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Middle East/North Africa - Oman

Political ruling

Supreme court upholds one-year jail terms for five netizens

8 March 2013

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Reporters Without Borders condemns last week's supreme court ruling upholding one-year jail terms and 200-rial fines (400 euros) for five netizens who were convicted of cyber-crime and insulting the sultan.

The five are **Ali Bin Hilal Al-Muqabali, Mohamed Bin Zayed Al-Habsi, Abdullah Bin Salem Al-Siyabi, Hilal Bin Salim Al-Busaidi** and **Abdullah Al-Abdali**. As Abdali is a medical student, the court released him so that he can finish this year's course, but told him he will have to begin serving his jail sentence as soon as it is over.

Reporters Without Borders strongly regrets the supreme court ruling, handed down on 25 February, because it deprives these men of their freedom for the sole reason that they used online social networks to call for political, social and economic reforms.

Five other netizens – **Khalfan Al-Badwawi, Sultan Al-Saadi, Hatem Al-Maliki, Khalid Al-Nofali** and **Mohamed Al-Fazari** – are currently been prosecuted on the same charges – cyber-crime and insulting the sultan.

As they told the court that is trying them that their Facebook accounts were hacked and that they were therefore not responsible for what was posted on them, the court has requested an expert testimony.

A hearing scheduled for 27 February was postponed until 5 March and then until 20 March to allow the expert to prepare his testimony. The expert designated by the court is none other than Dr. Hossein Bin Saeed Al-Ghafri, a lawyer and adviser to the Oman's Information Technology Authority (ITA), and a member of the [International Association of Cybercrime Prevention](#).

"One can only wonder about the neutrality and objectivity of the expert chosen by the court to issue such a crucial opinion," Reporters Without Borders. "An independent expert must be appointed."

Appeals by 11 persons convicted of illegal assembly were accepted by the [supreme court](#) on 4 March. Their lawyer, Khalifa Al-Hinai, said that they will be retried before appeal courts and that he meanwhile plans to request their release on bail.

The appeals of three others were rejected on procedural grounds but they plan to submit [new appeals](#) which Al-Hinai thinks will be accepted.

Reporters Without Borders points out that Oman fell 24 places in its [2013 press freedom index](#) and is now ranked 141st out of 179 countries.

There were several waves of arrests of Omani human rights defenders and activists in 2012 after they voiced support for oil company employees in the Fahoud oil fields in a desert region to the southwest of Muscat who have been on strike since 24 May 2012.

In all, more than 40 Omani activists were prosecuted last year on charges of illegal assembly, cyber-crime and insulting the sultan. No fewer than 28 of them were [convicted on appeal](#) in

December alone.

On 16 January 2013, an appeal court [sentenced](#) eight writers and bloggers to jail terms and fines on lèse-majesté and cyber-crime charges. It also upheld the convictions of three other bloggers and activists.

Around 20 detainees in Muscat's Samayel prison staged a [hunger strike](#) from 9 to 24 February in protest against their imprisonment and the time taken by the supreme court to consider their appeals.

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