



Election Report

OMAN
Consultative Council Elections
29 October 2023

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Executive Summary

The 2023 Consultative Council election marked a significant milestone in the nation's political landscape as the first of its kind with Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said on the throne. His cousin Qaboos bin Said Al Said, had passed away in 2020 after governing the Sultanate of Oman for 50 years. The election was also pioneer as it was conducted entirely through a mobile app called *Intikhab*, reaching a notable turnout of 65.88%.

Oman is an absolute monarchy where the Sultan wields considerable authority across legislative, executive, and judicial spheres. The Consultative Council represents the main political institution that can channel citizen interests, and the only one elected through open elections. Only individual candidates can run for office, as political parties are not allowed. The election's significance lies not only in its pioneering digital form but also in its reflection of broader socio-political dynamics. It underscores a continuity with past bureaucratic norms while signaling the evolving aspirations and concerns of Omanis, but also their awareness about the limitations of the body, particularly in light of socio-economic challenges and calls for reform.

Against the backdrop of the Israeli invasion of Gaza and Oman's ongoing digitization efforts outlined in the Vision 2040, the election unfolded amidst a blend of geopolitical tensions and domestic aspirations for modernization. Vision 2040 aims at developing strategic sectors like digital infrastructure and green energy sources to diversify the Omani economy and make it more competitive in global markets. Yet, the transition towards digitization has been met with skepticism in certain sectors with concerns about the oversight of these digital tools, potential government surveillance, and the stifling of dissenting voices. Certain candidates were excluded from participating in the election by the governing committee, raising concerns regarding the fairness and transparency of the electoral process. Social media platforms emerged instead as a crucial and more open avenue for political grievance, especially among younger demographics and in contrast to the traditional outlets.

Higher participation in certain districts versus others highlights important differences in the political climate across the country; the governorates of Dhofar and Sharqiyah South participation went beyond 80%. In the sparsely populated Wusta governorate it climbed to 90%. In contrast, in governorates like Dhahirah and Muscat the percentage remained closer to a mere 50%. Further analysis of the results shows that participation among young voters was lower, suggesting less political engagement compared to older generations.

Moving forward, enhancing electoral transparency and fairness remains imperative, necessitating robust mechanisms for oversight and accountability. Addressing disparities in representation, fostering inclusivity, and ensuring open dialogue will be pivotal in fostering trust and confidence in Oman's electoral processes, aligning with aspirations for progress and democratic governance.

Introduction

On October 29th, Oman celebrated the election of its tenth Consultative Council (Majlis al-Shura), where a total of 843 candidates competed for 90 seats, representing 64 electoral constituencies or wilayas, grouped in 11 governorates. The voter turnout was 65.88%, with 496,279 votes cast out of 753,260 registered voters.¹ No women were elected.

It was the first election for the Consultative Council held with Haitham bin Tariq Al Said as Sultan of Oman, after the death of long-term ruler Qaboos bin Said Al Said in 2020, and the first one for this body to be carried out entirely through a mobile phone app, making the Sultanate a pioneer in e-voting.² The platform, called *Intikhab*, completely transformed the usual electoral atmosphere of paper ballots and polling stations as votes were cast from each voter's phone, with no displacement needed.

The election took place without incidents, albeit in a climate of tension due to the ongoing Israeli invasion of the Gaza strip that started on October 7, which sparked severe discontent across Omanis of all ages and political tendencies. Beyond national media and a few outlets from other GCC countries or India, the election received little international coverage.³

Background to the election

The election was held in a context of deep concern about the Israeli invasion of Gaza. The Sultan and different government institutions issued a series of declarations in solidarity with Palestinians while protests against the Israeli occupation took place in Muscat and other cities.⁴ Besides Palestine, the event was the first electoral date after the Covid pandemic, which had accelerated the ongoing process of digitization of Oman as defined in the Vision 2040. The program, a strategy developed by the government towards the modernization of the Sultanate across different spheres, largely resembles the Saudi Vision 2030 drafted by the consulting firm McKinsey, and has the efficiency of political and government institutions as one of its main pillars of action.

To achieve such efficiency, one of the main strategies is the gradual implementation of digital infrastructure to reduce the volume of bureaucracy and

¹ Data from *Intikhab*, the official app the Ministry of Interior has designed for elections in Oman

² Only a few countries allow remote digital voting, usually for expatriates (France), to reach rural areas (Bangladesh), or for people with disabilities (Australia). Estonia is the most advanced example overall; in the 2023 national election, 51% of participation was through e-voting, while 49% opted for polling stations. See e-Estonia. How did Estonia carry out the world's first mostly online national elections? Available at: <https://e-estonia.com/how-did-estonia-carry-out-the-worlds-first-mostly-online-national-elections/>

³ For an analysis of previous legislative elections in Oman, see Marc Valeri, Election Report: Oman/Consultative Council, October 15, 2011. Available at: <http://opemam.org/sites/default/files/ER-Oman-Consultative-Council-2011.pdf>; and Luciano Zaccara, "Comparing Elections in Gulf Cooperation Council Countries after the Arab Spring: The United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Kuwait," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 3, iss. 1 (2013), pp. 80-101.

⁴ Zainab Fattah, "Protests Erupt Across Mideast as Israel Readies Gaza Assault," *Bloomberg*, October 13, 2023. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-10-13/protests-erupt-across-mideast-as-israel-prepares-gaza-assault>; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Oman, "Oman Says Actions of Israeli Occupation Forces in Gaza Constitute War Crimes." Available at: <https://www.fm.gov.om/oman-says-actions-of-israeli-occupation-forces-in-gaza-constitute-war-crimes/>; *Oman Observer*, "His Majesty Reaffirms Oman's Solidarity with Palestinians," October 11, 2023. Available at: <https://www.omanobserver.om/article/1144089/oman/his-majesty/his-majesty-reaffirms-omans-solidarity-with-palestinians>

improve the experience of citizens when dealing with the administration.⁵ The e-voting platform that was used for the elections, *Intikhab*, was developed as a public-private partnership between Omantel and the Ministry of Information to achieve the goals outlined by the Vision 2040.

The increased digitization of the public sphere that the Vision 2040 proposes, however, has been criticized by some as a means of further monitoring public opinion,⁶ and some of the candidates were barred from the electoral lists by the Ministry of Information. Some of the excluded individuals were Awad al-Suwaifi, Majid al-Rahili, and Ahmed al-Hadabi, who had previously served in the Consultative Council during the eighth term (2015-2019). According to human rights organizations, the ministry did not share the reasons for the exclusion.⁷

The election was the first one to be held with Haitham bin Tariq as the Sultan of Oman. Haitham started his rule in 2020 after the death of Qaboos bin Said, and in 2021 made several modifications to the Basic Law of the country to introduce a procedure for succession and established the role of Crown Prince. The 2023 election to the Consultative Council, to some extent, served to mark the continuity with the rule of Qaboos institutionally and politically speaking.

Quantitative indices of democracy

Measurement	Name and year of report	Institution	Index	Points, Ranking, and Classification
Political Rights and Freedom	Freedom House Report, 2023	Freedom House	PR: Political Rights, CL: Civil Liberties	PR: 6/40 CL: 18/60 Classification: Not free
Perception of Corruption	Corruption Perceptions Index, 2022	Transparency International	TICPI: Perception of corruption index	TICPI: 44 (52 in 2021) - 0 very corrupt and 100 very clean Rank 69/180
Political Transformation	Bertelsmann Transformation Report, 2022	Bertelsmann Foundation	PT: Political Transformation	PT: 2.95/10 Rank: 125/137 Classification: Hard-line Autocracy
Democracy Quality	Democracy Matrix 2020	University of Würzburg and German Research Foundation (DFG)	QT: Quality of Democracy	QT: 0.251/1 Rank: 146 out of 176 Classification: Moderate Autocracy
Election Integrity	V-Dem, 2020	Varieties of Democracy	ED: Electoral Democracy CE: Clean Elections	ED: 0.17 / 1 CE: 0.65 / 1

⁵ Oman Vision 2040. Vision Document. Available at: <https://www.oman2040.om/VisionDocument?lang=en>

⁶ Omani Center for Human Rights, The Annual Report of Human Rights in Oman, 2023, p. 20. Available at: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ta_ShokLA7tVuu_VR7iHow9b8x1ZBOaP/view

⁷ Omani Center for Human Rights, Exclusion of Candidates from The Shura Council Elections Without Providing Reasons, June 4, 2023. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20231002053128/https://ochroman.org/eng/2023/06/shura/> (retrieved from Web Archive)

Overview of the political system

The Sultanate of Oman is a hereditary absolute monarchy headed by the Sultan. According to the Basic Statute of 1996 (amended in 2011 and then in 2021), the Sultan serves as Head of State and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, and his person is inviolable.⁸ The Sultan can often accumulate other cabinet positions. The current monarch, Haitham bin Tariq, serves as Prime Minister, as did his predecessor Qaboos bin Said for most of his reign.

The Sultan holds legislative, executive, and judicial powers meaning he can promulgate and ratify laws, appoint and dismiss ministers, cabinet officials (including the PM and the president of the Council of Ministers), judges or military officers, as well as pardon or commute any penalty.⁹

The two main political institutions besides the Sultan himself are the Council of Ministers and the Council of Oman or Majlis Oman, a bicameral organ formed by the Consultative Council or Majlis al-Shura (lower house) and the State Council or Majlis al-Dawla (upper house). The Council of Ministers is meant to assist the Sultan in the formulation and implementation of policies, while the two chambers Council of Oman can approve or amend any laws drafted by the Council of Ministers. The definitive approval, however, rests in the hands of the Sultan.

The Consultative Council is unique in Oman as it possesses a mechanism for interpellation it can direct at any minister. It is, therefore, a body that holds partial legislative and oversight powers. The Consultative Council is also the only democratically elected institution in the Sultanate, with all members chosen through a direct secret ballot every four years.

In parallel to the increased efforts of digitization of the Omani public institutions as described in the Vision 2040 program, an important part of the activity the Consultative and State Councils perform is available online.¹⁰

Electoral system

The only elected representatives in the Omani political system are the members of its lower house, the Consultative Council or Majlis al-Shura. Elections are held every four years and must be called three months before the term officially ends, or before if the Sultan deems it appropriate. The competences of the house, the proceedings to call and hold elections, and the requirements for prospective candidates are outlined in the Art. 48 of the Basic Law.

Candidates to the Consultative Council run as individuals, since political parties are not allowed in the country. Any Omani national can present its candidacy to be elected as a member of the Consultative Council so long they are 30 years old and over, hold at least a General Education Certificate,¹¹ are not sentenced in a criminal case, registered to vote, not placed under guardianship by a court, are mentally fit, and not affiliated with any security or military authority. Elected representatives can present their candidacies for the next term without limit.

⁸ Basic Statute of the State, Art. 41, 1996.

⁹ Ibid, Art. 42.

¹⁰ See Consultative Council website (<https://www.shura.om/>) and State Council website (<https://www.statecouncil.om/>)

¹¹ Which accounts for 12 years of schooling, largely equivalent to K-12 in the US or A-levels in the UK

Voters, on the other hand, must be Omani, 21 and over, and registered to vote in the wilaya they reside in as reflected in their ID. For the 2023 election, electors could register through the *Intikhab* app or the election website until September 14.¹² Voters also needed to have their IDs up to date so they could support the technology required for the election. For this reason, civil service centers remained open on October 28, a Saturday, the day before the election.¹³

In order to cast their votes via the e-voting system, Omanis followed a series of steps on their *Intikhab* app. First, the voter has to take a picture of their ID, front and back, and upload it to the system. Then, they need to approach the ID chip to the phone for scanning - *Intikhab* uses the NFC feature also common in mobile payment apps. After that, voters had to take a self-portrait so the app could validate their identity with biometric data. Finally, voters could choose from the list of candidates available for them in the wilaya and click on the confirmation button to cast their vote. There was also an audio-guided functionality for the visually impaired.

Candidates are elected by direct majority in the constituency they run for. Depending on the population, each wilaya can elect one representative (less than 30,000) or two (30,000 or more).

A key difference with previous elections is that Omanis living outside of the country were allowed to vote from abroad. A total of 13,843 voters cast their votes also through *Intikhab* on October 22 at between 8 am and 7 pm, in contrast with residents in Oman who were scheduled to vote on October 29 during the same hours.¹⁴

Impact of the electoral system (process) and size of the constituency

The electoral results in Oman are deeply influenced by constituency size, electoral district boundaries, and population distribution. The Consultative Council largely overrepresents rural and sparsely populated administrative districts like Wusta (26,131 Omani nationals in 2020)¹⁵ and Musandam (35,346), both with 4 wilayas and 4 delegates each. In contrast, highly populated governorates like Muscat (563,731 nationals, 6 wilayas and 11 representatives), or Batinah North (576,550 nationals, 6 wilayas and 12 representatives) show a notably higher ratio of population per representative: On average, each elected representative in the governorate of Wusta represents 650 Omanis. In contrast, in Muscat, a delegate represents an average of 51,248 voters.¹⁶

¹² *Zawya*, "Shura Council elections: Interior Ministry announces extension of deadline," September 1, 2023. Available at: <https://www.zawya.com/en/world/middle-east/shura-council-elections-interior-ministry-announces-extension-of-deadline-cnbfm44m?amp=1>

¹³ *The Arabian Stories*, "Civil status centres to remain open on Saturday for renewal, replacement of voters civil ID cards," October 26, 2023. Available at: <https://www.thearabianstories.com/2023/10/26/civil-status-centres-to-remain-open-on-saturday-for-renewal-replacement-of-voters-civil-id-cards/>

¹⁴ *Arabian Daily*, "13,843 Omanis abroad vote in Shura Council's 10th term election," October 22, 2023. Available at: <https://arabiandaily.com/13843-omanis-abroad-vote-in-shura-councils-10th-term-election/>

¹⁵ Population numbers come from the 2020 official census, available online: <https://ecensus.gov.om/ecen-portal/indicators/category/1/subCategory/6> Figures refer only to Omani nationals. As of 2023 these numbers are probably slightly higher across the country.

¹⁶ These numbers only represent averages. The number of Omanis per delegate depend on the population of each wilaya, which also varies significantly

Dhofar (population 226,173), stands out as an exceptional case. It is comprised of 10 wilayas and 11 representatives due to its unique historical circumstances and vibrant civil society. In urban centers like Salalah, the district's capital, there has been a notable series of protests in recent years. These demonstrations primarily centered around issues like unemployment and improved labor conditions, but also reveal distinct Dhofari characteristics. Notable protest events occurred during the Arab Spring in 2011, then in 2018 and 2019. In 2020, Haitham bin Tariq issued a pardon after assuming the throne to the dissidents living in exile in an effort towards reconciliation, although some of them refused it and have not returned ever since.¹⁷ Omanis went to the streets again in 2021 in Salalah, proving that economic and social discontent continued under the new Sultan.¹⁸

While these protests took place in other parts of the country, particularly in cities like Sohar, Dhofari demands for reform have their roots in the mid-twentieth century, if not earlier.¹⁹ This extensive historical backdrop has enhanced their leverage over public officials in Muscat, arguably prompting authorities to allocate more seats to Dhofar in the Council as a strategic move to mitigate the risk of further escalation in the future.

Another crucial factor in the electoral process in Oman is the prohibition of political parties, which makes other types of networks fundamental for campaigning, elite recruiting, and mobilization. These networks often rely on tribal affiliations and sectarian divisions, particularly in wilayas where a single tribe or tribal confederation predominates.²⁰ Examples of this pattern include Muttrah, where one of the two seats is typically held by a Lawati,²¹ Rustaq, where the al-Abri clan has usually had one or two representatives, or Masirah, where the al-Junaibi have held important political power even before the times of Qaboos. In some cases, tribalism can contribute to the success of individual leaders, as seen in Wadi al-Maawil, where Khalid bin Khilal al-Maawali, the current chairman of the Consultative Council, has secured election four consecutive times.

Results

The results of the election were published immediately after the deadline on October 29 at 19:00 local time, as the app *Intikhab* counted the votes in real time.

¹⁷ *TRT World Magazine*, "The real story behind the 'pardons' of exiled Omani dissidents," 2020. Available at: <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/the-real-story-behind-the-pardons-of-exiled-omani-dissidents-38462>

¹⁸ *Aljazeera*, "Rare protests in Oman over jobs draw massive police response," May 24, 2021. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/24/rare-protests-in-oman-over-jobs-draw-massive-police-response>

¹⁹ For a longer account of the Dhofari file, its deep roots in history, and its ramifications in today's context, see Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution, Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965-1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) and Alice Wilson, *Afterlives of Revolution. Everyday Counterhistories in Southern Oman* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023)

²⁰ Oman is a very diverse country in terms of religion and ethnicity. Around 45% percent of the population follow Ibadism, the religion of the Sultan. There is a similar percentage of Sunnis, and some 5% are Shi'a of different denominations. In terms of ethnicity, Oman is home mostly to Arabs, but also Baluchis, East Africans, or Gujaratis. For a more detailed account about the role of the different minorities in Oman, see Marc Valeri, *Oman. Politics and Society in the Qaboos State*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

²¹ The Lawati are a Shi'a community original from the Sindh province of modern-day Pakistan that have been present in Oman at least since the 18th century. Most of the Lawati population resides in Muttrah, with smaller concentrations in other parts of the country, notably within the Batinah governorate.

Since political parties are not allowed in Oman, the results of the election reflected below show the names of the individuals who won their respective seats. Annex I at the end of this report includes a table with all the elected council members, their districts, and their wilayas.

No women were elected, and 61 out of the 90 members of the Consultative Council were chosen for the first time.²² Khaled al-Maawali (Wadi al-Maawil, Batinah South) was elected chairman of the Council for a fourth time in a row during an extraordinary session held on November 9. Tahir al-Junaibi (Duqm, Wusta) and Said al-Saadi (Suwayq, Batinah South) were chosen as first and second vice-presidents of the house, respectively.²³

Qualitative analysis of the election

a. Participation

According to the *Intikhab* app, 753,260 of a total of 1,516,556 (49.67%) Omanis aged 21 and over registered to vote for this election, 362,611 women (48.14%) and 390,649 men (51.86%). A total of 496,279 Omanis (65.88% of those registered to vote) cast their ballots, 237,432 women (65.48%) and 258,847 men (66.26%).²⁴ This figure represents a notable increase compared to previous elections - in 2019, the turnout was 49% of around 713,000 registered voters, and in 2015 it was 57% of some 612,000. The 2011 election, fueled by the enthusiasm of the Arab Spring, reached a voter turnout of 77%.²⁵ The higher degree of participation in the 2023 election could be ascribed to the easiness of registering and voting via an app, rather than going to a physical poll station.

Yet, participation across regions varied widely. The top performers in this variable were Wusta (91.69%), Dhofar (85.6%), and Sharqiyah South (80.37), while Dhahirah (46.17%) and Muscat (52.76) showed the lowest levels. In other regions of the country, voter turnout percentages were more aligned with the national average of 65.88%.

Age plays a significant role in electoral participation, with notable differences observed across age groups. The turnout among Omanis in their fifties nearly doubled that of those in their twenties. Out of around 450,000 Omanis aged between 21 and 30, only 108,183 (around 24%) cast their votes in 2023. In contrast, the turnout for Omanis aged 51-60 was of 43% (63,301 of an estimated population of 450,000). The percentage of Omanis aged 41-50 who cast their ballot was 38%, while for those aged 31-40, it was 31%. This indicates a trend of decreasing participation as the age of voters decreases.

²² *Times of Oman*, "A Historic First: Fully-Digitised Shura Council Elections Held," November 19, 2023. Available at: <https://timesofoman.com/article/138740-a-historic-first-fully-digitised-shura-council-elections-held>

²³ Afrah Al-Balushi, "Shura Council Elects New Chairman, Members Take Oath," *Oman Observer*, November 9, 2023. Available at: <https://www.omanobserver.om/article/1145421/oman/community/shura-council-elects-new-chairman-members-take-oath->

²⁴ Data from *Intikhab*

²⁵ *Times of Oman*, "A Historic First: Fully-Digitised Shura Council Elections Held," November 19, 2023. Available at: <https://timesofoman.com/article/138740-a-historic-first-fully-digitised-shura-council-elections-held>

b. Competition

A total of 843 candidates competed for 90 seats in the Consultative Council, 32 of whom were women. However, the degree of competition varied widely across constituencies. Densely populated governorates usually counted with more candidates competing for one seat, although the exact ratio of competition varied widely case by case.

Muscat, the most populous district, counted 93 candidates for 6 wilayas and 11 seats, having mostly 11-12 candidates per wilaya except for the extraordinary case of Seeb, where 32 Omanis ran for two seats. Dhofar was by far the governorate with more candidates (194), but also showed large disparities between highly contested seats (Dhalkut or Rakhyut, 47 and 33 candidates for one seat, respectively), and less competitive ones (Muqshin, where only five candidates competed for one seat).

Governorates with fewer residents also showed disparities. Wusta, the smallest one in terms of population, had 71 candidates standing for four seats while Musandam, only slightly more populated, had only 19 candidates for four seats. Dhahirah showed extreme disparities as it had 18 candidates running for two seats in its capital, Ibri, where most of the population is concentrated, only five candidates for the one seat in Yanqul, and two for one spot in Dhank.

A look at the percentage of the votes that elected candidates achieved shows a different picture and suggests that urban wilayas were more competitive. Most seats in Muscat, for instance, were achieved with around 20% of the votes, with an extreme of 15.1% and 12.5% for the highly competitive two seats of Seeb. Other urban wilayas like Nizwa or Bahla in Dakhiliya, Sohar in Batinah North, or Sur in Sharqiyah South showed similar values.

The case of Dhofar is also revealing. The wilayas of Dhalkut and Rakhyut, had their seats decided with 50% percent of the votes or more, despite a large number of candidates standing, suggesting that most of the other candidates were not viable candidates. Salalah, the capital and most populated wilaya also showed a higher value when compared to other urban areas in Oman, as its representatives were chosen with 34.33% and 32.85% of the votes despite the high number of options.

c. Transparency and fairness

The government emphasized that conducting elections through digital means ensured fairness by reducing human intervention, thus minimizing opportunities for corruption. Officials further argued that an e-voting system would enhance voter anonymity and encourage participation, particularly for individuals facing challenges in reaching a physical polling station.²⁶

The body in charge of election oversight is the Supreme Elections Committee. Formed according to the criteria described in the Royal Decree 54/2023, it includes one of the deputy chairmen of the Supreme Court and a judge from the same body, two judges from the appeal court, an assistant to the attorney general, and two employees from the Ministry of Interior. The Supreme Elections Committee had the responsibility of ensuring obedience to electoral laws and

²⁶ Ahmed Al Kaabi, "MoI showcases latest voting apps," *Oman Observer*, October 17, 2023. Available at: <https://www.omanobserver.om/article/1144350/oman/community/moi-showcases-latest-voting-apps>

regulations and declaring the election null in any of the wilayas if they detected any violations.²⁷

While elections seemed to proceed without many difficulties, mostly technical issues with a quick fix, the lack of international oversight and the lack of transparency regarding the e-voting and counting system raise several important questions about the potential involvement of the government in the voting process or data leaks. None of these aspects were addressed by the Ministry of Information or Omantel, the company responsible for the app, who otherwise declared that the artificial intelligence present in *Intikhab* guaranteed a fair process.²⁸

In terms of media oversight, while some national outlets provided in-depth coverage of the election with live interviews and reporting from across the country, few international platforms were present in Oman during the election. The media center set up by the Ministry of Information at the Intercontinental Hotel in Muscat only largely local media. No international observers were present either.

As for the e-voting system, there are elements to praise but also serious concerns. The *Intikhab* app, developed as a public-private partnership between Omantel and the ministry of Interior, provides an incredible amount of data (statistical, information about candidates, or a discussion board), enhancing transparency and improving the overall voter experience. It also represents a step forward if compared to the previous version used in the municipal elections of 2022. However, there is no end-to-end accountability of the system that can be guaranteed by a third party.

d. Representation and debate

The electoral law states that candidates can carry out their campaigns in their respective wilayas from the day the final electoral list is released up until the day before the election. The Ministry of Information asked the candidates to remove the billboards from their respective wilayas on Saturday, October 28 to prepare for the voting day on Sunday.²⁹

Since political parties are not allowed and freedom of expression is limited, campaigning and debates mostly rely on specific issues related to the wilaya in which the candidate is running for a seat. Candidates also make extensive use of tribal networks in pursuit of votes.

Debate in media outlets is subject to government monitoring and self-censorship. In 2021, the radio host Kholoud al-Alawi was temporarily suspended from her show *All Questions* on Hala FM, the first privately-owned radio channel in Oman. The alleged reason for this suspension was part of an interview with Mohammed al-Zedjali, renowned legal scholar and elected in 2015 and 2019 to the

²⁷ *Zawya*, "E-voting for Shura members election in Oman," July 28, 2023. Available at: <https://www.zawya.com/en/world/middle-east/e-voting-for-shura-members-election-in-oman-x6dc592d>

²⁸ Ahmed Al Kaabi, "MoI showcases latest voting apps," *Oman Observer*, October 17, 2023. Available at: <https://www.omanobserver.om/article/1144350/oman/community/moi-showcases-latest-voting-apps>

²⁹ Vinod Nair, "Shura Elections: Oman Is All Set to Elect New Members Tomorrow," *Oman Observer*, October 28, 2023. Available at: <https://www.omanobserver.om/article/1144844/oman/community/shura-elections-oman-is-all-set-to-elect-new-members-tomorrow>

Consultative Council in the wilaya of Sohar. During the interview, al-Zedjali made what were perceived as critical comments of the Consultative Council.³⁰

Although the radio station had al-Alawi return to the show soon thereafter, the threat of repercussions for media outlets being critical of any public institution remains a serious impediment to public debate in Oman, more so during election campaigning.

Social media was also a crucial venue for the campaign, particularly for the younger electorate. Candidates particularly from Dhofar, but also from governorates like Batinah North, Dakhiliya, or Muscat made extensive use of platforms like Twitter, usually with short clips of rallies and introductions. In some cases, other users would reply to these threads prompting debate, in certain occasions even bringing up sensitive topics like corruption or the lack of freedom of expression.

e. Openness

The 2023 election was relatively more open due to the better accessibility granted by the e-voting system. The incorporation of 61 newly elected members to the Consultative Council also suggests that participating and securing election is not restricted to a small class of politicians that have been part of the administration in the past. The system does not disincentivize Omanis from different backgrounds to participate as candidates and welcomes new members whenever they gain the required support in their constituencies.

However, important elements made the election more restricted, since political parties are still not allowed in Oman and therefore ideological cleavages are hard to draw.³¹ Candidates run on their own programs, often focusing on aspects that almost exclusively affect their wilaya. Freedom of expression remains severely limited, making public debate also constrained to the boundaries marked by the law and the political power. And more instrumentally, no opinion polls were carried out and shared with the population and the media.

Some candidates were removed from the list via ministerial decision, potentially due to their criticism towards critical issues like corruption in public offices. Some of the excluded individuals were Awad al-Suwaifi, Majid al-Rahili, and Ahmed al-Hadabi, a formerly elected member of the Consultative Council from the wilaya of Bidbid, in Dakhiliyah. The Omani Center for Human Rights stated that the candidates had been removed from the list due to information gathered by the Omani intelligence service.³²

The amount of data made available in real time by *Intikhab* indicates a process of making the electorate more aware of the possibilities of political engagement, leading to greater involvement in elections at different levels. Serious concerns remain, however, regarding the possibility of more critical individuals accessing the list of candidates for an election.

³⁰ Committee to Protect Journalists, "Omani Authorities Suspend Radio Journalist Following Guest's On-Air Critical Comments," January 13, 2022. Available at: <https://cpj.org/2022/01/omani-authorities-suspend-radio-journalist-following-guests-on-air-critical-comments/>

³¹ Freedom House Report 2023, Oman. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/oman/freedom-world/2023>

³² Omani Center for Human Rights, Exclusion of Candidates From The Shura Council Elections Without Providing Reasons, June 4, 2023. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20231002053128/https://ochroman.org/eng/2023/06/shura/> (retrieved from Web Archive)

f. Significance

Both the results and the process signify a clear continuity with the bureaucratic processes deployed by Sultan Qaboos and evident in the elections for the Consultative Council held in 2019, 2015, or 2011.

The election proves to be more relevant if put in the context of the protests that took place in 2021, where Omanis demanded improvement in the labor markets and living conditions in the country. In cities like Sohar, protests were explicitly against corruption. Such events tested the reactions of the new Sultan. The 2023 election can be understood as a vehicle to channel the response of Omanis to this circumstance through the only electoral mechanism available in the country.

In terms of the voting process, the election marked the first time an e-voting system was used as the only mechanism available to cast the vote in a national election, after the experience of the 2022 municipal elections. The apparent success of *Intikhab* not only marks a stepping stone in the digitalization of electoral politics in Oman, but shows that the Sultanate is committed to one of the main items of the national program outlined in the Vision 2040 document: the digitalization of the public sphere.³³

Finally, the 2023 election kept a trend of normalization of the voting processes in Oman after the surge in participation of 2011, where many Omanis who took part in the protests happening across the country saw the election as a form to channel such discontent. While protests have continued, albeit intermittently after 2011, the average of participation in the elections of 2015 and 2019 has slightly gone down and shows a more stable pattern, and the attitudes of voters seem less convinced that the Consultative Council can bring much change to the country. This sends an important message to other countries of the GCC, where countries like Qatar have been trying to establish elections but worried about jeopardizing the political status quo.

Conclusions

The first election for the Consultative Council with Haitham bin Tariq as the Sultan of Oman showed increased participation due to the e-voting system, but also proved that the Omani electorate is more aware and cautious about a body that only holds partial legislative and oversight powers, and that cannot make any final decisions. The fact that no women were elected shows a worrisome step back in terms of female representation.

After the enthusiasm caused by the relative political overture that Qaboos initiated in 2011 by, among other measures, picking some of his ministers from the Consultative Council, Omanis seem less keen on the body. Frequent concerns include the excessive role that tribal affiliations and bribes play in campaigning and ultimately in the results, or that being a member of the house might be more of a means for the candidates to advance in their public careers than an effective way to represent the voice of the electorate. These might be important reasons to explain the low participation of younger voters.

As the campaign showed, areas like Dhofar showed a higher turnout, and provided a great number of candidates, incredibly high participation, and a relatively more vibrant campaign. This reflects a more active political life in

³³ Oman Vision 2040. Vision Document. Available at: <https://www.oman2040.om/VisionDocument?lang=en>

general, in parallel with other events like protests in the past that also echo a historically grounded specificity. Even if the Consultative Council is ultimately a body without much political weight, high participation can be indicative of pressure for reform, discontent, and active civil society, and many other factors.³⁴

The exclusive use of an e-voting system shows how the goals of the Omani Vision 2040 of an increased digitization of the public administration become tangible in specific mechanisms like elections. While reportedly convenient for many, and probably the reason for the higher number of votes cast, there are important concerns about whether this system may go in parallel with further surveillance of citizens from the regime.³⁵

To follow better standards of open and fair competition in the future, there are a few measures that the Sultanate of Oman can take. If the e-voting system is to stay, the Consultative Council may incorporate a better end-to-end, open verification procedure of vote counting validated by national and international electoral observers. A better campaign to attract media coverage from the region and abroad can potentially improve the openness of the elections and contribute to the quality of the debate.

³⁴ Adam Przeworski, *Why Bother with Elections?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018)

³⁵ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power.* (London: Profile Books, 2018)

Annex: Election Results - Consultative Council, Tenth Term (2023-2027)³⁶

Batinah North					
<i>Al-Khaboura</i>		<i>Liwa</i>		<i>Saham</i>	
Sultan bin Humaid bin Mohammed al-Hosni (re. 37%)	Omar bin Ali al-Hosni (28.59%)	Ahmed bin Said bin Abdullah al-Sharqi (re. 35.13%)	Saif bin Khalid al-Reesi (33.10%)	Yahya bin Zayed al-Abdulsalam (22.55%)	Mohammed bin Ali al-Balushi (18.16%)
<i>Shinas</i>		<i>Sohar</i>		<i>Suwayq</i>	
Abdullah bin Suroor al-Kaabi (34.11%)	Yousef bin Ahmed bin Shahin al-Balushi (re. 31.50%)	Abdullah bin Ali al-Balushi (17.85%)	Khalid bin Sultan al-Jabri (15.94%)	Said bin Hamad bin Hilal al-Sa'di (re. 69.58%, vice 2)	Hamed bin Khamis bin Ibrahim al-Jadeedi (re. 21.17%)

Batinah South				
<i>Al-Awabi</i>	<i>Barka</i>		<i>Musan'ah</i>	
Tariq bin Mohammed al-Kharousi (34.68%)	Yasir bin Ali bin Sultan al-Mebaihsi (re. 29.37%)	Walid bin Salim al-Malki (re. 29.25%)	Abdullah bin Said al-Saadi (43.15%)	Ammar bin Salim bin Mohammed al-Saadi (re. 38.97%)
<i>Nakhal</i>	<i>Rustaq</i>		<i>Wadi al-Maawil</i>	
Badar bin Nasser bin Ali al-Jabri (re. 41.48%)	Hemyar bin Nasser al-Harrasi (26.25%)	Khamis bin Hamdan al-Ghafri (17.25%)	Khalid bin Hilal bin Nasser al-Maawali (re. 47.74%, chair)	

Buraimi			
<i>Al-Buraimi</i>		<i>Al Sunaynah</i>	<i>Mahdah</i>
Hilal bin Rashid al-Ghaithi (19.13%)	Humaid bin Jum'ah al-Shamsi (17.85%)	Hamdan bin Ali bin Rashid al-Manea (re. 65.58%)	Salim bin Ali bin Salim al-Kaabi (re. 61.33%)

³⁶ The following tables detail the roster of representatives elected in Oman on October 29, 2023. Each table refers to a governorate (in bold), divided into different wilayas (in italics). The number between parentheses alongside the name of each Council member denotes the percentage of votes with which they were elected. In case of wilayas with more than one representative, the first one that appears obtained a higher percentage of votes. The note *re* is added to indicate if representatives were re-elected. The chairman is marked as *chair* and the vice presidents as *vice 1* and *vice 2*.

Dakhiliyah						
<i>Adam</i>	<i>Al-Hamra</i>	<i>Jabal al-Akhdar</i>	<i>Bahla</i>		<i>Bidbid</i>	
Salim bin Hamed bin Salim al-Mahrouqi (re. 38.74%)	Jamal bin Ahmed bin Hamad al-Abri (re. 42.81%)	Hassan bin Ahmed al-Nabhani (27.63%)	Omar bin Ali al-Junaibi (21.02%)	Abdullah bin Al Waleed al-Hinai (20.44%)	Ahmed bin Nasser al-Seyabi (26.27%)	Talal bin Said al-Muharbi (14.66%)
<i>Izki</i>		<i>Manah</i>	<i>Nizwa</i>		<i>Samail</i>	
Younis bin Ali bin Azan al-Mantheri (re. 23.40%)	Zahir bin Sarhan bin Marrash al-'Amri (re. 19.93%)	Mohammed bin Salim al-Sulaimani (33.83%)	Ahmed bin Nasser bin Salim al-Abri (re. 22.41%)	Ali bin Nasser al-Harrasi (14.10%)	Younis bin Mohammed al-Seyabi (17.20%)	Mohammed bin Khamis bin Nabhan al-Hussaini (re. 12.95%)

Dhahirah			
<i>Dhank</i>	<i>Ibri</i>		<i>Yanqul</i>
Hamood bin Ahmed bin Hamed al-Yahyaai (re. 64.20%)	Humaid bin Ali bin Humaid al-Nasiri (20.41%)	Abdulaziz bin Hamdan al-Balushi (re. 19.07%)	Ali bin Mohammed bin Salmeen al-Alawi (re. 26.94%)

Dhofar					
<i>Al-Mazyona</i>	<i>Dhalkut</i>	<i>Mirbat</i>	<i>Muqshin</i>	<i>Rakhyut</i>	<i>Sadah</i>
Ahmed bin Monshir Balhaf (35.19%)	Mohammed bin Masoud al-Obathani (50.92%)	Mohammed bin Ali al-Amri (52.02%)	Suhail bin Said al-Shashaei (62.71%)	Ahmed bin Bukhait al-Jahfali (51.38%)	Salim bin Ali al-Mahri (48.46%)
<i>Salalah</i>		<i>Shaleem and Hallaniyat Islands</i>	<i>Taqah</i>	<i>Thumrait</i>	
Hamid bin Awadh Swakhroun (34.33%)	Mohammed bin Hasan al-Ansi (32.85%)	Yousef bin Mohammed al-Mahri (52.79%)	Khuwaidem bin Mohammed al-Mash'ani (47.23%)	Ali bin Musallam Ghawas (61.14%)	

Musandam			
<i>Bukha</i>	<i>Dibba</i>	<i>Khasab</i>	<i>Madha</i>
Abdullah bin Ahmed bin Abdullah al-Malik (re. 73.05%)	Mohammed bin Ali bin Mohammed al-Shaihi (re. 82.14%)	Ahmed bin Ali al-Shihi (24.45%)	Ahmed bin Ali al-Saadi (58.36%)

Muscat					
<i>Al-'Amerat</i>		<i>Seeb</i>		<i>Bawshar</i>	
Mohammed bin Ramadhan bin Qasim al-Balushi (re. 29.48%)	Ibrahim bin Khalfan al-Hadi (24.45%)	Ali bin Mansoor al-Amri (15.10%)	Ahmed bin Said al-Balushi (12.50%)	Mansoor bin Khalifa al-Seyabi (20.18%)	Ali bin Khalfan al-Hassani (14.76%)
<i>Muscat</i>	<i>Muttrah</i>		<i>Quriyat</i>		
Khalil bin Khalfan al-Wahaibi (30.76%)	Hussain bin Mohammed al-Lawati (22.55%)	Najib bin Saleh al-Zedjali (19.47%)	Jum'ah bin Said al-Wahaibi (23.79%)	Salim bin Hamoud al-Ghamari (23.44%)	

Sharqiyah North				
<i>Al-Qabil</i>	<i>Al-Mudhaibi</i>		<i>Bidiyah</i>	<i>Dima and al-Tayeen</i>
Yaqoob bin Mohammed bin Khalifa al-Harathi (re. 52.59%)	Nasser bin Sultan bin Mohammed al-Habsi (re. 41.01%)	Hamdoon bin Hamood bin Ghunaim al-Fazari (re. 26.06%)	Mansoor bin Zahir bin Salim al-Hajari (re. 47.82%)	Abdullah bin Ali bin Hamed al-Hamahami (re. 25.09%)
<i>Ibra</i>		<i>Wadi Bani Khalid</i>	<i>Sinaw</i>	
Yahya bin Said al-Muselhi (25.97%)	Abdullah bin Hamad al-Harathi (24.21%)	Hamoud bin Said al-Saadi (35.99%)	Mohammed bin Nasser al-Mahrouqi (38.94%)	

Sharqiyah South				
<i>Al-Kamil and Al-Wafi</i>	<i>Ja'lan Bani Bu Ali</i>		<i>Ja'lan Bani Bu Hassan</i>	
Abdulaziz bin Rashid al-Hashemi (51.05%)	Said bin Mohammed bin Jum'ah al-Saadi (re. 23.47%)	Nasser bin Abdullah al-Sunaidi (22.68%)	Sulaiman bin Amer al-Rajhi (35.63%)	Mohammed bin Amer al-Mashaikhi (27.11%)
<i>Masirah</i>	<i>Sur</i>			
Ghanim bin Said bin Khamis al-Junaibi (41.52%)	Talib bin Khamis al-Balushi (20.92%)	Yousef bin Salim al-Mukhaini (20.25%)		

Wusta			
<i>Al-Jazir</i>	<i>Duqm</i>	<i>Haima</i>	<i>Mahout</i>
Mohsin bin Said al-Junaibi (95.58%)	Tahir bin Mabkhout bin Ali al-Junaibi (vice 1, 51.88%)		Mohammed bin al-Atha bin Hamood al-Harsoosi (re. 56.27%)
			Ali bin Salim al-Wahaibi (25.81%)