

# URGENT ACTION

## JOURNALISTS' SENTENCES REDUCED, ONE ACQUITTED

**On 26 December, the Appeal Court in Muscat reduced the three-year prison sentences of two Azamn journalists, Ibrahim al-Maamari and Youssef al-Haj, to six and 12 months respectively. They are prisoners of conscience. A third Azamn journalist, Zahar al-Abri, was acquitted.**

The three year prison sentences of Azamn editor-in-chief **Ibrahim al-Maamari** and deputy editor-in-chief, **Youssef al-Haj**, were reduced to six months and one year respectively by the Appeal Court in Muscat, Oman's capital, on 26 December 2016. Their fines were also reduced from 3,000 Omani rials (about US\$7,800) to 1,000 Omani rials (about US\$2,600) each. The time they have already spent in detention will be taken into account. The two journalists have been taken to Oman's Central Prison in Samail, south west of Muscat, to serve the remainder of their sentences. Their lawyer has lodged a fresh appeal against their conviction and sentences before the Supreme Court. At the same appeal hearing, on 26 December, **Zaher al-Abri**, another Azamn journalist, was acquitted and the court overturned the Ministry of Information's decision to close the Azamn newspaper. However, despite the court's ruling, the Minister for Information extended the closure of the newspaper for another three months on 8 January.

On 26 September 2016, the Court of First Instance in Muscat sentenced Ibrahim al-Maamari and Youssef al-Haj to three years' imprisonment after convicting them of "undermining the prestige of the state" and other charges under Oman's cybercrimes law and press and publications law. Zaher al-Abri was sentenced to one year imprisonment and a fine for misusing the internet. The three journalists' trial before the Appeal Court began on 10 October 2016. The court ordered the release of Ibrahim al-Maamari and Youssef al-Haj after reducing their bail from 50,000 rials (US\$ 130,000) each to 2,000 rials (US\$ 5,200). Zaher al-Abri had been released on 22 August on bail pending appeal for 1,000 rials (about US\$ 2,600).

### **Please write immediately in English, Arabic or your own language:**

- Calling on the Omani authorities to immediately and unconditionally release prisoners of conscience, Ibrahim al-Maamari and Youssef al-Haj;
- Calling on them to ensure that, pending their release, the two men are protected from torture and other ill-treatment, granted regular access to their lawyers and families, and receive any medical care they require;
- Urging the Omani authorities to respect and protect the right to freedom of expression and to repeal or amend all legislation that criminalizes the peaceful exercise of this right.

### **PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 22 FEBRUARY 2017 TO:**

Minister of Justice  
Sheikh Abdul Malik al-Khalili  
Ministry of Justice  
PO Box 354  
Ruwi PC 112  
Muscat, Sultanate of Oman  
Twitter: @moj\_gov  
**Salutation: Your Excellency**

Minister of Interior  
His Excellency Hamoud bin Faisal bin  
Said Al Busaidi  
Ministry of Interior  
PO Box 127,  
Ruwi 112  
Muscat, Sultanate of Oman  
**Salutation: Your Excellency**

**And copies to:**  
Chairman, Oman Human Rights  
Commission  
Dr 'Isa Bin Sa'id Sulayman al-Kiyumii  
Fill in form at:  
[http://www.ohrc.om/website\\_complaintsa](http://www.ohrc.om/website_complaintsa)  
[ddn.php?language=en](http://www.ohrc.om/website_complaintsa)  
Muscat, Sultanate of Oman  
Fax: +968 24 2189 06

**Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country.** HIS EXCELLENCY ABDULAZIZ ABDULLAH ZAHIR AL HINAI Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman, 167 Queens Gate Sw7 5HE, 020 7225 0001, Fax 020 7589 2505

**Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.** This is the fourth update of UA 206/16. Further information: [www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde20/5148/2016/en/](http://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde20/5148/2016/en/)

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### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

In September 2011, a court of first instance sentenced Ibrahim al-Maamari to two months in prison and ordered the suspension of the Azamn newspaper for one month after its publication in May 2011 of an interview with an employee of the Ministry of Justice who accused the Minister of Justice of career rigging. In January 2012, an appeal court upheld the sentence but did not implement it as the newspaper issued an official apology before the appeal.

On 28 July 2016, Ibrahim al-Maamari was summoned and arrested by Omani State Security following the publication on 26 July of an article accusing the head of Oman's Supreme Court and the chairman of the Judicial Council of intervening in the outcome of verdicts on behalf of influential officials. He was charged with "disturbing public order" and "publishing details of a civil law case" under Articles 25 and 29 of the 2016 press and publications law, as well as charged with undermining the prestige of the state and its status, under Article 135 of the Omani Penal Law, and with publishing material that would disturb public order, under Article 19 of the cybercrimes law.

Zaher al-Abri was arrested on 3 August after he commented on Twitter about the detention of Ibrahim al-Maamari. Youssef al-Haj was arrested on 9 August following the publication of a series of articles based on exclusive interviews with the vice-president of Oman's Supreme Court confirming allegations of corruption made in the original article by Ibrahim al-Maamari. The same day the Ministry of Information ordered the shutdown of Azamn newspaper and its online news site.

In detention, Youssef al-Haj suffered from shortness of breath and had repeated asthma attacks; he also has a slipped disc in the back, which has been causing him severe pain. He went on hunger strike for a few days in protest at the lack of medical care he needed. On account of ill health, Youssef al-Haj was held at the Royal Oman Police Hospital in Muscat between 20 and 25 September, after which he was returned to prison.

Throughout their detention, the three men were held in solitary confinement in windowless cells. They met with their lawyers for the first time on 15 August when their trial began before the Court of First Instance. On 26 September, the court sentenced Ibrahim al-Maamari and Youssef al-Haj to three years' imprisonment and fines, and set their bail at 50,000 Omani rials (US\$ 130,000) each should they decide to appeal against the rulings. Zaher al-Abri was sentenced to a one year prison sentence and a fine. The three journalists' trial before the Appeal Court began on 10 October. The court ordered the release of Ibrahim al-Maamari and Youssef al-Haj after reducing their bail to 2,000 Omani rials (US\$ 5,200) each. After the second appeal hearing on 7 November the court set 17 November to issue its verdict which was postponed to 12 December and again to 26 December.

In March 2016, during Oman's review before the United Nations' Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the government rejected recommendations to guarantee the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, including a recommendation to support civil society organizations. Oman only partially accepted recommendations to review current legislation that fails to protect the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association.

Further information on UA: 206/16 Index: MDE 20/5455/2017 Issue Date: 11 January 2017