

Oman

Country:

Oman

Year:

2016

Freedom Status:

Not Free

Political Rights:

6

Civil Liberties:

5

Aggregate Score:

25

Freedom Rating:

5.5

Overview:

The authorities intensified their efforts to suppress criticism of corruption and the government in 2015, arresting several human rights and political activists. Meanwhile, falling global oil prices put pressure on Oman's economy and the state's ability to maintain social benefits. The government reported a budget deficit of roughly \$11.6 billion for the year, despite having reduced its food and fuel subsidies.

Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Said returned to Oman in March from Germany, where he had been receiving medical treatment since the previous July. Although Qaboos, who has no children or brothers, is known to be ill, a successor has yet to be publicly designated.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 8 / 40 (-1) [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 decree, created a bicameral body consisting of an appointed Council of State (Majlis al-Dawla) and a wholly elected Consultative Council (Majlis al-Shura). Citizens elect the Consultative Council for four-year terms, but the chamber has no legislative powers and can only recommend changes to new laws. The sultan, who issues laws by decree, also 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.

Consultative Council elections were held in October 2015, with 590 nonpartisan candidates competing for the council's 85 seats. Authorities reported a turnout of nearly 57 percent. One woman won a seat. Separately, in November, the sultan appointed the 85 members of the Council of State for a new four-year term, including 13 women.

Oman held its first-ever municipal elections in 2012. About half of the eligible voters participated, choosing among 1,475 candidates for seats on 192 local councils. Four women won seats in the municipal elections.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 2 / 16

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

Although all Omani citizens over the age of 21 are eligible to vote, noncitizens represent about 44 percent of the population, and citizenship is difficult to obtain for those with non-Omani fathers. A 2014 law allows the revocation of citizenship for Omanis who join organizations deemed harmful to national interests.

C. Functioning of Government: 2 / 12

Oman's legal code does not provide an effective framework for prosecuting corruption, nor does it include freedom of information provisions. However, after anticorruption protests in 2011, Sultan Qaboos issued a decree mandating the State Financial and Administrative Audit Institution 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 60 out of 168 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Several high-profile corruption cases involving government officials and executives from Oman's oil industry resulted in convictions and prison terms in 2014. In July 2015, six individuals linked to a state-owned company received prison terms of between three and five years for their role in a scheme to smuggle subsidized diesel fuel for sale outside the country.

Discretionary Political Rights Question A: 2 / 4 (-1)

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. However, the government's growing sensitivity to criticism and Qaboos's health-related absences may impede the effectiveness of such channels.

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 redlines. 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.

As in 2014, several activists and bloggers were detained for their online writings during 2015. In January, well-known writer Ali al-Rawahi was released after four days of detention for discussing corruption on social media. Later that month, Saeed Jaddad, a human and political rights activist who was a leader of 2011 antigovernment protests in Dhofar, was arrested after writing an open letter to U.S. president Barack Obama about human rights violations in Oman. He faced at least two criminal cases during the year and received one- and three-year prison sentences related to his online activities. Mohammed al-Fazari, a political reform activist and chief editor of the news site *Mowatin Magazine*, fled the country in July in defiance of a travel ban imposed the previous year; his brother, Mahmoud al-Fazari, was then detained for two weeks and questioned about Mohammed's escape. Five other bloggers and activists were arrested in August for their criticism of the government.

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. The authorities reportedly monitor personal communications, and the growing number of arrests, interrogations, and jail terms related to criticism of the government on social media has encouraged self-censorship among ordinary citizens in recent years.

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. The authorities have continued to monitor, arrest, and prosecute individuals involved in protests that called for economic and political reforms in 2011 and 2012, including Saeed Jaddad.

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.

Omani workers are legally able to organize and form unions, bargain collectively, and strike. However, there is only one authorized trade union federation, and neither government employees nor household workers are permitted to join unions. Strikes are reportedly rare in practice.

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 penal code assigns prison terms for vaguely defined national security offenses, and security forces do not always adhere to existing rules on arrest and pretrial detention. Prisons are not accessible in practice to independent monitors, but former detainees have reported beatings and other abuse, including during interrogation.

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

Same-sex sexual activity is punishable with up to three years in prison, and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people face discrimination in policy and practice.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 5 / 16

Most Omani citizens enjoy freedom of movement, but travel bans are often imposed on political dissidents, and foreign workers cannot leave the country without permission from their employer.

State-owned companies and the ruling family are dominant forces in the economy, limiting the role and autonomy of small and other private businesses.

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. Only about a third of women participate in the labor force, but the figure has steadily increased in recent years.

Oman's labor policies put migrant workers at a severe disadvantage and effectively encourage exploitation. Such workers risk deportation if they abandon their contracts without documentation releasing them from their previous employment agreement, meaning employers can often keep them in abusive conditions. The government has pursued an "Omanization" process in order to replace foreign workers with native Omanis. Among other tactics, temporary visa bans for foreign workers in various professions have been issued or extended since 2013. In 2015, the authorities offered amnesty to tens of thousands of foreign workers who had overstayed their visas, allowing them to return home without penalties. Despite a 2008 antitrafficking law, the authorities do not actively identify or protect human trafficking victims, and prosecutions are relatively rare.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

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