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Omani activists sentenced as crackdown on free speech continues

In the latest case on Monday, a court in the capital Muscat sentenced five activists to jail terms of between one year and 18 months on charges including publicly insulting the Sultan as well as using the internet to publish defamatory and insulting materials, and publishing materials harming public order. They have been released on bail pending appeals.

Around 20 other Omani activists face similar prison terms after being charged with a number of offences connected to the exercise of their freedom of expression and assembly including protesting, inciting protests, insulting the Sultan, and obstructing the traffic.

Most are currently out on bail while their trials are ongoing.

“These sentences are the latest phase in the Omani government’s orchestrated crackdown on freedom of expression and assembly, which has been under way since last year,” said Philip Luther, Middle East and North Africa Programme Director at Amnesty International.

“All charges levelled against activists merely for engaging in peaceful activism must be dropped. If anyone is imprisoned on the basis of such charges, we would regard them as prisoners of conscience and call for their unconditional and immediate release.”

The five sentenced on Monday were university students Mohamed al-Badi and Mona Hardan, who writes on Facebook under the name Wardat Dhuffar (Dhuffar Rose), poet ‘Abdullah al-‘Arimi, Taleb al-‘Ebri, and photographer Mohamed al-Habsi. All five were also handed fines of 1,000 Omani riyals (around US\$2,600). They have been reportedly released on bail pending appeals.

On 9 July another poet, Hamad al-Kharousi, was sentenced to one year’s imprisonment and a fine of 200 Omani riyals (US\$520) after being convicted of insulting the Sultan and using the internet to publish defamatory and insulting materials. Hamoud al-Rashidi, a writer, was given a six-month sentence and a fine of 200 Omani riyals. They were both also released on bail pending appeals.

These seven activists are among dozens of others who face prison sentences and fines on similar charges related to protests and freedom of expression.

Protests in Oman in early 2011 – sparked by popular unrest across the Middle East and North Africa – led to a number of political and social reforms, but tight restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly remain in place.

Scores were arrested and many brought to trial in 2011 with at least one man reported to have died when police forcibly dispersed protesters in the town of Sohar.

The court proceedings currently under way follow another wave of arrests of activists, writers and lawyers in late May and early June 2012.

“The Omani authorities’ ongoing attempts to stamp out dissent are unacceptable, and they must uphold the rights of all Omanis to peacefully exercise their right to freedom of expression,” said Philip Luther.

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