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Interactive Heritage: Oman's Shura Culture and Deliberative Democracy

Democracy has been the ideology of choice to fight the enemies of the United States for decades. As terrorism flourishes in the present day, greater numbers of scholars and analysts blame authoritarian petro-states as the cause. Their antidote is democracy and indeed, Western-style democracy, with its contested elections and transitions of power, is the gold standard of current US policy. Yet for all the complaints about a lack of popular democracy in the Middle East, one country has been quickly gaining momentum on the democratic front. That country is Oman, a nation with a population of about 3.5 million near the strategic entrance to the Persian Gulf. How is it possible that one study after another and intensive research has consistently ignored a country that today enjoys universal suffrage, including women? (Ehteshami, 2003). Jeremy Jones, a senior strategic fellow at Oxford University's Center for Islamic Studies, speculates that Oman is often lumped together with other GCC nations¹ due to its small size, and is thus ignored as an independent country (Jones, 2007). There is no excuse for such ignorance of a geopolitically important and progressive country. Although Oman has garnered more attention recently after becoming the first Middle Eastern country to sign a free-trade agreement with the United States, much more analysis of its unique system of government is needed. Over the past three decades, Sultan Qaboos bin Sa'id has carefully charted a course of increased democracy by institutionalizing the use of Oman's traditional *shura* political

¹Gulf Cooperation Council nations: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE (Global Security, 2005)

process in a new body known as the *Majlis al-Shura*, a democratically elected consultative council. This consensus-driven process makes Oman an example of popular deliberative democracy, a theory which attempts to lessen the divisiveness in traditional aggregative democracies.

While scholars have ignored Oman, they have not been so uninterested with the *diwaniyah* of Kuwait. These popular meetings are supposed to be evident of a mass movement of the body politic, and indeed, they have gained some rights over the past few years. Yet for all of the laudations that the Kuwaiti government receives, the results of reforms have been negligible in light of Oman's. Kuwait's *diwaniyahs*, despite being more diffuse in society and having greater popular participation, do not nearly embody the ideals of deliberative democracy as effectively as Oman's *Majlis al-Shura*, based on the inclusion of different groups into the political process and the power people wield over their own government. In this paper, the abstract theory of deliberative democracy will be analyzed first, followed by its specific applicability to Oman. Second, a history of Oman's 1400 year democratic tradition will lead to the modern day development of Oman's democratic institutions, and why deliberative democracy was the effective choice after the Dhofar War. Third, a complete comparison of Oman's democracy to the *diwaniyah* of Kuwait will follow, with special focus on the gains the two populations have made toward a popular democratic system of government and on the status of women's rights. Finally, this paper will analyze Oman's critics and look at how Oman's government and people view their country. Oman deserves greater research attention from Western universities, a goal this paper attempts to rectify.

Deliberative Democracy: Theory and Practice

The concept of democracy is one of the oldest and most discussed topics in political theory. How should a government be designed, what rights should a people have and what is society's definition of justice are all questions without easy answers. Even harder is the balancing of individual and collective rights. One theory that attempts to answer these questions is known as deliberative democracy. In the book *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson identify four main characteristics of deliberative democracy: it justifies actions by the government, it makes those actions accessible, it binds those actions on everyone and it encourages a dynamic process of discussion. This leads to their definition of deliberative democracy as “[...] a form of government in which free and equal citizens (and their representatives), justify decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible, with the aim of reaching conclusions that are binding on all citizens but open to challenge in the future” (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004, 7). In a deliberative democratic system of government, political factions will not try to outmaneuver each other for victory, but instead identify solutions that are mutually acceptable and explainable to the public. The goal is to make everyone amenable to even the most controversial proposals, since all sides of an argument have been heard, and the justifications for the final decision are easily available. In short, this form of government increases transparency between the decision-makers and the people. In order for deliberative democracy to function in the long-term, it requires three critical elements: reciprocity and publicity (O’Flynn, 2006) as well as accountability (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004). Reciprocity demands that each citizen and representative explain their actions with justifications. Publicity demands that decisions are

explained to everyone as much as possible, and accountability requires that representatives be controlled by the people they represent. These factors come together to encourage mutual respect and build a society around a civic framework.

This binding around a national unity of deliberative democracy is particularly effective in war-torn countries with different sects or ethnic identities (O'Flynn, 2006). By allowing even small ethnic groups to discuss their issues and be part of a consensus-driven process, decisions can and will seem more acceptable, encouraging further political reconciliation. This can make even the most turbulent transition from terror to democracy less painful and significantly shorter. Of course, the other concern after a significant conflict is the risk of anarchy from a lack of political leadership. This balance can be achieved with a system of government that David van Mill calls an absolutist democracy. Following some of the threads of Hobbes arguments, he writes that "I suggest that instead of trying to control power, or divide it up or make it safe, the best solution is simply to give it back to the people and trust them, because as Hobbes noted many years ago, if sovereigns are going to abuse power, there is little to be done about it at the constitutional level" (van Mill, 2006, 141). This idea is inline with the deliberative democracy ideal. Creating strong democratic institutions requires centralized national leadership, but also an accountable leader to discourage authoritarianism. Van Mill has addressed this fundamental problem by relying on the people to enforce a moderating influence on the leadership and each other. As will be shown later, this effectiveness was critical in the reforms that Sultan Qaboos began after the Dhofar War. First, however, it is important to look at how critics have challenged this theory.

Deliberative democracy had a renaissance in the 1990s after the repeated failure of democratic theory to address war-torn nations in the Middle East, Africa and the former Soviet Union republics. With the increased discussion came heated debate about its effectiveness, and

the potential negatives of a deliberative democratic system of government. First among these negatives is the question whether deliberative democracy protects individual rights. Since nearly all laws can be changed (even if by consensus), certain individual rights may not be protected. A common example would be the *Brown v. Board of Education* case requiring the desegregation of public schools. The claim is that if the United States were a consensus-based democracy, desegregation would never have occurred. While this argument appears to have merit, it fails to take into account one of the basic tenets of deliberative democracy: that everyone is equal and free with the power to debate and negotiate. African-Americans never had this equality or that power. Therefore, it is pure speculation what would have happened if America were a deliberative democracy. One of the more prominent critiques of the theory itself is the alleged political instability in deliberative democratic countries. Specifically, every generation or even every new cohort of leaders can completely replace the current code of laws. This argument assumes that the laws passed by a legislative body and forced on people without their active consent is a positive. As Gutmann and Thompson write, “By allowing for orderly change that takes into account how justified particular laws are, deliberative democracy offers the degree of deference to the past, but no more” (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004, 54). In their argument against this point, the two note that aggregative democracy does not prevent such fundamental changes either, and major changes can happen suddenly with little public input (such as with Supreme Court decisions). One final critique involves the bias of the people deliberating laws. Skeptical political scientists believe that those debating proposals will be better educated and will have a selection bias toward the elite. While this critique is completely valid, and likely true as well, the system is no worse than aggregative democracies currently in place.² While deliberative democracy may not change this

²After all, the US Senate is not called a millionaires’ club for no reason

bias, the system is crafted in such a way that even those not connected to the elite have a voice.

Deliberative democracy has many strengths and weaknesses, and Oman has used these to its advantage, which will be discussed next.

Oman Democratic Development: From Mohammed to the *Majlis al-Shura*

Understanding Oman's current democracy requires a clear view of its unique political culture and history, especially that of *shura*. Oman has some of the most progressive policies in the Middle East, despite being one of its most conservative countries. This interplay comes from *shura*, which is the name of the consensus-driven process of making political decisions, even at the highest levels of government. Unlike the divisive and angry politics that often characterize politics in Western democracies, Oman relies on finding solutions that all can find supporting. In other words, Oman exhibits the characteristics of deliberative democracy. According to Jones, Omanis have a social desire to showcase an ideology of politeness in the public sphere (Jones, 2007). This has many individual effects, but one of the most important is that the progressive measures supported by the sultan are not easily blocked for religious reasons. Since the sultan has made it a national priority to modernize, this politeness and the *shura* process prevents hard-line conservatives from preventing the policy from being put into place. However, since the process allows for debate, even those who may not be happy with the final results are not disenchanted, for their input was valued and considered in the decision-making process. It is garnering all of these views from different sectors of the population that has made *shura* so democratic, and why the government of Oman has been more progressive in recent years. This political culture comes from necessity, as Oman has a very diverse population split between different races and religions

(Jones, 2007). As this paper previously discussed, deliberative democracy is particularly effective in diverse countries such as Oman. The strength of Oman's political institutions is its longevity – the ideals embodied in Oman's political culture are more than a millennia old.

Oman is considered by some to be the oldest functioning democracy, with about twelve centuries of government, although not without interruptions (Ghubash, Hussein. Trans. Mary Turton, 2006). In fact, Oman is mostly a product of the democratic elements of the Qur'an and Islam. According to the Qur'an, the caliph must be elected by the sunna and should not be a theocratic leader. As Hussein Ghubash states clearly, "The *umma*, or community, is the source of legitimate power in Islam" (Ghubash, Hussein. Trans. Mary Turton, 2006, 4). The idea that the community should decide its leader is part of *shura*, the term of which comes from the Qur'an itself. The theory was first clearly used during the consultation of the community of believers in finding the first caliph after the death of the Prophet Mohammed. In addition, Islam and the Qur'an have many other elements that would be considered part of a liberal democracy, including the rule of law and equality (Riphenburg, 1998). However, it is important to note that while there is equality among believers, there is no equality for those who are not Muslim. The Qur'anic origins of this theory of governance provides great strength to the ideas of deliberative democracy in Oman and in other Muslim countries. Beyond the Qur'an, a sect of Islam known as *Ibadhi* Islam³ was the most formative of Oman's political character in its early history. The sect created a democratic system for deciding on a future leader of the community, known as the *Imam*. People would nominate candidates for the position, and then the religious scholars would choose the best candidate. Heredity was discouraged in the position, and an emphasis was placed on selecting the

³Which is considered part of the *Kharijite* sect, one of the first groups to leave the main religious body of Islam (Riphenburg, 1998).

best adult male in the community. This choice in turn was put before the people for final acceptance (Ghubash, Hussein. Trans. Mary Turton, 2006). This level of support for wide consultation is impressive given its origins in the eighth century. While this system had interruptions due to different caliphs invading the area, the ideals of the system have lasted into the twenty-first century (Rippenburg, 1998).

While the actual government of Oman may have changed over the centuries, its basic framework has not. The primary system has been one in which a strong leader sets the agenda and who is balanced by the community. This system is still in place today, if more institutionalized than before. The history of this development over the past three decades is largely synonymous with the history of Oman's current ruler, Sultan Qaboos. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was an armed conflict in the southern region of Oman known as the Dhofar War. The conflict came out of grievances against the sultan of Oman at the time, Sa'id bin Taymur, and was partially financed by the Soviet Union. The war began in 1965 and was fought steadily with standard counterinsurgency tactics until July 23, 1970, when Taymur was deposed by Qaboos bin Sa'id. The new sultan targeted the root causes of the conflict, eliminating the moral legitimacy of the fighters and thereby preventing them from recruiting the numbers needed to continue the fight. What should have been an enormously long war, according to J. E. Peterson in *Oman's Insurgencies*, became a smoldering fire that was eventually put out within a matter of years. In the aftermath of the war, the *shura* process and deliberative democracy greatly unified the country. Rather than suppressing the political power of the enemy fighters, Sultan Qaboos reintegrated the fighters quickly into his new government, and even some prominent rebels were offered government positions. The sultan then proceeded to use Oman's new oil wealth to quickly modernize and develop the Dhofar region, going so far as to give about 40% of the oil profits to

an area of Oman with only 10% of the population (Peterson, 2007). Throughout this process, the sultan maintained steady leadership. Most importantly, he was involved in everyday government decision-making, as he acted as both the head of state and head of government (Allen and Rigsbee, 2000). This allowed him to quickly modernize the country, and begin to increase popular participation in the government.

Oman has had meetings for centuries known as *majlis*, which provided input to the government and allowed it to hear about real issues. These meetings were stopped at times, including during the reign of Sultan Taymur (Allen and Rigsbee, 2000). Sultan Qaboos wanted a return to the consultative process that had been the hallmark of Oman since its early days. Starting in 1975, he began a yearly tour of the country in which he directly addressed the issues of the people (Allen and Rigsbee, 2000). On the institutional level, he created the first representative council in 1981 called the State Consultative Council (Peterson, 2007). While the council began with a very limited range of decision-making authority, representatives quickly gained more power, including the right to look at legislation before it was handed to the sultan. In 1983, the closed sessions of the council were broadcast to the public for the first time (Allen and Rigsbee, 2000), just four years after the creation of C-SPAN in the United States. The State Consultative Council continued to evolve until it was replaced in 1990 by the *Majlis al-Shura*. The *Majlis al-Shura* had representatives from each of the regions of Oman, and they were selected by the region themselves (although not without the approval of the sultan) (Allen and Rigsbee, 2000). Over time, the new council gradually expanded both its powers and its electoral suffrage, up to and including universal suffrage for all adults over the age of 21 in the past few years (Peterson, 2007). In 1996, the first written constitution of Oman was promulgated and placed into force, and the government continued to evolve with the creation of the Council of State, whose role appears

to be similar to the US Senate or the British House of Lords. It is important to note that Oman's government is not stagnate, and has yet to stop evolving its institutions. This is mostly due to the motives of Sultan Qaboos, explained next.

The question of why the sultan brought democracy back to Oman is simple considering the political framework already in place in Oman. The *Majlis al-Shura* formalized what was already a political reality – that a process of consensus had worked for Oman for centuries and did not need to stop in the modern era. By putting together a council, the sultan was able to bring the process to the forefront, and slowly build participation – enhancing the process simultaneously (Jones, 2007). This goal is also documented by Anoushiravan Ehteshami, who states that political participation was the primary goal of the new council (Ehteshami, 2003). The reasons behind the sultan's decision are not as Byzantine as they seem. Given the events in the region, and the potentially explosive diversity of religions in the country, increasing participation within the context of tradition was an excellent method for keeping the country moderated against extremism, as described earlier regarding the theory of deliberative democracy. The council does increase popular participation and representation, as those elected to the council are members of their home regions (Jones, 2007). However, the sultan is not completely innocent in these changes either. There was increasing demand for a more democratic process from the new merchant class in the late 1970s. As Calvin Allen and W. Lynn Rigsbee put it:

Likewise, the development of the consultative bodies has followed a pattern of change only after internal pressure, the most notable example here being the development of legislative review. While protecting his own authority, most particularly in the area of defense, Qaboos's most notable accomplishment has been to sense the winds of change and not resist the moves to limit royal sovereignty (63).

This criticism is valid to a degree, but also shows the power of the Omani people. Between the *Majlis al-Shura* and the *majlis*, everyday Omanis have the power to shape the policies that affect

them. Considering Oman's status in 1970, Oman's development to democracy has been nothing short of extraordinary, especially considering some of its neighbors in the Middle East and the lack of violence used by the people.

Oman's Modern Democracy

The power to shape policies lie in the electoral structure of the *Majlis al-Shura* and that body's substantive politics. The quiet nature of elections has led some to believe that Oman has no politics at all (Jones, 2007), but this claim is spurious. Omani elections are not designed to pit two candidates against each other in a death match with character assassinations and divisive politics such as those found in races for the United States Congress, but rather to identify the candidate that represents the district best and can move the consensus of the council forward. Since all candidates are running to show their point of view in the *shura* process, none of them take positions on political issues, since doing so would prevent them from reaching consensus. This is also the reason why political parties do not exist in Oman. While there is a constitutional ban on patently religious parties (such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt), political parties are seen as divisive in Oman, and would lead to more strife and less dynamic laws (Jones, 2007). Perhaps the best news is that elections are already becoming a part of the fabric of Oman's political life: Ehteshami writes that "Even in the 2000 election, one could sense a high degree of institutionalization of elections: the process was referred to as *intikhab* (election) and not *tarsheeh wa ikhtiyar* (nominations and choice) [...]" (Ehteshami, 2003, 71-72). Official complaints of the election were investigated with expedience as well, although there were still some worries from outside observers. In all, the political decision-making process in Oman is more open and

democratic than ever before.

While Oman's council has become more democratic, the bigger question is how much political power it wields in the current system of government. Although it may be compared to a parliament, the council has no unconditional legislative authority – it cannot pass laws, nor vote for ones that are about to be implemented against the sultan's wishes. However, it does have a couple of powers, namely the right to review culture, social, education and economic issues mostly without interference (Ehteshami, 2003). It also comments on laws and policies set forth from the sultan's cabinet. All of this would seem to indicate nothing more than a show legislature designed to show support among the people for the sultan's policies. In the strict regard for constitutional law, the *Majlis al-Shura* cannot act as a check on the sultan. However, the council is separate from the government. As Allen and Rigsbee note, the representatives are not allowed to be simultaneously in the council and hold a ministry position. While it cannot act as a check on the sultan legally, in reality, it has significantly more power than expected. Because of *shura*, when there is consensus on the council against a new law, the government responds quickly to rectify the issues. In fact, the council works in much the same way as Western parliaments, with committees and multiple readings of bills. After a final version of legislation is agreed to, the sultan usually signs the bill into law, even if it makes changes to his original version (Allen and Rigsbee, 2000). In fact, the opinion of the *Majlis al-Shura* is so highly regarded that even the elite submit to the opinions of the council (Ehteshami, 2003). All of this shows the importance of *shura* process in the everyday politics of Oman. While the Council has no constitutional legislative powers to override the sultan, its ability to “advise and consent” gives it an enormous amount of influence over policy, and ultimately, over the sultan.

Oman and Kuwait: The Different Democratic Experiences

Oman's democracy was developed over a period of three decades, with little anger and animosity. Once completed, the country had one of the most liberal suffrage policies in the Middle East, and had one of the most progressive governments in the Middle East. Kuwait, on the other hand, has had nothing but strife since attempting to gain democracy. Despite what may be perceived as a more deliberative democratic structure for popular participation, Kuwaiti citizens have not yet gained enough legitimacy as a force to prevent the government from acting unilaterally. While this difference is due in part to the leadership of the two countries, this proves the decisiveness of the *shura* process. Oman's leaders cannot go against the consensus of the community without serious repercussions. Conversely, Kuwait's leadership can just ignore the people, even though it has greater popular participation. In other words, deliberative democracy is not a battle of which country has more voters or even the best participation, but rather which follows the spirit of the ideal to the greatest degree. Oman will be compared to Kuwait, which also has a culturally-strong deliberative democratic process. First, this section will provide a background on Kuwait's *diwaniyah*, before moving on to discuss Kuwait's democratic development over the past three decades and a comparison of Oman to Kuwait.

The word *diwaniyah* denotes two different things in Arabic: it is the word to describe a living room, and it also describes a meeting between close acquaintances⁴ (Tétreault, 2000). These meetings are meant to bring neighbors and friends together to socialize on a range of issues, including politics. The history of these meetings is extensive, with some form of them existing for more than four centuries. In the *diwaniyah*, each family sets up the meeting according

⁴The meeting is generally in the living room, hence the Arabic name for the room led to the name of the meetings.

to its wishes, and the son will often take over in the absence of the father. The best *diwaniyah* will have an independent telephone to call friends and do other activities (Royal Scottish Museum, 1985). Unfortunately, the meetings are not entirely democratic, since they usually exclude women. Because they are traditionally male, women have no place to bring up viewpoints or discuss the latest politics in the country, severely diminishing their power to wield political influence. These limitations degrade the democratic nature of the meetings, which is unfortunate, since Kuwaitis have a wide array of protections in the constitution and in the law that protect the *diwaniyah*. Kuwait's system, by its very nature, breaks the fundamental principle of deliberative democracy that everyone is equal.

The most recent developments of democracy in Kuwait show that the system is far more divisive and inefficient than Oman's. One of the first modern examples came during the crackdowns of 1979, when the al-Muhris family was thrown out of the country for inciting riots and religious violence. The government banned all assemblies of 20 people or more, except for the *diwaniyah*. The government went far in its crackdown, but was very much aware that any hindrance of the weekly gatherings would quickly destroy any public goodwill. This pattern of banning gatherings except *diwaniyah* will be seen repeatedly in the modern era, and especially for a time during the democracy protests of 1989-1991. While Kuwait has had elections for decades, the people were powerless to stop Amir Jabir from dissolving parliament in 1989, and lacked any ability to force him to reinstate it. Without any power to petition the government, politicians formed their own *diwaniyah* and began to attract crowds of more than several thousand (Boghardt, 2006). According to Lori Plotkin Boghardt, this is the first time that a mass political movement was formed, as well as the first time there was a mass mobilization of the body politic. As individuals started holding more protest *diwaniyah*, the government responded in force,

arresting and tear-gassing leaders and breaking up meetings. The government then did the unthinkable to many Kuwaitis – it banned any *diwaniyah* that demanded action on a national level (Boghardt, 2006). This action was intolerable to Kuwaitis, and they demanded changes from the Amir. Eventually, the rhetorical heat died down and reformist politicians started using the *diwaniyah* as a means of explaining their views and gaining popular support. All was quiet with the approaching elections of 1992, until the opposition to the government decided to boycott the election. This led to another crackdown on the leaders of the *diwaniyah* (Boghardt, 2006). Overall, what were once deeply-rooted deliberative democratic symbols untouchable by the government had become the center of attacks to prevent democratic development.

This development of democracy leads to a discussion between the elections of Kuwait and Oman. Kuwaiti elections revolve around the *diwaniyah*, since that is where politicians have the most influence. In fact, candidates for office have campaigned at the meetings since the 1963 legislative elections (Tétreault, 2000). In the 1990s, the campaigns began to use their own *diwaniyah* sites, where they could ask audience members questions and respond to their issues. Mary Ann Tétreault believes that the populism of Kuwait can be found in these meetings. She also identifies a pattern called *diwaniyah* voting, in which a large group will agree to support one or two candidates in order to avoid having their votes spread too thinly. This has led to the so-called “Sunni Primary” in which Sunni citizens agree to a select few choices in order to increase their representation in parliament. This strategy has come under fire from the government, and it is trying to pass a “single district” plan that would eliminate much of this power (Tétreault, 2000). From this discussion, there are several important points to glean regarding Kuwait’s democracy. First is the fact that the government has attempted to block mass participation, while Sultan Qaboos has made it a goal of increasing popular participation. The

second and perhaps most important point is that the Kuwaiti government ignored centuries of cultural tradition while the Omani government did not. The Kuwaitis actively tried to suppress the *diwaniyah* in the early 1990s while the Omanis have attempted to enhance the influence of the *shura* process. This different emphasis on the status quo in Kuwait and the political progression in Oman is the main difference between their two democracies. It is all the more interesting considering that Kuwait had legislative elections decades before Oman, yet its people had a harder time protecting their rights than Omanis. Today, Oman enjoys better representation than Kuwait, and it managed to begin these changes without an enormous amount of invective. Altogether, Oman has a stronger deliberative democratic framework because its government is prevented from ignoring the advice of consensus, while the Kuwaiti government has free rein to ignore the popular meetings of everyday people at its pleasure.

Women in Oman and Kuwait

This paper has so far mostly ignored the issue of women in Oman and Kuwait. Underpinning deliberative democracy is the belief that all have an equal right to discuss issues, including women. Islam itself states that all believers are to be treated equally. However, this is not a definitive rule, as Oman is ahead on this political benchmark over Kuwait, both in regard to women participating in the political process and their representation in the upper echelons of government. Oman is the leading proponent for women's rights in the region, and it was the first country in the Middle East to allow women to vote as well as having the first women minister in the cabinet (Fattah, 2006). These two milestones are not merely ephemeral instances of political expediency, but rather a concerted effort by the entire government to bring more women into the

political process. Even in a conservative country such as Oman, fully 33% of the population agree that woman should be able to hold top legislative and executive positions. Over the years, the Omani government has increased funding for women's training centers, and in 1994, 20% of the government workforce was composed of women. Oman remains more liberal than other Arab nations, but it is important to note that the society still holds a widely conservative view on the role of women (Fattah (2006) and Allen and Rigsbee (2000)). The answer to how Oman can be so progressive again lies in the modernity of its current sultan. When the Council of State was created in 1996, the sultan appointed several women to it, designed to exemplify that women can hold top positions in the "think tank" of the government. Even more importantly, he appointed three women to the cabinet in 2004 as the Ministers of Tourism, Social Development and Higher Education, further demonstrating a commitment to wide participation in government. While it is still difficult to run for office as a woman due to social constraints, there appears to be gaps opening in the façade of conservatism in Oman (Jones, 2007).

While Oman has made important progress in making women equal to men, the same cannot be said for Kuwait. The *diwaniyah*, one of the most basic social elements available to publicly participate in the political process, is almost invariably men only. This prevents women from gaining a voice, and it also prevents them from emphasizing women's issues, creating a dangerous feedback loop. As discussed previously, campaigns will often set up their own *diwaniyah* as a means to connect to voters. During one event featuring female speakers, the audience was heavily segregated between men and women, and women had a much more difficult time discussing what they heard due to the claustrophobic conditions on their side of the aisle (Tétreault, 2000). However, by the 1996 election, women had become more mobilized in Kuwait and had started bringing their issues to the fore of some campaigns. Without a vote, though, they

were still shackled in Kuwait's political system (Tétreault, 2000). Thankfully, Kuwait has recently expanded suffrage to women in 2005, and women voted in parliamentary elections for the first time in 2007 (Freedom House, 2007). Nonetheless, women in Kuwait received the vote several years after Oman, and they still remain locked out of the *diwaniyah*. Not all is different between the countries, however. Culturally, they both have traditional views on women, although Oman is slightly more liberal than Kuwait. This pervades the entire society, from health care to education and employment. Overall, these two countries show how different democratic approaches can be for some members of the population. Oman's *shura* process assures that women have a protected say in the decisions of government. As Jeremy Jones brilliantly characterizes

“[Sultan Qaboos] has clearly stated that to exclude women from the public life, either in business or politics, or in any other sphere, would be foolish and self-defeating. Women make up (almost) half the population and the country will only realize half of its potential if women do not play a full part” (174).

This realization has not hit the leaders of Kuwait, who continue to mostly ignore women's issues. Overall, Oman embodies the ideal of deliberative democracy significantly better than Kuwait in regard to women.

Views on Oman: External and Internal

All of this information regarding Oman's democracy needs to be placed in the context of current views of the country from outside observers as well as the views of the Omani people themselves. The US Department of State has many programs of mutual interest with Oman, and it is attempting to expand its bilateral agreements (such as with the recent free-trade agreement mentioned in the introduction). Nonetheless, the 2006 Human Rights report published by the department was direct in its conclusions: “Significant human rights problems remained [in Oman].

Citizens did not have the right to change their government, which is a 'hereditary sultanate.' The government restricted freedoms of speech, the press, assembly and association, and religion. Despite legislated equality for women, discrimination and domestic violence persisted due to social and cultural factors [...]" (U.S. Department of State, 2006). While these claims are certainly valid, this analysis of Oman's current political situation leads to the debate about individual versus collective rights. Muslims sometimes views collective rights higher than some individual rights, in contrast to America (Ghubash, Hussein. Trans. Mary Turton, 2006). It is also important to note that Oman is still progressing, and is certainly not at the zenith of its government and social reforms. Similarly to the United States, Britain – the power that had jurisdiction over Oman for a significant part of the twentieth century – “share[s] excellent bilateral relations” with Oman, especially on defensive matters (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2006). While America and Britain monitor Oman's progress, NGOs are vociferous in their attacks on it. Freedom House, a well-respected NGO devoted to democracy advocacy, gave Oman a six out of seven for political rights and a five out of seven for civil rights, with the best being a one. This led to a rating of “not free” (Freedom House, 2007). It is important to note that their methodology relies on democratic elements found in Western democracies, and fails to take into account the deliberative democratic elements or the individual versus collective rights debate. Internally, Omanis support the consultative *shura* process, but are not looking for a Western-style democracy. In fact, on a scale of one to seven, with seven representing the highest internalization of democracy, Oman was ranked a one (Fattah, 2006). On the other hand, literature by the state emphasizes the democratic and Islamic nature of Oman's system of government, as well as women's participation (both through text and conspicuous photos of women voting and debating issues in the *Majlis al-Shura*) (Oman Ministry of Information, 2000). While there is no clear consensus on Oman's democracy,

either internally or externally, it is clear that the system is continuing to evolve and mature.

Conclusions and Final Words

Looking over the points covered, it is hard to see how researchers and democracy activists have failed to notice the progressive state of Oman. This area of research is certainly being carried out. Lisa Wedeen has studied the Qat chews in Yemen (Wedeen, 2007), and while there are some strong similarities with Kuwait's *diwaniyah*, Oman's *shura* process of government is in a league of its own in terms of including the largest percentage of the population into the democratic process. One element that this paper did not cover was the plight of migrant workers, who are entirely excluded from the electoral system. While this is a major gap in Oman's democracy, it is also a gap in the United States' as well. Oman's transformation to a deliberative democracy demonstrates how far other countries in the region, such as Kuwait, have to go. While Kuwaitis have managed to gain some semblance of democratic rights, it has utterly failed to integrate women into the fold. Looking at the process and results of the political life in Oman and Kuwait, it is clear that Oman's *shura* process is significantly more powerful over the government than the *diwaniyah*, despite being less diffuse in the population. In conclusion, Oman better embodies the ideal of deliberative democracy than Kuwait. It remains ahead of its time in the region, and its political stability will allow millions to enjoy popular democracy everyday. In the words of President George W. Bush: "Oman is leading the pursuit of social and economic reforms in the region [...]" (Bush, 2006). As democracy in the Middle East remains elusive for reformers, more and more will look to a country that has managed to adjust from a conservative and traditional political culture to a modern one in less than two decades, all without strife and violence.

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