

and original contribution to the literature on Coptic–Muslim relations is unquestionable. ✧

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**SULAIMAN H. AL-FARSI.** *Democracy and Youth in the Middle East: Islam, Tribalism and the Rentier State in Oman.* London: I.B. Tauris, 2013. xii + 228 pages, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. Cloth US\$100.49 ISBN 978-1-7807-6090-2.

Since the Arab Spring, questions about the likelihood of democratic movements or political openings in the ruling systems of the Arab Gulf have become commonplace. In *Democracy and Youth in the Middle East*, Sulaiman Al-Farsi argues that the Omani *ibādī* model of leadership selection through *shura* (consultation) and *ijtihad* (diligence) positions Oman as a possible example of an Islamic country in which Islam and political participation have historically been harmonious.

The book is an effort to assess the extent to which the Omani tradition of *shura* can spawn a more democratic political system in the post-oil/post-rentier state era. Al-Farsi identifies three types of democratization processes in Oman that could support a moderate transitional period: a traditional model of following *shura* through adherence to Ibadism led by religious institutions, a top-down model that the Omani government has continuously put forth before and after 1970 when Sultan Qaboos came to the throne, and a possible bottom-up democratic movement led by Omani youth. A chapter is dedicated to each of these processes, in which Al-Farsi analyzes qualitative research gathered through in-person interviews. The result is considerable insight into the Omani government's ethos and its view of politics and people.

Al-Farsi justifiably emphasizes the uniqueness that characterizes Oman, especially in comparison with other Gulf countries. He highlights the willingness of Omanis to work at all job levels, their dedication to the preservation of their culture and heritage in the face of globalization and modernization, and most importantly, the tradition of Ibadism, which has given Oman a religious character and historical participatory system through *shura* unlike those of any other Islamic country. The practice of *shura* at the highest political levels has enabled the country's leadership to maintain both political and religious legitimacy while also playing a large role, in the eyes of Al-Farsi's respondents, in a gradualist approach to changing the political system.

Yet this volume is not without problems. As acknowledged by the author, how much we can generalize from these findings is limited by the small sample of interviewees (ten respondents per group, thirty interviews in all), the almost total absence of women's voices, and the (indirect) affiliation of nearly all respondents with the government. This narrow base weakens Al-Farsi's conclusion that all three forces—government, religion, and youth—are in agreement over the future of Oman.

Also, the definition of democracy used in this text seems too simple: Al-Farsi focuses on popular elections only and does not question other key components of a democratic system such as political parties (which are banned in Oman), protection of minority rights, social equality, and respect for individual rights. Al-Farsi's text is not sufficiently critical: at times he omits facts, and at others he is too quick to draw conclusions when the issue raised requires further analysis. For example, when discussing non-governmental organizations, he does not clarify that they all must operate under the Ministry of Social Development. He also states that the lack of press criticism of state policies is attributable to either the media's satisfaction with the status quo or its apathy, and that because the military is under the sultan's control and the country is not under any security threat, there is no need for parliament to be involved in foreign policy decisions. Finally, he attributes the lack of gender equality to discomfort or unwillingness on the part of the Omani people without further explanation.

Al-Farsi is cynical about the younger generation. He finds young Omanis to be influenced by the media yet politically unaware. He concludes that they "feel that the political rights available are sufficient" (204) and are "in agreement with the government's view" (213) of a top-down democratic process, but are ultimately confused. The book, published in 2013, came out too soon to include what would have been an essential analysis of the 2011 youth-led reform protests that demanded anticorruption laws and greater powers for the Majlis al-Shura. The quick governmental response to these protests is an angle that could have added depth and texture to Al-Farsi's analysis of Oman's top-down model of democratization.

Despite some flaws, the book is a valuable contribution to the scant literature on Oman and its politics. The segments on Ibadism, Omani tribalism, and the tradition of shura are excellent and exceptional investigations. As an Omani himself, Al-Farsi is able to write in a way that genuinely transmits the mindset that governs Oman's policies and many of its people. ✂

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