

United Arab Emirates | Freedom House

Political Rights: 8 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 1 / 12

All decisions about political leadership rest with the dynastic rulers of the seven emirates, who form the Federal Supreme Council, the highest executive and legislative body in the country. These leaders select a president and vice president, and the president appoints a prime minister and cabinet. The emirate of Abu Dhabi, the major oil producer in the UAE, has controlled the federation's presidency since its inception.

In 2006, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum succeeded his late brother as ruler of the emirate of Dubai and prime minister of the UAE. The 40-seat Federal National Council (FNC) serves as an advisory body, reviewing proposed laws and questioning federal government ministers. Half of its members are elected by an electoral college chosen by the seven rulers, while the government directly appoints the other 20 for two-year terms. The first elections to the FNC took place in 2006 with a 6,689-member electoral college. In the 2011 elections, only about 36,000 voters participated despite an expansion that allowed the participation of more than 129,000 members. The next FNC elections are scheduled for 2015.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 2 / 16

Political parties are banned in the UAE. The allocation of positions in the government is determined largely by tribal loyalties and economic power. Since 2011, the UAE has aggressively cracked down on suspected members of the Association for Reform and Guidance, or Al-Islah—a group formed in 1974 to peacefully advocate for democratic reform—accusing them of being foreign agents of the Muslim Brotherhood intent on overthrowing the government. In a mass trial widely criticized for violating international standards, 94 defendants—including human rights activists, academics, and students—faced such an accusation in 2013. The so-called UAE 94 trial resulted in the convictions of 69 defendants, who received prison terms ranging from 7 to 15 years; the remaining 25 were acquitted.

Citizens are believed to constitute less than 20 percent of the population. Noncitizens—including many expatriate minority groups—have limited opportunities for participation and representation in politics.

C. Functioning of Government: 2 / 12

The UAE is considered one of the least corrupt countries in the Middle East, and the government has taken steps in recent years to increase efficiency and streamline bureaucracy. In February 2014, authorities began to operate a website inviting citizens to provide feedback on government operations and propose new initiatives. The UAE was ranked 25 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency

International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Discretionary Political Rights Question A: 3 / 4

Citizens have some limited opportunities to express their interests through traditional consultative sessions.

Civil Liberties: 13 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 4 / 16

Although the UAE's constitution provides for some freedom of expression, the government restricts this right in practice. The 1980 Publications and Publishing Law, considered one of the most restrictive press laws in the Arab world, regulates all aspects of the media. It prohibits criticism of the government, its allies, and religion and also bans pornography. Journalists commonly practice self-censorship, and outlets frequently publish government statements without criticism or comment. Media operate with relatively more freedom in the free media zones of Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Ras al-Khaimah—areas in which foreign outlets produce material for foreign audiences—but the zones remain subject to UAE media laws and have additional regulatory codes and authorities. In May 2014, the government blocked the printing of an edition of the *New York Times* featuring an article about abusive labor practices in the construction of New York University's Abu Dhabi campus.

Social media platforms have become a popular source of news and means of communication but are heavily monitored by the government. A 2012 cyber law allows for the imprisonment of anyone who publishes online content that insults the state, organizes antigovernment protests, or is deemed a threat to national security. Offenders can also be fined up to \$272,000. Shezanne Cassim, an American arrested under the law in Dubai in 2013 for posting a satirical video that mocked UAE youth, was released from prison in January 2014 after serving nine months. Iyad el-Baghdadi, a democracy activist known for satirizing Arab dictators on Twitter, was forced to leave the country in April after authorities issued an ultimatum of voluntary deportation or prosecution on unknown charges.

The constitution provides for freedom of religion. Islam is the official religion, and the majority of citizens are Sunni Muslims. The minority Shiite Muslim sect and non-Muslims are free to worship without interference. The government controls content in nearly all Sunni mosques.

The Ministry of Education censors textbooks and curriculums in both public and private schools. Several Western universities have opened satellite campuses in the UAE, although faculties are cautious to not criticize the government out of fear of losing funding. In February, eight Kuwaiti students were expelled from the University of Sharjah and the University of Ajman and threatened with deportation after attempting to form student unions. Kuwaiti media alleged that UAE authorities suspected links between the unions and the Muslim Brotherhood.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 2 / 12

The government places restrictions on freedoms of assembly and association. Public meetings require government permits. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) must register with the Ministry of Social Affairs and can receive subsidies from the government, though they are subject to many burdensome restrictions. In January 2014, the government prevented Human Rights Watch (HRW) from holding a press conference in Dubai about its annual human rights report, which included information about violations in the UAE. HRW's Middle East director was barred from entering Dubai.

In late 2012 and early 2013, authorities arrested 20 Egyptians and 10 Emiratis on the charge of establishing an illegal branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. In January 2014, the Egyptian defendants received prison sentences ranging from four to five years. Nine of the Emirati defendants received sentences of just over a year. The final Emirati defendant, a sheikh, received a prison sentence of more than four years. In May, British lawyer and human rights advocate Victoria Meads was banned for life from entering the UAE. She had previously investigated allegations stemming from a 2012 EU resolution condemning abuse of civil society activists, human rights defenders, and political detainees in the UAE.

Workers—most of whom are foreign—do not have the right to organize, bargain collectively, or strike. Expatriate workers can be banned from working in the UAE if they try to leave their employer before at least two years of service. Workers occasionally protest against unpaid wages and poor working and living conditions, but such demonstrations are frequently dispersed.

F. Rule of Law: 3 / 16

The judiciary is not independent, with court rulings subject to review by the political leadership. The legal system is divided into Sharia (Islamic law) courts, which address family and criminal matters, and secular courts, which cover civil law. Sharia courts sometimes impose flogging sentences for drug use, prostitution, and adultery. A 2013 report by the International Commission of Jurists noted grave irregularities in the UAE 94 trial, including lack of adequate access to legal counsel during interrogations, lengthy detention in unofficial facilities, and failure to adequately investigate allegations of torture.

While the federal Interior Ministry oversees police forces, each emirate's force enjoys considerable autonomy. Arbitrary arrests and detention have been reported, particularly of foreign residents. Prisons in the larger emirates are overcrowded. An antiterrorism law passed in July 2014 allows the cabinet to determine whether groups are terrorist organizations and introduces fines of up to \$27 million, imprisonment of up to life, and death sentences for terrorist offences. The law is broad and ambiguous, defining a terrorist offence as any action or inaction carried out for a "terrorist result," which includes "opposing the country, or influencing the public authorities of the country or another country or international organization while discharging its duties, or receiving a privilege from the country or another country or an international organization."

Discrimination against noncitizens and foreign workers, who comprise more than 80

percent of the UAE's population, is common. While the Interior Ministry has established methods for stateless persons, known as *bidoon*, to apply for citizenship, the government uses unclear criteria in approving or rejecting such requests. Same-sex relations are illegal, and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people are subject to widespread social stigma and discrimination.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 4 / 16

Emiratis face no apparent restrictions on freedom of movement within the UAE or on their type or place of employment. Stateless residents are unable to secure regular employment and, along with foreign workers, face systemic discrimination. Under UAE's *kafala* system, a migrant worker's legal status is tied to an employer's sponsorship; 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.

The UAE has made reforms in recent years to ease procedures for establishing and operating businesses. However, the government exercises considerable influence over the economy and is involved in many of the country's major economic and commercial initiatives.

The constitution does not address gender equality. Muslim women are forbidden to marry non-Muslims and receive smaller inheritances than men. No laws protect against marital rape, and men are permitted to physically discipline their wives. Women are politically underrepresented, though they have in recent years received appointments to various levels of government, including the cabinet. Seven women gained seats in the FNC as a result of the 2011 elections.

Despite a 2006 antitrafficking law and the opening of new shelters for female victims, the government has failed to adequately address human trafficking.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

[Full Methodology](#)