

QUICK POLICY INSIGHT

Opposition in the United Arab Emirates

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With abundant riches and a largely contented, wealthy population, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has not spawned the dramatic political activism that has wracked other Arab countries over the past two years. But the country's modest political opposition — a home-grown, gentle and peaceful pro-democracy protest inspired by the experience from the Arab Awakening— has been emphatically repressed.

The most recent sign of the government's crackdown was Decree Law 5/2012 on cybercrimes of 12 November 2012. Anyone using 'any information technology medium' — Twitter or Facebook, as well as proprietary websites — **'to deride or damage the reputation or stature of the state or any of its institutions'** risked imprisonment. The new regulation follows a series of moves designed to squash protests and demands for a reform of the UAE's political system.

In March 2011, for example, people from across the spectrum of political and civil rights activists lodged a petition with the president of UAE Federation to demand the **establishment of an elected national assembly with real powers**. The political and economic establishment in the country — where **political parties are not permitted** — opposes any such dramatic or rapid opening of the political process. At present, only half of the members of the Federal Council (the country's federal parliament) are elected in the seven emirates, and those elected members are chosen by a limited number of Emirati citizens selected by their Emir. Voters display little enthusiasm in electing a body that merely plays an advisory role; in 2011, only about 129 000 citizens were permitted to vote, and only about 25 % actually did so.

The 2011 petition elicited a harsh reaction from the government and security authorities. Contrary to all international conventions, seven UAE citizens who had signed were stripped of their nationalities. The seven were then arrested, later to be joined by notable UAE citizens.

The detainees are not the only protesters in the country, although they were among the most prominent. UAE political opposition groups include individual intellectuals, businessmen, students, and groups asking for

The Emirati government has reacted harshly to all signs of political activism on the ground and in cyberspace.

greater political leeway and civil rights. UAE residents of Iranian origin also often oppose the UAE government's criticisms of Iran. The government often lumps all these people and groups together as 'agents of foreign powers' and 'Islamists'.

Al-Islah: The largest and most endangered opposition group

Al-Islah is a moderate Islamist movement that calls for a more representative political system in the UAE.

The largest and best organised opposition group in the UAE was not founded to foment regime change. Al-Islah, also known as the Reform and Social Guidance, was registered as an official NGO in the UAE in 1974¹. The organisation's early activities related mainly to sports, culture, charitable work and social activities. As the second civil society organisation to be awarded a license to operate by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, al-Islah enjoyed good relations with state officials for two decades. In that period, as in the years that followed, the group never employed violent or aggressive methods.

Yet over the years, the organisation developed a **political reform agenda** in parallel to its social agenda — a pairing typical of political Islamist movements across the Arab world, but one that earned it the ire of UAE authorities. Inspired by the values of moderate political Islam, al-Islah argues it aims to provide moral guidance and political reform — including, notably, an elected national legislature — for UAE citizens. The organisation is a sister organisation to the Freedom and Justice Party in Egypt and al-Nahda in Tunisia, although the nature of al-Islah's relation to such organisations (particularly the Muslim Brotherhood) is a subject of disagreement (*see table below*).

The Emirati authorities have led a systematic campaign to uproot the movement, which it considers a national security threat.

In 1994, the government fired the organisation's board of directors and named a new board. Since then the organisation's influence has been reduced in a number of ways, including by prohibiting al-Islah members from holding public office. Members who also occupied prominent posts in the media, academia and health industry have also been fired. The Chairman of al-Islah, Sheikh Sultan bin Kayed Al-Qasimi, was among those arrested after the March 2011 petition was submitted. Over the last 18 months, some 60 members of al-Islah have been detained. Other preemptive responses by the UAE authorities have effectively shut the organisation down and silenced its call for political reform².

The UAE government and its supporters maintain that al-Islah constitutes a **national security threat**, as the activities of the movement are considered subversive. Many UAE citizens, tribal leaders and economic operators who fear political instability support the government's hard line. Yet the government's actions 'to protect its people and national identity' have also had a secondary — and perhaps even more damaging — effect: attracting

¹ A number of other, unrelated groups in the Middle East are also named al-Islah (للإصلاح), which means 'reform' in Arabic.

²<http://www.hrw.org/middle-eastn-africa/united-arab-emirates>
<http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2012/09/18/fear-and-loathing-in-emirates/dusy>

international attention to the authorities' fear of dissent and to the brutality of their reactions. With prominent articles appearing in the *Financial Times*, the *Guardian* and other news outlets, the UAE is beginning to appear as repressive as far more dictatorial and unpopular regimes. The cost of dissent has proved high to al-Islah. **The cost of repression may prove higher for the Emirati leadership.**

	Al-Islah	The UAE government
General view of the al-Islah movement	Inspired by the values of moderate political Islam, al-Islah's aim is to provide moral guidance and discourage extremism. From its origins as an NGO first registered in 1974, al-Islah has opposed violence and favoured reform.	The movement is disloyal to the state, a threat to political stability and endangers the results reached by the Emirati leadership through a 'transformation of a tribal society to a modern state, creating synergy between people in a multinational society in a very short period of time'.
Al-Islah's links to other movements	Shares ideologically compatibilities with other movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, but has no <i>direct</i> links with any movement abroad.	Linked financially and politically to the international Muslim Brotherhood movement and orchestrated from abroad. The movement is engaged in clandestine activities.
Al-Islah's objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The establishment of an elected national assembly with real powers. • Reform of the political system in the UAE and for an end to government interference in all spheres of public life, including the media and the judiciary. 	The movement's aims run counter to religious and cultural tolerance and to rapid economic and social development already established in the country.
Al-Islah's methods	Non-violence.	The movement includes an armed wing.
Allegations	<p>People arrested are 'human rights defenders' and civil liberties activists.</p> <p>A series of serious human rights violations have occurred when members were in custody: detainees were refused family visits and subjected to torture, solitary confinement and regular beatings.</p>	<p>People were arrested for offenses under the criminal code.</p> <p>The investigation is ongoing, and its results are, by their nature, <i>sub judice</i>. Until court hearings are held, no one may comment authoritatively on the results of the investigation or respond to allegations of mistreatment.</p>

The European Parliament's reaction

The European Parliament adopted a resolution on human rights violations in the UAE on 26 October 2012³. This resolution has been harshly criticised by the UAE government and by Gulf-based media, all of which regarded

³<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&language=EN&reference=P7-TA-2012-400>

The Emirati authorities have criticised the European Parliament resolution of 26 October 2012 which they regard as biased.

The European Union should support the aspirations of Emirati citizens and work with state institutions but also with the emerging civil society.

the resolution as 'biased and prejudiced'.

The resolution notes that domestic civil society and political organisations are not the only political actors to face difficulties in the UAE. Additionally, 'prominent internationally renowned non-governmental organisations promoting democracy in the region had closed in 2012 by the authorities of the United Arab Emirates, notably the National Democratic Institute and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung'.

The European Parliament's resolution underlines that 'it is crucial to continue the efforts to **increase the cooperation** between the EU and the Gulf region and to promote mutual understanding and trust'. The European Parliament is the first EU institution to have called for a strategic partnership between the EU and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. One way to lead 'a **constructive and frank political dialogue** on issues of common concern' is to hold regular inter-parliamentary meetings between the European Parliament and the Emirati Federal Council. The latest such meeting was held in Abu Dhabi in April 2012.

The European Parliament has urged the European institutions, including the newly appointed EU Special Representative for Human Rights, to take concrete actions to ensure a clear and principled EU policy vis-à-vis the UAE. The new EU Delegation to be opened in Abu Dhabi in early 2013 will allow the EU to engage in regular political dialogue with Emirati political institutions and civil society. The Union has the same **moral obligation to support the aspirations of Emirati citizens for a more representative and accountable political system** and establish links with the emerging Emirati human rights and civil society organisations as it had — and as it fulfilled — in the context of the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan uprisings.

The Emirati political and economic establishment hold that political parties and national elections in other Arab states have produced chaos and sectarian conflict. The country's ruling class fears that an elected parliament would turn to radical Islamism and jeopardise the status quo at home. The State Minister for Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash, has stated that 'the UAE's end goal is not a liberal multiparty system. This model does not correspond with our cultural or historical development⁴.'

For the time being, the authorities are not willing to expand the country's policies of social and economic openness and cultural and religious tolerance to the political sphere. Yet in the long run, it may prove counterproductive to suppress citizens' discontent and anger in such a repressive manner.

⁴ Anwar Gargash: Amid Challenges, UAE Policies Engage Gradual Reforms. The National, 26 August 2012