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Oman: Shura Council Elections and Aspirations for Change

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On October 27, Omanis will elect representatives to their 85-member lower house of parliament, the Shura Council, for four year terms beginning in 2008. Some analysts consider the Council, established in 1991, to be the most advanced in the Gulf region apart from Kuwait's, and see it as part of a gradual move toward democracy and wider popular participation. For example, Oman enfranchised women as voters and candidates in 1994, well before Kuwait. But a closer look reveals that in the past sixteen years the Council has achieved little and failed to meet Omanis' aspirations. The Shura Council has remained advisory and has not evolved into a legislative body and partner to the government, as Omani officials often claim.

Article 29 of the Omani law regulating the appointed upper house (the 59-member State Council) and elected Shura Council specifies the powers of each body. The Shura Council's powers include reviewing legislation drafted by government ministries and passing them on to the State Council with recommendations, as well as submitting proposals for social and economic legislation. The Council may also provide feedback on government initiatives, propose development projects, and participate in raising citizens' awareness of the country's development goals and government efforts in that regard. Members may give opinions on subjects on which the Sultan seeks the Council's input, and look into matters related to public services and infrastructure.

Despite this variety of powers, many Omanis believe that in reality the Council's role has been limited to looking into public services. And even for this Council members do not receive credit, as government ministers constantly point out that development in public services and infrastructure is a result of the government's vision and plans rather than initiatives by Council members.

Some Council members are frustrated by the lack of appreciation from either the public or the government. Shura Council member Rahila bint Amir bin Sultan al-Riyami stated on several

occasions that members do not receive due credit for their work, and asserted that the government actually does accept and consider suggestions and proposals of Council members. Media coverage of recent Council deliberations, however, revealed little government willingness to accept members' proposals and amendments to upcoming laws.

Another Council member, Hummoud al-Amri, said in a recent interview that a member nominates himself to be the voice of the citizens but does not hold all the keys to achieving their demands, and citizens need to realize that. He also noted that Council members themselves are doubtful of their ability to represent citizens and achieve their aspirations. Member Hamad al-Rawahi, also a Council member, said that he considered the slow and hesitant process of developing the Council's role as appropriate for Oman, considering its tribal and cultural characteristics.

Council member Zayed al-Rashidi said in a recent interview that there was little awareness of the Council's role due to the lack of an effective media awareness campaign. He pointed out that members receive no privileges to encourage them to seek office and yet continue to participate in the process. In fact the upcoming elections will see the largest number of candidates yet in Omani elections: 808 male and 25 female candidates vying for 85 seats. Why does the number of candidates increase every year, and what are the incentives that encourage candidacy? Rashidi says it is to complete the public services projects introduced in the previous term; citizens say it is for personal gain.

The Shura Council's president is appointed by the Sultan, another controversial aspect of the Council's operations. A new Council president was appointed in September 2007, the first change since the Council's establishment in 1991. The newly-appointed president is a state advisor and former Minister of Social Affairs and Labor.

Activist and former Shura member Taiba al-Maawli says that the Council's presidency is an obstacle to its development, and that the government should grant the Council political and financial independence. Having served two consecutive terms in 1994-1999, she argues that the Council has not only not gained power since then but has regressed. She says that the Council's role is not even truly consultative; the government refers proposed laws and projects to the Council merely to inform rather than to consult it. Al-Maawli is not optimistic about the upcoming term, because although the Shura Council has the right to express its views, those views are simply ignored. The Council is paralyzed, unable to legislate or hold anyone to account. Al-Maawli believes the Council will not have any role unless there are external pressures affecting economic interests.

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