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Oman: Intolerance of dissent mounts as a dozen more activists sentenced

The conviction of a dozen more Omani activists on protest-related charges is a further sign of the growing intolerance of dissent in the country, Amnesty International said today.

A court in the capital Muscat on Wednesday handed down a year's prison sentence and a fine of 200 Riyals (equivalent to US\$520) for 11 activists for participating in a peaceful protest. A twelfth man also received a one-year prison sentence for insulting the Sultan.

The 12 – whom Amnesty International would consider prisoners of conscience if they go to jail – are expected to be released on bail on 11 August pending appeals in their cases.

Wednesday's verdict is the latest in a string of court cases involving around 35 Omani activists who are being targeted in connection with their calls for greater freedoms in the country since last year.

“Dissent is on trial in Oman, with the authorities cracking down on dozens of activists who have peacefully protested or otherwise spoken out to criticize the lack of freedom in the country,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Middle East and North Africa Programme Director at Amnesty International.

“If the defendants end up behind bars, Amnesty International will consider them to be prisoners of conscience and will campaign for their immediate and unconditional release.”

In recent weeks, trials have begun for dozens of writers, activists and bloggers arrested in late May and early June 2012. Most have been charged in connection with exercising their right to freedom of expression and assembly, through public protests, publishing or other means.

On 6 August, Muscat's court of first instance sentenced eight other men to one year imprisonment and a 1000 Riyal (US\$2,600) fine on charges including insulting the Sultan and using the internet to publish defamatory material. They have also been released on bail pending their appeals. A woman on trial with them was acquitted.

“Political leaders must be prepared to be criticized and have their performance scrutinized. Instead of addressing the criticisms raised, the Omani authorities are hiding behind provisions of the penal code to stifle dissenting voices,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

Last month, [at least seven other activists](#) were sentenced to prison terms on protest-related charges.

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.

Before the latest wave of arrests and trials of activists since May this year, scores were arrested and many brought to trial in 2011.

Omani police also violently dispersed protests on a number of occasions, leading to the reported death of at least one man in the town of Sohar.

Amnesty International calls on governments and bodies with influence over Oman's ruling government – including the United Kingdom – to speak out against the Omani authorities' ongoing crackdown on freedom of expression and assembly.

“Oman should not get a free pass to ride roughshod over basic freedoms - the international community should do more to halt this crackdown,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.