

# EU ANNUAL REPORT ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY IN THE WORLD

## 2018 COUNTRY UPDATES

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### United Arab Emirates

**1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation:** The overall human rights situation has not fundamentally changed in 2018. Some positive steps were taken by the country's leadership - notably with regards to women's empowerment and freedom of religion or belief. The adoption in April 2018 of a Labour law guaranteeing equal wages for men and women was followed in December by a Presidential decree introducing gender parity for the upcoming 2019 elections in the Federal National Council, the UAE representative body. The 5<sup>th</sup> Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, seeking to promote inter-faith dialogue and aiming at empowering moderate voices, was held in November in Abu Dhabi. An UAE Fatwa Council was established in June 2018, and is chaired by Sunni Scholar Sheikh Abdullah bin Bayyah - known for his work against religious extremism- acting as the official point of reference for issuing state-approved legal Islamic opinions and rulings. Important challenges however remain, including continued restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, allegations of arbitrary and/or incommunicado detentions and torture and of enforced disappearances, the extensive application of counterterrorism legislation as well as alleged violations of human rights in Yemen, either by UAE troops engaged in the Saudi-led coalition or by Emirati-backed local militias. Political parties and trade unions remain forbidden, civil society is under-developed and under strict government control.

**2. EU action - key focus areas:** The EU has monitored the human rights situation in the country throughout 2018, including individual cases, such as the case of Ahmed Mansour (see below) in close coordination with EU Member States and like-minded embassies. The EU has focussed on the importance of the right to a fair trial, access to a lawyer, the right to information, the presumption of innocence, and an end to investigations based on extraction of confessions through torture and ill-treatment. The EU reiterated its call for a *de jure* moratorium of the death penalty and for a prohibition of ill-treatment to be enshrined in law. The ongoing war in Yemen, in which the UAE actively takes part in the coalition lead by Saudi Arabia, has prompted the EU to reiterate the need for all warring parties to protect civilians and to respect International Humanitarian Law.

**3. EU bilateral political engagement:** The UAE is the first country in the Gulf region with whom the EU set up a comprehensive dialogue on Human Rights. The 8<sup>th</sup> UAE-EU Human Rights Informal Working Group, which took place in July 2018 in Abu Dhabi, provided the overall framework for the EU and the UAE to discuss salient human rights topics in their bilateral relations. These informal working group meetings have provided a platform for the EU and the UAE to have an open and frank dialogue and for the EU an opportunity to continue to stress that respecting international human rights obligations and the rule of law, including international humanitarian law, is a guarantee for long term sustainable stability.

The EU followed closely the case of UAE national Ahmed Mansour, the 2015 Martin Ennals Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) awards recipient, whose conviction for "defamation, disruption of public order and the propagation of incitement and hatred" for his social media activities (on the basis of the Cybercrime law) and sentencing to 10 years imprisonment were upheld by the Federal Supreme Court on 30 December. The judicial developments regarding Ahmed Mansour were addressed consistently by the EU with the UAE authorities and received close attention also in the European Parliament. Questions regarding his health condition, the numbers of family and other visits in prison, as well as the possibility to observe his trial were raised. Following his lost appeal at the end of December, a HRVP spokesperson statement was released, reiterating the EU principled position that no one shall be detained merely on the grounds of peaceful expression of opinions and asking for Mansour's case to be reconsidered.

**4. Multilateral context:** In January 2018 the UAE undertook their 3<sup>rd</sup> Universal Periodic Review (UPR) and accepted 132 recommendations and took note of 98 recommendations, out of the 230 received. Most of the noted recommendations related to civil and political rights including accession to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. Other recommendations concerned appropriate measures to ensure a safe environment for human rights defenders free from harassment and intimidation; amendment of the Code of Criminal Procedure and establishment of a maximum limit for pre-trial detention; and immediate notification to defendants of the charges against them. The next UPR review will be in 2023.

The preparations for the UN Human Rights Council and the UNGA Third Committee sessions also permitted further EU dialogue and outreach with the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Intentional Cooperation.