

# Oman | Freedom House

**Political Rights: 9 / 40 [Key]**

## **A. Electoral Process: 2 / 12**

Sultan Qaboos has ruled Oman since seizing power from his father, Sultan Said bin Taimur, in 1970. The 1996 basic law, promulgated by royal decree, created a bicameral parliament consisting of an appointed Council of State (Majlis al-Dawla) and a wholly elected Consultative Council. Citizens elect the 84-member Consultative Council for four-year terms, but the chamber has no legislative powers and can only recommend changes to new laws. The Consultative Council is part of a bicameral body known as the Council of Oman. The other chamber, the 59-member State Council, is appointed by the sultan, who has absolute power and issues laws by decree. The sultan serves as the country's prime minister; heads the ministries of defense, foreign affairs, and finance; and is the governor of Oman's central bank. In 2003, the sultan decreed universal suffrage for all Omanis over the age of 21.

Parliamentary elections have been held twice, once in 2007 and again in 2011, when Omanis elected 84 members of the new Majlis al-Shura from over 1,100 candidates. Oman held its first-ever municipal elections in 2012. That year, 50 percent of eligible voters participated, choosing among 1,475 candidates for 192 seats on 11 local councils. Four women won seats in the elections.

## **B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 2 / 16**

Political parties are not permitted, and no meaningful organized political opposition exists.

## **C. Functioning of Government: 2 / 12**

Oman's legal code does not possess an effective or cohesive framework for prosecuting corruption, nor does it include freedom of information provisions. However, after anticorruption protests in 2011, Sultan Qaboos issued a royal decree mandating the State Financial and Administrative Audit Institution (SFAAI) to increase transparency and efficiency within government ministries while reducing conflicts of interest. Government officials are required by law to declare their assets and sources of wealth. Oman was ranked 64 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Several high-profile corruption cases involving government officials and executives from Oman's oil industry were prosecuted in 2014. In January, Juma Al Hinai, a Finance Ministry official and executive with state-owned Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), was convicted of graft. He was fined and sentenced to three years in jail and a 20-year ban from holding public office. In February, Ahmad al-Wahaibi, the CEO of Oman Oil Company, was sentenced to 23 years in jail for accepting bribes, abuse of office, and money laundering. In May, former commerce minister

Mohammed al-Khusaibi was found guilty of bribing Mohammed al-Amri, a former Transport Ministry undersecretary, to award a building contract to a company in which he was a shareholder. Amri was fined and sentenced to three years in prison.

### **Discretionary Political Rights Question A: 3 / 4**

Mechanisms exist for citizens to petition the government through local officials, and certain citizens are afforded limited opportunities to petition the sultan in direct meetings.

**Civil Liberties: 17 / 60**

### **D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 5 / 16**

Freedom of expression is limited, and criticism of the sultan is prohibited. The 2004 Private Radio and Television Companies Law allows for the establishment of private broadcast media outlets. The government permits private print publications, but many of these accept government subsidies, practice self-censorship, or face punishment for crossing political “red lines.” In 2013, *The Week*, an English-language weekly newspaper, was briefly suspended for publishing an article described as being sympathetic to Oman’s gay community. The newspaper subsequently published an apology on its website for running the story; its editor-in-chief, Samir al-Zakwani, is being sued by the government for the article.

Omanis have access to the internet through the national telecommunications company, and the government censors politically sensitive and pornographic content. A 2008 decree expanded government oversight and regulation of electronic communications, including on personal blogs. In an effort to intimidate critics, the government arrested and detained several bloggers in 2014 for speaking out against rights abuses. In July, human rights activist Noah Saad was arrested and detained for more than three weeks before being released without charge. Muawiyah Al-Rawahi, an activist blogger who criticized the government’s handling of a 2013 teacher’s strike, was also arrested in July and detained for nearly a month in a psychiatric hospital before being released. In August, Mohammed al-Fazari, a political reform activist and editor-in-chief of the online news site *Mowatin Magazine*, was detained for nearly a week before being released without charge. Another activist and blogger, Saed al-Jadad, was issued a travel ban in October and arrested in December. Al-Jadad, who was a leading organizer of 2011 protests in Dhofar, has been arrested several times in the past for his activism.

Islam is the state religion. Non-Muslims have the right to worship, but they are banned from proselytizing. Non-Muslim religious organizations must register with the government. The Ministry of *Awqaf* (religious charitable bequests) and Religious Affairs distributes standardized texts for mosque sermons, and imams are expected to stay within the outlines of these texts. The government restricts academic freedom by preventing the publication of material on politically sensitive topics.

### **E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 3 / 12**

The right to peaceful assembly within limits is provided for by the basic law.

However, all public gatherings require official permission, and the government has the authority to prevent organized public meetings without any appeals process. In September 2014, Maina Kiai, UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of peaceful assembly and association, criticized Oman for stifling freedom of assembly.

After mass protests in 2011 calling for economic and political reforms, the sultan promised new jobs, an increase in social benefits, and measures to address government corruption. After the government was slow to implement the promised economic and political reforms, new protests erupted in 2012, leading to further crackdowns and arrests. By the end of 2012, more than 30 activists, writers, and bloggers had been arrested or detained, though many were eventually released. Human rights activist and blogger Saeed Jaddad, who was arrested in 2013 after organizing and encouraging protests, remained in jail as of the end of 2014.

The basic law allows the formation of nongovernmental organizations, but civic life remains limited. The government has not permitted the establishment of independent human rights organizations and generally uses the registration and licensing process to block the formation of groups that are seen as a threat to stability.

Oman's 2003 labor law allows workers to select a committee to represent their interests but prevents them from organizing unions. Additional labor reforms enacted in 2006 brought a number of improvements, including protections for union activity, collective bargaining, and strikes. However, legal protections for Oman's 1.5 million migrant workers remain inadequate, and domestic servants are particularly vulnerable to abuse. Omani workers are able to organize and form unions and have gone on strike to press for better wages and working conditions.

#### **F. Rule of Law: 4 / 16**

The judiciary is not independent and remains subordinate to the sultan and the Ministry of Justice. Sharia (Islamic law) is the source of all legislation, and Sharia court departments within the civil court system are responsible for family-law matters, such as divorce and inheritance. In less populated areas, tribal laws and customs are frequently used to adjudicate disputes. The authorities do not regularly follow requirements that they obtain court orders to hold suspects in pretrial detention. The penal code contains vague provisions for offenses against national security, and such charges are prosecuted before the State Security Court, which usually holds proceedings that are closed to the public. Prisons are not accessible to independent monitors, but former prisoners report overcrowding.

The 1996 Basic Law banned discrimination on the basis of sex, religion, ethnicity, and social class. Omani law does not protect noncitizens from discrimination.

Same-sex relationships are illegal in Oman, and members of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community face discrimination in policy and practice.

#### **G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 5 / 16**

Foreign workers risk deportation if they abandon their contracts without documentation releasing them from their previous employment agreement. Under

these regulations, employers can effectively keep workers from switching jobs and hold them in conditions susceptible to exploitation.

The government is aggressively pursuing an “Omanization” process in order to replace immigrant workers with native Omanis. Foreign workers who leave their jobs will not be able to return to work in Oman for two years. Those who are currently working in Oman cannot bring their families to Oman for six months. Hiring migrant labor in several sectors, including construction and domestic work, has been prohibited.

Although the basic law prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, women suffer from legal and social discrimination. Oman’s personal status law, based on Sharia, favors the rights of men over those of women in marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. According to official statistics, women constitute a very small percentage of the total labor force in Oman. However, the number of women in Oman’s workforce has increased by 133 percent in the past seven years. Women are waiting longer to marry and have children as they pursue professional opportunities.

Despite a 2008 antitrafficking law, Oman remains a destination and transit country for the trafficking of women and men.

**Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)**

**X = Score Received**

**Y = Best Possible Score**

**Z = Change from Previous Year**

**[Full Methodology](#)**