

# ‘WITHOUT SULTAN QABOOS, WE WOULD BE YEMEN’: THE RENAISSANCE NARRATIVE AND THE POLITICAL SETTLEMENT IN OMAN

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**Abstract:** Oman’s developmental trajectory is a ‘positive outlier’ to most post-colonial states, particularly those with significant natural resource reserves. Its trajectory confounds many of the usual expectations surrounding the impact of rentier incomes on conflict and inclusive development. This piece attempts to disentangle the threads of Oman’s apparent good fortune to reveal characteristics of its political settlement that may (and may not) have salience elsewhere. This paper spotlights the influence of narrative and the non-domestic factors that played pivotal roles in the formation and evolution of the political settlement, suggesting that both have generally been understated within the literature to date. © 2017 The Authors Journal of International Development Published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd

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Sultan Qaboos has ruled Oman since he deposed his father, Sa’id bin Taymoor, in a coup in 1970. Often dubbed the ‘sleepy Sultanate’, Oman is one of the few Middle Eastern states that rarely features in the international headlines. Its politics are the least studied of any state in the Arab Middle East presumably, in part, because of its stability, internal cohesion, relative prosperity, and ability to maintain genial diplomatic relations with its important neighbours.<sup>1</sup> At the time of the coup that brought Sultan Qaboos to power, however, the Sultanate was fighting a violent conflict against communist-supported secessionists in the

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<sup>1</sup>The degree to which Oman is overlooked is striking, even when compared with other small Gulf states. For more, see Hunt and Phillips (forthcoming).

southern region of Dhofar, whom the British government believed were close to victory.<sup>2</sup> It had no formal bureaucratic institutions and was beset with grinding poverty. The country's leader had scarcely left his summer palace since an assassination attempt against him in 1966. Isolated and bereft of indigenous support networks, Sultan Sa'id attempted to rule over a small, impoverished, fragmented and geographically dispersed population through a small group of British advisors and military personnel.<sup>3</sup> In the popular press, Oman was described alongside Yemen, as 'rushing headlong into the fifteenth century' (Peterson, 1978, p. 13) because of the death of basic infrastructure. In 1970, the country contained only three primary schools—with a total student population of just 900 boys (UNESCO, 1972, p. 1)—and no secondary schools. There was one hospital, 10 km of paved road, and the average life expectancy was 50 years of age [the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average was 70 years].

Nearly five decades later, and with Sultan Qaboos still in power, Oman's basic human development indicators are strikingly removed from what they were in 1970. A brief survey of the indicators starkly illustrates the contrast: by 1997, the World Health Organisation ranked Oman first out of 191 countries in 'health care system performance and outcome' and eighth best for its overall health system (WHO, 2000, pp. 154, 200). In 2010, the United Nations Development Programme judged Oman to have made the 'fastest progress in human development' since 1970, assessing it to have edged out China, which it ranked in second place for the same period (UNDP, 2010, p. 27). In 2011, nearly 98 per cent of Oman's primary school-aged children were enrolled in school, and 98 per cent of young adults (15–24) were literate (UNICEF, 2011). In 2013, the World Economic Forum surveyed 140 countries and found Oman to have the world's fifth best roads (WEF, 2013, p. 277). Finally, the average life expectancy of an Omani citizen is now 76 years of age, while neighbouring Yemen is more than a decade behind at 65, and the OECD average sits only slightly higher at 80.

This article asks how Oman's political settlement emerged and is held together under the leadership of Sultan Qaboos. It argues that the contingent processes that drove the dramatic developmental changes since 1970 are crucial to providing an answer, as the transition imbued the settlement around the central figure of Qaboos with a high degree of outcome legitimacy. Drawing from semi-structured interviews, field observations and archival research, this piece argues that early successes of the transition were actively reconstructed and diffused within a narrative that assigns almost exclusive agency to Sultan Qaboos as both the genesis and guardian of the country's rapid transition from conflict and poverty to peace and development. The ability to construct and disseminate meaning in this way is an act of power, underpinned in this instance by the apparent rapidity of the positive changes underway. The power of a narrative is visible when it becomes widely accepted as presenting a self-evident or commonsensical understanding of the way that something 'naturally' is. It does so, however, not because it presents the only logical understanding of something but because it also actively excludes alternative ways of understanding it (Epstein, 2008, p. 9). Through its master signifier of 'rebirth' or 'awakening', Oman's 'renaissance narrative' focuses on national cohesion and the Sultan's apparently overwhelming success in providing welfare and

<sup>2</sup>UK Ministry of Defence documents from early 1970 suggest that Britain feared Oman was becoming their own 'micro-Vietnam in the Arabian Peninsula' (Ministry of Defence 1970, FCO 46/609).

<sup>3</sup>All but one of Sultan Sa'id's government ministers were British, as was his Defence Secretary, Chief of Intelligence and Chief Advisor (Cobain 2016, Kindle location 1436).

development.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, it obfuscates the degree of centralised authoritarian control that remains another hallmark of Oman's political settlement. It also expunges, almost entirely, the decisive nature of British political and military intervention and direction in the early years of Sultan Qaboos' tenure. This paper suggests that the causal influence of narrative and discourse has been understated in the literature on political settlements to date, which has instead focused more on the ways that rule-based institutions (whether formal or informal) create space for, and set limits on, behaviour (for example, North, Wallis, & Weingast, 2009; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).<sup>5</sup>

Another important, and widely overlooked, factor in the consolidation of Oman's political settlement around the centralised authority of the Sultan was the presence of a relatively well-educated group of Omani citizens, who had been recently violently expelled from the island of Zanzibar. These citizens had skills that allowed them to administer core technical functions within a nascent state bureaucracy, but also had strong incentives to uphold a narrative of national cohesion as a means of consolidating their own, somewhat tenuous, positions in Omani society. This group was not at the centre of political or economic power hierarchies but was dominant at the middle and upper-middle level positions of the bureaucracy. With few exceptions (Valeri, 2007; Kharusi, 2012), and for reasons discussed later, the contribution of Zanzibari-Omanis has generally been excluded from the literature on Oman's political development. Analysis has instead focused on more visible factors, such as the figure of the Sultan, the influx of oil revenues or the influence of the British, thus sapping agency from all but an incredibly exclusive elite and underemphasising the role of a nascent middle class in the adoption and evolution of the political settlement.<sup>6</sup> This article thus represents an attempt to show how examining the role of a group outside (and quite detached from) the relatively narrow elite circles of tribal and religious leaders, Muscat-based merchants and British advisors provides a more textured account of the dynamics underpinning the emergence of Oman's political settlement.

Finally, this piece highlights the transnational context in which Oman's political settlement emerged. Many of the recent political settlement frameworks set their conceptual boundaries at the borders of the state in question, particularly through their focus on the dynamics of domestic elite contestation (for example, Di John & Putzel, 2009; OECD, 2011; Bell, 2015). This piece also shows how the interplay of domestic and international power dynamics shape and potentially reinforce conflict and exclusion. Owing to space constraints, and the desire to focus on aspects of political settlements that have been underemphasised in the literature to date, this piece focuses less on the contestation among Oman's traditional elite groups (such as the tribes, religious leaders and merchants, solid treatments of which can be found in Peterson, 2004; Valeri, 2009)<sup>7</sup> and more on the discursive reproduction of the settlement, the role of non-elite groups in consolidating it and the permeability of domestic and international spheres in all contemporary settlements.

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<sup>4</sup>The concept of the 'master signifier' is explored by Laclau and Mouffe (2001) as the central meaning that structures a discourse.

<sup>5</sup>It is important to note that while these pieces deal with the substance of political settlements (as discussed later), they do not explicitly use the term.

<sup>6</sup>Takriti (2013a, p. 209) notes, for example, that shortly after the coup in 1970, the British faced a 'dilemma: how to create a bureaucracy and bring about economic development in a country as bereft of an educated managerial class as Oman?'

<sup>7</sup>It is a misnomer to suggest that these elite groups constituted a 'ruling elite' as they were less consulted by the Sultan and his British advisors in decision-making than they were co-opted (using the extraordinary influx of oil wealth) or, less often, coerced into acceptance, as discussed later.

## 1 THE POLITICAL SETTLEMENT FRAMEWORK

The issue of what precisely constitutes a political settlement is contested. Although the term has not been widely used in academic circles, the substance behind it draws from a rich literature examining the pathways of political change (for discussion, see Rocha Menocal, 2015, p. 6; more recent examples of such work includes North *et al.*, 2009, and Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Drawing from Laws (2012), Khan (2010) and Di John and Putzel (2009), we use ‘political settlement’ to refer to the distribution of power and resources, and the institutions and discourses that perpetuate these arrangements within a political community and give it legitimacy. As Rocha Menocal (2015, p. 2) writes, political settlements ‘define who has power and, crucially, who does not. They outline the parameters of inclusion and exclusion in a given political system’. It is broadly accepted that the management of violence is conceptually central to the ways in which these parameters are set (Phillips, 2016, p. 632; Laws, 2012, p. 7; Khan, 2010, p. 20), an emphasis that prevents the term from becoming interchangeable with, for example, ‘political landscape’ or simply ‘politics’. We, therefore, consider a political settlement to consist of the suite of measures that channel conflict through mechanisms that render the use of violence unlikely, do so with a reasonable degree of predictability and that have popular legitimacy. While acknowledging some of the definitional problems associated with the term, this piece uses it to refer to the (often implicit) agreement that conflict will be dealt with, in the main, through non-violent means, and to the institutions and agents through which this legitimately occurs.<sup>8</sup> It also argues that like institutions, the stories that people circulate about politics, relationships and identities also legitimise or delegitimise violence (Cobb, 2013, p. 1), and this piece therefore places a specific focus on the narratives that underpin the emergence of Oman’s settlement.

When Sultan Qaboos came to power, there were several critical junctures that helped to reshape power dynamics in ways that facilitated more developmental outcomes. None of them would have brought about the kind of change witnessed in Oman today on their own, and their contingent interaction is explored subsequently. These junctures include the Organisation of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) ‘revolution’ of 1973 (the windfall from which facilitated the rapid centralisation of power), the scheduled British withdrawal from the Arabian Peninsula and the revolution in Zanzibar. Each will be discussed briefly before exploring how the outcome legitimacy they facilitated was harnessed by a purposeful narrative that frames Oman’s development as almost entirely attributable to the individual agency of Sultan Qaboos.

## 2 THE OAPEC REVOLUTION: RENTS AND RAPID CO-OPTATION

Hydrocarbon rents are widely acknowledged as the basis for rapid development in Oman. Resource rents undoubtedly underwrote the country’s economic ‘miracle’, funding both physical infrastructure and social welfare initiatives.<sup>9</sup> When Oman’s first oil exports began in 1967, a barrel cost just under \$1.50 on the international market (BP, 2013). This modest amount still represented a boon for the Omani economy, causing a 40 times’ increase in the Sultanate’s annual revenue between 1960 and 1970 (Valeri, 2009, p. 92). However, more

<sup>8</sup>This definition draws from Phillips (2013, 2016).

<sup>9</sup>For the role of rents in political settlements, see Booth (2012).

salient to the long-term prosperity of Oman was the oil crisis in 1973 (the 'OAPEC revolution'), after which oil revenues nearly quadrupled. The rapid increase in export volume combined with the dramatic increase in global oil prices ushered in unprecedented state wealth shortly after Sultan Qaboos' ascent to power. As a result, Qaboos was able to buy the majority stake in Petroleum Development Oman in 1974 (PDO, 2012, p. 3) and thus ensure long-term control over the state's finances. Although the oil crisis lasted only 1 year, the purchase of PDO meant far greater state profits for every barrel of oil that Oman has sold since. Under the previous Sultan, Oman received only 50 per cent of oil profits and the right to 12.5 per cent of all oil exported. Today, as a result of the purchase, the government's total take is closer to 90 per cent.

Exponentially higher export earnings brought hard currency to fund national development projects (including roads, schools and health centres), and the military campaign against the insurgency in Dhofar. Qaboos used the increased revenues to afford sophisticated military equipment, contract officers seconded from the UK and generous terms for defecting rebels, including a cash payment if they surrendered their weapons. Additionally, the Dhofar Development Department was established with funding from both this windfall and the British government and formed a core component of the counterinsurgency effort. The Department oversaw the completion of major infrastructure projects including ports, schools, housing, hospitals, paved roads and experimental farms, as well as radio and colour television stations (Peterson, 1978, p. 206). Finally, these revenues greatly enhanced the new Sultan's ability to co-opt existing elites such as tribal and religious leaders and thereby centralise power beyond anything previously imaginable in the sparsely populated and regionally fragmented Sultanate. Shortly after assuming power, state payments to tribal sheikhs were increased (Ackland, 2003, 810) and more widely distributed. This enlarged the number of the state's direct beneficiaries while eroding the sheikhs' traditional mandates of managing land deeds, water use, welfare provision and education (Peterson, 1978, p. 118).

Powerful commercial elites were also co-opted with oil revenues, which shifted the economic engine from traditional merchants to the state, giving it a near monopoly on major economic opportunities. British documents note that from early on, 'Sayyid (sic) Qaboos made clear that his voice would predominate in military, financial and external affairs, and he stressed, in the award of large commercial contracts' (Crawford, 2003b, p.158). This represents a seismic shift in the relative power of Oman's financial and political elites, with the merchant class becoming, for the first time, unambiguously subordinate to the Sultan. Marc Valeri suggests that selected merchant families and businessmen were given fixed percentages of oil revenue in 1970 to ensure that they had a personal stake in the success of the emerging order under Sultan Qaboos (2009, p. 102; also Crystal, 1990). Through government contracts, Qaboos supported merchants with long-standing links to the al-Sa'id dynasty while promoting additional families who had demonstrated loyalty to him personally.

However, such windfalls were not unusual at the time, and the co-optive capacity of resource rents affected political settlements in other Gulf countries as well (Crystal, 1990; Beblawi & Luciani, 1987). What was unusual in Oman was the degree of relatively inclusive economic development and social cohesion that the process of co-optation underpinned. In the section that follows, we suggest that this cannot be explained without recourse to the discursive construction of Sultan Qaboos' pivotal role in the country's rapid development. Oman is not entirely unique in this either though, and other regional leaders have fostered cults of personality around themselves, without their countries experiencing

the same level of cohesion or economic inclusion. We argue further, therefore, that the 'renaissance narrative' surrounding Qaboos effectively accentuated a perceived dichotomy between him and his predecessor, and that this dichotomy gained further plausibility owing to a number of fortuitous junctures, of which increased oil revenues was only one.

### 3 BRITISH WITHDRAWAL FROM THE GULF

The economic shift within Oman also occurred in conjunction with the decline of British hegemony in the region. Although Oman was not formally colonised, the British had maintained decisive economic, political and military influence throughout the Arab Peninsula for nearly a century by the time that Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced in 1968 that they would withdraw from the region. Britain had already left neighbouring South Yemen several months prior to Wilson's announcement, and by 1970, it was formally under the control of a Marxist government—an outcome that the British government worried would be repeated in Oman. As the departure drew closer, Whitehall's concerns sharpened over Sultan Sa'id's inability to defeat the communist insurgency in Dhofar. British documents note that 'Qabus is likely to be a much better bet than the current Sultan, especially as he may well rely ... on HMG's support, encouragement and advice' (Acland, 1970, cited in DeVore, 2011). While denied at the time, the 1970 coup against Sultan Sa'id was carried out almost entirely by British military and intelligence personnel (Takriti, 2013b), without a single shot being fired by any Omani other than Sultan Sa'id, who fired in self-defence (Kane, 2012, Kindle location 2670). Although a broader discussion of the British-led coup is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that Qaboos did not have the standing to implement a coup on his own. Limbert notes, for example, that he had never set foot in the capital of Muscat, and that some communities may not have even known of his existence prior to the coup (2010, p. 174). The British coup therefore, granted Qaboos a rapid succession to power. However, it was another juncture—the revolution in Zanzibar—that ultimately helped to embed his power beyond the most visible circle of elites that could be directly targeted for co-optation.

### 4 REVOLUTION IN ZANZIBAR

While the revolution in Zanzibar predated Qaboos' ascension by 6 years, its effects directly impacted his tenure. Omani Arabs were historically associated with the slave trade through Zanzibar and became the target of a local revolt following independence from Britain and the overthrow of the monarchy. By the end of 1964, an estimated 12 000–15 000 Arabs had been killed or deported (Clayton, 1981, p. 98) in what some Omanis refer to as a process of ethnic cleansing or even genocide against the Muslim population of Zanzibar.<sup>10</sup> Sultan Sa'id absorbed some 3700 of the early refugees (Peterson, 2004, p. 46), but the majority fled to Mombasa, Dubai, Cairo or to European cities. It was only after the coup in Oman that a critical mass of more educated Zanzibari-Omanis—who would become the technocratic backbone of the country—opted to leave their initial places of refuge to heed what is now widely referred to within Oman as 'the call'. The 'call' was Sultan Qaboos'

<sup>10</sup>Interview with academic at Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat: 13 April 2014.



invitation to the diaspora to reside in Oman as citizens and contribute to national development, which allowed him to leverage their superior education and skills in support of his state-building agenda.

## 5 NARRATIVES ABOUT SULTAN QABOOS' AGENCY

Despite the advantageous circumstances and critical junctures outlined earlier, the 'renaissance' or awakening (*al-nahda*) of Oman is almost exclusively ascribed to the individual agency of Sultan Qaboos in Omani popular narratives.<sup>11</sup> During fieldwork, the idea that 'without Sultan Qaboos we would be Yemen' was offered, almost reflexively, by Omanis seeking to explain the exclusive impact that Sultan Qaboos is perceived to have had on Oman's national development.<sup>12</sup> His ability to effectively co-opt tribal, religious and commercial elites is widely attributed to his unique personal attributes, including the potency of his tribal lineage. As the sole heir of an Ibadhi father from the capital city and a Sunni mother from Dhofar, he was seen to represent both of the key conflicting parties to the Dhofari insurgency.<sup>13</sup>

The renaissance narrative provides a reasonably coherent system of meaning through which to understand Oman's rapid development. It overstates the degree to which Sultan Qaboos acted alone to affect change, but its empirical veracity is not the point. It assigns legitimacy to the notion that Sultan Qaboos was uniquely endowed to steer the rapid evolution of Oman's political settlement while dramatising the country's apparent good fortune at his ascent to power. The narrative rests on the construction of binary categories: wealth/poverty, peace/conflict and even light/darkness. This construction places the country's modernisation under Sultan Qaboos in stark contrast to the preceding era under Sultan Sa'id, which is framed as one of political fragmentation, economic turmoil and open insurrection. Qaboos himself has framed the shift in Oman's fortunes that occurred under his rule as being one of agential difference between himself and his father: 'He [Sa'id] knew five languages, but he wasn't cultured. Knowledge is one thing and culture is something else .... He didn't believe in change. His thinking went back to an age which is not this present age' (quoted in Townsend, 1977, p. 78).

Regardless of the means at Sultan Sa'id's disposal to address development goals before oil exports began in 1967, the government of Qaboos quickly set about working to highlight the period of his father's rule as '38 years of medieval and harsh rule' (Ministry of Information, Labour and Social Welfare, 1971, p. 24). The British archives are suggestive of the degree to which British officials believed that purposely forging a narrative about Qaboos would solidify his authority and show that his advisors assisted with its germination immediately upon his ascent: 'A radio was installed and began broadcasts in Muscat within 72 hours of the succession' (Crawford, 2003c, p. 3). Qaboos was provided with a 'radio team' that was to 'assist him in various spheres' (Crawford, 1971, p. 7), and a number of anti-communist propagandists were seconded as media

<sup>11</sup>The importance of ideas and narratives within state formation is discussed in the wider literature on nationalism and identity (some widely cited examples include Anderson, 1983, and Gellner, 2006) but has generally not been emphasised within the political settlements literature.

<sup>12</sup>See for example <http://muscatconfidential.blogspot.com.au/2012/06/new-series-im-super-thanks-for-asking.html>, where the author remarks: 'This blog has always held to the observation that there is a word for what Oman would be like without HM Qaboos—And that word is "Yemen"'.  
<sup>13</sup>Ibadhism is a school of Islam distinct from Sunni or Shi'ism.

advisors to the new Sultan (Takriti, 2013a, pp. 253–254). Takriti notes that on the day after the coup was announced, a British Development Officer began sending regular press releases about the transition to the Reuters office in Dubai (Takriti, 2013a, p. 199). By the time Qaboos first entered Muscat a week after the coup, over 1000 British-led soldiers lined the streets to greet him, flanked by British journalists that had been flown in by the Foreign Office to cover the event (Takriti, 2013a, p. 200). This illustrates the importance that the Sultan's British advisors placed on communicating a broad and consistent account of the 'awakening' that Omanis were already supposed to be experiencing.

The renaissance narrative credits all national development to Sultan Qaboos personally and is reiterated throughout most official documents and speeches. Oman's first *Five Year Development Plan 1976–1980* reported that 'it was not until 1970 that oil revenues were used to develop the country .... In fact, the development of the modern Oman only started in that year' (1976, p. 2 cited in Ministry of Information, 2002). Royal speeches consistently refer to the modest starting position of the country's infrastructure, education and health systems: 'In 1970 there were three schools in a country comprising 900 students' (Qaboos 1972, cited in Ministry of Information 2002a). Eight years later, even these efforts by his father were discounted. In the 10th anniversary of National Day Speech, the Sultan encouraged the audience to recall that:

Ten years ago ... we were poor in everything .... We had no hospitals to take care of our people, we had no schools to prepare our young to take their place in the world, we had no government structure with which to organise and develop the resources of our country (Qaboos, 1980 cited in Ministry of Information, 2002b).

Despite some writers seeking to counter this mythologising (Field, 1984; Owen, 1970, p. 379), Sultan Sa'id's rule remains characterised in the popular imagination (and much of the English language literature) as medieval, consisting of 'benign neglect and petty restrictions' (Allen, 1987, p. 69; Halliday, 1974, p. 275). The perception of Sa'id's Oman as a neglected fiefdom is something that forms a strikingly common refrain within Oman, with people of all ages frequently attesting that 'Under Sultan Sa'id, we had six miles of paved road, one hospital and only three schools'.<sup>14</sup>

What is more striking, however, is the degree to which the narrative contradicts the historical record. While there is no doubt that Qaboos was critically important to Oman's development, scholars such as Uzi Rabi (2006) and Takriti (2013a) argue that the changes he implemented early in his tenure have been overstated. They highlight instead the influence of his father and the British government, respectively. Rabi (2006, p. 1) argues that it was actually Sultan Sa'id who paved the way to Oman's financial solvency. From a starting point of near bankruptcy in 1932, the first 37 years of Sa'id's rule were spent repaying millions of pounds worth of British loans that had been accrued by his own father, Sultan Taimur. He accomplished this by personally and parsimoniously micromanaging the small funds from customs taxes and various subsidies, as well as slashing expenditure, beginning with the royal family.

As oil revenues began to trickle in, Sultan Sa'id issued a statement outlining plans for water and electricity systems, a modern port and rationalised currency system (Sa'id, 1968). Despite this modest influx, he remained fiscally prudent; his palace remained mostly built of mud, and the expensive pomp and circumstance suggested by his British advisors was repeatedly declined. Indeed, until the day he was overthrown, Sa'id

<sup>14</sup>Various interviews, Muscat: 2011–2014.



continued to 'act and behave with the shrewdness and calculation of someone always on the edge of financial ruin' (Chatty, 2009, p. 43). If the speed of the development under Qaboos can be considered miraculous, it was due, in no small part, to the fact that he could capitalise on the momentum of plans already approved by his father. After just 2 years of oil revenue under Sa'id, completed developments included a water supply for Muscat and Muttrah, a new post office and two blocks of government flats, with two hospitals, a girls' school and a police barracks under construction as of December 1969 (Townsend, 1977, p. 170). British diplomatic records indicate that he had also approved a harbour at Muttrah, roads to the port, interior hospitals, new agricultural markets and a public garden for Muscat (Crawford, 2003a). However, the fact that projects actually began just months after he was deposed was used to mythologise the economic 'miracle' as being solely directed by Qaboos after wresting power from his purportedly anachronistic father.

## 6 'THE CALL' TO THE DIASPORA AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE POLITICAL SETTLEMENT

Like the renaissance narrative more broadly, the popular mythologising surrounding 'the call' that Qaboos made to the Omani diaspora presents his individual agency as the spark that began Oman's transition from poverty to prosperity. Within days of taking power, Qaboos announced that the '[t]ime will shortly come for Omanis living abroad to be called to the service of their homeland' (Qaboos, 1970, cited in Records of Oman, 2003). At this point, several groups would have fallen under the umbrella of 'Omanis living abroad', including those studying or working in the Gulf and the African diaspora, as well as political communities living in exile owing to their opposition to his father. What is noteworthy for the purposes of this piece is that the invitation was gratefully received by one group in particular—those who had recently fled the violence in Zanzibar. As one returnee noted: 'This was a chance for refuge; people were given citizenship immediately, and that was worth diamonds'.<sup>15</sup>

One of the most widely echoed observations within the state-formation literature is that the creation of a reasonably effective bureaucratic apparatus is, at least historically, critical to the centralisation of authority (Weber, 1998; Tilly, 1992). This can be seen in Oman, where its eclectic diaspora played a vital role in staffing its nascent state institutions and implementing development projects. The new arrivals brought professional experience in administration, banking and other technical fields and joined international advisors and consultants in building modern educational and health systems, military units, telecommunications systems and other economic infrastructure. One Omani interviewee discussed the vast number of people that this group entailed by recalling his father, who worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, processing volumes of visa applications at home after work:

I remember he used to bring home stacks of these applications. All they needed was a signature but it took him all evening. I asked him, 'is there anyone that *isn't* getting in?' to which he replied 'we need these people to build the country'.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Interview with retired manager at Oman Central Bank who had 'returned' from Zanzibar, Muscat: 15 April 2014.

<sup>16</sup>Interview with former senior member of the Royal Diwan, Muscat: 20 May 2014.

Zanzibari-Omanis constituted one of the largest groups of these returnees with between 8000 and 10 000 immigrating by 1975 (Al-Rasheed, 2005, p. 101) out of a population of around 1 million (although records are scant). This group was almost certainly the most highly educated. Many of the Zanzibaris/Zinjibari had been schooled under a British education system and quickly formed the technocratic backbone of the new state institutions that were created under Qaboos, such as the Ministry of Defence, PDO, the domestic intelligence agencies (Peterson, 2004, p. 47) and the Interim Planning Council, which was tasked with driving national development initiatives (Valeri, 2007, p. 486). Zanzibaris were broadly perceived as the early 'intelligentsia' after 1970 (Limbert, 2010, p. 134). A retired senior official from the Ministry of Telecommunications recalled that in the 1970s, 'a majority of the technical workers were from East Africa because they were educated'.<sup>17</sup> At the time, Zanzibar was second only to Egypt in terms of education levels in Africa and was 'self-sufficient in doctors, experts and engineers' (Hamad, 2009, p. 189). A look at the broader biographical backgrounds of key technocrats in the 1970s reveals the level of influence that Zanzibari-Omanis held in technical and managerial appointments, for instance, in the Interim Planning Council (Peterson, 1978, p. 127). Oman's first healthcare advisor was Zanzibari, as were the early managers of Muscat's ports, airports and banks. Additionally, owing to their education and lack of social restrictions against gender mixing, Zanzibari women also contributed in areas of critical skill shortages serving as the first female Omani police officer, electrical engineer, pilot, doctor and, later, ambassador.<sup>18</sup>

This group was generally considered non-threatening to existing elites as they did not actively seek power or align themselves with political forces. This influx of relatively skilled labour also provided Qaboos with allies who were detached from local political relationships in ways that further increased their instrumental value to the new Sultan. 'They [the Zanzibaris] were in unison with His Majesty to develop Oman; the Zanzibaris were already trained and educated'.<sup>19</sup> The English language proficiency of the Zanzibari-Omanis also offered them a distinct advantage in the international economy, allowing for easier integration into crucial international industries such as banking, petroleum and telecommunications, as well as working closely with international (predominantly British) advisors on the ground. The former manager of Oman Central Bank recalled that in the early days, more than 95 per cent of workers in the Central Bank were Zanzibaris,<sup>20</sup> where English was a requirement 'because of the international links'.<sup>21</sup> By providing the technical background and educational qualifications to staff a more modern economy, Oman was able to divest itself relatively early of a preponderance of expatriate advisors and thus take greater ownership of national development than was the case in other Gulf states.

Where the legacy of the Zanzibaris is considered problematic is in its ability to disrupt the unifying theme of the Renaissance narrative. The prominence of the Zanzibari-Omanis within the bureaucracy during this time is still a matter of sensitivity in some quarters. To

<sup>17</sup>Interview with former senior member of the Ministry of Telecommunications, Muscat: 9 May 2014.

<sup>18</sup>Interview with Omani academic, Muscat: 12 April 2014.

<sup>19</sup>Interview with retired manager at Oman Central Bank who had 'returned' from Zanzibar after 'the call', Muscat: 15 April 2014.

<sup>20</sup>This was not seen to be a deliberate or nepotistic strategy, as the individuals were generally unknown to each other. Instead, recruitment was based on those that responded to public employment ads. 'I didn't know them personally. They were just the most educated people. People would see the ads and they are the ones who responded'. Interview with retired manager at Oman Central Bank who had 'returned' from Zanzibar, Muscat: 15 April 2014.

<sup>21</sup>Interview with retired manager at Oman Central Bank who had 'returned' from Zanzibar, Muscat: 15 April 2014.

single out one particular group and their role in building modern Oman is widely seen as divisive and thus contradictory to the level of cohesion ostensibly overseen by Sultan Qaboos. On this issue, interviewees were consistently at pains to recognise the contributions of all Omanis in the early period of state-building under Sultan Qaboos. One former State Council member stressed that 'Omanis came from all over, some were in the Gulf but others from China and Russia. East Africans were just the largest group, but it took all of us'.<sup>22</sup>

You have to be careful. Zanzibaris did not play THE single role—if you say this, the Baluchis will complain, the Lawatis will complain, the Oman born Omanis will complain. It makes sense to give everyone their due, but obviously the Zanzibaris were the most trained. Also, the Zanzibari women [were able to contribute because they were] not conservative and could mix with anyone in the workplace, which was not the case for Omani-born women.<sup>23</sup>

With such sensitivities in mind, it is important to highlight that this paper does not seek to inflate the contributions of this group, but it recognises that a subsection of 'returnees' contributed to Oman's development in two unique ways. First, earnings from this group were not expatriated out of the country as is typical when countries rely on non-indigenous skilled labour. Typically, countries undergoing rapid economic change hire highly trained expatriate labour, while a critical mass of the indigenous population acquires the necessary skill sets. During this time, expatriate earnings tend to flow out the country. Owing to the revolution in Zanzibar, however, the Zanzibari-Omanis who 'returned' were cut off from their place of birth, and their earnings therefore tended to stay within Oman. Second, although it is not unusual for a country to call upon its educated diaspora to return and contribute to national development initiatives (see Jonkers, 2008, for a comparative study of China, India, Argentina and Mexico), it is less common that this group could be called upon so quickly in such large numbers despite such a long temporal detachment. Most of the 'returnees' were in fact not returnees at all, having never set foot in the country that now offered them a passport. As one such person noted, 'My family was in Zanzibar for 200 years!'<sup>24</sup> In some ways, this group represented the best of both worlds, a skilled labour force readily committed to the cause of Oman's development and highly dependent on its success, having lost their ability to return to their homes in Zanzibar.

These two factors meant that Sultan Qaboos had access to a sizeable group of people who were in possession of technical skills that allowed them to work reasonably effectively in bureaucratic and administrative roles. Their detachment from the hierarchies of political power (as a result of their long absence and outsider status) also meant that they did not pose an immediate challenge to existing elites (Al-Rasheed, 2005, p. 102), such as the tribal and religious leaders and the merchant class that Qaboos and his inner circle were working to co-op through the methods discussed earlier. Without access to a pool of relatively well-educated citizens that could administer complex state-building projects, it is unlikely that Qaboos could have centralised his political control over Oman so quickly and overseen such significant developmental growth. Despite this, the contribution of the Zanzibar diaspora to the consolidation of the political settlement under Sultan Qaboos has received very little scholarly attention to date.

<sup>22</sup>Interview with former State Council Member, Muscat: 12 May 2014.

<sup>23</sup>Interview with scholar at Sultan Qaboos University: 14 April 2014.

<sup>24</sup>Interview with academic at Sultan Qaboos University: 13 April 2014.

The renaissance narrative also focuses on the priority that Sultan Qaboos gave to educating the population while portraying his father as inherently predisposed against education. However, Sultan Sa'id was himself well educated, and it is more likely that he saw an educated population as posing an immediate threat to his political survival. He is quoted in British archival documents as saying: 'What is there here for a young man with education? He would go to university in Cairo or to ... London, finish in Moscow and come back here to foment trouble' (cited in Smiley, 1975, p. 41). The British Consul General reported in 1966 that Sa'id 'knows the value of education, but cannot see how he can get the benefits of it without creating a powerful force for disruption in his state. So he neither provides any but a few elementary schools *nor will he permit the return of those who go abroad for education*' (emphasis added, Sa'id, 1968, cited in Carden, 1968, p. 4). Thus while Sultan Sa'id had reasons to see an educated population as a grave threat to his political survival, his son had reasons to see it as precisely the opposite, dependent as his ambitions were upon quickly capitalising on oil revenues to dispense patronage and thereby centralise power.

## 7 BRITISH IMPERIALISM, AUTOCRACY AND THE RENAISSANCE NARRATIVE

The economic aspects of Oman's settlement are distributive and broadly inclusive, but these remain politically exclusive. Sultan Qaboos is an absolute monarch. He is not only the head of state but also the head of foreign affairs, finance and the military. Like his father, Sultan Qaboos keeps a small coterie of advisers but preserves exclusive decision-making in nearly all areas. Oman's political settlement thus continues to rest on a basic foundation of autocratic personal rule underpinned by a narrative that astutely monopolises outcome legitimacy for Sultan Qaboos alone. However, this was not an inevitable outcome. A competing vision for a constitutional monarchy had been championed by Oman's first Prime Minister (Qaboos' uncle) Tariq bin Taimur, who spoke 'volubly about his aims to achieve a democratic, constitutional, de-tribalised, internationalised, Arab and outward looking Sultanate' (Crawford, 1970, p. 2). The more inclusive political framework that Tariq favoured was, however, deemed inappropriate for Oman by Qaboos—a determination that was presumably shared by the British government (Takriti, 2013a, pp. 206–221). The British Consulate General in Muscat recorded notes on a private conversation with Qaboos regarding the matter:

He said that he had spoken to many of the Sheikhs and Walis in the country and also to individual members of the government about the question of a constitution. None had wished it at this stage in the Sultanate's development since was an irrelevancy .... Sayid Qabus made it clear that his voice would predominate in military, financial and external affairs (Crawford 1970, p. 1).

The contingent, agential and discursive factors outlined earlier were critical to shaping the contours of Oman's political settlement, but so too was the coercive capacity provided by the British military and Foreign Office. Without active British support, it is extremely doubtful that Qaboos would have had the military capacity to quell the Dhofari rebellion that constituted the most immediate threat to his early rule. The British-led counterinsurgency was often brutal, using torture and demonstrative violence to subjugate the Dhofari fighters: 'We burnt down rebel villages and shot their goats and cows .... Any enemy corpses we recovered were propped up in the Salalah *souk* as a salutary lesson to any would-be freedom fighters' (Cobain, 2016, Kindle location 1510, citing a British

officer quoted in Halliday, 1974, p. 351). Such strong external coercive support obviated the need to divert the state's limited bureaucratic capacity towards administering an effective military, as was typically in the case when political settlements were forged in Europe (Tilly, 1992). Along with their active combat role, British SAS squadrons also operated Civil Action Teams, which focused on the so-called hearts and minds components of the counterinsurgency campaign, and establishing rudimentary health, education and agricultural services in Dhofar as more of the rebels surrendered (Cobain, 2016, Kindle location 1635; DeVore, 2012, p. 152; Worrall, 2013, p. 83).

The role of the British in establishing and subsequently maintaining the dominant narrative of Qaboos as a singularly decisive agent of change is emphasised by the ongoing classification of some of the key archival documents surrounding the 1970 coup. Documents covering the British role in the coup only exist in the public sphere because they were temporarily misfiled and happened to be uncovered by dogged researchers, particularly Abdel Razzaq Takriti (2013b, 156) and Marc DeVore.<sup>25</sup> These documents remained classified despite the normal 'thirty-year rule' of classification having long been exceeded. A search by the authors in 2016 confirms that most related files remain closed until at least January 2021 under the prejudice-based exemption. It appears, therefore, that almost 50 years after the coup, there is a sense within the British government that the 'renaissance' framing of Qaboos' early rule ought not be explicitly challenged by information revealing the extent of British involvement in his ascent to power.

The depth of the British involvement underscores an apparent contradiction in Sultan Qaboos' achievements: on the one hand, he presided over a period of extraordinary economic development and is genuinely admired by the majority of Omanis, who credit him personally with developing the country against the odds. On the other, his rule was greatly facilitated (some say created) by British imperial interests (Takriti, 2013a, 2013b), which helped him to consolidate a highly exclusive political system that is being increasingly, albeit quietly, questioned as succession looms (Hunt, 2014). The fact that the political settlement remains, at least discursively, inextricable from the personality of Sultan Qaboos raises questions over its durability once he leaves office.

How then can we understand Sultan Qaboos' ability to achieve a level of consensus behind his leadership sufficient to centralise power so quickly? This piece has argued that the rapid economic and developmental transition formed an essential backdrop to this and was the linchpin of the early political settlement. Without the major economic changes, Qaboos would have had few outcomes with which to illustrate the purportedly stark difference between his leadership and that of his father. However, without also having access to a relatively well-educated group of citizens to staff the early bureaucracy, Oman is unlikely to have been able to sustain the economic development that has underpinned the settlement beyond the initial influx of revenue. This piece has argued, therefore, that the political settlement emerged initially out of a series of fortuitous junctures that culminated in the state's unprecedented ability to co-opt, and sometimes coerce, the population with new oil revenues. The settlement has endured, however, to a significant degree because the nature of the transition was astutely reproduced in a narrative that has excluded alternative ways of understanding the changes that Omanis were experiencing. This exclusion is particularly pronounced regarding the autocratic nature of politics, and the role of the British in violently suppressing the Dhofari insurgency. Here, the apparent improvements in prosperity and security are framed as

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<sup>25</sup>DeVore recounted his search through the archives in BBC4 (2009).

inextricably linked to the personal qualities of Sultan Qaboos, in a discursive move that has foreclosed debate about how the political settlement may adapt to a successor after Qaboos.

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