

Oman & press freedom: Prison sentences to journalists of “Azamn”, newspaper permanently closed

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Oman: Court of First Instance in Muscat hands prison sentences to journalists of “Azamn” and closes newspaper permanently

On 26 September 2016, the Court of First Instance in Muscat reportedly sentenced three journalists of “Azamn” newspaper, Ibrahim Al-Maamari, Yousef Al-Haj, and Zaher Al-Abri, to prison and ordered the newspaper to close permanently. It was the final hearing in the trial, and if they appeal, there is a large bail, which may keep them in jail during any appeal process.

Ibrahim Al-Maamari, who is Editor-in-Chief, has been convicted of four charges – “disturbing public order, misuse of the Internet, publishing details of a civil case, and undermining the prestige of the state.” He was sentenced to three years’ imprisonment, in addition to a fine of 3000 RO (US \$7,800) and a ban on working as a journalist for a period of one year.

Yousef Al-Haj, the Editorial Secretary who was serving as Deputy Editor after Al-Maamari was arrested first, has also been sentenced to three years in prison in addition to a fine of 3000 RO (US \$7,800). He is also banned from working as a journalist for a period of one year. He was convicted of six counts of “breach of public order, misuse of the Internet, undermining the prestige of the state, publishing details of a civil case, publishing about a case for which a decree had been issued to ban news about it, and slander.”

Additionally, the court decided that in the event that Al-Maamari and Al-Haj appeal the verdict against them, they would have to pay a bail of 50,000 RO (US\$130,000). This is a very large sum and appears to be designed to keep them in prison, according to local reports.

Journalist Zaher Al-Abri, who is a member of the Editorial Committee, has been sentenced to one-year imprisonment and fined a thousand Omani riyals (US \$2600) after being found guilty of using “an information network [the Internet] for the dissemination of material that might be prejudicial to public order.” His bail was set at 5000 Omani Rials (US \$13000), and he was already released on 22 August 2016.

Both Ibrahim Al-Maamari and Yousef Al-Haj are being held at the Special Division of the Omani Police General Command in Muscat, which is the executive arm of the Internal Security Service (ISS). [\[1\]](#)

The Gulf Center for Human Rights (GCHR) denounces in the strongest terms the prison sentences handed down against the journalists of “Azamn”, while strongly condemning the decision to close the newspaper, which was issued after a sham trial that lacked the minimum international standards for fair trial and due process.

The GCHR urges the authorities in Oman to:

1. Revoke the sentences issued against journalists Ibrahim Al-Maamari, Yousef Al-Haj and Zaher Al-Abri, and the order to close “Azamn” newspaper as they violate freedom of the press and abuse their rights to freedom of expression;
2. Release journalists Ibrahim Al-Maamari and Yousef Al-Haj immediately and without any conditions and protect press freedom in the country; and
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Oman are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.

GCHR respectfully reminds you that the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1998, recognises the legitimacy of the activities of human rights defenders, their right to freedom of association and to carry out their activities without fear of reprisals. We would particularly draw your attention to Article 6 (c) “Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others: (c) To study, discuss, form and hold opinions on the observance, both in law and in practice, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and, through these and other appropriate means, to draw public attention to those matters” and to Article 12.2, which provides that “the State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the present Declaration.”

The Gulf Center for Human Rights (GCHR)

P.S.

* <http://www.gc4hr.org/news/view/1382>

Footnotes

[1] For more information about the trial of the three journalists of “Azamn”, see the following link:
<http://www.gc4hr.org/news/index/country/6>