

URGENT ACTION

AZAMN JOURNALISTS SENTENCED TO PRISON

An Omani court of first instance issued its verdict on 26 September against three journalists from the daily *Azamn* newspaper. Two of the journalists received three-year prison sentences and the third a one-year prison sentence. The court also upheld a government order to permanently close the *Azamn* newspaper.

On 26 September, the Court of First Instance in Muscat, Oman's capital, sentenced *Azamn*'s editor-in-chief, **Ibrahim al-Maamari**, and its deputy editor-in-chief, **Youssef al-Haj**, to three years' imprisonment, after convicting them of "undermining the prestige of the state" and other charges under Oman's cybercrimes law and press and publications law. The court also sentenced *Azamn* journalist **Zaher al-Abri** to a one-year prison sentence for "misusing the internet", in relation to a tweet he posted following the arrest of his colleague Ibrahim al-Maamari. Ibrahim al-Maamari and Youssef al-Haj are currently detained, but may be released on bail against a payment of 50,000 Omani rials (US\$ 130,000) each if they decide to appeal against the rulings. On 27 September, the authorities moved them to Oman's Central Prison in Somail, near Muscat. Zaher al-Abri has not yet started to serve his prison sentence; his bail payment was set at 5,000 rials (US\$ 13,000). The court also upheld a government order to close permanently *Azamn* newspaper.

Officials arrested Ibrahim al-Maamari on 28 July following the publication on 26 July of an article accusing the head of Oman's Supreme Court and the chairman of the Judicial Council of intervening in the outcome of verdicts on behalf of influential officials. Youssef al-Haj was arrested on 9 August following the publication of a series of articles based on exclusive interviews with the vice-president of Oman's Supreme Court confirming allegations of corruption made in the original article by Ibrahim al-Maamari. On the same day the authorities ordered the closure of the newspaper and its on-line news site. Zaher al-Abri was arrested on 3 August after he tweeted about the detention of Ibrahim al-Maamari. On account of ill health, Youssef al-Haj was held at the Royal Oman Police Hospital in Muscat between 20 and 25 September, after which he was returned to prison.

Please write immediately in Arabic, English or your own language:

- Calling on the Omani authorities to immediately and unconditionally release Ibrahim al-Maamari and Youssef al-Haj, who are prisoners of conscience, and to quash the conviction of Zaher al-Abri, as all three journalists are being punished for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression;
- Calling on them to ensure that, while detained, Ibrahim al-Maamari and Youssef al-Haj are protected from torture and other ill treatment and are granted regular access to their lawyers, families and any medical care they require;
- Urging them to respect and protect the right to freedom of expression, including by repealing or amending all legislation that criminalizes this right.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 9 NOVEMBER 2016 TO:

Minister of Justice
Sheikh Abdul Malik al-Khalili
Ministry of Justice
PO Box 354
Ruwi PC 112
Muscat, Sultanate of Oman
Twitter: @moj_gov
Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Interior
His Excellency Hamoud bin Faisal bin
Said Al Busaidi
Ministry of Interior
PO Box 127,
Ruwi 112
Muscat, Sultanate of Oman
Salutation: Your Excellency

And copies to:
Chairman, Oman Human Rights Commission
Dr 'Isa Bin Sa'id Sulayman al-Kiyumii
Fill in form at:
http://www.ohrc.om/website_complaintsaddn.php?language=en
Muscat, Sultanate of Oman
Fax: +968 24 2189 06

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. Please insert local diplomatic addresses below:

Name Address 1 Address 2 Address 3 Fax Fax number Email Email address Salutation Salutation

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date. This is the first update of UA 206/16. Further information:
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/MDE20/4789/2016/en/>

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

In September 2011 a court of first instance sentenced Ibrahim al-Maamari to two months in prison and ordered the suspension of the *Azamn* newspaper for one month after its publication in May 2011 of an interview with an employee of the Ministry of Justice who accused the Minister of Justice of career rigging. In January 2012 an appeal court upheld the sentence but did not implement it as the newspaper issued an official apology before the appeal.

On 28 July 2016 Ibrahim al-Maamari was summoned and arrested by Omani State Security. A member of the Public Prosecution office stated that he was facing several charges based on Articles 25 and 29 of the 2016 press and publications law, which can carry up to two years' imprisonment with a fine, as well as charges of undermining the prestige of the state and its status, under Article 135 of the Omani Penal Law, and of publishing material that would disturb public order, under Article 19 of the cybercrimes law.

In detention Youssef al-Haj has been suffering from shortness of breath and has had repeated asthma attacks; he also has a slipped disc in the back, which has been causing him severe pain. He went on hunger strike for a few days in protest at the lack of medical care he says he was receiving.

In March 2016 the government of Oman rejected recommendations to guarantee the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, including a recommendation to support civil society organizations following the United Nations' Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a state-led review of the country's human rights record. Oman only partially accepted recommendations to review current legislation that fails to protect the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association.

Names: Zaher al-Abri, Youssef al-Haj, Ibrahim al-Maamari
Gender m/f: m

Further information on UA: 206/16 Index: MDE 20/4900/2016 Issue Date: 28 September 2016