

Opinion - Challenges for Oman's New Sultan

Written by Hamdullah Baycar

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HAMDULLAH BAYCAR, JAN 24 2020

Sultan Qaboos of Oman passed away on Friday, 10 January, ending his 50 year-rule since 1970. He had been the longest-serving ruler in the Arab world. Haitham bin Tariq Al Said was agreed to be appointed as the new Sultan by the Defence Council and the country's Royal Family. The country faced both difficult and prosperous times under Sultan Qaboos's rule. His father, who had been considered eccentric after surviving an assassination attempt by Communist rebels, had not effectively responded to the politics of the time, thereby isolating Oman from the rest of the world and generating many internal problems for it. Under this political atmosphere, Sultan Qaboos, who was young, energetic, and supported by the British, removed his father from the throne in 1970 through a bloodless coup and declared himself the new Sultan with promises of modernising the country. He dealt with a civil war and an underdeveloped country during the first years of his reign. By the time of his passing, he had not only consolidated his power but also achieved noteworthy development of his country thanks to oil revenues. Qaboos's reign is known by state elites as the "Omani Renaissance" and is praised at every possible opportunity.

Recently, however, Sultan Qaboos faced unrest because of the increasing unemployment rate, especially amongst university graduates, compounded by political demands which became more visible with the Arab Spring protests. If there was one thing that Oman has succeeded at most under Sultan Qaboos, it is the delivery of non-interference and impartial, mediating policies in international affairs. With the death of Sultan Qaboos, the challenges of unemployment and human rights, coupled with recent successes in the international arena, will shape the politics of the new Sultan, Haitham bin Tariq Al Said. Most probably, he will have to follow and acknowledge the achievements and policies of Sultan Qaboos, while, at the same time, presenting to his nation his own vision and plans for responding to the challenges of both domestic and international policies.

Sultan Qaboos was a member of the House of Al Said whose rule goes back to when they expelled the Portuguese from the Gulf in the 1600s. Since then, the house has been one of the major powers, not only in today's Oman, but also throughout the Gulf. Oman, contrary to other young Gulf nations, is considered, both by foreigners and locals, to have a historic state and national experience. Sultan Qaboos's 50-year rule saw many changes and challenges, not only in the region but around the world. What makes Oman different from many other global and regional powers are its stable and consistent foreign relations, which are based on the principles of neutrality, non-interference, and mediation.

Oman was able to keep its neutral position even during the period in which all of its neighbours were taking part in a dispute. This is illustrated not only by the recent diplomatic crisis in the Gulf in which three of the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC; Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain) blockaded a fourth member of the block (Qatar), thereby leaving only Kuwait and Oman impartial. Oman also kept diplomatic relations with Israel, one of the arch enemies of the entire Arab world, at least rhetorically, if not practically as well. Indeed, Sultan Qaboos's invitation of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Oman in 2018 sparked controversy throughout the Arab World.

If Israel is the first archenemy of the Arab world, Iran would be considered the second (if not equal) in line, at least by most of the Gulf states. Oman's relations with Iran during the Sultan's reign did not curry any favour among his Arab brothers either. Not only did he keep high-level of diplomatic relations with Iran and mediate between Iran and the US in 2013, which led to the famous P5+1 nuclear deal agreement, but also did not support any side in the infamous Iran-

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Iraq war.

He was also against any military involvement in Syria, even though many Arab countries took sides with the different opposition parties against the Syrian leader Assad. His country was one of the very few Arab countries that kept its embassy open in Damascus during the civil war. He did not join the Yemeni operation with his two neighbours, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, either, even though he had a bloody history with Yemeni Communist groups during its own civil war in Dhofar, which is an Omani region very close to Yemen.

The notion of Sultan Qaboos being the modern founding father of the nation (n.b. that his birthday, November 18, is also celebrated as a National Day), not to mention the fact that his period has been dubbed the "Omani Renaissance" given its economic, scientific, artistic, and cultural achievements, have all turned him into a personal cult leader. Therefore, it will be very hard to criticise any of his policies, let alone fill his shoes.

Sultan Qaboos's popular image could be one of the first challenges for his successor, Haitham bin Tariq Al Said, especially seeing as it is customary for leaders to be compared to their predecessors. Taking into account that his predecessor was the founding father who ruled the country for 50 years, it will require extra efforts on the part of Haitham bin Tariq to convince his people that he is capable of ruling the country. Experts already predict that the new ruler will not be expected to be an initiator, but rather a follower (of Qaboos).

The new Sultan's job is harder than his predecessor's due to the fact that he will have to create his own public image. He does not have the chance to delete the previous period as was the case for Sultan Qaboos when he became sultan. He will have to acknowledge the leadership of his predecessor and build his image upon that. He will also have to respond to the immediate demands of the people, particularly the young population, who did not experience the country's pre-oil period of underdevelopment and, therefore, may not be grateful enough to stay silent. Seeing as 75% of Omani revenues are still derived from oil revenues, it would be another domestic challenge for Haitham bin Tariq to diversify the market and deliver good jobs to his university-educated citizenry, especially as the number of university graduates looking for jobs reached 60000 by 2017.

The challenge is not limited to domestic policies, but also extends to international policies. Qaboos was able to maintain a neutral international policy throughout his 50-year reign (even though this was liked by some and disliked by others). The new sultan's capability of staying impartial during occasions on which neutrality is difficult to maintain is, as of yet, unknown. In regions's politicized atmosphere, it is one of the biggest challenges to stay impartial, and especially so since, with the exception of Kuwait and Oman itself, all the other members of the GCC and the other states of the Arabian Peninsula are currently involved in significant regional and global disagreements, from GCC-based crises to disputes with Iran and Israel to the situation in Yemen and Syria and several other military involvements in the region.

Haitham bin Tariq Al Said was appointed by the Royal Family Council and Defence Council as the new ruler of Oman. Haitham bin Tariq was close to the late Sultan and served in crucial roles for Oman in both the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs (as Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Secretary-General for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and the Ministry of Heritage and Culture. Both roles are crucial for Oman as they are responsible for the creation and maintenance of domestic (in virtue of empowering the national identity) and international relations (by being impartial and a mediator). Haitham bin Tariq knows the intricacies of Qaboos's foreign affairs and has already vowed to follow in the footsteps of his predecessor. Yet time will have to show whether Haitham will be able to maintain Qaboos's legacy and policies while, at the same time, creating a new public image of his own.

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