

US State Department human rights reports

Gulf allies: A record of repression and torture

Part 5: Oman

Kate Randall
29 April 2011

The US State Department recently released its “2010 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.” This year’s annual report provides details on human rights conditions in over 190 countries. Included are reports on the member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which represents the US-backed monarchies of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and Kuwait.

This Saudi-dominated alliance backed the imposition of a no-fly zone in Libya, and has provided key support for the attack on Libya by the United States and European powers. The GCC has also provided military and police personnel to put down insurrections against the repressive regimes in Bahrain and Yemen.

While the US seeks to cloak its imperialist assault on Libya in “humanitarian” terms, its allies in the GCC are guilty of widespread violations of human rights and practice repression and torture in their own countries. This WSWS series examines these human rights abuses as documented in the State Department reports. This installment covers Oman. See our previous reports on Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait.

The Sultanate of Oman is an absolute, hereditary monarchy, ruled for the past 41 years by Sultan Qaboos al-Said. Political parties are banned and the sultan has sole authority to amend the country’s laws through royal decree. An elected Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council) serves as an advisory body only and has no legislative powers.

Oman has a population of about 3.3 million, of whom about 1 million are non-nationals. It is strategically located across the Arabian Sea from Iran and astride the Strait of Hormuz, through which Persian Gulf exports must travel. Oman’s proved reserves of petroleum total about 5.5 billion barrels, the 24th largest in the world.

The US has backed the authoritarian Qaboos regime and has remained silent in recent months as the sultan’s security forces have fired on protesters. In one instance on February 27, police opened fire on a demonstration in the sheikdom’s largest industrial city, Sohar, killing at least six protesters who were demanding democratic rights, a representative legislature and jobs.

According to the US State Department’s report for 2010, “Principal human rights problems included the lack of consistent independent nongovernmental inspections of prisons and detention centers. Some restrictions on privacy and freedoms of speech, press, assembly, association, and religion remained, yet they were not universally applied. Women faced societal discrimination, and instances of domestic violence were reported. There were also isolated reports that some employers placed expatriate laborers in situations indicative of forced labor or abuse.”

Police, prison and judicial procedures

The Royal Office, part of the sultan’s cabinet, controls all internal and external security as well as coordinates all intelligence and security policies. The Royal Oman Police (ROP), also part of the cabinet, provides security at points of entry and serves as the country’s immigration and customs agency.

There is no legal requirement that police obtain a warrant before making an arrest. Police are required to either release the person or refer the matter to the public prosecutor, who must formally arrest or release the person within 24 hours. Judges may, however, order detentions for 14 days for investigation and may grant extensions of detention. There were reports of authorities detaining without charge foreign workers suspected of being in the country illegally.

Although the law provides for an independent judiciary, the sultan may act as a court of final appeal. Principles of Sharia (Islamic law) inform civil commercial and criminal codes. There is no trial by jury.

Police are not required to obtain search warrants before entering homes, although they were frequently obtained from the public prosecutor’s office. The government closely monitors private communications, including cell phones, email, and Internet chat rooms.

The Ministry of Interior requires citizens to obtain permission to marry foreigners, unless they are nationals of Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Failure to obtain such approval may result in denial of entry for the foreign spouse or denial of citizenship rights for children.

No respect for civil liberties

Criticism of the sultan is prohibited in any form. The government bans “material that leads to public discord, violates the security of the state, or abuses a person’s dignity or his rights”; “messages of any form that violate public order and morals or are harmful to a person’s safety”; and “defamation of character.” Courts generally interpret these laws to mean that it is illegal to criticize or insult any public official.

Editorial opinion in the country’s eight privately owned newspapers—four Arabic, four English—was generally consistent with government views. The government owns four radio stations and two television stations and licensed one privately owned television station, and these also maintained a generally pro-government line. There was no regular international media presence.

Three authors remained barred in 2010 from public and media

appearances on national security grounds: Abdullah al-Riyami, a poet and human rights activist; Mohamed al-Yahyai, a journalist and author; and Mohamed al-Harthy, an author and poet. Although the three subsequently received royal pardons, their activities remained restricted throughout the year.

The Ministry of Information reviews all media products and books, both those produced inside the country and those imported. Authorities banned from sale a range of literature, poetry and historical books prior to the Muscat International Book Fair.

An estimated 50 percent of the Oman population used the Internet, and the government enforced restrictions on free speech via this medium. The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority monitors Internet service providers, and authorities blocked some virtual private networks that were used in an attempt to circumvent censorship.

In an effort to promote self-censorship, the government placed warnings on websites informing users that criticism of the sultan or government officials would be censored and could lead to police questioning.

Lamhaa, an Indian film about the Kashmir conflict, was banned in July in all GCC countries. The Oman government banned *Sex in the City 2* in May, citing inappropriate content.

The law provides for freedom of association only “for legitimate objectives and in a proper manner.” During 2010, the Council of Ministers prohibited numerous associations deemed “inimical to the social order” or otherwise inappropriate. Associations must also register with the Ministry of Social Development, which must approve association bylaws.

The average time for an association to receive approval and register was two years. Associations must get government approval to receive funding from an international group. Nationality-based associations were limited to one per nationality.

Restrictions on religious freedom

Almost all Omani citizens are either Ibadhi or Sunni Muslims. Shi’a Muslims represent less than 5 percent of citizens. The majority of non-Muslims are foreign workers from South Asia, although there are also small communities of ethnic Indian Hindus and Christians.

Non-Muslims are allowed to practice their beliefs openly only on land specifically set aside by the sultan. Article 209 of the penal code prescribes a prison sentence and fine for anyone who publicly blasphemes God or his prophets, or commits an affront to religious groups by spoken or written word, although there were no reports of prosecutions for such offenses.

Refugee and human trafficking

Oman is not party to the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol. The Royal Oman Police, which is responsible for determining refugee status, did not grant asylum or accept any refugees for resettlement during 2010.

According to the State Department, “Authorities apprehended and deported hundreds of Somalis, Yemenis, Ethiopians, and Eritreans who sought to enter the country illegally by land and sea in the South, and Afghans and Pakistanis who generally came to the country by boat via Iran. Authorities generally detained these persons in centers in Salalah or the northern port city of Sohar, where they stayed an average of one month before deportation to their countries of origin.

No right to change government

Sultan Qaboos al-Said retains ultimate control over all foreign and domestic issues, and citizens do not have the right to change their government. While citizens 21 years and older have the right to vote for the Consultative Council, this body has no legislative powers. Political parties are not allowed.

Public officials are not required to disclose their financial records, and the law does not provide for public access to government information.

No registered human rights nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or autonomous domestic human rights groups were in existence in 2010. A government-funded human rights committee reporting to the sultan submitted reports of 72 cases of alleged human rights violations, but no figures on disposition of these cases were available by year’s end.

Discrimination

The penal code criminalizes homosexuality with jail terms of six months to three years.

There were a non-specified number of prosecutions for homosexual conduct in 2010; there were nine prosecutions for sodomy in 2009.

The legal code criminalizes rape, but does not recognize spousal rape. Cultural and societal influences inhibit women from reporting rape. There were cases of foreign nationals working as domestic employees who alleged they had been raped by their sponsors or recruiting agencies, but police investigations resulted in few rape convictions, according to foreign missions.

The law does not specifically address domestic violence, but allegations of spousal abuse in civil courts were reportedly common. Sexual harassment is not specifically prohibited. While women may legally own property, only about 0.4 percent of landowners were women.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is not prohibited by law, but the Ministry of Health bans doctors from performing the procedure in hospitals or other health care facilities. FGM is performed on some girls, ranging in age from one to nine, mostly in rural areas. Cases of life-threatening consequences as a result were reported, including one of a girl brought to a health center with excessive bleeding three days after the procedure.

Human trafficking, forced prostitution

Men and women who travel to Oman, primarily from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Indonesia, are often subject to trafficking in persons, specifically conditions indicative of forced labor. Most of these migrants from South and Southeast Asia travel willingly to Oman with the hope of employment in domestic service or as low-skilled workers in the country’s construction, agriculture or service sectors.

Oman is also a destination for women from China, India, Morocco, Eastern Europe and South Asia who are forced into commercial sexual exploitation, generally by nationals of their own countries.

Nine Omanis and 13 foreigners were indicted in the last year for trafficking in seven cases. Oman convicted one Omani for labor

trafficking and another Omani for involuntary manslaughter after forcing a foreign national to work on a fishing vessel, following which the individual drowned after being pushed from the boat. The remaining cases involved trafficking for sexual exploitation.

Workers' rights and conditions

The government recognizes the right of workers to form unions, but union activities are restricted. Unions cannot accept financial contributions from any source without the approval of the Ministry of Manpower (MoM). Workers have the right to strike, but are required to obtain assent from an absolute majority of workers to approve strike action. Employers must also be notified three weeks in advance.

Some strikes did occur. This year in March, Omani state oil workers struck to demand higher wages, joining other sections of workers in popular protests against the Qaboos regime. (See "Oil workers strike in Oman")

The private sector minimum wage for citizens is 140 rials per month (\$360), inadequate to provide for a decent standard of living for a worker and family. This minimum wage does not apply to small businesses with less than five employees, family members working for a family firm, and some categories of manual workers.

Foreign workers are not guaranteed a minimum wage, and there were reports of some migrant workers working more than 12 hours a day for as little as 30 rials (\$78) a month.

To be continued



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact