

A portrait of Sultan Qaboos bin Said of Oman. He is an older man with a white beard and mustache, wearing a white turban and a white thobe with gold embroidery. He is seated in a yellow upholstered chair with a dark wooden frame. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in traditional Omani attire.

## Oman: the subtle use of power by Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said

military-Earth thinking notebook

le Chef d'escadrons (TA) Arnaud LAFOLIE

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Relations internationales

**Having come to power in 1970 after overthrowing his own father, the current sovereign of Oman has profoundly reformed his country during a reign that was a priori exemplary. From a backward and poor country, divided by two major rebellions and situated in a region that was nevertheless conducive to crises and tensions, he has made a haven of peace, tolerance and prosperity.**

**In order to achieve this, Sultan Qaboos bin Said was able to give great political modernity to his autocratic system, while respecting the traditional principles of government. The purpose of this short article is to present how and with what constraints an Arab ruler, perfectly accustomed to Western political culture, must know how to rule as a true tribal chief in order to maintain his legitimacy and effectiveness.**

In January 2013, Sultan Qaboos bin Said, sovereign of Oman since 1970, undertook a two-week tour of the Dakhiliya region (the mountainous region about 200 kilometres from the capital, Muscat) to meet the population.

This type of tour is a key moment in Omani political life, when the sultan meets with local councillors and residents. There are many moments of dialogue - shura - when the sultan speaks openly with his subjects. He can give political orientations, make general speeches, but also deal with the most concrete local issues. In these large meetings, the sultan sits in the manner of the Arab judges of the classical era: He sits on the width of a large quadrilateral, the lengths of which are occupied by local officials who, on this occasion, wear a matching turban and belt and display their khanjar, a wrought dagger which is also the symbol of the Sultanate. During these visits, the Sultan is invariably accompanied by his Government, which, surprisingly for a foreigner, sits and poses in traditional dress, each holding an assault rifle between its legs.

The fatherly gaze of Sultan Qaboos, the local assemblies where he comes to sit, the

group photo of the government in arms, these few images invite us to take a curious look at the mode of government implemented by the sovereign of Oman.

### **The man of the Omani renaissance, an omnipresent image**

- Sultan Qaboos, the undisputed father figure

The sultan's face is everywhere: in the street, on giant posters, in shopping malls... In army buildings, the sovereign is depicted in all the official attire. Every administration, every business is required to display his portrait. One wonders what could pass for the personification of power in a country reputed to be one of the last absolute monarchies in the world. In reality, Omanis, and even more so the many foreigners who work in the sultanate, are very happy to display the portrait of their sovereign, and most of them do so spontaneously. Moreover, the image he gives is not at all that of a dictator and even less that of a politician on a permanent campaign, but rather that of a father who is often smiling and whose face is always imbued with great gentleness.

#### **- Enlightened despot**

Sultan Qaboos is truly a man of a high level of culture and education. Trained by British tutors, a graduate of the Sandhurst Officers' School and a long-time globetrotter, he has acquired since the late 1960s a very good knowledge of Western culture and has developed very strong ties of friendship with the United Kingdom. He is also a patron of the arts in his own country, whose heritage he constantly encourages. It should be noted that he had the imposing Muscat opera house built on his own funds, against the advice of the Mufti of Oman, the country's leading religious figure.

However, this sovereign, whose image is omnipresent but who remains a discreet, even secretive man, reigns over all the country's affairs: head of the armies, absolute master of foreign policy, he is his own Prime Minister and nothing is done without his consent. Neither a businessman nor a lazy king, the sultan is the initiator of all the country's major projects. It is forbidden to criticise him publicly or to challenge his decisions and, in fact, no real freedom of speech is left to his potential opponents.

"Running a country well is an art, you either have the gift for it or you don't" (Sultan Qaboosbin Said, Washington Post 1999).

#### **- Modern head of state, but still a traditional leader**

The policy of Sultan Qaboos has been hailed by many observers as exemplary in terms of harmony and stability in the field of economic development. His policy has been hailed by many observers as exemplary in terms of harmony and stability in the field of economic and social development, but few analysts have noted that this stability is due as much to a proactive policy of investment and reform as to subtle control by the State and the population: capable of thinking like a technocrat, the Sultan of Oman governs de facto like a tribal chief.

In this context, he has been able to distribute the bulk of the important posts in the State among the different tribes and personalities that make up the Omani mosaic, whose cohesion is as recent as it is fragile. The clientele of Sultan Qaboos is thus extremely

varied and includes members of the traditional aristocracy as well as recently "Omaniized" groups: Baluchis, Iranians, Zanzibari and Indians, who owe all their success to the Sultan and who, in return, are fully loyal to him. In the sultanate's current order, these different groups are perfectly neutralized and their balance de facto prohibits the emergence of a real counter-power.

### **- Ancient rules still in force**

First, it should be recalled that the principle of human relations in traditional Omani society is based on dialogue. Letting one's anger out is seen as a serious breach of the rules of good manners, and refusing to engage in debate is simply perceived as an offence.

In this context, the Sultan knows how to behave in a benevolent and attentive manner in all circumstances: his role is to judge and possibly to punish, but he must do so as publicly as possible and, above all, he must know how to show leniency, publicly and ostensibly. Thus, Sultan Qaboos officially pardoned those who had hatched a plot against him in 2006 and, in the same way, in 2013, he granted a public pardon to the Internet users accused of lese-majesty, sentenced since the summer of 2012 after the (very short) Omani spring.

In the sphere of political decision-making, the mode of government in Oman is based on the principle of Shura, i.e. the council resulting from an assembly. This principle, which was very theoretical for many years, was officially put back on the agenda after the protests of 2011. Today, the Omani parliament consists of two chambers, one elected and the other appointed, whose deliberations are widely publicised in the media. However, their opinions remain purely consultative and only the royal family and its clientele seem to have a certain capacity for influence in the state.

### **- An essential aspect of politics and the economy: redistribution**

Since the accession of Sultan Qaboos to the throne, Oman's development has been based on the exploitation of gas and oil deposits discovered in the second half of the century. Oman's hydrocarbon revenues are far behind those of most other Persian Gulf countries, but they have been sufficient to trigger a broad movement of reform and progress.

However, in this very traditional society, the Sultan's legitimacy depends on how these revenues are redistributed and the entire population is keenly aware of the social and economic consequences of redistribution. It is not uncommon, at conferences or official meetings, to see mere subjects of the Sultan apostrophing to the authorities by questioning them about the apparent inequality of investment policy. In the regions furthest from the capital, the delay in the construction of a road, a school or the modernisation of a port may be judged very harshly by a population that is extremely sensitive to these problems. In fact, one of the Sultan's primary concerns during his provincial tours is to show the population and local councillors that no one will be forgotten in the great game of state rent and investment.

### **- Controlling the population**

However, redistribution is not always enough to appease the possible demands of a population that never refrains from debating and commenting on political issues. For the Omanis, although fully devoted to their sultan, are nonetheless formidable scrutineers of their own society and of the political choices of the ruling elite.

Thus, the provincial tours and the traditional mode of government of Sultan Qaboos are also intended to monitor, in situ, the degree of allegiance of this population, in the perfectly orchestrated framework of sessions of grievances followed by numerous demonstrations of gratitude organized by the governors of the wilayat.

There are, however, many other means of gently controlling this population, which is much less docile than it appears. The massive increase in the number of civil servants, especially in the police and the army (which may seem paradoxical in a country without enemies and with no crime, so to speak), is a solid guarantee against unemployment. This, together with the strong incentive for companies to recruit Omanis in preference to better trained and cheaper foreign labour, is a strong guarantee against unemployment.

Another example is taxis, which are very easily licensed to Omani civil servants, thus allowing them to supplement their income. Naturally, conversations with their passengers will provide information that will feed into the regular reports taxi drivers make to the authorities.

And what about the large credit facilities granted to businesses and individuals by banks, most of which are owned by relatives of the royal family? Obtaining a home loan is very accessible, and a large number of Omani families now have access to property, while the construction sector continues to flourish. As a result, more and more Omanis are now being held by the banks, and thus by the aristocracy of the regime.

### - The Future

The question of the succession of Sultan Qaboos occupies many conversations in private. Briefly married in 1976, the Sultan has never taken a wife since his divorce and has never had a child, perhaps for fear of suffering the same fate as his own father. Upon his death, a family council and a defence council will be responsible for enforcing the instructions he would have left in the vault. The family council will be able to give its blessing to the heir whom the sultan has left in his will, or designate any other person of his choice as stipulated in the "Basic Law of the State" of 1996.

Fears and doubts about this succession are further reinforced by a simple calculation: born in 1940 and apparently in good health, Sultan Qaboos should be able to rule for a few more years, but the beginning of his successor's reign could correspond with the depletion of the Sultanate's hydrocarbon reserves. The risk of an unprepared man, strictly controlled by the royal family and in the midst of an economic crisis, taking the throne is therefore real and truly worrying in the medium term.

The Chief of Squadrons (TA) Arnaud LAFOLIE, an Arabic-language trainee at the EMSST, is a member of the 2012-2013 class of the Command and Staff College of the Armed Forces of the Sultanate of Oman.

He is the author of the book "**Lemonde arabe tel qu'il est**" (The Arab world as it is ) published in May 2011 by Editions de l'Œuvre.

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