

rights? There is very little Canadian literature on Aboriginal peoples and human rights, and this book helps to explain why: the relationship between Aboriginal and human rights is inadequately defined. Kulchyski takes the first step towards clarifying this relationship by identifying what distinguishes Aboriginal rights from human rights. The distinction highlights that the struggles of Aboriginal peoples differ from those of other marginalised peoples such as women or religious minorities. Aboriginal struggles are against a colonial state that uses rights to further its colonial project. Kulchyski does not outright reject the value of human rights, but simply asks us to view them as a practice and find the particular contexts in which they are useful.

This book is essential reading for scholars working in human rights or native studies. The content itself is not particularly new, although the third section presents several case studies based on Kulchyski's own research. What makes it unique is the framing of this content. The book is essential for scholars because it forces the reader to question some deeply entrenched beliefs about human rights. Of course, many will not welcome this shift in thinking. A more receptive audience however will be Indigenous activists and non-Indigenous allies looking to transform capitalist and colonialist systems. Kulchyski has deeply Marxist ideals and correspondingly revolutionary intentions. He inspires the reader to action by demonstrating that there is real need for change and providing some possible pathways towards it.

Jason Chalmers  
University of Alberta

**Sulaiman H. Al-Farsi. *Democracy and Youth in the Middle East: Islam, Tribalism and the Rentier State in Oman* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013). 320 pp. \$99.00 Hardcover.**

The contemporary history of Oman may be said to have begun in 1970 when Sultan Qaboos replaced his father as ruler and set the country firmly on the path to socio-economic development and to political evolution. Oil provided the means for the former while the course of the latter was principally determined by the personality and vision of the present sultan, still in power some 45 years later. The Sultanate of Oman is unquestionably an authoritarian state but most would agree that it has a benevolent ruler and that its people believe that the existing system is legitimate. But two relevant qualifications should be noted. First, the throne must pass in the coming years to a new sultan and considerable uncertainty surrounds the process of succession. Second, as education and exposure to the outside world advances and deepens, younger Omanis may be increasingly discontent with the system as it presently exists.

In this book, apparently derived from a British PhD thesis, Sulaiman Al-

Farsi notes the general classification of Oman as a rentier state but he also seeks to locate the social contract between ruler and ruled within the concept of *shura*, an Arabic word usually translated as “consultation.” Al-Farsi starts with two basic premises. First, he contends that Oman is the only country that has maintained *shura* throughout its history. Second, he discerns that the present Sultanate is transitioning smoothly from “traditional *shura*” (the role of religious and tribal notables in selecting and legitimating *imams*, Oman’s religious cum secular leaders, throughout most of the Islamic period until near the present) to “current *shura*” (the institution by the modern state of first appointed and then elected consultative councils).

His opening chapters on the concept of democratization in the Arab world and the Omani context are somewhat disappointing as they add little original and display a rather lackadaisical use of sources. But Al-Farsi reaches his stride in the final three chapters that form the heart of the book. He conducted extensive interviews with thirty Omanis and divided these into three equal groups of respondents based principally on their position or role in society. He posits as three distinct models regarding the role and importance of *shura* in Oman, and the interviews illustrate differences in attitudes about what *shura* means today and how it affects the future evolution of Omani politics.

The first of these models is the “traditional” one with respondents drawn from religious institutions and backgrounds. The conception of *shura* to this segment is inextricably linked to principles within the Ibadi sect of Islam (to which perhaps one-half of all Omanis adhere), although some respondents claim pre-Islamic roots. Citing the role of *shura* in the selection of Ibadi *imams*, these respondents argued that the principle of *shura* was necessary to legitimate any government and that the current government in Oman fulfilled the requirements. Their view of contemporary *shura* was that it remained faithful to the religion-based requirements of traditional *shura* even as participation was expanded.

Next is a “top-down” model led by the government and based its creation of first the appointed State Consultative Council and then that organ’s replacement by the Shura Council, which was gradually transformed into a completely elected body. Complementing the Shura Council is the State Council, an appointed body of senior notables. The ten respondents discussed in this category are government officials who express the view that the opening of the tribal horizons of Omani society requires a patient and gradual approach. The continuation and adaptation of *shura* is necessary because it “is seen as the cornerstone of the legitimacy and authority of the state.” (90) They contend that it was possible for the state to adopt some modern democratic institutions (elections and parliamentary bodies) because of their commonalities with *shura*. The innovation lies in the expansion of the *shura* process from a traditional approach (which restricted participation to civic and religious notables) to a new approach incorporating mass participation and the election of representatives from throughout society. There was also an attempt to perceive harmony between the two types of *shura* by equating the appointed State

Council with a traditional council of the elite while the Shura Council represents the modern form.

The third “bottom-up” model represents the views of younger, educated Omanis who find themselves faced with the necessity of squaring traditional norms and practices with the appeal of democracy. Al-Farsi perceives consensus regarding the utility of adopting some aspects of democratic principles to Oman but with the distinction that the equal separation of powers in Western states between executive, judicial, and legislative branches is not applicable in Oman where the separate authorities converge at the ruling level. These Omanis appear to see no conflict between traditional and contemporary *shura* although they share the concern with the other groups about “tribal fanaticism” resulting in a lower standard of elected members to the Shura Council, particularly as many graduates refrain from participation.

The overall effect of the study is the convergence of the three groups’ views that the present system both fulfills Oman’s requirements at present and that a non-elected ruler is best for the Omani polity. Indeed, Al-Farsi speculates that “stability in the position of a ruler in Islam so long as he is found suitable and capable may suit Middle Eastern societies better than presidential democracies because the presence of the social divisions may find open democratic environment a fertile soil to strengthen their positions above all others, including the national interests.” (180) As a result, the younger generations seem more likely to seek gradual and controlled evolution within the present system than to seek Western-style democracy. Their position, therefore, is in close agreement with both the top-down and traditional segments.

It can certainly be argued that these attitudes reflect the benign atmosphere of a rentier state that promises economic prosperity in exchange for political quiescence, accompanied by a measure of paternalism. The Omani protesters inspired by the Arab spring demanded jobs and an end to corruption while explicitly voicing their allegiance to the sultan. Still, there is much to be said about an innate Omani philosophy (mirrored in other Gulf monarchies) that emphasizes consensus and harmony over individual rights. Given that Oman’s experiment with a modern state is less than fifty years old, there probably can be no authoritative answer. But Al-Farsi clearly has provided valuable substance to ponder.

J.E. Peterson,  
[www.JEPeterson.net](http://www.JEPeterson.net)