

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

CIVICUS MONITOR WATCHLIST

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESTRICTIONS
TO CIVIC FREEDOMS





INTRODUCTION

The UAE's continued efforts to project a tolerant image internationally have been in the [spotlight](#), with a glaring contradiction between an image that promotes a diversity of voices and the UAE human rights defenders who face trial and imprisonment for speaking their minds.

The Dubai Expo, which has been running from 1st October 2021 until March 2022, with a purported mission to bring people together to create a better tomorrow, has been a classic demonstration of the contrast between the image projected by the UAE internationally and its dismal record of oppressing and imprisoning peaceful human rights defenders.

Civil society across the world has joined efforts to spotlight this hypocrisy. Notably, on 14th October 2021, 28 human rights organisations, led by the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR), launched the [Alternative Human Rights Expo](#) to counter the narrative of "tolerance" and "openness" that the UAE claims to uphold. The alternative expo is a campaign coordinated by civil society parallel to the Dubai expo and aims to highlight the ongoing repression in Dubai.

A similar contradiction was demonstrated in late November 2021, after Major General Ahmed Nasser Al-Raisi was [elected](#) President of the International Criminal Police Organisation (INTERPOL) during the INTERPOL General Assembly. Al-Raisi's election poses a significant threat to human rights and civic freedoms in light of the Major General's role in perpetrating torture as Inspector General of the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) Interior Ministry.

Ahead of the INTERPOL general assembly, civil society joined together to highlight the unsuitability of someone accused of such gross human rights violations for the INTERPOL presidency. Three members of the European Parliament's subcommittee on human rights had [warned](#) that Al-Raisi's election as president of INTERPOL "would undermine the mission and reputation of INTERPOL and severely affect the ability of the organisation to carry out its mission effectively".

The Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR) has also filed to prosecute Al-Raisi in France under the principle of universal jurisdiction for his role in perpetrating torture.

In a glaring demonstration of the UAE's complete intolerance for peaceful dissent, human rights defenders in the UAE face long prison sentences and severe retaliation for peacefully exercising their freedom of expression, while the government tightens the reins by enacting more restrictive legislation and using surveillance techniques against activists and dissidents.

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



CONTINUED DETENTION OF HRDS

2022 marks the tenth 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. 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 seven years in prison, four of these political prisoners reportedly remain imprisoned despite having completed their sentences. Abdullah Al-Hajiri, Omran Al-Radwan Al-Harathi and Mahmoud Hasan Al-Hosani completed their sentences in 2019, and Fahd Al-Hajiri's sentence was completed in 2020. Instead of releasing them at the end of their sentences, they were transferred to a so-called "counselling centre" within Abu Dhabi's Al-Razeen prison facility. Among the UAE 94 prisoners currently serving 10-year sentences are human rights lawyers Dr Mohammed Al-Roken and Dr Mohammed Al-Mansoori and academic Mohammed Abdul Razzaq Al-Siddiq, the father of Alaa Al-Siddiq.

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

Ahmed Mansoor

March 2022 marks five years since the arrest and subsequent imprisonment of prominent human rights defender [Ahmed Mansoor](#). Mansoor, who was arrested in a late-night house raid on 20th March 2017 and held incommunicado for a year, was 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 even a bed or mattress.

Extremely worrying [reports](#) have recently emerged that Mansoor is facing retaliation in prison for speaking out about his detention conditions, which amount to torture. These reports also indicate that Mansoor's health is in danger as a result of torture and dreadful detention conditions. The retaliation followed a July 2021 media publication of a letter written by Mansoor detailing his mistreatment in prison, which was smuggled outside by a prisoner and was supposed to remain confidential. In response to the publication, authorities moved Mansoor to a smaller and more isolated cell, denied him access to critical medical care and confiscated his reading glasses.

GCHR and Human Rights Watch published an extensive [report](#) based on the secret letter on [27th January 2021 entitled: Persecution of Rights Defender Ahmed Mansoor](#) which 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

M Other human rights defenders and journalists arrested for their opinions still remain in detention. Among them is [Dr. Nasser Bin Ghaith](#), who was [arrested](#) during a raid on his home on 18th August 2015, and detained for his online criticism of the Emirati and Egyptian authorities. He was later sentenced to ten 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.

The public is requested to [sign a petition](#) by the International Campaign for Freedom in the UAE (ICFUAE) to help free Emirati human rights defenders.

NEW CYBER CRIME AND ANTI RUMOUR LAW THREATENS FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

In continued efforts by authorities to completely dismantle dissent in the country, despite the image of tolerance projected internationally, a newly [adopted](#) anti-rumour and cybercrime law, which replaced the Law on Combating Information Technology Crimes, criminalises the work of journalists, whistleblowers, activists and peaceful critics. Federal Law No. 34 of 2021 on combating rumours and cybercrime, which took effect on 2nd January 2022, uses broad and vague terminology, especially in matters relating to “state security,” placing 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. It imposes a prison sentence on anyone who publishes information which harms the interest or image of the state or its agencies, and it imposes a prison sentence for defamation, among other worrying provisions. 15 CSOs [joined efforts](#) to express concern that the maximum prison sentences for these offences has not been explicitly indicated in the new law, thus leaving authorities with unfettered discretion to impose disproportionate penalties for acts which are protected under international law.

SURVEILLANCE

In 2016, Citizen Lab [documented](#) the shocking extent of targeted spyware attacks on human rights defenders and civil society in the UAE. According to their investigations, in 2012 at least three dissidents, including a journalist and Ahmed Mansoor, were targeted in this way by a UAE-based customer operating from within the office of Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed al-Nahyan.

In July 2021, it [emerged](#) that more than 400 people with UK mobile phone numbers, including exiled dissidents and supportive activists, featured in a list held by NSO Group at the behest of their client, the UAE Government. According to a report by The Guardian, the UAE is one of 40 countries that has access to the NSO spyware and is able to hack into and secretly take control of a mobile phone.

The NSO Group only recently [stopped](#) doing business with the UAE in late 2021, after reports emerged of the authorities’ widespread use of Pegasus spyware to hack the phones of activists and other dissidents.



RECOMMENDATIONS

To the UAE government:

- Immediately and unconditionally release all those who have been arbitrarily detained in relation to their peaceful human rights work.
- Cease targeting and arbitrarily detaining human rights defenders and others who peacefully exercise their right to free expression.
- 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 UAE's human rights obligations.
- Comply with international standards for prisoners, including allowing regular family visits, access to healthcare and regular consultations with lawyers, and end the practice of solitary confinement.
- Cease the use of surveillance technology to target dissidents and activists.

To the international community:

- Call for urgent and immediate action to address violations of the rights to expression and association.
- Hold the UAE accountable for its human rights violations and ensure that the UAE respects its domestic and international human rights obligations.