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Social Appeasement in Land Administration: Modernization and Reform of Land Allocation in the Sultanate of Oman

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Executive summary

Background of Land Administration in Oman

The initial centralization of the GCC states depended on tribal support and land acquisition through the drawing of borders around areas of tribal loyalty. Land borders were foreign to Eastern Rulers and disputes over historical rights to territories caused divisions and tension. Some borders between Qatar and Bahrain for example continued to be disputed until as late as 2008. (Rabi, 2016) After ruling families profitably established power by Western backing, the central government took the role of distributing oil revenues by means of social welfare and sought to equally allocate land ownership to its citizens. Cataclysmic oil wealth caused unprecedented rates of urbanization and urban planning standards and land management policies were largely ignored in the effort to quickly build a modern infrastructure while strategically unifying and mixing tribes. (Richthofen, Heim, Rupp, & Joosten, 2018)

The first land administration entity in Oman was the Ministry of Land Affairs established in 1972 under Sultan Qaboos and was later renamed The Ministry of Housing in 1986. In order to regulate housing for the growing population “the Omani government installed a land-allocation process *by lottery* in the 1980s granting every Omani citizen, first male and since 2003 female, the right to enter this lottery and eventually receive a plot.” (Richthofen, Heim, Rupp, & Joosten, 2018) The Land lottery system was officially established in 1984 for Omani males over age 21 (Royal Decree 81, 1984) and later updated in 2008 to include females over age 24 (Royal Decree 125, 2008) The Royal Decree states that every male and female Omani citizen who meets the age requirement has the right to a free 600 sqm² plot of land and the Ministry of Housing was given sole responsibility to respond to land applications and to implement distribution.

Political, Economic, and Social Impacts

Since the Land Allocation system was established, Oman has continued to struggle with the concept of Land Governance and management. As land requests started to pile, the distribution of land became increasingly random and plots were allocated sometimes far away from developed areas without any planning guidelines. Moreover, without proper administration policy oversight, corruption was allowed for through means of holding certain classes of lands for those with high social status, the usage of *wasta* for land acquisition outside of the realms of the bureaucratic process, along with rampant nepotism in land allocation functioning both inside and outside of the Ministry.

Due to lack of socially studied and accepted solutions for land allocation, land is continuing to being cut arbitrarily, distributed to citizens for free, and sometimes reserved for social elites by means of tribal *Wasta* “واسطة”¹. This has resulted in urban sprawl, over

¹ Essays, UK. (November 2018). The Concept of Wasta. Retrieved from <https://www.ukessays.com/essays/business/concept-of-wasta.php?vref=>

consumption of land, “White-Land”² (land that is withheld from the market and usually granted to elites), and an overall local sense of entitlement. Though lottery system is also originally meant to provide equal rights for men and women to own a plot, a study performed on *Land-allocation and clan-formation in modern residential developments in Oman*³ concludes that “Unless the government applies both incentives for land development and taxation for land speculation, the system cannot be said to be ‘fair’ nor ‘efficient’” (Richthofen, Heim, Rupp, & Joosten, 2018).

According to Nebel’s study on urbanisation patterns in Oman, Land Allocation has created unsustainable urban sprawl, high energy consumption, and overconsumption of land and spatial resources. (Nebel, 2016) Not only is the system unsustainable for the future of urban development, it has proven extremely expensive for the government. The paternalistic nature of the ‘rentier state’ in which the government acts as a father distributing to his children, has put sole pressure on the government to provide all major services and infrastructure resulting in a strong social entitlement to land and services. For example the Ministry of Housing handles all land requests, conducts zoning for housing plots, and eventually has to make sure to provide proper facilities, roads, and electricity to the allocated plots. (Al Shueili, 2015) Currently, since 46.7% of the population in Oman is between the ages of 18-29, demand for land and housing is high and ever increasing. Many citizens wait 3-10 years to receive their plot and when they do receive it, they discover many issues with incompetence in the Ministry of Housing. For example, numerous plots have been allocated to two or more people and many times the areas are not checked or surveyed before they are allocated. With continual population growth and increasing urbanisation, the central government has been unable to effectively match the pace required to provide adequate services and infrastructure to plots across cities and rural areas. As citizens wait on long lists to receive land, tensions are rising and more demands on the government are being pressed.

The effects of the land “lottery” have also created negative impacts in society. The tribal social mosaic of life and community in Oman prior state centralization and land allocation have been largely diminished and many old neighborhoods are abandoned for isolated villas. As a result of this, today in Muscat city, it is rare to see neighbors engaging with one another and the system has failed to create a cohesive society. In a recent interview with Ahmed Mukheni, a socio-political researcher in Oman, he discussed his view on the impacts of plot allocation or “plottery” have on the Omani identity and sense of community. He stated that over the last 50 years, Omanis have continuously evolved two personalities, one in their tribal area where they are from and one in Muscat. In the area where they originate, their sense of community, neighborhood, and willingness to cooperate is high. But, in Muscat they become individualistic as if they do not belong there. We can see this clearly in the way that Omanis continue to return to their villages every weekend- and when they go back, the stereotypes that they have between each other in Muscat are continually reinforced.

Though the land allocation system impacts society and their sense of community in negative ways, in parallel, it is also manipulated by people themselves through the neo-tribal

² Heim, B., Joosten, M., Richthofen, A. V., & Rupp, F. (2018). Land-allocation and clan-formation in modern residential developments in Oman [Abstract]. *City, Territory and Architecture*, 5(1). doi:10.1186/s40410-018-0084-6

³ Heim, B., Joosten, M., Richthofen, A. V., & Rupp, F. (2018). Land-allocation and clan-formation in modern residential developments in Oman [Abstract]. *City, Territory and Architecture*, 5(1). doi:10.1186/s40410-018-0084-6

social construct of loyalty building and the giving of favors between various tribal bonds. The system, which seeks to lessen informal tribal transactions by controlling distribution of land, “the social bonds remain and we can see parallels of a modern Omani population with strong tribal roots undermining a centralised land allocation system.” (Richthofen, Heim, Rupp, & Joosten, 2018)

Due to the poor land administration, in the political realm, Omani citizens have continually demanded more transparency from the Ministry of Housing in the past. (Times of Oman, 2015) But recently, under the new leadership of Sultan Haitham Bin Tariq since early 2020, many promising changes have been made in order to achieve more efficiency and accountability. In January 2021, The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (renamed in 2020) held their first ever press conference on the status and goals for land allocation. In the conference, The Ministry revealed their aims to issue a housing law by October 2021 along with an urban planning law by December 2021. Their current vision is to work towards “comprehensive transformation to achieve sustainable urban development for prosperous societies” and have adopted the values of transparency, competence, equity, integration, and sustainability. (Nasseri, 2021) In addition, they also revealed data on the status of land development and distribution. According to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, 40% of land that is owned in Muscat City is not developed and only 19% percent of land owners in the city have actually developed their plots. The percentage of the development of lands allocated outside of Muscat such as in Dhofar is even lower at only 7%. In terms of land distribution the Ministry stated that currently 91% of Omani households own one or more housing units (NCSI) and in the last ten years, a total of 343,692 plots were distributed of which 78% were allocated to women. In terms of plot distribution requests, as of December 2020, there are 447,612 plots requested and under a new royal directive, the ministry plans to distribute 23,000 plots in 2021 (Nasseri, 2021).

Introduction / background of the content

Land governance, administration, and management practices and policies in the Sultanate of Oman are in need of significant revision. High levels of top-down governance combined with a lack of transparency, insufficient planning structure, and poor policy implementation has led to the massive misuse and overconsumption of land resources. There are many examples of increasing problems due to lack of land management in Oman and in other Gulf states such as “desertification, biodiversity loss, pollution in marine and coastal areas, air pollution, and water scarcity and quality.”(Calabrese,& Husari, 2021)

At the onset of rapid urbanization after the discovery of oil, land administration processes in Oman were quickly established and handed over completely to The Ministry of Housing without a cohesive planning framework. Moreover, the implementation of social welfare land entitlement policies such as the Land Allocation or “Lottery” system in the midst of former autonomous tribal territories created a complex balancing act between social appeasement and consolidating loyalties to the central state. Today, the Land Allocation system continues in Oman and its impact on urban development and the societal makeup is drastic. Various tribal influencers and growing social entitlement to free plots has created extensive damage including corruption in Land Administration practices. As Oman continues to urbanize and populate at a high speed, it is urgent that the Land

Administration system undergoes a major reform, but the risk of social impacts along with the lack of sufficient policy oversight continues to threaten the future of the country's sustainable land management and modernization.

Conclusion

Though positive changes are slowly being made and there is hope on the horizon for better land administration, the damaging results of the land allocation system in Oman demands urgent reform and revision. As Oman continues to rapidly urbanize in an unsustainable way, there is an evident need for an in-depth social and political analysis which has the potential to reveal a new way forward in land governance, administration, and management not only in Oman but across the GCC. The multi-dimensional reality of forming both strategic and socially accepted and implementable solutions for the future of sustainable development makes for a difficult journey ahead. But, with the right tools, proper planning methodology, and the will to move forward, Oman can begin to reverse the damage that has been done and slowly start to remold and restructure its neighborhoods and cities in a way that encourages sustainability, creates social cohesion, and builds an innovative and bright future for the generations to come.

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