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Pro-Democracy Protests Spread to Oman

Another autocratic U.S. ally in the Arab world faces a non-violent challenge.

Most Americans are not familiar with the sultanate of Oman. The mostly desert country the size of Kansas wraps around the Arabian peninsula's southeastern corner, bordering Yemen on its southwest and the empty quarter of Saudi Arabia along most of its inland border. Oman's long seacoast runs along the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. Its northern tip forms one side of the strategically important Strait of Hormuz across from Iran.

Oman's autocratic monarchy has long been one of the closest U.S. allies in the Middle East. And, as with authoritarian U.S. allies in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen, a largely nonviolent, pro-democracy struggle has arisen in Oman as well.

Protests began in the capital of Muscat on February 19 but soon spread to other cities across the country. Similar to the other largely nonviolent insurrections taking place elsewhere in the Arab world, the protests have been centered on demands for democracy, human rights, economic justice, and curbing official corruption. As in Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, and other monarchies that have witnessed protests in recent weeks, most protesters are not demanding the abolition of the monarchy. They're seeking an elected parliament with real power, essentially transforming the current absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy.

On February 26, protests in Oman spread to the northeastern industrial city of Sohar. Although starting out exclusively nonviolent, a forcible response by government security forces the following day resulted in some stone-throwing by the crowd. A police station and government building were reportedly torched. Security forces killed two protesters and wounded several others. On Monday, protesters temporarily blocked roads leading to the country's second largest port and [new protests broke out in the capital](#). Meanwhile, in the southern city of Salalah, demonstrators began a sit-in near the office of a provincial governor. In response, the sultan replaced nine cabinet members, raised the minimum wage by 40 percent, and announced his intention to create 50,000 new civil service jobs. These measures did not satisfy the pro-democracy protesters. On March 3, demonstrators set up a tent city in the center of Sohar. Two days later, protests hit Oman's oil producing region. Workers at the main oil field at Haima began an ongoing sit-in.

The Obama administration has thus far refused to support the protesters demands or call for a democratic opening. But State Department spokesman [P.J. Crowley said](#) that U.S. officials had contacted the Omani government and encouraged them "to undertake reforms that include economic opportunity and move towards greater inclusion and participation in a peaceful political process."

Our Man in Muscat

Oman's ruler, Sultan Qaboos bin Said, is well-regarded in the West. An Anglophile (trained at Sandhurst) and a cultured man with musical talents, he has long been depicted as a "moderate" Arab leader. He has ruled Oman since 1970 when he overthrew his father, Sultan Said bin Taimur, who had effectively banned almost all aspects of 20th-century development.

The sultan serves as both head of state and head of government, as well as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, prime minister, defense minister, foreign affairs minister, and finance minister. There is no crown prince or other major figures in the royal family to either serve as a counterweight or to back up his rule. Nor is there a legal process currently in place for

selecting a successor. There is no heir apparent, nor is there likely to be one. Qaboos is 70 years old, has no children, and is unmarried. (He is known to have a harem of at least 100 men, though they generally keep a low public profile.)

Although Oman's oil reserves are significantly less than its richer neighbors to the north, in recent years they have provided the country with impressive economic growth. However, that does not substitute for the [lack of political freedom](#). Qaboos refuses to allow any group to meet without official permission, and all NGOs must be licensed by his regime. There is severe press censorship, there are no political parties or independent human rights groups, and it is strictly forbidden to criticize the ruler. The sultan established an 84-member quasi-parliamentary body known as the Majlis Shura in 2002, which has no legislative authority and only serves in an advisory capacity.

Despite such limitations, pro-democracy activists have sought creative means of spreading their message, such as using donkeys as mobile billboards to criticize the regime. Such efforts had little impact. The events of the past two weeks are the first time the regime has faced a serious challenge to its autocratic rule.

Economic and Strategic Ties

Oman is also the location of one of the lesser-known U.S. military interventions. In the late 1960s, a popular leftist uprising composed primarily of peasants from the southwestern province of Dhofar as well as participants from other parts of the country began challenging the regime. In response, in the early 1970s, the United States and the British helped coordinate a counter-insurgency war with the support of troops from Pakistan and Iran, which was then under the rule of the Shah. This strategy of finding regional surrogates to intervene in counterrevolutionary warfare rather than dispatching U.S. forces to do the actual fighting came to be seen as the most marked success of the Nixon Doctrine. The Omani government, with this outside assistance, crushed the leftist rebellion by 1976. Ties between the United States and Oman have been close ever since.

In the years between the overthrow of the Shah in early 1979 and Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait (which led to an opening for U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia and other emirates further north), Oman was the country in the Persian Gulf that most welcomed U.S. forces. In subsequent years, the availability of Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait for U.S. forces has limited Oman's role to providing air bases for refueling, logistics, and storage. Despite its friendly relations with the United States, Oman has maintained better relations with Iran than other Arab countries of the Gulf and has thereby served at times as an intermediary.

Oman's total population is around 2.5 million. But approximately 600,000 of them are guest workers from the Philippines, Egypt, and South Asia, who serve as maids, drivers, and construction workers. The U.S. State Department has noted that abuses of foreign workers and even human trafficking are commonplace. Despite this, Congress approved [a free trade agreement](#) with Oman in 2006, which appears to have boosted the fortune of the sweatshop owners rather than the earnings of either Omani or foreign workers.

As with other allied autocracies in the region, Oman's human rights record has been something of an embarrassment. Under the Clinton administration, the authors of the State Department annual human rights report, as a result of pressure from department superiors, changed the description of the Sultanate of Oman to downplay the authoritarian nature of the regime. Although the 1991 report described Oman as "an absolute monarchy," subsequent reports [simply referred](#) to the sultanate as "a monarchy without popularly elected representative institutions." The sultan's speeches, justifying his country's lack of democracy as a reflection of its cultural traditions, have been first written in English by Western advisers and then translated into Arabic.

Although most Americans may not be familiar with Oman, Omanis are certainly familiar with the United States and its support for the sultan. The growing unrest will make it difficult for the United States to remain silent about the severity of the country's problems. Oman is yet one more test of whether the Obama administration will continue to back an autocratic status quo in allied Arab countries or respect the wishes of their people, manifested through large-scale nonviolent action.