

# United Arab Emirates - Minority Rights Group

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As elsewhere in the Gulf, rapid economic expansion has been accompanied by a vast influx of migrant workers who now number some 8 million and represent more than 88 per cent of the total population. Some groups of migrant workers from particular countries have their own private schools and associations, but the cultural activities of each are largely socially isolated from that of others and migrant workers as a whole do not form cohesive groups. The foreign population mainly comprises South Asian 59.4 per cent (includes Indian 38.2 per cent, Bangladeshi 9.5 per cent, Pakistani 9.4 per cent and others 2.3 per cent), Egyptian 10.2 per cent, Philippine 6.1 per cent, and other 12.8 per cent (2015 estimate).

**Main languages:** Arabic (official), Indian and Pakistani languages, Persian

**Main religions:** while almost all Emirati citizens are Muslim (around 85 per cent Sunni and 15 per cent Shi'a), taking into account the migrant population the total Muslim population is 76 per cent, alongside Christian 9 per cent, other 15 per cent. Unofficial data suggest that these include primarily Hindu and Buddhist, with smaller numbers of Parsi, Baha'i, Druze, Sikh, Ahmadi, Ismaili, Dawoodi Bohra Muslim, and Jewish making up less than 5 per cent. These figures can vary somewhat as the official government data collection overlooks many short-term migrants and also enumerates Baha'i and Druze as Muslim.

**Main minority groups:** Ithna'ashari (Twelver) Shi'a

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Like other Gulf states, the discovery of substantial oil reserves in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) some decades ago has brought rapid social and economic change to the country. This includes the growth of a large migrant labour force who, despite comprising almost 90 per cent of the total population, still experience frequent marginalization and exploitation. This situation is perpetrated by the survival of the *kafala* (visa sponsorship) system, whereby a foreigner resident in the Emirates requires sponsorship by a local citizen. Sponsors typically hold the passport of the expatriate while they are in employment with them, thereby restricting their ability to leave the country or change jobs. They also have the right to ask the government to cancel the work permit or deport the foreign worker in case of unexcused absence or participation in a strike. Foreign employees who leave their employers before the end of the contract may face imprisonment, fines or deportation: as a result, many workers are discouraged from reporting work-related grievances. Unsurprisingly, this leaves many low-paid foreign workers at risk of abuse, exploitation and forced labour.

While there have been a number of positive reforms in recent years, including the

approval in 2017 of a law that limits the working hours for domestic and agricultural workers while entitling them to a weekly day off and annual leave, it does not prohibit employers from charging recruitment fees and still requires the workers to pay compensation to their employers in case of early breach of their contracts. Many migrants continue to suffer a range of human rights abuses, including unpaid wages, long working hours, confinement to the house, and physical, psychological or sexual abuse by their employers. Domestic workers who experience rape or sexual assault rarely take their case to court due to the possibility that they themselves may be prosecuted if the case is treated as consensual sex outside marriage. According to UAE law, foreign women may face imprisonment or deportation if they bear a child outside of marriage.

Unlike expatriate men who can obtain residency permit for their families for three years, expatriate women can only secure a one-year residency for her family, renewable only if she works in specialist professional sectors. In marriage, on the other hand, UAE law discriminates against foreign men who will not, under any circumstances, be able to secure citizenship from their Emirati wives, even though foreign women can be granted citizenship from their Emirati husbands. Children of Emirati mothers and foreign fathers do not receive Emirati nationality by default. However, they can apply for naturalization once they reach the age of 18.

UAE also has historically had a significant stateless population, known as Bidoon. Though official figures have put them at around 10,000 people, other estimates put them at between 20,000 and 100,000. This group became stateless either because they belong to tribes that were not considered for citizenship when the UAE was established or they are UAE-born with foreign parents who are not able to secure their children citizenship in their country of origin. A further issue emerged following independence in 1971 and the subsequent passing of Federal Law Number 17 the next year, offering citizenship to anyone who could prove residency since 1925. While residents of the newly formed UAE were required to register for citizenship, widespread illiteracy and a lack of understanding among some communities prevented them from doing so. As a result, once the registration system for citizenship was tightened and additional requirements imposed, including the presentation of a 'family book', Bidoon were unable to access documentation. As a result, they did not have passports or any form of identification, restricting their movement inside and outside the UAE, while also denying them access to education, healthcare, employment and other public services. Beginning in 2008, the government launched a drive for stateless Bidoon to register for a Comoros passport: not extending to actual citizenship or residency rights in Comoros itself, it has enabled thousands of Bidoon to secure documentation – without, however, extending them actual citizenship as Emirates.

As for refugees, the UAE does not grant asylum or refugee status to individuals fearing returning to their home countries. However, the government works with the UN refugee agency UNHCR on a case-by-case basis to allow certain individuals to remain temporarily in the country. Persons with a claim to refugee status do not have the right to work and need to frequently renew their residence permit, placing a considerable financial burden on asylum seekers and preventing them from accessing basic services such as healthcare and education.

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## **Environment**

The seven emirates of the United Arab Emirates compose a federation bordering Oman to the east, Saudi Arabia to the south, and, depending on whether the UAE and Qatari or Saudi interpretations are followed, also Qatar in the west, and with most of its settled cities and towns bordering the Arabian/ Persian Gulf on the western side and a short stretch of the Gulf of Oman in the east. It is located to the south of the strait of Hormuz. Its location as a neighbouring state to both Saudi Arabia and Iran largely shapes its political and economic choices. The country has an arid desert climate characterized by low rainfall and high temperatures. It is also one of the world's biggest producers of oil and gas.

## History

The United Arab Emirates is a federation of seven states that declared their independence in 1971, having previously been British Protectorates (at that time six emirates, Ras al-Khaimah joined in 1972). These states had previously been known as the Trucial Oman or Trucial States. They had shared similar histories as tribal populations ruled by leading families involved in trade. Since the discovery of oil and the development of the oil and gas sector, the UAE changed its fortunes to become one of the countries with the highest income per capita in the world. The population rocketed from 180,000 in 1968 to a million by 1982 and 2 million by 1993 and by 2017 stood at over 9.4 million. Yet only around 1.1 million of that population are nationals: the majority of the population is made up of migrant labourers, drawn to the UAE in search of employment as construction labourers, domestic workers and in other sectors.

In 2008-09 the economy was strongly hit by the financial crisis and a sharp fall in oil prices, which required the government's intervention to boost liquidity, cut expenditures, reduce fuel subsidies and introduce new taxes. Unlike other Arab countries, the UAE did not experience any major incidents of unrest during the Arab Spring. This is attributed in part to the government's announcement of political reform and a US\$1.6 billion fund for infrastructure investments in the less affluent northern emirates.

In 2017, the UAE alongside Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt cut diplomatic and trade relations with Qatar, accusing it of supporting armed groups and undermining the stability of the region. Qatari citizens were subsequently banned from entering or transiting through the UAE. Similarly, Emiratis were banned from traveling to or transiting through Qatar. These procedures caused family separations and violated the rights of Qataris and their relatives in the UAE. As a result, in June 2018, Qatar filed a case against the UAE before the International Court of Justice, with the court ruling that the UAE may have been guilty of discrimination against Qataris in the country.

The UAE was also one of the first countries to join the Saudi-led military coalition against the Houthi rebel movement in Yemen by training, funding and supporting the Yemeni government's forces. The coalition has indiscriminately bombed schools and homes, used banned weapons, blocked aid and committed other human rights abuses. In 2018, Amnesty International reported that the UAE is facilitating torture in Yemeni detention centres and called for an international investigation.

## Governance

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is governed as a federal presidential republic, composed of seven absolute monarchies, one in each emirate. The federation is loose, and each ruler maintains significant powers in accordance to the provisional Constitution of 1971. Abu Dhabi's ruler serves as President and Dubai's ruler as Prime Minister of the UAE. Currently, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan holds the federation's presidency. There is also a Council of Ministers led by the Prime Minister, a supreme council of rulers and a Federal National Council (FNC) composed of 40 members who, until 2006, were appointed to serve by the rulers and which reviews proposed laws, and a Federal Supreme Council (FSC) of the individual rulers of the seven emirates which is the highest constitutional authority. The Constitution became permanent in May 1996 and was amended in 2009 and 2016. Amendments are proposed and submitted by the FSC to the FNC.

Steps towards democracy are very slow. In December 2006, the system of choosing the FNC members was changed, for the first time involving a measure of election: in each emirate a group of electors was appointed by the Emir (totalling just under 7,000 for the whole country), who then could vote for those amongst them who stood for election. Those elected henceforth make up half the members of the FNC, which can still only advise and monitor, but not legislate. Some further expansion of the FNC and its powers has been mooted, so far without further elaboration.

More than 88 per cent of the population reside under the *kafala* system. Each foreigner in the UAE requires sponsorship by an Emirati who will have the power to hold the expatriate's passport and impose restrictions on their movements and change of employment. Domestic workers are not protected under UAE labour law. However, in 2017, the President approved a law that limits the working hours for domestic and agricultural workers and entitles them to a weekly day off and annual leave. Despite these reforms, many migrants continue to be subjected to abuses and severe exploitation.

Political parties are banned in the UAE, and individuals who criticize the government are subject to detention, imprisonment and torture. In September 2017, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination called on the UAE to establish a national human rights institution. In February 2018, the government said it planned to do so. Between August and December 2018, it also introduced a temporary visa amnesty for migrant labourers without up to date visa documentation to regularize their status.

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## **Minority based and advocacy organisations**

## **Sources and further reading**