

Impact of Ibadhism on Omani Politics

AJAY KR. UPADHYAY

Associate Professor

S.D. (P.G.) College, Ghaziabad (U.P.) India

Key Words : Ibadhism, Walis, Majlis Hamalat al-Ilm, Majlis al-Am

INTRODUCTION

Ibadhism appeared “as a doctrine that evolved entirely apart from” Sunni and Shia dogma. Ibadhi theologians developed a council of the ulama as well as a Majlis al-Am (akin to a senate) and a *Majlis Hamalat al-Ilm* (bearers of knowledge). These erudite men quickly adopted the basic principles of tolerance and the authority of a just ruler. Yet, because Ibadhi theologians concluded that the office of the Imam was temporal and not divine, they allowed believers to oppose him and even to overthrow an Imam if he was not pious or if he was unjust. The principles of consultation and free elections for leaders - which would be akin to consensus and contract in contemporary practices of democracy, positing that the Ibadhi Imamate may be held to be the longest democratic experience in the history of mankind. The underlying difference between Ibadhism and democracy was that the latter was “moderate, constitutional, capable through the constitution of ensuring the continuation of democracy.”¹ Ibadhi norms united the many tribal fiefdoms scattered throughout the southern parts of the Arabian Peninsula under the Yarubis (1624-1741), a truly “exceptional example for the Islamic State”. Indeed, depending on his qualifications, an Imam could not rule without regular and open consultations, certainly a harbinger of future institution building. Still, by the end of the third century, the Imamate was gone, followed by tribal decay, anarchy and occupation. Sadly, these conditions lasted for over 500 years, the result of internecine conflicts.

The legacy of the Yarubi dynasty was the restoration

of the Imamate under a “climate of freedom”. Ironically, if freedoms, consultations and elections of successive imams stood as sources of strength, nepotism and avarice became their weaknesses. The country is covered in a veil from about the end of the tenth century AD until the early seventeenth century. This seems to have been a ‘dark age’ of tyranny, despotism and internal strife. The veil began to lift when the Portuguese, followed by English, Dutch and French traders and adventurers arrived off the coasts of Oman. From the little that is known of Oman during the period from the tenth century to the arrival of the Portuguese, it can be gleaned that for part of this period the interior of the country was tyrannically ruled by a family which styled its members ‘king’ and which came from the al-Nabhani tribe. By that time, in addition to the anarchy of the interior of the country, the Portuguese had occupied Muscat and the coastal towns for well over a century. The ‘sun of salvation’ which scattered the enemies of Oman and replaced chaos with order was Nasir bin Murshid bin Sultan al-Ya’arubah, who was elected Imam at Rostaq in 1624. Nasr was a remarkable man and an outstanding military and political leader.² At the time of Nasr’s election, there were at least five petty rulers who styled themselves ‘king’ in Oman, based at Rostaq, Nakhl, Sumail, Samad and Ibra, with other forts and towns in the hands of other tribal leaders and the whole country was beset by internal strife. His cousin Sultan bin Saif al-Ya’arubi succeeded him. Imam Sultan completes the capture of Muscat and the complete expulsion of the Portuguese in January 1650.³

In the seventeenth century, when the British displaced the Portuguese and the Dutch as the dominant

sea power in the area, the Omanis were able to reassert themselves. This time the weight of the Omani state lay on the coast, and for two centuries Muscat was the capital of a flourishing commercial empire. The Yaruba family, who led the capture of Muscat from the Portuguese, founded a new dynasty with Muscat as the capital and by 1700 they had built the largest fleet of any non-European state active in the Indian Ocean.⁴ The previous decentralized nature of the government was replaced by a strong and dominant central power, the *walis* and *qadhis* (governors and judges) were appointed to rule and a minister justice in his name in all major towns. Equally significant, the community's wealth now permitted, for the first time in the history of the Arab occupation of Oman, large sums of money to be spent on renovation and repair of the *falaj* system⁵, with consequent encouragement to agriculture and a resultant movement away from a subsistence economy. As commented by Omani historian:

*.....Oman revived during his government and prospered; the people rested from their troubles, prices were low, and roads were safe, the merchants made large profits, and the crops were abundant. The Imam himself was humble. He used to traverse the streets without an escort, would sit and talk familiarity with the people. Thus, he persevered in ordaining what was lawful and forbidding what was unlawful.*⁶

The Imam Sultan died in 1679. Nothing revealed the changed and centralized nature of the government more than his succession, which was not by an Imam elected democratically and acclaimed by the people *en masse*, but by his son Bil'arab. The hereditary principle thus established persists to this day, and with it a denial of a nine-hundred-year-old principle of the right of the Omani people to choose their own leader. In fact, this right had not so much been denied as sold: Imam Sultan realized, as did the more effective of his successors, that filling the pockets of a few key tribal leaders made both their religious fervour and their democratic principles seem less important. It was only when pockets became empty that the cry for an elected Imam and a return to true religion became heard. For much of the period of his Imamate, he was fighting with his brother Saif for control of Oman.

After the death of Bil'arab his brother Saif assumed the title of Imam, and continued with his father's policy of making money for himself through trade and hence making money for many of his subjects through his active

encouragement of their business endeavours. The country's prosperity continued, and the Imam Saif continued also the work of water-supply and *falaj* renovation and repair and the consequent encouragement of agriculture. 'Oman was strong under his administration and became the best of countries.'⁷ The hereditary principle was now established, and his son as Imam succeeded Saif. This Imam's claim to fame is modest. But the Imam Sultan bin Saif died in 1718 and was succeeded by his twelve-year-old son, Saif bin Sultan II. No boy of twelve could hope to have the necessary statecraft to maintain stability, particularly when his easy-going father had tended to let matter slip. The absence of the strong central control encouraged rivals, kingmakers and adventurers. The battles and alliances which occurred during the ensuing long period of bloody internal strife are too numerous and too complex to be followed here. It is sufficient to say that the rival sides in this civil war were divided broadly on Yamani-Nizari lines. The Yamani tribes were led initially by Khalf bin Mubarak, of the Bani Hina tribe, and thus became known as 'Hinawi'. The Nizari tribes were led by Muhammad bin Nasr of the Bani Ghafir, or Miyayihah, and were henceforth known as 'Ghafiri'. Although both leaders were killed in a battle in Sohar in 1724. The bitterness and suspicion engendered during this costly and cruel civil war has its echoes even today in tribal rivalries and mistrust.⁸

At first the main challenge to the Yaruba Sultans came from inside Oman, from the tribes of the interior whose former dominance had now been displaced by the prosperity of the coast. Civil war broke out in the early eighteenth century and two tribal confederations, the Hinnawi and the Ghafiri, united the 200 tribes of the interior and challenged the coast. A Persian invasion in 1737 marked the beginning of the end of the destructive fratricidal struggle. The Persians left Oman and Ahmad was elected Imam shortly afterwards in about 1744. Ahmad bin Said was that rare man with vision who liberated Oman from Persia. He was probably the first Omani nationalist, and, although he would in turn fall to foreign machinations - between France and Britain - his long rule (1741-83) ushered in the sultanate system. To save the country from further bloodshed, Ahmad bin Said accepted an appointment as Imam, even though he lacked full consensus. His election "was deemed to be a special case" because, as a statesman, he succeeded in making "tradition obey policy and not the reverse".⁹ Remarkably, Ibadhi leaders concluded that Ahmad deserved their full

backing because he rejected colonial hegemony and rallied the majority around a nationalist mindset. This was an act of merit and an exceptional one at that.

The Yaruba in Muscat were defeated by this internal opposition, and their place was taken by a new dynasty, which exploited the wars in order to seize power on the coast. Once established, this new dynasty, the Al bu Said, as opposed to the tribes, but allowed a division of authority to take place. For the first time political and religious power were separated. The office of Imam was to remain with the tribes of the interior, but his non-religious powers were to be limited. The main political power was to be with the Sultan of Muscat, who was to control the Omani empire.¹⁰ On the political plane, it has been demonstrated that the spiritual ideals of the Ibadhi Imamate had to be backed with statecraft and with considerable temporal power and authority for the polity to have stability. The elective democratic principle, the very heart of Ibadhism, came up against the sharp rocks of human frailty and encouraged intrigue. The Ya'arubi experience showed that the dynastic principle with hereditary succession had its inherent weakness also, but on balance was more suited to the needs of the Omani people at the time.¹¹

There were several uprisings during the Imam Ahmad's 39-year-long reign, and in the last years of his reign he was challenged by a revolt led by two of his sons. Upon his death in 1783, the Imam Ahmad's second son, Sa'id, was elected Imam. The Imam Sa'id was weak and ineffectual, and commanded no respect. His son Hamad usurped political control from his father and moved the capital to Muscat, where he ruled, using the title 'Sayyid' (Lord). He made no attempt to assume the role of Imam, which his father retained, quite ineffectually, in Rostaq, until he died sometime between 1811 and 1821. No attempt was made to elect or appoint another Imam upon his death, nor did his successors ruling as temporal lords in Muscat attempt to use the title of Imam.

Sayyid Hamad bin Sa'id ruled in Muscat from 1784 to 1792. He appeared to have been a shrewd politician and an effective ruler, for the trade of Oman continued to flourish and there is no record of any challenge from the tribes of the interior, suggesting that all benefited in one way or another from the general wealth, either directly or through a generous subvention payment from the ruler. Yet in his rule were sown the seeds of yet another future division of the country. The erstwhile 'Oman' came to be known as 'Muscat and Oman', the people of Muscat

and the coastal towns being traders and Oman being the home of the tribal traditionalist.¹² This split caused much discord in the latter part of the nineteenth century and was not finally healed until Sultan Qaboos renamed the country 'Oman' in 1970.

Sayyid Hamad died in 1792 and his uncle took his place as ruler, Sayyid Sultan bin Ahmed (one of the Imam Ahmad's rebellious sons). Sultan was the strongest man and no one was prepared to challenge his assumption of the role of ruler. To strengthen his position against any flickering ambition on the part of his brothers Sa'id (the Imam) and Qais (the third son of Imam Ahmed), Sultan concluded a family agreement with them at Barka in 1793. This agreement involved a virtual dismemberment of Oman: Sa'id was to continue in Rostaq as Imam, Qais was to have Sohar, and Sultan to have Muscat. A modern historian has commented: - "The compact of Barka was a tangible manifestation of the changes effected by two generations of Al Bu Sa'id rule. Sovereign power was now divided, the Imamate was falling into desuetude, and the most vigorous member of the ruling family, Sultan, was concerned almost wholly with maritime and commercial enterprises. Not unnaturally, a growing estrangement between the Al Bu Sa'id and the inland tribes developed, becoming more marked in succeeding generations. Oman's great need in the nineteenth century was for strong leadership and military strength."¹³ During the twentieth century up to 1970, the Sultanate knew only three Sultans¹⁴.

- Taymur Bin Faysal , 1913-31
- Sa'id bin Taymur, 1931-70
- Qabus bin Sa'id Al Sa'id, 1970 Onwards

Each of these individuals marked a distinct era in the history and development of the political structure of the state. The direct and indirect influences of these Sultans on the state cannot be understated; nor can the role played by the ruling family be minimized. In general, circumstances required the Sultans to work administratively within the limitations of the ruling family. Without various members of the family, regardless of how incapable they may have been, the Sultanate could not have been functioned, even in its customary, haphazard way.

On July 23, 1970, supporters of Qabus bin Said Al Said stormed al-Hisn, the sultan's seaside palace in Salalah, and forced his father the sultan to abdicate and accept exile.¹⁵ From the first days of his rule, Sultan Qabus bin Sa'id sought to establish a new image of the

monarchy. Within a week of the coup, he flew to Muscat and was enthusiastically welcomed. Shortly afterward, in the first radio broadcast by an Omani monarch to his people, Qabus declared an amnesty for all former rebels, changed the country's name from the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman to the Sultanate of Oman to emphasize its unity, lifted the numerous petty restrictions in force under his father, and toured the major towns of the Omani interior accompanied by newly submitted Dhofari rebels to meet tribal leaders and establish Oman's "new era."¹⁶ For the next few years, nearly any Omani, when asked what he or she thought of the new ruler, would almost inevitably reply, "Before him, there was nothing. Now, there is everything."¹⁷ Over the next decade or more, the sultanate made enormous strides in developing its potential and raising the standard of living of its people.¹⁸

Oman had suffered thirty-eight years of medieval and harsh rule.¹⁹ As Sultan Qabus himself said, that his accession is marked with mounting concern and intense dissatisfaction due to the ill administration of his father. His first aim, he added, would be 'to remove all the unnecessary restrictions that you have been suffering under'.²⁰ Official publications reveal that 'it was not until 1970 that oil revenues were used to develop the country. In fact the development of the modern Oman only started in 1976'²¹ and that 'there was no effort to explore for oil in other than the Petroleum Development (Oman) concession area] parts of the Sultanate'.²² These restrictions were, a prime justification for the coup and the more serious ones will be considered in relevant sections. Sultan Qabus's first acts in 1970—abolishing restrictions on smoking, singing and wearing spectacles—were newsworthy enough. Automobiles, radio, cement houses, even sunglasses were forbidden.²³ Sunglasses were forbidden; so, under specific circumstances, were shoes.²⁴ These were typical of the petty and incomprehensible restrictions attributed to Sultan Sa'id regime, and they are, for the most part, the purest nonsense.

Immediately after the coup of 1970, Qaboos faced a myriad of problems—the Dhofar war, popular expectation, general ignorance of conditions in Oman, and few contacts in Muscat. There were few Omanis with any education. The existing government was minimal and ill-suited to development. The country lacked nearly all infrastructures, including a modern port, roads, schools, electricity outside the capital area, and even office space

for the government. What he was not lacking were expatriate advisers, mostly holdovers from the days of Sa'id. Government came to be controlled by an interim advisory council dominated by expatriates under the direction of the military secretary, Colonel Hugh Oldman, who had replaced Waterfield in January 1970. Immediately upon the coup, Interim Council composed largely of expatriates was established in Muscat to oversee the transition. Sultan Said's two principal Omani officials, both members of his family, retired or left the country. In the following months, a nucleus of capable Omanis took up new positions in the new government, and most existing expatriate advisers were replaced by better-qualified ones. Sayyid Tariq bin Taymur, the new sultan's uncle, returned from years of exile in Cyprus and Germany to assume the newly created position of Prime Minister. Qabus was disposed to rule as a benevolent monarch, while Tariq sought to introduce a constitutional monarchy.²⁵ Tariq's return and enthusiastic handling of the prime ministership so soon after the coup resulted in an immediate political crisis. This was caused partly by personality differences and mistrust between the Prime Minister and sultan; Tariq was better known, more confident, and more dynamic than Qaboos, who had spent several years in virtual isolation in Salalah. Logistic problems also arose as the respective roles of Prime Minister and Sultan were never clearly defined. It is not even certain that Qaboos had approved the appointment of Tariq in the first place. Finally, the two men had fundamental philosophical differences. Tariq has been portrayed in several Western studies as favoring a constitutional monarchy or even republican form of government. In contrast, Qabus's outlook was very conservative: He saw himself as the inheritor of the Al-Sa'id tradition of absolute rule.

Tariq's distinctive philosophical approach was very apparent in the Omani administration during the first year after the coup. Whether or not one accepts Tariq's reputation as a liberal, the scope and personnel of his cabinet differed greatly from those of any preceding one. New ministries of education, health, justice, information, labor, social affairs, and economy joined existing ministries of interior and foreign affairs. The Al Bu Sa'id royal family still controlled the largest block of ministerial posts, but these men, including Faisal B. Ali Al-Sa'id and Fahd B Mahmud Al-Sa'id, had, like Tariq, opposed Sa'id and gone into exile. Other cabinet members included Saud al-Khlili, a prominent tribal leader, and Asian al-Jamali, a

trained medical doctor. There were no expatriates: It was a cabinet of national reconciliation with few ties to the old order.²⁶ From 1970 until 1990, Oman's priorities were the development of the country's infrastructure, providing health care to all Omanis, and the development of an educational system. Three major factors led Oman to expand the level of popular participation in government include: the accomplishment of the aforementioned goals, the upcoming economic and social challenges to the status quo, and the question of what system or individual will succeed Sultan Qaboos.²⁷

Qaboos retained direct control of defense, finance, petroleum affairs, Dhofar, and the Capital Area, just as his father had. Even though the Omanis who held the top posts in these departments resigned, the new appointees had very close ties to the old order; the new governor of the Office; the defense secretary, Hamad b. Hamud Al bu, Sa'id, had been Sa'id personal secretary. The remainder of Qaboos' advisers were expatriates. Even without the power struggle between Qaboos and Tariq, the transition from Sa'id government to the new order was difficult. The new cabinet was beset with problems: There was no clear idea of either general policies or authority, either collectively or for individual ministers, personnel lacked expertise, and there were staff shortage and almost no coordination. Tariq's relationship with Qaboos meant that the cabinet received little information, a situation exacerbated by Tariq's absence throughout much of the first year while he was settling his personal affairs in Europe and seeking diplomatic recognition for the new government. Tariq did not even have a secretary to handle his correspondence in his absence. By the end of 1971, Tariq felt compelled to resign; he spent many of his remaining years abroad. Qaboos was quick to assert his control over the administration. He assumed the prime ministership- adding that to the defense and finance portfolios. While Oman's new-found oil production was a god send for the fledgling government, income remained limited in the first several years relative to the enormous need, with government revenues (overwhelmingly derived from oil) only slightly more than 50 million Omani riyals in 1970, 1971 and 1972. It was not until 1973-74 that the oil-price revolution boosted government revenues to 211.6 million riyals in 1974. This bonanza permitted the government to bring expenditures (roughly half of which were on development) back into line with revenues in 1974.2 A first priority was to create incipient ministries for social services, such as education, health and public

works. These were staffed in the early days by Omanis returning from abroad, as well as expatriates, with so-called "Zanzibaris" prominent among their numbers.²⁸ More "traditional" areas of government fared better, as most of the *walis* (the sultan's representatives in the towns and villages) remained *in situ* under the aegis of the ministry of the interior. The same held true for the *qadis* (judges) under the ministry of awqaf and Islamic affairs. While the new sultan and his govern and rapid economic development, serious questions arose of how to go about it. Sultan Said bin Taymur had initiated the first modest development schemes in the two short years he had been in receipt of oil revenues. These essentially amounted to a couple of schools and office buildings, a few roads, a new seaport and a "Greater Matrah" plan, in addition to the barely functioning health dispensaries and agricultural farms he had been forced to establish as a condition of British subsidies in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁹

The first uncertain steps were being taken to create an appropriate government almost entirely from scratch. He set up a council of ministers, with himself as chair and Thuwaini b. Shihab as deputy. The process was accompanied by confusion in how tasks were to be divided among government departments: the Ministry of Trade and Development was replaced by the Center for Economic Planning, which was replaced by the Ministry of Development, which in turn was replaced by the Supreme Planning Council. Sultan Said had held steadfast to his policy of isolation until his abdication. He was content to accept British military and financial assistance when necessary while striving to hold Whitehall's demands for liberalization and development at bay.³⁰ An early point of friction was over the appropriate role of the ruling Al Said family in governing. Elsewhere in the Gulf, the ruling families hold considerable power and influence *vis-à-vis* the ruler. Oman has no constitution. Absolute power is vested in the sultan, who combines supreme executive, legislative, judicial, and military authority. The sultanate is hereditary in the Al-Sa'id branch of the Al Bu Sa'id royal family, which has ruled the country since 1744. No formal principle of succession exists, although in the twentieth century rule has passed to the oldest, freedom son.

Given the enormous impact of rapid change, it is inevitable that the three major themes in Omani politics- the Sultans and the ruling family, administration and the tribes- should be greatly affected and transformed.

Perhaps the role of the Al Bu Sa'id has changed the least, as the ruling family has remained firmly entrenched in the mainstream of the nation's political life. The historical basis of the dynasty assured the Sultanate of an ideological affinity with its neighbours in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and Iran- close relationships made vital by the threat posed by Dhufar rebellion. The Al-Said³¹, however, were small in number and had been clearly subordinate to Sultan Said bin Taymur and even to his predecessors. Qabus's word was final on all matters, but he could be lobbied. In the November 1974 cabinet, the Al Sa'id held the portfolios of defence, foreign affairs, information, interior and education. In addition, Al Bu Sa'ids were ministers of justice, land affairs and diwan affairs. The family continued to be a highly visible elite in Muscat, in tandem with the established merchant families and expatriate advisers- an Al Bu Sa'id member of any commercial partnership, such as real estate, seemed to assure success. There the traditional presence of an Al Bu Sa'id wall, a neutral figure admits tribal rivalries, continued. In short, the family seemed destined to dominate the country's politics for some time to come, with the dynastic Al Sa'id undoubtedly retaining importance after the wider role of the Al Bu Sa'id elements has been forgotten.³²

REFERENCES

1. Hussein Ghubash (2006). *Oman: Islamic Democratic Tradition*, New York: Routledge, p. 9.
2. Townsend (1977). *Oman: The making of a State*, p. 34
3. Ibid, p.35
4. Halliday (2002). *Arabia without sultans*, p.267.
5. The *Falaj* is a system of tapping underground water which is led by man-made subterranean channels to villages where it is used for irrigation and domestic purposes.
6. Sir A.T Wilson (1928). *The Persian Gulf*, London: Oxford University Press, p.104.
7. Townsend (1977). *Oman: The making of a State*, p. 37.
8. D. Hawley (1970). *The Trucial States*, London: Allen & Unwin, p.87.
9. Ghubash (2006). *Oman: The Islamic Democratic Tradition*, p.70.
10. Halliday (2002),. *Arabia without sultans*, p. 268.
11. Townsend (1977). *Oman: The making of a State*, p. 38.
12. Townsend (1977). *Oman: The making of a State*, pp. 38-39.
13. J.BKelly (1968). *Great Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1793-1880*, London, p. 91.
14. Taymur Bin Faysal (1913-31), Sa'id bin Taymur (1931-70), Qabus bin Sa'id Al Sa'id
15. J.E. Peterson (2004). "Oman: Three and a half decades of Change and Development", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XI, No. 2, p. 125.
16. Sultanate of Oman, Government Information Service, August 12, 1970, "Sultan's Visit to Bahlah" (mimeo.) and "Transcript of a Statement by Jalalat as-Sultan broadcast over Radio Oman, Sunday 9 August 1970" mimeo, archives of Petroleum Development Oman [PDO], Mina al- Fahl.
17. Peterson (2004). "Oman: Three and a half decades of Change and Development", p.125.
18. Ibid, p.125.
19. Ministry of Information (1971). *The New Oman*, Muscat: Ministry of Information, Labour and Social Welfare, p. 24.
20. Ibid, p. 7.
21. Sultanate of Oman Development Council (1976). *The Five-Year Development Plan 1976-1980*, Muscat, p. 2
22. Ministry of Information and Youth Affairs (1980). "Oman in 10 Years", Muscat: Ministry of Information and Youth Affairs, p.118; also in, D. Hawley (1977), *Oman and its Renaissance*, London: Stacey International, p.178.
23. UnniWikam (1982). *Behind the Veil in Arabia: Women in Oman*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 6.
24. Liesl Graz (1982). *The Omanis: Sentinels of the Gulf*, London: Longman, p.16.
25. Peterson (2004). "Oman: Three and a Half Decades of Change and Development", p.127.
26. Allen (1987). *Oman: The Modernization of the Sultanate*, p. 81.
27. Katzman and Katz (1995). *Oman: Political Development and the Majlis Ash' Shura*, p.16.
28. Because of Oman's long connection with the East African littoral, especially but not exclusively the island of Zanzibar, thousands of Omanis had been born in and/or lived in East Africa. Many of them fled Zanzibar after the revolution in 1964, and others returned to Oman only after 1970. They were welcomed because of their education and knowledge of English.
29. Peterson (2004). "Oman: Three and a Half Decades of Change and Development", p.127.
30. Ibid, p.129
31. Al- Sa'id is a branch of Al Bu Sa'id royal family.
32. Peterson (1978). *Oman in the Twentieth Century: Political Foundations of an Emerging State*, p. 210.
