

# Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/oman-wave-of-arrests-aims-to-stifle-12-06-2012,42773.html>

Middle East/North Africa - Oman

Basic freedoms under threat

## Four netizens get jail sentences on lèse-majesté charges

13 July 2012

[Read in Arabic \(بالعربية\)](#)

Reporters Without Borders is dismayed to learn that a Muscat court passed jail sentences on four bloggers and online activists on 9 July on charges of insulting and defaming Sultan Qaboos bin Said. Three were given one-year sentences. The fourth was got six months.

“On the pretext of punishing allegedly defamatory comments, the sultanate’s justice system is stifling dissent by urging its citizens to express their opinions in a ‘legal’ manner and in accordance with the ‘legal definition’ of free speech, which seems to leave little room for freedom of expression,” Reporters Without Borders said.

“We call for this verdict to be overturned on appeal and we urge the authorities to end their abusive prosecutions of dissidents, who are just exercising their right to impart and receive news and information.”

**Hamoud Al-Rashdi**, a writer, was sentenced to six months in prison and a fine of 200 rials (425 euros) for publicly insulting the sultan. The other three – the poet **Hamad Al-Kharousi**, the poet and activist **Mahmoud Al-Rawahi** and the activist **Ali Al-Mikbali**– were sentenced to a year in prison and a fine of 200 rials for insulting and defaming the sultan online.

According to [Muscat Daily](#), Rashdi was convicted under article 126 of the [Criminal Law](#), which punishes “defaming His Majesty the Sultan or his authority publicly,” while the others were convicted under this article and articles 16 and 19 of the [Cybercrime Law](#).

Article 16 punishes using the Internet or other technological methods to defame, insult or invade privacy. Article 19 punishes using the Internet to spread or promote attacks on religious values or threats to public order.

All four were released on bail of 1,000 rials (2,130 euros) pending the outcome of their appeal, which is due to be heard in September.

Their convictions follow a wave of arrests in June and are part of a government campaign against netizens who are demanding political reforms.

Rashdi and Kharousi were arrested on 8 June, on the same day as several other bloggers and writers who are still being held without being officially charged. According to a source close to the case, not all of them have been able to see a lawyer.

The Dublin-based [Front Line Defenders](#) said it was thought that Al-Rashdi was arrested for carrying a banner critical of the authorities and that Al-Kharousi was arrested for writing a poem critical of the sultan.

Al-Mikbali was arrested on 9 June for comments he had posted online, while Al-Rawahi was arrested two days later during a sit-in. Al-Rawahi is also charged – along with around 20 other activists – with participating in an illegal demonstration. The verdict is due on 22 July.

The public prosecutor’s office issued a [statement](#) on 13 June deploring an increase in insulting and defamatory comments and calls for demonstrations and strikes. They were incompatible

with the values and ethics of Omani society and the principle of free speech, and could threaten public order and the national interest, it said.

The statement went on to announce that the main instigators had been arrested. An investigation would be carried out in accordance with legal procedures and those responsible would be brought to trial. The attorney-general's office would continue to ensure respect for the laws and the rules of good conduct, it added.

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### **12.06.12 - Wave of arrests aims to stifle political and social protests**

[Read in Arabic \(بالعربية\)](#)

Reporters Without Borders condemns the wave of arrests aimed at Omani bloggers since the end of May.

"We are concerned about the crackdown on Oman's bloggers aimed at silencing the protest movement that has resurfaced in the sultanate, as well as its websites," the press freedom organization said.

"We deplore the illegal and random nature of these arrests. We ask the authorities to release the bloggers immediately and unconditionally and to call a halt to arbitrary arrests."

The blogger **Esmael al-Meqbali**, a member of the Oman Group for Human Rights, together with two other activists, Habiba al-Hinai and Yaqoub al-Kharusi, were arrested on 31 May on their way to the Fohoud oilfield in the Omani desert, to check on conditions of [oilfield workers on strike](#) since May 24.

When they appeared in court on 4 June, the prosecutor accused them of "inciting the crowd" to demonstrate against the government. Al-Hinai and al-Kharusi were released the same day but al-Meqbali was ordered to be held for a further week. He is reported to have gone on hunger strike.

The blogger and activist **Eshaq Al-Aghbari** was arrested on 4 June. He became famous during protests in Oman in February last year, when he was placed in detention for several days. Two days later, it was the turn of **Khalfan Al-Badwawi**, an engineer and blogger who was one of the organizers of protests in the Western Sahara in 2011. Like the three activists arrested on 31 May, neither al-Aghbari nor al-Badwawi has been allowed to see their lawyers.

Another wave of arrests took place on 8 June. Several writers and bloggers were held by the Special Department of the Omani police, including bloggers **Nabhan Al-Hinshi** and **Hassan Al-Raqishi**, the writer **Humood Al-Rashdi**, the poet **Hamad Al-Kharousi** and two poets and activists, **Ali Al-Saedi** and **Ali Al-Hajji**.

All these arrests took place after a [statement](#) on 4 June by the attorney-general who spoke of "the recent increase in defamatory statements and calls for sedition by some people under the guise of freedom of expression" and expressed his intention to "take all necessary legal action against those uttering, circulating, encouraging or contributing to them".

The threat comes at a time when demands for political reform are growing on social networks, in parallel with calls for the release of the first three activists detained.

According to various Omani websites, the bloggers and writers were believed to have been arrested for views they had expressed online. However, as with the other detainees, the charges against them are not known. In the last post on his [blog](#) on 5 June, al-Hinshi deplored the first wave of arrests and criticized the attorney-general's statement.

Lawyer Bassma Mubarak al-Kayoumi was quoted in the newspaper [Gulf News](#) as saying she believed the arrests violated several articles of the law which, among other things, stipulate that no one can be arrested without being given a reason and an arrested person "has the right to call whomever needs to be alerted about the arrest to provide assistance within the confines of the law".

Following the protests and demonstrations that shook the country last year, Sultan Qaboos announced some reforms in an attempt to quell popular discontent. Omanis are still waiting for these reforms to be carried out, which partly explains the revival of the protests.

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