

In Oman the Old Monarch Passed Away, but the New One Will Guarantee Continuity

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The Sultan of Oman – Qaboos bin Said Al Said – passed away at the age of 79. He was the longest serving monarch in the Gulf. Within 24 hours, an envelope with his will got opened, and the new ruler was announced and sworn in before the governing family council.

His name is Haitham bin Tariq Al Said, and he is a former Minister of Heritage and Culture of the Sultanate of Oman, as well as a cousin of the late Sultan.

I was given this news before it hit the wires, in Tokyo, by my friend, Dr Hamed Alhamami, Director of UNESCO Regional Bureau for the Arab States and Representative to Lebanon and Syria. We know each other well, from my “Lebanon years”, and now he came to Japan for just a few days, in order to forge a closer co-operation with the Japanese government and to seal support for Yemen and Syria.

Dr. Alhamani, an Omani himself, is a good friend of the new ruler.

We were just ready to depart together for Nikko, an ancient World Heritage Site north of Tokyo, when I noticed that he had tears in his eyes. He explained:

“Our ruler died in Oman, after years of terminal illness. He was the most important person in my country. He changed everything there. When I was a child, we could not even afford a pair of shoes. Now, the citizens of Oman are enjoying free education, medical care and each 20-year-old person, either a woman or a man, has the right to receive from the state, 600 square meters of land.”

While visiting Oman, which is, at least on paper, not as wealthy as Saudi Arabia or Bahrain, I did not witness any misery as in the above-mentioned countries. It is a nation tolerant towards the Shi’a, a friend of Syria and Iran, as well as both parts of the bitterly divided Yemen. It is a “unique”, different Gulf state, respected by all Arab countries, having no disputes with its neighbors.

Throughout the bitter war in Syria, a war ignited by the West and its allies in the Gulf, Oman has been maintaining its diplomatic presence in Damascus. It has also been sending regular flights to Yemen, bringing the injured and ill people to Muscat, so they can be treated by the best medical facilities in the country, of course for free. The relationship between Muscat and Teheran is also good, even now, when the White House is igniting military conflict in the region.

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Oman has been maintaining very good relationship, with both Beijing and Tokyo.

Dr. Alhamami came to Japan to strengthen collaboration between UNESCO – Arab Region, and Japan, particularly to support the education sector in both Syria and Yemen.

And so, it happened that during his visit to Japan, Oman’s monarch died, and the new one took the reins of power.

During the train journey, Hamed explained to me, in detail:

“The former Sultan built the nation with a focus on the people, lifting the country out of poverty and modernizing and developing it with educated, healthy people. Education all the way to the highest level is free and students are even paid a monthly stipend of up to US\$300.”

Health care is also free. There are centers that attend to primary care, and for more complex cases, patients are referred to hospitals.”

Dr Hamed Alhamami used to work in the education sector of Oman:

“For education, the former Sultan was particularly hands-on. When I was the director general of curriculum at the Education Ministry, I used to get his hand-written notes with comments on the textbooks...”

Sounds like socialism, Arab-style? Yes, perhaps, except that it is not called like this in the Middle East, even when it actually is.

As the old, beautiful local train was climbing up towards the mountains and the ancient city of Nikko, itself a UNESCO protected world heritage site, Hamed could not stop counting the great achievements of his former monarch:

“And you know, for the poor students, things improved dramatically, too. They could be enrolled in private universities at government expense and would still be eligible for a government stipend.”

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And now? Sultan Qaboos did not have children. And so, Haitham bin Tariq Al Said was handpicked before the old monarch passed away.

Oman and its ruler have been, especially recently, obsessed with culture; local, Arab and foreign. A new lavish opera house in Muscat, and new elegant museums, were clear proof of it. The choice of Haitham bin Tariq was therefore logical.

Culture and harmony, in the turbulent sea of the region. The Middle East is on fire, but Oman appears to be calm, at least for now.

I asked Hamed, what he predicts will happen now, in the near future?

He replied without much hesitation:

“Externally, the former Sultan enforced a non-interference foreign policy. The country maintained good relationships with all other states in the area. He paid very close attention to Palestine, Yemen and Syria, providing countries and peoples with both material support and policy advice. I expect the country to closely follow the path laid out by the former Sultan.”

And something close to the spirit of UNESCO:

“The new Sultan is a former Minister of Culture and Heritage and was instrumental in signing the co-operation with Syria for its cultural restoration work.”

Oman, perhaps the most stable country in the Gulf, just lost its esteemed ruler who governed for half a century. But it gained another enlightened monarch. It appears that admirable continuity has been quietly ensured.

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