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Becoming a 'Positive Outlier': A Case Study of Oman

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See also the authors' forthcoming open access article (2017) in the *Journal of International Development*: 'Without Qaboos We Would Be Yemen': The Renaissance Narrative and the Political Settlement in Oman.

Executive summary

At the time of the coup that brought Sultan Qaboos to power in 1970, the Sultanate of Oman was considered to be 'rushing headlong into the fifteenth century'. It had only ten kilometres of paved road, a handful of schools and a single hospital run by missionaires. It was fighting a violent conflict against communist-supported secessionists in the southern region of Dhofar, whom the British government believed were close to victory.[1] It had no formal bureaucratic institutions, and was beset with grinding poverty. The country's leader had scarcely left his summer palace since an assassination attempt against him in 1966. Isolated and bereft of indigenous support networks, Sultan Sa'id attempted to rule over a small, impoverished, fragmented, and geographically dispersed population through a small group of British advisors and military personnel.[2]

Within the space of just 40 years, however, Oman was ranked first on the United Nations' list of the top ten 'movers' in the world, edging out other success stories like China and India. This paper traces the foundations of the extraordinary transformation known widely within Oman as 'The Renaissance'. Oman has been selected as a case study not only due to its developmental trajectory but also its status as a 'positive outlier' to many post-colonial states – particularly those with significant natural resource reserves. It **confounds many of the usual expectations about the impact of rentier incomes on levels of domestic conflict and cohesion**.[3]

Drawing from semi-structured interviews, field observations and archival research, this paper aims to trace the processes by which Oman became a positive outlier, and to disentangle the threads of its apparent good fortune to reveal characteristics of its political settlement that may (or may not) have salience elsewhere.

The paper seeks to illustrate the degree to which Oman's developmental trajectory deviated from the orthodox 'theories of change' held by most contemporary development organisations. It highlights the importance of factors that are often held to be peripheral to processes of domestic change, particularly:

- **quality secondary education**;
- **the (re)production of narrative;** and
- **the interplay of domestic and international power dynamics.**

It argues that Oman's **rapid economic transition formed the essential backdrop** to its developmental progress, and was the linchpin of the country's early political settlement. Without the major economic changes, Sultan Qaboos would have had few outcomes with which to illustrate the purportedly stark difference between his leadership and that of his father. However, **without also having access to a relatively well-educated group of citizens to staff the early bureaucracy, Oman is unlikely to have been able to sustain the economic development that has underpinned the settlement** beyond the initial influx of revenue.

The political settlement emerged initially, therefore, out of a series of fortuitous junctures that culminated in the state's unprecedented ability to co-opt, and sometimes coerce, the population with new oil revenues.

The settlement has endured, however, to a significant degree because **the nature of the transition was astutely reproduced in a narrative that has excluded alternative ways of understanding the changes Omanis were experiencing.** This exclusion is particularly pronounced regarding the autocratic nature of politics, and the role of the British in violently suppressing the Dhofari insurgency. Here, the apparent improvements in prosperity and security are framed as inextricably linked to the personal qualities of Sultan Qaboos, in a discursive move that forecloses debate about how the political settlement will adapt to the Sultan's successor once Qaboos leaves office.

1 UK Ministry of Defence documents from early 1970 suggest that Britain feared Oman was becoming their own 'micro-Vietnam in the Arabian Peninsula' (Ministry of Defence 1970, FCO 46/609).

2 All but one of Sultan Sa'id's government ministers were British, as was his Defence Secretary, Chief of Intelligence, and Chief Advisor (Cobain 2016, Kindle location 1436).

3 Other DLP case studies of positive outliers include Somaliland (Phillips 2013), Ghana (Jones, Jones and Ndaruhutse 2014), and Botswana (Sebudubudu and Molutsi 2009).

1

Introduction

In 2010, the United Nations Development Programme produced a list of the world's 'top movers', which ranked 135 countries according to their success in improving human and economic development indicators since 1970. Though this list featured well-known success stories such as China and India, it was the relatively unpublicised state of Oman that was allocated the top spot (UNDP, 2010: 29). This paper explores the configurations of power in Oman since Sultan Qaboos came to power in 1970. It uses a political settlements framework to assess the factors that contributed to Oman's trajectory as a 'positive outlier'. Importantly, it includes non-domestic flows of power and resources within its analytical scope – something that has often been overlooked in studies adopting a political settlements approach to date.

Often dubbed the 'sleepy Sultanate', Oman is one of the few Middle Eastern states that rarely features in the international headlines. Its politics are the least studied of any state in the Arab Middle East[4] – presumably, in part, because of its stability, internal cohesion, relative prosperity, and ability to maintain genial diplomatic relations with its neighbours. Nearly five decades into Sultan Qaboos' reign, Oman's basic human development indicators are strikingly removed from what they were when he came to power in 1970. A brief survey of the indicators starkly illustrates the contrast: by 1997, the World Health Organisation ranked Oman first out of 191 countries in 'health care system performance and outcome', and eighth for its overall health system (WHO 2000: 154, 200). In 2011, nearly 98% of Oman's primary school-aged children were enrolled in school, and 98% of young adults (aged 15-24) were literate (UNICEF 2011). In 2013, the World Economic Forum surveyed 140 countries and found Oman to have the world's fifth best roads (WEF 2013: 277). Finally, the average life expectancy of an Omani citizen is now 76 years, while neighbouring Yemen is more than a decade behind at 65, and the OECD average sits only slightly higher at 80.

This paper asks why Oman experienced such dramatic developmental changes during the leadership of Sultan Qaboos. Oman has been selected as a case study because its developmental trajectory is a 'positive outlier' to that of most post-colonial states – particularly those with significant natural resource reserves. It confounds many of the usual expectations surrounding the impact of rentier incomes on domestic conflict and cohesion.[5] Drawing from semi-structured interviews, field observations and archival research, this paper aims to trace the processes by which Oman became a positive outlier, and to disentangle the threads of its apparent good fortune to reveal characteristics of its political settlement that may (or may not) have salience elsewhere.

It argues that one particularly important thread was the presence of a relatively well-educated group of Omani citizens, who had been recently violently expelled from the island of Zanzibar. These citizens had skills that allowed them to administer core technical functions within a nascent state bureaucracy, but also had strong incentives to uphold a narrative of national cohesion around the central figure of Sultan Qaboos as a means of consolidating their own, somewhat tenuous, positions in Omani society. This group was not at the centre of political or economic power hierarchies, but was dominant at the middle and upper-middle level positions of the bureaucracy. With few exceptions (Valeri 2007; Kharusi 2012), and for reasons discussed below, the contribution of Zanzibari-Omanis has generally been excluded from the literature on Oman's political development.

4 The degree to which Oman is overlooked is quite remarkable. A review of the English language scholarly books devoted to post-independence political developments finds comparatively few detailed accounts of Oman. In edited volumes on Middle Eastern politics and economics, Oman is seldom included. When it is included in Gulf-centric volumes, authorship on Omani political issues is limited to a handful of scholars, such as J.E. Peterson, Marc Valeri, Uzi Rabi, Mandana Limbert, and Abdel Razzaq Takriti. A review of academic journals also finds little on Oman, although they include significant contributions from Cecil (2006), Chatty (2009), Kechichian (2008) and Takriti (2013). A Proquest search, for example, reveals 482 scholarly journal articles published with the word "Oman" in the title in the last decade, only ten of which were categorised under political science. The majority of articles drew from the geological, anthro-historic, and medical fields. Even major global databases have statistical blindspots. Some World Bank snapshots of the region are miss-ing data on Oman, despite the fact that Oman is a founding member of the powerful six-member Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This may in part be due to its perceived stability. A special 'World in 2012' edition of *The Economist* (2011) mentioned every country in the GCC and Arabian Peninsula (to watch for signs of instability in the coming year) – except Oman.

5 Other DLP case studies of positive outliers include Somaliland (Phillips 2013), Ghana (Jones, Jones and Ndaruhutse 2014), and Botswana (Sebudubudu and Molutsi 2009).

Analysis has instead focused on more visible factors, such as the figure of the Sultan, the influx of oil revenues, or on the influence of the British, thus sapping agency from all but an incredibly exclusive elite and underemphasising the role of a nascent middle class in the adoption and evolution of the political settlement.[6] This paper attempts to show how examining the role of a group outside (and quite detached from) the relatively narrow elite circles of tribal and religious leaders, Muscat-based merchants, and British advisors provides a more textured account of the dynamics underpinning the emergence of Oman's political settlement.

A second thread pursued in this paper is the construction of a narrative that assigns almost exclusive agency to Sultan Qaboos as both the genesis and guardian of the country's rapid transition from conflict and poverty to peace, development, and education. The ability to construct and disseminate meaning in this way is an act of power, underpinned in this instance by the apparent rapidity of the positive changes underway. Focusing on national cohesion and the Sultan's apparently overwhelming success in providing welfare and development, the narrative obfuscates the degree of centralised authoritarian control that remains another hallmark of Oman's political settlement. It also expunges, almost entirely, the decisive nature of British political and military intervention early in Sultan Qaboos' tenure.

This paper, therefore, purposefully spotlights the place of narratives (and the ideas they express) within Oman's developmental experience, suggesting that this has generally been omitted from the literature on political settlements to date. Much of the work in this area focuses on the ways that rule-based institutions (whether formal or informal) create space for, and set limits on, behaviour (see for example Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; North, et al. 2009).[7] Little explicit work has been done on how narratives are created and cohere alongside these processes.

The paper also highlights the external context in which Oman's political settlement emerged. Many of the recent political settlement frameworks set their conceptual boundaries at the borders of the state in question, particularly through their focus on the dynamics of domestic elite contestation (see for example Di John and Putzel 2009; OECD 2011; Bell 2015). It also shows how the interplay of domestic and international power dynamics shape and potentially reinforce conflict and exclusion.

The political settlements framework

The question of what precisely constitutes a political settlement remains vexed. The study of political settlements draws from political economy analysis, particularly the nuanced process tracing associated with historical institutionalism, and examines the means by which rules are created and evolve into more structured arrangements within society. Although the term has not been widely used in academic circles, the substance behind it draws from a rich literature examining the pathways of political change (for discussion see Rocha Menocal 2015: 6; more recent examples of such work includes North, et al. 2009, and Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). Drawing from Laws (2012), Khan (2010), and Di John and Putzel (2009), the term is used in this paper to refer to the distribution of power and resources, and the institutions and discourses that perpetuate these arrangements within a political community and give it legitimacy. As Rocha Menocal (2015: 2) writes, political settlements 'define who has power and, crucially, who does not. They outline the parameters of inclusion and exclusion in a given political system.'

The literature broadly accepts that the management of violence is conceptually central to political settlements (Phillips 2016: 632; Laws 2012: 7; Khan 2010: 20), and that this prevents the term from becoming interchangeable with, for example, 'political landscape', or even simply 'politics'. We, therefore, consider a political settlement to consist of the suite of measures that channel conflict through mechanisms that: render the use of violence unlikely; do so with a reasonable degree of predictability; and that have popular legitimacy. While acknowledging some of the definitional problems associated with the term, this paper adopts a 'common sense' use of it to refer to the (often implicit) agreement that political matters will be dealt with, in the main, through non-violent means. It is important to emphasise that the term implies more than simply one-off peace or power-sharing agreements, although these are generally significant moments within the evolution of more structured arrangements (Khan 2010; Gray and Whitfield 2014).[8]

The inherent complexity of such configurations invites analysis of the beliefs and narratives that provide the ideational foundation upon which reasonably stable institutions invariably rest. As David Hudson and Heather Marquette note, ideas have generally been absent from political economy analysis because they are considered too complex to translate into operational outputs, but 'to relegate ideas to the "soft" end of politics would be a mistake' (2015: 67). Historical examples of this abound: the late North Korean dictator, Kim Jong-il, routinely stressed that he 'rule[d] through music and literature', and he invested an inordinate amount of state resources in producing poetry to articulate the cult of personality that he maintained around himself (Jin-Sung 2014: 7).

6 Abdel Razzaq Takriti (2013, 209) notes, for example, that shortly after the coup in 1970, the British faced a 'dilemma: how to create a bureaucracy and bring about economic development in a country as bereft of an educated managerial class as Oman?'

7 It is important to note that while these pieces deal with the substance of political settlements (as discussed below) they do not explicitly use the term.

8 This definition draws from Phillips, 2016.

Why invest in producing such stories? This paper suggests, along constructivist lines, that the investment is made because power and ideas are mutually generative. It has long been understood that power is about more than simply persuading someone to do something that they otherwise would not (Foucault 2003). It flows through the ideas that people hold about power. As the anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom writes, 'power rests in part on the very illusion that power exists' (Nordstrom 2004: 233).

Of particular salience to this paper is the official projection – and popular acceptance – of the 'renaissance narrative' of transformation under Sultan Qaboos, which aimed to tie citizens to a new form of centralised autocratic rule. State institutions and oil-funded development gave Qaboos considerable latitude to weaken the links between religious and tribal elites and their followers while bolstering the vertical relationship between all citizens and the state, of which he was carefully portrayed as the embodiment. New oil revenues allowed the state to function as the most important conduit of economic opportunity to both elites (usually through business contracts and political positions) and the general public (usually through employment).

The change in basic governing structures since 1970 has been extraordinary: tribal leaders, once the key providers of welfare and dispute resolution, have become salaried employees of the state; regionalism borne of geographic isolation has been altered through development infrastructure that visibly connects diverse territories; and the state has fostered a version of Ibadhi Islam[9] through state-dictated religious education and sermons that prioritise national unity. One retired senior bureaucrat illustrated the prevailing view of these changes among contemporary Omanis:

> Oman has never been as unified as it is today… you could not travel throughout Oman until 1970 [without the permission of the two main tribal confederations]. Qaboos diluted their [the tribal leadership's] power. Instead of there being five or six sheikhs, he empowered one hundred. And there were payments, but you deprive them of their administrative power… The schools helped too, as did the Ibadhi [Islamic school] doctrine which is very conciliatory.'[10]

However, the centralisation of authority under Qaboos did not entirely negate the power of other actors to shape outcomes, particularly those instrumental in development planning and implementation. Oman's bureaucracies were staffed both from senior tribal ranks and with new entrants, by direction of the royal court – which, as discussed below, had several incentives to work toward developmental outcomes.

9 Ibadhism is a school of Islam distinct from (and which predates) Sunni or Shi'ism. Though little known outside of Oman, where it is the dominant religious sect, Ibadhism is associated with moderation and tolerance of other views and religions.

10 Interview with former senior State Auditor, Muscat: 16 April 2014.

2

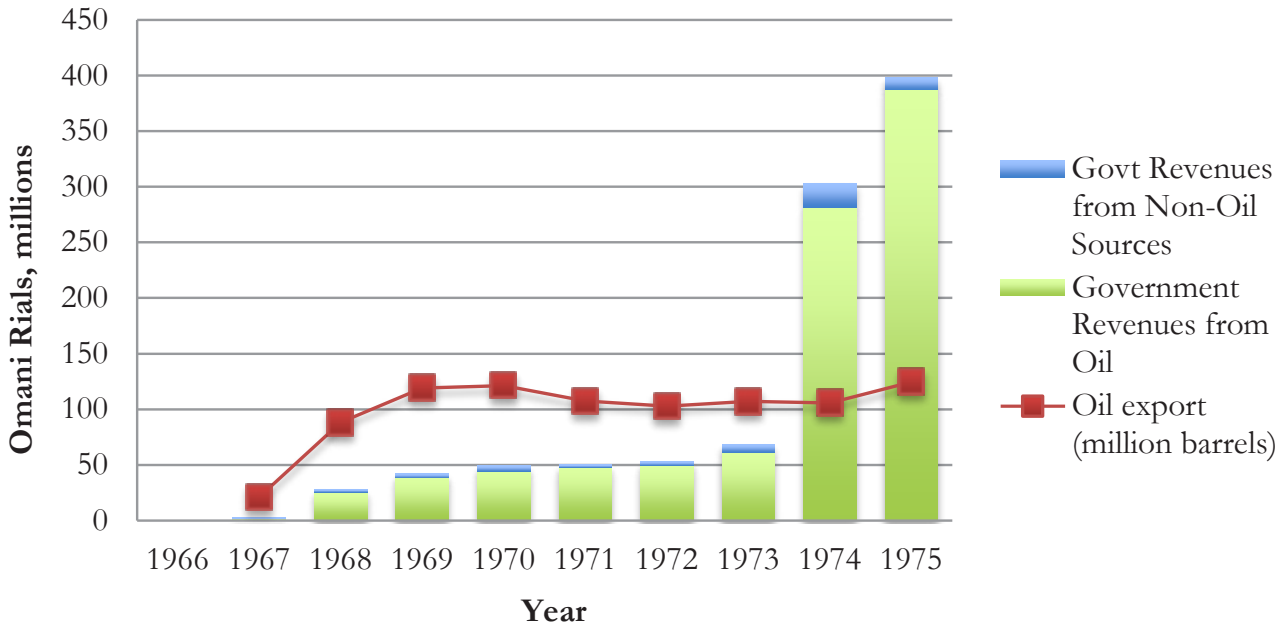
Critical junctures

When Sultan Qaboos came to power there were several particularly important critical junctures that facilitated his ability to work in a reasonably developmental (albeit autocratic) manner – that is, in a way that took the developmental needs of the citizenry seriously. These junctures included the OAPEC (Organisation of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries) 'revolution' of 1973 (the windfall from which facilitated the rapid centralisation of power), the scheduled British withdrawal from the Arabian Peninsula (and the shifts in strategic colonial interests that this entailed), and the revolution in Zanzibar. Each will be discussed briefly before exploring how the outcome legitimacy they facilitated was harnessed by a purposeful narrative that frames Oman's development as almost entirely attributable to the individual agency of Sultan Qaboos.

The OAPEC revolution: Rents and rapid co-optation

Hydrocarbon rents are widely acknowledged as the basis for rapid development in Oman and elsewhere in the region. Rents underwrote – and continue to support – the Omani economic 'miracle', in which national development programs began funding physical infrastructure and social welfare initiatives. When Oman's first oil exports began in 1967, a barrel cost just under USD 1.50 on the international market (BP Statistical Review 2013). This modest amount still represented a boon for the Omani economy, causing a fortyfold increase in the sultanate's annual revenue between 1960-70 (Valeri 2009: 92). However, more salient to the long-term prosperity of Oman was the oil crisis in 1973 (the 'OAPEC revolution'), after which oil revenues nearly quadrupled (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Government revenue relative to oil exports 1966-1975



Source: Oman Statistical Year Book (various years), Oman Central Bank. 1 Omani Rial = 2.6 USD

The rapid increase in export volume combined with the dramatic increase in global oil prices ushered in unprecedented state wealth shortly after Sultan Qaboos' ascent to power. As a result, Qaboos was able to buy the majority stake in Petroleum Development Oman in 1974 (PDO 2012, 3) and thus ensure long-term control over the state's finances. Though the oil crisis lasted only one year, the purchase of PDO meant far greater state profits for every barrel of oil that Oman has

sold since. Under the previous Sultan, Oman received only 50 per cent of oil profits and the right to 12.5 per cent of all oil exported. Today, as a result of the purchase, the government's total take is closer to 90 per cent.

Exponentially higher export earnings brought hard currency to fund national development projects (including roads, schools, and health centres), and the military campaign against the insurgency in Dhofar. Qaboos used the increased revenues to afford sophisticated military equipment, contract officers seconded from the UK, and generous terms for defecting rebels, including a cash payment if they surrendered their weapons.

Additionally, the Dhofar Development Department was established with funding from both this windfall and the British government, and formed a core component of the counter-insurgency effort. The Department oversaw the completion of major infrastructure projects including ports, schools, housing, hospitals, paved roads, and experimental farms, as well as radio and colour television stations (Peterson 1978, 206).

Finally, these revenues greatly enhanced the new Sultan's ability to co-opt existing elites such as tribal and religious leaders and thereby centralise power beyond anything previously imaginable in the sparsely populated and regionally fragmented Sultanate. Shortly after assuming power, state payments to tribal sheikhs were increased (Ackland 1970) and more widely distributed. This enlarged the number of the state's direct beneficiaries while simultaneously eroding the sheikhs' traditional mandates of managing land deeds, water use, welfare provision, and education (Peterson 1978, 118). In this way, oil revenues facilitated rapid state expansion without what Ghassan Salame terms 'painful choices between expenditure on security, prestige and social services' (Salame 1994: 15).

Powerful commercial elites were also co-opted with oil revenues, which shifted the economic engine from traditional merchants to the state, giving it a near monopoly on major economic opportunities. British documents note that from early on, 'Sayyid Qaboos made clear that his voice would predominate in military, financial and external affairs, and he stressed, in the award of large commercial contracts' (Crawford 1970). This represents a seismic shift in the relative power of Oman's financial and political elites, with the merchant class becoming, for the first time, unambiguously subordinate to the Sultan. Marc Valeri suggests that selected merchant families and businessmen were given fixed percentages of oil revenue in 1970 to ensure that they had a personal stake in the success of the emerging order under Sultan Qaboos (2009, 102; see also Crystal 1990). Through government contracts, Qaboos supported merchants with long-standing links to the al-Sa'id dynasty while promoting additional families who had demonstrated loyalty to him personally.

However, such windfalls were not unusual at the time, and the co-optive capacity of resource rents affected political settlements in other Gulf countries as well (Crystal 1990; Beblawi and Luciani 1987). What was unusual in Oman was the degree of relatively inclusive economic development and social cohesion that the process of co-optation underpinned.

In the section that follows, we suggest that this cannot be explained without recourse to the discursive construction of Sultan Qaboos' pivotal role in the country's rapid development. Oman is not entirely unique in this either though, and other regional leaders have fostered cults of personality around themselves, without their countries experiencing the same level of cohesion or economic inclusion. We argue further, therefore, that the 'renaissance narrative' surrounding Qaboos effectively accentuated a perceived dichotomy between him and his predecessor, and that this dichotomy gained further plausibility due to a number of fortuitous junctures, of which increased oil revenues was only one.

British withdrawal from the Gulf

The economic shift within Oman occurred in conjunction with the decline of British hegemony in the region. Although Oman was not formally colonised, the British had maintained decisive economic, political and military influence in the Gulf[11] for nearly a century by the time Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced in 1968 that they would withdraw from it within four years. Britain had already left neighbouring Aden in Yemen several months prior to Wilson's announcement. By 1970, South Yemen was formally under the control of a Marxist government as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen – an outcome that the British government was determined to prevent in Oman. At this time, Oman was considered a de facto protectorate of the British crown, with no independent international representation. As the departure drew closer, Whitehall's concerns sharpened over Sultan Sa'id's inability to defeat the communist insurgency in Dhofar. British Ministry of Defence documents from early 1970 suggest that Britain feared Oman was becoming their own 'micro-Vietnam in the Arabian Peninsula' (Ministry of Defence 1970, FCO 46/609).

According to declassified documents and written accounts by British officers, the scheduled British withdrawal accelerated the transition of power from Sultan Sa'id to his son, Qaboos (Joyce 2003; Takriti 2013b; Kane 2012). As the withdrawal loomed, Britain's desire to secure its military, political, and commercial interests in the region (particularly by maintaining control over Oman's Mussandam Peninsula on the Straits of Hormuz through which so much of the world's oil transited daily), became more pressing. Central to this agenda was the desire to defeat the communist insurgency in Dhofar that was gaining traction beyond the original conflict zone (Takriti 2013b: 159-60), and Qaboos was seen as more amenable to British

11 Known historically as the Persian Gulf, its name is contested. Outside of Iran (in the Arab Gulf states), the term Arabian Gulf is preferred.

instruction than his father. British documents note that 'Qabus is likely to be a much better bet than the current Sultan, especially as he may well rely… on HMG's support, encouragement and advice' (Acland 1970, cited in Devore 2011).

While denied at the time, the coup against Sultan Sa'id was carried out primarily by British military and intelligence personnel (Kane 2012; Tikriti 2013b), without a single shot being fired by any Omani other than Sultan Sa'id, who fired in self-defence (Kane 2012, Kindle location 2670). The archival record reveals the Foreign Office's desire that its involvement be minimised:

> A public argument about whether the action of the seconded officers went beyond the maintenance of law and order could never be conclusively settled and would provoke speculation which might damage not only our interests in Oman but in other countries which employ British servicemen in their forces. It will therefore be important to extract the undertakings proposed by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary… (England 1970: 1).

Though a broader discussion of the British-led coup is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that the primogeniture transfer of power to Qaboos had not been considered imminent at the time that it occurred. Sultan Sa'id had been an absolute ruler for nearly forty years with minimal delegation of power, even to his only son Qaboos. Despite pleas from the British Consuls General to train Qaboos in statecraft through some practical experience with a regional governor, the young prince was kept mostly isolated in Salalah and tasked with religious study following his military education at Sandhurst. The Consul General in Muscat wrote just months before the coup that the 'Government continues to creak along haphazardly while the Sultan in Salalah studies the recommendations of the consultants and makes up his mind whether or not to abandon his 37 year regime of taking every decision himself down to the minutest detail' (Crawford 1969b, unpaginated).

Meanwhile the separatist movement in Dhofar was gathering momentum. When meagre oil exports began in 1967, it was anticipated that oil-funded development would halt the discontent. Yet Sultan Sa'id continued to divert nearly all national income to pay down debts (most of which had been accrued by his father from the British government) and fortify his defences. In his Valedictory Address, the outgoing Consul General in Muscat wrote to the Political Resident in Bahrain that 'In the medium, say four to five years and long term future, the Sultan's thoroughness, and concern for his people, and the certainty that he will spend little or none of the oil revenues on himself or his family should tell in his favour.' However, he also admitted that in the interim, 'a disgruntled servant may murder him at any time' (Carden 1969).

Further, Qaboos likely did not have the standing to implement a coup on his own. Limbert notes, for example, that Sultan Qaboos had never set foot in the capital of Muscat, and that some communities may not have even known of his existence prior to the coup (2010: 174). However, the fact that the Foreign Office had only become convinced that the removal of Sultan Sa'id was necessary one month before it occurred shows that 'preparations by both Qaboos, along with his associates, and by some of the expatriates in Muscat had emerged long before then' (Peterson 2014: 329).

The British coup therefore, granted Qaboos a rapid succession to power. However, it was another juncture – the revolution in Zanzibar – that ultimately helped to embed his power beyond the most visible circle of elites that could be directly targeted for co-optation.

Revolution in Zanzibar

The 1964 revolution in Zanzibar predated Qaboos' ascension by six years, but its effects directly impacted his tenure. In sharp distinction to his father, Sultan Qaboos welcomed the large number of Zanzibari-Omanis fleeing the violence in Zanzibar and leveraged the superior education and skills that many had gained there within national development projects.

To explain this dynamic, it is necessary to recall that the island of Zanzibar was once the dynastic seat of the extensive 19th century Omani empire, which also included parts of Kenya and mainland Tanzania. Close familial ties had been maintained ever since: courtiers, and then merchants and farmers, emigrated to the more prosperous part of the empire after successive waves of drought and war in Oman proper.

In the decades immediately following World War II for instance, the size of Zanzibar's Omani population increased from 9% to 17% (Limbert 2010: 141). While some individuals travelled back and forth with 'casual regularity', others relocated more permanently, adopting the local language of Swahili (Kharusi 2012: 338). During this time, many individuals maintained connections with their villages and communities, often sending money to Oman to support their struggling extended families.

The Zanzibar revolution – which one former senior state auditor called 'a blessing in disguise for Oman'[12] – reversed the exodus. Omani Arabs, historically associated with the slave trade through Zanzibar, were the target of local revolt following independence from Britain and the overthrow of the monarchy. By the end of 1964, an estimated 12,000-15,000 Arabs had been killed or deported (Clayton 1981: 98) in what some Omani observers refer to as a process of ethnic cleansing or even genocide against the Muslim population of Zanzibar.[13]

12 Interview with former senior state auditor, Muscat: 16 April 2014.

13 Interview with academic at Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat: 13 April 2014.

Sultan Sa'id absorbed some 3,700 of the early refugees (Peterson 2004a: 46), but the majority of Zanzibari-Omanis[14] fled to Mombasa, Dubai, Cairo or to European cities. Even with the prospect of oil in Oman at this time, going back to the sultanate was considered by many to be a return to poverty and disease. One interviewee noted the difficulty of the transition:

> We were coming from a very good life, with a car. When we arrived [in Oman in 1970], the house had no electricity and you had to sleep on the roof because of the heat but the sun would rise at 4am. We were used to equatorial climates. Even breathing was difficult.[15]

It was only after the coup in Oman that a critical mass of more educated Zanzibaris – who would become Oman's technocratic backbone – opted to leave their initial places of refuge to heed what is now widely referred to within Oman as simply 'the call'.

The 'call' was Sultan Qaboos' invitation to the diaspora to reside in Oman as citizens and contribute to national development. It allowed him to leverage their superior education and skills in support of his state-building agenda.

14 This includes the ruling royal al-Busaidi family.

15 Interview with former senior State Auditor, Muscat: 16 April 2014.

3

The 'renaissance' narrative

Despite the advantageous circumstances and critical junctures outlined above, Omani popular discourses ascribe the country's 'renaissance' or rebirth (*al-nahda*) almost exclusively to the individual agency of Sultan Qaboos. During fieldwork the idea that 'without Sultan Qaboos we would be Yemen' was offered, almost reflexively, by Omanis seeking to explain the impact that Qaboos has had on Oman's national development.[16]

Oman's political settlement is underpinned by a remarkably consistent discourse about the ostensible 'renaissance' that Oman experienced once Sultan Sa'id was removed to make way for his son. More than forty years after that event, loyalty to the state, with Qaboos as its embodiment, has been informally institutionalised by the 'renaissance narrative'.

This mythologises the exclusive agency of Qaboos in overcoming political violence and economic stagnation to restore a glorious past. Even his ability to effectively co-opt tribal, religious, and commercial elites is widely attributed to his unique personal attributes, including the potency of his tribal lineage. As the sole heir of an Ibadhi father from the capital city and a Sunni mother from Dhofar, he was seen to represent both of the key conflicting parties to the Dhofari insurgency.[17]

The renaissance narrative provides a reasonably coherent system of meaning through which to understand Oman's rapid development. It has proven extremely useful for national cohesion and development, although it may be in the process of being challenged, given demographic change and rising expectations in the region (Hunt 2014).

Sultan Qaboos is referred to as the 'Father of the Nation,' and affectionately known as 'HM' (His Majesty) by English-speaking Omanis. He is closely identified with the state and its economic modernisation in official documents, speeches and historiography. This modernisation is placed in stark contrast to the preceding era under Sultan Sa'id, which is instead identified as one of political fragmentation, economic malaise, and open insurrection. The binary opposition of wealth/poverty, peace/conflict, and even light/darkness forms the basis of the narrative, and provides the context for the discussion later in this section of the divergent educational policies maintained by father and son.

The British archives suggest that British officials believed the narrative would solidify Qaboos' authority, and assisted with its germination: 'A radio was installed and began broadcasts in Muscat within 72 hours of the succession' (Crawford 1971: 3). In addition to the haste with which this feat was achieved, the same source notes that Qaboos was provided with a 'radio team' that was to 'assist him in various spheres' (Crawford 1971: 7). The historian Abdel Razzaq Takriti notes that on the day after the coup was announced, a British Development Officer began sending regular press releases about the transition to the Reuters office in Dubai (Takriti 2013a: 199). By the time Qaboos first entered Muscat, a week after the coup, over 1000 British-led soldiers lined the streets to greet him, and were flanked by British journalists that had been flown in by the Foreign Office to cover the event (Takriti 2013a: 200). Takriti also underlines that the programs aired on *Radio Oman* 'were carefully managed by British anti-communist propagandist Pauline Searle, drawing on her previous experience in Malaya' (Takriti 2013a: 253-4) to illustrate the importance that the Sultan's foreign advisors placed on communicating a broad and consistent account of the 'awakening' that Omanis were already supposed to be experiencing.

The narrative credits all national development to the new ruler, and continues to be echoed in official documents and speeches. Oman's first *Five Year Development Plan 1976-1980* reported 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 that year' (1976: 2 cited in Ministry of Information 2002). Royal speeches consistently refer to the modest starting position of the country's infrastructure, education and health systems. Likewise, Qaboos' 1972 National Day Speech asserted: 'In 1970 there were three schools in a country comprising 900 students' (Qaboos 1972). Eight years later even these efforts by his father were discounted. In the tenth anniversary National Day Speech, the Sultan encouraged the audience to recall that:

16 See for example http://muscatconfidential.blogspot.com.au/2012/06/new-series-im-super-thanks-for-asking.html, where the author remarks: 'This blog has always held to the observation that there is a word for what Oman would be like without HM Qaboos – And that word is "Yemen".'

17 Ibadhism is a school of Islam distinct from Sunni or Shi'ism.

> Ten years ago... we were poor in everything... We had no hospitals to take care of our people, we had no schools to prepare our young to take their place in the world, we had no government structure with which to organise and develop the resources of our country (Qaboos 1980).

Regardless of the limited means at Sultan Sa'id's disposal to address development goals before oil exports began in 1967, the government of Qaboos quickly set about highlighting his father's tenure as '38 years of medieval and harsh rule' (Oman Ministry of Information 1971: 24). That view was also reflected in Western scholarship just after the coup, with Fred Halliday (1974) describing Sultan Sa'id in *Arabia Without Sultans* as:

> One of the nastiest rulers the world has seen for a long time… Sa'id's rule prevented Omanis from leaving the country, discouraged education and health services, and kept from the population a whole series of objects including medicines, radios, spectacles, trousers, cigarettes and books (Halliday 1974: 275).

Some writers have sought to counter the mythologising that surrounds these restrictions (Field 1984; Pridham 1986; Owen 1970: 379).[18] Yet Sultan Sa'id's rule remains characterised in the popular imagination as medieval, consisting of 'benign neglect and petty restrictions' (Allen 1987: 69). The perception of Sa'id's Oman as a neglected fiefdom is strikingly common in Oman. People of all ages frequently attest that: 'Under Sultan Sa'id, we had six miles of paved road, one hospital and only three schools – for boys only.'[19] This was a common response by interviewees of various demographics to the question about what life was like in Oman before Sultan Qaboos.

What is more striking, however, is the degree to which the narrative contradicts the historical record. While there is no doubt that Qaboos was critically important to Oman's development, scholars such as Uzi Rabi (2006) and Abdel Razzaq Takriti (2013a) argue that his ability to alter his circumstances early in his tenure has been overstated. They highlight instead the influence of his father and the British government, respectively.

Uzi Rabi (2006: 1) argues that it was actually Sultan Sa'id who paved the way to Oman's financial solvency. From a starting point of near bankruptcy in 1932, the first thirty-seven years of Sa'id's rule were spent repaying millions of pounds worth of British loans accrued by his father, Sultan Taimur. He accomplished this by personally and parsimoniously micromanaging the small funds from customs taxes and various subsidies, as well as slashing expenditure, beginning with the royal family. The civil list, originally 30% of national income, was reduced to 2.5% by 1968 (Peterson 1978: 89-90), prompting 'great discontent among the cadets of the Sultan's family' (Metcalfe 1934, R/15/6/188).

Budgets were balanced despite the devastating financial impacts of natural disasters, the global Great Depression, and World War II. After 15 years of successive drought decimated date production and depressed customs tax revenue, Sa'id balanced the budget by reducing the pay of the armed forces, and by closing all beneficent activities, including the state's only school. Sa'id defended these decisions in a letter to the British Consul:

> As you know we have tried to balance our budget during the recent years by stringest [sic] economies and without providing for bare necessities for our public services. Without our present financial conditions, it has not been possible to think of any general improvement of the various activities of our government' (Said 1937 in *Records of Oman 1988*: 65).

After World War II, Oman's finances improved considerably. A traveller's account from the period attests that 'An annual budget is prepared and the money spent on sanitation, anti-malarial measures, fire-fighting, street lighting and public works' (Phillips 1966: 80). As a result of this concerted debt management program, Landen argued in 1967 that Sa'id was largely responsible for restoring 'freedom of action and de-facto as well as de jure independence of his sultanate vis a vis the British' (Landen 1967: 422).

As oil revenues began to trickle in, Sultan Sa'id issued a statement to his people outlining the financial resources of the sultanate, verbosely titled 'The Word of Sultan Said bin Taimur, Sultan of Muscat and Oman, about the history of the financial position of the Sultanate in the past and the hopes for the future, after the export of oil.' Usually referred to as simply 'The Word', it outlined the country's financial resources and the Sultan's use of them, along with plans underway for water and electricity systems, a modern port, and a rationalised currency system (Said 1968).

As these plans progressed, Sa'id's financial prudence was accompanied by none of the royal extravagance that marked his son's rule (Takriti 2013a: 218). Even when modest revenues from hydrocarbons began flowing in 1967, his palace remained mostly built of mud, and the expensive pomp and circumstance suggested by his British advisors was repeatedly declined. He remained 'a man of conservative habits… [who] owns no Cadillacs, aeroplanes or yachts, but enjoys the simpler life of a man of action' (Phillips 1966: 13). Indeed, until the day he was overthrown, Sa'id continued to 'act and behave with the shrewdness and calculation of someone always on the edge of financial ruin' (Chatty 2009: 43).

This parsimoniousness laid the financial foundations for the economic miracle of Oman's renaissance. The financial health of the sultanate was confirmed by Qaboos' British financial advisor in 1970, who noted, with some surprise, that 'There is no financial mess here, only a nice clean slate' (Aldous 1970).

18 Major R.P. Owen (1970, 379) cautioned early against the 'exaggerated and sometimes lurid reporting of repressive policies'.

19 Various interviews, Muscat: 2011-2014.

Rabi (2006) argues that in marginalising the contributions of Sultan Sa'id, the dominant narrative emphasises the poor economic, social and developmental circumstances of the sultanate that he presided over primarily to heighten the contrast between his rule and that of his son. Marc Valeri also suggests that the renaissance narrative is built on the deliberate negation of Sultan al Sa'id's achievements (Valeri 2009: 133). He argues that it ignores the many challenging structural circumstances that dominated the preceding century – including famine, global depression, Spanish flu, and world war, not to mention the comparable conditions in neighbouring states – to isolate the reign of Sa'id as particularly brutal (Valeri 2009: 133).

Acknowledgement of Sa'id's role in Oman's economic development is – like that of the British government – conspicuous in its absence from the official and popular discourses about Sultan Qaboos' ascendance. If the speed of the development under Qaboos can be considered miraculous it was due, in no small part, to the fact that he was able to capitalise on the momentum of plans and funding that had been pre-approved by his father. In December 1969, after just two years of oil revenue under Sa'id, completed developments included a water supply for Muscat and Muttrah, a new post office and two blocks of government flats, with two hospitals, a girls' school and a police barracks under construction (Townsend 1977: 170). British diplomatic records indicate that the Sultan had also approved a harbour at Muttrah, roads to the port, interior hospitals, new agricultural markets and a public garden for Muscat (Crawford 1969b). However, the fact that projects actually began just months after Sultan Sa'id was deposed was used to mythologise the economic 'miracle' as being solely directed by Qaboos after wresting power from his anachronistic father. As one interviewee noted, 'By the time Sultan Qaboos took power, there was some money. The ports, airports, and hospital were his father's, so when Sultan Qaboos came things started moving quickly, which gave people the confidence to come'.[20] These projects created timely business and employment opportunities that were expanded with the help of the educated Omani diaspora who returned to the country at Qaboos' invitation.

'The call' to the diaspora and the consolidation of the political settlement

Like the 'renaissance narrative' more broadly, the popular mythologising surrounding 'the call' that Qaboos made to the Omani diaspora presents his individual agency as the spark that began Oman's transition from poverty to prosperity. Within days of taking power, Qaboos announced that the 'Time will shortly come for Omanis living abroad to be called to the service of their homeland' (Qaboos 1970).

At this point, several groups would have fallen under the umbrella of 'Omanis living abroad', including those studying or working in the Gulf, in Africa, and political communities living in exile due to their opposition to his father. While some interviewees saw 'the call' as a direct message to the African diaspora, others suggested that there was a wider audience.[21] The next line of that early speech, though rarely quoted, seems to confirm that broader purpose. There Qaboos stated that 'those who have been disloyal in the past are forgiven', which was seen at the time as a clear message to the Imamate Omani government based in Saudi Arabia, which was a self-determination movement from the interior region of Oman (Joint Statement 1971). The invitation was gratefully received, with one returnee noting: 'This was a chance for refuge; people were given citizenship immediately, and that was worth diamonds.'[22]

One of the most widely echoed observations within the state-formation literature is that the creation of a reasonably effective bureaucratic apparatus is, at least historically, critical to the centralisation of authority (Weber 1998; Tilly 1992). This dynamic can be seen in Oman, where its eclectic diaspora played a vital role in staffing its nascent state institutions and implementing development projects. The new arrivals brought professional experience in administration, banking and other technical fields and joined international advisors and consultants in building modern educational and health systems, military units, telecommunications systems, and other economic infrastructure. One Omani interviewee recalled his father, who worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, processing volumes of visa applications at home after work:

> I remember he used to bring home stacks of these applications. All they needed was a signature but it took him all evening. I asked him, "Is there anyone that *isn't* getting in?", to which he replied "We need these people to build the country."[23]

Zanzibari-Omanis constituted one of the largest groups of these returnees: between 8,000-10,000 had arrived by 1975 (al-Rasheed 2005: 101). This group was almost certainly the most highly educated. Many of the Zanzibaris/*Zinjibari* had been schooled under a British education system and quickly formed the technocratic backbone of the new state institutions, such as the Ministry of Defence, Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), the domestic intelligence agencies (Peterson 2004b: 47), and the Interim Planning Council, which was tasked with driving national development initiatives (Valeri 2007: 486).

Zanzibaris were broadly perceived as the early 'intelligentsia' after 1970 (Limbert 2010: 134). A retired senior official from the Ministry of Telecommunications recalled that in the 1970s, 'a majority of the technical workers were from East Africa

20 Interview with former senior State Auditor, Muscat: 16 April 2014.

21 Interview with various Omanis who moved from Zanzibar to Oman after 1970, Muscat, April-May 2014.

22 Interview with retired manager at Oman Central Bank who had 'returned' from Zanzibar, Muscat: 15 April 2014.

23 Interview with former senior member of the Royal Diwan, Muscat: 20 May 2014.

because they were educated.'[24] At the time, Zanzibar was second only to Egypt in terms of education levels in Africa, and was 'self-sufficient in doctors, experts and engineers' (Hamad 2009: 189). As one senior Zanzibar government official wrote in his memoirs, in the late 1950s 'The British government's policy in Zanzibar had been… to educate the people, by opening up schools everywhere' (al Busaidi 2012: 92). Qualifying exams made advanced study in the UK possible. With this influx, Oman 'inherited' several Oxford- and Cambridge-educated Zanzibari administrators to work in its early ministries.[25]

A look at the broader biographical backgrounds of key technocrats in the 1970s reveals the level of influence that Zanzibari-Omanis held in technical and managerial appointments, particularly in crucial international industries. The first healthcare advisor was Zanzibari, as were the early managers of Muscat's ports, and airports and banks.

Additionally, due to their education and lack of social restrictions against gender mixing, Zanzibari women also contributed in areas of critical skill shortages. They included the first female Omani police officer, electrical engineer, pilot, doctor and, later, ambassador.[26] In 2003, Zanzibari Sheikha Aisha bint Khalfan bin Jameel al-Sayabiyah became Oman's first female government minister as the minister for the National Authority for Industrial Craftsmanship. Her compatriot Hunaina Sultan Ahmed al-Mughairy became the Omani ambassador to the US.

This group was generally considered non-threatening to existing elites, as they did not actively seek power or align themselves with political forces. This influx of relatively skilled labour also provided Qaboos with allies who were detached from local political relationships in ways that further increased their instrumental value to the new Sultan: 'They [the Zanzibaris] were in unison with His Majesty to develop Oman; the Zanzibaris were already trained and educated.'[27]

The English language proficiency of the Zanzibari-Omanis also offered them a distinct advantage in the international economy. It eased their integration into crucial international industries such as banking, petroleum and telecommunications, and their collaboration with international (predominantly British) advisors. The former manager of Oman Central Bank recalled that in the early days, more than 95 percent of his employees were Zanzibaris.[28] English was a requirement for Central Bank staff 'because of the international links'.[29] By providing the technical background and educational qualifications to staff a more modern economy, Oman was able to divest itself relatively early of a preponderance of expatriate advisors and thus take greater ownership of national development than was the case in other Gulf states.

Zanzibaris also formed the core of the domestic intelligence officials in the years following the coup. In their history of the Arabisation of Oman's intelligence services, Dale Eickelman and M. G. Dennison write that until 1988, when native birth became a condition of employment, the intelligence apparatus was generally led by British officers and staffed by Zanzibaris in its middle ranks. This was at least in part because the British: 'continued to favor the promotion and advancement of Zanzibari Omanis because of their excellent command of English' (Eickelman and Dennison 1994: 15).

Where this legacy is considered problematic is in its potential to disrupt the unifying theme of the renaissance narrative. The prominence of the Zanzibari Omanis within the bureaucracy is still a matter of sensitivity in some quarters. To single out one particular group and their role in building modern Oman is seen as divisive, and thus contradictory to the level of cohesion ostensibly overseen by Sultan Qaboos. Interviewees were consistently at pains to recognise the contributions of all Omanis in the early period of state-building under Sultan Qaboos. One former State Council member stressed that 'Omanis came from all over, some were in the Gulf but others from China and Russia. East Africans were just the largest group, but it took all of us.'[30] In Omani political discourses, the desire to be seen as part of a cohesive Omani nation is predominant. Another interviewee noted:

> You have to be careful. Zanzibaris did not play THE single role – if you say this, the Baluchis will complain, the Lawatis will complain, the Oman born Omanis will complain. It makes sense to give everyone their due, but obviously the Zanzibaris were the most trained. Also, the Zanzibari women [were able to contribute because they were] not conservative and could mix with anyone in the workplace, which was not the case for Omani-born women.[31]

24 Interview with former senior member of the Ministry of Telecommunications, Muscat: 9 May 2014.

25 Including Oxford graduate Saudi bin Ahmed al Busaidi, former Assistant Wali or Deputy Governor in Dar es-Salaam and then Mudir or local administrator in Stone Town. During the Zanzibar revolution he was imprisoned along with many other government officials. He later worked in Oman's Foreign Service and then the Ministry of Interior (see *Memoirs* 2012). His daughter, HE Dr. Rawya Saud Al-Busaidi, would become the first female minister in Oman, serving as the Minister of Higher Education since 2004.

26 Interview with Omani academic, Muscat, 12 April 2014.

27 Interview with retired senior manager at Oman Central Bank who 'returned' from Zanzibar after 'the call'. Muscat: 15 April 2014.

28 This was not seen to be a deliberate or nepotistic strategy, as the individuals were generally unknown to each other. Instead, recruitment was based on those that responded to public employment ads. 'I didn't know them personally. They were just the most educated people. People would see the ads and they are the ones who responded.' Interview with retired manager at Oman Central Bank, Muscat: 15 April 2014.

29 Interview with retired manager at Oman Central Bank, Muscat: 15 April 2014.

30 Interview with former State Council Member, Muscat: 12 May 2014.

31 Interview with scholar at Sultan Qaboos University: 14 April 2014.

With such sensitivities in mind, it is important to highlight that this paper does not seek to inflate the contributions of Zanzibaris. But it recognises that a subsection of 'returnees' contributed to Oman's development in two unique ways.

First, earnings from this group were not expatriated as is typical when countries rely on non-indigenous skilled labour. Typically, countries undergoing rapid economic change hire highly trained expatriate labour while a critical mass of the indigenous population acquires the necessary skill sets. During this time, expatriate earnings tend to flow out the country. Due to the revolution in Zanzibar, however, the Zanzibari Omanis who 'returned' were cut off from their place of birth, and their earnings therefore tended to stay within Oman.

Second, while it is not unusual for a country to call on its educated diaspora to return and contribute to national development initiatives (see Jonkers 2008 for a comparative study of China, India, Argentina and Mexico), it is less common that this group could be called on in such large numbers despite such a long temporal detachment. Most of the 'returnees' were in fact not returnees at all, having never set foot in the country that now offered them a passport. As one such person noted, 'My family was in Zanzibar for 200 years!'[32] In some ways, this group represented the best of both worlds: a skilled labour force readily committed to the cause of Oman's development and highly dependent on its success, having lost their ability to return to their homes in Zanzibar.

These two factors meant that Sultan Qaboos had access to a sizeable group of people with technical skills that allowed them to work reasonably effectively in bureaucratic and administrative roles. Their detachment from the hierarchies of political power (as a result of their long absence and outsider status) also meant that they did not pose an immediate challenge to existing elites (Al Rasheed 2005:102), such as the tribal and religious leaders and the merchant class that Qaboos and his inner circle were working to co-opt through the methods discussed above.

Without access to a pool of relatively well-educated citizens that could administer complex state-building projects, it is unlikely that Qaboos could have centralised his political control over Oman so quickly and overseen such significant developmental growth. Despite this, the contribution of the Zanzibar diaspora to the consolidation of the political settlement under Sultan Qaboos has received very little scholarly attention to date.

Education policies during Sultan Sa'id's rule

Oman had few formally educated nationals within its own borders prior to the 1970 coup, owing largely to the restrictive educational policies enacted by Sultan Sa'id. One of the most important, and overlooked, political differences between Sultan Qaboos and his father was that Qaboos outwardly perceived an educated population as a political opportunity, while his father outwardly perceived it as a political threat. Both men implemented their education policies accordingly. The renaissance narrative expounds the priority that Sultan Qaboos gave to educating the population while portraying his father as inherently predisposed against education. There were, however, reasons other than personal perferences for the positions that the two men took. While Sultan Sa'id had reasons to see an educated population as a grave threat to his political survival, his son had reasons to see it as precisely the opposite: his ambitions depended on quickly capitalising on oil revenues to dispense patronage and thereby centralise power.

The British Consul General reported in 1966 that Sultan Sa'id 'knows the value of education, but cannot see how he can get the benefits of it without creating a powerful force for disruption in his state. So he neither provides any but a few elementary schools *nor will he permit the return of those who go abroad for education*' (emphasis added, Carden 1966: 4). In 1960, Sultan Sa'id told the British Consul General in Muscat that Britain lost control of India because of the education it had provided:

> When [Hugh] Boustead pressured the Sultan to establish primary schools to educate the sons of the Shayks and other notables the Sultan scoffed 'That's why you lost India – because you educated the people.' (FO 371/ 148931, BA1053/5, 7 June 1960, cited in Rabi 2006: 156).

Some attribute this policy to Sa'id's own lack of sophistication. In fact, Sa'id spoke several languages, had been educated broadly and had travelled widely (undertaking a global tour as a young man, for example). His own formal education was international, at an elite school in Pune, India.

Having been educated himself, why did Sa'id neglect education for his own people? Qaboos provided one answer in an interview with a Lebanese journalist: 'He [Sa'id] knew five languages, but he wasn't cultured. Knowledge is one thing and culture is something else... He was headstrong and bigoted. He didn't believe in change. His thinking went back to an age which is not this present age' (quoted in Townsend 1977: 78).

However, it is just as likely that Sultan Sa'id perceived educated people as a political threat because of the inevitability of unrealised expectations for educated job-seekers. He is quoted in the British archival documents as saying: 'What is there here for a young man with education? He would go to university in Cairo or to…London, finish in Moscow and come back here to foment trouble.' (FO371/14893, BA10153/5, 7 June 1960, cited in Smiley 1975: 41; Boustead 2002: 223).

32 Interview with academic at Sultan Qaboos University: 13 April 2014.

Even though other infrastructure development projects had begun under Sultan Sa'id, education was undoubtedly neglected for fear that no jobs could be provided to graduates. Under Sa'id, Omanis were thus forced to emigrate to the broader Gulf region for education or work. John Duke Anthony estimated that in the 1960s Omanis constituted nearly half of the non-indigenous Arab workforce in the neighbouring United Arab Emirates (Anthony 1975: 94).

This regional labour market played a role in defusing economic and social instability:

> Once these men have gone and solved the problems of finding jobs they do not lightly throw up their jobs to return so the bulk of the younger and therefore more revolutionary inclined men stay out of the country while the bulk of their more stable elders remain in Oman (Carden 1969).

Young men were the most likely to emigrate, and their absence had important political implications. Today, a generation of older Omanis still recall the long treks by beasts of burden to visit their fathers working in the UAE and Kuwait. They note that they would probably also have emigrated had the political utility of education not been dramatically altered under Qaboos.

Education policies during the 'renaissance' of Sultan Qaboos

Qaboos oversaw the greatest expansion of education in Omani history. One of his first promises upon becoming Sultan was that all citizens would be educated 'even [if only] under the shadow of trees' (Qaboos' National Day Speech, 18 November 1972).[33] Within one year of the coup, school enrolments had increased by 671% (UNESCO 1972: 1). Oman imported textbooks and teachers to educate 65,000 pupils between 1970 and 1976 (*Financial Times* 1984, III).

As with his father, the example of Qaboos' own education is sometimes used to justify his views on the instrumental value of education. Qaboos himself had been educated in the Sultanate and then at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in the UK. The legacy of his exposure to international settings is often referred to by Omanis to explain his love of classical music, which is widely cited as an example of the lasting influence of his British education. Indeed, from the early days of radio in Oman, Qaboos insisted that one whole station be devoted to playing only classical music.[34] Given that music is forbidden in some strict Ibadhi interpretations of Islam, Qaboos' ability to flout this restriction is taken as a sign of his willingness to challenge tradition and entrenched religious authority. This willingness to challenge the status quo may have also facilitated his willingness to champion the introduction of mass education in a society that had never experienced it.

Mass education is one of the first and most enduring contacts between the individual and the state, and it has a recognisable place in the development of human capital, as well as national cohesion and assimilation (Ansell and Lindwall 2013: 505). It is no coincidence that mass compulsory educational systems have often come to the fore in times of major economic and social change. In the American context, for instance, mass education, particularly compulsory education, helped to assimilate migrants during a time of mass migration from Europe to America during industrialisation. American Professor of Education Gerald Unks argues that the abandonment of the one-room schoolhouse for segmented classrooms and grades both mirrored the industrial assembly line that future graduates would be entering, and – through relentless repetition of history and language studies – assimilated newly arrived migrants, making them 'bonafide' Americans (Unks 1979: 241).

John Townsend wrote that in the late 1960s the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman (as it was then known) had 'no natural national cohesion, either ethnic or geographic' (1977: 54). The sultanate's coastal cities were hemmed in by a mountain range, the Rub al-Khali 'Empty Quarter' desert, and the Indian Ocean: this isolation gave rise to the metaphor of an island (Landen 1967: 29; Townsend 1977: 16; Peterson 1978: 14; Kaplan 2011: 34). Vast geographic distances divided settlements, limiting travel and communication and the likelihood of any wider 'Omani' identity emerging. The southernmost region of Dhofar still remains ethnically and linguistically closer to Yemen, and many of its inhabitants speak local languages, rather than Arabic. In this way, Omanis tended to identify more with their local regions or tribes than with the idea of an Omani nation.

Qaboos used education to overcome these divisions – and did so with clear intent. In his early addresses, he stressed: 'never, in the long history of this nation has the need for unity been greater' (Qaboos 1970). He recognised education as both an economic necessity and a significant tool for socialisation. But he was also aware of its potential pitfalls, noting that 'If education does not proceed along the right track, then the provision of education may turn out to be more disastrous than the lack of it' (Qaboos quoted in UNESCO 1972: 21).

The new educational initiatives helped to create a national identity outside of religious and tribal affiliation, socialised adults as well as children into the new regime, and broke the monopoly of religious education. First, formal education in Oman assisted in the consolidation of a national identity by educating adults as well as children. To combat high illiteracy rates in the general population, schools were run in two shifts per day (Hanson 1970). Aside from equipping the population with basic skills, the introduction of mass education established state dominance in historical narratives and language. The new educational system prioritised ancient culture and common heritage over divisive current events.[35]

33 This phrase is widely celebrated and quoted by Omanis. Various interviews, Muscat: 2011-2013.

34 Interview with academic at Sultan Qaboos University: 15 April 2014.

35 Marc Valeri critiques the school curriculum, however, for the rapidity of its move from the nineteenth century empire to the 'renais-

Policies were also enacted for uniformity in dress, language of educational instruction and religious service, which bolstered the undertaking being spearheaded by the educational program. As part of this effort, the Sultan decreed in 1981 that every citizen be given a patronym, thus asserting the Omani heritage of influential non-Arab groups such as Indian merchants, the Lawaityaa (al-Lawati), the Baharina (al-Bahrani), and groups that traditionally staffed the sultanate's military forces such as the Baluch-native Omanis (al-Baluchi) (Kharusi 2012: 348).

Finally, the introduction in 1978 of mass *compulsory* education fostered state dominance in both secular and religious instruction. Islamic studies became compulsory for all secular students, and secular studies were introduced in Islamic Institutes (Qaboos 1977). This effectively broke the power of religious leaders to establish large groups of followers around themselves independent of the state. Like tribal sheikhs, religious leaders found their mandates as autonomous agents eroded: they became salaried employees of the state. The government funds the salaries of Ibadhi and Sunni imams (but not those of Shi'a or non-Muslim religious leaders). All religious leaders are licensed by the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, although some of their work is circumscribed. For example, Friday prayers delivered by Imams in all mosques deal with topics selected by the Sultan. During the 'Arab Spring' demonstrations in Oman in early 2011, for instance, Friday prayer topics were adjusted to stress calm, peacefulness, and deference to authority.[36]

Today, Oman's national cohesion is manifest in one of the lowest levels of sectarian conflict in the Middle East, high representation on the Global Peace Index and the absence of large-scale violence since the end of the Dhofar insurgency in 1975. Oman is now described as 'socially cohesive, with a strong emphasis on traditional values, behaviours and interaction' (Peterson 2011: 99-100). It is not uncommon to hear nationals proudly profess themselves as 'Omani first'; other identifications based on tribal family, geographic origin or religious sect are recognised, but not prioritised over their relation to the state.

The government's efforts in this area are widely recognised in Oman:

> The government [has] worked very hard to manufacture a common Omani identity, and it doesn't want divisive issues being brought up because it threatens the national identity they have created. Historically, Omanis (both men and woman) didn't all wear the same clothes, many didn't even speak the same language, and some didn't even consider themselves part of the Omani community.[37]

One activist highlighted the non-divisive nature of religious identity in Oman, and Qaboos' role in it: 'I am a Sunni, my mother is Ibadhi, my wife is Shi'a. This [is] not a problem... For this, I give credit to the government, to SQ [Sultan Qaboos] himself. They don't play in religion. It is very dangerous.'[38]

This role in religious balancing is important given the diversity of Islamic sects represented in Oman. While generally comprehensive, the Omani Census does not collect information on religious identification. However, J. E. Peterson estimates Oman's population at 45% Ibadhi, 50% Sunni, and 5% Shi'a and Hindu (Peterson 2004a: 32), while the US Department of State has estimated that 75% of citizens are Ibadhi, with 20% Sunni and 5% Shi'a (US Department of State 2012).

Despite this diversity, sectarian violence is virtually unknown in Oman, and 'intercommunal friction rarely goes beyond unstated resentment' (Peterson 2004a: 43). Jones and Ridout (2012) argue that an ideology of politeness in Oman eschews public discussion of social and cultural difference, especially questions of religious difference. They, along with others, also point to the tenets of Ibadhi Islam itself, which include tolerance of monotheistic difference (Hawley 1995: 201; Kechichian 1995: 24; Jones and Ridout 2015: 10).

Oman has maintained a measure of religious harmony and coexistence underwritten by the Sultan's absolute authority. Religious dates are proclaimed by royal decree, and are typically announced at the last moment. Often they are intentionally different to those observed by neighbouring states. Royal speeches stress the role of religion and the dangers of misinterpretation of religious tenets. Young people are admonished not to propagate causes of difference born of 'fanaticism based on a lack of knowledge among the Muslim youth about the correct facts of their religion' (Qaboos 1994).

Under Qaboos, both religious and tribal leaders have been brought in as salaried employees of the state, while being given enough leeway to guard their own legitimacy. These actors are integral players in Oman's political settlement, as they influence both the formal and informal institutions that regulate behaviour. For instance, in the wake of demonstrations across the Arab world in 2011-2012, tribal leaders were called on to defuse tensions by mediating between protestors and authorities (Valeri 2015). Similarly, it was reported that sheikhs' stipends were quietly increased under the proviso that they regained control of the younger tribal members (al-Azri 2013: xvi). In this way, education, religion and tribal identity have been co-opted to promote national cohesion and economic development, while centralising the ultimate authority of the Sultan.

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sance' of the 1970s. Jeremy Jones and Nicholas Ridout suggest instead that the curriculum is a rehabilitative exercise in which the national community is taught to value international openness over isolation and internal preoccupations (Jones and Ridout 2012: 18).

36 Interview with academic at Sultan Qaboos University: 24 December 2011.

37 Response on popular Omani blog platform by *Muscat Daily* columnist, Susan al-Shanfi, 24 February 2013.

38 Interview with Omani activist and blogger, Muscat: 23 February 2013.

British imperialism, autocracy and the renaissance narrative

The economic aspects of Oman's political settlement are distributive and broadly inclusive, but it remains politically exclusive. Sultan Qaboos is an absolute monarch. He is not only the head of state, but also the head of foreign affairs, finance, and the military. Peterson argues that Oman, to a far greater degree than any other state in the GCC, is 'governed by a single man' (2013: 321). Like his father, Sultan Qaboos keeps a small coterie of advisers, but is known to preserve exclusive decision-making in nearly all areas.

This concentrated power is portrayed as being in keeping with traditional authority, and is bolstered by a national mythology combined with a cult of personality. For instance, much modern infrastructure bears the name of the Sultan, including the country's first university, largest mosque, most advanced roads, best hospital, and even entire neighborhoods. Many personal homes (including those of expatriates) have a picture of the Sultan prominently displayed near the front door or main sitting area. Omanis also receive a 'daily diet of Qaboos' (Chatty, 2009: 46) through the media: national newspapers feature, as front-page news, the release of Qaboos' official proclamations and exchanges of greetings with other heads of state. One of the most powerful tools for promoting Qaboos' authority and public image has been his annual tours, during which he travels throughout the country to meet people and hold large public gatherings (*Majlis*). During this time, citizens can petition him directly and grievances are rectified by summoning the offending ministers, who are required to attend (Chatty 2009: 57).

Oman's political settlement thus continues to rest on a basic foundation of autocratic personal rule underpinned by a narrative that astutely monopolises outcome legitimacy for Sultan Qaboos alone. However, this was not an inevitable outcome. A competing vision for a constitutional monarchy had been championed by Oman's first prime minister, Qaboos' uncle Tariq bin Taimur, who spoke 'volubly about his aims to achieve a democratic, constitutional, de-tribalised, internationalised, Arab and outward looking Sultanate' (Crawford 1970: 2).

Qaboos deemed this more inclusive political framework inappropriate for Oman – a determination that was presumably acceptable to the British government as well (Takriti 2013a: 206-221). The British Consulate General in Muscat recorded notes on a private conversation with Qaboos in which Qaboos asserted that the idea of a constitution for Oman was not widely supported, and that authority would rest with him:

> On 30 October [1970], Sayyid Qabus described to me in firm and decisive tones his own views on his relations with Tariq and the new government. He said that he had spoken to many of the Sheikhs and Walis in the country and also to individual members of the government about the question of a constitution. None had wished it at this stage in the Sultanate's development since was an irrelevancy… The Sultan said as he learned more about Tariq, he gained the impression that even he would not force the issue of a constitution and would apply his mind, as Qabus hoped he would, to the essential task of determining the government's areas of responsibility and decision under the sultan's overall direction. Sayid Qabus made it clear that his voice would predominate in military, financial and external affairs (Crawford 1970: 1).

The contingent, agential and discursive factors outlined above were critical to shaping the contours of Oman's political settlement, but so too was the coercive capacity provided by the British military and Foreign Office. Without active British support it is doubtful that Qaboos would have had the military capacity to quell the Dhofari rebellion that constituted the most immediate threat to his early rule. The British-led counterinsurgency was often brutal, using torture and demonstrative violence to subjugate the Dhofari fighters: 'We burnt down rebel villages and shot their goats and cows… Any enemy corpses we recovered were propped up in the Salalah *souk* as a salutary lesson to any would-be freedom fighters' (Cobain 2016, Kindle location 1510, citing a British officer quoted in Halliday 1974, 351). Such strong external coercive support obviated the need to divert the state's limited bureaucratic capacity towards administering an effective military, as was typically the case when political settlements were forged in Europe (Tilly 1992). Along with their active combat role, British SAS squadrons also operated Civil Action Teams, which focused on the so-called 'hearts and minds' components of the counterinsurgency campaign, and establishing rudimentary health, education, and agricultural services in Dhofar as more of the rebels surrendered (Cobain 2016, Kindle location 1635; DeVore 2012, 152; Worrall 2013, 83).

Information gathering was a core component of this effort and the British established, and subsequently led, Oman's intelligence agencies until 1992, when the first Omani director of the Internal Security Service was appointed (Eickleman and Dennison 1994: 6). The extent of British dominance in the intelligence apparatus was such that all documentation was still required to be in English, which caused resentment among local staff. Eickleman and Dennison quote one Omani officer as saying in the late 1970s: 'we are ashamed to have translated into English on [sic] what people are saying about their government' (1994: 15).

The role of the British in establishing and subsequently maintaining the dominant narrative of Qaboos as a singularly decisive agent of change is emphasised by the ongoing classification of some of the key archival documents surrounding the 1970 coup. Documents covering the British role in the coup only exist in the public sphere because they were temporarily misfiled and happened to be uncovered by dogged researchers, particularly Abdel Razzaq Takriti (2013b, 156) and Marc DeVore.[39]

39 DeVore recounted his search through the archives in BBC4 2009.

These documents remained classified despite the normal 'thirty-year rule' of classification having long been exceeded. Abdel Razzaq Takriti commented on his own archival search:

> The British Foreign Office continues to suppress the documents pertaining to the coup up to this very day. Unsurprisingly then, not a single detailed study of it has been made so far. Nevertheless, relevant documents were found after a seven-year search, tucked away in a seemingly unrelated Ministry of Defence (MOD) file, having escaped the watchful eyes of official censors. On the basis of these documents, it is now possible to reconstruct the course of events [of the coup] (Takriti 2013b: 156).

A recent search of the British archives by the authors revealed that most related files still remain closed until at least 1 January 2021 under the prejudice-based exemption. This includes the 'Coup in Oman and Muscat Part 1' file within the Prime Minister's Office (Correspondence and Papers, PREM 15/537), which was reviewed in 2012 but resealed until January 2021, along with the 'Successional claim of Sayyid Qabus of Muscat and Oman' (FCO 8/1551), and 'Safe conduct for ex-Sultan of Muscat and Oman after coup d'etat' (FCO 8/1424). It appears, therefore, that almost fifty years after the coup, there is a sense within the British government that the 'renaissance' framing of Qaboos' early rule ought not be explicitly challenged by information revealing the extent of British involvement in his ascent to power.

The depth of the British involvement underscores an apparent contradiction in Sultan Qaboos' achievements: on the one hand, he presided over a period of extraordinary economic development and is genuinely admired by the majority of Omanis, who credit him personally with developing the country against the odds. On the other, his rule was greatly facilitated (some say created) by British imperial interests (Takriti 2013a; 2013b), which helped him to consolidate a highly exclusive political system that is being increasingly, albeit quietly, questioned as succession looms (see Hunt 2014). The fact that the political settlement remains, at least discursively, inextricable from the personality of Sultan Qaboos raises questions over its durability once he leaves office.

4

Implications

Did the stars simply align for Oman? Was its unexpected transition from entrenched poverty and violent insurrection essentially the result of a series of largely fortunate – but unrepeatable – circumstances, combined with Qaboos' personal skill at negotiating change when presented with critical junctures? To an extent this is of course true, and the case of Oman highlights how contingent political trajectories are. Without a relatively well-educated group to staff its early bureaucracy, Oman is unlikely to have been able to achieve the rapid economic development that it did. Qaboos' access to this group – grateful to be living in Oman after the revolution in Zanzibar, and possessing skills conducive to implementing development programs and working in international industries – proved critical to Oman's development. He also had access to unprecedented levels of oil wealth, and a high degree of external assistance from a powerful state that sought economic (though not necessarily political) development for Oman.

Transnational context

The British government's strategic interests in establishing a stable Oman meant that it strongly supported the new Sultan, whom it saw as ideologically and strategically aligned. In so doing, the British government invested heavily in the cultivation of a narrative about national cohesion – an ambition that is now viewed with suspicion as either neo-colonial or simply unviable. However, the brushstrokes of this effort (coercive support mixed with various so-called 'hearts and minds' campaigns) were broadly consistent with those in other British counterinsurgency campaigns. These include Palestine, Greece, Malaya, Egypt, Kenya, Cyprus, Aden and Borneo (DeVore 2011, 488), and more recently Afghanistan and Iraq, where similar levels of national cohesion and development did not follow. That is, the results were not repeated elsewhere. Why? This paper has argued that historical and structural context are obviously crucial to answering this question. However, Omani agency is crucial too – and not only that of Sultan Qaboos, but also that of the diverse groups that have participated in the (re)production of a narrative that imbues the country's political settlement with local legitimacy. The renaissance narrative overstates the degree to which Sultan Qaboos acted alone to effect change, but its empirical veracity is not the point. Not only does it assign legitimacy to the notion that Sultan Qaboos was uniquely endowed to steer the rapid evolution of Oman's political settlement; it also actively excludes alterative ways of understanding the processes of contestation that this entailed.

To be clear, this is not to suggest that the colonial or counterinsurgency-based models are an appropriate basis for development assistance – the devastating ramifications of these practices are as well documented. Rather, this paper has sought to illustrate the degree to which Oman's developmental trajectory deviated from the orthodox 'theories of change' held by most contemporary development organisations, and the salience of factors that are normally held to be peripheral to processes of domestic change. For a political settlements framework to be a useful component of development actors' work, its analytical scope must include the broader relationship between recipient states and global structures of power. Without this, the international complexities and inequalities that help to fuel poverty, conflict, and instability will be written out of the picture.

Secondary education

The domestic dimension of political settlements also offers some important implications regarding education. This paper, in common with a growing body of research carried out for the Developmental Leadership Program (DLP), suggests that the availability of quality secondary education provides an important – though not sufficient – base from which locally owned development has tended to emerge.[40] DLP research on developmental leadership in Ghana (Jones et al. 2014), Somaliland (Phillips 2013), Mauritius (Braugtigam and Diolle 2009), and Botswana (Sebudubudu and Molutsi 2009) have all highlighted various ways in which quality, meritocratic secondary schools have featured in the biographical backgrounds of leaders and elites who have shaped local developmental outcomes.

40 The implications of this suggestion may be daunting for development practitioners: correlations between development and improvements to the quality of secondary education are difficult to demonstrate in the short term. Results may only become apparent after decades rather than the two- to five-year windows more typical in development program monitoring and evaluation, and even then causation is challenging, perhaps impossible, to prove definitively.

The paper on Somaliland (Phillips 2013; see also Phillips 2016) argues, for example, that quality secondary education was one of the most important factors that Somaliland's relevant political elite had in common, and that this appears critical to the emergence and maintenance of a peaceful political settlement following the civil war in the 1990s. In particular, it found that a disproportionate number of Somaliland's most influential political actors attended one school in particular (Sheekh School), which taught a curriculum that prioritised leadership skills and critical thought. A key indication of the importance of Sheekh School is the fact that all but one of its four presidents attended it, as did all three of its vice presidents.

Similarly, Braugtigam and Diolle find that in Mauritius, an 'unusually high number of people who were stakeholders and decision-makers at independence were graduates of the island's elite, meritocratic government-run secondary school, Royal College' (2009: 32). In Botswana, Sebudubudu and Molutsi (2009: 29) find that 'many of the elite studied together in institutions outside the country and/or in a few elite schools within the country, [where] they developed a common political and social value system.' In Ghana as well, Jones et al. (2014: 43) demonstrate the importance of one particular meritocratic and publicly funded secondary school (Achimota), which was attended by around a quarter of the country's most significant developmental leaders.[41]

Of course, quality education does not ensure effective leadership, and neither does its absence ensure poor leadership. But there is a growing body of evidence that points to the longer-term significance of quality secondary education in the backgrounds of leaders that pursue broadly inclusive development goals. Despite these findings, secondary education is seldom funded by major international donor agencies – partly because the Millennium Development Goals focused solely on achieving universal primary education. Rather, Western programs to advance developmental reform through education are focused on tertiary level students and professionals, and are generally imbued with an explicit aim of teaching liberal democratic values and concepts.[42] Educational programming that emphasises independent critical thought instead of specific norms and values is less apparent.

This paper has suggested that the rapid economic transition formed the essential backdrop to Oman's developmental progress, and was the linchpin of the country's early political settlement. Without the major economic changes Qaboos would have had few outcomes with which to illustrate the purportedly stark difference between his leadership and that of his father. However, without also having access to a relatively well-educated group of citizens to staff the early bureaucracy, Oman is unlikely to have been able to sustain the economic development that has underpinned the settlement beyond the initial influx of revenue.

This paper has argued, therefore, that the political settlement emerged initially out of a series of fortuitous junctures that culminated in the state's unprecedented ability to co-opt, and sometimes coerce, the population with new oil revenues. The settlement has endured, however, to a significant degree because the nature of the transition was astutely reproduced in a narrative that has excluded alternative ways of understanding the changes Omanis were experiencing. This exclusion is particularly pronounced regarding the autocratic nature of politics, and the role of the British in violently suppressing the Dhofari insurgency. Here, the apparent improvements in prosperity and security are framed as inextricably linked to the personal qualities of Sultan Qaboos, in a discursive move that forecloses debate about how the political settlement will adapt to the Sultan's successor once Qaboos leaves office.

41 The attribution of the term 'most significant developmental leaders' is, of necessity, partly subjective. The authors included in their list leading technocrats, academics, journalists, activists and political leaders who were widely acknowledged to have worked towards creating reforms (Jones, et al. 2014: 41-42).

42 Such programs include the U.S.-Middle East Partnership's Leaders for Democracy Fellowship Program, the Fulbright Program, Harvard University's Ash Center for Democratic Governance, and Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government. For further discussion of these programs and the impact of Western education on democratisation see Gift and Krcmaric (2015).

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