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Middle East/North Africa - Oman

Still waiting for reforms

Wave of arrests aims to stifle political and social protests

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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 **Esmaeel 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.
