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Sultan of Oman pardons activists

The Sultan of Oman's decision to pardon all activists and writers convicted last year for insulting the ruler, IT crimes and taking part in unauthorized protests should be just the first step in addressing the issue of freedom of expression in Oman, said Amnesty International.

His Majesty Sultan Qaboos issued the pardon on Thursday and ordered that the prisoners be released today. Amnesty International received information that all those held on such charges were released this morning.

"While the Sultan's pardon is a very welcome step, it should be the first of many taken to address freedom of expression as a whole in Oman and to lift restrictions on freedom of expression by repressive laws," said Philip Luther of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa programme.

"Individuals peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression should never have been put in prison in the first place, nor tried on charges that criminalize freedom of expression."

Amnesty International considered all those held solely for peacefully exercising their rights to be prisoners of conscience and had been calling for their immediate and unconditional release and for their convictions to be quashed.

Dozens of Omani activists had been sentenced or were standing trial when the Sultan issued the pardon.

The trials began in 2012 after numerous writers, activists and bloggers were arrested during a crackdown in Oman in late May and early June 2012.

During this time, Oman's Public Prosecution issued a number of statements threatening to take legal action against anyone who publishes "offensive writing" in the media or online deemed to incite others to action "under the pretext of freedom of expression".

The trials, some of which reached the Supreme Court, had seen multiple delays. In February 2013 many of the jailed activists went on hunger strike for around a week to 10 days in protest at the delay of their hearings at the Supreme Court. It ended after they were informed that their appeals would be heard. In February and March the Supreme Court upheld sentences of eight people but accepted the appeals of eight others and ordered a retrial. Alongside the 16 cases, the trials of at least 18 other activists were still ongoing when the pardon was issued.

The Omani authorities have maintained strict restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly. Several bloggers and journalists have been targeted in recent years after criticizing the government, including some who have been detained.