

SIMMERING UNREST AND SUCCESSION CHALLENGES IN OMAN

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The uncertain health of the sultan of Oman has heightened concern about the future of the country, the most personalized of all Gulf monarchies. Many Omanis have long equated the country with its ruler, Qaboos bin Said Al Said, who won their loyalty by building up a state and a national identity centered on himself. However, amid mounting popular frustration, criticism of Qaboos has emerged, as has anxiety about what will follow his reign. There are several measures the regime can undertake to avoid further unrest.

A New Environment

- The Omani model of political legitimacy is intimately linked to Qaboos. But the country's young population feels less indebted to the ruler, and an increasingly vocal civil society has been complaining about deep-seated flaws in the state he built after taking power in 1970.
- In 2011 and 2012, most major towns saw peaceful protests by Omanis demanding higher salaries, better living conditions, substantial political reforms, and the end of corruption.
- The regime responded with a combination of economic gestures, firings of some top officials, and the detention of peaceful activists. Since 2012, repressive measures have become more prominent, with new investments in the security sector and crackdowns on dissonant voices.
- Political parties are prohibited in Oman and, despite some cosmetic reforms, nearly all power remains with the monarch.
- While the protests did not initially target the sultan, criticism of Qaboos and his practices has become more common. Protesters are worried about the future of the country and are speaking out on its behalf.

Changes Are Needed to Avoid Further Unrest

Oman's leaders should recognize that the environment has changed. Young Omanis will not be willing to grant the next ruler the same degree of control that their parents granted Qaboos. Instead, Qaboos's successor is likely to face renewed demands for reform.

Limits on civil society should be relaxed. Rather than actively harassing and repressing peaceful alternative voices, the regime should encourage civil society organizations, a step toward allowing some public participation in governance.

Answers to political uncertainties should be provided. The regime's reluctance to appoint a prime minister or a crown prince with some executive powers and to prepare for a post-Qaboos Oman has only fueled popular anxiety over the perceived lack of a long-term economic and political vision for the country. If the current ruler does not provide answers to these questions soon, the uncertainty could provoke considerable turmoil in the event of Qaboos's sudden demise.

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