



CIVICUS MONITOR WATCHLIST

THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS TO CIVIC FREEDOMS



INTRODUCTION

The UAE’s continued effort to project a tolerant image internationally is once again in the [spotlight](#), with a glaring contradiction between an image that promotes diversity of voices, while UAE human rights defenders face trial and imprisonment for speaking up.

Ahead of the Dubai Expo which ran from 1st October 2021 until March 2022, civil society [joined efforts](#) to highlight the contrast between the image projected by the UAE internationally, and its dismal record of oppressing and imprisoning peaceful human rights defenders. The sustained onslaught on civic space, through targeting human rights activists, enacting repressive laws and using the criminal justice system as a tool to systematically retaliate against those who advocate for human rights continues to be a serious cause for concern.

Now, as the country prepares to host the 28th United Nations Global Climate Talks (COP28) from 30th November to 12th December 2023, the CIVICUS Monitor, the Gulf Centre for Human Rights, ALQST for Human Rights, the [Emirates Detainees Advocacy Centre](#), Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and other civil society groups continue to document unrelenting civic space restrictions and highlight the repression still happening in the country. CSOs have raised concern that at least 58 prisoners of conscience [remain](#) in prison despite completing their sentences, the practice of [torture](#) in prisons and detention centres including against HRDs remains widespread in the UAE, HRDs and peaceful critics continue to be systematically targeted by authorities in retaliation for their peaceful human rights work, while the recently adopted [Cybercrime law](#) of 2022 criminalises the work of journalists, whistleblowers, activists and peaceful critics in a bid to silence dissent.

It is also difficult to see how civil society can meaningfully participate in or critique this important meeting against the backdrop of an increasingly retaliatory and punitive context, where Emirati law, including the Cybercrime law, [forbids](#) criticism of “the state or the rulers” and imposes punishments, including life imprisonment or the death penalty, for association with any group opposing “the system of government” or for vague “crimes” such as “damaging national unity” or “the interests of the state”. In a [report](#) released in June 2023, Amnesty International identified key human rights risks in the UAE that threaten the success of COP28 as including the suppression of the right to freedom of expression and a closure of civic space, crackdowns on freedom of association and peaceful assembly, the danger of digital espionage and surveillance, and the host country’s opposition to the rapid phasing out of fossil fuels.

ABOUT THE CIVICUS MONITOR

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#), an online platform that tracks threats to civil society in countries across the globe, rates civic space – the space for civil society – in [The United Arab Emirates](#) as “**Closed**”.

The data provides the basis for civic space ratings, which are based on up-to-date information and indicators on the state of freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Countries can be rated as:

CLOSED
REPRESSED
OBSTRUCTED
NARROWED
OPEN

These concerns were also amplified by a coalition of human rights organisations who make up the Stand Up for Emirati Detainees (SANID) Campaign which, on 1st May 2023, issued [a joint statement](#) signed by 44 human rights organisations highlighting their concerns on the ability of CSOs to effectively advocate for climate justice in the host country given its poor human rights record.

These, among other civic space violations, see the UAE added to the CIVICUS Monitor Watchlist, ahead of COP28.

1. ARBITRARY AND EXTENDED DETENTION OF HRDS

UAE94

2023 marks the eleventh anniversary of the arrest and [arbitrary detention](#) of a group of pro-democracy activists known as the “UAE 94,” who remain arbitrarily imprisoned for signing an online petition calling for political reform in 2012. They are held in Al-Razeen prison, a maximum-security facility in the desert of Abu Dhabi, where activists, government critics and human rights defenders are commonly held.

Sentenced to [between](#) seven to fifteen years in prison, [55](#) of the activists have served their sentences but continue to be unjustly detained as authorities [use](#) vague anti-terrorism laws which allow for indefinite detention. Despite allegations of torture by state officials, the UAE has [failed](#) to conduct an independent, impartial and comprehensive investigation into the allegations that members of the UAE94 were subjected to torture and ill-treatment before and after their trial, and failed to bring those responsible for these violations to trial and provide redress and compensation to their victims.

Their detention conditions are dismal, and they continue to suffer torture with impunity.

WHRDS AMINA AL-ABDOULI AND MARYAM AL-BALUSHI

In keeping with the authorities’ practice of detaining HRDs beyond their prison sentences, two women activists, Amina Al-Abdouli and Maryam Al-Balushi, also [remain in prison](#) despite having completed their five-year sentences in 2020, after authorities brought new charges of publishing false information against them in retaliation for speaking out about their terrible prison conditions.

AHMED MANSOOR

March 2023 marked six years since the arrest and subsequent imprisonment of prominent human rights defender [Ahmed Mansoor](#). Now 54 years old, Mansoor was arrested in a late-night house raid on 20th March 2017, held incommunicado for a year and sentenced to ten years in prison on charges related to posts on his social media calling for the release of imprisoned HRDs, and for exposing rights violations in Yemen and Egypt. Since his arrest, he has been held mostly in solitary confinement, away from the public and other prisoners, and without basic necessities such as a bed or mattress – only recently receiving something to sleep on.

In January 2022, worrying [reports](#) emerged that Ahmed Mansoor was being retaliated against in prison for speaking out

about his detention conditions, in retaliation for a July 2021 media publication of a letter written by Mansoor detailing his mistreatment in prison. Authorities moved Mansoor to a smaller and more isolated cell, denied him access to critical medical care and confiscated his reading glasses. An extensive [report](#) published by GCHR and Human Rights Watch titled: “Persecution of Rights Defender Ahmed Mansoor” revealed the serious, systemic violations of his due process and fair trial guarantees under international human rights law in his trial and appeal cases. Both trials were completely closed, and the government has refused requests to make public the charge sheet and court rulings.

DR. NASSER BIN GHAITH

Dr. Nasser Bin Ghaith also [remains](#) in prison, after he was [arrested](#) during a raid on his home on 18th August 2015 for his online criticism of the Emirati and Egyptian authorities, and later sentenced to 10 years in prison. Following his arrest, Dr. Bin Ghaith was held in solitary confinement in an undisclosed location for nine months, and was eventually transferred to Al-Sader jail, where he has been subjected to ill treatment and denied medical attention. Despite his hunger strikes, prison authorities have consistently denied Dr. Bin Ghaith appropriate medical care, including his prescribed blood pressure medication.

2. SYSTEMATIC USE OF TORTURE AGAINST HRDS

The use of torture against detained and imprisoned HRDs raises a serious cause for action. Despite the UAE’s ratification of the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT) in 2012, the practice of torture remains widespread in the UAE. Civil society has [raised concern](#) about the absence of legal safeguards from the Emirates’ legislation, and has extensively [documented](#) ongoing torture and abuse in prison, including the use of prolonged solitary confinement. Mention of the torture of imprisoned HRDs was made by the UN Committee Against Torture in its July 2022 [concluding observations](#) following its review of the UAE. The committee expressed concern that “reports received detail a pattern of torture and ill-treatment against human rights defenders and persons accused of offences against State security who, by virtue of the State security or terrorism charges against them, are subject to a legal regime with fewer and more restrictive procedural guarantees.”

3. CYBER CRIME AND ANTI RUMOUR LAW THREATENS EXPRESSION

The newly [adopted](#) Federal Law No. 34 of 2021 regarding combating rumours and cybercrime, which took effect on 2nd January 2022, criminalises the work of journalists, whistleblowers, activists and peaceful critics. The law uses broad and vague terminology, especially in matters relating to “state security,” which places excessive discretion on authorities to criminalise and impose lengthy prison sentences on those legitimately exercising their rights. Specifically, the law criminalises any form of political opposition by imposing a life sentence on anyone who undertakes any activity intended to change the ruling regime, imposes a prison sentence on anyone who publishes information which harms the interest or image of the state or its agencies, and imposes a prison sentence for defamation, among other worrying provisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE UAE GOVERNMENT

- Immediately and unconditionally release all those who have been arbitrarily detained in relation to their peaceful human rights work.
- Ensure that HRDs, CSOs and other peaceful critics are able to meaningfully participate in or critique this important meeting without fear of retaliation.
- Stop targeting and arbitrarily detaining human rights defenders and others who peacefully exercise their freedom of expression.
- Investigate the allegations of the use of torture in prisons and detention centres, including the torture of HRDs and peaceful critics, and ensure that those found guilty are brought to justice.
- Review Federal Law No. 34 of 2021 regarding combating rumours and cybercrime which restricts the rights to association and expression and withdraw restrictive provisions of the laws which are at variance with the UAE's human rights obligations.
- Comply with international standards for prisoners, including by allowing regular family visits, access to healthcare and regular consultations with their lawyers, and ending the practice of holding them in solitary confinement.
- Close down the Counselling or Munasaha centres as they have no legal basis and are used to unjustly keep HRDs detained as a pretext to prevent them from continuing their human rights activities if they are released.

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

- Call for urgent and immediate action to address fundamental rights violations of the rights to expression and association.
- Urge the United Arab Emirates to improve its dismal human rights record to ensure a successful conference, and successful climate justice interventions by CSOs in the country thereafter.
- Allow all participants coming to COP 28 to express themselves freely on issues of concern to them including protesting peacefully on climate justice issues and do not restrict topics, themes or issues to which participants must adhere.