

Oman | Freedom House

Political Rights: 9 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 2 / 12

Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Said 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 since, 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 December 2012. Fifty percent of eligible voters participated, choosing between 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

Although corruption has not been perceived to be a serious problem, the issue was a factor in mobilizing protests in 2011 and 2012. 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 anti-corruption 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. In August 2013, the SFAAI launched a smart phone application to go along with its social networking site to allow Omanis to report instances of abuse or corruption by government officials. Oman was ranked 61 out of 177 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index.

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 September 2011, Youssef al-Haj and Ibrahim Ma'mari of the newspaper *Al-Zaman* were convicted of “insulting” the minister of justice and sentenced to five months in prison after reporting in May on allegations of corruption at the ministry. In January 2012, an appeals court upheld the convictions, but suspended their sentences. In August 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 running the story.

Omanis have access to the internet through the national telecommunications company, and the government censors politically sensitive and pornographic content. The sultan issued a decree in 2008 expanding government oversight and regulation of electronic communications, including on personal blogs. In January 2013, eight Omanis received prison sentences ranging from 12 to 18 months for writings or blog posts that were considered slanderous to the sultan or in violation of cyber laws. Another eight citizens who received prison terms for similar charges had their prison sentences upheld in early 2013 by the Supreme Court. These detainees, however, were among more than 50 activists, writers, and bloggers pardoned by Sultan Qaboos. An additional 14 activists who were serving prison sentences for participating in the 2011 demonstrations in Sohar were pardoned and released on July 22. One of these activists, human-rights blogger Sultan Al-Sa’adi, was arrested again just one week later and charged with insulting the sultan on Twitter. Al-Sa’adi was released from prison on August 20 after being held for 22 days without access to legal representation.

Islam is the state religion. Non-Muslims have the right to worship, though 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 expects imams 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 appeal process.

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 most had been released by July 2013.

In August 2013, demonstrations were held in the town of Liwa to protest industrial pollution emanating from the Port of Sohar. Security forces used tear gas to disperse demonstrators. Among the protesters was Shura Council member Talib al-Mamari.

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. In March 2013, several thousand migrant laborers working on an expansion project of the Muscat Airport went on strike to protest unsafe working conditions after a worker died on the job. The strike ended after one day when the contracting company agreed to improve safety conditions. In September, a four-day strike of over 9,000 foreign workers employed by an Omani construction company ended with the workers receiving higher base pay and improved working conditions. In October, teachers from several hundred schools throughout Oman went on strike demanding the creation of a teacher's union, increased pay and benefits, and improved working conditions. Most teachers went back to work despite their demands not being met.

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 to 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.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 5 / 16

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

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. Homosexual acts are illegal in Oman. 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](#)