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Journalists, human rights advocates protest blocking SMS news services

[Saddam Al-Ashmouri For Yemen Times](#)

SANA'A, June 6 — Journalists, human rights activists and politicians staged a sit-in on Tuesday in front of the Yemeni Cabinet building in what's being called "Freedom Square." The sit-in falls within a framework of demonstrations staged to protest the blocking of SMS news services from Nass Mobile and Without Chains Mobile, as well as blocking Aleshteraki.net, Al-Shoura.net and Al-Umah.net web sites.

Ahmed Saif Hashed, head of Parliament's Rights and Freedoms Committee, alleges that the Yemeni government is afraid of such news services because they are able to reach ordinary citizens while the authority attempts to impose one policy and wants its voice heard.

Hashed added, "When the margins of democracy shrink and freedom is restricted by blocking web sites, we don't feel that we belong to this age."

He continued, "The challenges ahead are large and we should remain firm until the confiscated rights are restored, even if we must resort to demonstrations."

Member of Parliament Fuad Duhabah assures that Yemeni law warrants the right to freedom of expression for every citizen while the state, represented by the Ministry of Information, wants to confiscate that right.

Duhabah went on to say that such demonstrations aim to turn the issue into a public opinion issue, whereby citizens feel that by blocking such services, they are being deprived of their rights.

The Demonstrators Committee decided on Thursday to resume demonstrations and sit-ins in Freedom Square until all demands are met, including SMS news services from Nass Mobile and Without Chains Mobile, as well as electronic web sites.

Earlier, demonstrators, including hundreds of press members, political party affiliates and women leaders, chose a committee comprised of former Al-Nass Editor-in-Chief Ali Al-Jaradi, head of the Yemeni Socialist Party's media department and executive director of the National Committee for Defending Human Rights and Freedoms, known as HOOD, as well as editor-in-chief of the blocked Al-Shoura.net and Women Journalists Without Chains chairperson, Tawakul Abdulsalam Karman..

The sit-ins will continue every Tuesday until the Yemeni government meets their demands and citizens and parties have the right to operate their own private media, maintaining that they are against blocking of news services.

The demonstrators called on all supporters of freedom of opinion and civil society organizations to join the sit-ins until the authorities meet all of their demands. "Any excuse to impede implementing these demands by the government is not accepted," they noted in a statement.

Despite Prime Minister Ali Mujawar's directives regarding halting the blocking of Aleshteraki.net and Al-Shoura.net, the two web sites once again were blocked four

hours after the blockage was halted.

Sami Ghalib, head of the Yemeni Journalists Syndicate's Rights and Freedoms Committee, noted that the Yemeni government deals with media in an improvisational way, maintaining that such government measures and practices are counter to the Yemeni Constitution.

Additionally, the editor-in-chief of Al-Shoura.net accused the Yemeni Information and Telecommunications Ministries of being security institutions whose main task has become blocking and controlling services rather than providing them to citizens.