

affairs by the physical introduction of new political element in their foreign affairs position.

#### **Practical effect**

A wider communist-bloc representation in the peninsula would serve as something of a warning note to the United States that the region is not the reserve of any superpower, although the reaction of the U.S. would not necessarily turn out to the advantage of the Arab states. It might produce some small shifts in trading patterns but not to any great degree, to judge by the Kuwait experience in that respect. Little else of great practical value can be discerned in following the Kuwaiti advice, and the political consequences are, at best of debatable value.

#### **Arab ranks**

Consideration of extending and initiating new diplomatic links might be better directed to the rehabilitation of some of the presently rather frayed inter-Arab ties. A real and functioning Arab amity is the region's best and most powerful political strength. And there is no lack of work and effort to be made in that sphere. A suggestion made recently by a Saudi Arabian newspaper, that Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak be invited to the Arab summit offers an intriguing line of thought. An Egypt restored to the Arab ranks would be a far more positive step than diplomatic gestures to the communist bloc. That development would give Arab diplomatists a very difficult but a much more rewarding task for the exercise of their skills.

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### **STATE ADVISORY COUNCIL FORMED**

NOT NORMALLY REGARDED as a political pace-setter in the Region, the Sultanate of Oman has jumped ahead of some of its Gulf neighbours and set up a 45-member State Advisory Council. The Advisory Council, which is to be presided over by Khalfan bin Nasser al Waheibi, the former Minister of Labour, has been set up by a Royal Decree to 'involve the public in development decisions as part of the efforts of the government towards greater cooperation between the government and the private sector'.

#### **Composition**

Of the 45 members, all of whom will be government appointees, seventeen will represent the government and twenty eight the non-government sector. The non-government sector

members are further divided into eleven representatives of the private sector and seventeen representing the various regions of the country. The Council will have an executive wing and a Secretariat General. The President, the Vice President, two members from the government sector and three from the non government sector make up the Executive. The Secretariat, with Mohammad Ahmad al Nabhany as Secretary General, will be responsible for the financial and administrative affairs of the Council.

#### **Limited objectives**

The objectives of the Council are limited to offering opinions on the economic and social development in the country. It then passes its recommendations to the Sultan. Its opinions on matters outside that sphere are excluded other than 'on certain subjects as allowed by his Majesty the Sultan'. Patently, a long way off a democratic assembly, but at least a long way towards one.

#### **"Democracy"**

Advocates of the 'democratic process' in the Arab countries may be either encouraged or dismayed at this development. The former might see it as the small beginnings to a wider popular participation in the business of government; the latter as a mere device to perpetuate authoritarian rule. A more realistic view would be to regard this in the larger Arab horizon. 'Democracy', in its specific political meaning simply does not flourish anywhere in the Arab countries. There is rule by consensus, rule by default, rule by force, and rule by imposition. Not in any Arab country is a government properly elected by popular franchise; nowhere in the Arab states is there a genuine electoral machinery to enable the ordinary people to decide on the form of government they will have. Permitted political opposition, held by some as the essence of democracy, is generally circumscribed, mostly discouraged, and often repressed in the Arab world.

#### **Widespread fallacy**

The '99 per cent' returns on referendum and elections that have been held in various international Arab states are, of course, mainly governmental public relations exercises and are nowhere taken as a serious expression of the 'popular will'. The outside world regards such alleged manifestations with dismissive disbelief and the latent cynicism of the indigenous voter is heavily reinforced. Yet, it is a common error and a widespread fallacy that an absence of the

technical trappings of democracy equates automatically with a lack of popular support. Let there be a genuine and contested election in Egypt today and the likelihood is that Hosni Mubarak would be returned to power with a comfortable majority. Have a similar exercise in, say, the United Arab Emirates and Shaikh Zaid would undoubtedly be reaffirmed as President. Would Muammer Qaddafi be ousted from his position by a free election in Libya? Might the voters in Iraq consign President Saddam Hussain to a political limbo? Who knows? The question is mainly academic. Western style democracy is not, today, a working or workable proposition in the Arab world. Efforts to transplant it, as instanced in the Sudan, in Syria, in Jordan, have proved sterile and unacceptable. In the last resort, forms of government are what the bulk of the people will allow. Impossible tyrannies and hated regimes can impose themselves on a country but they cannot long survive without support or acquiescence from the people.

#### **Political machinery**

Not many can sensibly dissent from an accepted view that the Arab people desire a greater share in the direction of affairs in their own countries. The western-style democracy has been shown to be an unsuitable pattern for the Arab states. In most of them any organised political opposition is commonly regarded as a potential revolutionary force and a direct security threat to the governing regime. A 'loyal opposition' is not a piece of political machinery which has much credence or standing in the Middle East; where they have existed the concentration centred on the element of opposition without much heed of national loyalties. Oman's neighbours will watch with interest to see how the Sultanate's Advisory Council fares in future and whether it provides an example to follow.

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#### **IN BRIEF**

##### **Iran**

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● **At least 3,500 people are known to have been executed in Iran** since the beginning of the Islamic revolution in September 1979, according to Amnesty International. And, the London-based human rights organisation adds, the true total may well be even higher than that.

Amnesty's latest figures show that since Abolhassan Bani Sadr was deposed as the country's president on 20 June, more than 1,800 people have lost their lives as part of the govern-

ment's intensive drive to wipe out all opposition to the president regime.

The leftist Islamic guerilla movement — Mohaheddin-e-Khalq say that almost 100 children were among the latest recorded victims. According to the organisation's Paris office, the children, who were wounded in recent demonstrations in Tehran, were taken from their hospital beds to the city's Evin prison where they were slaughtered in early October.

● **Iran's consul-general in Hamburg, Kamran Malik, has resigned his post** in protest at the latest round of executions in Iran. Malik was joined by his two vice-consuls and the mission's financial director in requesting political asylum in West Germany.

● **Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev has sent a message of congratulation** to Hojatoleslam Ali Khamenei on his recent election as president. However, according to informed sources, although Brezhnev's message expressed a hope that Iran and the USSR would enjoy a better relationship in the future, it lacked the warmth and friendliness of his message to deposed president Abolhassan Bani Sadr after his election to the position of president last year.

● **Some nine claims for compensation were filed by Iran** on 20 October at the US-Iran arbitration tribunal in the Netherlands. The claims — worth between them more than \$700 million — were filed on the tribunal's first registration day and US officials believe they are the first of 800 claims which will eventually be filed. The tribunal was set up as part of the January agreement to free the US hostages and is empowered to deal with claims from both sides.

● **A ministerial delegation recently visited the Soviet Union** seeking help to rebuild war damaged cities in Iran. The mission, led by the Minister of State for Housing and Urban Development, Mohammed Shahab Gonabadi, is the first ministerial-level visit to the USSR since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. According to recent broadcasts on Tehran Radio, the Soviet Union's Ambassador to Tehran has already indicated his country's agreement to undertake work on the Ramin power station near Ahwaz, for completion as soon as possible. And, said Energy Minister Hassan Ghafuri recently, the Soviet Union is also willing to cooperate in other power and water schemes.

● **Oman's Deputy Prime Minister for Security**