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ME/1982/2  
Middle East Sub-Cttee

Dhofar after the revolution

Recent history

Dhofar became part of Oman only in the second half of the nineteenth century. In ancient times it was the major source of frankincense and the starting point of a trade by sea and land which made it relatively wealthy until mediaeval times. It was in ancient times a part of the empire of Hadramawt, one of the great kingdoms of old South Arabia for more than a millenium before the rise of Islam.

In modern Dhofar, as well as Arabic, there are three Semitic (but non-Arabic) languages spoken which are descended from the languages of ancient South Arabia. The spoken Arabic of Dhofar is like that of Hadramawt and the culture of Dhofar is much more like that of South Yemen than that of Oman proper.

There is probably some truth, therefore, in the assertion that throughout the bourgeois nationalist phase of the revolution (1965-1968) there was a strong separatist element in the political aspirations of the people.

The nationalist phase ended in 1968 when the PF adopted Marxist ideology. The basic tendency of their teaching to recruits was pro-China and the USSR was depicted as being imperialist in its general orientation. The civil war did not begin to be won decisively by the Government forces until the massive intervention of Iran at the

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beginning of 1974. It came to an end officially in 1975.

#### The geography of Dhofar

Some knowledge of the terrain is useful in understanding political events in Dhofar, since in many ways the mountain area of the Country was ideal for guerrilla activity.

Dhofar has a long coastline on the Indian Ocean with a number of important ports. Although there is a big semi-circular plain behind Salala, the capital and biggest port, communication by land was very difficult and even now it is not possible to go by road up the coast from Salala to Oman proper. At the height of the revolution the Government troops held only Salala and its surrounds and a number of military posts on the coast and in the mountains.

Behind the semi-circular coastal plain there is a long, deep mountain range. The front part of the mountain plateau gets the fringe of the monsoon rains from mid-July to late September and in this area it is possible to rear cows, as well as goats and a few camels. The frankincense trees are in the lower valleys of this area.

The back part of the high plateau is desert. There is little rain or water but there is a Bedouin population herding camels and goats

The peoples of Dhofar

Although Arabs from all over the Arab world played a part in the People's Front, the great majority of the soldiers were Dhofaris, so that it is useful to know something of the various communities in the area.

In the big towns of the coast the Arabs are from settled groups which are also found in neighbouring S. Yemen. They were for most part merchants, bringing in goods (especially rice) on the monsoon winds from Aden and Mukalla. There was a fairly large slave population, many the property of the previous Sultan. All the previous Sultan's slaves were freed by the present Sultan and given large amounts of money and they are now an economically powerful group. The soldiers in the capital were mainly Balochis from Oman's former province of Gwadar.

Some of the Arabs, mainly in the town, had high prestige with the mountain people because of their descent from the Prophet or former ruling groups. In the old days they would be immune from attack and would not carry arms. Normally however those who did not carry arms were of inferior status.

In the high desert there was a large group of Arabs of tribal origin, the Bayt Kathir. Apart from them, the mountain people spoke South Arabian languages almost to the exclusion of Arabic.

The main mountain peoples are the Mahra, in the high desert area, herding camels and goats. For about a hundred years they have been penetrating

the more fertile part of the mountain. They have also settled some ports, such as Sidh. They have good relations with the Mahra of S. Yemen and movement over the border is limited only by the difficulty of the terrain.

The other most important groups all speak Jibbali (mountain language). The speakers are divided into tribal and non-tribal elements. The tribal elements (the Qarā) almost certainly are invaders from the south who subjugated the original population and made them into a kind of serf-class of inferior status. The invading groups over the course of time adopted the language of the original mountain people.

Before the revolution these mountain people lived off their herds, trading clarified butter for rice and the dried sardines used for fodder. Cows were killed almost exclusively for important occasions such as weddings or funerals and these were community feasts. Mountain people were usually in debt to coastal merchants and others, but they did not settle debts by selling cows to them. The money needed for weddings was raised by contributions within the tribe, usually by the prospective bridegroom and a few friends.

The authority of the Sultan was not great in this area even before the revolution and it was dangerous to travel there without elaborate arrangements of temporary truces.

The society was therefore pastoral and food-gathering, that is to say it was not an agricultural society with a peasant class. Only on the coast was there

a little agriculture, mainly coconut palms.

The effect of the revolution on the social structure

During this period all the elements in the PF had to co-operate on a basis of equality. This meant that tribal feuds and alliances were no longer a basis of action, that the former serf class and slaves were treated as equals. At the same time there was a heavy programme of political indoctrination and anti-religious propaganda.

After the accession of Sultan Qabus in 1970 people began to surrender. The terms were then, and remained, very good. After 24 hours of de-briefing, or 48 for important people, they were released. Many of these now occupy important positions, even in the top ranks of Government, as do many people educated in Eastern Europe and the USSR. However, it should be noted that, so repressive was the regime of the father of the present Sultan, almost every person of importance in Oman has been an active rebel at some time in his life. It emphatically does not mean, however, that there is any sympathy for socialist or Marxist ideas at Government level. On the contrary after the collapse of Iran, Oman has been encouraged by the great powers to assume some part of its role as a bulwark against Communism. In fact, however, Iran is probably now even more anti-communist than it was under the Shah, but it is now no longer subject to the influence of the great powers.

In the mountain area of Dhofar the old social

structure has almost entirely disappeared. The mountain has been opened up by a big new road system, schools and watering-points have been established over the whole area and new towns with mosques and hospitals built at strategic points. Even the remotest parts are visited fairly regularly by health teams. Thus some of the most important demands have been met.

There are nevertheless elements of instability locally. Surrendered revolutionary soldiers were organised as a kind of local gendarmerie responsible for local security. They do this fairly well but they are underemployed, interested in international politics (as a result of training) in a way most Arabs are not, and essentially pensioners of the Sultan. They seem to be loyal to the Government almost everywhere, but dissatisfied. Attempts to disband them and/or incorporate them into the national army have not succeeded.

The position of women, always better in this society than in the towns, is not as good as it was in the PF, and they resent the loss of their equality. Similarly, although the position of the former serf-class is now one of practical equality, the old habits of deference persist, even though they are not and cannot be now exploited as forced labour. It is interesting that Pakistanis are now appearing as cheap labour even in mountain areas.

Despite the fact that the mountain people seem now, by and large, to be loyal to the Government they remain uninterested in Islam, and people are not to be seen praying at the prescribed times. However this may be as much a reflection of a

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non-religious pre-revolutionary culture rather than the effect of an atheist training.

There are elements of instability affecting Dhofar at the national level. There has been a rapid development since the end of revolution of a small, powerful bourgeoisie. This is believed by Omanis to be co-terminous with high government officers, and this group is increasingly unpopular in Oman.

Secondly although Oman has a largish area and population (say, one million) compared with Kuwait, Qatar or Abu Dhabi its oil revenues are relatively small. A large proportion of development money is spent in Dhofar. This is resented by non-Dhofaris and not particularly appreciated by Dhofaris.

Finally the demands of the great powers that Oman should play a role in international relations create strains in the Country and create instability.