
United Arab Emirates (UAE)

The UAE is a federation of seven emirates: Abu Dhabi, 'Ajman, Al Fujayrah, Sharjah, Dubai, Ra's al Khaymah, and Umm al Qaywayn. The president and vice president are elected by the Federal Supreme Council, which is composed of the rulers of each emirate. The UAE has experienced rapid economic development and growth during the past several decades, but it lags in the development of its civil society: the country does not hold elections for any public office, and political participation is limited to the ruling family in each emirate. The government has not signed most international human rights and labor rights treaties. Migrant workers, comprising nearly 90 percent of the workforce in the private sector, are particularly vulnerable to serious human rights violations.

Freedom of Association and Expression

A major obstacle to monitoring and reporting human rights violations in the UAE is the lack of independent nongovernmental organizations. The government actively discourages formation of such organizations. In July 2004 a group of lawyers and activists led by prominent lawyer Mohammad al-Roken filed an application with the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare under the Association Law to form the Emirates Human Rights Society. In April 2005 another group of thirty activists headed by human rights campaigner Khalifa Bakhit al-Falasi also filed application for a human rights association. According to the Associations Law, the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare should reply to these requests within a month of their filing, but as of October 2005 the ministry had not responded to these applications.

For the past five years, the government has barred twelve prominent UAE commentators and academics from disseminating their views. In June 2000 the government sent a letter to Abu Dhabi Television stating that "based on information from the administration we urge all producers to refrain from hosting the following [twelve] individuals in programs for the Abu Dhabi channel and the Emirates channel." The ban effectively applies to the print media as well as radio and television broadcasts. Otherwise, the media is relatively free from official censorship, but is susceptible to heavy self-censorship due to pressures from officials and influential business interests.

Migrant Labor

Nearly 80 percent of the UAE's population are foreigners, and foreigners account for 90 percent of the workforce in the private sector, including as domestic workers. The UAE's extensive economic growth has attracted large sums in domestic and foreign investment, and a recent construction boom is one of the largest in the world. There are persistent credible reports of abuses committed by employers,

especially in small firms and against low-skilled workers. A main factor is the immigration sponsorship laws that grant employers extraordinary control over the affairs of migrant workers.

Abuses committed against migrant workers include nonpayment of wages, extended working hours without overtime compensation, unsafe working environments resulting in death and injury, squalid living conditions in labor camps, and withholding of passports and travel documents by employers.

In 2005 the UAE witnessed an increasing number of public demonstrations by migrant workers protesting nonpayment of wages. During a protest on September 24 (one of at least three that month), 800 workers blocked a main highway in Dubai. They were part of a group of six thousand workers employed by Al Hamed Development and Construction of Abu Dhabi, and had not been paid for more than five months. In an unprecedented development, the minister of labor and social welfare, Ali bin Abdullah al-Kaabi, required the company to pay all overdue wages within twenty-four hours, and prohibited it from hiring migrant workers for the next six months.

Since becoming minister in November 2004, al-Kaabi has introduced a number of promising reforms that have met stiff resistance from the business community. Following a surge in heat-related illness and injuries at construction sites in July 2005, the ministry directed construction companies to give their workers an afternoon break from 12:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. during the months of July and August. However, a number of companies defied this order and publicly stated that they prefer to pay fines rather than comply.

Women domestic workers are often confined to their places of work, and may be at particular risk of abuse including unpaid wages, long working hours, and physical or sexual abuse.

Trafficking

According to the U.S. State Department, human trafficking to the UAE is an endemic problem. Large numbers of young boys are annually trafficked to the UAE to be trained as camel jockeys, and in 2005 the UAE government estimated the number of children working as camel jockeys to be between 1,200 and 2,700; international organizations have put the numbers much higher, at between five thousand and six thousand. Responding to the international criticism, UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al Nahyan issued a federal decree in July 2005 requiring that all camel jockeys must be eighteen years of age or older. The law stipulated that violators will be jailed for up to three years and/or fined a minimum of Dh50,000 (U.S.\$13,600). The government's ability to institute mechanisms of enforcement will be tested in the coming year.

Key International Actors

The UAE has emerged as a major business and trading hub in the Middle East, attracting substantial foreign investments. The U.S., Japan, and the European Union are among the UAE's main trading partners. In April 2004 the UAE signed a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) with the

U.S., and the two countries in November 2004 began negotiations toward a Free Trade Agreement (FTA).

In its 2005 annual report on human trafficking, the U.S. State Department downgraded the UAE to the third tier, including it among “countries whose governments do not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and are not making significant efforts to do so.” In September 2005 the White House, in a memorandum to the secretary of state, said that the UAE had taken actions that averted the need for the president to make a decision to impose or waive sanctions under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000. According to this memorandum, the UAE’s efforts to combat trafficking would be re-evaluated in six months.

The UAE in October 2004 acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. However, it is not a signatory to other major international human rights instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, and the Convention against Torture.