

United Arab Emirates

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Some positive steps taken by the country's leadership - notably with regards to women's and youth empowerment – contributed to improving the country human rights situation. The 1-3 October 2019 elections for the Federal National Council (FNC), the UAE representative body, produced gender parity based on a combination of public suffrage and appointments by the authorities. Half of the newly appointed/elected members of the FNC are now women. In addition, in October 2019 an Arab Charter on Women's Rights was launched in Abu Dhabi.

Marking the year of tolerance by the UAE leadership, 2019 witnessed the historic visit of Pope Francis and the signing of the Abu Dhabi Declaration on 'human fraternity for world peace and living together'. In relation to that, the leadership ordered the construction of an Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi, where a church, a mosque and a synagogue are to be located.

Nevertheless, important challenges remained in the field of civil and political rights. Of particular concern were the enduring restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, allegations of arbitrary detentions and torture, ill-treatment and issues related to human trafficking and labour rights. Political parties and trade unions remained forbidden, civil society underdeveloped and under strict government control. Concerns also continued to with regard to the right of fair trial and due process, including for foreign nationals held in detention. A case in point prompting international scrutiny was the situation of several prominent human rights defenders who remained in detention and whose long prison sentences were upheld.

With the upcoming EXPO 2020 in Dubai on the horizon, there was an increasing focus on labour rights. Due to the magnitude of the event, the international community closely monitored the welfare conditions of foreign workers. Visiting delegations from participating countries expressed satisfaction with the overall situation, but also underlined that EXPO 2020 should trigger more systemic improvements for foreign workers in the country.

2. EU action - key focus areas: Working closely with EU Member States and like-minded embassies, the EU monitored the human rights situation in the country throughout 2019, including individual cases, labour issues and human trafficking. The judicial developments regarding human rights defender Ahmed Mansour and others were addressed consistently with the UAE authorities.

The EU focused on the importance of the right to a fair trial, access to family and lawyers, and sustaining good health conditions. The EU also repeatedly reached out on the case of the terminally-ill prisoner Alia Abdunour, requesting clarifications on the charges against her and on allegations of her degrading treatment during detention, and calling for her release on those grounds.

In 2019, the EEAS Spokesperson issued two statements on individual human rights cases in the UAE. On 1 January in reaction to the final verdict of the Federal Supreme Court upholding a ten-year sentence against Ahmed Mansour²⁹, calling for upholding the freedom of opinion and expression in the UAE. On 7 May, following the passing of Alia Abdunour³⁰, the EU recalled the absolute and non-derogable prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

In 2019, the Chaillot Prize for Human Rights in the GCC countries was awarded to two Emirati organisations – the Dubai Foundations for Women and Children and the Higher Committee for Special Olympics. It was the first time the Chaillot Prize came to the UAE.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The UAE was the first country in the Gulf region with which the EU set up a comprehensive dialogue on human rights. For planning reasons, the ninth UAE-EU human rights informal working group did not take place in 2019 but will be held in Brussels in early 2020. The dialogue provides a platform for the EU and the UAE to hold an open and frank dialogue on most salient human rights issues. The EU consistently stresses that respecting international human rights obligations and the rule of law, including international humanitarian law, is a guarantee for long term and sustainable stability and prosperity.

Specifically, when addressing the situation of human rights activists, the EU continues to highlight the importance of the right to a fair trial, access to a lawyer, the right to information, the presumption of innocence, and the need not to trigger confessions through torture and ill-treatment. Furthermore, the EU has continuously underlined the importance to respect the rights to freedom of expression and association, and to freedom of religion or belief. To note that the UAE has not ratified the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

4. Multilateral context: The next UPR review for the UAE will be in 2023. As in the past, the preparations for the UNGA Third Committee sessions provided the opportunity for further dialogue and outreach with the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, including on EU-led resolutions (DPRK, Myanmar, rights of the child and freedom of religion or belief) and resolutions that the EU supports (human rights in Crimea, human rights in Syria, the integration of gender equality through the UNGA Third Committee work).

In 2019, the EU delegation marked the international day against the death penalty with a statement and its presence on social media.

The UAE pledged USD 65 million during the EU-UN co-chaired 'Third Brussels Conference on the future of Syria and the region' held in Brussels on 14 March 2019.

²⁹ https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/iran/56111/statement-spokesperson-case-ahmed-mansoor_en

³⁰ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/61934/statement-spokesperson-passing-alia-abdulnour-uae_id