

United Arab Emirates | Freedom House

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 5 / 40

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 1 / 12

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 0 / 4

The Federal Supreme Council, comprising the dynastic rulers of the seven emirates, is the country's highest executive body. It selects a president and vice president from among its members, and the president appoints a prime minister and cabinet. The emirate of Abu Dhabi has controlled the federation's presidency since its inception in 1971; the current president, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, succeeded his father in 2004. In 2006, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum succeeded his late brother as ruler of the emirate of Dubai and as vice president and prime minister of the UAE.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4

The unelected Federal Supreme Council is also the country's highest legislative authority, but it is advised by the 40-seat Federal National Council (FNC), which can review proposed laws and question government ministers.

Since 2006, half of the FNC's members have been elected for four-year terms by an electoral college chosen by the rulers of each emirate, while the government directly appoints the other half. The size of the electoral college has expanded over time; in 2015, it grew to more than 224,000 members, some 34 times larger than in 2006, though this still represented less than half of the voting-age citizen population. Voter turnout in the 2015 elections remained low, at 35 percent of those eligible.

There are no elected legislative bodies in the individual emirates.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 0 / 4

The UAE's electoral framework applies only to the advisory FNC, and it lacks universal suffrage. While the electoral college has expanded, and overseas voting was permitted for the first time in 2015, there is no accountability for the procedures by which the rulers of each emirate draw up the lists of eligible voters. The geographical allocation of FNC seats results in significant overrepresentation for the smaller emirates.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 2 / 16

B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 0 / 4

Political parties are banned, and all electoral candidates run as independents.

Since 2011, the UAE has aggressively cracked down on opposition activists, particularly if they are suspected of belonging to the Association for Reform and Guidance (Al-Islah), a group formed in 1974 to advocate for democratic reform. The government has accused members of Al-Islah of being foreign agents of the Muslim Brotherhood intent on overthrowing the regime, and designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization in 2014. Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood has been a factor in efforts by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and their regional allies to isolate that country since 2017. Dozens of activists, civil society leaders, academics, and students remained imprisoned during 2018 as part of the broader crackdown.

B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 0 / 4

The political system grants the emirates' hereditary rulers a monopoly on power and excludes the possibility of a change in government through elections.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 1 / 4

The political choices available to eligible voters are severely limited in practice, and the alignments of both voters and candidates are heavily influenced by tribal networks.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 1 / 4

Approximately 90 percent of the population of the UAE consists of noncitizens who lack political rights and electoral opportunities, including thousands of stateless residents. There is no clear process for obtaining citizenship without Emirati parentage or marriage to an Emirati man; children of Emirati mothers and foreign fathers must apply for naturalization.

Women make up about 48 percent of the FNC electoral college, and 78 women ran as candidates in the 2015 elections. Only one woman was elected, and another eight were appointed by the government; one of them was named as speaker and president of the body, marking the first time that the position had been held by a woman. In practice, ordinary women have little opportunity to organize independently and advance their interests through the political system.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 2 / 12

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 0 / 4

Government policies are determined by the dynastic rulers of the seven emirates. The FNC performs only advisory functions and has struggled to arrange hearings with government ministers. In practice, policymaking authority has coalesced around the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, since the titular UAE president suffered a stroke in 2014. The president, Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, began appearing more often in state media in June 2018, though there was no obvious change to the crown prince's de facto leadership.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 2 / 4

The UAE is considered one of the least corrupt countries in the Middle East, and the government has taken steps to increase efficiency and streamline bureaucracy. Nevertheless, there are no genuinely independent anticorruption mechanisms, and senior members of the ruling families are able to shield themselves and their associates from public scrutiny.

The collapse of the Abraaj Group private equity firm beginning in February 2018, several months after institutional investors questioned its alleged mismanagement of funds, highlighted regulatory and oversight weaknesses in the financial sector in Dubai that could also have implications for the strength of the country's safeguards against public-sector malfeasance.

C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 0 / 4

The government generally lacks transparency, and despite legal provisions for access to public information, it remains difficult in practice. The State Audit Institution does not release public information about its reports, and its remit is limited to federal entities and state-owned companies, whereas most spending takes place in the individual emirates; the institution can conduct audits of an emirate's entities if asked by its ruler.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 12 / 60**D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 3 / 16****D1. Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4**

The 1980 Publications and Publishing Law, considered one of the most restrictive press laws in the Arab world, regulates all aspects of the media and prohibits criticism of the government. Journalists commonly practice self-censorship, and outlets frequently publish government statements without criticism or comment. Media operate with more freedom in certain "free zones"—areas in which foreign media outlets can produce news content intended for foreign audiences—but the zones remain subject to UAE media laws and have additional regulatory codes and authorities.

Emirati-owned and UAE-based media outlets have participated actively in a government-backed media campaign against Qatar that began in May 2017. In June 2017, the attorney general issued a statement warning that anyone who showed sympathy or favoritism toward Qatar in any medium could be punished with three to 15 years in prison and a fine of at least 500,000 dirhams (\$136,000) under the penal code and a highly restrictive 2012 cybercrime law.

A number of well-known commentators have been jailed in recent years for criticizing the authorities, expressing support for dissidents or human rights, or calling for political reform. In May 2018, leading human rights activist Ahmed Mansoor was sentenced to 10 years in prison for using social media to “publish false information that damages the country’s reputation.” He had been in detention since his arrest in March 2017.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 1 / 4

Islam is the official religion, and the majority of citizens are Sunni Muslims. The General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments provides regular guidance to Muslim preachers; it and a Dubai counterpart appoint the country’s Sunni imams. Shiite clergy have their own council to manage religious affairs. There have been some allegations of noncitizen Shiite Muslims facing discrimination or deportation in recent years. Christian, Hindu, and Sikh places of worship have been built on plots of land donated by ruling family members. Blasphemy is a criminal offense, as is proselytizing to Muslims by non-Muslim groups.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 1 / 4

The Ministry of Education censors textbooks and curriculums in both public and private schools. Islamic education is required in public schools and for Muslims in private schools. Several foreign universities have opened satellite campuses in the UAE, although faculty members are generally careful to avoid criticizing the government. At least 10 faculty members from New York University (NYU) have been denied entry to teach or conduct research at NYU’s Abu Dhabi campus. Students, staff, and support personnel have also been denied entry. The UAE authorities have placed scholars and students who have criticized aspects of government policy on a unified Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) security blacklist, barring them from the wider region.

In May 2018, a British doctoral student, Matthew Hedges, was arrested at Dubai International Airport after completing a research trip to the country. He was held in solitary confinement in Abu Dhabi for five months and ordered to stand trial on espionage charges. Hedges was convicted on November 21, after a trial that lasted five minutes, and sentenced to life imprisonment. Under international pressure, he was then pardoned by the UAE president five days later and promptly deported.

D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 1 / 4

A number of laws adopted in recent years give authorities broad discretion to punish

individuals' speech on sensitive topics. The 2012 cybercrime law, which amended and replaced one passed in 2006, introduced lengthy prison terms for vaguely worded offenses such as damaging "the reputation or the stature of the state or any of its institutions." A 2014 counterterrorism law prescribes punishments including the death penalty for offenses like "undermining national security" and possession of material that opposes or denigrates Islam. A 2015 law against hate speech and discrimination contained loosely worded definitions and criminalized a wide range of free speech activities. These and other criminal laws have been actively enforced, including against ordinary social media users.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 2 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 1 / 4

The government places restrictions on freedom of assembly. Public meetings require government permits, and unauthorized political or labor protests are subject to dispersal by police.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? 0 / 4

Nongovernmental organizations must register with the Ministry of Social Affairs and can receive subsidies from the government, though they are subject to many restrictions. International human rights groups have been denied entry to the UAE. Local human rights activists are at serious risk of detention, prosecution, and mistreatment in custody.

E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 1 / 4

Workers—most of whom are foreign—do not have the right to form unions, bargain collectively, or strike. They can seek collective redress for grievances through state mediation or the courts, and the government sometimes arranges concessions and settlements. Workers occasionally protest against unpaid wages and poor working and living conditions, but such demonstrations are typically dispersed by security personnel, and noncitizens who participate risk deportation. Professional associations require government licenses and are closely monitored by the authorities.

F. RULE OF LAW: 3 / 16

F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 0 / 4

The judiciary is not independent, with court rulings subject to review by the political leadership. Judges are appointed by executive decree, and the judiciary as an institution is managed largely by executive officials. Many judges are foreigners working on short-term contracts.

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4

Detainees are often denied adequate access to legal counsel during interrogations, and lengthy detention without charge is not uncommon. Judges are empowered to extend such detention indefinitely. The mass trial of 94 political dissidents in 2013 was widely criticized for systematic violations of international due process standards, though serious violations have also been observed in other cases.

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 1 / 4

Authorities have been criticized by international human rights organizations for failure to investigate allegations of torture and mistreatment in custody. In 2016, the UN special rapporteur on torture found credible evidence that a group of Libyan nationals charged with—and later acquitted of—terrorism offenses had been tortured in UAE custody. Other detainees regularly report abuse by the authorities. Economist Nasser bin Ghaith, a high-profile detainee who had been sentenced to 10 years in prison in 2017 for social media posts that were deemed “insulting” to the UAE, engaged in a series of hunger strikes during 2018 to protest poor prison conditions.

Sharia (Islamic law) courts sometimes impose flogging sentences for offenses including drug use, prostitution, and extramarital sex.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 1 / 4

Discrimination against noncitizens and foreign workers is common, and they are at risk of deportation for relatively minor offenses. Women face legal and societal discrimination on a variety of issues, including employment. Same-sex sexual relations can draw harsh criminal penalties, and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people are subject to widespread social stigma.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 4 / 16

G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 1 / 4

Emiratis face no apparent restrictions on freedom of movement within the UAE or on their type or place of employment, although under the country’s *kafala* system, migrant workers’ legal status is tied to their employers’ sponsorship, meaning they can be punished or deported for leaving employment without meeting certain criteria. Stateless residents’ freedom of movement is limited by their lack of travel documents; under a government program, many stateless people have received passports from the Comoros that ease travel and other activities but do not confer full citizenship. Societal norms sometimes restrict a woman’s ability to travel without the consent of her husband or father. Qatari nationals have been barred from the UAE since 2017.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 1 / 4

The UAE has enacted reforms in recent years to ease procedures for establishing and operating businesses. However, the government and ruling families exercise

considerable influence over the economy and are involved in many of the country's major economic and commercial initiatives.

Women generally receive smaller inheritances than men under Sharia, and women are excluded from state benefits aimed at supporting home ownership.

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 1 / 4

Muslim women are forbidden to marry non-Muslims, while Muslim men may marry Christian or Jewish women. Women are generally at a distinct disadvantage under laws governing marriage and divorce. All sexual relations outside legal marriage are criminal offenses, which deters victims from reporting rape. No laws protect against spousal rape, and men are permitted to physically discipline their wives.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 1 / 4

Foreign workers are often exploited and subjected to harsh working conditions, physical abuse, and withholding of passports with little to no access to legal recourse. A series of ministerial decrees issued in 2015 aimed to give migrant workers more flexibility to terminate employment under certain conditions. Foreign household workers were not covered by those decrees or by labor laws in general, leaving them especially vulnerable. A law adopted in 2017 guaranteed such household workers basic protections and benefits including sick leave and daily rest periods, though they were inferior to those in the national labor law, and household workers would still be unable to leave their employers without a breach of contract.

A competitive rivalry between Abu Dhabi and Dubai for eye-catching development projects masks deeper sensitivities in relations between these two emirates and the five less affluent emirates in the northeast. Economic disparities also persist among UAE citizens across the seven emirates and between citizens and the noncitizen majority.