic, and judicial aspects, is necessary for any significant critical analysis of the relationship between the state, religion and democracy. For the assertion of the *Ibadi* principle of *Shura*, article 9 of the Basic Statute of the State (BSS) stipulates that: 'Rule in the Sultanate shall be based on justice, *Shura* and equality. The citizens have the right - in accordance with this Basic Statute and the conditions and provisions stipulated by the Law - to participate in public affairs'<sup>204</sup>.

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<sup>204</sup> Information Committee of the State Council. *Sultanate of Oman: The Basic Statute of the State*. (Muscat: The State Council Press, 2008).

It is clear that *Shura* is regarded as one of the State's premier political values. To fulfil article 9 of the BSS, Oman adopted the system of having two parliamentary chambers; which are the *Majlis Al-Dawlah* (the State Council) and the *Majlis Al-Shura* (the *Shura* Council). Both Councils form together a bigger entity called *Majlis Oman* (Council of Oman). The Bureaus of both Councils meet together once or twice a year and both of them meet occasionally also with the Council of the Ministers.

Economically, the BSS, in article number 11, determines economic policy. The article states that: 'the national economy is based on justice and the principles of free economy. Its essence is the constructive and fruitful co-operation between public and private activity. Its objective is the achievement of economic and social development in order to increase production and raise the standard of living of the citizens according to the State's general plan and within the limits of the Law. Freedom of economic activity is guaranteed within the limits of the Law and the public interest in a manner that will ensure the well-being of national economy'.

The BSS has also consolidated justice and equality for the citizens in several articles which are significant in any popular political process. Article 12 states that: 'justice, equality, and equality of opportunities for Omanis are the pillars of the society and are guaranteed by the State'. Article 17 asserts that: 'all citizens are equal before the Law and share the same public rights and duties. There is no discrimination between them on the ground of gender, origin, colour, language, religion, sect, domicile, or social status'. Article 59 affirms the supremacy of the law by stating that: 'the supremacy of the Law shall be the basis of governance in the State. The dignity, integrity and impartiality of the judges are guaranteed for the preservation of rights and freedoms', and articles 60 and 61 confirm the independence of the judiciary and the freedoms given to judges:

Article 60: 'The judiciary is independent and its functions are exercised by the different types and grades of courts which issue judgments in accordance with the Law'.

Article 61: 'Judges are subject only to the Law and cannot be removed except in cases determined by the Law. No party can interfere in law suits or matters of justice, such interference shall be considered a crime punishable by law. The Law shall

determine prerequisites to be fulfilled by whomever exercises judicial functions, the conditions and procedures for appointing, transferring and promoting judges, the guarantees accorded to them, the cases where they cannot be removed from office and all other relevant provisions’.

It is clear that the Basic Statute of the State has set down solid ground for a genuine participatory political process in the country and *Shura* is seen as a prime political value and championed by the state. What is also clear is that a strong civil society is concomitantly needed to practice it in a proper manner and develop it over time.

It is worth noting that no diagrammatic illustration of the structure of the current Omani government can currently be found either in the literature or in government publications. As it is essential to show the position of the Council of Oman in comparison to other government entities, Figure 3-3 represents my attempt to provide such systematic representation giving a view of the whole governing structure (whilst not charting the kinds of authorities given to the Council of Oman which is later explained in Figure 3-4).

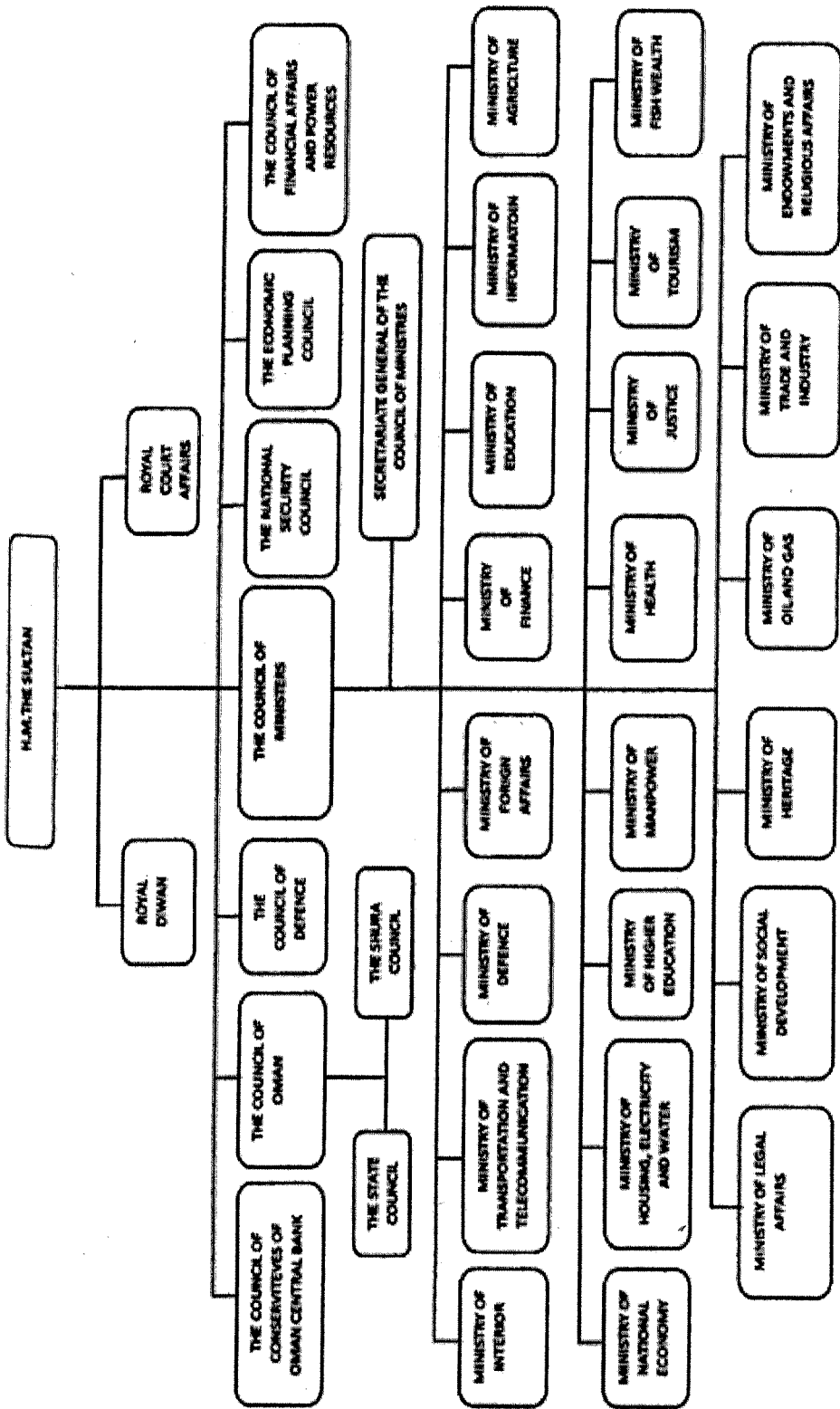
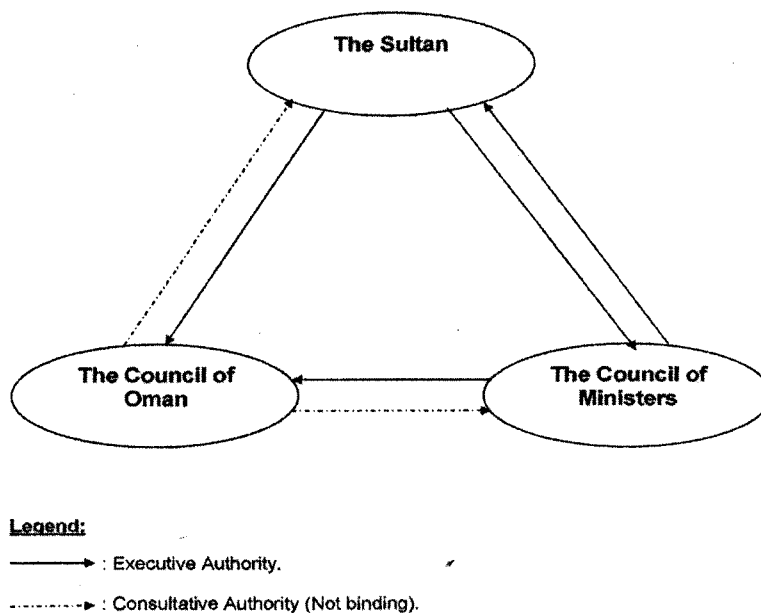


Figure 3-3: The Omani Government Structure

### 3.6 *Majlis* Oman (Council of Oman)

The overarching dome of *Majlis* Oman consists of *Majlis Al-Dawlah* (State Council), which acts as an upper chamber, and *Majlis Al-Shura* (*Shura* Council). The Council of Oman meets once a year under His Majesty the Sultan in the presence of the Royal Family members, the Council of Ministers' members, the Military and Security Leaders, the State and Consultative councils' members, and the foreign Ambassadors in Oman. The Sultan, and occasionally also the Chairmen of the State and the Consultative councils, give addresses which are regarded as setting out plans for the coming period. Figure 3-4 illustrates the relationship between the three major political entities in the country. Until now the initiatives and recommendations which come from the State Council and the *Shura* Council are not binding. They are left to the government and the government alone decides whether to accept or reject them. By contrast, the decisions taken by the government are binding, although most of them are normally revised by the two Councils before issuance.



**Figure 3-4: The Omani Government and *Majlis* Oman Authorities**

### 3.6.1 *Majlis Al-Dawlah* (State Council)

The State Council was established in 1997. Its Chairman and members are appointed for a term of four years<sup>205</sup>. Its membership mainly comprises former ministers, undersecretaries, ambassadors, senior military and police officers, tribal leaders, dignitaries and academics. The objectives of the establishment of the State Council are to assist the government in implementing the overall development strategy, to contribute to maintaining the values and the heritage of Omani society, and to help preserve the achievements of the country and uphold the principles of the Basic Statute of the State. The State Council, according to article 18 of the Royal Decree for its establishment, is responsible for:

- Preparing studies which contribute to the implementation of development plans and programmes, and assisting in finding appropriate solutions to economic and social challenges;
- Submitting recommendations for encouraging investments in the production, services and resources development sectors;
- Conducting studies and submitting recommendations related to human resources development and the enhancement of the administrative efficiency of the state organs in order to meet national objectives;
- Reviewing draft laws before their promulgation, with the exception of some specific laws which necessitate referral directly to His Majesty the Sultan. The Council also submits its recommendations on draft laws which are referred to it by the Council of the Ministers;
- Examining issues of national interest that are referred from His Majesty the Sultan of Oman or the Council of Ministers.

The State Council functions through the Council's Bureau and the Specialised Committees. The Bureau comprises the State Council Chairman, two Deputies, and four members who are elected via secret ballot by the Council, in its first ordinary session of the term. It holds periodic meetings upon the invitation of the Chairman. Emergency

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<sup>205</sup> Information Committee in the State Council. *The State Council: its Bureau, Committees and Administrative Apparatus During the Fourth Session (2007-2011)*. (Muscat: the State Council Press, 2008).

meetings can be called if and when necessary. Decisions of the Bureau are taken by a majority of members present. Government officials may also attend on invitations to discuss specific issues concerning their departments, entities and/or ministries. The main functions of the Bureau are:

- Drawing up plans and supervising the activities of the Council and its Committees, as well as providing assistance to members in carrying out their duties in a manner that ensures the smooth functioning of the Council;
- Rendering assistance to the Council's Committees, approving regulations governing their conduct, and coordinating their activities. The Bureau serves as the authority that proposes the formation of committees and submits these proposals to the Council for approval during the first sitting of the session;
- Authorising committees to study specific issues, in which they must submit reports on findings and correlate recommendations. The Bureau, upon receipt of such reports and having studied them, may decide to submit the reports to the Council for debate, or take whatever measures it deems appropriate;

The Council forms its permanent committees in the first sitting of its first session of the term. The Bureau proposes members of each committee at the first annual session of each term. The composition of the committees takes into account the specialisation and experiences of its candidates. The Council, in accordance with its by-laws, may decide to form *ad hoc* committees designed to address specific issues. Such committees are dissolved on completion of allocated assignments or upon a decision issued by the Council. Besides the permanent and *ad hoc* committees, the Chairman may refer any subject to a joint committee for examination. The activities of the committees form the actual output of the council, since through their regular meetings, they conduct studies covering the various issues that are to be addressed. They submit findings in the form of a report, which includes sources, results, and recommendations. At the beginning of each annual session, each committee proposes a list of topics that fall under its remit and which require examination. The Council has five permanent committees at present:

- The Legal Committee
- The Economic Committee
- The Social Committee

- The Human Resources Development Committee
- The Committee for the Follow up of the Implementation of Development Plans

The State Council, through its different committees, has reviewed and studied draft laws since its establishment in 1998 up to February 2008 (see Appendix 4)<sup>206</sup>.

### **3.6.2 *Majlis Al-Shura (Shura Council)***

In 1991 His Majesty Sultan Qaboos established the *Shura* Council, a sixty-member body representing the 59 Omani districts in addition to the Chairman<sup>207</sup>. The *Shura* Council superseded the appointed fifty five-member State Consultative Council (*Majlis Al-Istishari Li-Dawlah*), which had been created in 1981 and offered significant regional and popular, as well as official, representation.

Following the first national census in Oman, in 1993, it was decided that districts with populations exceeding 30,000 would be represented by two members. This step added more than twenty members to the council. The process of electing the members has improved gradually. In addition to the increase in the number of members from 59 in 1991 to 83 in 2007 - which is still expected to rise even further in the future due to the rise in the Omani population - the government has no longer involved itself in the selection of one of the two members elected by the people in each district, nor in the selection of two of the four in the districts whose populations exceed 30,000. The whole election process has in fact become direct and free; and from the second term in 1994, women were allowed to stand for election firstly in the capital area, and later on in all the districts.

In addition to having financial rights, all members of the Council possess parliamentary immunity and they can express themselves freely and have the right to question the ministers when they are invited to speak by the Council.

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<sup>206</sup> Information Committee in the State Council. *The State Council: its Bureau, Committees and Administrative Apparatus During the Fourth Session (2007-2011)*. (Muscat: the State Council Press, 2008), pp. 19-24.

<sup>207</sup> *Al-Shura* Council. *The Shura Path in the Sultanate of Oman in Quarter a Century (1981-2006)*. (Al-Anan printing, Rusayl Industrial Area, 2006), pp. 11-215.



The *Shura* Council functions through the Council's Bureau, the Council's Office, the Specialised Committees, and the Secretariat General. The Bureau is comprised of the *Shura* Council Chairman and two deputies who are elected by secret ballot, by the Council, in its first ordinary session of the term. The main functions of the Bureau involve:

- Preparing the annual reports for His Majesty the Sultan and other reports for the Sultan or for the Council of Ministers;
- Supervising the annual financial budgetary;
- Calling any or all of the Specialised Committees to ratify their reports;
- Inviting the ministers to the Council and announcing the issues that the Council members would like to raise;
- Presenting the suggestions raised by any member of the Council in front of the Council members if they are found to be suitable;
- Calling the Council to ratification and controlling its sessions.

The Council's Office comprises the *Shura* Council Chairman, two Deputies, and six members who are elected by secret ballot by the Council in its first ordinary session of the term. The main functions of the Office involve:

- Drawing up plans and supervising the activities of the Council and its Committees, as well as providing assistance to members in the carrying out of their duties in a manner which ensures the smooth functioning of the Council.
- Offering assistance to the Council's Committees, approving regulations governing their conduct and coordinating their activities. (The Office serves as the authority which proposes the formation of committees and submits these proposals to the Council for approval during the first sitting of the session.)
- Authorising committees to study specific issues, in which they must submit reports on their findings and correlate recommendations.

The Bureau, upon receipt of such reports and having studied them, may decide to submit the reports to the Council for debate, or take whatever measures it deems to be appropriate. The Council has five permanent committees at present:

- The Legal Committee

- The Economic Committee
- The Health and Social Committee
- The Education and Culture Committee
- The Committee for the Services and the Development of the Local Communities

As is the case in the State Council, the *Shura* Council may also decide to form *ad hoc* committees designed to address specific issues and such committees are dissolved upon the completion of allocated assignments or upon a decision issued by the Council. The Council also has the right to form other permanent committees when necessary; for example in 1992 the Council formed two new committees -the Wording Committee and the Sessions' Assessment Committee. During the second term the Council formed two other committees - the Assessment and Follow up Committee and the Environment and Human Resources Development Committee.

The Council's Committees are regarded as the real element through which the Council makes use of its authorities. The awareness of the committees regarding the authority they possess allows them to conduct in depth studies and they benefit from the power given to them to follow up any matter and meet any persons who may help in the completion of their job. The reports of the Committees are discussed in the Council and if they are found to be satisfactory the Chairman sends them to the Sultan.

Beside the plethora of checks and balances which guarantee the independence of the Council - among them the financial and administrative independence, the full time membership of the members, the parliamentary immunity, and the freedom of expression for members - the Royal Decree for the establishment of the *Shura* Council determined the authorities given to the Council, which are:

- 1) The capacity to review the economic and social bills which are initiated by the ministries before their final submission.
- 2) The right to define what the Council deems to be suitable for the improvement of the current economic and social laws in the Sultanate.

These authorities are better than those granted to the previous appointed State Consultative Council during the 1980s, which was only assigned to offer opinions (not to revise or initiate new ideas) of the economic and social laws/bills which were initiated by the government ministries. Having benefitted from those authorities, the Council revised the draft laws as shown in Appendix 5.

The Council also participates via the offering of opinions in terms of the issues directed by His Majesty the Sultan and/or the government. Most importantly, the Council plays a significant role in the preparation of the five-year development plan and in the preparation of the national budget of the Sultanate. The Council also practises its duties via a calling upon government ministers to discuss certain issues. Examples of these invitations are shown in Appendix 6. In addition to the achievements mentioned above, the Council also studied and sent reports to the government regarding the different issues shown in Appendix 7.

From the detailed illustration above it should be clear that the *Shura* Council has been given a genuine power with which to practise its duties efficiently. The government has responded to almost all the issues initiated and/or studied by the Council.

### **3.7 The Electoral Principle and the Electoral Committees**

The Omani *Shura* experiment is profoundly distinguished by its gradual expansion in terms of political participation and the authorities granted to the people. After the appointment of the members of the State Consultative Council in the 1980s, the *Shura* Council began in 1991 to have 'semi-elected members', whereby the people of each district elected two candidates and the government selected one of the two. Participation was not open to all citizens in the 1991 elections but invitations to vote were sent through the *Walis* (local governors) to the tribal leaders, dignities, and to some graduates. Military personnel were excluded. Some women were allowed to participate in the elections as voters but not as candidates. In the 1994 elections, yet more citizens were allowed to participate and women from the capital area were allowed to run for a seat. This reflects the policy of gradualism, as rural areas are regarded as not being ready to accept women candidates running for a seat. Since 2002 participation has been expanded quantitatively and qualitatively. For the first time in

Omani history, in 2002 all citizens over 21 years old were allowed to vote. The number of male voters thus increased from 9500 in 1991 to 822,000 in 2002. The government did not interfere in the election process, and as Oman follows a pluralist system, whoever acquires the highest number of votes therefore represents the people and the results are announced directly from the voting stations on the same day. The whole election process since then has been subjected to a thorough judicial supervision. All restrictions on female participation across the whole of Oman have been rescinded<sup>208</sup>. There are different factors that variously underpin this process of gradualism: it could be a response to globalisation; a response to the changes in the region after the Gulf Wars; or a response to the internal demographic and cultural transformations and urbanisation.

The government represented by the Ministry of Interior administers and regulates the election process via an announcement of the election date well in advance, by registering candidates' names; by explaining the election rules to candidates and voters; by setting up the different committees required for the election; by purposively informing people through the media committee about the significance of their participation - held to be both a political right and a national duty - and finally by declaring the day of the election to be a national holiday for those who wish to participate.

The election process passes through three main stages. The first stage includes the foundation of the electoral registry and the approval of the list of voters for each district. It is stipulated that each voter should have inhabited his/her district since birth or be currently residing in the district. Each voter has the right to vote only in one electoral station. The second stage includes the sending of the applications of candidature membership to the Ministry of Interior, which in turn directs them to the Master Committee (discussed below). The Master Committee returns the names to the Ministry of Interior excepting those candidates who have criminal histories. The third stage includes the Election Day and the announcement of the results. The voting time given on the Election Day lasts for 12 hours. The voting boxes are sealed at the same time over the whole country. The election boxes are carefully designed and have two locks; the head of the local election committee keeps the keys for one of them and the head of

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<sup>208</sup> *Al-Shura Council. The Shura Path in the Sultanate of Oman in Quarter a Century (1981-2006)*. (Muscat: Al-Anan printing, 2006), pp. 60-71.

the local sorting committee keeps the key for the other lock. The candidates attend the sorting process and their names (at the end of the day) are organised into descending order. If two of them score the same number of votes the sorting committee draws lots in front of them in order to announce the winner.

It is necessary to explain in detail the organisation of the elections, including an exploration of the different committees and their duties, in order to establish to what extent the whole process is genuine and reliable.

The Ministry of Interior forms one Master Committee headed by the Ministry of Interior's Vice Chancellor, and includes others who are mainly judges and solicitors. The duties of the Master Committee include the supervision of the other *local* committees in the various districts; dealing with the different issues sent to it by the local committees; approving all candidatures and voter lists for all districts; taking decisions regarding any unfairness claims sent by the candidates; deciding on the best means for making the election process clearly manageable and readily accessible; and sending the voting results of all districts to the Minister of Interior for their announcement<sup>209</sup>.

Similarly, the Ministry of Interior forms local committees to ensure the smooth operation of the election. In each district there is one main committee and three sub-committees. The main committee is headed by the *Wali* (the local governor) and involves other members such as a Judge, the deputy *Wali*, and two heads of any government civil departments in the district. The duty of this main committee includes the conduction of the preparation required to make the election process successful. This includes the supervision of the three sub-committees, the organisation of the coordination between local citizens and the Master Committee in the Ministry of Interior, and the distribution of the sorting results to the Master Committee, and the composition of a final report to the Ministry of Interior.

The other three sub-committees are: the organising committee; the voting committee; and the sorting committee. The organising and voting committees are each headed by a member of the main committee. The sorting committee is headed by the

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<sup>209</sup> *Al-Shura Council. The Shura Path in the Sultanate of Oman in Quarter a Century (1981-2006)*. (Muscat: *Al-Anan* printing, 2006), p. 69.

judge member of the main committee. The organising committee is responsible for the preparation of the voting foyers, the control of the entrances and exits, the general maintenance of the voting station and its proper conduct, and the distribution of the final report to the main committee. The voting committee is responsible for making sure that voting boxes are empty before the beginning of the election, submitting the voting forms to the voters, punching the voters' cards, signing and stamping the voting forms, watching carefully over the process of the insertion of the voting forms in the boxes, the sealing of the voting boxes by the end of the day, and the distribution of a final report to the main committee. The sorting committee is responsible for sorting and counting the votes and preparing a detailed report on the results.

### **3.8 The Annual Royal Tour**

As mentioned briefly above, His Majesty initiated (during the 1970s) a unique form of political participation, in which HM and most of his government ministers move from the capital area to the various Omani districts; this has become known as the Annual Royal Tour. The Sultan meets up with the tribal leaders and the dignitaries in order to discuss their needs and to listen to their suggestions regarding matters related to their local areas or even to larger scale national affairs. The ministers move around the towns and villages to listen to the different needs of the citizens. Accordingly, prior to the end of the Tour, the Sultan announces the different development projects which have been identified during the consultative process of the Tour<sup>210</sup>.

This Tour is – at least locally - regarded as a form of direct democracy; locally, people call this tour the ‘Omani casual parliament’. It is also regarded as a unique form of leadership which serves to strengthen the national unity between the Sultan and the citizens; during the meetings between the Sultan and the citizens; they engage in unprompted and direct dialogue. Constructive criticism is encouraged and the Sultan listens to his peoples’ ambitions and sufferings and concomitantly conveys his

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<sup>210</sup> For more information about the Royal Tours see: Chatty, D. Rituals of Royalty and the Elaboration of Ceremony in Oman: View From the Edge. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, No. 41, 2009. P.p. 50-53.

directives to the government members and to the citizens. The Annual Royal Tour thus has the following characteristics<sup>211</sup>:

- 1) The physical taking of the ruling regime with its different sectors and highest power directly to the citizens in their local areas;
- 2) The Provision of casual and direct meeting between the Sultan and the citizens;
- 3) The thorough discussion of the country's general policies and exploration of development issues jointly by the government and its citizens;
- 4) The development of these issues through casual questionnaires which lead to the re-prioritisation of national plans.

Different national symposia have been held alongside the Royal Tours, designed to discuss other specifically significant issues. For example, in 2001, 2003, and 2005, symposia were held to discuss finding suitable employment vacancies for the national human resources; this resulted in a fully-resourced initiative known as the '*Sanad Project*' which has succeeded in finding jobs for the majority of unemployed Omanis. During the 2009 Tour another symposium was held to explore the empowerment of Omani women in this male-dominated culture. As a result, many recommendations were approved by the Sultan which strengthened the status of women, including their right to access to government housing land. A more general outcome was the visible encouragement to include women in every aspect of life, and specifically establishing women's rights to be returned as representatives in the *Shura Council*.

Through sensing the people's needs, the Sultan conveys his directives to the government ministers urgently to execute particular development projects such as those concerned with electricity, water, education, health services, housing, and road paving. The daily tour of the ministers provides a follow up of the projects under construction and involves meetings with citizens. It strengthens the national 'fabric' and manifestly 'grounds' a sense of social cohesion and national unity. In addition to this, it offers a model to other government's agencies and agents in their quotidian dealings with citizens of how to carry out their duties properly, promptly and effectively<sup>212</sup>.

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<sup>211</sup> *Al-Shura Council. The Shura Path in the Sultanate of Oman in Quarter a Century (1981-2006)*. (Muscat: *Al-Anan* printing, 2006), pp. 28-29.

<sup>212</sup> Some scholars such as Dawn Chatty (2009), argue that the Sultan is becoming distant from his people as ordinary people cannot see him easily as they used to do during the 1980s and 1990s. Although this argument partly true but it is over simplified. This situation in Oman has dramatically changed;

### 3.9 Conclusion

As has been discussed above, the nature of the Omani social fabric is tribal and full of tensions in relation to democratisation processes and ambitions. Whilst the majority of the Arab tribes are divided into two main blocks, the *Qahtani* and *Adnani*, tribalism does not depend on blood ties only but also on tribal alliances (*Shaff*) and political coalitions. Throughout Omani history, the relationship between both tribal blocks has witnessed times of harmony, when the *Qahtani* tribes ruled the country and the *Adnani* remained the policy makers through the dominance of *Majlis Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd*. However, when this relationship was violated by either of the two parties, the results included massacres, tribal wars and foreign invasions. Tribes have remained in competition with each other and have fought against the centralisation of power in their own interests. This is why Omani history has not witnessed times of sustained security, order and prosperity other than when the state possessed strong armed forces in order to enforce law and order and focus on issues of prosperity. With this in mind, since 1970 the Omani government has started to encourage loyalty to an Omani national identity which takes priority over and above all other loyalties including loyalty to the tribe. It has used oil revenues to centralise power until it reached a certain stage of stability, and thenceforth the social transformation process reached an acceptable level and the government began to decentralise power, partly by allowing some sort of political participation which has been extended gradually in proportion to advancement in terms of social transformation.

The performance of the Omani government, according to the data presented above, seems reasonable and relatively successful in the context of the country's economic capacity: the judiciary and the popular voting system are clear and well organised; the relationship between the government and the people, whether in terms of the Annual Royal Tour or the National Election, seems to be good; and the State and the *Shura* Councils are doing genuine and functional jobs. They have most certainly been given some significant measure of authority and they are using them prudently and

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population has increased so the number of people that want to meet up with the Sultan has increased, the Sultanic system is gradually giving up some of its authorities so it is not a one man show situation anymore and people have their representatives in the *Shura* Council that can even help them in securing a safe access of their petitions to the government, Oman is an institution-state now and enforcing a state of law so people's rights is preserved and no need to take grievances to the Sultan himself. Additionally, the concept of the Royal Tours has developed from a very primitive to a stage to organize high quality symposiums.



effectively. The political reform process has built up gradually since 1970 until the present time and it is expected to continue to be built up in the future. There are no articles in the Basic Statute of the State which prevent the formation of political parties. Parties might be formed in the future if they can be shown to enhance political reforms. However, with the increasing number of graduates and an anticipated depressed economic performance, the younger generation in particular may not accept the current level of political reform nor the way in which it is developing; they may push for wider penetration in terms of political participation.

The economic performance of Oman is also at an acceptable level given the available resources. Oil still contributes the highest share to the national income. Diversification plans are being implemented, but other industries still fail to compete with the oil share in terms of the national income. The economic growth level appears to be slower than population growth and cultural development. This problem is especially pertinent as oil reserves are declining and are expected to start running out in about two decades. At the same time, the population has dramatically increased, and the number of graduates is increasing and a political pressure from the younger generations is forming. It is supported not only by the improving levels of education but also by the urbanisation process and the different facets of globalisation. As a result, a bottom up democratisation model is slowly emerging, challenging the contemporary top down model and pushing for more political reforms.

The following chapters will discuss this issue further in order to find out how the imbalance between economic growth and population growth may affect the political landscape in Oman in the future. The chapters feature analysis of data gathered through conducting semi-structured interviews in Oman. The specific purpose of these chapters is to examine the contemporary *Shura* process in Oman and the challenges it may face from the religious clergy and the younger generation as the former may resist modernisation of the *Shura* and the latter might not be satisfied by the level of improvement in the political process.

## 4 The 'Top-Down' Model: Challenges to its Success

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter and the following two chapters contain an analysis of data drawn from the semi-structured interviews conducted in Oman, comprising three different categories. This chapter focuses on a discussion of information obtained from representatives of the Government of the Sultanate of Oman, who champion a top-down model. The following chapter examines the views of religious scholars, who support the traditional model, and Chapter 6 explores data captured from the younger generation, who represent the bottom-up model. It is important to make it clear at this stage that the empirical study found the respondents from the three categories uniformly use the phrase 'educated people' to mean 'graduates', 'tribalism' to mean 'tribal fanaticism' and also 'democracy' to mean 'democratisation process'.

This chapter contains an analysis of the views of the government respondents involved in the process of the contemporary *Shura*. This is in order to establish whether or not, in a post-rentier state model era, a coherent democratic discourse based on three different forms of popular participation (i.e. the traditional, contemporary and bottom-up) does indeed characterise the political landscape of Oman. A further aim here is to explain why the Omani government favours a top-down democratisation process at the present time, and to what extent this has been successful. Additionally, I will examine of the impact the traditional practice of *Shura* has on the recent democratisation process in Oman, and why the younger generation of Omanis are initiating a bottom up democratisation process.

There is no doubt that there are major questions regarding the motives that have prompted the Government in the Sultanate of Oman to adopt this process from the top-down; chiefly, the extent to which this approach is significantly affected by economic variables, especially oil revenues; and the impact of social variables such as tribal fanaticism, education and culture. The following sections highlight respondents' views on each of these issues.

## 4.2 Reasons for Adopting the Political Process from the Top

The *Shura*, with a historical form that largely restricts political participation to religious intellectuals and tribal notables, may not be suitable for application in the modern-day era without modification to reflect the ongoing overall development in the country. Sultan Qaboos promised from the early days of his rule that his people would have a role in governing the country, as is evident in his speeches. For example, in 1971 the Sultan said: 'We shall strive hard to establish just, democratic rule in our country within the framework of our Omani Arabs' reality, the customs and traditions of our community, and the teachings of Islam – which always light our path'<sup>213</sup>.

The government took the initiative to dictate change in the political process from the top, and opened the political horizon gradually in a phased manner that can be traced clearly every ten years. The country has chosen the Islamic *Shura* to be the political process in Oman. As GR6 (6/2/2009) said:

*There was a clear desire for public participation in the political process in Oman not to be like the experiences of other countries. There was deep research into the mechanisms of participation, and there was deep research conducted in order to find suitable criteria.*

The different political systems that ruled Oman throughout history are all Islamic and *Ibadist*. These systems all believed in the principle of *Shura* and applied it but in different forms that is proportionate with the type of rule. This, in addition to the fact that Oman is the only known Islamic state that has applied the political *Shura* practically for twelve centuries, renders the alienation of this ancient legacy by any newer political system impossible. This is because the Omani people would be expected to reject any alternative system to the *Shura*, which is seen as the cornerstone of the legitimacy and authority of the state.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the surrounding area was populated with different ideologies, where many systems of rule had been changed through military coups, from monarchies to republics. Some Arab states had adopted variants of socialism, others republicanism. It was therefore necessary for the political leadership in Oman to balance these factors, in order to maintain the legitimacy of the current ruling system.

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<sup>213</sup> The Ministry of Information. *The Royal Speeches of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said: 1970-2005*. (Muscat: Modern Colour Printers, 2005), p. 12.

In the process of redrafting the Islamic *Shura* in Oman, the leadership adopted some of the foundations of modern democracy, such as elections and parliamentary institutions. This was made possible by the existence of commonalities between *Shura* as a principle and the essence of democratic process – commonalities such as the election of a people, the foundations of justice, and concepts of equality and human rights. Arguably, this was aimed at presenting *Shura* as a model which accords with some of the recent democratic principles, whilst at the same time preserving the values of the society.

The semi-structured interviews demonstrated that the government has clearly decided to dictate change in the political process from the top down for the following reasons: the historical legacy of the *Shura* in Oman; the growing number of graduates; urbanisation and globalisation. The following sections present an analysis of the views of the Government representatives, in terms of the rationale behind the Government of the Sultanate's adoption of the political process of *Shura* from the top down.

#### **4.2.1 The Role of the Historical Legacy**

Oman has had a unique experience of *Shura* throughout its idiosyncratic history, which has been implemented at both a political and a socio-cultural level. At the time of the re-construction of the modern nation-state in the 1970s, the political process in the country drew limited international attention in terms of development and modernisation. The *Shura* had been selected as a political approach in Oman, as it constituted an important element in the political legitimacy of the ruling system and because of its long history in Omani traditional manners of organising governance. This was of particular importance as the ruling system was, at the time of the building of the modern state, facing challenges from the followers of the Imamate and the rebellions in *Dhofar*, as well as those of ordinary people who were influenced by certain political trends in the Arab World, particularly Arab nationalism and quasi-Marxist ideologies.

Most of the respondents agreed that the contemporary *Shura* process in Oman had been chosen because it derived from the political history of the country. For example, GR4 (28/2/2009) and GR5 (15/3/2009) said that '*Shura* in the present is an extension of the *Shura* in the past', while GR6 (6/2/2009) said: 'It links the past to the present as the

present *Shura* practice is taken from the old *Shura* practice. This link helps people to accept the idea'. This supports the claim that *Shura* was an appropriate choice for the government, in seeking to silence any voices that may have called into question the legitimacy of the ruling system had another political system been adopted, especially if such a system had contradicted the historical identity of the Omani society.

Some respondents put forth further justifications for the choice of the Islamic *Shura*. For example, GR8 (4/1/2009) described *Shura* as an historical approach: '*Shura* is an approach that Omani people have lived with throughout their deep history'. GR9 (23/3/2009) identified it as an old social and tribal legislation: '*Shura* in the Omani society is not a new thing; it was existent since before (the new state system) as a social and tribal legislation'. GR5 (15/3/2009) said: 'Oman has succeeded in implementing the *Shura* more than other countries, maybe because its historical importance in Oman makes it politically and socially viable'. If it can be claimed that as an approach the *Shura* is viewed as both a legislative and a historical experience, there is no doubt that to a large extent it represents the very identity of the society, and ensures the legitimacy of any ruling system in the country. GR1 (24/2/2009) clearly asserts this view:

*Shura is not limited to Islamic regimes only or to the modern theories of democracy that restrict the authorities of the government or country, "Shura" is deeper in meaning, more comprehensive in practice and further in aims and ends. The country gets power, unity and system from it. The society gets from "Shura" its solidarity, symbiosis and collaboration.*

Some respondents spoke more explicitly of the link between the *Shura* and Islam. This connection is important as it undermines the religious radicals who may challenge the legitimacy of the ruling regime, under the pretext that the contemporary *Shura* violates the *Shari'a* law. For example, GR7 (31/3/2009) said: '*Shura* has historical roots in Oman. It has started since Oman entered Islam and continued throughout Omani history. This practice rooted the idea of *Shura* in the thought, abstract conceptualisations and ambitions of the Omani society'.

These key terms: 'roots', 'practice', 'thought', 'conceptualisation' and 'ambitions', demonstrate near certainty that the *Shura* as a political system is more appropriate for Oman than any other political system, because the tradition of the *Shura* means identity, stability and a symbol of dignity for the Omani people. It is the primary source of the identity of Omani society. Furthermore, in selecting the *Shura*, the

legitimate government avoids potential clashes with religious intellectuals who are still regarded and frequently function as significant social leaders.

Some respondents spoke of the important link between the *Al-Busaidi* ruling family and the religious legitimacy of the *Shura*, as the family always and explicitly maintained their identity with their faith. For example, GR1 (24/2/2009) said:

*The extended Shura practice in Oman appears in the different aspects of life and in different levels of the social network of Oman, including in the Royal Family itself, and the Royal Family does not deviate from this rule in the process of choice. The Basic Statute of the State has come to be a stabiliser of this principle.*

Some of the Sultans were also called Imams or the sons of the Imams, whilst others were seen wearing the traditional white turban that is normally used by religious leaders and Imams. Some Sultans, in their Royal seal, have named themselves *Al Wathiq Be Amr Allah* (The Confident in God's Will). For example, GR6 (6/2/2009) said:

*The Al-Busaidi Sultans were able to distinguish between the religious dimension and the civilian dimensions of their rule while staying close to the two dimensions at the same time. For example, Sultan Said bin Sultan used the title Imam/Sultan together in his written decisions. The other sultans used the title 'the confident in God's will' to legitimate their rule on religious lines. The former Sultan, Said bin Taymur, was wearing the religious personality sometimes, especially after Jebel Akhdar War. He held religious rituals in his palace and was frequently wore a white turban to exhibit the religious dimension of his rule.*

Other respondents explained the philosophy that underpins Article 6 in the Basic Statute of the State. This statute attributes the role of determining the new successor to the throne to the Ruling Family. If they do not agree on the choice of the successor to the throne, the Defence Council will confirm the appointment of the person designated by the Sultan, in his letter to the Ruling Family Council. For example, GR6 (6/2/2009) claimed that the Omani legislation in this regard reflects general Islamic political practice as the rightly-guided Caliphs did the same thing when they prioritised certain names but left the actual choice to the nation which has sovereignty in this matter. He added that 'the hereditary system generally provides a sort of stability. If there are multiple options but an absence of social channels and a framework that allows the circulation of power peacefully, this can lead to societal break up and destruction'. His point is that in tribal societies hereditary rules may provide stability more effectively than democratic ones.

Some respondents spoke about the process of the modernisation of the *Shura*, which accords with the overall codification of Islamic jurisprudence. Judges do not, however, depend on jurisprudence texts other than those of civil law, though the two are clearly closely related. The result of this is that despite the fact that Oman is an Islamic country, Islam, Christianity and Hinduism do not in themselves affect governance. The modernisation of *Shura* is essential to satisfying the desires of non religious people in Oman, such as the rebels in *Dhofar* and the less religiously-motivated followers of Arab political trends. For example, GR1 (24/2/2009) said:

*Our embrace of the march of Shura present springs from the success of the process of turning this deep-rooted heritage and extended practice into an up-to-date civilised behaviour. This behaviour takes from the past its originality and from the present its benefits.*

In summary, respondents stressed the point that the *Shura* stems from the depths of Omani history and they assert that this fact was the main rationale behind the government's selection of it as a political basis for the modern state system. This historical relevance of the *Shura* makes it possible for people to accept, adhere to, and interact with the contemporary *Shura* process, and it facilitates attempts to make it more successful as a democratisation institution in the future. Most importantly, the adoption of *Shura* did not provoke the social resistance that it was feared might have occurred had another, more culturally alien system, been adopted. This Islamic *Shura* has been modified to accord with the wider ongoing development in the country, and particularly with development in education and literacy levels. This is evident in the following section.

#### **4.2.2 The Role of Education and Culture**

As has been mentioned above, the few Omani people who had studied prior to 1970 in neighbouring countries encountered ideologies that were common currency across the Arab World. They posed a challenge to the legitimate ruling system, because they regarded it as authoritarian, and argued for its substitution by others such as a republican, one-party system. At the time those educated people represented a minority, but they sought to extend their base through the educational institutions in which they occupied a large number of professional positions. The government realised this, and began to adopt a pluralist approach, declaring this openly to the citizenry. This declaration, as well as the swift developments that were initiated in the various public sectors, served to weaken and placate the challenging forces at that time. However, the

situation was problematic for the state-building process, and in particular with regard to the political reconstruction of Omani society. It would have been difficult to ask poorly educated people, who formed the majority of the whole population at that time, to participate in any modern political process, as their political awareness and culture was not refined by modern education, and their illiteracy and lack of political sophistication was likely to hinder them in their ability to work within the structures of modern political processes. This situation should be contrasted with those who studied in regular schools, and benefited from the curriculum in terms of the organisation of ideas and in the expansion of their understanding. Political participation of a democratic kind is particularly difficult if such people are unacquainted with modern political processes, and if such processes contradict their inherited traditions.

This may explain why the political process quite deliberately began with the Annual Royal Tours, as participation in those tours did not require a high level of education. A decade on, as the quality and quantity of education had evidently improved, the government fulfilled its earlier promise to open up the political horizon, and the process of the institutionalisation of the *Shura* began with the construction of the appointed Council (*Majlis Al-Istishari lid-Dawlah*: State Consultative Council). It was preceded by the establishment of *Majlis Al-Zira'a Wal-Asmak Was-Sina'a* (The Council of Agriculture, Fish and Industry). The brief of the latter was limited to discussion of policies related to those three sources of living for the Omani people throughout history. The powers given to the former were wider and covered most issues related to development policies. Nevertheless, the authorities given to both councils remained essentially consultative.

The subsequent ten years saw the establishment of the elected Council, and further improvements in education. This was supplemented by the gradual return of the cohorts of students who had studied abroad, and the Sultan Qaboos University, established in 1986, saw the graduation of its first students. The elected *Shura* Council is still taking gradual steps in broadening political participation in accordance with the levels of education and the culture of the community.

This link between education and the gradualism of political process may appear strange to observers outside of the immediate context, but closer observers of the process



of social transformation in Oman have found that most of the population were in fact illiterate in the 1960s. When the building of a modern state began in the 1970s and with it a modern education system, it became necessary to fill vacancies in the public service with the personnel bearing qualifications that were now available in the labour market. For example, the primary certificate (Class 6) was sufficient for a citizen to obtain an officer rank in the army during the 1970s. After the expansion of education, the Secondary School Certificate became the standard, whereas now a university degree is required. This gradual development in education applies to everything in Oman and affects everything including the political process. For example, GR1 (24/2/2009) said that education is used purposively to embrace the process of development in the country in general, and when the general level of education was significantly improved, appropriate qualification became a requirement to complete the process of building a political system that could boast sophisticated judicial, executive and legislative authorities.

The question arises as to why education in particular has this influence upon the political process and what level of education is and was intended. Apart from the limited challenges of those citizens who returned from study abroad before 1970, educated citizens are now to be viewed as better able to think systematically, are less influenced by tribal fanaticism and hence may be expected to push the political process forward. This reflects a view that tribal fanaticism had previously played a role in the outbreak of internal wars, and had manifest this sort of negative influence for several centuries. This education imperative is particularly relevant to those who studied in Western countries gained the insight of other more pluralist cultures, acquired social skills, and obtained postgraduate qualifications.

The interview data reveal that many of the respondents focused on the importance of education in the consolidation of the modern *Shura*. This suggests that education is one of the reasons which served to reinforce the adoption of the political process by the government from the top, during the early days of renaissance. GR10 (8/3/2009) said: 'Political change was unavoidable as there has been a development among Omani people in education and culture'. GR10 used the word 'unavoidable', which suggests that the government had no choice other than to open the political horizon for the participation of citizens, as graduates were challenging the political system, and their number was expected to rise dramatically. It was also anticipated that they would become aware of

their duties and rights. This is exactly what GR7 (31/3/2009) expected: 'The democratic process is related to the cultural and cognitive accumulation in the society; the greater the number of educated people, the more they feel the necessity of their having a role in decision making on the level of the district, region or country'.

The phrase 'they feel' used by GR7 seems to have been referring to the graduates, but it may be that he meant 'the government feels'. This assertion is given weight by the fact that elsewhere, he has exhibited frustration regarding the non-legislative power given to the *Shura* Council. The implication of this is that the government feels the necessity for opening up the political horizon when educational levels expand in society. (It is possible that he may have refrained from phrasing it in this manner in order to avoid an accusation of criticising the government's performance).

Some respondents offered justifications for the delay in opening up the political horizon, despite the government's promises to the citizens in the early days of the contemporary *Shura*. For example, GR9 (23/3/2009) said: 'For the *Shura* at present, it was impossible to go directly into its new institutional form. There were priorities such as expanding education and lifting up the citizens' standard of living'. Here, GR9 is saying that the government's slow progress in the *Shura* application was in order to allow an 'umbrella of education' to prevail in the country. Whilst this does not deny a view of the inflated argument of the influence of educated people on the government at the beginning of their adoption of a pluralist political system, it is a reminder of the perceived difficulty of opening up the political system whilst the majority of citizens were uneducated.

What can be gathered from the respondents' views above is that the Government's embracing of the political process from the top-down can be traced to the beginning of the Renaissance in the 1970s, when citizens educated in some neighbouring countries before the 1960s and 1970s formed a challenge to the government. This could be seen as one of the reasons that prompted the government to open the political horizon in the first instance, but it is certain that the development of political process later became a strategic concomitant with the development of the level of education. In other words, the citizenry's progress at educational and cultural levels played a vital role in the process of opening up the political horizon. Such expansion in education has of course

been reflected in wider urbanisation and globalisation processes from the 1990s onwards, not least in the enhancement of social mobility.

### 4.2.3 The Role of Globalisation

There is a great deal of debate about the impact of globalisation on the political regimes in the Middle East. As has been discussed in Chapter Two, some scholars consider that it can be credited as contributing to the process of social mobility from the 1990s onward, thereby leading to pressure on the government to carry out political reforms. Others feel that the political reforms in some states, such as the Arabian Gulf Countries, come from governments which are lacking in policies conducive to real social mobility. What is happening in the contemporary *Shura* process in Oman is not much different than what has appeared in this debate, although there is no academic study in particular which discusses the relationship between globalisation and the *Shura*. This being the case, a decision was made in the design of the study to introduce a question on the impact of globalisation on the current political process in Oman. It should be noted that all interviewees seemed to be aware of the meaning of globalisation, as they answered the question without asking for further clarification. Having said this, their responses tend to concentrate on the political, legal and social sides of globalisation rather than commercial aspects. This is probably because the main theme of the interviews focuses on the political process in Oman, and has nothing to do with the new global trade system.

There were differing views on globalisation and its impact on the political scene in the Sultanate. Few respondents were of the opinion that it has had a direct impact on the political scene, whereas some felt that it was only effective in certain aspects of this arena, such as in the international organisations and conventions that the country has been involved with during the last two decades. Other respondents linked globalisation to the satellite channels and the internet. Finally, there are those who felt that the Sultanate's tolerance and open approach to the world throughout history have reduced the effect of globalisation. GR1 (24/2/2009) began by arguing that globalisation does not contradict Islam, and he supported this claim with a *Quranic* verse that calls for this sort of opening up: 'This is the law of life that has been emphasised by the Quranic

verse: "O mankind ! lo !we have created you male and female , and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another".

As an attempt to reduce the significance of the influence of globalisation on the political process in Oman, GR1 (24/2/2009) said:

*Globalisation as a term may be new, but its different applications were always there and were practiced by countries and communities across different periods of history, although never at the same level that we see nowadays because of the great progress in the means of transportation and communication.*

GR1's admission that the effects of globalisation have increased in the contemporary era suggests that it has an influence on the political scene in Oman. However GR1, arguing for a reduced actual influence of globalisation, says that Oman's external relations are more than an attempt to accrue short term benefits. Rather, with its history of trading relations with much of Africa and the Middle East, and underpinned by its strategic position in the Gulf region, Oman has always embraced new principles and ideas if these in turn support the Omani people.

GR9 (23/3/2009) endorses GR1's argument with this statement: 'We in Oman have a society that has never lived in isolation. We are in fact integrating with the world'. The phrase 'never lived in isolation' demonstrates a firm belief that Oman is not radically challenged in any way by globalisation, since it has never suffered from isolation unlike some of its more immediate neighbours. The use of the word 'integrating', however, leaves no doubt that Oman is perceived as inevitably affected by globalisation, but that it still can manage itself in these circumstances.

Another example which confirms the ability of Omani society to adapt itself to globalisation came from GR6 (6/2/2009): 'I think that the Omani culture and the Omanis themselves are pragmatic, i.e. they do not insist on a certain culture or a certain political framework; their aim is to reach a certain benefit or result'. GR6 aimed here to explain that Omani people are able to adjust themselves to cultural changes, because they are pragmatic and tolerant towards different cultures. The majority of the interviewees agreed that Oman, through globalisation, is affected by other nations and cultures, but in turn also impacts on those others. GR9 described the positive impact of globalisation, arguing that Oman knows how to blend the benefits of globalisation with growing

demands for equal rights, accountability and transparency. He added that globalisation is not forcefully imposed on states by external forces. He here concentrates on the influence of globalisation on society, but not the political system. The words 'not forcefully' indicate that the society does not see globalisation as a threat, a fact that leads to the acceptance of some of the democratic values, such as equality, accountability and transparency. The embracing of such values by the society could lead in turn to an influence on the political scene in the long run, through an enhancement of the levels of social mobility.

Some respondents were confident that the benefits to be derived from globalisation are greater than the potential costs. For example, GR2 (18/3/2009) said: 'All efforts are being exerted so as to harvest the economic and scientific fruits of globalisation, while thwarting, and safeguarding against, its negative effects'. She is suggesting that the Sultanate has tried to maximize the positive aspects of globalisation and minimize the negative ones. The words 'harvest' and 'fruits' reflect the notion that there are positive aspects of globalisation in the eyes of some citizens. Additionally, GR2 feels that the negative effects of globalisation can be avoided.

As for the relationship between globalisation and the contemporary political process in Oman, most respondents agreed that there is no direct relation between the two. For example, GR8 (4/1/2009) said: 'Globalisation has an impact on economic, cultural and social issues and on the means of telecommunication', by which she means that there is no further direct impact on the political arena. This is clarified elsewhere, for example when she said: 'I do not see any impact of the international or regional events on the Sultanate, as it does not obey foreign dictations'. The word 'dictations' implies that GR8 feels that some superpowers have hidden agendas that serve their interests, and that they use globalisation in order to fulfil those agendas.

The majority of the respondents agreed that there is no direct relationship between the initiation of the contemporary *Shura* in Oman and globalisation, which indicates that globalisation is not perceived as a causal factor in the emergence of the *Shura*. GR6, for example, said: 'Much of the political literature and many researches that have been carried out connect the two things (political process and globalisation). I think there is no relation between them though they may accord in time'. GR6 (6/2/2009) also said:

*His Majesty started to separate the internal theatre from external effects slowly and carefully without any interference that may hinder this vision. Therefore, I do not think that there is a clear and direct connection [between globalisation and the Omani political arena].*

Some respondents, in order to deny any role of globalisation in the contemporary political process in the country, related the political steps to internal needs. For example, GR10 (8/3/2009) said: 'The political change in Oman is not connected to Globalisation but to the societal needs with concomitant adherence to *mores* and traditions'. By this, he means that the political openness in the State is the result of the evolution of internal demand, part of the educational and cultural advance in the community, and not a result of external demand. GR3 (23/3/2009) also supported this argument: 'Globalisation affected many places, but much of the development that took place in Oman is not because of globalisation and external calls'. The word "much" possibly means that there may exist some developments which may be results of globalisation, especially in the last two decades. For example, the modified Labour Law and the Labour Union that has been recently founded are part of the requirements of the signing of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the Free Trade Agreement (FTA)<sup>214</sup>. What supports this argument still further is GR7's claim: 'Globalisation may have speeded up some political steps in the development of the *Shura* work in the Sultanate'. The 'steps' to which he is referring are perhaps the participation of women in the political process, as part of the wider establishment of a universal franchise in the Sultanate.

Some respondents, however, believed that the contemporary social movements occurring in society in recent times are partially a result of globalisation – for example through some TV channels such as Al-Jazeera. This obviously refers to the change in the definition of sovereignty due to certain elements such as the introduction of the media and the internet, which challenged the old definition of the state political borders and sovereignty. Most interviewees agreed that there is a significant impact of mass media and the global technical revolution in information on the Omani community, which is reflected variously in the political situation in the country. GR8 and GR10 raised the issue of the range of influences which the media and the internet revolution have affected on the political scene. For example, GR8 (4/1/2009) said:

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<sup>214</sup> See Al-Jabri, K. *Oman's Joining the WTO and Signing the FTA with the US*. PhD Thesis, University of Durham, 2009.

*The media and internet revolution has had a greater influence on the political life through the creation of larger spaces of freedom for the citizen who is the axis for producing knowledge and information. Without granting him all chances of freedom, equality, justice and learning opportunities, his creative participation in development cannot be ensured so as to ensure the development of democratic institutions.*

GR10 (8/3/2009) also said: 'There is no doubt that these issues (the media and the internet) have an influence upon the society and a reflection on the political scene. We accept these influences and respond to them seriously and try to organise and legitimise them'.

It is evident that GR8 felt that this openness of access to information would mean a strengthening of civil society, which is required for the improvement of political practice. The words 'respond to them seriously'; used by GR10, who occupies an executive position in the government, convey something about the influence of the media and the internet revolution on the political scene. They may reveal also something of how the government responds to that influence. Also the word 'legitimise' suggests that new legislative measures have been issued in response to the influences of the mass media and the internet revolution.

GR9 (23/3/2009) had a different view on the influence of the media and the internet revolution on the political scene, positing that the openness of information has created a careless generation:

*What is really worrying is the young generation's ambitions became strange; some of them dream of being a football player and others want to be singers and there are only very few who want to be politicians. The influence of the media and the internet revolution is only effective upon a small portion of the society. This contradicts with our desire to create a strong civil society.*

She was indirectly supported by GR1 when he argued that in an age defined by globalisation, Oman had to develop mechanisms which allowed access to information but without undermining the essence of 'Omanism' that is respect for community and for others.

Here GR9 speculates that the proliferation of recreation channels has created a generation lacking in traditional motivation, and argues that these channels are not a phenomenon which can be credited for the occurrence of social mobility. This would appear to suggest that the media and the internet revolution might not best serve the interests of social mobility which could have a positive effect on the political situation

in the country. GR1 (24/2/2009), with regard to the abundance of depressing TV channels, said that Oman will not use the old ways of blacking out the media, and that home and community bear responsibility in the upbringing of new generations under these conditions. He suggests that the local information institutions should offer balanced programmes which compensate for some of the negative effects of many recreational television channels.

Some of the interviewees broached the subject of the effect of globalisation on legal matters, and the links between globalisation and the Sultanate's allegiance to some international organisations. Specifically mentioned was the signing the agreement with the WTO, and mention was made of some international conventions that have taken place in the last two decades. Perhaps of most importance is the Sultanate's accession to the Free Trade Agreement with the United States. This is because some articles of those conventions stipulate the development of some laws, and the establishment of certain civil society organisations. For example, GR7 (31/3/2009) said:

*Today, you sign cultural, economic, security, political and commercial charters, and these countries ask you to adhere to certain criteria of globalisation and integration among societies. Countries undergo internal and external pressures to change their policies and apply the appropriate political and social models.*

The words 'necessitates' and 'pressures' indicate the direct influence of the international organisations in Oman, which agrees with the influence of those organisations on government policies (discussed in section 2.8). However, in an attempt to minimize the significance of the pressures that take place due to the Sultanate's signing of international conventions, GR9 (23/3/2009) said:

*Some international agreements do not add anything to our policies, the country signs them as an accompaniment in order to keep the state in the international system. Furthermore, when we sign agreements we reserve some articles that conflict with our religion or traditions, so we take the best and leave the rest. We cannot implement the American pragmatism. The collective interest is more important for us than that of individualism.*

The word 'accompaniment' indicates that not all steps expressed as intentions by the government in response to given international pressures are practised in reality. The state takes them to be in line with the global system, but it does not necessarily apply them, particularly if they are contrary to the prevailing religious mood and the dominant traditions. This is the very essence of the concept of the *Umma* – the 'nation', but in a



particularly Islamic context - and if the elites have this attitude towards the very strengthening of the concepts of the *Umma* and the community, then the possibility of social transformation in accordance with the values of democratisation in Oman is brought into question. GR5 (15/3/2009) supported this argument: 'Some laws have been drafted to keep side by side to what happens in the world'.

To summarise, many of the interviewees minimize the impact of globalisation on the contemporary political process in Oman, on the grounds that the Omani people, through their routine contact with neighbouring nations, are made conscious of their difference from others in the region. Others felt that globalisation has not played a significant role in furthering or initiating the process of opening up the political horizon, the process adopted by the government since the 1970s. It was claimed, however, that it had in fact brought about an acceleration of some political steps in the last two decades. More importantly, some of the interviewed elite emphasised the issue of how imperative is the adherence to the concepts of the *Umma* and community, stating that globalisation will not make Omani society surrender these principles for the sake of democratic values.

Some respondents looked at the issue from the economic influence of globalisation through signing agreements with international organisations or superpowers. They felt that signing those agreements oblige the Sultanate to draft legislation as a response to those agreements. However, other respondents played down the effect that may result from signing those agreements by saying that the Sultanate only takes from them what is suitable for its essential nature and composition. Other respondents feared the influence of the satellite channels and internet on the new generation. Overall, the respondents believe that the political process in Oman is certainly not a result of globalisation or foreign dictates, and point rather to belief in the indigenous political processes which may reduce challenges from the religious intellectuals and the young generation.

### **4.3 Traditional and Contemporary *Shura*: Similarities and Differences**

After exploring the reasons that might have influenced the Omani Government to adopt the political process from the top down, respondents were asked about the

relationship between *Shura* in the past and in the present. There was some variation in respondents' interpretation of the question. Some focused on the relationship between the two historical phenomena and argued that the recent is a natural extension of the old. Others went on, especially when faced with sub-question prompts, to talk about the similarities and differences in the two expressions. A third group spoke of the pros and cons of the old and the contemporary *Shura*. Some others, however, drew on more than one of these conceptualisations of the question.

It was notable throughout the interviews that many of the respondents did not distinguish between the *Shura* as a **principle** (that is as something which is derived from the traditions or the religion) and the *Shura* as a **practice** and a political application, so it is not surprising that the majority of the respondents said that there is no contradiction or difference between the traditional and the contemporary *Shura*, as both expressions share the same principle although they are – at least partially - different in the manner in which they practise this principle. Even in the literature, there is nothing to be found that differentiates between the principle and the practice of the *Shura* except what some intellectuals on occasion express orally. GR1 (24/2/2009) said: "There is no discrepancy between them. There has been development of that experience to cope with the modern time", GR5 (15/3/2009) said:

*The modern experiment is an extension of the old one. It passed through all royal families that ruled Oman since ancient times till it reached the State of Al Said. It is a deep-rooted process in the Omani societal self. What happened during recent years is nothing more than development. There is no contradiction or difference between the two experiments.*

Only two of the respondents noted the difference in practice in a clear and direct way. For example, GR8 (4/1/2009) said: 'There is no difference between the two in terms of principles, but there is difference in the mechanisms and the way of practising those principles', and GR4 (28/2/2009) said:

*There is no difference between the traditional and the contemporary Shura except in practice. Shura in the past was simple in its understanding and in its practice. People in each wilayat (district) used to know each other; there were no outlandish people in the society as transportation means were primitive. The harmony in society in each wilayat, due to the similarities in lifestyle patterns and the daily behaviour of people, has facilitated the system of the Shura in leading to united views. While at present the situation has become more complicated, as residents in districts came from different*

*places that resulted in mixing up of inhabitants. This does not negate the presence of harmony in the society, but it resulted in complication in the process of Shura due to the cultural differences of people. This complicated situation necessitates the establishment of institutions for practicing Shura.*

Apart from the similarities and differences between the traditional and the contemporary *Shura*, it is important to be aware of two points raised by GR4. His first related to the lack of strangers in the community in the past, which meant that the *Sheikh* or the *Faqih* (religious intellectual) could readily represent the people given his familiarity with their culture. With the diversity of the population at present, however, and the different cultural groups constituting Omani society, pluralism has now to be a recognised factor in the democratic representation of people. Hence, giving the traditional *Shura* legislative and executive powers may not be a risky project on the grounds that the decision makers are the elite of society, who are seen as the most knowledgeable and wise people. However, in respect of widening participation in political decision-making, the new *Shura* process could make the issue of extending legislative and executive powers in the current phase very risky (see section 4.4.2 below); such risks reflect the fact that the community in Oman is still youthful and lacking experience, and with the presence of social problems, such as tribal fanaticism, the reluctance of some graduates to participate in elections, and the purchase of electoral votes.

The second point, more importantly, highlights the difficulties in geographical movement and the primitive means of transportation which have troubled Omani people in the past (see also section 5.4. in the Chapter 5). If this is a sufficient reason for explaining the lack of social leaders representing marginal groups in the process of *Shura*, it throws the very question of the process of selection of the Imam himself into question. Scientific education and the practice of religious education have been hitherto concentrated in very limited areas, far from each other, in the interior of Oman, perhaps most importantly *Nizwa* and *Rustaq*. This has made the opportunity to be educated and achieve social mobility limited to the residents of those areas and its neighbouring towns. This fact has likely seen the powerful *Imamate* concentrated in certain families from certain areas throughout the different phases of Omani history. This does not bring into question the integrity of the selection processes behind the assignation of the Imams or the principle of inheritance in the *Ibadi* notion, but simply provides the reasons for the fact that the *Imamate* has always been geographically and genealogically concentrated. It is also worth noting that upon the death of an Imam, the people in the

inner circle of the ruler are more likely to be chosen as Imams as difficulties in transportation and topography often deprive other qualified intellectuals in remote areas of selection opportunities. (See section 5.3.1).

Returning to the comparison between the traditional and contemporary *Shura*, some respondents detailed the differences in the practice of both processes. GR7 (31/3/2009), for example, said:

*The old Shura depended on religious thought in choosing the Imam and today it has become political and religious thought and these two processes helped to root the idea of choosing the one who will represent the nation, whether the Imam in the past, or the members of the Shura Council now.*

He here addresses the distinction between the religious dimension of the traditional *Shura* and the civil dimension of the contemporary *Shura*. At the same time he adds that the two processes accord with one another in terms of the election of national representatives, such as the Imams in the past and the members of the *Shura* Council at present.

GR6 (6/2/2009) was the most objective in comparing the traditional and the contemporary *Shura*, and this is not surprising because he is regarded as a political thinker and talks from his career experience in the *Shura* Council:

*The old Shura made the decision process based on what is called agreement or consensus. We notice that the Shura Council even now rarely practices voting, and there is rarely a divergence of opinion on a matter of such great gravity that there occurs what Western democracies would be familiar with in terms of disagreement. The Shura of the Imams was executive and legislative, as it used to take its rules from the Islamic jurisprudence and the Imams had to execute them, but its rules are compulsory to a great extent. The present Shura rules are not compulsory. The second thing is that Shura in the past was a channel for choosing the Imam and a channel for the circulation of power, but now the Shura is a constitutional institution that aims at providing the opinion that supports the government in the process of decision making and it is not compulsory too. Third, the process of choice, despite the fact that there were some similarities in the channels such as the tribe or the area, there were some differences in the real criteria. Most of the members of the council of the elite (Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd) were religious men or scholars who are known for their social position or their financial power. The modern structure of the Shura from 1970 until now has not necessarily reflected the values found in old Shura except may be in the beginning of the Shura Council, because the role of the tribe (in determining the Council's members) was clear and there were no real elections.*

*However, now there are members from the different categories of the society, yet, the role of the tribe is still clear.*

According to GR6, the traditional and the contemporary *Shura* meet in the principles of unanimity and consensus and non-reliance on the voting process in meetings and decision-making. The traditional *Shura* is distinct as it provided a channel for the devolution of power through its executive authority and its binding decisions, and it was flawed, according to GR6, by the limited number of citizens who were able to participate in it. By contrast, the contemporary *Shura* is distinguished by its institutional and participative openness to all citizens. Its flaws stem from the fact that its authority is only advisory. GR10 (8/3/2009) reflects a similar view when he says: '*Shura* will be more successful if it benefits more from the traditional *Shura* whilst utilising the modern features', and he presumably means that it should be a more successful legislative and executive process, and a channel for the devolution of power, though not necessarily at the level of the ruling, but at the governmental level. He amplifies this belief when he speaks of the need for new blood in the Government (as is shown below in section 4.5.2).

In general respondents' views show an agreement in terms of the quintessential principles shared by the traditional *Shura* and the contemporary *Shura*, both based on the religious thought and the values of society. By contrast, there is considerable variation in practice between the two processes. In the past, the ruler was chosen to represent the people, while now members are elected to represent people in the *Shura* Council. In the past, political participation was preserved for *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd*, whereas it is now open to all segments of society.

Therefore, the interviewed elite did not feel that the traditional *Shura* might be a challenge to the contemporary *Shura* but rather saw the latter as a natural continuation of the former. They also did not view the followers of the traditional *Shura* as thus opposed to the government.

#### **4.4 Respondents' Critique of the Contemporary *Shura***

Responses generally indicate that the approach taken by the Government in the process of the modernisation of the *Shura* did not meet citizens' expectations. This is

because no women from outside the capital area were elected to the *Shura* Council, nor, except on rare occasions, did qualified citizens represent people in the Council. The negative effects of some social factors such as tribal fanaticism remained significant in the *Shura* Council elections. The Government, in order to balance the situation, has taken some steps, such as including qualified people (including women) in the State Council and the Council of Ministers and thus absorbing them into the governance process. The Government did not rush to give comprehensive powers to the *Shura* Council. It was not easy to rely entirely on the studies and recommendations of the Council, largely because of the quality of its members, and powers have not exceeded an advisory level until very recently.

It was important, therefore, for me to research views of government representatives on these aspects. Generally, interview data, as detailed below, show that the defects in the contemporary *Shura* process are the direct result of two main factors: one is related to the role of government and the second is related to the negative/non-modern practices of Omani society.

#### **4.4.1 The Role of Government**

Two respondents, GR6 and GR7, spoke of the disadvantages of the contemporary *Shura*. Their views are important to this study because they derived from their daily participation in the realities of the *Al-Shura* Council's work. GR6 (6/2/2009) focused on three points he saw as important in terms of the improvement of the mission of the *Shura* in the future: The first point was expressed as follows:

*An effective role of the Shura council should appear in policy because people now are not certain that it has an effective role. This can be shown in the Royal decrees of issuing legislations, by referring to the role of the council in the creation of these legislations. There are also clear instructions to the mass media not to transmit what happens in the Shura Council meetings. There is, also, an agreement from the Council of Ministers that the Shura Council can issue a publication on condition that they should modify the press items according to the vision of the Minister of Information and the Omani News Agency.*

Here GR6 expresses the opinion that it is imperative that the government gives the *Shura* Council a higher effective status. This is implicit in the mentioning of the Council's role in some of the Royal decrees – which were related to the issuance of certain legislations; and in the mentioning of the issue of broadcasting the meetings of

the Council; and in the mentioning of the absence of requirement setting and the potential effects of this upon the publication of the Council's newspaper. GR6 intends to promote and propagate the Council throughout society in order to convince people of the importance of its role, in the hope of encouraging people to nominate the best qualified citizens for membership in the future.

In the second point, GR6 urges the Government to promote guarantees to the members of the Council after the end of the term, and also stresses the need to clarify the legislation relating to parliamentary immunity so as to ensure the non-prosecution of the member after the fall of the parliamentary immunity. GR6 also here urges the government to consider the creation of a special retirement system for members which would ensure a fixed income following the end of a given membership:

*Many people are afraid of joining the Council as members because of many considerations, such as judicial pursuit due to the fact that the legislations related to parliamentary immunity are not clear. Some considerations also are related to occupational development and progress. If a person, for example, was a director or a general director, he cannot go back to his previous job after leaving the council and there is no retirement system or system that gives them an advantage.*

There are two important points here, relative to those previously raised during interview with the Minister of Interior during the 2007 elections. The first relates to the return of a member of the Council to his previous public job after the end of the term, and it is here proposed by respondents that this runs counter to the full independence of the Council member. Such a policy is likely to make a member cautious in terms of his/her accountability when in government due to considerations about his/her future career. The question of creating a pension system for the members after the termination of the membership is difficult because of the high turnover rate of the Council's members, which according to GR6 reaches 65%. Most members in Oman rarely run for more than one session, (in contrast to some developed countries where some members serve for decades). Regarding the issue of parliamentary immunity, it was argued here that the immunity law covers the members during the period of membership and it ends by the end of the term, and that there had not been any judicial pursuit of any former Council member for his professional performance during the membership.

In the third point made by GR6 (6/2/2009), the Government is urged to strengthen the infrastructure of the political process:

*The infrastructures of the political process require transparency of information, freedom of opinion, the encouragement of civil society institutions, and finding channels and civil frameworks different from the tribe. The tribe is very effective in our society and we cannot consider it negative but the social system could be based on tribal frameworks or occupational frameworks. Therefore, we should have alternative framework other than the tribal framework, otherwise it is natural to expect that the member that is voted for will represent his tribe first and not the area or the Sultanate and his loyalty will be for the tribe. Thus we are not following the efficiency criterion.*

Therein is a call here for the government to improve the social infrastructure of political process in the Sultanate. The words '[A]lternative frameworks' may be taken to mean strengthening civil society associations in order to replace tribal fanaticism in as a determining factor in the elections. GR6's argument here is questionable, because civil society organisations in some neighbouring countries such as Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon are dominated by different ethnic forces.

From his vantage point, GR7 (31/3/2009) claimed that 'there is a gap between the *Shura* Council and the Government, our work is flawed and our authorities are incomplete and there is a gap between us and the Council of Ministers'.

GR7 has here directed our attention to the limited powers granted to the *Shura* Council, describing it as non-legislative, and its subjection to constraints and routine is clearly a matter of concern for him. Efforts on the part of the members of the Council are sometimes ignored by some government agencies, and this in turn causes frustration for the qualified members of the Council. At the same time, GR7 here confirms that His Majesty does not accept the presence of such a gap between the government and the *Shura* Council and commissions His directives to avoid it. GR7 (31/3/2009) also said:

*The committees of the parliament should have qualified, professional and administrative staff. The administrative staffs in our committee consist of four simple employees, one of them is an expert and most of his time is spent on serving the higher authorities in the Council. Although the Council had its independence and administration it may still be ashamed to practice any pressure on the government to increase its budget or its authorities because the Chairman of the Council is appointed. I think that the time has come to elect the Chairman of the Council, to give the chance to the Council to practice its authorities in a wider and more comprehensive style. We should*



*not be afraid of this step because the members are the core of the society and they are interested in protecting the country and keeping it away from the dangers that affect the safety and stability of the society, and they depend on the parliamentary immunity to achieve the aims selected by the government and the society equally and carefully.*

GR7 speaks above about the importance of having an elected Chairman of the *Shura* Council, as the Chairmen appointed by the Government not only find it difficult to criticise the government's performance, but also to bring pressure on the government to strengthen the Council's financial position. The current financial situation, it is proposed here, has resulted in a shortage of qualified administrative staff. This situation limits the ability of the Council to exercise its existing powers, and it would be even more difficult were the government to decide to give greater powers to the Council.

When I interviewed GR3 (23/3/2009), I put forward most of the points raised by GR6 and GR7 above. GR3 is a senior official of the Ministry of the Interior, which oversees many of the policies related to the *Shura* Council, including the regulations governing the elections, election administration, and most probably the aspects of policy-making concerning the progress of the Council. GR3's response was as follows:

*The effect cannot be denied, especially in the case of tribalism but not for sectarianism. As a government we do not interfere. The conviction of the citizens has its role. Unfortunately, voters are not looking for the best, but they are interested rather in tribal ties and affinity relationships. Hopefully, as time passes and the number of educated people increases, the effect of the tribe will decrease. We are better than some countries which have tribes. The reluctance of educated people to participate is worrying. They speak of what the Council has done and express dissatisfaction with the members. This negative attitude and reluctance of the educated citizens is the reason behind that because they are counted for changing things for the better. On the other hand, some people express their unwillingness to leave their jobs for a not guaranteed membership period that may be long or short. The answer to those people is that the membership means service to the nation and should not be linked to one's career. A constituency may re-elect the same member if he has proved himself to be apt. Some distinguished members are honoured, when not re-elected, with membership in the State Council, and some of them have a prominent career opportunity in the private sector. The authorities conferred to the Council are numerous but they are not exercised. Besides, members may not be familiar with the numerous powers conferred to them. It is their duty to get acquainted with them through coordination with the secretariat of the Council and to make use of them in an appropriate manner.*

In addition, according to GR3, the creation of social institutional alternatives to tribal fanaticism such as political parties, as GR6 suggested, is not desirable: 'we see

that tribalism is better than political parties. The tribe's loyalty is beyond question but a party might be directed by foreign ideologies'. He said that graduates showing any reluctance to participate in the political process are denying their responsibility to the nation, and that their justification for giving up regular jobs is unacceptable and incompatible with the principle of sacrifice for the homeland. This is especially so since some members are absorbed by the State Council and the private sector after the end of their terms. He also added that the additional authorities of the *Shura* Council will come in a timely manner, and that there are no members of the Council who could be assigned with the responsibility of the presidency because of a lack of experience:

*The question of the appointment of the head of the Shura Council remains one of the higher policies held by government due to a lack of members who are able to take on this responsibility, and that may be changed in the near future if the legislature finds that there are members who have the abilities to assume this responsibility. The Chair of the Council, usually, is one of the qualified citizens who has served the State and who has sufficient experiences and skills to take on this responsibility. There are young and enthusiastic members who may have the scientific competence, but lack the sufficient experience.*

Regardless of the explanations given by GR3 and the Minister of Interior, it is obvious that citizens see that there are some points that people are uncertain about and need to be clarified. GR6 and GR7, themselves members of the Council, have this impression, and it is certain that they sensed these concerns from the members of the Council or from the public who spoke with them about the Council.

#### **4.4.2 The Role of Community**

Oman is a tribal society, in which the tribe is the very foundation of the social fabric. It occupies, one might say, ontological priority. As GR7 (31/3/2009) put it; the tribe is considered to be a symbol of pride and honour, and the origin of any citizen. It plays a significant social role in looking after its new generations and the protection of its people. It helps them to achieve their needs, indeed it provides a normative framework which defines at least non-biological needs, and it stands beside them at times of adversity and misfortunes. By contrast, the negative aspects of tribal culture includes the tribe's unequivocal support to its people regardless of the rightness or wrongness of those people's conduct, and the capacity for tribes to compete with, or make alliance (*Shaff*) with, other tribes in order to achieve their interests over and above the interests of others, and sometimes even over and above the national interest. The tribe at times sees other

social entities as having instrumental significance only, in the sense that the interests of other tribes and those of units such as the nation are of secondary importance<sup>215</sup>.

Despite the importance of tribalism in ensuring the social cohesion of Oman, the internal wars that the country suffered throughout history were due to tribal fanaticism. A classic example – as mentioned in Chapter 3 above - is the conflict which occurred towards the end of the Second Imamate State, in the late era of Imam Al-Salt Ibn Malik, which was due to tribal conflict between blocs of *Nizari* and *Yemeni*. The repercussions of this conflict lasted for more than four centuries. Another prime example is the internal war that occurred towards the end of the *Ya'ariba* rule due to tribal conflict between blocs of *Hinawi* and *Ghafri*. Again, the repercussions of this conflict remained until the 1970s. It is this negative side of tribalism (tribal fanaticism) that the contemporary government has sought to counter by attempting to make a national loyalty take precedence over and above all other affiliations.

The construction of the contemporary *Shura* in Oman, built on the government's establishing of general rules, now awaits its completion by qualified people who can use the given powers and convince the government that the society is eligible for greater authorities. The problem occurs if the tribe or sect submits unequivocal support to their candidates in the *Shura* Council elections, at the expense of the qualified candidates. GR1 (24/2/2009) said:

*This is what election enlightenment campaigns kept calling for in the last elections to prevent interference by social components which have potentially politically damaging effects and to stop these components from being controllers of perspectives in a narrow minded way that deprives the society of potential efficiencies.*

This problem hinders the fulfilment of the desired goal of the *Shura*, and would probably delay the process of gaining greater powers. It might be expected that the state will not surrender its legislative powers to non-qualified citizens, at a time when there are competencies and experts available for the government who are currently drafting the legislation.

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<sup>215</sup> Rabi, U. 2006, pp. 9-16.

The field study focused on the views of the government officials on the impact of societal malpractices on the contemporary *Shura* process in Oman. Interviews revealed that the influence of tribal fanaticism, in manipulating elections towards its own interests, is a concern for most respondents, including GR6 and GR7 who were seen in the last section as critical of the government steps in opening up the political horizon. These are the sort of social vertical divisions that were cited in Chapter 2 and are likely to hinder democratisation processes. By contrast, the interviewees did not seem to be concerned whatsoever about sectarianism and its concomitant problems, believing that it has no role of any type in the contemporary *Shura* process. GR6 (6/2/2009) noted more than once the negative impact of tribal fanaticism on the *Shura* Council's elections; he said: 'The role of the tribe is now clear in nominating candidates'. He means that tribal fanaticism has directed elections in its favour, which may thus effectively minimise freedom of voting. He said elsewhere: 'The role of the tribe was clear and there were no real elections'. This does not mean that the independent candidate does not belong to a certain tribe but that he undertakes candidacy independently because he feels that he is properly qualified for the job, and seeks election in the light of his skills and experience rather than his tribal origin or tribal support.

GR7 (31/3/2009) spoke in an indirect way about tribes sustaining support of their tribal brethren candidates to reach the *Shura* Council regardless of their competence: 'Most of the members of the council are not supreme because their education and abilities are very limited in thought and contributions'. Accordingly, GR9 (23/3/2009) felt that government intervention in scheduling the opening of the political horizon gradually is unavoidable, fearing that the tribal tyrannies, if the door was opened in one swift movement, could lead to chaos and tribal conflict: 'The government interference in the beginning was important because of the tribal society that may lead to tribal tyranny and control of elections'.

GR6 (6/2/2009) spoke about a timetable that some of the tribes agreed on for the electoral return of each one of their candidates at each session of the *Shura* Council: 'In some areas, tribes have a table system and the membership is circulated among them'; this process is a breach of the *Shura* process and leads to an increase in the rate of rotation of Council members in each term. In addition it deprives independent candidates of their chances in elections. GR1 (24/2/2009) also said: 'Some of the old

ways still affect the process of selecting the representatives of the *Shura* council. Some of the candidates and voters gather in the public councils found everywhere in the Sultanate to consult each other before the day of election'.

By contrast, some interviewees said that the tribe is sometimes a positive factor in elections. It prompts people to participate and some respondents said that the tribe is part of a reality that we should live with and that tribes now are weaker than before; GR7 (31/3/2009), for example, said: 'The whole tribe participates effectively when the tribal leader asks for participation'. In fact, tribe might be a positive factor in raising the turnout in the elections, but fundamentally it is a negative factor because it denies an election its credibility by guiding the process of voting in accordance with tribal ties rather than devotion to finding the most suitable and best qualified candidate. GR9 (23/3/2009) said:

*Omani people even in big towns always tend to live as families or tribes at the same place. Even if one of them moves from the rural areas to the capital area, after some time he brings his relatives to reside next to him. This is the nature of the Omani society's tendency to kinship relations in residential areas. That is why tribes, with regard to the administrative division, remained concentrated in certain residential areas. Tribalism now does not have that previous titanic force. The Omani government is a welfare government; therefore the reliance on the tribes or the tribal leaders is lessening.*

GR9, therefore, believes that while the tribe as a social fabric is part of the Omani social reality, it is now weaker as a source of social allegiance than before because people are more urbanised and also because of the welfare role that the Government now occupies. This role was previously understood as a function of the tribe. This is the very essence of the implicit social contract between the government and citizens. Therefore, living in urbanised towns does not dilute these kinship relations, nor does the government social contract. It might be surmised from this that the current social transformation process in Oman will not much affect the cohesion of the social fabric.

The other phenomenon that is identifiable in Omani society, and one which the respondents spoke about, is the reluctance of the educated classes, particularly graduates, to participate in elections. GR1 (24/2/2009) feels that participation is a national duty and the failure of the educated class to participate may lead to an unwanted result such as the dominance of tribal fanaticism:

*It is a national duty to adhere to performing this task for everyone with dedication to this work and it is important to give preference to the public interest rather than to personal interest. Thus, there must be no preference to a tribe or belief if we wish to establish an effective partnership on the long run away from the disadvantages of hateful fanaticism.*

It was mentioned in the previous section that graduates are not willing to sacrifice their jobs for the Council's membership and that they are not sure about the future of the Council's members financially and judicially. Some respondents believe that this negative attitude of graduates, and their reluctance to participate in the elections, opens up even greater access to the council for some of the less qualified (tribal candidates). GR3, for example said: 'This negative attitude and reluctance on the part of intellectuals is the reason behind that [tribal control of elections], although they are counted for changing things for the better'. So GR3 argues that the reluctance of the educated classes to participate in elections enables tribal fanaticism to play an even more significant role in elections and to direct elections in such a fashion that they reflect and reinforce tribal divisions. The word 'intellectuals' that he used gives an indication that not all educated people are targeted to improve the political process in the country but only those who have the sufficient capabilities and the necessary attributes to be able to enhance the process.

Some respondents gave some explanations of the reasons behind the educated class' boycott of the elections. GR6 (6/2/2009) felt that the poor performance and perceived lack of functionality of some former members of the *Shura* Council had a negative effect on the turnout of the educated classes to the elections: 'Some of the ex-members were not good examples'. In addition, GR9 felt that the absence of a clear agenda of appropriate candidates for membership of the Council made the educated class of voters incurious and disinterested regarding the elections: 'The absence of clear agendas of the candidates led the educated people to boycott elections'. This does not necessarily suggest a need for political parties, but possibly suggests using the social and cultural space provided by law to convince people of their capabilities and their political views. Political parties are seen as incompatible with the general approach of the *Shura*. For example GR1 (24/2/2009) said:

*The Shura is not monopolised by the pressure groups and parties or majorities, it is the right of everyone to participate in making decisions with regard to his future and for all members of society without differentiation between one person and another, a male or female.*

As an affirmation of the importance of the role of graduates GR1 (24/2/2009) said:

*As for educated people's refrain from the last elections of the council, this will not achieve the hoped for benefits of the council. I do not know the reason behind this refrain, but I'm sure that the progress of this council and the practice of its real authorities in serving the society and the country will not be achieved in the way we desire unless everyone takes the initiative - especially the people of knowledge and experience - to join this national criterion. Its members must also make great effort to activate the Council's authorities in the required way.*

Once again the words 'knowledge and experience' determine what kind of educated classes are considered reliable and sufficiently competent to improve the political process in the country. It is not clear whether tribal fanaticism causes the educated class' reluctance to participate, or whether the educated class' reluctance to participate furthers tribal fanaticism. There might be some other reasons as well such as the absence of clear agendas of the candidates. If we take into account, however, the youthful nature of the Omani society, we might say that the opportunity for educated classes to change the reality for their benefit, if they are willing, would be far greater. This is because educated young people, who have been taught to regard the nation as the priority, constitute a proportionally bigger unit than the uneducated older people who give their primary allegiance to other social units such as the tribe. GR9 (23/3/2009) supported this argument when she said that the educated class' boycott of elections due to tribal fanaticism could be an excuse but not a reason because graduates have the same habit in the civil society associations, taking into account that tribal fanaticism is not present there:

*The educated people's boycott is also obvious in the civil society organisations; this is because of the weakness of volunteering culture. We should expand their awareness of the volunteering culture; we should dedicate the culture of bonus to the national home. The public job is not a bonus from the citizen to his country because he gets salary for it. The real bonus is the one comes outside the official duties, particularly in the volunteered social service.*

Therefore, it seems that the graduates' boycott of the political process does not necessarily reflect dissatisfaction with the political process itself but could be a result of carelessness due to a lack of awareness of the significance of social activities in general. This point has also been mentioned by some of the younger generation respondents themselves (as will be discussed in Chapter 6). This problem coincides with the observation in Chapter 2 about the weak civil society in the Arab World in general and their unwillingness to participate in volunteering culture.

A third phenomenon that affects the elections, and one that the respondents themselves noted, is that of vote-buying. GR4 (28/2/2009), for example, said: 'I heard about some malpractices of buying votes and we need to have some strict regulations to minimize them. The Ministry of Interior is fully aware of this problem and I heard that some suspects were interrogated by the responsible ministry'.

The words 'strict regulations' used by GR4 reflect the urgency of this matter and indicate that it requires imperative, quick and firm action to check it. GR9 (23/3/2009) also considered vote-buying to be a serious matter that should be addressed to ensure that qualified candidates run for seats of the Council, and not those who are simply able to buy their votes: 'The malpractices of some candidates through buying votes affected the stature of the Council and led the educated people to run away from this unhealthy environment'. Here is another definition and articulation of precisely who amongst the educated classes are needed to improve the political process, namely those who fight any malpractices such as vote-buying.

In general, it is clear from these data that there are some shortcomings in the government and in the governance process of the contemporary *Shura*. On the other hand, however, the government appears to be monitoring the development of the community, and does not want to widen the political space as long as some social practices, such as tribal fanaticism, the reluctance of educated classes to participate, and the process of vote-buying are still significantly affecting the political environment<sup>216</sup>. Since the Government has adopted this process from the outset it may be suggested that it has a particular responsibility to take more courageous steps to promote the positives of the contemporary *Shura* in the future and to minimize the negative features which impede its efficient progress and success.

#### **4.5 Challenges to the Contemporary *Shura***

The contemporary *Shura* is expected to face challenges from the followers of the traditional *Shura*, from the new generation, and from the economic problems which

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<sup>216</sup> The Minister of Interior said in an interview published in Oman Newspaper on 19/4/2010 that the Ministry will apply the articles mentioned in chapter 7 of the Electoral Principle on any case found guilty but at the same time it does not rely on rumours for taking actions against vote-buyers. For more details see: <http://main.omandaily.om/node/14551>. Last accessed on 20/4/2010.



Oman faces related to oil. Followers of the traditional *Shura* might feel that the contemporary *Shura* partly differs from the old one, and may become sceptical regarding the secular nature of the contemporary *Shura*, given that the old one was explicitly religious and that participation was restricted mainly to religious intellectuals. Some of the new generation of Omani citizens feels that the contemporary *Shura* does not suffice to meet their expectations, and they may apply certain pressure tactics to improve it.

Economic crises, especially those related to oil, may affect the contemporary *Shura* positively or negatively depending on how those crises affect the general citizenry's standard of living. This may well have concomitant political effects and be reflected in the political process. The following sections discuss the respondents' views regarding these issues.

#### **4.5.1 The Challenge of the Traditional *Shura***

As is well known, the *Shura* and *Ibadism* are inseparable from each other and have been closely associated since the earliest days of the accession of Oman into the Islamic Empire. Therefore, the Imamate and Royal political systems that rule Oman share these two socio-religious identities, but they vary in their level of commitment to the application of these component principles of society and politics; they do not vary, however, in their allegiance to the principles of the *Shura*. Islam, with all its religious texts and teachings, remains the official religion of the state. This means that the principle of consultation (*Shura*) has always been practised in one way or another by these systems, but that the Imamate system remains the most committed to the applications of *Shura* because of its religious nature.

Any observer of the political history of Oman will find that the Imamate did not constitute a real challenge to other systems, except for those cases in which those systems deviated or failed in their mission to honour the religion, the homeland and its citizens. If a breach of the principles of Islam is ever seen to be clear and irrefutable, or the unity of the homeland is at risk due to internal or external dangers, or standards of justice and prosperity for the citizens' are seen to decline, then intervention of the Imamate is enabled, required and immediate (see section 5.3.5 below).

In this respect, the followers of the Imamate, as outlined in Chapter One, formed real challenges to the Sultanate in the twentieth century: the first of such challenges occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century and ended with the signing of the '*Seeb Agreement*' in 1918; the second of such incidents occurred in the 1950s and ended with the defeat of the Imamate in that same decade. As historically speaking this is quite recent, it may not be surprising that Omani people, especially government officials, are unwilling to talk about the Imamate for fear of occasioning embarrassment in one way or another, for if they give their opinion of the Imamate or even of the religious character of the *Shura* in Oman they run the risk of evoking powerful and historically heated tensions. On the other hand, the suffering experienced by the Omanis in past political conflicts - and particularly those conflicts resulting from tribal fanaticism - may act so as to discourage such evocations given the current, if precarious, blessings of unity, stability and national cohesion which are so precarious as things stand.

Despite the sensitivity of the issue of the traditional *Shura*, the government respondents did not hesitate to talk freely about it. Some of them made a comparison between the traditional *Shura* and the contemporary *Shura*. Some respondents viewed the origin of the *Shura* as cultural but not religious and suggested that it could have been found in history prior to the emergence of Islam. GR1 (24/2/2009), for example, said: 'The march of *Shura* in the Sultanate cannot be limited to a certain date or era that tells the start of its outbreak'. This is an indication that Islam might not be the real start of the *Shura* in Oman. He also described *Shura* as a 'rooted' behaviour in Omani society: 'It is deep-rooted in behaviour, heritage and the cultural stability of the Omani people. It has intervened in the simplest features of the daily life of a society that believes in the diversity of views'. We can infer from this that *Shura* describes a social behavioural trait more than it describes a religious principle. GR1 is not the only respondent who refuses to see Islam as the chief initiator of the *Shura* in the first instance (some respondents in section 5.2.1 in the next chapter share the same view). This in fact does not represent a challenge to religious legitimacy, as Islam as a religion believes in all heavenly religions and the Messengers that conveyed those religions.

Some respondents, such as GR7 (31/3/2009), however, directly credit the origin of the *Shura* in Oman to Islam: 'The *Shura* had historical roots in Oman and it is strongly connected with religious thought as the process of choosing the Imam', and here he not

only linked the *Shura* to Islam but to the Imamate and *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd* that are well known principles of *Ibadism*, although GR7 is not himself *Ibadi*. In fact, there are signs that the Kings of Oman before Islam had conducted *Shura* with their followers, such as the case of the Kings consulting their people when they received the invitation from Prophet Mohammed to join Islam.

The majority of the respondents did not hesitate to talk freely about the relationship between Islam and the *Shura* despite the religious nature of the Imamate system. They used various expressions to address it; GR10 and GR1, for example, talked about the allocation of a whole *Surat* (chapter) under the name of *Al-Shura* in the Holy Qur'an as an indication of the importance of the *Shura* principle. GR10 (8/3/2009), for example, said: 'The forty second *Sura* of the Holy *Quran* is called *Al-Shura* and has been specified to be recited until the end of the world'. Similarly GR1 (24/2/2009) said: 'The forty second *Sura* of the Holy *Quran* is called 'Al *Shura*' to emphasise this great human principle'. GR3, GR1 and GR10 quoted some *Qura'nic* verses that speak of the *Shura*. GR10 (8/3/2009), for example, said:

*The Shura in Oman rose from a pure religious spring, and it is an implementation of the Quranic order, 'and consult with them upon the conduct of affairs' and 'Those who responded to their lord and practiced prayer and whose affairs are a matter of counsel'.*

Furthermore, unexpectedly, a number of respondents have linked the *Shura* to *Ibadism* and particularly to the Imamate and *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd*, including non-*Ibadists* such as GR6 and GR7. For example, GR3 (23/3/2009) said: 'The *Ibadi* sect has had a major role in the consolidation of the idea of the *Shura*' and GR5 (15/3/2009) said: '*Shura* in Oman was practised in different ways, such as selecting the Imam by *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd*'. This could be seen as indicating that Omani people currently feel the issue of the Imamate no longer constitutes a strong concern for the government. As mentioned earlier, the imamate usually does not pose a challenge to the political systems unless such systems neglect any of their main duties – those of serving the Islamic mission, and protecting the interests of the homeland and its citizens. This fact may well induce people to feel free to talk about the Imamate, particularly since the Imamate system is an undeniable part of the history of Oman and the Omani government is confident about its own performance in general. However, in respect to the government's efforts to convert the *Shura* into a civil-political approach, society as a

whole, and of course the elite interviewed here - seems to be unable to revoke the religious legitimacy of the *Shura*.

Respondents, such as GR6 (6/2/2009) spoke about the positive aspects of the *Shura* in the past: 'It [the *Shura*] was a mechanism for decision making as the Imam did not use to take the decision and he used to execute the decisions taken by the council of the elites'. Here he describes the actual type of political participation as being one in which the Imam does not possess absolute power. This may well be, however, an inaccurately high estimation of the traditional *Shura* by the respondents. GR8 (4/1/2009) valued the traditional *Shura* even more by saying: '*Shura* has got a strong tie with Islamic faith and its principles such as freedom, justice, dignity, equality, respect of the other and human rights'. Here she linked the traditional *Shura* with some principles of modern democracy such as freedom and human rights, which reflects the degree of political warmth and enthusiasm which is exhibited by some in discussions about the traditional *Shura*.

Apart from Islam, *Ibadism* and the Imamate, some respondents linked the *Shura* as an institution with other sociological phenomena. This does not necessarily deny or minimise the relationship between Islam and the *Shura* but it suggests that the *Shura* has been practised in Oman on two levels: the political and social. Participation in the former was dominated by the religious intellectuals and that of the latter was oriented towards other levels of society, i.e. those less religiously 'qualified'. For example, GR9 said: '*Shura* in the Omani society is not a new thing; it has been available overtime as a social and tribal legislation'. In conclusion, - and following the discussion in Chapter 2 - Islam as represented in traditional *Shura* does not inhibit, and may indeed be seen as effectively continuous with processes of democratisation represented by the contemporary *Shura*.

#### **4.5.2 The Challenge of the New Generation**

This thesis works on the supposition that when an initiative to open a political horizon comes from the top, it might mainly be result of one of the following two factors. Either: a strong government, or a weak society. It could of course be a result of both factors. If this supposition is applied to the situation in Oman, it help us understand

that in the early years of the Renaissance in Oman, especially during the seventies and eighties, both factors were pertinent and possible causal factors in the contemporary context being discussed here. The government was strong and possessed financial stability, and it provided job opportunities for citizens in the public sector. Equally relevant was the fact that the community was weak due to the small population, the absence of a significant educated class and the absence of an alternative source of income other than that generated by and deeply involved with the state. However, in the light of an increasing population and growing educated class, from the nineties onwards, the government's initiative to open up the political horizon from the top started to face challenges that required a change in the political plan. This coincided with the concomitant fact of the saturation of the public sector and the emergence of the private sector as an alternative to state-oriented business and income generation. The field study asked the government representatives about the impact of these factors and variables on the political process in Oman.

The Interviewees did not deny the existence of pressure on the Government from the new generation due to the patent increase in population which has occurred and due to a manifest increase in cultural awareness, but they felt that there were positives from that as well; GR1 (24/2/2009), for example, said: 'The internal social mobilisation is one of the most important effects that we all depend on to serve this country and achieve what its people look forward to such as progress, stability, safety and prosperity'.

This indicates that the government has planned from the beginning to respond to this foreseeable situation and that there is a distinct absence of any sense of shock resulting from the increasing pressure on the government from the educated new generation.

As for the influence of the increase in population on the political scene, GR1 (24/2/2009) said: 'The accelerating increase of population was an indicator of extending development services to all communities'. While GR8 (4/1/2009) said: 'The main feature of the demography in Oman is that young people form more than 50% [of the population], this creates burdens; maintaining development at its current levels', and GR5 (15/3/2009) said:

*The increase in population has a positive side as it enriches the experience of the political arena for the citizenry; because political demands are greater*

*and there is an expansion of the voters' priorities as well. The disadvantage is that influencing and addressing these priorities in an atmosphere of lesser consensus makes a greater strain on the polity than in the past.*

The words 'influencing and addressing' can be inferred as demonstrating that the government possessed more stable control of Omani society when the population was smaller. The increase in population quantitatively and qualitatively left the government in a more difficult position to maintain control, as it were, of the social contract.

Although GR1 regarded the natural increase in population as a positive indicator of successful development in the country, both GR8 and GR5 viewed this increase as causing pressure on the government. GR8 believed that the recent population increase put pressure on the development process which in turn means that the state will not be able to continue in the welfare-oriented fashion that has characterised the implicit social contract hitherto. The consequence of this may be that the end of the rentier state model will result in increased pressure to open up the political horizon. GR5 considered this increase in population to be able to potentially enrich the political process; it was conceded that it would indeed place political pressure on the government.

By contrast, GR9 and GR6 had different opinions; GR6 (6/2/2009) said: 'it was expected that this class [the middle class] would call for reform or political change, but it was discovered that this class does not want any reform because they benefit from the present situation and change would not be to their benefit'.

He believed that any of the demographic or cultural factors discussed are unlikely to effect the political situation as long as the economic situation in the country remains strong. It is suggested here that the concept of social mobility is too weak and unreliable to facilitate change in the political process taking place from the bottom up, as the implicit social contract in the rentier state model between the government and citizens is still the strong and dominant conception of government amongst the Omani citizenry. GR9 (23/3/2009) said: 'We have a just distribution of wealth and equality in rights; that is why we have political stability'. She has, however, therein contradicted the opinion of GR6, that the lack of social mobility is due to shortcomings in the Omani concepts of, and actual expressions of, distributive justice and not due to economic prosperity or lack thereof.

There is another factor in demographics which is pertinent to this thesis: the rise in the demographic proportion of foreign employees that most Gulf countries suffer from has emerged as a concern in the expostulations of some respondents. For example, GR8 (4/1/2009) said: 'Demography in Oman has not changed much if compared to some neighbouring countries where percentage of foreigners reached 80%, our society, hence, still having a solid social structure'. GR4 (28/2/2009) also said:

*Expatriates now account for 40% of the whole population of Oman. There are directives from the government to keep this percentage or reduce it if possible. We hope to maintain the expatriates' percentage at the current level and we encourage our people to work in the private sector to reduce the number of expatriates.*

GR8 and GR4, therefore, considered the impact of the expatriate labour on population structure to be somewhat relevant, although they clearly note that the proportion in Oman is not large compared to some neighbouring countries. In the United Arab Emirates, for example, foreign workers form up to 80% of the whole population. GR4's words are important here because he occupies a senior post in the Ministry of Manpower. Besides the issue of labour saturation in the public sector, the foreign employees issue seems to have obliged the government to encourage Omani people to join the private sector no matter what political pressure this step might bring. For example, GR4 (28/2/2009) said: 'We have no doubt that Omani people in the private sector share the same amount of loyalty to the government as their counterparts in the public sector. The government provides them with protection and incentives'.

By contrast, GR5 (15/3/2009) said:

*If the citizen finds a job opportunity in the private sector, they will definitely head for that sector. This is good. The only disadvantage is that the loyalty and 'belonging' of such citizens to the government would be less, as they make a living from a source other than the government. Accordingly, this will make room for independence from government. The citizen would not be concerned for their future career in the public sector.*

GR5 exhibits the opinion that the citizenry's employment in the private sector may result in a challenge to the social contract between the government and the citizens. GR7 (31/3/2009) clearly, however, saw that it may initiate and facilitate social mobility which will cause pressure on the government to open up the political horizon. He says, for example:

*Nowadays, following the employment of many citizens in the private sector, these citizens have become more independent than before and they have the ability to criticise the government. They also possess wider areas of speech, dialogue and discussion about the political affairs and Shura in the country.*

Therefore, GR5 and GR7 felt that employment of the citizenry in the private sector could put political pressure on the government and may have the effect of reducing loyalty to the government. If this happens then the implicit social contract will face a real challenge, because such a scenario gives wider room for social mobilisation and could be the instigating factor in a real bottom-up political process. GR4 diminished this concern somewhat, however, by saying that loyalty is not affected as long as the government continues to provide citizens who are working in the private sector with protection and incentives.

The interviews also show that the political demands of the new generation are concentrated around three main issues: holding wrongdoers responsible, increasing the powers of the *Shura* Council, and allowing civil society organisations to be formed; as well as aiding and encouraging devolution of power in order to give more opportunities for the technocrats to exercise their expertise. It must be noted, however, that some respondents viewed those demands not as a reflection of local political need but as the result of media-set agendas and external influences.

As for civil society organisations, regulations were issued in the Sultanate during the last five years which opened the way, for the first time in Oman, for the establishment of civil society institutions - unions, associations and syndicates. However, the Cultural Club and the Women Associations have been established since the 1970s. Most interviewees noted that the majority of these associations are independent as far as administration and financing goes, unlike their counterparts in some of the neighbouring countries. Some respondents saw the government's financial support and provision of headquarters for these organisations as not affecting their independence, especially in light of the fact that they need this support in the early period of establishment.

Some interviewees spoke about the healthy and non-paternalistic type of control that the government applied at this stage on those organisations. GR9 (23/3/2009), for example, noted that the controls established by the government do not affect the



independence of associations: 'Having regulations does not mean hindering those associations'. She has justified her view on the basis that the government's control on the associations serves to protect such organisations from the hidden agendas of some NGOs.

### 4.5.3 The Challenge of the Oil-related Problems

Oman is regarded as an oil state where oil revenues still make up more than half of the government's income. The government has used the oil revenues to draw an implicit social contract with its citizens. The political situation went well when the economic situation, particularly surrounding oil revenues, was healthy and stable. The Sultanate suffered several economic upheavals during the 1980s and late 1990s brought about by declines in oil prices. It currently faces the challenge of declining oil reserves. The study asked a question about the prospect of vulnerability in the political situation in Oman due to any economic shock which may result from the declining oil production, declining oil reserves or falling prices.

Oman is an oil state and 'oil is still the main source of income', as GR5 (15/3/2009) says, and as GR6 (6/2/2009) asserts, 'Oil represents 40% of the total local income and 70% of the governmental revenues'. Given this fact, the political situation remains vulnerable to any oil shock. However, some respondents were optimistic about future of oil in Oman. GR5 (15/3/2009), for example, felt that the oil in Oman is accessible for decades to come:

*Oil in Oman will be found for at least 40 years to come. Old studies forecasted that oil was supposed to have depleted in Oman at this present time. However, thanks to new explorations and innovations in technology, it is possible to keep the production levels up and we still have oil reserves.*

The ability of the Sultanate to sustain its oil reserves in the decades to come does not negate the existence of prior economic crises nor preclude the possibility of future ones due to a decline in reserves and production rate, or falls in oil prices. The interviewees who felt that the economic crisis is affecting the political situation produced varied opinions and prognoses. GR3 (23/3/2009), for example, said: 'If your economy is weak, this will affect your performance and would be reflected on the political arena'. He suggested that economic instability affects the 'performance' of the country and its government, but he did not want to say that it might affect the political situation. This may be due to the fact that he is a senior official and so he prefers to use more diplomatic

language. GR4 (28/2/2009) said: 'We get affected by crises, however the government is working on real alternatives for oil'. Herein is a clearer sign regarding the impact of economic fluctuations on the political situation, but the respondent showed some optimism regarding government steps in creating appropriate economic alternatives.

GR10 and GR7 are examples of the few respondents who have directly tied the economic crises to political instability: GR10 (8/3/2009) saw that there is a direct impact of economic crises on the political situation; 'The economic recession affects the political situation as citizens will apply stress to ease the economic complications'. He also gave an example of the pressure that can be formed by citizens on the government during a time of economic crisis of 2008: 'During the last financial crisis, more than one senior official came out with announcements to calm down the citizens'. GR7 (31/3/2009) said, on the same topic:

*In times of economic crises and economic decline, the different pressures on the institutions of the country increase, especially on the government and in terms of the people's requests to the institutions that represent them become greater. The less the revenues of the country are, the less numerous the job opportunities, so hungry people will knock every door and they may turn into arsonists trying to reflect their frustration on the society, especially if they become persuaded that the government has not given them fair job opportunities and a reliable income. Legal and illegal pressures will increase and social cohesion will, undoubtedly, be affected by the economic crisis.*

The quotes above indicate that the social contract between the citizenry and the government could be affected in the post oil era or during the concomitant powerful economic shocks.

Some respondents, however, did not see a direct link between economic crises and the political situation; for example GR6 (6/2/2009) said:

*The present elite are the same old commercial elites and the existence of oil enabled them to use their power more. They had financial ability to study overseas and they are still on the side of government even now. We can see that many decision makers in the private sector are very careful about their political announcements in order to retain their harmony with the government. Thus, the reality is that we do not have a real private sector. The government is the basic engine of the economy.*

Therefore, according to GR6, we may be inclined to think that the mutually beneficial relationship between the government and the economic elites that own the private sector reduces the chances of such crises posing real challenges to the

government. GR6 (6/2/2009) also added: 'people feel grateful to the government because services are nearly free', referring to the free public services provided by the government to citizens, which indeed practically form the basis of the social contract between the two parties. This means that not only the economic elites reduce the challenges on the government during any particular crisis but the ordinary people who are tied by the implicit social contract are unlikely to pose a threat to political stability except in extreme circumstances. However, he believed that there is a possibility for breaking this contract: 'Change will happen if the government asks people to pay taxes. At this time people will call for change'. He stipulates that the social contract would be broken only if the government abandoned its support for free public services and demanded citizens to pay taxes.

The interviewees, when questioned about the impact of economic fluctuations on the political situation, were – quite reasonably - expected to speak about the implicit social contract between the government and the citizenry, but I noted that this was not a concern to most of them. They spoke with confidence and self-assurance about the prosperous economic future of the State. Some interviewees, as mentioned above, spoke of the persistence of oil in Oman for several decades to come. In general, the interviewees did not hide their concern about the potentially damaging effects of economic crises on the political situation. However, they put their trust in the government to overcome such situations and postulated that the impact on the political scene would be limited.

#### **4.6 Future of the *Shura* in Oman**

Although the *Shura* in Oman lasted for several centuries, the era of the contemporary *Shura* is but a few decades. The contemporary *Shura* process will need more time to mature and stabilise. The community is still in the process of maturing, and there is significant hope among respondents that it will lead to the alleviation of the tribal hindrances as well as other factors which continue to play a role in depriving the *Shura* Council of its right to assign its positions to the most qualified members. The Government, which embraces the contemporary *Shura* in Oman, monitors the conditions of society and accordingly opens up the political horizon step by step. However, it is unclear how long this gradual opening up will continue, and where the limit will be. It is

also not clear whether the *Shura* Council will be given legislative powers in the future nor whether the current consultative powers will remain.

I raised these questions with government representatives.

The majority of the interviewees believed that the *Shura* will evolve in the future; GR1 (24/2/2009), for example, said:

*Development is a mode of life, so all individuals and groups should cope with this aspect, each in his position and according to his responsibilities and duties. This will help create a civilized society that sanctifies rights and respects duties. This is what the Sultanate has sought since the start of the blessed progress in 1970 AD until now.*

Thus he urges the community to keep up with the government's steps in advancing the *Shura*. GR3 (23/3/2009), said: '*Shura* experience will in general evolve over time to a more advanced level in the future'. GR5 (15/3/2009) said: 'I think that in the future the political leadership will opt for developing the practice of *Shura*'. The words 'I think' may be inferred to reflect his reservation due to the realities of the political situation, and not necessarily his lack of belief in the development of the *Shura* in the future, as I have reported similar reservations he expressed previously. GR9 and GR10 stressed the importance of gradualism in the development of the *Shura* in future. GR9 (23/3/2009) said: 'The *Shura* will develop in future but I wish that it comes calmly, gradually and smoothly as it does now'. GR10 (8/3/2009) said: 'I expect the *Shura* to develop in the future at steady but gradual pace'.

Some respondents linked the development of the *Shura* in the future with the development of community awareness. GR4 (28/2/2009), for example, said:

*The coming phases will witness forward moves but in the right time frame. This depends on the maturity of the society, the cultural awareness of people, and to what extent they are aware of their rights and duties and not following the footsteps and wills of others.*

He refers to the youthful demographic of the community, which indicates fear of giving them greater political space at the present time, in light of the fact that such a community may be prone to misuse and/or exploitation. GR9, in a similar vein, said: 'The society is still not ready so the Council [must] be given legislative authority'. This is an implicit reference to the social ills discussed in section 4.4.2 above, which affect

the *Shura* Council's elections. GR2 (18/3/2009) on her part believed that the development of the *Shura* in the future must be intimately linked to increasing the number of female members in the Council: 'in the future, the success of the consultative process and the participation of the people in governing will be further enhanced by a wider participation of women in the *Shura* council as elected members'.

This point is interesting not only because GR2 is a woman and pro-women in the council, but because the arrival of a greater number of women to the *Shura* Council in the future might be seen as an indication of two important facts: (1) the dwindling influence of tribal fanaticism and the male-community culture; and (2) the growing awareness of the community, especially if these women come from outside the capital area. The government, in order to strengthen the status of women, held a three day symposium called 'the Omani Women Symposium' at the sideline of the Annual Royal Tour, mentioned previously in section 3.8<sup>217</sup>. In this regard, GR3 (23/3/2009) mentioned that the government earnestly seeks to strengthen the role of women through awareness-raising campaigns before the elections. The tribal community, however, clearly continues to have a different opinion:

*The view of society may differ from our view in terms of the government's support of women. We have focused in the awareness campaigns on the importance of women but it seems that even women did not vote for women for one reason or another and we do not interfere.*

GR7 and GR9 held an ambivalent view regarding the contemporary *Shura* and what it should represent and be in the future. GR7 (31/3/2009) felt that the level of the contemporary *Shura*, sociologically speaking, and in terms of cultural development, was the least developed of all areas/sectors, and believed that consolidation of democratic thought should be the next step:

*This [Shura] is a qualitative development of the country, yet it is not enough and it is not compatible with the development that happened in Oman in the epoch of Sultan Qaboos and I think that stabilising democratic thought in Oman is the next step because it is one of the necessities of the future development.*

Here it cannot be inferred that GR7 is lacking assurance of the potential of the contemporary *Shura* process and therefore wishes to bring Western style democracy instead, as it was clear in paragraph 4.3, that his view recorded an overall positive attitude to the *Shura*. Most likely is that, through his membership in the *Shura* Council

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<sup>217</sup> See the, Omani Women Symposium, *Oman Daily Observer* issued on the 17 October 2009.

and the difficulties he faces due to the non legislative powers of the Council, he is forced to call for the consolidation and practical expression of democratic thought. He may well be indicating that to give real legislative powers to the *Shura* Council would be a wise and astute move.

GR9 (23/3/2009), however, believed that the powers of the *Shura* Council must be increased, but does not encourage giving legislative powers to the Council, fearing that then legislation may be drafted for the benefit of certain forces. She refers to the possibility of the emergence of tribal fanaticism or sectarianism as forces which may direct the legislation towards serving the interests of those forces, as has occurred in some of Oman's neighbouring states. She noted that the enactment of legislation in Oman is not monopolised by the government, as citizens are consulted through some civil channels:

*I hope that the Shura Council's authorities will increase and that it will have more capable members to effectively use those authorities. The government does not ignore the Council's recommendations now and utilises them at times, but the society is still not ready for the Council to be given legislative authorities. Even legislations that come from deep-rooted parliaments have problems. I would prefer to hold referenda on any legislation rather than legislate it by the parliament. The current legislations in Oman are not monopolised by the government; other parties are consulted prior to their output, such as civil society organisations. In some deep-rooted parliaments some legislative measures are set to serve the bigger parties and pressurising forces and are not necessarily for the sake of the public. I hope we will not become like them; we are still on the safe side. I say that because our ministry is in contact with all facets of the social spectrum.*

GR9 works in the Ministry responsible for all social aspects, and knows more about the potential of society and its strengths and weaknesses, and has a greater awareness of possible dangers which would loom in the event that the council be permitted to enact legislation. Tribal fanaticism and sectarianism are not at present forces which are able to completely dictate the course of the government's control of the enactment of legislation. The vertical social divisions mentioned (Chapter 2), which cause real challenges for the democratisation processes in Iraq and Lebanon, support GR9's vision.

In summary, it can be said that the majority of the interviewees are optimistic about the evolution of the *Shura* in the future, although they do not specify the limits that mark the full achievement of this process, nor do they delineate a schedule for such an evolution. They seem to be optimistic about the prevailing gradualism. This optimism seems to limit their fear of a challenge from the new generation looking for better political participation through a wider political space. It also emerged that some respondents do not wish to give legislative powers to the *Shura* Council, fearing that such powers would be abused. By contrast, some interviewees said that the current *Shura* still fails to match up to its nominal ambitions and that it must be strengthened in the coming period through the granting of legislative powers. Some respondents can be seen to be calling for accordance with a gradualist approach to the *Shura's* evolution in order to avoid any shock in the community, while others stressed that the opening up of the political horizon must be proportionate to the community's awareness, particularly because the demographics of the population show the majority of Omani society to be, in relative terms, still young.

#### **4.7 Conclusion**

There are major questions about the motives that have prompted the Government in the Sultanate of Oman to adopt a process of political reform from the top-down. To what extent is the *Shura* process successful? And what challenges does this process face?

From material gathered through semi-structured interviews, I have established that the government decided to tackle the political process from the top-down for the following main reasons: the historical legacy of the *Shura* in Oman; the growing numbers of educated classes; urbanisation; and globalisation. It seems that the selection of the *Shura* was unavoidable as it has been practised in the country for several decades and is regarded as a cornerstone in the nation's identity and in the authority and legitimacy of any ruling system in Oman. The *Shura* has, however, been modified to meet the requirements of modernity, and to cope with the improved and still improving levels of education and cultural awareness in Omani society.

In general, respondents' views demonstrated a consensus of sorts with regards to the fundamental principles of the traditional and contemporary *Shura*. Both are based on the religious thoughts and values of Omani society, but there is a considerable variation in practice between the two processes. In the past, the ruler was chosen to represent the people but the political participation was mainly preserved for *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd*, whereas now members are elected to represent people in the *Shura* Council and participation is open to all segments of society. This means that the *Shura* has been chosen because it has a firm connection to tradition. The practice of contemporary *Shura* has some shortcomings that need to be addressed in order to satisfy citizenry of its legitimacy, but respondents displayed optimism about its ability to evolve in the future.

As for the challenges that the contemporary political process faces, most respondents believed that the challenges were largely from the followers of the traditional *Shura* and the new generation; and those posed by economic problems particularly in relation to oil. However, interviewees reduced the significance of the challenges that might come from followers of the traditional *Shura* and found the contemporary *Shura* compatible with the old one. Respondents expected some challenges to come from the new generation because their number is increasing and the government's ability to maintain the same level of the implicit social contract is decreasing. The economic factors may challenge the current political situation during oil related economic crises or in the post-oil era but the respondents, in general, are optimistic of the Sultanate's ability to survive these times. This may partly answer the second research question that stated: why the Omani government decided to adopt a political process from the top down.

The optimism gathered from the government respondents about the political and economic stability of the country, even in the post-oil era, was, in fact, something I had almost expected because the respondents in this chapter were government representatives and believe in the government's agenda. The following two chapters will tackle many of the same issues discussed here, but concentrate on some issues more than others in order to enrich the study, depending on the respondent's backgrounds. It is intended that Chapters 5 and 6 will say more about the contemporary political process in Oman initiated by the government from the top-down and how it is evaluated from the other two segments of respondents' perspectives.



## 5 The Traditional Model: Theology of *Ibadism* and Modernity

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of data obtained from religious scholars in Oman, who were carefully selected according to their experience and careers. I analyse four themes in order to assess the clergy's satisfaction of the contemporary *Shura* process in Oman and the extent to which they can challenge that process:

- 1) Origins of the *Shura*
- 2) Political systems in *Ibadism*
- 3) Traditional and contemporary *Shura*
- 4) Democracy and globalisation from the perspective of *Ibadi* Islam.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, this thesis originally intended to study contemporary *Shura* in Oman after 1970. However, in order to understand the legitimacy of the contemporary *Shura*, and the challenges it may face, particularly from the followers of the traditional *Shura*, it is necessary to highlight the origins of the *Shura* and its applications, as well as the political principles of *Ibadism*. Addressing these aspects will shed light over the debates surrounding the legitimacy of the current *Shura*, especially as there is no study to date that has explored these aspects in depth.

This chapter will also analyse the views of religious scholars concerning the contemporary *Shura* and the accompanying political, social and economic factors, as well as respondents' views on democracy and globalisation. Therefore, the objective of this chapter is to reach two important points; firstly, to ascertain the legitimacy of the contemporary *Shura* and the system of government in Oman and, secondly, to determine the extent to which the followers of the traditional *Shura* can be a real challenge to the political system in Oman or the extent to which any sort of modernisation in the Islamic *Shura* can be embraced.

## 5.2 The *Shura*: Origin and Practice

### 5.2.1 The *Shura* before Islam

Some of the interviewees spoke about the existence of the *Shura* in Oman and across the wider region in historical terms. This suggests that the origin of the *Shura* is not only derived from divine Islamic principle. If this is the case, then to what extent is *Shura* an obligation? There is no doubt that Islam has come to determine it through the Holy Quran. For example, RR2 (1/04/2009) said:

*Shura, in the past, has been generally practiced in these terrains, and when I say terrains I do not only mean Oman, but the territories of the region. It has been practiced from Yemen to Damascus and this was a tangible reality from our readings from the God's Book. Balqis, the Queen of Saba' consulted her people when she received a letter from the Prophet Sulaiman (King Solomon). This proves that Shura was practiced in these areas. It has been proved through history also, that the two kings of Oman consulted their people when the Prophet called them to join Islam, and following the Shura, decided, they willingly turned to Islam.*

Some respondents said that rulers before Islam had their own advisors that were the equivalent to the Council of Elite in Islam (*Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd*) and were known as the *Mala*<sup>218</sup>. Therefore, it can be argued that even the Council of Elite is not an Islamic concept but that its religious members, following Islam, made it look like a religious entity. For example, RR1 (14/01/2009) said:

*Prior to Islam, those giving opinion were called the 'Mala' as came from Queen Balqis's tongue in the Holy Quran when she said: 'dear Mala give me your opinions, I did not use to take a decision without your advice'. The Mala are the elite, the notables, the sheriffs. God says to Moses in other verse 'the Mala are conspiring to kill you'. In the Islamic society this Mala phrase became substituted by Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd.*

This means that the *Shura* was available before Islam, but Islam incorporated it as a political system. Despite the *Jahiliyah* time, (i.e. before the emergence of Islam), the *Shura* was practised in the region among different societies. This became evident as stories in the Holy Quran of the different Prophets from Solomon to Moses. During the *Jahiliyah* time, although known for its blasphemy (*Kofr*), *Shura* was still practised as a social norm among the *Quraish* tribe.

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<sup>218</sup> Al-Hashmi, S. S. *Tagrobat Al-Shura fi Sultanate Oman: Baina Al-Shura Al-Islamiyah Wad-Dimocratayah Al-Mua'asirah*. (Muscat: The Dawlah Council, 1999). Pp. 12-13.

### 5.2.2 Islam and the *Shura*

Despite its historical roots in the region, the majority of the respondents regarded the *Shura* as an Islamic pillar in governance. This was because Allah mentions it in two verses in the Holy Quran. In one of the two verses God clearly directs the Prophet to consult his companions. This is seen as a religious edict that cannot be ignored<sup>219</sup>. For example, RR1 (14/01/2009) said:

*There is no doubt that Islam paid attention to Shura, and regarded it as the pillar of Rule, so one cannot rule without Shura. Highlighting the significance of Shura, God mentions it in two different verses in the Holy Quran so that it be adopted; in the first verse God orders his Messenger to consult his companions when he said: "and consult them about the conduct of affairs". The intellectuals regard Shura as an obligatory system and a ruler should take Shura from the intellectual people.*

The practice of the *Shura* by the Prophet and his companions asserted the significance of the *Shura* in political Islam; as RR3 (25/03/2009) puts it: '*Shura*, as a principle is a godly approach. The Quran came up with it and the Prophet, peace be upon him, practised it'. This is also what RR7 (17/04/2009) has said:

*Any Islamic state or community can never disregard Shura. It's indispensable. To do so is regarded as a lack of faith, because the person, or the community who does so, is regarded as if he/they have sold something ordained by the Almighty God and His Messenger, and used by the Prophet and the Caliphs afterwards.*

It is clear the respondents regard the *Shura* as an Islamic **principle** that all Muslims should believe in and practise. However, the respondents also agree that the *Shura*, as a **practice**, has no one form that the Holy Quran provided; rather, it was left for the Muslim community (following the principle of *Ijtihad*) to decide how to practise it according to the interests of Islam and the community, taking into account the surrounding circumstances. For example, RR3 (25/03/2009) said: 'the *Shura*, as a political practice, is a result of the Muslims' diligence after the Prophet's death; when the companions gathered in *Saqifat Bani Saedah* and decided to select one of them to be the Caliph and selected Abu Bakr'.

The interviewees made it very clear that the ruler should not necessarily be the best religious scholar of his time, but that he should be the most eligible for the post,

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<sup>219</sup> Al-Hashmi, S. S. 1999, pp. 15-17.

according to the peoples and the state of Islam's needs. For example, RR7 (17/04/2009) said:

*There is no doubt that the 'Rightly-Guided Caliphs' of Muslims, are the best rulers ever to rule the State of Islam, being selected by the scholars, leaders and heads of tribes in the Arabian Peninsula and by the Great Quran Memorisers. They were chosen not just for their superior religious intellectuality, as there was a galaxy of great religious scholars whom may well have been better than them in these terms at the time, but they were also chosen for their other capabilities and their suitability for the post.*

This means the selection of a ruler requires the activation of the principle of *Ijtihad* (diligence) in order to decide who is the most eligible for the post. This is exactly what RR7 (17/04/2009) is urging for in the political arena:

*The credo does not accept things unless through either a clear or extrapolated text. Allah, has opened the door of Ijtihad for Muslims, while Revelation was still coming down and the Prophet were alive and extraction and arbitration of opinion was in place. If Ijtihad was applied during the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him), it is more important to utilise it after the point when the Revelation stopped coming down and new variables emerged, particularly on the political side.*

The practice of the *Shura* during the time of the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs, following the death of the Prophet and before the foundation of the different Islamic sects, proved there is no single method for selecting the ruler, as the four of them were selected in four different ways. For example RR5 (5/01/2009) said: 'It was evidenced by consensus, as was the case after the Prophet passed away, where the Caliphs were chosen through *Shura*, in different methods'. RR10 (13/04/2009) outlined the four ways of selecting the "Rightly-Guided Caliphs". They are the 'clear delegation', the 'consultation', the 'direct appointment' and the 'quick decision'. The 'delegation' is as the Prophet did, when he delegated Abu Bakr to be the Imam of prayers during the Prophet's period of sickness. People understood that Abu Bakr had the priority to be the Caliph after the Prophet. The 'consultation' took place when Abu Bakr became severely ill. He selected six of the most important companions and ordered them to consult with each other and choose one of themselves to be the second Caliph and they chose Omar. The third 'direct appointment' way, took place when Omar was assassinated. He directly appointed Othman, who was one of the six selected for consultation by Abu Bakr.

Finally, the 'quick decision' took place when Othman was killed during a time of chaos; people feared the situation of unrest and decided quickly to appoint Ali to the post<sup>220</sup>.

Accordingly, there are many ways of selecting the Islamic ruler. The matter is discretionary and there are no decisive scripts. If we link this fact to the discussion that took place in Chapter 2 about Islam and democracy, we can confidently say that Islam has not come with a certain political system but delegated this matter to Muslims to choose what suits their time. So, if democracy does not ruin any of the Islamic values, it is certainly welcomed although the problem that may face democratisation processes is social divisions more than Islam.

Here is a clear statement for Muslim scholars: any radical thoughts concerning the character of the Islamic state's ruler should be eradicated. Respondents cited here say he does not have to be a religious-intellectual in order to be eligible for the post, but should be the right person for the right time. This fact reduces the challenge of the followers of the traditional *Shura* to the government in Oman, which adopts the modernised contemporary *Shura* from the top-down.

### 5.2.3 *Ibadism and the Shura*

Although the *Shura* was physically practised at the outset of the Islamic State (i.e. during the time of the Prophet and the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs), the conflict that took place during the time of the fourth Caliph played a part in the establishment of the three Islamic sects that each adopted three different political approaches<sup>221</sup>. The interviewees addressed this matter and claimed that *Ibadism* is the closest sect in following the Prophet and his successors' political approach. For example RR1 (14/01/2009) said:

*The Ibadi sect, calls for no Qurashia (the concept of priority of Quraish tribe adopted by the Sunni sect) and no Baitawiah (the concept of priority of Aal Al-Bait or Ali's family adopted by the Shi'a sect), meaning that Caliphate should not be restricted to Quraish as a tribe, or to Aal Al-Bait as a family, but is considered as a legitimate right to all qualified Muslims if they are selected by the nation. Ibadism sees that Imamate for the nation; the nation decides whom*

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<sup>220</sup> Al-Hashmi, S. S. 1999, p. 18.

<sup>221</sup> Al-Ja'abiri, F. *Al-Bu'ad Al-Hadhari lil-Aqidah Al-Ibadiyah*. (Muscat: *Al-Istiqamah* Bookshop, 2004), pp.33-66. See also Saeed, M. N. *Al-Qanoon fi Aqa'ed Al-Firaq wal-Mathahib Al-Islamiyah*. (Cairo: *Dar Al-Salam* Publishers, 2007), p. 370.

*to put at the front and whom to put at the back and there is no divine preference for a certain tribe or family.*

Similarly RR5 supported this argument by saying that the *Ibadis*, 'through the non-limiting of Caliphate or imamate to a certain family or tribe, helped Omanis more than others to be more politically realistic. It helped them to elect the most efficient, and the most qualified; those who possess the qualifications'.

Even though *Ibadism* seems to call for the opening-up of the domain for any qualified Muslim to rule the Islamic State, they say that if a qualified person is found in a *Quraish* tribe they will give him priority. RR7 (17/04/2009) said: 'Sectarian views in governance are not confined to *Ibadis*. Even the four *Sunni* schools and others do not agree on the need to limit the Islamic Caliphate to the *Quraish* tribe'. RR5, however, said: 'They (*Ibadists*) also say that if there is one from *Quraish*, this one is the more deserving'. Also RR3 (25/03/2009) said: '*Ibadi* people say if the best candidate is found in *Quraish* they will prioritise him, but he has to be selected'. At the same time, *Ibadi* scholars do not say that the *Sunni* sects do not acknowledge the *Shura* just that they do not give it the same significance as *Ibadism* does. For example, RR5 (5/01/2009) said: 'To be fair, all *Sunni* sects acknowledge *Shura*, but when we come to the practice and space given to *Shura*, we find it has greater room with the *Ibadis*'.

*Ibadism*, as has been discussed, believes in choosing the ruler. The respondents, therefore, clarified the parameters that are used to select the ruler. For example, RR3 (25/03/2009) said: 'The verse that states: 'the most honoured is the one having the most piety', represents the principle that should be followed in selecting the leader'.

The respondents also determined the legitimate method through which Imams are selected: The Council of Elite (*Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd*). For example, RR5 said: '*Ibadis* think that the way by which a ruler comes to power should be legitimately right, and he cannot gain this legitimacy unless he is re-elected'. However, there is an exception for this concept (see section 5.3 below). The council of elite by itself is not for the religious elite only, as other non-religious people can be members, such as the tribal leaders and the notables. RR1 (14/01/2009) clarified this point:

*The concept of Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd shrinks and expands. For example there was a period in the Omani history when the concept was only permitted to the*

*religious intellectuals. When the religious intellectuals were powerful, their influence on society was strong, particularly those religious intellectuals close to the Imam. In this case the concept (of Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd) shrinks and becomes limited to religious scholars. The concept expands when there is power among tribal leaders, and the council is composed of both the religious intellectuals, and the tribal leaders; the former for their religious influence and the later for their tribal influence. Sometimes even the notables can be within Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd, for example a well known merchant or an agricultural landlord, because they have influence on part of the society.*

There are two important points that may have helped the *Ibadi* notion to survive until the present time: (1) not closing the *Ijtihad* door and (2) professing no sanctity for any human being, regardless of whether he is a politician or a religious scholar. They do not consider any of them as belonging to the level of holiness as happens in some Islamic schools of thought such as *Shi'a*, where they tend to treat their religious Imams in unusual ways, with a sort of sanctification. For example RR5 (5/01/2009) said:

*The Ibadis know no sanctification for humans. It is nothing more than respect. And this is clear in their practices. A scholar's words are not convincing unless they are accompanied by evidence. Once the evidence is accepted, the scholar's words become convincing. So, they stressed this matter. The door of diligence (Ijtihad) is not closed for them, contrary to other sects, which consider the door of diligence as being closed; hence they became limited to a certain circle.*

In summary, although the *Shura* may have been found in the region prior to the emergence of Islam, its having been mentioned in the Holy Quran, and having been practised by the Prophet and his companions, made it a divine pillar in political Islam. However, the practising of the *Shura*, particularly during the four 'Rightly-Guided Caliphs' time, shows that Islam arrived not with a fixed political system, but instead left the situation to the Muslims to decide whom to choose, using the principles of *Ijtihad* and *Ijma*. The practising of the *Shura* at that time also suggests that the right to rule in Islam is not hereditary, nor restricted to a certain tribe or family. Even Ali, the first cousin of the Prophet, who was also the husband of the Prophet's daughter Fatima, had not been prioritised to be the first ruler following the death of the Prophet, but was the fourth Caliph. At the same time, scholars do not hesitate to say that if a qualified person is found in the *Quraish*, then they will prioritise him if he is elected. This means that there is some sort of flexibility in the practice of the *Shura*. These arguments have been used by *Ibadi* scholars in building their unique *Shura* system throughout history. Once again, this flexibility in practising the *Shura* is arguably reducing the distance between

Islam and greater political pluralism, and bringing the *Ibadi* political system very close to modern democratic systems of selecting a ruler.

### 5.3 Political Regimes in *Ibadism*

*Ibadi* people, in order to differentiate their ruling system from the Umayyad system, have chosen to call their rulers Imams not Caliphs. This fact, however, does not mean that the *Ibadi* concept limits the system of governing in *Ibadism* to the Imamate alone. *Ibadism* can still contain other political systems as will be discussed in the following sections.

Some respondents spoke about reasons that might make the *Ibadi* scholars tolerate hereditary rule in *Ibadism*. For example, RR1 (14/01/2009) said:

*With the presence of the Ibadi sect that rejects hereditary rule, Omani history witnessed different ruling systems. Among those are the Imamate states, the kingdoms and the Sultanic States. The Sultanic States and the kingdoms are hereditary systems. The Ibadi sect determined the issue of the legitimacy of rulers other than Imams; when Abu Malik Al-Silani, one of the Ibadi great intellectuals, was asked about the legitimacy of the rule of Omar Bin Abdul Aziz (the wisest ruler in the Umayyad Dynasty), he replied: It became legitimate through contentment and submission and they are more important than the homage<sup>222</sup>.*

This means that rule through submission, under the Islamic construct of *Ijtihad* and *Ijma*, is seen as being legitimate. Another *Shari'ate* legislative view that makes *Ibadi* scholars tolerate the hereditary rule is the Prophet's recognition of the Omani Kings, when Oman converted to Islam. RR6 (10/01/2009) cites the statement of Allah's Messenger to the people of Oman when the Omani people converted to Islam (If you join Islam, you will be safe and your monarch will be safe too). Here are two key arguments. The first is that the governance regime in Oman before Islam was a monarchy, and the second, and more important, is that the Messenger agreed to the monarchical regime. Also RR10 (13/04/2009) said:

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<sup>222</sup> RR1 said: Sultan *Qaboos*, for example, may have not had homage through *Ahl Al Hal Wa Al Aqd*, but he received a homage from the Omani nation when they contented Him and submitted to his rule and the masses went out to praise him. Also RR6 said: Sultan *Qaboos* is characterised by a clear and distinct feature as the whole sultanate accepts his governance, even the Islamic jurists.



*After the sons Of Julandy, Abd and Gaiffar accepted the invitation of Prophet Mohammad to join Islam, the Prophet left them as kings and did not substitute them with other rulers. This is the Prophet's consideration for the stability of societies. As long as the society is satisfied with a certain political authority to rule it, the Prophet (PBUH) would not change this authority. The sons of Julandy continued as kings of Oman for a long time.*

Some of the interviewees tried to justify why the Prophet allowed Omani territory to be ruled by its own rulers instead of appointing a governor to rule, as he had with the other territories joining Islam at that time. For example RR5 (5/01/2009) said:

*Perhaps because Oman, before Islam, was already an independent state, with its own rulers, geographical territory, customs and mores, Prophet Mohammad spoke to them as a state. They dealt with the messenger who brought the letter of the Prophet in a civilized way. That civility was also the case according to the Protocol of Contemporary States, and they sent a delegation to offer their condolences when the Prophet passed away.*

From the above it is clear that *Ibadism* takes into account the social make-up of Omani society when considering political issues, as well as the Prophet's actions, in recognising the monarchical system in Oman, and above all, the stability of the society. These issues cannot be reached only through a legitimate homage to the ruler but also, probably more importantly, through the wise practice of rule. *Ibadi* scholars see that the *Shura* cannot be considered without the accompaniment of other important issues such as justice and stability. For example, RR5 (5/01/2009) said:

*We were talking about independence in Oman history. This independence is a crucial part of anthropology. Omanis themselves were familiar with independence and used to running their affairs themselves. This is what Prophet Mohammad noticed. He appointed Walis and rulers from among them. It is as if Omanis have always had the desire to rectify the political situation following every setback through returning to the right (Imamate) legal system of governance. This may be waived whenever the practice of *Shura* and justice is available to run the country's affairs, leading to welfare, stability, security, livelihood expansion, scientific production and care for religious institutions, including mosques and endowments etc.*

Similarly, RR2 (1/04/2009) said that ruling system with *Ibadism* does not look at *Shura* alone but looks into other aspects that are of no less significance such as stability, which is regarded as one of the basic pillars in rule and justice, which is seen in Islam, as a basic right to all people living in the country, including the non-Muslims. He also spoke about the way of inauguration of the Muslim ruler, which he regards as a flexible process that cannot be restricted. He supported his argument by mentioning the

differences between the processes of inaugurating each one of the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs. He also said that rulers throughout the Omani history, be they Imams or Sultans, had practised *Shura* during their reign and they did not tyrannise by their own opinions but consulted with far-sighted people. This means that the different systems are legitimate so long as they embrace the *Shura*.

There are some other *Shari'a* legal bases with *Ibadism* that facilitate the acceptance of hereditary regimes and respondents have addressed these, RR4 (24/02/2009) said:

*In the religious thoughts of the Omani people, national policy itself is the religion, even though it changes and the nation's interests need to be weighed and considered. These changes that fulfil the nation's interests are seen as part of the religion, particularly in response to global changes. This was the prevailing view over the years, with any disparity in the proportions of those scales taken into account. This was recognised by the previous Omani scholars, and from it, general rules became ingrained, such as: damage should be removed, preventing corruption is preferable to bringing gain, religion is the final destination, and, if two evils conflict, the lesser damaging effect should be chosen. This flexibility has enabled the transition from the Imamates systems to the ones of the Sultans, without any constraints or hindrances.*

What further strengthens the legitimacy of the hereditary regimes in *Ibadism*, is that some of the *Ibadi* religious-scholars recognise dynastic orders in their publications. For example, RR6 (10/01/2009) mentioned that *Ibadi* authors accepted the *Sultanic* regimes, like Suleiman Ibn Abdullah Al-Barooni, the writer of the book '*Blossoming Roses in the Ibadi Imams and Kings*'. The title of the book professes an inherent acceptance of the *Ibadi* kings particularly because mentioning kings in the title is seen as much stronger than mentioning it inside the publication. It is regarded as a strong recognition of the dynastic systems.

*Ibadi* scholars consider any Islamic ruling system legitimate as long as it recognises and practises the *Shura*. Respondents spoke about the different types of ruling systems that are seen as being legitimate in *Ibadism*. For example, RR6 (10/01/2009) said:

*Ibadism had two types of governance. It is either an Imamate in which the Faqeeh (jurist) had the major role, or it may be governance by force and inheritance. If the ruler called himself an Imam, then he should consult the jurist and as a result, the door will be open for the Imam or the jurist to practise his political point of view. If the ruler calls himself a sultan then he no*

*longer needs the Faqeeh. Indeed, along the Ibadi history and until the era of Sultan Qaboos, the jurist had his role; he is still a part of the political equation, he is not excluded. This does not mean that the Sultanate is illegitimate, we should not confuse the two matters. What I want to emphasise is that we should not limit the Ibadi tradition to the governance of the Imamates. We should be careful concerning this point.*

What emerges from the above is crucial, as it clarifies that the tension that has always existed between the Imamate, and the Sultanic state, is not due to conflict over the legitimacy of the ruling regime. Rather it was due to other political reasons. What further supports this argument is that *Ibadi* scholars recognise the title 'Sultan'. As mentioned above, *Ibadi* scholars have chosen the title "Imam", in order to differentiate themselves from the other Islamic sects. But do not consider other titles forbidden. For example, RR2 (1/04/2009) said:

*There is nothing in the Shari'a law that determines the title of the Islamic ruler. He can be called Imam or Sultan or President, but he has to be ready to accept Shura, and implement it in the Islamic framework. This will lead to something close to the three authorities (the Executive, the Legislative and the Judiciary Authority), if he follows the pillars of ruling in Islam: justice, the Shura and considering the interests of people. This is because justice guides us to the judiciary authority, the Shura guides us to the legislative authority and the public interest guides us to the executive authority.*

Similarly, RR10 (13/04/2009) supports this argument by saying that it is not necessary to call the Muslim ruler an Imam. The *Ibadis* were not satisfied with the Umayyad rulers and they wanted to mark their Islamic experience with the title of Imam: this has no connection to any religious perspective.

RR3 (25/03/2009) said, also:

*The use of the Sultan title by the Omani people does not conflict with the title of Imam, as Sultan was mentioned in the Holy Quran, and was used by some Muslims such as the Ottomans. Even Abdul Aziz Bin Saud was a Sultan before he converted himself to a King for some reason or another.*

As such, the ruling system in *Ibadism* is not confined to the Imamate non-hereditary system but can also tolerate the other monarchic systems. Of course, the Imamate system is given priority in *Ibadism*, in which *Shura* becomes an obligation for the Imam. However, *Ibadi* jurists also look into other vital issues in ruling systems; they look at the stability of the society, justice, and the nation's interests taking into account global changes. Moreover, the way of inauguration of the Muslim ruler is a flexible

process as it does not have to be done through *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd*. The title of Imam is not divine but it was used by *Ibadi* people to differentiate him from the Caliph title that was used by the hereditary Islamic states.

The title of Sultan is not prohibited in Islam so long as he adheres to *Shura*, Justice and fulfils the nation's interests. Therefore, it can be said that, on the one hand, there is no doubt surrounding the legitimacy of the current ruling system in Oman, in that it has fulfilled all of the issues mentioned by the jurists above, including differences to *Shura*. On the other hand, this system might not be considered authoritarian, at least not in the same way as authoritarian regimes in the Arab World (discussed in Chapter 2), as it did not tyrannise by its own opinions but consulted with far-sighted people in accordance to the *Ibadi* notion.

The following sections discuss respondents' views of both the Imamate system and the other systems that ruled Oman, in a hope to clarify the kind of relationship between the Imamate and the Sultanate and hence give an answer to the third research question.

### **5.3.1 The non-Hereditary Regime (the Imamate)**

Having discussed the respondents' views regarding the different political systems in *Ibadism*, I set out here to discuss the particularities of the Imamate (non-hereditary) system. Chapters 3 and 4 noted that some of the Imamate states throughout the Omani history seem, at first glance, to have some sort of hereditary nature. Respondents, however, rejected this claim. RR7 (17/04/2009) said:

*Choice of the Imam is a must; Ibadis did not follow the inheritance of governance and the rule that appears in the form of families is not inherited, but is carried out by the pledge of allegiance, by at least some jurists. Many of the Imams' allegiances were supported by just two or three jurists.*

Respondents concentrated on the principles of contract and homage in the Imamate system. The Imam cannot be considered legitimate unless the *Ahl Al Hal Wa Al Aqd* select him. For example, RR6 (10/01/2009) said:

*Political authority was given by the orders of the religious elite, especially in the first epoch of Imamate in Oman. "Faqeeh" or the religious scholar was the main element in any government. He practiced Shura both theoretically and practically, by taking part in the government's affairs, yet Shura was still confined to the elite. The elite were the only people who could appoint the*

*Imam or dismiss him. Bay'ah (homage) was an essential condition. If the Imam was not given a pledge of allegiance he could not be a ruler and he would lose his legitimacy.*

Regardless of the selection of the Imam by the religious elite, the Imams themselves in *Ibadism* are different. They differ, mainly, according to the way they attain the post. RR3 (25/03/2009) explained these different types; he said that the most legitimate is the selected Imam (*Imama Aqd*), then the *Mohtasib* Imam, who is the person who undertakes the responsibilities of Imamate during the period of weakness, not for a majestic goal, but for the sake of God. Finally, there is the *Mutaghallib* Imam, who takes authority by force, normally for a majestic goal. This still can be accepted if he properly implements the responsibility of Imamate, particularly justice. This explains why an Islamic ruler of any type can still be considered legitimate so long as he is found just and qualified, but the most legitimate is the one selected by *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd*.

In the *Ibadi* tradition, some Imams have been regarded as strong and others weak depending on their ability to interpret the religious jurisprudence. One of the stipulations that religious elites impose upon a weak Imam is to consult them in all affairs. This categorisation is applicable to the three types of Imams mentioned in the previous paragraph. For example, RR6 (10/01/2009) said: 'In *Ibadism* the appellation of strong and weak Imam does not mean he is strong or weak politically or militarily. The weak Imam is the one who has not got enough knowledge to reach the stage of conclusion and devisal, thus they call him a weak Imam'.

After discussing the non-hereditary system in *Ibadism*, some respondents discussed examples of the Imamate system that might have looked like hereditary systems. This was to clarify any misunderstandings that may have arisen around the Imamate system. For example, RR1 spoke about the two Imamate States that looked somewhat like they had a hereditary system. The first was in the Second Imamate State that started with Mohammed Bin Abi Affan in (177 AH) and ended with Imam Azan Bin Tamim in (280 AH). All Imams came from one tribe (i.e. *Yahmad*) except one, who was Imam Abdul Malik Bin Humaid. Although they came from the same tribe, they did not come from the same family. The second is the family Imamate that appeared in the *Ya'ariba's* Imamate. Imam Sultan Bin Saif is the cousin of Nasser Bin Murshid the founder of the *Ya'ariba's* Imamate, and was succeeded by his son Bil'arab Bin Sultan.

Then his second son, Saif Bin Sultan followed him, then Sultan Bin Saif the Second and so on. RR1 (14/01/2009) also said:

*Concerning the tribal rule that appeared in the Second Imamate State, it is not a hereditary system, as it may appear from the first instance. There is no doubt that homage took place to the person, not to his kinship. He is selected firstly by Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd, then they gave him the homage after dictating the stipulation of Imamate on him, such as: 'Never breach the opinions of Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd', and 'Rule according to the Holy Book', and to follow the footprints of his precedents. These had no hereditary intentions, it was done according to their qualifications and history has proved the adequacy of those Imams. Nevertheless we wish that it had never happened in the Ibadi history and in particular in the Imamate history in order to avoid any misunderstandings.*

Here is an important argument that enhances the legitimacy of the non-Imamate systems. The Imamate system itself is accused of having had some sort of inheritance issues, despite their defence that the relatives of the Imams were selected by the scholars and that it was not a direct inheritance. This weakness in the position of the Imamate is a strong point in favour of the other political systems that ruled Oman, where an heir is not nominated and the matter of occupying the throne is left to the process of selection. In this case, legitimacy of those regimes is seen as being almost equal to the legitimacy of the Imams. Therefore, according to this issue, the followers of the traditional *Shura*, arguably, might be in a weaker position to challenge the contemporary *Shura*, the one adopted by the government in Oman.

Furthermore, in order to stress the flexibility of the Islamic political system in selecting a ruler, respondents spoke about the long-sighted vision of the elite, in which the ruler's religious capability is not the sole parameter that qualifies him for the post. For example, RR2 (1/04/2009) said:

*They did not bequest the rule on a whim, but the matter of practical implementation, the long-sighted vision for the state's future and the nation's interest, led the intellectuals to pay homage to the candidate, based on what had been noticed of their implementation of the Shari'a principles to ensure a calm and stable rule.*

Once again, the respondents gave an example of what happened after the death of the Prophet. This is in order to show that the Islamic system is flexible and allows for the selection of the suitable person for the right time. For example, RR2 (1/04/2009) said:

*If you go back to what had happened in Saqifat Bani Saedah you will find that there are essential parameters to be found in any person selected for the rule;*

*it is well known that Imam Ali Bin Abi Talib was enriched in the science of fiqh more than Abu Bakr or Omar (the first two Caliphs), however due to some other parameters other than the Shari'a fiqh, they were selected as Caliphs before him. These characteristics from my point of view and from my readings are taken into account in selecting the ruler after the death of the Imam or Sultan. If these qualities are found in a person related to the ruler or close to the circle of decision making, then he will be given priority over others for the sake of stability and order. If the qualities are not found in a relative of the past ruler then he will not be selected and a search will take place in the distant circles of the past ruler.*

After discussing the principles surrounding the non-hereditary system (Imamate), respondents raised an important issue concerning the way of practising the rule in the aftermath of homage. They saw that those theoretical principles in selecting the ruler are not sufficient to legitimise him, if time proves that he is not suitable for the post. This means that although legitimate selection of the ruler is fundamental, this selection might be over-ruled by the ruler's wise performance afterwards. This argument is in favour of the ruling regime in Oman now, and hence of the contemporary *Shura* process adopted by that regime as discussed in section 5.3.2 below. For example, RR5 (5/01/2009) said:

*One point not known to many people is that Shura is also considered by Ibadis to be closely connected to justice. I mean it is not sufficient for the public authority, that the method is right whereas the practice is wrong. If the method by which a ruler is chosen is right and this ruler does not implement the Shura in a manner that leads to justice and running the country's affairs in a proper way, it would not be considered satisfactory that the method of choice was right. It does not help him that he was chosen in the right way and yet is ruling without justice.*

### **5.3.2 The semi-Hereditary Regime**

As has been discussed, the *Ibadi* political system witnessed both the non-hereditary and the hereditary political regimes. I prefer to call the latter the 'semi-hereditary' system as Omani history has not had such a thing as the 'crown prince' post, which is abundant in other Arabian Gulf States where the crown prince automatically becomes in charge after the death of the previous ruler. In Oman, the new ruler in all cases is chosen by the elites or by the ruling family themselves and even if the ruler has a son he is not directly eligible to the post and has to go through the selection process. As such, the non-hereditary and the hereditary systems are seen as legitimate by *Ibadism* so long as they adhere to *Shari'a* law and recognise the *Shura*. In this section, I discuss the respondents' views about this exception in the *Ibadi* political ideal and how

it comes to accept the rulers who have not been selected by the elite. For example, RR3 (25/03/2009) said: 'the Imamate is not an obligation unless someone is found to be suitable for it and its components are available such as *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd* and the sufficient number of men and munitions are also available'.

Respondents said that the ruler might be truly legitimised if he shows good conduct towards the nation's religion and its people, even if his selection to the post was not brought about through the religious elite. For example, RR5 (5/01/2009) said:

*Implementing Shura sometimes exceeds the issue of electing a ruler, and includes concentrating on the practice of running the country's affairs and justice, which means establishing equality among people, equality in opportunities, establishing an efficient administrative system that simplifies means of living and setting up a social system which observes prevalent customs. All this comes together to grant legitimacy and legality to a ruler.*

One of the points which the respondents stressed, which justifies the legitimacy of the non-elected ruler, is that the religious elite consider it to be the case that people are normally more obedient to those rulers belonging to a family or a tribe who have experience in ruling. This point in particular justifies the implicit arrangement that took place between the *Qahtani* and *Adnani* tribal blocks during the 8<sup>th</sup> century (see section 3.2), which granted the Imamate to the *Qahtani* tribes as throughout the Omani history people used to submit to their rule. For example, RR1 (14/01/2009) said:

*The intellectuals pay attention to the fact that people subjugate to those having precedents in terms of ruling; this is particularly so if qualifications are found in the son; among those qualifications we include education, mainly religious science, integrity, ability to take the responsibility, impartiality, confidence and justice. These qualifications qualify the person to be the Imam, so if his father or grandfather or brother was an Imam and the people subjugated to him, therefore people will submit even more to this person because he comes from the same family.*

Another point which enhances the legitimacy of the ruler is his successful performance, no matter how he has reached the post. Most of the interviewees spoke about this. For example, RR5 (5/01/2009) said:

*People may accept someone not been chosen in the right way. I mean if *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd* did not meet at least and elect him and give him the pledge. He may be chosen nonetheless by some people without public pledge. However, he may make reforms, do justice to the subject, and implement the principles of Shura and justice in a practical way. So, they may tolerate this and see his authority over them as legitimate.*



The respondents invoked examples from Omani history, wherein the religious elite legitimised one hereditary ruling tribe and refused legitimacy to another one according to their difference in performance. For example, RR5 (5/01/2009) mentioned that both *Nabahina* and *Ya'ariba* States witnessed issue of regime succession but they legitimised the latter because it bore prosperity that became apparent as being in their interest in science, in the welfare of the community, in the increase in the modes of production and the religious and agricultural aspects in addition to the geographic expansion of the state. As such, there were no attempts to overthrow them, as was the case with the *Nabahina* State. Accordingly, *Shura* cannot be viewed as independent from Justice.

The respondents also spoke about the current ruling family in order to explain why it is seen as legitimate. As the founder of the current ruling family was an Imam selected by *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd*, his successors still can gain legitimacy from the legitimacy of their grandfather and from their adherence to *Shura* and to the policies of the religious intellectuals. For example, RR1 (14/01/2009) said:

*Ahmed Bin Said (the founder) reached the Imamate through the Shura process and his progeny adhered to the religion and to the religious intellectuals who were taken as advisors, judges, teachers for their children, and they were consulted in the religious teachings. Even when some followers of the Imamate tried to go forcefully against the Sultans, for different reasons, the Sultans did not renounce them and they remained in adherence to them and to the sect because the sect exemplifies a security and a socially significant aspect of Omani history.*

Also, using the principle of prioritising those having ruling experience, RR4 (24/02/2009) argued that as long as the qualifications of civility and leadership are exhibited in the person from the ruling family, even if there is an equivalent to him in the society as a whole, his roots with the ruling family should give him the priority, in order to avoid dispute and to avoid conflict within the society. He supported his argument by saying that Prophet Moses, peace be upon him, was not mistaken to ask his lord to involve his brother Haroun as a prophet with him, to share in the responsibility entrusted to him, with the efficient people at his time - the good Jewish believers, but the kinship overbalanced that selection.

The above quotes argue that the Imamate and the Sultanate can live side by side as long as both systems fulfil the general requirements of ruling, those such as *Shura*, the honouring of justice and the furthering of prosperity. They reflect also the flexibility

found in the *Shari'a* law and in the *Ibadi* notion regarding the legitimacy of the ruler in Islam, a fact that connects Islam to the day to day issues and arguably narrows the distance between Islam and democracy.

As for the homage of the Sultans, respondents said that there is nothing prohibiting the members of the ruling family from internally selecting one of their own to be the new ruler. Here is a signal of the article in the Basic Statute of the State which mandates the selection of the new sultan to the Ruling Family Council. For example, RR7 (17/04/2009) said:

*In the Sultans' system in Oman, allegiance is pledged internally by the ruling families, and there is no harm in that. It not necessary that allegiance has to be pledged by the jurist, this is in order to avoid strife and loss of lives and waste of money and the proliferation of terror and fear. The ruler must be obeyed as long as good conditions are ensured, and challenging him is not permissible in order to prevent sedition. Consent and Submission have the same effect of allegiance. Therefore, whoever takes the rule, be they Sultan or President or Imam, so long as they achieve the duties proscribed, they must be obeyed.*

It can be argued that this represents *Ibadi* thought and it is in favour of democratically selected rulers, as the quote calls for obeying whoever takes the rule so long as he fulfils the Islamic requirements.

In summary, the political system in *Ibadism* has not got just one unique form. It can be a hereditary system as long as it achieves the desired goals of the good for religion and the citizenry. The selection of Imams by the religious elite in the Imamate system is an obligation but it is not an obligation in the hereditary systems. The selection of rulers, however, is not seen as sufficient to legitimise them if their performance proves they are unsuitable. By contrast, successful performance of a ruler may substitute for a lack of legal selection and he must be obeyed regardless of the method of his selection. The ruler becomes more exposed to political challenges if he is found to be unsatisfactory in the post regardless of how he reached the throne.

### 5.3.3 Stipulations for Deposition of the Ruler

*Ibadi* jurisprudence sets general principles which regulate the matter of challenging or deposing the ruler<sup>223</sup>. It appears that Imams are more vulnerable to deposition because they are expected to stick to the religious teachings. For example, RR6 (10/01/2009) said:

*The Imam comes by a contract and if he does not apply the "Fiqh" or Islamic jurisprudence which is justice, mercy with people, humility with people and the application of laws, he can be deposed. If he applies the Islamic jurisprudence, people will be satisfied with him and if he does not apply it, unseating him would become necessary.*

The objection of the jurists alone towards certain Imams, whom they may consider illegitimate, is seen as insufficient for deposing them. People's resentment – as will be discussed below - is more important in delegitimizing the Imam. For example, RR6 (10/01/2009) said:

*Sometimes Faqeehs objected to a certain Imam, and they could not unseat him. Some jurists objected to the Imam Mohammad Ibn Ismael Al-Hadhery in Nizwa and he was not unseated. In the epoch of the Imam Saif Ibn Sultan, Aisha bint Rashed Al-Riyamiya, who was one of the great Islamic jurists in her age, objected to Qaid Al-Ardh [nick name of Imam Sultan Ibn Saif] and considered his Imamate illegitimate, but he was not unseated and was considered one of the most successful Imams militarily in his fight against the Portuguese.*

As for systems other than the Imamate, the jurisprudence is less strict because the nature of the ruling dynamic is not religious but civil. The ruler in hereditary systems becomes vulnerable when he obviously breaches the religious teachings or misuses his authority. In the *Ibadi* ideal the Imamate does not disappear, it serves to monitor the situation from a distance and it intervenes at times which are necessary in order to protect religion, state and people. For example, RR10 (13/04/2009) claims that the dogmatic aspect of *Ibadism* necessitates the presence of a Muslim ruler for Muslims at all the times according to the system of Imamate. He said that there is no era without an Imam. So the *Ibadis* divided the Imamates into different categories which are the apparent Imamate, the hidden Imamate, the purchased Imamate and the defence Imamate, according to the strength and weakness of the relevant Muslims.

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<sup>223</sup> Saeed, M. N. 2007, pp. 369-370.

However, there are some stipulations that should be taken into account before challenging or deposing the ruler. This is in order to avoid any sort of unrest in the state. For example, RR5 (5/01/2009) said:

*The question of deposing the ruler involves certain controls. It is subject to the public interests which decide what can rectify the status of a particular ruler. It goes through some steps, beginning with advice, then supervision, then an assessment with regard to accountability and a demand for reform. Sometimes it ends with the necessity of deposition where possible. Deposition as I understand from some readings is determined by two aspects: popular discontent with the performance of a particular ruler, and accordance with the principle of Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd, including the advice of scientists, experts and scholars. They may multiply or may diminish; but it is rare to have only one segment, say only scholars criticizing the performance of a certain ruler without popular resentment regarding the poor conditions of living and social, moral, religious and even scientific aspects of society.*

After following all the steps mentioned by RR5 above, the decision of deposition only takes place if the victory's essential bases are available; otherwise the process will be a failure and become a mess. This has been asserted by RR3 (25/03/2009) when he argued that in the custom of the Imamate, it is forbidden to rise against the unjust rulers unless their blasphemy is very obvious. If this is the case then it is stipulated that 'victory-agents' or conspirators have to be, to a great extent, part of the process, and those going against him must have a great belief and will, towards victory, otherwise the revolution will be converted into mess, which is not acceptable in *Shari'a* legislation.

From this discussion, it seems that the citizenry's resentment is more influential in the deposition of a ruler than the jurists' objections. In all cases, the regulations which organise the process of deposing the ruler should be followed, starting with the advice stage. Military coups are forbidden according to Islamic law. For example, RR10 (13/04/2009) said:

*Coups d'état are not present in Islamic law; even the dismissal of the ruler can never take place unless his apostasy is very clear, even if his disbelief is clear, disobedience should be preceded by some processes such as consultation and other things. There is a saying that "it's better to be ruled by a fair ruler who does not apply the Islamic law than ruled by a Muslim ruler who applies the Islamic law in the presence of sedition". The religious intention here is to keep stability and spread justice and ensure people's freedom.*

Some respondents spoke about the process of the foundation of the current ruling family, which took over from the *Ya'ariba* when they misused their authority and left the

country subject to foreign intervention. For example, RR5 (5/01/2009) said that the second half of the State of *Ya'ariba* witnessed many flaws because the practice of rule was wrong and the performance became weak. They got rid of the *Shura*, people started to feel resentful, and weakness was established. Therefore, some parts of Oman were seized and disorder sparked until Imam Ahmed Bin Said saved the situation. Thus, even the currently monarchic system originated as an Imamate rule which had rescued the country during an epoch of weakness and this is what the Imamate normally does.

The interviewees stressed that the Imamate throughout time had not been involved in challenging a ruler unless he has been proved to be unqualified for the post. Whenever the country witnessed political unrest, the *Shura*, represented by the jurists, has become involved in rescuing the situation. For example, RR3 (25/03/2009) said:

*The vision of the religious intellectuals throughout history has remained wide and comprehensive and the Shura that has represented them has remained the saver of the country during periods of weakness. The weakest periods which the country has witnessed have been due to the weakness of the religious intellectuals or disputes among the ruling families that have either led to seeking help from foreign forces or to the invasion of the country by other countries. The weakness that occurred towards the end of the Nabahina State, for example, led to Portuguese intervention in some parts of the country, and the weakness which occurred towards the end of the Ya'ariba State led to a tribal dispute that in turn led to the Persian invasion.*

This means that the followers of the traditional *Shura* cannot be seen as a threat to the current political regime in Oman, since throughout history their interventions have not been directed towards the ruling regimes themselves, but to rescuing the state during periods of weakness. This is particularly the case when a foreign force has become involved in internal issues of the State due to weakness in the political regime. Also, the matter of deposing a ruler is not arbitrary but subject to certain rules. The decision of deposing the ruler is not enough to be taken by the religious intellectuals but it should be backed by clear public resentments. In all cases, it should not be taken through a military coup but through certain steps that start by advice to the ruler, then supervision of his performance, ending up with announcing his disqualification for the post. The last step should not be taken unless there are guarantees for the success of the removal, such as sufficient people and munitions to challenge the ruler militarily. Without these sorts of guarantees, religious scholars prefer to stay under the same ruler to avoid any presence of sedition in the society. This argument is in favour of the stability of any

democratic system that may appear in any Islamic state if not challenged by the vertical social divisions. Unfortunately, the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed many coups although arguably this took place in Arab States where Muslim people had deviated from their wise Islamic principles and adopted external ideologies.

#### **5.4 The Traditional and Contemporary *Shura***

The previous sections have shown that any Islamic political system can be tolerated by *Ibadism* as long as it practises the *Shura* in one way or another. This section specifically explores religious respondents' views of the contemporary *Shura* and how they evaluate it religiously in comparison to the traditional *Shura*. As for the *Shura* itself, the respondents believe that any type of *Shura* is welcomed by *Ibadism*. For example, RR1 (14/01/2009) said:

*If we talk about the Shura in the contemporary time, I say that the Shura is welcomed according to the Shari'a legislation, and that the development that we see is related to the in-loco-parentis [the Sultan] principle, which sees the country's goals as being modernisation proportionate with the level of maturity in the Omani mentality.*

The contemporary *Shura* is welcomed by the respondents because it does not neglect the historical aspect of the *Shura* and the religious legislations. RR5 (5/01/2009), for example, argues that the contemporary *Shura* in Oman is not duplicated from east or west. It is the product of three sources: (1) the legal aspect from the Quran, the *Sunnah*, (2) from the historical experience and the historical product of this experience, and (3) from the requirements of the age. This means that contemporary *Shura* has the same legitimacy as the traditional one.

Many respondents believed that the modernisation process in the country, has changed the old notion of *Shura* from depending on the elite alone to exercise wider political participation. For example, RR8 (20/04/2009) said:

*The complexity of science and the scientific disciplines which compel us to keep up in parallel line with modernisation through the appointment of the right person in the right place, and to consult the people who are in good professions, and not do as we did in the past where the man of the tribe and religious jurists are consulted over everything. This is the simple difference between the previous and the current schools.*

What can be derived from the above is that the impact of globalisation in terms of tribal legitimacy increasingly determines political power in Oman. In particular the emerging professional classes in the Sultanate now form a more influential force in urban areas – one that was in the previous school represented by the traditional tribal structures.

Respondents also believed that the contemporary *Shura* has combined both tradition and modernity through the establishment of the two-council system, wherein the State Council substitutes the traditional council of the elite and the *Shura* Council takes a modern form of participation by having publicly elected members. For example, RR2 (1/04/2009) argues that the government through the contemporary *Shura*, mixed what was practised before and the ambitions of the people which look at what is available in the world through implementing the traditional and the modern *Shura* in the two-council system.

Some respondents believe that although public participation in the *Shura* is a new practice to *Ibadism*, it has legitimate support from the legal scholars. For example, RR7 (17/04/2009) said:

*There is an Islamic principle which can be used to legitimise the elections, which states: the nation does not meet on a deviation. Therefore, the collective opinion is usually given preference, and this can be viewed as equivalent to the views of Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd in the traditional Shura. The current expansion makes for more efficiency and accuracy as the opinion of a hundred is better than the opinion of ten.*

Respondents also believe that there is no harm in expanding the council of the elite (*Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd*). This is a sign of the current situation of the State Council. For example, RR1 (14/01/2009) argues that the concept of *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd* can be expanded to embrace civil society associations as civil rule does not require members of the associations to be purely religious. It can also contain physicians, lawyers, sportsmen -if there is a person who has influence on the society- and also women if there are female associations with social influence. Most important to RR1 is that the member of the council has an influence over a good part of society.

In addition to welcoming the contemporary *Shura*, religious respondents did not hesitate to criticise the traditional *Shura* because it concentrated on religious and tribal leaders and did not benefit from all the qualified elite. This indicates that the traditional

model itself was not a perfect model that could be used as a parameter to assess the contemporary *Shura*. This may serve to strengthen the legitimacy of the contemporary *Shura* and reduces the likelihood of it being challenged by the traditional *Shura*. For example, RR10 (13/04/2009) said:

*Shura was based on scholars but Oman is big and scholars are everywhere, so not all scholars were consulted and those who were consulted and who took part in the council of the elite were the scholars who were around the Imam. Nowadays, after development of the means of transportation and communication, it has become natural for Shura to develop into an accurate political system that benefits from the experiences of others and achieves the interests of the nation and the citizenry.*

The respondents seem to be content with the contemporary *Shura* because, as in the traditional *Shura*, the concept of the *Umma* and the preference of collectivism over individualism are rooted in the process. For example, RR4 said: 'There is no conflict between the traditional and contemporary *Shura* in terms of the aims and objectives it espouses. It is the objection to individualism by the collective desire to reach a superior goal'. Similarly, RR8 (20/04/2009) said: 'The Omanis are exercising their political right in the *Shura* Council, and they have inherited this tradition from their ancestors, while still maintaining respect for the practice of the old and the young'.

This indicates that the religious elite may play a role in hindering the process of social transformation in Oman from reaching advanced standards with a full separation of powers such as those seen in the Western democracies. They welcome any sort of modernisation in the political process so long as it does not go against the superior goals of the concept of the *Umma* and so long as it preserves Islamic values, ethics, traditions and norms.

In summary, respondents do not see any contradiction between the traditional and the contemporary *Shura*, which arguably leaves no question about the legitimacy of the contemporary *Shura* at least among religious leaders. The religious respondents have shown a clear flexibility in their vision of the contemporary *Shura*, and theirs are not merely their personal views - most of the views are explained and sometimes supported by evidence from the *Shari'a* law. They believe that the age needs modernisation in *Shura* as professional classes have now emerged and the concept of *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd* itself does not mind the expansion of the council of elite. This expansion, according to



their views can also include women, which demonstrates a revolution against the radical views of some Islamists against women. They also accept the presence of a two-council system, aimed at substituting the old council of elite with the State Council, and increasing the number of *Shura* Council members as a substitute for the quality of the members of the old elite council, because the larger number the members are, the more accurate their decision is perceived to be. But at the same time they stress the necessity of preserving the concept of *Umma*, which means that the degree of advancement in the *Shura* should preserve the values, ethics, traditions and norms of society and not reach a level of full separation of powers.

#### **5.4.1 The Powers of the Contemporary *Shura***

As for the powers given to the contemporary *Shura*, the respondents seem to be supporting the government's steps in the gradual opening up of the political horizon. They believe that this gradualism reflects a shrewd approach to government. For example, RR3 (25/03/2009) said:

*The contemporary Shura is wise because of its gradualism in its modernising approach. It is not imitating the others and it is not hurrying in the implementation of modernity. Some might have preceded us in education levels but they have not been so canny in implementing democracy.*

The religious respondents believe that some of the democratic experiences in the Arab World have been devastating because they were implemented without sufficiently careful attention being given to the nature of the society. For example, RR10 (13/04/2009) argued that some pluralistic experiences in some Arab countries have hindered the march of progress because it hurried to put all authorities in the hands of the parliament. He added that he is with keeping many authorities in the hands of political leadership to determine what is good for the nation and the citizenry. This does not negate him being for the development and activity of the *Shura* but condones it being done in a calculated way. Also RR8 (20/04/2009) said:

*We hear about the parliaments chairs "being thrown under the pretext of democracy, and of parliament's resolved, a government resigning and interests breaking down, and we do not want this to happen in Oman because this is a disruption of development and gives priority to personal or factional interests.*

This shows that religious people are not only confined to studying the religious studies but are open-minded and know what is going on around them. This knowledge led

them to conclude that the gradual steps taken by the government in opening up the political horizon are best for Oman, as some other, quicker moves towards democratisation in some Arab States that have the same social divisions witnessed some devastating results. Accordingly, these respondents urge the citizenry, particularly the younger generation, not to hurry towards opening up the political horizon and so to avoid the mistakes seen in other Arab States such as Iraq and Lebanon. They predict that more powers will be given over in the future but urge people to maintain the Omani identity for the meantime. For example, RR2 (1/04/2009) argued that we do not have to hurry up this opening, precisely to avoid mistakes. He added that the Sultanate now is obliged to adapt its policies to fit the international standards. These things make the country fulfil what the young generation wants but according to Omani – and not alien - standards.

When the religious respondents spoke of maintaining the Omani identity, they most likely meant to reserve the concept of *Umma* and to prioritise collectivism over individualism. They believe that the separation of powers counters these principles and, consequently, it stops society from benefiting from all its potential. For example, RR5 (5/01/2009) said:

*If you say that, for example, there is a complete separation between the executive and the judiciary powers, you are here helping to create clear institutions in society as much as you deprive the community of specific benefits. Therefore, the issue of the separation of powers must be examined. As a specialist in Shari'a studies, I would say that the full separation of powers - a point that needs to be studied - may lead to the omission of some of the benefits of society, such as the system of the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice, for example, which accords with legal conditions and with controls and which addresses many of the general phenomena in society. The argument applies to the Shura Council in the event of making it a legislative authority separated from the rest of the authorities. It will make the other bodies lose too much of their powers, whether individually or collectively, whether it was a certain ministry or the Council of Ministers, or whatever. The Islamic community needs to be a holistic community for the service of each individual. Community is the goal, not the individual. There should be an optimal use of all elements of society.*

#### **5.4.2 The Influence of Tribal Fanaticism**

As the government's elite in Chapter 4 did, the religious respondents spoke of the tribal nature of Omani society. They believed that during the first Imamate States the role of the religious elite was powerful but its role dwindled over time due to the strengthening role of tribalism. This had not been seen as a problem as long as tribal

fanaticism does not monopolise the whole political decision-making process. For example, RR6 (10/01/2009) said:

*With time, the authority of the Faqeeh began to dwindle and the authority of the tribe became stronger. There were examples in which the Imam was appointed by the leaders of tribes, only without the opinion of the Faqeeh like the Imamate of Mohammed Bin Nasser Al-Ghafri at the end of the epoch of the "Ya'ariba" reign.*

Unfortunately, this tribal decision to appoint Al-Ghafri led to the emergence of a long tribal conflict between the *Hinawi* and *Ghafri* blocs, discussed in Chapter 3. This is because the pure tribal political decision is regarded illegitimate in the Omani tradition. However, tribalism can influence political decision-making nonetheless. For example, RR2 (1/04/2009) said: 'Tribal leaders had a role in *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd* in the past and in the security and stability of Oman'.

The religious respondents, agreeing with the government elite's opinions presented in Chapter 4, believed that tribal fanaticism in the current era has been weakened due to the welfare provision of the government (a reference to the social contract) and advancement in education. However, with the existence of this weakness, the spiritual influence of tribal fanaticism on people is still felt. It appears most obviously during the *Shura* Council's election. For example, RR6 (10/01/2009) said:

*The tribe is not the same as before. In the past, the leader of the tribe was the only one who could affect the village. Nowadays there are many factors which have an effect such as education, the liberty that has begun to appear, and the high standard of living that has made them independent from the leader of the tribe. However, mentally, we still cannot get rid of the tribe as an ideal however much we can get rid of it as a social entity. Voters think that the leader of the tribe can benefit them, their families and the whole village where they live. These aspects encouraged the populace to elect the respective tribal candidate.*

Also, RR8 supported this argument when he said that the Sultan, having in mind the structure of tribal society of Oman, did not start the *Shura* process by elections but by appointing members of the Council. The Sultan did not want our democratisation process to be dialectical but wanted it to be organised, civilised and effective.

Once again, the reliance on educated classes to improve the democratic culture appeared in the religious respondents' views. They believe that the graduates in particular are able to reduce the influence of tribal fanaticism in elections, which would

facilitate the process of encouraging more qualified citizens to run for office. For example, RR3 (25/03/2009) said:

*There is a stronger impact [of tribal fanaticism] in certain districts more than others but it is not hindering much; in time the number of educated people will increase, the faith in Shura will be greater, and educated people will be selected, not the candidate of the tribe.*

### **5.4.3 Boycotting the Elections: the Graduates Response**

Respondents gave almost the same reasons as those mentioned in the previous chapter about the boycotting of educated classes in the *Shura* Council's elections. Some of them addressed the role of tribal fanaticism and the Council's limited effectiveness. For example, RR6 (10/01/2009) said:

*The tribe is still powerful and it makes the educated people less important, that's why the educated person cannot reach the Council easily. The tendency of educated people to refrain from elections has other reasons behind it, such as lack of satisfaction with the effectiveness of the Council, participation not being compulsory, and the ambiguity regarding the benefit the Council brings to people. The educated people are not satisfied with the benefits of the Shura Council; they still think that its effectiveness is limited and that the members inside the Council do not have enough power to practice.*

Some respondents spoke of the unwillingness of graduates to sacrifice their career for temporary Council membership, of the non-effective media coverage on the Council's performance and of the ambiguity surrounding parliamentary immunity. For example, RR9 (4/03/2009) said:

*A citizen with a successful career may not be willing to sacrifice his job for a temporary membership that may not exceed four years; some consider it as a risk. This is in addition to the weakness in the financial stimulus. Among other factors, concern was expressed regarding shortcomings in the information that the Council can access and the inertia of the citizen such that he remains isolated from the performance of the Council. Finally, the lack of clarity in the scope of parliamentary immunity and how the future of the member might turn out to be after the expiry of the period makes people hesitant to run for a seat.*

Some respondents said that the contemporary *Shura* is not perfect but graduates should not boycott it. They should be involved and convince the political leadership to improve the level of the experiment. For example, RR8 (20/04/2009) argued that they should try to encourage change in the way Omani people favour through persuasion, rather than drumbeating, in reference to some pluralistic experiments in the region. He believed that although there are negative aspects of the practice so far, including the

non-legislative powers for the *Shura* Council, these powers and others will certainly come. He added that these things demanded to be dealt with using wisdom and good policy decisions. Nevertheless, he added that these children must be embraced and enlightened until their vision becomes mature.

RR8 spoke here about some of the social problems, which represent the social divisions - discussed in Chapter 2 - present in most Middle Eastern societies that need to be taken into account when opening up the political horizon. Some of the interviewees believe that the powers given to the *Shura* Council are sufficient at this stage and that they will increase with time when better educated members reach the Council. They urge the young generation not to be influenced by the media. For example, RR3 (25/03/2009) said:

*Educated people should not boycott elections, what is said about the limited authorities of the Council is not accurate and reflects a short-sighted vision; more authority is available and when more educated members reach the Council and they send up their visualisations to His Majesty the Sultan for more authority they will be given it. It is not acceptable to give authority to one who never effectively uses it. The demands that we hear these days from some in the citizenry are regarded as exhibiting too much touchiness due to the influence of foreign factors. The areas open for the civil society organisations are sufficient and proportionate with the current situation.*

#### **5.4.4 Challenge of the 'Rentier State Model'**

Respondents spoke indirectly about the implicit social contract between the government and its citizens. They believe that according to this contract, the people working in the public sector criticise the government less than those working in the private sector. For example, RR1 (14/01/2009) said:

*Sometimes the country employs citizens in jobs not to meet real requirements but in order to redistribute the wealth to those citizens. Some unnecessary ministries been established, the government could have proceeded without them. In this regard, you find that the employee in the public sector feels that he has more claims to the government than he would have if he was employed by the private sector. As for criticism, the employee in the public sector has less criticism to offer the government when compared to those in the private sector, and the latter criticises more if he gets less wages than those paid by the public sector.*

The respondents accordingly believed that any big economic problem would affect the social contract and this would be reflected in the political situation in the country. For example, RR3 (25/03/2009) said: 'The economic weaknesses lead to setbacks in the

development that affect the citizens and this would certainly affect the political process in Oman'. Also RR4 (24/02/2009) said: 'The economic problems may lead to the emergence of a more effective private sector which might form some effective pressure, especially in the presence of trade unions which can apply pressure on the government'.

In an attempt to reduce the effect of economic problems on political stability, some respondents spoke about the connection to the global economy. They argued that nowadays, states in general do not reach a point of economic failure, particularly if they cooperate with the international community, as they can seek loans or aid from other countries or international financial bodies. For example, RR1 (14/01/2009) said:

*The economic situation in the modern era is different from the ancient one; the economy is circulating now and is not stagnant. Also the economy is not local any more but is international and nations serve each other, so the country normally does not reach a point of bankruptcy. Rather, it seeks loans and aid from other countries, so if there is an impact it will be limited and it will be dealt with. The impact would be more if the country was in a status of animosity with other countries particularly with the great powers, which could lead to an economic boycott or an economic embargo.*

This means that while the social contract might be affected by large economic problems, the legitimacy of the political regime may not be affected, as both government and people can adapt to the new situation. The respondents said that, although Oman is an oil-producing state and oil is regarded as the major source of income, the Omani people and the government have managed to balance their living standards without too much luxury when compared to some neighbouring states, which will help them to cope with any economic shock. For example, RR8 (20/04/2009) said:

*As Omanis, the depletion of oil will not drive us mad, we are balanced and we are not living in comfort, and we have not abandoned our beautiful customs and traditions. The Omanis will adapt their lives depending on the circumstances; they will change their houses and cars and so on.*

In summary, the religious respondents echoed the views of government respondents in Chapter 4 regarding the contemporary powers given to the *Shura* Council, the influence of tribal fanaticism on elections, the negative effect of graduates' boycott on the development of the political process in Oman and the economic challenges that face the rentier state model. They seemed optimistic about future of the *Shura* process in Oman and urged graduates not to leave a wider space for tribal fanaticism to direct the political process and not to hurry further opening up of the

political horizon as vertical social divisions may ruin the whole process - as is happening in Iraq and Lebanon. They also feel that economic crises may affect the implicit social contract but not the stability of the country.

## **5.5 Democracy and Globalisation and the *Ibadi's* View**

### **5.5.1 The *Shura* and Democracy**

No single respondent from this category thought democracy contradicts Islam. They think that democracy does not negatively impact the *Shura* as a principle but it agrees with the *Shura* in terms of its practice. This is because both approaches are the direct result of human thoughts and experiences. For example, RR3 (25/03/2009) said:

*There is no contradiction between the Shura and democracy. It is not as some people think; that Shura comes from religion and democracy from the people. Shura is an Islamic political system that came from the Muslims' diligence and here one should differentiate between Shura as a principle and Shura as a practice. The intervention of religion in Shura is to immunise it from falling into being something forbidden by Islam.*

I take RR3 to have meant, in the last sentence of this quote, that it is the need to protect it from adopting values that contradict Islamic values, such as full separation of powers, which weakens the very essence of the concept of *Umma*. Respondents felt that the *Shura* and democracy agree in terms of the principle of the devolution of power as the rule should not be hereditary, however the *Shura* does not agree as far as changing the ruler before he dies, becomes physically incapable or proves unsuitable for the post. For example, RR4 (24/02/2009) said:

*What can be learned from the first four Caliphs who succeeded the Prophet is different than today's democratic calls. For the recent call, leaders should be re-elected or changed every few years and this fulfils what is known as the law of devolution of power in the State. While the system of the Caliphs, May Allah be pleased with them, talks about the continuity of the rule of the Caliph, as long as he is alive, conscious and capable. So a successor cannot be elected until the previous one has died.*

Therefore, the respondents believe that according to this tradition, a presidential kind of democracy such as those in the USA or France could not be implemented in Islamic societies. However, as Oman's experiment is close to a parliamentary democratisation process at the moment, nothing can prohibit the implementation of a

governmental democratisation process through which the prime minister comes to be elected alongside the Sultan's position. This stability in the position of a ruler in Islam so long as he is found suitable and capable may suit Middle Eastern societies better than presidential democracies because the presence of the social divisions may find open democratic environment a fertile soil to strengthen their positions above all others including the national interests.

It can be argued that this fact put limits to the ambitions of the new generations in Oman to have a comprehensive democratic system in future and at the same time it strengthens the legitimacy of the ruling system and the contemporary *Shura* process. This argument has proved its validity until now, particularly when one looks at the democratisation processes in the surrounding region, such as the experiment in Iraq.

### **5.5.2 The *Shura* and Globalisation**

As for the relationship between Islam and globalisation, none of the interviewees thought of anything that might be used to counter globalisation. They do not look at it from a doctrinal but rather a social angle. The only concern felt, was that they did not want globalisation to affect the value system in Oman. For example RR8 said: 'keeping pace with globalisation is not a defect and is not an error unless it is affecting the fixed values of Omani society'. They do not see any harm in taking particular political steps which could be read into as being an accompaniment to globalisation but, at the same time, they should not contradict religion. For example: RR7 (17/04/2009) said: 'Omanis are compelled to go along with globalisation, which does not now affect our faith, ethics, traditions and customs'. Also RR8 (20/04/2009) said:

*When society does not choose women to parliament, but they are given by the State seats in the Council of Ministers and seats in the State Council, this is not an error it is a wise policy, and there is nothing that prevents the majority of the members involved in the two chambers from being women.*

Once again, this is an enlightened view about women that turns the table on the radical Islamic jurists and supports the Omani government views on empowering women, mentioned in section 3.8. For the relationship between the *Shura* and globalisation, the majority of respondents believed that there is no link between the two as the political process in Oman began in the 1970s while the strong trend of globalisation was only really felt in the 1990s. For example, RR2 (1/04/2009) argued



that although the *Shura* in its recent form had been established in 1991, which is about the time of expansion of globalisation, there was a clear and announced vision about the political process in Oman since the 1970s. He added that before the *Shura* Council there was the State Consultative Council and even before that there was the Council for Agriculture, Fish and Industry that had a counselling role. Preceding even that, the Sultan came up with his outstanding method of *Shura* that comes through the annual open parliament seen in the Annual Tour, and before the tours were the Royal Speeches which had concentrated on the political participation scope since the beginning. He asserts therefore that globalisation in its contemporary form had no role in the establishment of the political process in the Sultanate. Also RR6 (10/01/2009) said:

*External effects are always there. They may accelerate the process of turning from appointment to elections. Nevertheless we have institutions that grow in all fields, in education, in economy and in other fields. We have continuous growth in Oman. Oman had consultative councils since the seventies and they have grown naturally. Globalisation cannot be limited to a certain time because globalisation had probably started before the age of the internet and satellite channels. However, I can say that openness to space channels and the internet has happened more recently. It had probably started in the nineties with space channels then it was followed by the internet in the middle of that same decade.*

The respondents believed that globalisation socially affects a few people but not the whole society. For example, RR5 (5/01/2009) argued that there was a great impact of globalisation due to the openness of communication and methods of acquiring knowledge, but community and government have shown some awareness of how to protect the generations from the ills of globalisation. There was no rush in the nation in favour of globalisation, unlike in other countries, which plunged determinedly into it in certain economic aspects, adopting an open policy, open tourism and consequently money laundering and unreal companies without consciences appeared.

This means that the social effect is marginal and the government is aware of it. The view that government itself, economically, is not affected by globalisation much and it did not rush the political opening process for the sake of the economy, as had happened in some neighbouring States, reflect the government respondents' views in Chapter 4. They believe that the contemporary political process in Oman has emerged since the 1970s and was not a product of globalisation which has only tangibly spread during the 1990s. This belief strengthens the legitimacy of the contemporary *Shura* which the respondents

believe stems from the Omani tradition. They do not deny though, the influence of globalisation on some governmental policies and on the society itself, but they do not see any harm in that so long as the Islamic values of the society are preserved.

## 5.6 Conclusion

This chapter examined the legitimacy of the contemporary *Shura* and investigated whether the followers of the traditional *Shura* pose a real challenge to reform of the political system in Oman.

What has emerged from the religious respondents' views is that the followers of the traditional *Shura* cannot be seen as a threat to the current political regime in Oman because, throughout history, their interventions have not been directed towards the ruling regimes themselves but designed to rescue the state during periods of weakness. This is particularly so when a foreign force has become involved in the internal issues of the State due to weakness within the political regime. Also, the matter of deposing a ruler is not arbitrary but subject to certain rules. It is not enough to be decided by the religious intellectuals but it should be backed by clear public resentments. In all cases, it should not be taken through a military coup but through certain steps that start by advice to the ruler, then supervision of his performance ending up with the announcement of his disqualification for the post. The last step should not be taken unless there are guarantees for the success, such as sufficient people and munitions to challenge the ruler militarily. Having not secured these sorts of guarantees, scholars prefer to stay under the same ruler to avoid any presence of sedition within the society. This argument is in favour of the stability of any democratic system that may appear in any Islamic state and has not been challenged by the vertical social divisions.

It can be argued overall that there is no doubt over the legitimacy of the contemporary *Shura*, as *Shura* in Islam and *Ibadism* has no unique form and the respondents believe that the current form of the *Shura* is more suitable for this period. *Ibadi* history also witnessed non-hereditary and semi-hereditary political systems and both of them are seen by the respondents as legitimate so long as they adhere to the *Shura* and fulfil the aspirations of the society. Therefore, there is no ground for the followers of the traditional *Shura* to challenge the current political system. But there is a

good chance for *Shura* to evolve in the future to satisfy some ambitions of the new generation. The following chapter focuses on some of the young generation's views on the contemporary political process in Oman.

## 6 The 'Bottom-Up' Model: Ambitions and Challenges

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of data obtained from younger generation respondents in Oman (age group 25-50) who were carefully selected according to their experience and posts in civil society associations. This chapter will analyse the following four themes in order to find out how successfully the younger generations are challenging the contemporary political process in Oman:

- 1) Their views of the traditional *Shura*
- 2) Their views of the contemporary *Shura*
- 3) Their political views and political demands
- 4) Their vision of Oman's political situation in the post-oil era

Arguably, the contemporary *Shura* is positioned in the centre between those who toe the traditional line, who want to conserve the image of the traditional *Shura*, and the younger generation, representing a bottom-up process, who are willing to be freed of the historical handcuffs and have a greater political space. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to find out to what extent the views of the younger generation are close to, or distant from, the government's views regarding the political process in Oman. In short, this chapter explores the attitudes of this generation towards Omani history and what values it has and also reviews the extent to which 25-50 year olds are satisfied with the political initiatives taken by the government, as well as the barriers they believe are hindering the political process.

The underlying argument here is that if these respondents are aware of Oman's history, traditions and contemporary issues, they will be capable of adopting the comprehensive political view that is a requirement in order to consolidate a solid political process from the bottom up. If not, however, they may not be counted upon for initiating a genuine process. So this chapter is going to explore aspects of their political view in relation to their awareness of Oman's history, traditions and contemporary issues because this understanding will help to formulate their ideas and come up with political agenda that still can embrace tradition, and convince both the people, and the government, to open further the political horizon.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, legitimacy of the Sultanate is contingent on a path of reform that currently embraces three distinct democratisation processes of participation. It is the process of bargaining between these that determines the extent to which an indigenous democratisation process has begun to evolve and define the political landscape of Oman. Thus, the previous chapter argued that there is some sort of mutual understanding between the traditional and the top-down democratisation process. In this chapter the study explores the third part of the democratisation process in the country by examining the political vision of the younger generation respondents.

## **6.2 The Younger Generation's Views of the Traditional *Shura***

I found it difficult to assess whether young people are aware of the historical and anthropological characteristics of their homeland and whether they represent a clear political agenda that takes into account the unique features of Omani society. This is because some of the respondents gave unexpected answers when interviewed. For example, when YGR10 (15/04/2009) was asked what he knows about the *Shura* and its history in Oman, he replied as follows: 'I had not had access to the *Shura* in the past because I was born during the Renaissance era, and furthermore, I did not understand the purpose of having the *Shura* Council until lately. Therefore, I am not aware of the past'.

This response is unexpected as it comes from an individual associated with the elite of Omani society who chairs one of the most active civil society associations and who has direct ties to the political system, indeed, is regarded as part of the *Shura* process. The response of YGR10 is an example of what GR6 said in Chapter 4, that the young-generation use phrases they hear in the media but when asked about their views on Oman they get confused. GR6 attributed this to the influence of satellite channels that talk about certain cultures that are not necessarily suitable for Oman. If the response by YGR10 reflects the views of some of the educated younger generation, change brought about by a bottom up political process seems unlikely to succeed as it needs charismatic social leaders who are able to redirect peoples' points of reference in a conservative community surrounded by a strong government with an effective apparatus of media control.

However, not all respondents in this category provided answers similar to those given by YGR10. Interviewees such as YGR2, YGR3, YGR4 and YGR5 are aware of

the *Shura's* history and have clear views about the present and future. The common factor that links these four respondents is their age and experience, unlike YGR10 who is younger than them and may adopt similar views in future. This observation, by itself, suggests that a bottom up process is possible because, with time, the younger generation will get older and more mature, will form the majority of the population and be more likely to support the political process from the bottom up. For example, this is what YGR2 (08/03/2009) said when he was asked about the *Shura* in the past:

*The Shura means 'consultation' in its widest range. It is rooted in the Holy Quran, which came in a spoken form about the community of believers. Therefore, it came to tell us about an existing situation and is very important to the structure of communities. Shura has to be applied and practiced, as it has the same obligations as the other religious ordinances.*

This answer is similar to those given by the religious respondents in Chapter 5. When a person is knowledgeable he gains peoples trust, and this makes him eligible to contribute to the contemporary political process and criticise its shortcomings. Similarly, YGR8 (09/01/2009) demonstrated an in depth understanding of the origin of the *Shura* when he spoke about the emergence of *Ibadism*. He believes that the *Ibadi* sect was not created as a result of religious indulgence but as a result of *bay'a* (pledge of allegiance), which was grounded on *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd* and which rejected any sort of hereditary rule. YGR8 (09/01/2009) also said: 'Over history, Oman adopted the *Shura* and succeeded. It is the most stable democracy in over 12 centuries'. YGR1 (19/04/2009) said: 'In the past there were councils that consisted of people with an in-depth knowledge, during which time it was known as the councils of *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd* throughout Islamic history in Oman'.

This demonstrates that some of the younger generation are as capable of understanding the history and context of *Shura* as their religious and tribal counterparts. Gaining trust and support from a wider society certainly enhances the ability of the younger generation to have a stronger influence in political change throughout the Sultanate.

Moreover, in an example that suggests some of the younger generation is on the right track with regards to gaining the trust of society, YGR3 (21/02/2009) explained the similarities and differences between the *Shura* and Democracy, with a clear description of the features of the contemporary *Shura* in Oman. He said:

*We should not compare democracy that stands as the only reference to the traditional systems such as Shura that calls for some sort of parallelism between ruler and ruled. We should understand the system that we have: What values does it sponsor and what parameters does it have as a controller for rights and accountability and so on? The three authorities [i.e. the executive, judicial and legislative] are available in Oman, but the only difference is that in Western countries they all exist on the same level and one does not prevail over the other. With us they all converge at the ruling level. This is because each society has its own peculiarities according to its traditions, and most countries started to take these aspects into account. Also, the issue of legislation in our societies is subject to three authorities, the religion, the ruler and the parliamentary institutions.*

I interpret YGR3 as saying that the *Shura* can never evolve into a modern secular democratic system. It will always have limitations, as the three authorities can never be separated in the same way as in the West. There are certain values that will always be present and limit a separation, such as the influence of religion and tradition. Religion, for example, will not legitimise any legislation that might contradict Islam. On the one hand, this puts limitations on the ambitions of the younger generation to have a full democratic political system in the future, although *Shura* can reach advanced levels that deepen the political participation and at the same time preserve the characteristics of the society. On the other hand, it may arguably support the position of the bottom-up democratisation process as it attracts more supporters to its campaign.

To summarise, some respondents have a good understanding of the traditional *Shura*, which they believe can never be the same as democracy, although it can enable the process of wider political participation. By contrast, other respondents demonstrated a lack of awareness of the traditional *Shura*, which in turn leads to confusion over the role of contemporary *Shura*. Nevertheless, with time the younger generation may gain sufficient knowledge that will support a bottom up political process by gaining more supporters from the community, particularly as the majority of the Omani population is young. The following section will highlight these issues in a deeper focus.

### **6.3 The Younger Generation's Views of the Contemporary *Shura***

It was important to ask the interviewees about their vision of the contemporary *Shura* because I hoped from their answers to draw out a fuller picture of their beliefs of the political process in general. When asked about their views on the contemporary

political process, some thought that the performance of the appointed members of the State Consultative Council, which was established before the *Shura* Council in the 1980s, performed better than the *Shura* Council's elected members during the 1990s onward. For example, YGR8 (09/01/2009) said:

*When you look at the performance of the Consultative Council, you find it was more practical than the Shura Council in 1990. Is there a problem with the people selected? Of course! We are talking about members who were being appointed, not elected. There was a process of selecting good people who would appreciate the efforts of government, on the one hand, and transfer the people's points of view, on the other. Were they more mature, aware and stable in that they occupy official positions and play a domestic role that qualified them to discuss the subjects?*

This is not necessarily a criticism of the elected political process. It demonstrates instead that the younger generation has a rational and patient approach to political change. This, in fact, is close to what the government respondents and the religious respondents have said in the last two chapters: that the members of the *Shura* Council are not necessarily the best qualified people in society. It seems, therefore, that the younger generation agrees with the earlier respondents that Omani society needs more time to reach political maturity. The following paragraphs explore the various issues surrounding the contemporary democratisation process in Oman in order to see if the views of the younger generation overlap or clash with the views of other segments of society, as explored in the last two chapters.

### **6.3.1 Old and Contemporary *Shura***

The younger generation understands that Oman has selected the *Shura* to be the political process because of its historical presence in the country, and that the contemporary *Shura* is an extension of the traditional *Shura*. This is important because it reduces the expected sort of bargaining between the three democratisation processes in the country and shows that the younger generation is not necessarily willing to replace *Shura* with western democracy. Instead, they probably want a greater role in the political decision-making. For example, YGR1 (19/04/2009) said: 'The contemporary *Shura* is an extension of the traditional *Shura* but has been developed in line with the development of the modern state'. The interviewees feel that the impact of the old *Shura* on the current *Shura* is marginal, because modernisation cannot be avoided. For example, YGR10 (15/04/2009) said: 'There is an influence of the old *Shura* on the



contemporary *Shura*, although it is minor, but the beauty of the new *Shura* is its jurisdictional authority - we have economic, political, and social, while the former was deciding in all fields'. Also YGR6 (08/03/2009) said:

*The impact of the past on the present is slight because times have changed. We now have a state of institutions. The world is heading towards democracy with all its pros and cons. The citizen in the past was easily satisfied and accepted less of everything and remained silent, but now the new generation is exposed to constructive and destructive ideas through the Internet and satellite channels. One does not accept the status-quo, regardless, any more. One feels that it is ones right to speak and that the state should listen.*

YGR6 spoke explicitly here about what this study has predicted at the beginning: that the younger generation will not accept what their fathers had accepted and they are likely to challenge the current political situation. The younger generation respondents believe that *Shura* was chosen because of its tradition, but that its influence on the contemporary *Shura* is only marginal. Therefore, they do not see the traditional process as hindering the modernity of the contemporary process, and seem to not mind *Shura* as defining the political process, as it fulfils the need for real political participation.

### **6.3.2 Influence of Globalisation**

In order to find out how young people look at the political process in Oman, the field study concentrated on the issue of globalisation and its influence on the political landscape in Oman. If these people believe that it is an indigenous process, their support of it might be more supportive and accordingly their bargaining is likely to be softer. While, if they believe that the political process is a result of foreign dictate, then their support might be weaker and their ambitions to convert it into something closer to Western democracy might be greater, particularly because a majority of graduates in Oman have studied abroad in Western countries.

I noticed that the young respondents paid considerable attention to the issue of globalisation: some rejected the connection between globalisation and the contemporary political process in Oman, while others argued that it has had a noticeable effect on the political process in Oman. Few of the interviewees believed globalisation was welcome. Except in matters that contradict the social dimensions it is worth considering whether globalisation can be fragmented, as they wish, or whether it is immutable as a whole package. Some of the respondents, such as YGR7 (03/04/2009), recognised that

defining globalisation is very difficult. YGR7 viewed it as a continuous process that has been present for a long time, but has, in the last 15 years, grown because of the great developments in communication. However, YGR3 (21/02/2009) said:

*Globalisation means an approach and context that unify the way humans live, the systems they follow and the devices they use in the different territories on Earth. The only exceptions are the cultures that have pure humanitarian characteristics and divergent perspectives. That's why we have some reservations, because we do not want to succumb or adapt or remove our inherited culture in order to adopt another culture.*

This definition of globalisation, with its accompanying concern, is a good basis for discussing the other issues related to the influence of globalisation on the political process in Oman. Some respondents, such as YGR9 (25/12/2008), believe that Oman cannot be separated from the world, as globalisation has become a fait-accompli, part of a wider political reality, and is something that Oman cannot and should not avoid. However, the respondents do not feel the current political process in Oman to be the result of globalisation, but the result of an indigenous desire to deepen the political participation in the country. For example, YGR1 (19/04/2009) said: 'The Sultanate led by His Majesty the Sultan has had a political vision before the expansion of globalisation and set up advisory councils since the eighties'. Globalisation may have started much earlier than the eighties, but the Sultan could have read the ongoing global situation and started the political process before the expansion of globalisation in the 1990s. Also YGR4 (12/04/2009) said:

*In the first interview of His Majesty with Newsweek Magazine, he spoke about the establishment of a modern democratic system in the Sultanate. Therefore, the idea was in existence even though the birth may have been late, but its gradualism was natural and there was no burning of the stages. I fear that the social-illnesses such as tribalism and the patriarchal society are detrimental to any sort of political openness. His Majesty is aware of the illnesses and does not want transparency in order to avoid social and political upheaval. We hope that the government initiatives in opening the political horizon will help dissolve the social-illnesses and create a new national identity.*

This argument was supported by other respondents, such as YGR7 (03/04/2009), who claims no strong or tangible effect of globalisation on the political situation of the Sultanate can be identified. He argues that even the initiatives for promoting democracy offered by the likes of the 'Middle Eastern Partnership Initiative', cannot be considered as one of the Western trials to bring democracy to the Middle Eastern societies. He added that the real aim of the initiative was to strengthen civil society in the Middle

Eastern countries, although its earlier aims were to support democratisation processes in the region. However, the aims changed after the arrival of some Islamic movements who came to power via democratisation processes, such as ' Hamas' and ' Hezbollah'.

Nevertheless, some respondents believe that globalisation has had a great influence, at least on the recent stages of the political process in Oman. They refer to the political steps that were taken by the government during the 1990s onwards, but not the 1970s when the process had only just began. For example, YGR5 (01/03/2009) said: 'There is no doubt that we have been affected by globalisation because the concept of globalisation is comprehensive, but globalisation does not deprive nations of their distinctive features'. Also YGR7 (03/04/2009) said:

*The information and technological revolution has had a great impact on the political process in Oman, because the unlimited openness created by new technologies has created a disorganised generation. There's a principal that says: 'The mass of information creates chaos of knowledge'.*

The satellite channels and Internet did not enter Oman until the mid 1990s, while the political process began far earlier, so the effect mentioned by YGR7 in the quote above does not mean that the political process in Oman stems from globalisation. The phrases: 'disorganised generation' and 'chaos of knowledge' is arguably another implicit conviction that refers to some of the younger generation's confusion. This confusion is a result of the knowledge they get from the external media that does not accord with Omani political reality. However, some of the younger generation, due to their ingrained understanding of Omani society, both past and present, do not look affected or confused by the media.

As for the acceptance of globalisation by the society, the respondents believe that it is welcomed so long as it does not affect the characteristics of the society. The characteristics they are referring to are mainly religious, traditional, and customary. Therefore, they are on the line of the traditional and governmental respondents; there is no harm in the accompaniment of globalisation but the law must protect the values of the society. For example, YGR5 (01/03/2009) said:

*Globalisation's affect on the social aspect of the nation is very dangerous. The danger is not related only to the social values but also to the religious beliefs. We cannot separate the two matters at all. We cannot apply the type of globalisation that destroys everything that we have. We should adhere to a minimum level of values and we must say to the world that 'we are civilization*

*builders and that the people of this area are the builders of this civilization', whether in Oman, Egypt or Pakistan, etc. Western people save thousands from their annual incomes to visit this area to see its great monuments. How can we establish a nation that has no principles, values, and customs and has no social, political and economical system?*

Furthermore, some respondents see that with the presence of globalisation, societies can still manage their choices and modify the political process according to their needs and social conditions. For example, YGR2 (08/03/2009) said: 'We only take and implement things that benefit our political environment and our society and that do not affect our culture, morals, traditions and mores'.

This means that the younger generation respondents are against accepting globalisation as it is and want to preserve the concept of *Umma*, with all this encompasses. They also believe that globalisations' influence is undeniable but its influence on the political process is secondary because the political will has been evident from the Omani leadership since the 1970s. This arguably blends the top-down and bottom-up political processes as they both seek to preserve the values of society.

### **6.3.3 Gradualism of the Contemporary *Shura***

Interviews revealed that the younger generation respondents seem to be in agreement with the government's gradual opening of the political horizon. They show some understanding of why the government is evolving the political powers step by step, in order for the conservative nature of Omani society to be taken into account and avoid political unrest. For example, YGR5 (01/03/2009) said:

*When we compare the Shura experiment in Oman and its logical graduation with other experiments, we discover that it's the most suitable way - we have much evidence. When Bahrain, for example, tried to rush into modern democracy, it found many obstacles and faced many internal problems as a result of its haste in applying democracy without deliberated study and graduation in applying it.*

Another example came from YGR9 (25/12/2008) who said: 'The development of *Shura* follows a progressive line in a slow way, and this is good to avoid any shocks for society resulting from confrontation between the conservative, traditional and tribal lines'. This stance means that the younger generation respondents are arguably in favour

of political stability due to the mutual understanding between the government and different sectors of the society.

Similarly, YGR1 (19/04/2009) has concentrated on the issue of women in the political process. She argues that gradualism is necessary and rational, with regard to the involvement of women in political participation because the Omani society remains tribal and conservative and may not otherwise accept the idea, particularly in rural areas. She said:

*The contemporary Shura has evolved gradually and women entered the Council in Muscat in the second round in 1994 and won two seats. The idea of the nomination of women outside Muscat did not circulate in the first instance because the Omani society is conservative and tribal.*

What is noticeable in Oman is that the role of tribal fanaticism in urban areas is less compared to its influence in rural areas. Urbanisation, in addition to globalisation and education, therefore enhances the political process in the Sultanate. YGR1 (19/04/2009) argues that the failure of any women to win seats in the last election was due to the women candidates' lack of preparation in comparison to the more efficient competitors among men. She refutes the locally spreading argument that claims 'women are the enemy of women in elections', it is just that women vote for the most qualified candidate, regardless of gender. At the same time, however, she does not deny the vulnerability of women, as well as men, when dealing with the loyalties to tribe and kinship during voting.

The opinions of the younger generation respondents reveal that their views coincide with those views of the respondents from the other two segments, who claim that the Omani society is not ready yet to properly practice a greater political experiment. They need some more time to accommodate the issue of political openness which they encourage to be done in a gradual manner.

#### **6.3.4 Tribal Fanaticism**

Most of the interviewees believe that tribalism in a tribal society is a given reality and that people should accept it, that it has a positive role even in the modern age. However, they recognise that problems occur when tribes unite on an issue that runs

counter to modernity or the national interest and form what can be called a 'tribal fanaticism'. For example, YGR3 (21/02/2009) said:

*Tribal lineage is important socially and genetically as many diseases in our time have a relationship to genetic lineages. Tribalism is only a problem when the tribe coerces a person to do things that he should not, as that is in opposition to the persons rights.*

As in the previous two chapters, the respondents feel that the negative impact of tribal fanaticism on the *Shura* Council's elections is great, and that this affects the political process because it goes against the desire of the qualified candidates. For example, YGR10 (15/04/2009) said:

*Unfortunately, the impact of tribalism is substantial and it is the reason for the slow pace of political process. The government cannot change the reality of tribal society, as the motto raised by tribal supporters: (fight for your tribe whether it is unjust or not), and calling for the selection of a tribal candidate, regardless of his efficiency.*

Also YGR7 (03/04/2009) said: 'The power of tribe exists and 'the man of tribe' is a candidate regardless of his qualifications at the expense of the educated candidate'. This argument is supported by YGR1 who believes that the preference of tribal representatives comes at the expense of qualified candidates. But, as some respondents said in chapters four and five, he believes that, with time, the role of tribal fanaticism in elections will diminish due to the increasing number of graduates and the increasing level of urbanization. Other respondents, such as YGR5, spoke about the current ongoing tribal agreements in some regions to circulate the membership between their representatives in turn.

YGR2 (08/03/2009), however, argues that the tribal interference in the *Shura* elections reflects the cohesion among the Omani people and this is because tribal fanaticism, according to his argument, has disappeared:

*I think there is a big role for tribalism in the elections and this is due to the cohesion and centrality of tribal values in Oman. I do not think what happens in elections is tribal fanaticism. Tribal fanaticism [according to its old understandings] disappeared a long time ago. I think what is happening does not exceed the meanings of cohesion and support among the society members.*

Once again, this argument from the younger generation respondents is unexpected - at least theoretically, in beginning of this chapter it was expected that younger generation prefers modernity to tradition - as modernity and democratisation should ideally increase the individual's freedom and not the collective interest. Kinship should not be encouraged to play a role in the political process regardless of how people look at it. In other words, this argument reflects a degree of confusion among the younger generation and a lack of consistency in their political views. To sum up: the view that the younger generation respondents have of the tribal society needs to be taken into account when opening the political horizon, as the degree of bargaining with the top-down model might be less than one might expect.

### 6.3.5 Graduates' Reluctance

I expected that the younger generation respondents would clarify the reasons behind graduates' reluctance to participate in the *Shura* process more than the interviewees in the previous chapters. But I found that most of them repeated the same reasons mentioned by respondents in the last two chapters, such as the negative tribal interference, the limited powers of the Council, the unwillingness to sacrifice ones job for a short-period membership, etc. To an extent this could be accepted, as this may reflect what is going on at the moment, however it may slow down the improvement of the political process in Oman which is dependent on the graduates' participation. Most respondents from the three segments have expectations regarding the graduates' participation and see them as the hope for improvement. For example, YGR6 (08/03/2009) said:

*The reason for the reluctance of intellectuals on the candidacy is the lack of desire to compromise for the post, and also the influence of the tribalism: it is not in favour of the educated candidate but the tribal candidate. Also the lack of political awareness among many of the educated people; they are not aware of their rights and duties, making them reluctant to participate. Finally, the limited powers of the Al-Shura Council do not encourage the educated people to interact with the forward march of the Shura.*

YGR8 (09/01/2009) has supported this argument by comparing the great achievements the educated person can make through his/her career with the minor achievements that can be made through the Council's membership. He also spoke about the filters that any particular bill passes through, between the Council and the Sultan, which weakens the role of the Council and does not encourage graduates to run for membership.

The following quotations represent the views of some respondents regarding the shortcomings of the contemporary *Shura*. YGR9 (25/12/2008) said: 'The young people who know what's happening in other countries think that we need to achieve greater contributions in the political arena and to be faster in making political changes'. YGR5 (01/03/2009) said: 'In my opinion, young people abstain from voting for many reasons; they do not feel that the *Shura* council plays a great role in the process of running or forming policies'. YGR10 (15/04/2009) said: 'Despite the few achievements of the *Shura* Council, it is considered, however, among intellectuals still to be below the level desired'. Also elsewhere YGR10 said: 'The cultured did not see the fruit of the *Shura* Council and there has become this grim picture; that the Council is ineffective and will not lead to a change in political reality'. All these quotes revolve around the issue of giving more powers to the *Shura* Council, and they see it as being crucial that graduates are attracted to participating in the political process.

Some respondents say that graduates boycotting of elections is not only found in Oman but in all countries around the world that hold elections. For example, YGR3 (21/02/2009) said: 'the phenomenon of graduates boycotting elections is international and not limited to Oman. Voting is a national right, therefore citizenry are not obliged to participate and one cannot be held accountable if one refuses this right'.

But one may argue here that the situation in Oman is different due to the tribal nature of the society which prefers a tribal candidate rather than the qualified candidate during elections. In addition, the number of graduates is not large compared to the lesser-educated people. In other countries, particularly in the West, kinship does not play a big role in directing elections and the majority of people are comparatively well educated. YGR7 (03/04/2009) argues (see below in section 6.4) that the person who does not vote has no right to criticise the political process. Therefore, if the graduates do not assess and criticise the political process how can it develop?

Rarely did the younger generation respondents touch upon their own role in the shortcoming of the *Shura* process, probably because they did not want to weaken their position in demanding more political space. YGR6 (08/03/2009) admitted that his boycott of the election may affect the political process as he and his peers are counted



on to improve the process through their support of the qualified candidates: 'As a voter, I am one of the graduates who neglected the elections and admit that this may have had a negative impact on the progress of the *Shura* process'. Only a few respondents have spoken about the quality of the members of the *Shura* Council. They see that the problem of the Council is not limited to the insufficient powers given to the Council but the insufficient qualified members that can make use of the given powers. For example, YGR1 (19/04/2009) said:

*In fact the powers given to the State Council, for example, are not greater than those of the Shura Council, but the quality of members of the State Council and their competence, makes them better at taking advantage of the powers and making the state respond to their perspective and recommendations.*

If this is the case, then the graduates arguably are condemned for their reluctance to participate because, by doing so, they leave greater space for unqualified members to reach the Council. This threatens the *Shura* process with stagnation and will slowdown its march towards reaching more advanced stages. It might be argued that graduates are not convinced by the whole *Shura* process or they may see it as a cosmetic exercise, but the responses that came from the interviewees did not suggest so. Once again, if the respondents do not blame the government for not giving more powers to the *Shura* Council because of the quality of the Council's members, then they show some understanding of the top-down model.

### **6.3.6 The Future of the *Shura***

Like the respondents in chapters 4 and 5, the younger generation of respondents showed a degree of optimism that the *Shura* will evolve into the future. That these respondents say it, however, is more significant than when the previous respondents said it. The younger generation respondents, due to their better education and awareness of other successful social experiments in democracy that they witness through media and the internet, were expected to show a greater appetite for more political transparency and criticise, if not confront, the contemporary *Shura*. For example, YGR7 (03/04/2009) said: 'Recently, the State Consultative Council was transformed to the *Shura* Council. However, it has not reached the final stage and the experiment will develop with time'. Also YGR4 (12/04/2009) said:

*The Shura, in the future will develop as society reaches a level of political ripeness and social mobility. This will be reflected positively on the Shura.*

*Creating mechanisms for symbiosis with citizens is in the favour of the activation of the political process and serves towards stability. This is because sustainable development needs mobilisation of all energies in order to maintain the status quo.*

This quotation indicates that the sustainability of the political process depends on its development through giving more powers to the *Shura* Council and creating a partnership with the civil society.

The belief in a gradual, continuous policy of opening up the political horizon led some respondents to attempt to predict the coming political scenarios. For example, YGR1 (19/04/2009) said: 'In the future I think that the *Shura* will develop more: perhaps there will be legislative powers to the *Al-Shura* Council alone or in conjunction with the State Council'. Also YGR5 (01/03/2009) said:

*I think that in the coming days we will witness some progress that leads to internal voting in choosing the Chairman of the Shura Council. We do not want to imitate the experiment of some Arab countries that witnessed quick political changes such as Kuwait, Jordan and even Israel, where you find the same faces leaving one government and joining the other. The same ministers are rotating in the same circles, but they change their positions in each government. Kuwait is an exceptional case because it is a totally negative case. The Umma Council, instead of being a civilised showpiece of Kuwait, has become a burden, because no minister stays in his position for more than six months. We have never heard of anything similar to this most experimental form of democracy.*

This means that what younger generation respondents are calling for, in any future political movement, is a genuine, parliamentary form of democracy, through electing the Chairman of the Council and improving its statutory powers, whilst avoiding other types of democratic systems, such as those in some Middle Eastern states, that continuously brings the same faces to the forefront, that hinders the process of greater liberalism.

This optimism of the younger generation respondents who believe that *Shura* will evolve in the future coincides with the other two segments views, mentioned in the last two chapters. Once again the top-down model seems to be not far from the younger generation's ambitions. The following section is to explore the demands of the younger generation.

## 6.4 The Younger Generation's Political Views and Demands

The interviewees have demonstrated why younger generations have some political demands. Some of them, such as YGR7 (03/04/2009), said that they want to be like their peers in other countries; practicing their rights and exercising their liberties free from the binds of their ancestors. They want to have a political system closer to Western democracies. Others spoke about the economic and demographic changes in the Omani society that oblige the government to widen the political horizon. For example, YGR6 (08/03/2009) said:

*We currently have a population explosion. The rate of population growth reached 3.8%, while the economic growth is slower: less than 3%. This will lead to internal pressure for change. This divergent rate of population growth and economic growth in the Sultanate may result in increasing unemployment and crime levels and this could result in severe political instability.*

This belief is, to some extent, very close to the hypothesis mentioned in Chapter 1, which argues that oil rentier states, particularly the less wealthy, now face increasing pressure to provide a standard of living previously taken for granted, that increasingly, the rentier state can no longer meet. Thus a significant challenge to the legitimacy of rentier states is expected, as challenges to the existing social contract implicit within the rentier state model come to the fore.

Other respondents felt that an increase in broader cultural awareness will automatically lead to political demands through which citizenry express a desire for a modern political system based on the separation and independency of authorities. For example, YGR8 (09/01/2009) said: 'As for the increase in cultural awareness, it is natural that it will be linked to political demands'. Also YGR3 (21/02/2009) said: 'When you build some energies, you should expect that those energies need to breathe out'. YGR1 (19/04/2009) said: 'They believe that they are ready to take the right decision. This is a healthy phenomenon because demanding means willingness to take responsibilities'. Of course, the pressure that comes from graduates for more accountability and transparency is not limited to the less wealthy rentier states but probably to most of them and voices started to emerge even from Saudi Arabia. YGR8, YGR3 and YGR1 refer here to the increasing number of graduates and their readiness to have a say in the political processes. Another example came from YGR8 (09/01/2009) who said:

*As for the increase in the cultural awareness, it is natural that it will be linked to political demands. If one receives a good education, lives in a safe and stable environment and in a prosperous era, one covets an executive authority expressing ones prospects and character and satisfying ones ambitions. One covets a political system that expresses this young character, born in this blessed era. The character expects to have a functional council; a real technocrat government that rewards well-doers and punishes failures; an independent, sovereign, judicial system, practicing its authority consciously without intervention.*

The above quote summarises the political demands of the new generation, which anchors around the three judicial, executive and legislative authorities. They are not saying that those authorities are unavailable, or not distinct, but that they want members of the Council of Ministers to be from the technocrat elite, more than from the tribal leadership and they want the *Shura* Council to be more effective.

Some respondents such as YGR9 (25/12/2008) speak about the top-down government initiatives. He argues that this positivity from the government has left no chance for a real political opposition to coalesce. But he also argues that this positivity from the government needs appreciation not confrontation. Indeed, YGR9 refers here to the implicit social contract and political initiatives that come as gifts from the government but the question that must be answered here is: 'Will the government be able to continue with the rentier state model in the post-oil era?'

Some other interviewees see that the government's political initiatives need to be improved in order to extend their validity and durability. For example, YGR8 (09/01/2009) said:

*I envisage refreshing this aspect, particularly, say, 40 years after the renaissance. It is our right, as citizens, to insist the Shura Council have full powers to call the executive authority to account. Powers given will bring active members. So, it would be better to give broader powers and sufficient opportunity to the Council to practice its powers and see who will participate. Aware and educated categories will come; I have no doubt about that.*

YGR8 is betting here that greater powers will bring more qualified members to the *Shura* Council. This argument is partially supported by YGR4 (12/04/2009) who argues that the powers given to the *Shura* Council are still limited if compared to the powers given to the Council of Ministers that still enjoys wide executive and legislative

authority. However, he sees that the experience the Council of Ministers' members enjoy is greater than those of some members of the *Shura* Council. Therefore, he supports transferral of more power but without haste. This argument is also supported by YGR6 (08/03/2009) when he says:

*To be fair, I agree sometimes with the government in applying the gradual policy, because from my observations, I see that people have not yet reached a sufficient degree of awareness to properly practice democracy. The tribal considerations still exist and some graduates, even, are still stuck to the principles of tribal fanaticism.*

It also seems that graduates are not only blamed for placing tribal fanaticism above all else, but also for their ineffective participation in the political process. For example, YGR7 (03/04/2009) said: 'If the educated person does not vote for the Council, he has no right to criticise the Council, because, basically he is not a part of the process'. What also is quite noticeable is that some of the younger generation respondents feel that the political rights available in Oman, are sufficient, but people might not be aware of them. For example, YGR5 (01/03/2009) said:

*We have everything in Oman; I can criticise, appeal, be equal to a minister or a deputy minister if he takes any abusive measures against me, and this is a part of political development. Political development is available but people might not know about it. I think that we have many positive political practices. There are no raids and we enjoy complete freedom. We have many liberties, much mercy and compassion that are not found in many countries.*

YGR5 speaks here about justice more than political openness. People might look to giving more power to the *Shura* Council and allowing the creation of real, civil society associations that are important in any modernising community. For example, YGR8 (09/01/2009) said:

*Hegel, in looking at urban human society, says that society is the formula invented by man to fill the space between the family and the state. Civil society institutions have an advantage in that they represent a bridge connecting the limited-effect family and the state with its wide vision and work. They must be formed to satisfy certain needs and necessities not by an act from the state. People should build what they want, to practice the democratic role among themselves in a syndicate, such as journalists and labourers and others. What happened in Oman as per civil society institutions is the same as per the *Shura* institution: The permission for establishing it came from the Sultan, in the Royal decree no. 14/2000.*

So YGR8 is criticising the establishment of the civil society associations by the government. This is questionable, because the state had only issued the law regulating

the establishment of those associations, while their establishment is left to the citizenry. Before the issuing of the law, establishing civil society associations was almost forbidden. Therefore, the law created the permissive environment for civil society associations to emerge but not actually establish them. However, some respondents such as YGR2 (08/03/2009) see that those associations should not copy the Western civil society organisations because they were formed in different conditions. According to him, the creation of the latter is characterised by conditions of hunger, oppression and deprivation, while the former are being created in conditions of justice and luxury.

In summation, some respondents felt that economic and demographic changes taking place in Oman affect the legitimacy of the rentier state model and leave no choice for the government except to surrender more political space. They feel that the three authorities should be clearly distinguishable, that the executive and legislative authorities should be enhanced through having more technocrat members in the Council of Ministers and the powers of the Council should be strengthened. At the same time they feel that independent civil society associations should be formed freely, away from government interference.

By contrast, other respondents feel that people in Oman have everything; including political participation and that they are in a better situation than some other countries. They encourage the government's policy of gradualism, because they do not want Oman to witness political unrest due to the tribal nature of the society. Therefore, as YGR4 (12/04/2009) said, this generation is confused and needs to debate among itself what it wants, in order to present its political demands in an organised manner. He said the Cultural Club started to have a weekly gathering for the younger generation's leaders to discuss these issues. It is clear that the bargaining between the bottom-up and the top-down models is accurately reflected in this section and the government must listen to the demands of this growing segment of the community.

#### **6.4.1 Civil Society Associations**

These respondents spoke at length about the civil society associations; on the one hand this may reflect their attention to the significance of those associations and on the other hand, it might reflect the difficulties those associations are facing, particularly

because they represent a fairly new experiment in Oman. The respondents criticised the graduates' unwillingness to participate in voluntary work, specifically in these associations. They also criticised the government's intervention in the associations' affairs. For example, YGR10 (15/04/2009) said:

*Graduates do not seem willing to sacrifice themselves or their time for the volunteer work, even in the civil society institutions. I was the President of the Story Writers Family, and am currently the Chairman of the Writers Association, and the number of those who were actually working does not exceed the number of fingers on one hand. Unfortunately, I think that the cultured people do not have the maturity, they are not aware of their role in society. Every one of the intellectuals sees the world through his vision and ignores all else.*

As for the governmental intervention in the associations' affairs, the respondents spoke about the difficulties and barriers that face the establishment of those associations and their administrative and financial dependency. For example, YGR6 (08/03/2009) said: 'When we wanted to establish an association for the writers, we have struggled because the approval from the responsible ministry took four years to be issued'. Also some respondents, such as YGR8 (09/01/2009) saw that the law hinders the establishment and development of those associations:

*The present law has been changed 12 times. It still does not cope with what the country has become. There is a group of aware youths, wishing to do many things, but the law hinders them with procedures. The problem is at the executive level. There are many problems hindering the development of the civil body. If these issues persist, the sector will not be able to provide anything, and what it might provide, would be deformed.*

However, other interviewees, such as YGR1 and YGR7 see that there is no harm in having this governmental control at this early stage of establishment of these associations until they become mature. They see that democratic experiments in other countries took several decades to reach a stage of maturity. By contrast, some respondents saw that the law has guaranteed the independence of the associations and that the other regulations have been set up to make sure that those associations are on the right track and do not contradict the general features of society. For example, YGR2 (08/03/2009) said:

*The Labour Union was established through the Royal Decree 74/2006, and there is a full article in the decree that talks about the independence of the Union. All civil society associations have freedom and independence in their practicing of their rights and powers, providing they do not contradict regulations and mores in the Sultanate. The matter of receiving financial*

*support does not affect independence, so long as it is not unconditional. The Union is trying to build a mutual partnership with the government and people's presumption that this cooperation will lead to government control over the Union is not correct.*

Some respondents commented about the financial support that these associations receive at this stage from the government saying it is necessary and does not affect their independence. They need that kind of support because they do not have fixed sources of income and their members show marginal commitment to pay for the expenses of the associations. For example, YGR6 (08/03/2009) said:

*We debated the impact of government support to the credibility and independence of our association, and we concluded that the budget received by Al-Shura Council from the government does not affect its independence and impartiality and that the relationship between us and the government is not necessarily a relationship of disharmony.*

This argument is supported by YGR10 when he says that we do not find any harm in the government's support, as the government does not require anything that may impair the independence of the associations.

#### **6.4.2 Influence of Employment in the Private Sector**

As for the influence of the citizenry working in the private sector on the political process, most respondents felt that their impact, through criticising the government's performance and applying political pressure, was minimal. Their source of income is independent of the government and this gives them greater liberty to criticise the public policies. As YGR9 (25/12/2008) says: 'The less the citizen needs support from the government, the more he is independent from the government'. Also YGR8 said: 'Peoples' heading for the private sector helps them to become independent. So, they will not hesitate in questioning any official'.

However, most respondents agree that governments in the Gulf States, including Oman, are a welfare government, in which government support exceeds the role of just offering employment to their citizens. Hence, even the private sector employees get governmental support through other means that fulfil the principles of the implicit social contract. Some respondents said that the independence of the employees in the private sector is only partial because the private sector itself is dependent on the government



projects. For example, YGR1 (19/04/2009) said: 'The private sector in the Sultanate exists only through government projects and therefore is wholly dependent on the government'.

Even though the private sector is not fully independent, some respondents feel that its employees have more freedom to criticise the government's performance than their counterparts in the public sector. For example, YGR10 (15/04/2009) said:

*Workers in the private sector are free and unrestricted and their means of earning a living are independent. Thus they have a greater capacity to criticise the performance of the Government, while employees in the public sector would be more cautious so as not to hurt their employment prospects.*

However, other respondents say that graduates working in the private sector are satisfied because they get a good income and that they are unwilling to change the current situation. For example, YGR4 (12/04/2009) said:

*The well-educated Omani employees in the private sector are in luxury, as their income is greater than their counterparts in the public sector. Therefore, they will not seek a political change. The other lower level workers lack tools to implement change even if they wanted to.*

YGR7 (03/04/2009) said that if the Omani educated people were to start up their own private businesses, they would be more independent and could apply more pressure on the government for greater political accessibility. He said: 'Graduates do not have the desire to establish private and independent work. If they did, they could exercise pressure on the government and would have a greater role in the political awareness'.

In summation, the citizenry working in the private sector are not likely to exert great pressure on the government to undertake the aforementioned political steps. This is because the private sector itself is dependent on the government projects and educated employees in the private sector are content in luxury and not willing to change the current political situation. They also indirectly benefit from the implicit social contract drawn between people and the government. Meanwhile, the non-graduates working in the private sector lack the tools to apply political pressure. This provokes the argument that there is not much bargaining between citizenry working in the private sector, contradicting my earlier view that they would be initiating a bottom-up political process to counter the government's initiatives from the top-down.

### 6.4.3 Post-Oil Era

The respondents' views of the post-oil era had differentiations. Some of them, such as YGR9 (25/12/2008), predicted that the current situation of stability will change to some sort of confrontation between people and the government, which would lead to some sort of political mobilisation and political unrest. Others, such as YGR5 (01/03/2009), thought that Oman's wise policies with the international community will qualify the country to receive international political and economic support. He said:

*Many countries do not have oil and nor do they have fixed resources or supplies; they have no strong sectors supporting their economy. However they are stable and have no political threats. For example, Jordan basically depends on subsidies for a particular political ethos, because it has no resources. However, if it pursues a reckless policy, it will not get those subsidies. There are Arab countries that have big resources and they were expected to be modern and rich countries, such as Iraq, Algeria and Libya. However, they are not advanced countries because politically they are not stable. There is a big difference between Jordan and Syria because Syria has more resources than Jordan. It has land, water and greater historical and archaeological sites than Jordan. However, Jordan is more stable than Syria because of its wise policy. Therefore, we should not be afraid of the post-oil period in Oman because we have many alternative resources that we can depend on. One of them is the tourist sector, which needs a great deal of development. We have many monuments in our country. We have some resources in our country that we have not started to benefit from. We have a fantastic climatic diversity.*

According to the above quote, YGR5 argues that political stability is not only dependent on economic prosperity as is the case in rentier states, and with its deterioration political unrest automatically occur. In other words, some other factors play a role in political stability such as wise policies of the states, bearing in mind that in the post-oil era the rentier states may use other economic alternatives to substitute for the oil depletion with support from the international community. Some other interviewees saw that economic alternatives will substitute most of the oil revenues by that time. In fact, all of these views are comprehensible, although one might find it difficult to understand when one of the younger generation respondents wishes to be ruled by a dictator in order to boost the economy during the post-oil era. For example, YGR6 (08/03/2009) said:

*Perhaps we will need a strong political will at that time, we may need what some call 'good dictatorship'; it means that an authoritarian dictator leads us to impose obligatory education and gives good incentives. He must be*

*tough in the end so the people will be productive and industrialist, as in the case in Korea for example.*

These views show to some extent that this generation is confused, supporting the views of respondents cited in the previous two chapters about this generation. At one time they call for more political openness and a democratic system, yet at another time they wish to be ruled by a 'good dictator'. It might be argued that respondents see a greater chance for greater political reform in the post-oil era, although some of them believe that Oman will not be significantly affected by the depletion of oil because of other economic alternatives and the economic and political support that Oman may get from the international community. If this is the case, then the top-down process will not lose much of its momentum at that time.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This chapter found variation in the respondents' responses towards the issues of the traditional *Shura*, the contemporary *Shura*, and the views that they have to improve this indigenous process. It was difficult to work out whether they are aware of the historical and anthropological characteristics of their homeland, and whether they have got a clear political agenda for their country that takes into account these features of their society. This is because some of them gave some quite unexpected answers to some of the questions posed in the interview such as their lack of knowledge about the *Shura* throughout history because they were born only in the 1980s, while at the same time they occupy the top position of an association responsible for culture in the country. Nevertheless, some of them show clear views regarding the traditional and contemporary political processes in Oman, and gave some recommendations of how to improve the political process in future.

Regarding the contemporary *Shura* in Oman, they felt that Oman has decided to choose the *Shura* because of its historical presence in the country, although they saw that the traditional *Shura* has a marginal impact on the current *Shura* process. The respondents saw also that globalisation has had an influence on the political process but that its influence is not great because sufficient political will was present within the Omani leadership since the 1970s. The cultural effect of globalisation is available and welcomed by society so long as it does not touch societies fixed values. They saw that globalisation does not forcefully impose certain values on societies, as societies can still manage their choices. Their belief is

that the political process is indigenous and not duplicated from elsewhere and so is not a result of globalisation or foreign dictation. This makes them feel responsible and duty-bound to sticking to it and not calling for its replacement by a democratic system, such as those found in Western countries. At the same time, it reduces their challenge to the top-down model, as their criticism does not target the legitimacy of the whole process, but only its shortcomings.

These types of views show to what extent this generation is not yet ready to initiate a bottom-up political process that could challenge the current situation adopted by the government. For the time being, this generation still needs the government's initiatives and support and it still needs more time to be able to stand on its own feet. However, it is worth mentioning that the legitimacy of the top-down model is not targeted by the younger generation because they are in agreement with the government's view of selecting the *Shura* to be the political process in Oman. Their current ambition does not exceed the need to improve the executive and legislative authorities in the country, although this ambition may grow and evolve with time.

## **7 Discussion and Conclusions**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter involves a general discussion of the different issues related to the thesis, particularly those that can give answer to the research questions. It links together the main themes of the study in relation to the research questions. It contains the final conclusions learnt from the thesis and draws overall conclusions about how we can properly understand and evaluate the process of democratisation in Oman.

### **7.2 Democratisation Problem in Oman and the Arab World**

Although Oman has its own unique participatory form of politics which has continued since the 8<sup>th</sup> century, this thesis has found that the challenge of democratisation process in Oman coincides, to some extent, with the problems surrounding democratisation in the wider Arab world. The Arab World in general has become characterised by its authoritarian regimes, conflicting ideologies, military coups and weak civil societies. The discovery of oil, which occurred during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Arab region, resulted in a strengthening of the position of the ruling regimes, an increase in intervention on the part of global superpowers, and a lowering of the chances for democratisation. It also led to the emergence of what has become known as the rentier state model, in which the ruling regimes extended their monopoly of power by initiating an implicit social contract with its citizenry. This contract secured a modern infrastructure and free services to the people, but at the expense of their rights to political participation.

Since the 1990s, most Arab regimes have adopted some sort of participatory system, an occurrence which is attributed mainly to the change in the global political system in the aftermath of the collapse of communism, the emerging dominance of the capitalist-democratic system, the increase in the promotion of democracy across the Middle East, and the wide scope and spread of globalisation. However, I have argued in this thesis that Oman has remained somewhat different, as its political process had been established in the 1970s, and it had been decided that it continue with its indigenous

traditional *Shura* system, but with a gradual modernisation process commensurate with the social transformation taking place in the country.

### **7.3 Reasons for Adopting the *Shura* from the Top-Down**

The Arab World is well known for its vertical social divisions, mainly formed on the basis of ethnicity, sectarianism, and tribalism (see section 2.3). People in the region are divided socially according to these vertical divisions, which have priority in terms of determining people's loyalties; most Arab states contain some or all of these divisions and subdivisions, which can be seen more clearly during civil wars and political conflicts. Democracy may offer a way to pacify these divisions but, in Iraq, the process has in fact exacerbated sectarianism, as it has in Lebanon, where confessionalism dominates the state order.

Since the early 1970s, the Omani government wanted a participatory political system. I noted that this was apparent in the Sultan's speeches, and that it began with the Annual Royal Tour and the initiation of councils such as the Council of Agriculture, Fish and Industry, which had appointed members and practiced some sort of accountable discussion with government officials. However, having in mind the vertical social divisions and the historical legacy of *Shura*, which is regarded as a key cornerstone in the identity of the nation and in the authority and legitimacy of the ruling system in Oman, the Sultanate decided to continue with the *Shura* and avoided any other participatory system, such as Western democracy.

The interviews I conducted with key officials from the Omani government who have relations with and to the political process, showed that the Omani government, during the early 1970s, might well have had a long-sighted vision, and might have expected that sooner or later some factors such as education, urbanisation, demographic changes and globalisation could emerge as pressuring forces which could necessitate the existence of a pluralistic political system. Time elapsed has proven that these factors have indeed created a new democratic culture in the later stages of Omani modern history and they have increased moves towards democratisation. These factors have shaped the political arena in Oman, which has been initiated originally by the government from the top down. This is because the population has dramatically increased, the number of

graduates is growing, and political pressure from the new generation is increasing. It is supported not only by the improving levels of education but also by the growing rates of urbanisation process and the different facets of globalisation. As a result, a bottom up democratisation model is slowly emerging as we speak, challenging the contemporary top-down model and pushing for more political reforms.

In accordance with the policy of opening the political horizon as a 'gift' from the top-down, and as a result of the pressure-laden factors mentioned above, I have shown that the government has decided to take steps forward, again, in terms of modernising the *Shura* process. This took place when the government decided to establish *Majlis Al-Shura* with elected members, including women, issuing the necessary legislation needed to guarantee real and fair political participation, and later on adopting a two-council system. The thesis examined the attitude of the religious intellectuals regarding the modernisation of the *Shura* and looked at their views regarding some other aspects of the contemporary epoch, such as democracy and democratisation. It also examined the views of some of the new generation in the hope of reflecting the extent to which the young generation is satisfied (or dissatisfied) with the steps taken by the government to open up the political horizon and modernise the *Shura* process. The following two sections discuss the main findings regarding these two segments.

#### **7.4 Religious Intellectuals Legitimise the Contemporary *Shura***

The thesis has examined the legitimacy of the contemporary *Shura* from the religious intellectuals' point of view in order to find out if the followers of the traditional *Shura* pose a real challenge to the political system in Oman. In my analysis, they are not likely to challenge modernisation in the contemporary *Shura* because the *Shura* itself existed in the region prior to the emergence of Islam. What's more, its description in the Holy Quran and its practice by the Prophet and his companions make it a divine pillar in political Islam. Additionally, the practice of the *Shura*, particularly during the time of the first four Caliphs, shows that Islam does not come with a fixed political system but leaves choices on this matter to Muslims.

Furthermore, the thesis found that the ruling system in *Ibadism* is not confined to the Imamate non-hereditary system, and that it can incorporate the other monarchic

systems. Of course, the Imamate system is given priority in *Ibadism*, in which *Shura* becomes an obligation for the Imam. However, regarding other semi-hereditary systems, *Ibadi* jurists consider other vital issues, such as the stability of the society, the level of justice, and the nation's interests, as well as taking into account global changes. This means that the practice of the *Shura* is flexible and is welcomed by the religious intellectuals, so long as it does not violate Islamic values or the traditions and mores of Omani society. Therefore, arguably, it can be said that on the one hand there is no doubt surrounding the legitimacy of the current ruling system in Oman in that it has fulfilled all of the issues mentioned by the jurists above, including *Shura*. On the other hand, this system might not be considered authoritarian, at least not in the same way mentioned in Chapter 2 on authoritarian regimes in the Arab World, as it does not tyrannise by its own opinions but consults with deep-sighted people, in accordance to the *Ibadi* notion. This fact belittles any challenges to the contemporary political process, as the clergy requirements are met.

What has also emerged from the findings is that the followers of the traditional *Shura* should not be seen as a threat to the political regime, because throughout history their interventions have not been directed towards the ruling regimes themselves but designed to rescue the state during periods of weakness. This is particularly so when a foreign force has become involved in the internal affairs of the State due to weakness in the political regime. Also, the matter of the deposition of a ruler is not arbitrary but is subject to certain rules and protocols. It is not enough for it to be decided upon by the religious intellectuals; it should be backed by clear and patent public resentment. In all cases, it should not be done through a military coup, but through certain steps which start with advice to the ruler, then supervision of his performance, and ends up with an announcement of his lack of qualification for the post. The last step should not be taken unless there are guarantees for the success of the deposition, such as sufficient people and munitions to challenge the ruler militarily. Without securing these sorts of guarantees scholars prefer to stay under the same ruler in order to avoid the presence of sedition in society. This implies that any modernisation in the *Shura* will not bring any challenge from the religious *Ulama* because if they feel that that the Islamic values have been violated they will peacefully demonstrate their resentment towards the government.



The thesis found also that the followers of the traditional *Shura* have a flexible attitude towards the contemporary *Shura*. Most of their views in this regard were explained and sometimes supported by evidence from the *Shari'a*. They believed that this historical age necessitates modernisation in the *Shura*, as the professional classes have now emerged, and the concept of *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd* itself does not restrict the expansion of the council of elite. This expansion, according to their views, should even include women. This reflects a revolution against the radical views of some Islamists towards women. They also believe that the existence of the two-council system is aimed at substituting the old council of elite with the State Council, and they asserted that the increasing number of the *Shura* Council's members substitute the quality members of the old elite council. They believed that the more members there are, the more accurate the decisions made will be. But at the same time they stressed the necessity of preserving the concept of *Umma*, and they emphasised that the degree of advancement in the *Shura* should not revoke the preservation of the values, ethics, traditions and norms of the society and it should not reach the level of a full separation of powers.

Religious intellectuals interviewed did not believe that democracy and globalisation contradict the Islamic doctrine as long as they do not affect faith, or the traditions and values of the Islamic people. They asserted that the *Shura* as a practice is a result of human beings' diligence, and emphasised that it is not divine. Similarly, democracy and globalisation are also the result of human activities and many of their principles can be incorporated into Islamic societies in a way that serves to retain the identity of the society and does not lead to chaos. They were probably referring here to the vertical social divisions, which may emerge as a hindering force if a democratic system was to be applied.

The respondents also believe that the contemporary political process in Oman has emerged since the 1970s and is not a product of globalisation, which only has tangibly spread during the 1990s. This belief strengthens the legitimacy of the contemporary *Shura* which the respondents believe stems from the Omani tradition. They do not deny though, the influence of globalisation on some governmental policies and on society itself but they do not see any harm in that, so long as the Islamic values of the society are preserved. This belief strengthens their satisfaction about the contemporary political process and reduces their tendency to challenge it.

## 7.5 Satisfaction of the New Generation

It was noted (p. 10) that some degree of challenge could be expected to come from the new generation, because their number is increasing and the government's ability to maintain the same level of the implicit social contract is decreasing. Empirical chapters demonstrated this, but also showed that some of the respondents were not aware of the historical and anthropological characteristics of their homeland and have not got a clear political agenda for their country which takes into account these features of their society. Nevertheless, some of them showed clear vision regarding the traditional and contemporary political processes in Oman, and they gave some recommendations as to how to improve the political process in the future. Some respondents showed a full understanding of the traditional *Shura* to an extent which led them to judge that *Shura* can never be like democracy, although it can achieve good levels of political participation.

Regarding the contemporary *Shura* in Oman, the empirical chapters showed that the respondents felt that Oman has decided to choose the *Shura* because of its historical presence in the country, but the traditional *Shura* has a marginal impact on the current *Shura* process. They believed that the political process is indigenous and not duplicated from elsewhere. Thus, it is not a result of globalisation and/or foreign dictation. This makes Omanis feel responsible for it and duty-bound to stick to it and not to call for its replacement by a democratic system such as those found in Western countries.

Younger generation respondents were also found to believe that globalisation has had an influence on the political process but that its influence is limited because a democratic political will has been present amongst the Omani leadership since the 1970s. They felt that the cultural impact of globalisation is very much present and is welcomed by society, so long as it does not undermine society's fixed values; that globalisation does not forcefully impose certain values on societies, as societies can still manage their own affairs and cultural milieu. This vision coincides with that of the religious respondents, and it reflects the fact that different segments of society believe that the political process of *Shura* is indigenous, which encourages people to adhere to it and support it.

Nevertheless, the thesis found that the younger generation respondents are not totally satisfied with the level of modernisation in the contemporary *Shura* process; they

said that there is a need for political change in Oman. They believe that the increasing demographic rate is greater than the increasing economic rate, which will reduce the government's ability to maintain the same level of quality in the social contract and which may affect the legitimacy of the rentier state model. They also spoke of the political demands that they look for; among them, a genuine parliamentary type of democratisation processes, through the election of the Chairman of the Council and through an improvement of its statutory powers, whilst still avoiding other types of democratisation processes such as those found in other Middle Eastern states. Such systems were perceived to recycle the same faces in the frontlines and hinder the development processes more than they facilitate them. They also want to see more technocratic representatives in the Council of Ministers. At the same time they encourage the government's policy of gradualism because they do not want Oman to witness political unrest due to the tribal nature of Omani society.

In general, the thesis found that since the political activists from the younger generation are a minority, some of them lack experience. They are still not powerful enough to initiate a bottom-up political process that could challenge the current gradual approach adopted by the government and still need time to be able to stand on their own feet. It is worth mentioning that the legitimacy of the top-down model is not penalised by the younger generation because they are in disagreement with the government in terms of selecting the *Shura* as the appropriate political process in Oman. Their current ambition does not exceed a desire to improve the legislative authorities in the country, although this ambition may grow and evolve with time.

## **7.6 The Shortcomings of the Contemporary *Shura***

### **7.6.1 Problems Related to the Government**

The empirical chapters revealed that there are some shortcomings in the contemporary *Shura* process attributed to the government, such as the absence of legislative powers in the *Shura* Council. These may be a causal factor in terms of the trend amongst the educated classes to exhibit a reluctance to participate in the process. The government is accused also of undemocratic leanings for appointing the chair of the

Council and not giving the Council a greater status, such that people would be more enthusiastic about participating in elections.

The empirical chapters showed that the respondents express desire for the role of the Council to be explicitly mentioned in some of the Royal decrees – which are related to the issuance of certain legislations; and they wish for there to be live broadcastings of the meetings of the Council; with free publications of the Council's discussions in a newspaper.

The respondents were also found to wish to urge the Government to secure guarantees to the members of the Council after the end of their term. These include the need to clarify the legislation related to parliamentary immunity so as to ensure the non-prosecution of the members after the end of their term and the fall of the parliamentary immunity. They also mentioned the need to consider the creation of a special retirement system for the members which would ensure a fixed income following the end of a given period of membership. However, some senior government officials said that the issue of establishing a pension system for the members after the termination of membership is difficult because of the high turnover rate of the Council's members, which reaches 65% per term. Regarding the issue of parliamentary immunity, the government officials argued that the immunity law covers the members during their periods of membership and it ends at the end of the term and there has not thus far been any judicial pursuit of any former Council member for his professional performance during his membership.

The respondents also urge the government to follow the efficiency criterion by strengthening the infrastructures of the political process, which needs to witness transparency in terms of information, freedom of opinion, the encouragement of civil society institutions and the finding of civil frameworks other than the tribe. They do not consider the tribe to be a negative facet of society but they feel that occupational frameworks may serve the political process better. The government, in the new millennium, has issued legislature that has opened the door to an initiation of the occupational framework and also permitted many civil society associations, unions and syndicates which have been established. They are still, however, in need of government support.

By contrast, some respondents, including the younger generation respondents, felt that people in Oman have everything including political participation and that they are in a better situation than the people of many other countries. They encouraged the government's policy of gradualism because they do not want Oman to witness political unrest due to the tribal nature of the society.

### **7.6.2 Problems related to the Society**

The government appears to be monitoring the cultural development of the community and does not want to grant a wider participatory political space as long as some social practices, such as tribal fanaticism, the reluctance of educated classes to participate, and the process of vote-buying are still significant factors in the political environment.

Within Chapter 3 and in the empirical chapters, it was found that Omani society is a tribal society, in which the tribe forms the foundation of the social fabric. It occupies ontological priority. The tribe is considered to be a symbol of the pride and honour, and of the dignified origin, of any citizen. It plays a significant social role in the upbringing of generations and in the protection of its people. It helps them to achieve their needs, indeed it provides a normative framework that defines at least non-biological needs, and it stands beside them during times of adversity and misfortunes. However, respondents did not deny tribal fanaticism's negative effect on the political process; rather, they argued that this effect will reduce with time in accordance with the increase in the number of graduates. However, they confess that graduates show some reluctance to participate in the political process, a fact which leaves greater space for tribal fanaticism and lesser for educated classes to guide the political process. This fact will slow down development in the *Shura* process.

Tribes may hinder the contemporary political process through two main channels of action; the first is that the tribe will fight – as it always does - the centralisation of power in the homeland. This by itself may favour the political process as it encourages decentralisation. The reality is different, however. Tribes fight against a centralisation of power because they want to dominate their own territories and to be in competition and confrontation with other tribes. The second channel of action is their tendency to form tribal allies (*Shaff*) in order to strengthen their political power against other tribal

enemies. They form tribal militias, which trigger tribal fanaticism at the expense of the stability of the homeland. This problem has provoked tribal wars throughout Oman's history and the repercussions of these wars have remained present for many centuries. This tribal fanaticism is the one factor that affects the contemporary political process presently, while the first channel of action is not tangibly felt. This is most probably because the enforcement of the state of law and the strength of the state monopoly has played a part in diminishing its influence. Some respondents believed that the strength of the tribe is less now because the state, through the implicit social contract, plays a welfare role which used to be undertaken by the tribe. They also believed that the tribe is playing a positive role in the *Shura* Council's elections by encouraging tribal followers to participate and hence raising the turnout.

The thesis found that there are certain reasons behind the reluctance of graduates to participate in the political process; these include their unwillingness to sacrifice their jobs for the Council's membership and the fact that they are not sure as to the post-membership future of the Council members financially and judicially. The lack of functionality of some of the former members of the *Shura* Council, and the absence of a clear agenda of appropriate candidates for membership of the Council, are also factors. However, some respondents believed that the graduates' boycott could be a result of their carelessness due to a lack of awareness of the significance of social activities in general, particularly because the same habit has been noticed in terms of their participation in civil society associations. This reflects their unwillingness to participate in culture voluntarily.

Vote-buying is another problem which this thesis has examined, and it was mentioned by some respondents who felt that it is hindering the credibility of the political process. The government officials did not deny that they have heard about the problem, but argued that unless they have a clear case in front of them, they regard them rumours and will not base their views and acts on such rumours. They asserted that the law is strict regarding this issue and that any candidates found guilty will be liable for legal accountability.

## 7.7 The Future of the *Shura* in the Post-Oil Era

Findings from the empirical chapters displayed optimism regarding the evolution of the *Shura*, although it is not easy to specify the limits that can be reached by this process, nor to delineate a finite time scale or schedule for such a process. The interviewees from the three segments of society seemed to be optimistic about the existing policy of gradualism, and are taking a pragmatic approach to the implementation of the *Shura* as the key feature of Omani politics. It also emerged that some respondents did not wish to give legislative powers to the *Shura* Council, fearing that they may be abused by the relevant interest groups. In contrast, some interviewees argued that the current *Shura* is not satiating their hopes, and they stressed that it must be strengthened in the coming period through the provision of legislative powers to the *Shura* Council. There were calls in places to follow a gradualist approach in the future in order to avoid any shock in the community, and some respondents believed that the opening up of the political horizon must be proportionate to the community's level of enlightenment, particularly because the demographics of the population show that the majority of Omani society is still young.

This sort of optimism seen in all the three categories of respondents is also applicable to the political and economic stability of the country in the post-oil era. They said that economic factors may challenge the current political situation during oil related economic crises or in the post-oil era and some of them predicted that the current state of stability will change and that there may be confrontation between people and the government. This would lead to some sort of political mobilisation and political unrest. But the respondents, in general, are optimistic regarding the Sultanate's ability to survive during such times. They spoke with confidence and self-assuredness about the prosperous economic future of the State. Some interviewees spoke of the persistence of oil in Oman for several decades to come, and they believed that economic alternatives will substitute most of the oil revenues by that time. In general, interviewees did not hide their concern regarding the potentially damaging effects of economic crises on the political situation. However, they put their trust in the government to overcome such situations and postulated that the impact on the political scene would be limited in its extent.

Furthermore, the respondents believe that the economic situation in the modern era is different from that of the ancient one and the economy, according to their views,

is stirring now and is not stagnant. Also, the economy is not local any more but is international, so a country does not normally reach a point of bankruptcy. This means that the social contract might be affected by economic problems, but the legitimacy of the political regime will not necessarily be affected as the government and the people can adapt themselves to the new situation.

As for the citizenry working in the private sector, the respondents, including the new generation respondents, believed that they are not likely to exert any great pressure on the government to undertake any political measures. This is because the private sector itself is dependent on the governmental projects and educated employees in the private sector are comfortable in luxury and not willing to change and/or challenge the current political situation. They are indirectly benefiting from the implicit social contract between the people and the government, while the lesser-educated citizenry working in the private sector lack the tools with which to apply political pressure.

The respondents also believe that a presidential kind of democracy such as those in the USA or France could not be implemented in Islamic societies. The stability in the position of ruler in Islam, so long as he is found suitable and capable, may suit the Middle Eastern societies more than the kind of presidential democracies because of the presence of the vertical social divisions in society. It may be considered a good chance to compete honourably or otherwise reach the leadership in order to strengthen their presence above all other social divisions, but not necessarily for the national interests in particular. This fact put limits on the ambitions of the new generations in Oman for having a comprehensive democratic system in the future and at the same time, strengthens the legitimacy of the ruling system and the contemporary *Shura* process.

## **7.8 Constraints and Directions for Future Research**

Chapters 1, 2 and 3, show that there is a substantial research gap in the field of Oman's contemporary political process. Although there is a limited literature which looks at the *Shura* Council and other studies more concerned with the social and political aspects of Oman, none of them focuses on issues such as the relationship between the *Shura* and rentierism, the *Shura* and tribalism, the *Shura* and globalisation,



the *Shura* and education, the *Shura* and urbanisation and the contemporary *Shura* in Oman and *Ibadism*.

As the first analytical study of the contemporary political process which has taken place in Oman since the 1970s, all these issues are tackled together without – as much as is possible - diluting the depth of analysis needed for the research. What is clear from the findings of this study is that all these issues are politically inter-connected and that incorporating them in the study reveals the apparently different factors which influence, and are influenced by, the actual political process in the Sultanate. Without representing all these issues in this study, which focuses on the contemporary *Shura*, the complete vision would have been distorted and a clear defect would have been evident in the study. Future research can take the findings of this study forward and focus on the relationship between the contemporary *Shura* and each of the aforementioned issues not only one by one but in their complex relationship. This focus will make a modest contribution to political science in its general understanding of democratisation processes and make a more specific addition to understanding developments in the complex political processes of this geo-political arena.

Future research would also conduct comparative studies which compare the *Shura* process in Oman and other democratisation experiments in Arab states such as Iraq; it might thus point to which political system and democratisation process might best suit Arab countries. In parallel, a comparative study setting the *Shura* against one of the constitutional monarchies in the Western world could be very fruitful; its findings, practically, could make a small start in bridging the politically-polarised gaps between the *Shura* and democracy and even between Islam and secularism.

The questions I set at the beginning of the study have been answered through the structure, analysis and findings of the study. However, the thesis through its findings is raising new ones which are coming below in a form of recommendations. This is because findings of this study showed that there are some shortcomings in the contemporary political process, some related to particular governmental positionality and others to a more generalised notion of society. Given that the *status quo* is that of a particular governmental power of influence, I should recommend that:

- Further studies be conducted to examine particularly the shortcomings attributed to the government in order to find out how to improve the political process as a whole.
- Research be conducted to examine the possibility of merging the Ministry of Legal Affairs and the *Shura* Council. Arguably, this could automatically transfer the legislative authorities from the government to the council without adding further financial or administrative burdens and strengthens the position of the council and at the same time solve the problems of lack of administrative staff in the *Al-Shura* Council.
- A study is conducted to evaluate the potential of local councils (including the municipal councils) to be constituted as electable bodies; this could enhance democratic culture particularly in rural areas and allow people to gain experience before running for candidacy during national elections and may reduce tribal fanaticism's control of elections.

## 7.9 Conclusions

The aim of this study was to analyse the relationship between the state, religion and democracy in the Sultanate of Oman, in relation to the rentier state. To achieve this aim, the study has applied an interpretive approach in order to analyse the extensive data gathered from semi-structured interviews. A document analysis approach was used when dealing with publications.

The research concludes that the contemporary *Shura* process in Oman can be taken as a promising, successful, example of the popular political participatory processes in the Middle East in general and in oil producing states in particular. This success needed an overall socio-political transformation in the Sultanate that underwent several calculated steps, commensurate with the levels of education, cultural awareness and urbanisation. The process has also taken into account some of the traditional fixed values of the society such as those related to the *Ibadi* legitimacy, the tribal legitimacy and the Sultanic legitimacy.

While submitting some of the Sultanic authorities to the citizenry, through adopting a political process from the top down and allowing the civil society to build up, the government simultaneously has taken some steps to dilute the influence of the tribal and religious institutions, but in a way that keeps them recognised within the political process. Among these steps is the absorption of tribal leaders into the government cabinet and at the same time the government urged people to prioritise the national interest above all other loyalties. This is seen as a step towards a nation-state building. It also acknowledged the religious establishment, through the selection of the *Shura* as the political process in Oman, which is regarded as an Islamic pillar, but at the same time, it modernised the *Shura* in a way that was commensurate with the requirements of the modern age. The Sultanate also has encouraged citizenry to learn and acquire higher levels of education and applied the distributive policy of the social contract in a balanced way that made its educated people more productive when compared to their counterparts in some of the neighbouring rentier states. This fact kept most of the important occupations in both the public and private sectors in the hands of the Omani people, not expatriates, as is the case of the UAE for example.

Gradualism in the political process was clear and took into account all factors mentioned in the previous paragraph. The political process began with the Annual Royal Tour that is still taking place and was developed through the establishment of the appointed councils, then the elected council and ended up with the establishment of the two-council system crowned by a sensed participation of women and the emergence of the civil society forces, through the establishment of dozens of civil society associations in less than five years.

More importantly, the political process in Oman seems to be well organised and trusted, as not one of the respondents accused the government of any malpractices in the political process. Additionally, all social spectrums are participating in the process without the emergence of destructive sectarianism or ethnicity during elections, as is the case in some Middle Eastern states.

The respondents have also shown some optimism towards continued political stability, even in the post-oil era, because they felt that Oman is preparing herself for that day politically, through adopting a genuine political process and via finding

economic alternatives to oil. I urge other rentier states in the region to take similar steps in applying some balance between the political and economic issues, in order to avoid any political shock in the post-oil era, taking into account that their populations are increasing, educational and cultural awareness levels are improving and their ability, as rentier states, to continue with hitherto accepted standards of living provided by the social contract, is declining.

In summary, the study concludes that the *Shura* process, which stems from tradition and deep-rooted history, suits Oman more than any other pluralistic system. This is particularly so because different segments of society believe in it, and in its potential to evolve. People, in general, trust the government's ability to overcome political and economic problems, even in the post-oil era. Therefore, taking into account the experience gained through practising the political process for several decades and the tolerable level of separation of powers, I argue that this development is likely to shift the political situation in Oman from a monarchic system to something close to constitutional monarchy, doing so without hazardous turbulences or political earthquakes.

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## Appendix 1: The Government Respondents (GR):

Code	Name	Date of Interview	Post	Remarks
GR1	HE Dr Yahya Al-Manthari	24/02/2009	Chairman of the State Council	
GR2	HE Dr Sharifa Al-Yahyae	18/03/2009	Minister of Social Development	Her ministry is responsible for Association-forming permissions
GR3	HE Mohammed Al-Busaidi	23/03/2009	Undersecretary of the Ministry of Interior	His ministry is responsible for regulating the elections
GR4	HE Hamed Al-Busaidi	28/02/2009	Undersecretary of the Ministry of Manpower	His ministry is responsible for syndicate-forming permissions
GR5	HE Nasser Al-Jashmi	15/03/2009	Undersecretary of the Ministry of Petroleum and Gas	Ex-Director General of finance in the Ministry of Finance
GR6	Ahmed Al-Mikhaini	06/02/2009	Deputy Secretary General of Al-Shura Council	
GR7	HE Dr Fuad Al-Sajwani	31/03/2009	Head of the Economic Committee in the Al-Shura Council	Ex-Deputy Chief of the Omani Central Bank
GR8	H. Honorary Samira Amin	04/01/2009	State Council Member	Head of the Omani delegation in the Arab Women Parliamentary Meetings
GR9	Shamsa Al-Harhi	23/03/2009	Dep. of Associations and Clubs Director in the Ministry of Social Development	Her Department is responsible for Association-forming permissions
GR10	Yaqoob Al-Kharboushi	08/03/2009	Dep. of Syndicalism Organisations Director in the Ministry of Manpower	His Department is responsible for Syndicates-forming permissions



## Appendix 2: The Religious Respondents (RR):

Code	Name	Date of Interview	Post	Remarks
RR1	HE Shaikh Ahmed Al-Syabi	14/01/2009	Secretary General of the <i>Iftaá</i> Office	
RR2	Shaikh Aflah Al-Rawahi	01/04/2009	Religious Businessman	Ex-Deputy Chairman of the State Council. Ex-Deputy Chairman of Al- <i>Shura</i> Council. Ex-member of the State Consultative Council. Ex-member of the Agric., Fish. & Indus. Council. Ex-member of the GCC Advisory Association.
RR3	Shaikh Mahmoud Al-Hinai	25/03/2009	Advisor of HH the Minister of Heritage and Culture	Ex-Imamate member and a relative of the last Imam
RR4	XXXXXX	24/02/2009	A senior Staff in the Office of HM Advisor for the Religious and Historical Affairs	
RR5	Dr Kahlan Al-Kharousi	05/01/2009	A reader in the <i>Iftaá</i> Office	PhD in the <i>Ibadi Fiqh</i> from Oxford University
RR6	Shaikh Khamis Al-Adawi	10/01/2009	Employee in the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs	Regarded as a renewal in the <i>Ibadi Fiqh</i>
RR7	Shaikh Mohana Al-Kharousi	17/04/2009	Ex-Religious Judge	Regarded as religious intellectual and comes from a tribe that ruled Oman in the past.
RR8	H. Honorary Abdullah Al-Kharousi	20/04/2009	State Council's Member	Was a representative of Imamate in Yemen then became an ambassador for the Omani Gov.
RR9	Dr. Hamed Al-Yahmadi	04/03/2009	A senior official in the Sultan Qaboos Institute of the Islamic Culture	Comes from a family that ruled Oman in the past.
RR10	Dr. Mohammed Al-Maámary	13/04/2009	A senior official in the office of the Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs	PhD. In Islamic <i>Fiqh</i> from Germany.

### Appendix 3: The Young Generation Respondents (YGR):

Code	Name	Date of Interview	Post	Remarks
YGR1	H. Honorary Shakour Al-Ghamary	19/04/2009	Chairmen of the Omani Women Association in Muscat	A member of the State Council and one of the first two Women members in the <i>Shura</i> Council
YGR2	Saud Al-Jabri	08/03/2009	Chairman of the Omani Labour Union	
YGR3	Sadiq Al-Lawati	21/02/2009	A founder of the Arab Dialogue Council in Washington DC	Ex-Ambassador for the Omani Government and regarded as a political intellectual
YGR4	Salim Al-Mahrouqi	12/04/2009	Chairman of the Cultural Club	Ex-informational attaché in Washington
YGR5	Ali Al-Jabri	01/03/2009	Chairman of the Journalist Association	The director of the Omani Television
YGR6	xxxxxxxxxx	08/03/2009	Head of an Internet Blog ( <i>Sablat</i> Oman)	
YGR7	Hilal Al-Syabi	03/04/2009	Ex-representative for Middle East Partnership Initiative	Ex-employee of the American Embassy in Muscat
YGR8	Said Al-Hashmi	09/01/2009	A reader in the State Council	A member of the Omani Writers Association and regarded as a political Intellectual
YGR9	Dr. Khalid Al-Zadjali	25/12/2008	Chairman of the Omani Film Association	
YGR10	Sulaiman Al-Maamary	15/04/2009	Chairman of the Omani Writers Association	Famous in writing stories.

#### Appendix 4: Committees' work in *Majlis Al-Dawlah* (State Council):

No.	Title of the Study	Committee	Date
1	National Population Policy	Social Committee	Oct. 98
2	Civil Transactions Draft Law	Legal Committee	May 99
3	Challenges facing Omanisation in the Private Sector	Economic Committee	Oct. 99
4	The Establishment of Private Universities	Social Committees	May 2000
5	Future of Tourism .. Its Role in Boosting the National Economy	Economic Committee	Oct. 2000
6	Evidence in Civil and Commercial Material Draft Law	Legal Committee	Jan. 2001
7	Civil and Commercial Procedure Draft Law	Legal Committee	May 2001
8	Protecting the Environment and Pollution Prevention Draft Law	Legal Committee	May 2001
9	Tourism Regulation Draft Law	Legal Committee	Jan. 2001
10	Draft Labour Law	Legal Committee	Oct. 2001
11	Draft Telecommunications Regulation Law	Legal Committee	Oct. 2001
12	Scholarships and Educational Grants Regulation Draft Law	Social Committee	Oct. 2001
13	Draft Fisheries Law	Legal & Economic	Mar. 2002
14	Economic Diversification and its Enhancement	Economic Committee	May 2002
15	Social Security and Principles of Establishing Social Support Fund	Social Committee	Oct. 2002
16	Emerging Negative Social Phenomena and their effect on the Omani Society	Social Committee	Jan. 2003
17	Challenges Facing Water Resources in the Sultanate	Economic Committee	Oct. 2003
18	Social Support and Social Security and their Role in the Improvement of the Social Conditions in the Sultanate	Social Committee	Apr. 2004
19	Road Accidents in the Sultanate and Strategies of Preventing them	Social Committee	Apr. 2005
20	The Housing Sector	Legal Committee	Apr. 2005
21	Care and Rehabilitation of the Disabled Draft Law	Social Committee	Jan. 2005
22	The Current Status of the Omani Labour Market and New Job Opportunities	Economic Committee	Dec. 2005
23	National Demographic Policy	Social Committee	Feb. 2006
24	Preservation of Public Wealth	Legal Committee	Apr. 2006
25	An Evaluation Report on the Performance of the Tourism Sector	Follow up Committee	Jan. 2006
26	Study on the Juvenile Law	Legal Committee	Nov. 2006
27	Study on the Development of Human Resources in the Public Sector	Human Resources Develop. Committee	Nov. 2006
28	A study on Development of an Appropriate Mechanism to Support Families Benefiting from the Social Security System and Low-income Families in getting Wider Opportunities for Higher Education	Social Committee	Nov. 2006
29	Study on Fisheries in Oman and Developing Methods of Investment in this Sector	Economic Committee	Dec. 2006
30	Study on the Development of Small and Medium Enterprises	Economic Committee	May 2007

31	Study on Environmental Pollution in Oman and Mechanisms of Prevention	Social Committee	June 2007
32	Report on the Evaluation of the Industrial Sector within the Framework of the sixth five-year plan	Follow up Committee	Jan. 2007
33	Draft Law on Company Income Tax	Legal & Economic	Feb. 2008
34	Draft Law on Food Safety	Social Committee	Feb. 2008
35	The Project of the Organisation of the work of Taxis within Muscat Governance	Economic Committee	Feb. 2008

**Appendix 5: Draft laws revised and suggested by the *Al-Shura*  
Council:**

- 1) Draft Labour Law
- 2) Solicitor Law
- 3) Civil and Commercial Procedure Draft Law
- 4) Tourism Regulation Law
- 5) Evidence in Civil and Commercial Material Draft Law
- 6) Protecting the Environment and Pollution Prevention Draft Law
- 7) Telecommunication Regulation Law
- 8) Scholarships and Educational Grants Regulation
- 9) Fisheries Draft Law
- 10) Protecting the National Economy from any malpractices in the International Trade Sector Law
- 11) Care and Rehabilitation of the Disabled Draft Law

The Council has also revised through self-initiatives the following Laws:

- 1) Improve the Inspection Law for the Art Works
- 2) Improve the Trade Agencies Law
- 3) Improve and enforce the National Treasury Protection and Avoiding Interests' Conflict Law
- 4) Improve the Printing and Publication Law
- 5) Improving the Pension Fund Law for the Omani Government Employees
- 6) Improving the Welfare Law
- 7) Initiating regulations that guarantees the independence of the judiciary

**Appendix 6: Issues discussed between the *Al-Shura* Council and several government ministers:**

- 1) Discussing the matter of drilling exploration wells near the source of the traditional water stream (*Falaj*) with the Minister of Water Resources
- 2) Discussing the problem of electricity cut out in some districts with Minister of Electricity and Water
- 3) Discussing the problem of Muscat Securities Market with the Minister of Trade and Industries
- 4) Discussing the problem of the wrongful fishing with Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries
- 5) Discussing the Head of Sultan Qaboos University about increasing the annual acceptance and improving the level of the scientific research
- 6) Discussing the Minister of Oil and Gas about the oil and gas reserves in the Sultanate and national employment in the oil companies
- 7) Discussing the Minister of Trade and Industries about the increase in the inflation rate especially in the building materials and some food commodities.

**Appendix 7: Reports sent by the *Al-Shura* Council to the government  
regarding various issues:**

- 1) Developing the agricultural and zoological sectors
- 2) Privatisation of the some government sectors
- 3) Efficiency of the banking sector
- 4) System of equivalent trade dealings (Offset)
- 5) Industrial role in the economic development
- 6) Employment of the national human resources
- 7) Muscat Securities Market Crises
- 8) Role of the large companies in stimulating the economy and developing the local societies
- 9) Studying the facilitated loans
- 10) Studying the trade monopolism
- 11) Road accidents and its effects and how to reduce them
- 12) Improving the national health services
- 13) Social welfare for the handicapped
- 14) Juvenile crimes
- 15) Renewing the ways for giving the alms tax
- 16) The educational and cultural measures in the nurture of the Omani children
- 17) The career's situation of those working in the educational sector
- 18) Culture development in Oman
- 19) The Role of the private universities and colleges
- 20) Civil defence services and crises management techniques
- 21) Sponsoring a symposium for simplifying the administrative procedures  
(Routine)

## Appendix 8: Interview Questions

1) Please talk to me about the political *Shura* in Oman in the past, present and future?

• حدثنا من فضلك عن الشورى في عمان في الماضي والحاضر والمستقبل

• هل تمر عمان بمرحلة انتقالية نحو الديمقراطية حالياً؟ كيف؟

• لماذا نجحت عمان أكثر من غيرها في ترجمة الشورى الإسلامية إلى منهج سياسي؟

• في الفكر الديني لدى العمانيين هل يمكن فصل الدين عن السياسة؟

2) What impact has the traditional practice of *Shura* had on the recent democratisation process in Oman?

• ما هو التأثير الذي تحدثه عملية الشورى القديمة على عملية الشورى الحالية في عمان؟

• هل يوجد تعارض بين الشورى التقليدية والشورى المعاصرة؟ كيف؟

• لماذا في رأيك سميت العملية الديمقراطية الحديثة في السلطنة بالشورى؟

• وفقاً للنظام الأساسي للدولة يتم اختيار وريث العرش من قبل مجلس الأسرة المالكة الكريمة، هل

لهذه الفلسفة علاقة بالنهج السياسي القديم في عمان لاختيار الحاكم؟

3) What influences globalisation has on the Omani political landscape?

• كيف تأثر المسرح السياسي في السلطنة بما يعرف بالعولمة؟

• لماذا في نظرك بدأت عملية الشورى وفق صورتها الحالية في التسعينات؟ وهل للأحداث

العالمية والإقليمية تأثير على الوضع السياسي في السلطنة؟

• كيف تؤثر الثورة الإعلامية والتقنية العالمية على العملية السياسية في السلطنة؟

4) What impact has the social factors such as tribalism and sectarianism on the contemporary political *Shura*?

• ما هو تأثير القبيلة والمذهبية على عملية الشورى الحالية في عمان؟

• لوحظ عزوف عدد من المتعلمين عن انتخابات مجلس الشورى لعام 2007، ما هو السبب في

ذلك من وجهة نظرك؟



5) How the growing cultural and demographic changes in the Sultanate affect the political scene?

• كيف تؤثر عوامل زيادة عدد السكان وتغير التركيبة السكانية واتساع الوعي الثقافي على الوضع السياسي في السلطنة؟

• لماذا من وجهة نظرك يطالب عدد من أبناء الجيل الجديد بمنحهم المزيد من الحريات السياسية؟  
• ما هي من وجهة نظرك الإصلاحات السياسية التي يطالب بها هؤلاء الشباب؟  
• إلى أي مدى تعتبر مؤسسات المجتمع المدني كالجمعيات المهنية وغيرها مستقلة في السلطنة؟  
• هل يعتبر تزايد عدد مؤسسات المجتمع المدني في عمان مؤشرا على اتساع المشاركة السياسية؟  
• كيف؟

6) What impact the economic fluctuation has on the political *Shura* in Oman?

• ما هو تأثير التقلبات الاقتصادية وخاصة التقلبات في سوق النفط على العملية السياسية في عمان؟

• كيف يؤثر تناقص المخزون النفطي على الوضع السياسي في السلطنة مستقبلا؟  
• كيف يؤثر استيعاب عدد كبير من المواطنين من قبل القطاع الخاص على الوضع السياسي في السلطنة؟

7) How do you see the political situation in Oman in the post oil era?

• ما هو تصورك للوضع السياسي في عمان في فترة ما بعد نضوب النفط؟

## Appendix 9: Interview with Dr Kahlan Al-Kharousi (05/01/2009)

**Q1: Can you please tell us about the *Shura* in Oman, in the past, the present and the future?**

To be sure, the *Shura* in Oman is derived from the Islamic approach, which is stipulated explicitly in the Holy Quran in many different contexts. It was applied in practice during the life of the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him), and after his death. *Shura* is an extension of what Omani people believe in as an Islamic basic pillar, supported by explicit pieces of evidence from the Holy Quran and the *Sunnah*. This is accompanied by the practice of *Shura* on the part of the Prophet and his companions, and what these companions learned from him on different occasions. All this made *Shura*, in Islam, one of the pillars of governance. It was also evidenced as a legitimate Islamic form of governance by popular consensus when the Prophet passed away, wherein the Caliphs were chosen through the process of *Shura*, using different methods. In terms of principles, *Shura* is one of the key Islamic ones. The people of Oman look at it that way. I mean here that the method of implementation may differ according to the conditions, circumstances and the public good. When speaking about *Shura* as a principle, the people of Oman stress that it is a fundamental standard that should be observed. So, they eagerly seek to implement it due to this pure religious understanding of it.

When disorder broke out among the Prophet 's companions, and after the split in the Muslim world, along with the intellectual doctrines which were much affected by political differences, we can see that the *Ibadis* embraced a closer relationship to *Shura*, with all its indications and meanings, rather than to other Islamic doctrines. For example, the Shiites confine the authority to a certain offspring, i.e. Imam Ali Bin Abi Talib. On the other hand, the Sunnis agree that the imams should be from the *Quraish*. Their agreement may sometimes falter. However, the prevailing opinion is that the imam should be from the *Quraish*. Also, they legitimise the authority of the conqueror i.e. if a ruler comes to power by way of conquering, he is granted legality and legitimacy.

To be fair, not all Sunnis acknowledge the *Shura*. When we come to the space and scope given to *Shura*, we find it has greater scope with the *Ibadis*. The Sunnis give greater weight to the vested interests and desires of the ruler in power. On their part, the *Ibadis* think that the way by which a ruler comes to power should be legitimately right, and he cannot gain this legitimacy unless he is elected.

Another substantial difference which can be discernable between the Sunni and Shiite views is that the *Ibadis* consider the occupation of the imamate of Muslims as being a right for every Muslim who has the qualities which make him valid for holding a public office. With the Shiites, it is confined to a certain offspring of Imam Ali Bin Abi Talib; and with the Sunnis, it is limited to a certain tribe, the *Quraish*. To be sure, each side has its evidence to support each case.

Regarding *Shura*, *Ibadi* scholars consider it an important comprehensive principle which should be the right of everyone who is qualified to hold public office. It specifies the way by which a ruler is chosen and the way a ruler has to manage governance affairs. For example, they talk about *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd* and the authority of the weak. They require that certain prerequisites be satisfied for this process in general. They implemented them in practice throughout their history in Oman and Yemen and North Africa.

One point not many people are aware of is that *Shura* is also considered by *Ibadis* to be closely connected to justice. I mean here that it is not sufficient for the public authority that the method is right whereas the practice is wrong. If the method by which a ruler is chosen is right and this ruler does not implement the *Shura* in a way which leads to justice and does not run the country's affairs in a proper way, this is not considered to be satisfactory. It does not help him if he is chosen in the right way if he rules without justice. People may thus accept someone not chosen in the right way. I mean if *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd* has not met and elected a ruler and given him the pledge, this ruler may still be considered to be just, and in that respect to be honouring the *Shura*. The political, military and economic circumstances experienced by a country might make a certain leader lead the opposition or the reform process, and then he may subsequently declare himself to be the ruler. He may be chosen by some people without

a public pledge. However, he may make reforms, do justice to the subjects, and implement the principles of *Shura* and justice in a practical way. So, they may tolerate this and see his authority over them as legitimate; it does not always work in the opposite way, that is, wherein the choice is considered correct but the practice is nonetheless wrong.

When we talk about *Shura*'s practical implementation, we also find that it takes various forms with the *Ibadis* and the people of Oman. Our understanding of the practice should not be limited to the manner of choosing the ruler, with the subsequent practice of the ruler being overlooked. *Shura* shouldn't be understood as being separate from justice. In all states and periods throughout Omani history, there has been an evident desire to establish the principle of *Shura*, and the consolidation of the principle of justice along with the *Shura*. There have been some incidents where rulers were deposed. The *Ibadis* apply what is now known in the literature of contemporary political jurisprudence as 'public control' on the performance of the ruler. Some people think that the *Ibadis* apply this principle if the ruler is not one of them. In fact, they apply it on their own rulers - those arising from amongst themselves. Some others think that they apply it only to those who are not chosen in a legally acceptable way or in conformity to the principles stipulated in their books of jurisprudence. In truth this is not the case - they have applied it to those who had already been legitimately selected. Take, for example, the disagreement that occurred in the Imamate of Imam Al-Salt Ben Malik during his late days. There were those who felt that his performance had faltered due to his old age. Some felt that he was still able to perform his functions. This debate led to much controversy. This disagreement has in turn enriched the political doctrine of the *Ibadis*. Another example is what is said about many of the leaders of the State of *Al-Nabahina*. Though they exist as a tribe, a doctrine and an intellectual school which is a composite part of the *Ibadis*, their poor performance in running the country led us to consider them as dictators and illegal rulers. The calls for their deposition had escalated.

On the other hand, the question of the deposition of the ruler involves doctrinal controls. The deposition of a ruler is subject to the public interests which decide what can rectify the status of a particular ruler. The process of potential deposition goes through several steps, beginning with advice, then supervision, accountability and a

demand for reform. Sometimes it ends up with the necessity of deposition where possible, and not just where it is permitted.

Deposition, as I understand from some readings, is determined by two aspects: popular discontent with the performance of a particular ruler, and the dictates of *Ahl Al Hal Wal Aqd*, including scientists, experts and scholars, arising from the society. They may multiply or indeed diminish; but it is rare to have only one aspect, for example *only* scholars criticizing the performance of a certain ruler without popular resentment regarding poor conditions in terms of social, moral, religious and even scientific aspects of Omani life and society.

For example, when we compare the State of *Al-Nabahina* with the State of *Al-Ya`ariba*, many researchers believe that the issue of regime succession existed in both States. However *Al-Ya`ariba's* interest in science, the welfare of the community, production and the religious and agricultural aspects of life, in addition to geographic expansion, empowered them. There were no attempts to overthrow them, as was the case with *Al-Nabahina* State. *Shura* cannot be viewed as being independent from justice. The question of succession is quite evident in *Al-Nabahina* State. It was also present in the States of *Al-Ya`ariba* and *Al-Busaid*. It was present during *Al-Rustumiya* State but less so than with *Al-Nabahina* and *Al Ya`ariba*, and was similar to the state of *Al-Busaid*. Perhaps due to the fact that Oman, before Islam, was already an independent state, with its own rulers, independence, geographical territory, expansion and customs, the Prophet Mohammad spoke to them as a legitimate state and set of rulers. They dealt with the messenger (who brought them the letter from the Prophet) in a civilized way. That was the case also according to what is known of the protocol of contemporary States when the Prophet passed away; they sent a delegation to offer their condolences.

When we look, for example to *Al-Rustumiyah* State, we find that some contemporary jurists and scholars considered the regime succession a shortcoming. But the good performance and the adoption of the principle of *Shura* and the practice of justice legitimated them. This shortcoming did not lead to a diminishing of their status or talk of deposition or rectification. Look at what happened in the State of *Ya`ariba*, especially during its second half, where there were many more flaws because the

practice was wrong and the performance was weak. They got rid of *Shura*. People started to feel resentful. Weakness set in. Therefore, some parts of Oman were seized and disorder came about until Imam Ahmed Bin Said rescued the situation.

We were talking about independence in Omani history. This independence is a crucial part of anthropology. Omanis themselves were familiar with independence and with running their affairs themselves. This is what the Prophet Mohammad noticed in the Omani people. He appointed *walis* and rulers from among them. It is as if Omanis have always had the desire to rectify the political situation after every setback by returning to the right legal system of governance. This may be done whenever the practices of *Shura* and justice in running the country's affairs are available to the ruling elite, leading to welfare, stability, security, livelihood improvement, scientific production and care for religious institutions, including mosques and endowments etc.

*Shura*, as a principle of selection, is sometimes ignored as being one of the possible juristic options. For example, say a certain scholar does not accept the Imamate of a certain person because he was not elected in the right way. But he does not call or seek to depose this person. He does not accept the method of selection as being in keeping with the purity of *Shura* principle of selection. But implementing *Shura* sometimes goes over and above the issue of electing a ruler, and focuses instead on the practice of running the country's affairs and ensuring justice, which makes demands regarding equality amongst people, equality in opportunities, establishing an efficient administrative system, and building a social system which observes prevalent customs. All this can come together to grant legitimacy and legality to a ruler.

From my readings, if we want to summarize *Shura* in Oman, we can safely say it is derived from three sources:

- 1- Legal dictations from the *Quran*, and the *Sunnah*, both known legislative sources.
- 2- From the historical experience and the historical product which we see now.

- 3- From the requirements which spring from the facts of the contemporary reality of men and women's existence.

Therefore, *Shura* in Oman, in the modern era, is not derived from east or west. It is the product of these three sources. Legal sources have been observed. Thus, we were the first – so to speak - to make *Shura* an established principle in the State Consultative Council, and the *Shura* Council afterwards. It was made by non-elected appointment first, then by election. It is taken from the legal tradition nonetheless. The principle is evident in the Quran: (their affairs are dealt with *Shura*); (consult them). Secondly, *Shura* is taken from the historical product, as well. History has an impact in shaping people's characters. We are not cut off from our history or genetic factors that have shaped us. Prophet Mohammad says: if you go to Omani people, they will not insult you or speak evil of you. Therefore, this testimony from the Prophet of the people of Oman's character certainly has an impact on the formation of people's character. The Ruler in modern Oman is aware that there is an historical inherited experience behind the practice of *Shura* which cannot be overlooked in this country. So, this political model, linked to history, was chosen as appropriate along with the employment of some modern tools.

Then, there is the third aspect - the facts of reality. In fact, decades before the reign of Sultan Qaboos, Oman experienced a period characterized by illiteracy, ignorance and isolation from the outside world. It took a long time and many phases to educate people, bring them back to their identity, namely with regard to their history and the legislative sources behind *Shura*, and to inform them of their identity and persuade them to stick to it. So, when you look at the experiment of *Shura*, you will find it to be a gradual process, beginning with the appointment of a consultative council, and afterwards, when the idea became mature in people's minds and they were able to regain most of their identity and there had been an increase in the level of education and literacy, *Shura* became based on election. The election process itself came in stages. Suffrage was limited according to certain criteria. These criteria were reduced until voting became the right of every person. The issue of women has also witnessed gradual stages in its evolution. The facts of reality have a role. This gradualism is there because reality itself is gradual in the way in which it witnesses change and conservation.

This in turn leads us to the subject of the *Shura* in the future. It is clear that what should be is one thing and what can be achieved is something quite else. Many people are now talking about the powers of a member of the *Shura* Council, and whether the *Shura* Council is a legislative authority or not. The issue of the separation of powers in democratic systems into legislative, judicial and executive has advantages. However, there is not always an outweighing favour in that direction. So, *Shura* in Oman is not a copy of the experiences of other countries. Not only does Oman benefit from the experiences of other countries, but also from its historical experience and elements of its identity.

But if, for example, there is a complete separation between the executive and the judiciary powers, you are therein helping to create clear institutions in society as much as you deprive the community of specific benefits. Therefore, the issue of the separation of powers must be examined. As a specialist in Islamic legal studies, I would say that the full separation of powers - a point that needs to be studied - may lead to the omission of some of the benefits of society, such as the system of the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice, for example. The case applies to the *Shura* Council in the event of making it a legislative authority separated from the rest of the authorities. It will make the other bodies lose much of their power, whether individually or collectively, whether this be a certain Ministry, or the Council of Ministers, or otherwise. The Islamic community needs to be a holistic community designed for the service of each individual. Community is the goal, not the individual. There should be an optimal use of all elements of society.

In future we need to raise awareness, we need to introduce the benefits of identity generated by legal, intellectual and historical data along with political practices, we need to promote awareness including knowledge of science, and we need to promote higher levels of education and specialization. We also need to encourage awareness of the importance of the election process and who is elected, and we need to use, maintain and ensure the benefits of Omani identity and experience and to choose gradualist policies of change which fit the reality of the situation.



**Q2: Why was Oman more successful than others in translating the Islamic *Shura* into Islamic methodology?**

A: The *Ibadi* doctrine has a great role in this. The *Ibadi* doctrine is an intellectual school based on discretions that lead to excellence. Geographic factors do not have the most prominent role. The *Ibadis* exercised *Shura* in those parts where they were outside of Oman. They were present in North Africa, and practiced *Shura*. Their *Rustamiya* State and its practices were lauded by supporters and opponents. The most famous historian of the State of *Al-Rustmiya* is Ibn Al Sagheer Al-Maliki. He is known for his intolerance, but he believed that the umbrella of justice covered all people, and when he saw progress, civilization and good policy, he praised them highly. So it is not regional geographical factors that have played the main role; discretions derived from legal evidences have been the basis. The adherence of *Ibadis* to certain doctrinal principles produced this particular outcome. The first of those principles is *action* as seen in the *Hadith*: faith is words *and* action. That is one of the solid original principles that has helped in the excellence of *Ibadi* discretion in such cases. Many non-*Ibadi* scholars believe that to be safe from hell and win in the Hereafter, it enough to say 'there is no god but Allah', that faith dwells in the heart and that action is a supplement, not a condition nor a pillar. No doubt the outcome will be different in practice; the followers of these scholars will most likely hold a belief in the need for verbal faith. Therefore, it will be formal, without a need for practical expression.

The second principle is survival from hell. If a scholar believes that a negligent Muslim will be agonized then get out from hell to paradise and that the final resort will be heaven and bliss, his performance, outcome and practice on the ground will, of course, be different, because this is human nature. On the contrary, some scholars believe that if a man does not become pious and righteous he will lose. No doubt the honesty of this scholar will be different from others. The issue of faith, where faith is words *and* action, and action is a pillar and condition in that faith, and the issue of the hereafter and the belief in eternal bliss and eternal agony, also figure among these factors.

The third principle which may be pondered by some people, is what is called in the faith 'Names and Attributes'. The *Ibadis* do not highly esteem anyone but God, the

Almighty. They do not liken God to His creatures, nor do they liken any of His creatures to Him. They do not hold any sanctity for any human being. There is no one infallible except Prophets and the messengers of god. All others, including scholars, legal experts, rulers, leaders and those who do good deeds for people, have no sanctity. If they do well, they will be rewarded. If they do badly, they will be treated according to their wrongdoing. They have no sanctity. Take the naming of the doctrine as an example. It is not attributed to Imam Jaber Bin Zaid. It is not attributed to him, although he is the real founder. It was attributed to a political spokesman as Sheikh Al Salmi says in a verse:

He who has no question in books,

We mention it in the doctrine.

Abdullah Bin Abadh has never had one juristic question in the *Ibadi* jurisprudence. Others named the doctrine, as the verse says:

Opponents named us like that,

However we accept.

Jabber Ibn Zaid is the real Imam and founder of *Ibadi* thought. His discretion and status is accepted according to the evidence we have. If the evidence was weak, it would be negated. Abu Obaida did not accept many of his questions though he is a student of his and knew well the status of Jaber Ibn Zaid. But when he found the evidence to not be in his favour, he abandoned Jaber Ibn Zaid's saying. Neither did Jaber Ibn Zaid hold objections to this, nor did Abu Obaida find there to be anything wrong in disagreeing with his teacher and *Sheikh*, Jaber Ibn Zaid. This is the case with Abu Obaida and with Al Rabie Ben Habib and his students Abu Sofra and others, who used the science of east and west in the same manner.

So discretion is not limited to the views of the doctrine founder. There is neither sanctity nor infallibility to his views. It is the evidence that matters. On the other hand, this means that dissenters in doctrine, if they possess the proper evidence to back up their dissent, may be followed by others. On the contrary, in some other doctrines, there is actual sanctity for founders. This is obvious in Sufism, where the *Sheikh* is highly

esteemed by his followers. This was greatly exploited in some Islamic doctrines to impart certain statuses upon men, which are closer to the status of God. Even in terms of the characteristics associated with the Imams, they may well not possess them. But some of their students may associate such attributes with them during their lives and after their demise. This is evidence that it is accepted to some extent. It is accepted to have attributes nearer to the metaphysical. For example, it is said that during the death of Ahmad Bin Hanbal two angels came to him and asked him about his god. He scolded them and said ‘such a question cannot be directed to me. Tell me, who is your Lord?’ We do not know who narrated this story and what it means or what its implications are. This is not found in *Ibadi* doctrine. If it is there, it is criticised and rejected.

The *Ibadis* accept no sanctity for humans. It is nothing more than respect. And this is clear in their practice. A scholar’s words are not convincing unless they are accompanied by evidence. Once the evidence is accepted, the scholar’s words become convincing. They emphasise this matter to the utmost extent. The door of discretion is not closed for them compared to other doctrines, which consider the door of discretion to be closed, and hence they become limited to a certain extent. The political history and political events had an impact on the formulation of this kind of jurisprudence. Jurisprudence in the *Ibadi* tradition tries to rectify and criticise the political situation. This is an important point. Many modern researchers of Sunni doctrines claim that Sunni jurisprudence is justificatory. We do not say that to satisfy our thirst for revenge. We say that as an acknowledgement of the correctness of this contention. It has been an actual reality. After Omar Bin Abdul Aziz – as mentioned in the Sunni books, not the *Ibadi* ones - his successor tried to follow the steps of Omar Bin Abdul Aziz and his just cause. Forty sheikhs approached him, swearing that there is no accountability or punishment for imams. So he abandoned Omar Bin Abdul Aziz’s cause. Which religion or science justifies misleading people and causing tragedies in the Muslim nation?

On the other hand, the *Ibadis*’ reluctance to limit the caliphate or imamate to a certain family or tribe helped Omanis more than others to be more politically real. It helped them to elect the most efficient, and the most qualified; those who possessed the proper qualities of leadership. They also say that if there is one from the *Quraish*, this

one is more deserving. But they have no one from *Quraish*. Most Omani tribes are *Qahtani*, not from the *Quraish*.

**Q3: How has the political scene in the Sultanate been affected by what has been lately known as globalisation?**

A: Generally speaking, globalisation undoubtedly reached the Omani, given that it is an open part of the world. Regarding the economic aspect and the globalisation of the economy, the nation became a part of that. Regarding knowledge and culture, there has been a great impact due to the openness of means of communication and methods of acquiring knowledge. The community has already been affected by globalisation. To what extent has the community, with its institutions (official & civil), benefitted from its advantages and protected its generations and the society from the ills of globalisation? I think that there has been some awareness. There was no rush in the nation towards globalisation, unlike in other countries, which plunged determinedly into it in certain economic ways. Therefore, they adopted an open policy, open tourism, and consequently money laundering increased and corrupt companies without conscience began to run after financial gains. So, when globalisation came about the people's social fabric swayed.

The political sphere in Oman was also affected by changes in the means of communication and the technology revolution. Linking this scientific progress to globalisation is not fair. Scientific advance in communication means, such as internet and satellite channels, was not intended to support globalisation. I do not believe that. To be sure, it helped mandate and expand globalisation. This undoubtedly had an impact, too. We are talking here about advantages and disadvantages. It remains to see how people cooperate to benefit from advantages and reduce disadvantages as much as is possible. You are part of the world and you cannot isolate yourself from the world.

Because of the nature of my work, I face issues I have not faced before, even at the social level. Take, for example, the contact between the two genders through chatting online. Ten years ago, we were never asked about that. Take also engagement and selecting a wife through the internet. These are matters never asked about. There are

also a lot of discussions concerning political matters, whether they concern community performance or the performance of state institutions. This is the outcome of scientific advance. It might have been used in globalisation to achieve certain goals. What interests us in Oman is to preserve the characteristics of our identity and the components of people's comfort at the levels of security and living standards. If it is possible to honour these interests, it means that we will have dealt with the facts of globalisation reasonably and in an acceptable way.

Also, globalisation degrades, dissolves and undermines the pillars of the social fabric, including good traditions, habits and customs that ought to be preserved and may be destroyed through globalisation or by a stirring of tribalism which could split people and invoke conflict. In spite of all the consequences of globalisation and satellite channels and so on, I think that the social fabric, with all its religious, cultural and social components is still cohesive and that there is public awareness of the dangers of globalisation and an acknowledgement that there are some abnormalities.

**Q4: What is the impact of tribalism and sectarianism on the existing process of *Shura* in Oman?**

A: I cannot give a full answer to this question. It needs examination, deduction and an analysis of certain outcomes. As an observer of this issue, I do not find a legal example of it to refer to in my answer. I can be sure that there is an impact and there might be an impact of tribal and doctrinal aspects on the process of *Shura*. We are talking about members, for example. It is likely that the tribal and doctrinal aspects - the tribal more than doctrinal - have a role in the elections. It is true that some *wilayats* do not reflect this impact. However, it remains that this aspect may be the main cause in elections. When examined closely, you may find there are tribal differences within one tribe or sectarianism inside one tribe that lead to the emergence of another member who may not represent all the tribes existing in the *wilayat*, or all or most of the doctrines found in that *wilayat*. It remains to be seen whether this is one of the matters that requires a coordination of efforts to save us from social ills. I stress here tribal and doctrinal "diversification" because it is not possible to marginalize tribalism in the Arab communities. The Prophet himself did not try to do that. He instructed us not to stir sectarianism, calling for equality between peoples, and the measure of precedence is piety.

These are principles which should be established in our society. Indeed, we should try to benefit from tribal distinctions and use it for good, say, during wars. The Prophet benefited from this. If it is possible to gain something positive from something, you will find that *Shari'a* calls for it. If it leads to dissent and disunity, you find the *Shari'a* directly intervenes forcefully to inhibit such sectarianism. So tribalism cannot be overlooked. When it is a cause of goodness it is encouraged and it is dealt with as a positive aspect. If it is, on the contrary, a factor which fragments the unity of the community and undermines the national cohesion, to use a modern term, here *Shari'a* must intervene. Of course, state institutions must step in to quell the causes of disorder because this factor will lead to disorder. What should be done before we reach the stage of disorder? No doubt, people must be informed and the spirit of cooperation encouraged. There must be greater awareness that doctrinal diversification is a positive factor that can be utilized. This is because the tie that links people together is the brotherhood in religion and attention should be given to the interests of the religion, not the factional doctrine. Regarding the tribal aspect, the principle of preference based on piety should be enhanced. This piety means also doing well across the board; executing works perfectly, and there are clear standards for people such as science, efficiency and competence. These standards are the basis of faith, not the tribe, not tribal elements or doctrines. These are things which lead to the cohesion of the people and protect the community against tribal disorder which may stir havoc purposefully or unintentionally.

**Q5: How do the facts of over population, demographic change and the increase in cultural awareness affect the political status of the Sultanate from your point of view?**

A: I have an optimistic view to some extent. I believe that the effects are good as these changes as a whole are benign and have laudable outcomes. More science, more cultural awareness, more positive convictions which call for more work and production, as well as an awareness of the importance of building and cooperation inside the society; these things lead to positive results. Given the reality witnessed in the world nowadays, the increase in population needs constant observation and good guidance. It is likely to have an impact on *Shura* institutions, for instance. It may positively affect the election of *Shura* members, their awareness of their responsibilities and the

performance of the council in general, given that it is an elected institution and a partner in running community affairs. Often, science matches with morality, and even awareness of the negative attributes others possess and the outcomes which may emerge from emulating others, means that you can immunize your generations and community in order to avoid harmful risks.

**Q6: In your opinion, why do many members of the new generation demand more political freedoms in the Sultanate?**

A: This is an echo of what is there in the world in general. It is a repetition of the calls of some of those who have certain goals in and for the communities. On the other hand, some of these demands have an advantage which decision makers should be aware of, and which should be studied in order to look for the best method to satisfy such demands. We know that many people lack the facts that help them take the right decision. This category tends to level blame and criticism because it lacks facts. Also, he who participates in making a decision is undoubtedly less critical than others. This is one of the benefits and advantages of *Shura*. When a community participates in taking a certain decision, whom will this community blame for that decision? The community is the decision taker and the agent. No one will be held accountable for it except the community. This is a positive aspect which should be examined and recognised. People should have clear facts to back up their arguments. People, through councils and other civil society institutions, can be partners in decision making and the implementation of those decisions. If a certain law is needed to make people aware and cooperate, and there are those who represent people who are elected to such councils, this makes people more convinced of the transparency of the decision and the clearness and honesty of its implementation as well.

Demanding more political freedoms can be also attributed to a different set of considerations. Globalisation has had a role. The impact of international-others and cultural imitation have had a role. Marginality sometimes plays a role, as well as an unawareness of the reasons behind making a certain decision. Lack of a space for popular community participation in the process of decision-making and implementation may also play a slight role.

To conclude, in *Shura* there are two parties, the decision maker, he who holds a position or an authority, standing over partners in accountability, and they who are required to provide advice and consultation and to accept advice. He who is consulted shares the responsibility. When Prophet Mohammad says: 'He who is consulted should be honest', this means that giving advice is a big responsibility that should be observed properly and given due interest. Otherwise, he may be considered to have breached trust. *Shura* is give and take. So, it is the responsibility of the consulted person to deliver opinion and advice to his best ability regarding the subject being consulted. It is a common responsibility. This commonness leads to a reasonable space for participation and political freedom demands by some people. However, freedom that means disunity, with no constraints or an imitation of others involving following their steps, is not sufficient. Prophet Mohammad says: 'do not be a yes-man, saying: if people do well, I do well and if doing badly, I do badly. But, adjust yourself. If people do well, do well and even if they do badly, do well'.

**Q7: What is the impact of economic fluctuations, especially in the oil market, on the political process in Oman?**

Sure, they play a role in the development plans. Oil price fluctuations are unavoidable and we cannot deny the impact that oil price fluctuations have on the country's development plans. The Gulf region, in general, until now has reached its extent of income sources diversification. However, the Sultanate is in a better situation than the others. This is because its quantity of oil cannot be compared to that of the neighbouring countries. The same is true with gas. We have an early awareness of the importance of diversifying sources of income for the state. There have been some endeavors already undertaken. It must be said that there are components in Oman which should be focused upon. People are talking about the consequences of the global economic crisis. They are talking particularly about a desire for greater food security rather than financial security and cash liquidity, though the crisis is about money. It is evident throughout Oman's history that it is a country of sea and palm trees. The components of food security are there; fish and dates are plentiful, in particular. We will not exaggerate and talk about agricultural wealth.



Oman is and an agrarian country, whether in terms of water or its geographical nature. What it has will be sufficient if there is good management, planning and implementation of resources. What is encouraging is that the Omani people in general like working. This is one of the components of food security. There should be awareness and cooperation among all parties in order to consolidate this understanding amongst people. Oil is a depleting wealth. Oman, specifically *Sohar*, is known for markets and factories. At his demise, Prophet Mohammad was enshrouded in clothes made in *Sohar*. Production of textile was quite familiar back then. *Sohar* was an example of mining. To what extent can minerals be utilized? We can also resort to industrial production. Specialists can talk better about this matter. However, from a legal point of view, and according to legal consideration, all these fields should be cared for and employed in order to avoid negative effects of oil wealth depletion. The believer is intelligent and discerning and should take the worst possibilities into account.

**Q8: How do you see the political situation in Oman in the post oil era?**

This is a tough question. If there is good preparation for this phase, the effects will not be substantial. During its long history Oman has not depended on oil, except in its recent period. The community has had many sources of income, including agriculture, fishing, shipbuilding, the textile industry, frankincense and others. These are things that society has created and employed. As long as there is a qualified and informed human element and difficulties are surmounted, things will go well. People need to be prepared for this. They should avoid leading luxurious lives. Islam calls for this. People should be motivated to work. Work fields should be opened. Cooperation is not limited to the social level. It covers the economic level, establishments and companies, the state level, decision makers and civil society institutions like Shura. All these are factors which will help the country continue its urban construction. If people lead luxurious lives and flee from work, the consequences will be harmful for society and development for a time, until God the Almighty corrects the situation and people understand and go to work to meet their needs.