

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES 2021 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United Arab Emirates is a federation of seven semiautonomous emirates with a resident population of approximately 9.8 million, of whom an estimated 11 percent are citizens. The rulers of the seven emirates constitute the Federal Supreme Council, the country's highest legislative and executive body. The council selects a president and a vice president from its membership, and the president appoints the prime minister and cabinet. Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, ruler of Abu Dhabi emirate, is president, although Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi exercises most executive authority. The emirates are under patriarchal rule with political allegiance defined by loyalty to tribal leaders, leaders of the individual emirates, and leaders of the federation. A limited, appointed electorate participates in periodic elections for the partially elected Federal National Council, a consultative body that examines, reviews, and recommends changes to legislation and may discuss topics for legislation. The last election was in 2019, when appointed voters elected 20 Federal National Council members. Citizens may express their concerns directly to their leaders through traditional consultative mechanisms such as the open *majlis* (forum), but they do not have the right to choose their government in free and fair elections.

Each emirate maintains a local police force called a general directorate, which is officially a branch of the federal Ministry of Interior. All emirate-level general directorates of police enforce their respective emirate's laws autonomously. They also enforce federal laws within their emirate in coordination with one another under the federal ministry. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces. There were reports that members of the security forces committed some abuses.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: torture in detention; arbitrary arrest and detention, including incommunicado detention, by government

agents; political prisoners; government interference with privacy rights; serious restrictions on free expression and media, including censorship and the existence of criminal libel laws; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including very restrictive laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental organizations and civil society organizations; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully in free and fair elections; serious and unreasonable restrictions on political participation; serious government restrictions or harassment of domestic and international human rights organizations; existence or use of laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual activity between adults; and outlawing of independent trade unions or significant restrictions on workers' freedom of association.

The government investigated, prosecuted, and punished some officials who committed abuses, primarily official financial crimes. There was no publicly available information on whether authorities investigated complaints of other abuses, including prison conditions and mistreatment, or prosecuted and punished officials in connection with these complaints.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings.

b. Disappearance

Human rights organizations reported instances of enforced disappearances by government authorities. Abdul Rahman al-Nahhas, a Syrian human rights activist sentenced in September to 10 years in prison on charges of terrorism and insulting the prestige of the state, reportedly was forcibly disappeared, threatened, tortured, held incommunicado, and denied access to his legal representative; he remained in prison at year's end.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution prohibits such practices, but there were some reports of occurrences during the year. Based on reports from released prisoners and their family members, diplomatic observers, and human rights organizations, UN human rights experts found that some individuals imprisoned for suspected state security and criminal offenses were subjected to torture or mistreatment. In June the UN special rapporteur for the situation of human rights defenders stated that five of the approximately 60 imprisoned members of the UAE 94, a group of Emirati scholars, activists, lawyers, and doctors who were sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment in 2013 for signing a petition two years earlier calling for greater democratic reforms, faced prison conditions that could constitute torture. She cited allegations that the men were held for long periods in solitary confinement, left without air conditioning as outside temperatures rose above 105 degrees Fahrenheit, and prevented from seeing sunlight.

Although legal reforms in 2020 made it illegal for authorities to use evidence obtained through torture or degrading treatment, human rights groups alleged that abuses took place during interrogations and as inducement for signed confessions.

Reforms to the legal code in 2020 and 2021 removed flogging as a permissible form of punishment under the federal penal code; however, sharia (Islamic) courts, which adjudicate criminal and family law cases, still impose flogging as punishment for adultery, prostitution, consensual premarital sex, pregnancy outside marriage, defamation of character, and drug or alcohol charges.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions varied widely among the individual emirates and between regular prisons (which hold those accused of nonpolitical crimes such as drug trafficking, money laundering, and killings) and state security detention facilities (which hold political activists or those the government defines to be terrorists). There continued to be allegations of overcrowding, long waits for health-care access, and poor sanitary conditions.

Physical Conditions: The government did not release statistics on prison demographics and capacity. Diplomatic observers and UN human rights experts reported that in Abu Dhabi, some prisoners reported overcrowding, particularly in drug units, poor temperature control, retaliation for raising complaints to their embassies, and inadequate sanitary conditions and medical care.

There were reports that individuals in state security detention facilities were mistreated, abused, and tortured. Prisoners complained to embassy representatives that they witnessed routine abuse of fellow prisoners, including long periods of solitary confinement and imprisonment in noncooled spaces where temperatures could reach upwards of 100 degrees Fahrenheit for most months of the year.

In February Human Rights Watch reported that government authorities had denied a British national access to critical medication and adequate health care throughout his 10-year detention on a six-year criminal sentence, ignoring his 2014 pardon.

According to diplomatic observers, overcrowding was periodically a problem in prisons in Dubai and the northern emirates. In particular, prisoners awaiting transfer to Abu Dhabi for federal prosecution experienced long stays in police holding cells equipped only for short-term incarceration. In June the minister of interior reported that the COVID-19 pandemic led to a reduction in serious crimes and a decrease of more than 20 percent in the country's prison population compared with 2020. The minister stated that 4 percent of the country's prison population tested positive for COVID-19. Prevention measures in prisons included mandatory vaccination, careful sanitization of facilities, a 15-day quarantine for new inmates, and awareness-raising sessions in different languages.

Some prisoners were not permitted exercise or reading materials. There were reports that some prisoners did not have access to outside areas and exposure to sunlight. According to human rights organizations, imprisoned activist Abdelsalam al-Marzooqi was held in solitary confinement in a secret location for eight months and denied visiting and contact rights for more than a year. In Abu Dhabi there also were reports of dangerously hot conditions when air conditioners broke during periods of extreme high temperatures.

While medical care was generally adequate in regular prisons, HIV-positive

noncitizen detainees reported not being given regular and uninterrupted access to antiretroviral treatment and experiencing other forms of discrimination, such as being held in segregated units or solitary confinement. Other prisoners reported prolonged delays in receiving medical treatment and difficulty obtaining necessary medication, including insulin for diabetics.

The Gulf Centre for Human Rights blamed the death in February of Jordanian journalist and writer Tayseer al-Najjar, two years after his release from prison, on health complications caused by the conditions during his confinement, which al-Najjar's wife supported. His sentence ended in December 2018, but he remained imprisoned until February 2019 due to his inability to pay a large fine, which local authorities eventually waived at the time of his release.

Prisons attempted to accommodate persons with disabilities based on their specific needs, such as placing wheelchair users on a lower floor. Some reports alleged inconsistencies in providing support for prisoners with mental disabilities. In Dubai and to some extent in Abu Dhabi, prison officials worked with mental-health professionals to provide support and administer needed medication. Training and facilities to accommodate prisoners with mental disabilities were allegedly less well developed in the other emirates. It reportedly was common for authorities to grant a humanitarian pardon in cases where a person with a disability had been convicted of a minor offense.

Administration: Some state security detainees were not permitted access to visitors or had more limited access than other prisoners. Although prisoners had a right to submit complaints to judicial authorities, details about whether any investigations into complaints took place were not publicly available, and there were no independent authorities to investigate allegations of poor conditions. Inmates reported retaliation from authorities after raising issues regarding prison conditions with diplomatic missions.

There were standard weekly visiting hours in regular prisons, but unmarried and unrelated visitors of the opposite sex had to receive permission from a prosecutor. As a result of COVID-19, some prisons throughout the country used teleconferencing measures in lieu of in-person visitations. Dubai police adopted a remote visual communication service between inmates in Dubai prisons and their

families inside and outside the country.

Prison authorities required Muslims to attend weekly Islamic services, and non-Muslims reported some pressure to attend ostensibly nonmandatory lectures and classes regarding Islam. Some Christian clergy raised concerns regarding lack of worship space for incarcerated Christians. In several emirates Christian clergy were not able to visit Christian prisoners.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted charitable nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to visit prisons and provide material support on a limited basis. Authorities did not grant access to independent human rights groups, media, or international monitoring bodies, and prohibited regular consular access for State Security Department detainees.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention. The government, however, reportedly often held persons in custody for extended periods without charge or a preliminary judicial hearing. The law allows state security officers to hold detainees for up to 106 days, but indefinite detention for such cases has been reported.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law prohibits arrest or search of citizens without probable cause. Legal reforms implemented in November 2020 provide the right to remain silent and require arresting officers to inform the accused of this right and the alleged charges upon arrest or detention. While awaiting a decision on official charges at a police station or the prosecutor's office, a detainee is not entitled to legal counsel. Police usually adhered to the requirement that they report an arrest to the public prosecutor within 48 hours. The public prosecutor must question the accused within 24 hours of notification of arrest.

Police investigations regularly take up to three months, during which time detainees were often held incommunicado and without public knowledge of their whereabouts. In some cases authorities did not allow detainees contact with attorneys, family members, or others for indefinite or unspecified periods. Some

detainees reported being monitored during meetings with family members and consular officials, as well as being prevented from discussing their cases or detention conditions.

Authorities often did not notify the appropriate diplomatic officials when a foreign national was detained. For state security detainees, notification was exceptionally rare, and information regarding the status of these detainees was very limited.

The law requires prosecutors to submit charges to a court within 14 days of the police report. Judges may not extend a detention beyond 30 days without charges; however, once charges are brought, judges may renew 30-day extensions indefinitely. Multiple detainees complained that authorities did not inform them of the charges or other details of their case for months at a time. There were also reports of authorities pressuring or forcing detainees to sign documents before having access to attorneys.

The 2020 legal reforms require police to furnish a translator when an individual does not understand Arabic. Noncitizen detainees reported that when the prosecutor presented the charges, they were written in Arabic and translation services were often inadequate.

Authorities treated prisoners arrested for political or security reasons differently from other prisoners, including placing them in separate sections of a prison. The State Security Department handled these cases and, in some instances, held prisoners and detainees in separate undisclosed locations for extended periods prior to their transfer to a regular prison.

Public prosecutors may hold suspects in terrorism-related cases without charge for six months. Once authorities charge a suspect with terrorism, the Federal Supreme Court may extend the detention indefinitely. The counterterrorism law provides for the establishment of rehabilitation centers under the *Munassaha* program, which aims to use psychosocial techniques to reform persons deemed to pose a terrorist threat or those convicted of terrorist offenses. The law stipulates that program administrators provide reports on detainees' status every three months and that the public prosecutor submit a final opinion on the outcome of rehabilitation to inform the court's decision on whether to release the individual.

Authorities may temporarily release detainees who deposit money, a passport, or an unsecured personal promissory statement signed by a third party. Abu Dhabi and Dubai utilize an electronic travel ban system, which allows authorities to prevent individuals involved in pending legal proceedings from departing the country without physically confiscating their passport. Nonetheless, officials routinely held detainees' passports until sentencing. Authorities may deny pretrial release to defendants in cases involving loss of life, including involuntary manslaughter. Authorities released some prisoners detained on charges related to a person's death after the prisoners completed *diya* (blood money) payments. Once an accused is found criminally liable for a death, judges may grant diya payments as compensation to the victim's family in an amount determined to be in accordance with sharia. For example, in June an Abu Dhabi court awarded 283,000 dirhams (AED) (\$77,100) in diya to the family of a woman killed in a hit-and-run car accident.

A defendant is legally entitled to an attorney after authorities complete their investigation and file formal charges. There were allegations that authorities sometimes questioned the accused for weeks without permitting access to an attorney. The government may provide counsel at its discretion to indigent defendants charged with felonies punishable by imprisonment. The law requires the government to provide counsel in cases in which indigent defendants face punishments of life imprisonment or the death penalty.

Authorities held some persons incommunicado, particularly in cases involving state security.

Arbitrary Arrest: There were reports the government carried out arrests without informing the individual of the charge, notably in cases of alleged violations of state security regulations. In these cases authorities did not give notice to the individual or to family members regarding the subject of the inquiry or arrest.

Pretrial Detention: Lengthy pretrial detention occurred, especially in cases involving state security. Diplomatic observers noted cases where the time defendants spent waiting for a court date surpassed the maximum sentence for the crime. The speed with which these cases were brought to trial increased, as it did in the previous year, with a lower number of State Security Court acquittals and

convictions in comparison with recent years. As a result of COVID-19, the government increased its use of video teleconferencing measures for litigation procedures.

In February international media reported that the government released eight Lebanese nationals who were detained in 2014 due to alleged links to Hezbollah. Fifteen other Lebanese nationals are reportedly still being held pending trial under the same charges.

Detainee's Ability to Challenge Lawfulness of Detention before a Court:

There were reports authorities delayed or limited an individual's access to an attorney and did not give prompt court appearances or afford consular notification, both for ordinary prisoners and in state security cases. Diplomatic observers reported this was a particular problem for foreign residents who were vulnerable to loss of job, home, and accrual of debt due to unlawful detention. There were no known reports of courts finding individuals eligible for compensation on the basis of unlawful detention.

According to human rights organizations, Amina al-Abdouli and Maryam al-Balushi – women who were arrested in 2016 and 2015, respectively, for alleged state security crimes – remained detained despite completing their sentences. Al-Abdouli made a recording in 2020 stating that the public prosecutor had filed a new case against her and al-Balushi in reprisal for their previous recordings regarding prison conditions. In January the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention issued an opinion urging authorities to release al-Balushi and al-Abdouli, citing concerns that they were in poor health.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary; however, court decisions remained subject to review by the political leadership. Authorities often treated noncitizens differently from citizens. The judiciary consisted largely of contracted foreign nationals subject to potential deportation, further compromising its independence from the government.

Trial Procedures

The constitution provides for the right to a fair and public trial, and the judiciary generally enforced this right. Abu Dhabi and other emirates expanded the implementation of virtual court systems, which allowed detainees and prisoners to participate in hearings and trials remotely and afforded continued access to the justice system despite pandemic-related government office closures. Dubai maintained a website where individuals could obtain basic information concerning pending legal cases, including formal charges and upcoming court dates. Diplomatic observers noted that in many instances a similar website in Abu Dhabi did not function effectively.

The law presumes all defendants are innocent until proven guilty. By law a defendant enjoys the right to be informed promptly and in detail of the charges. The 2020 legal reforms established the right to remain silent, the right to be informed of one's alleged crime at the time of arrest, and the inadmissibility of evidence obtained through torture or degrading treatment. The law requires all court proceedings to be conducted in Arabic but now mandates that an interpreter be provided when the individual being questioned does not speak Arabic. Despite the defendant's procedural right to an interpreter, there were reports authorities did not always provide one or provided poor-quality interpreting services.

Defendants have the right to be present at their trials and to have legal counsel in court for cases that carry punishment other than a fine. The defendant has a right to government-provided counsel after charges have been filed only in cases involving a capital crime or possible life imprisonment. The government may also provide counsel, at its discretion, to indigent defendants charged with felonies punishable by provisional imprisonment. The law provides prosecutors discretion to bar defense counsel from any investigation. Defendants and their attorneys may present witnesses and question witnesses against them. Defendants may not be compelled to testify or confess. Some defendants said they did not have adequate time to prepare a defense, sometimes due to limited telephone access. Verdicts were announced in open court, even if the case was heard in a closed session.

Both local and federal courts have an appeals process. Appeals are first heard by each emirate's court of appeals and can be escalated to a higher court if necessary.

In Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Ras al-Khaimah, appeals are escalated to the respective emirate's court of cassation. For those emirates that lack a court of cassation (Ajman, Sharjah, Umm al-Quwain, and Fujairah), appeals are escalated to the Federal Supreme Court in Abu Dhabi. Convicted defendants may also appeal death sentences to the ruler of the emirate in which the offense was committed or to the president of the federation. In homicide cases the victim's family must consent to commute a death sentence. The government normally negotiated with victims' families for the defendant to offer diya payments, in accordance with sharia, in exchange for forgiveness and a commuted death sentence. The prosecutor may appeal acquittals and provide new or additional evidence to a higher court. An appellate court must reach unanimous agreement to overturn an acquittal. In July an Emirati national convicted of homicide was executed after the victim's family refused to accept a blood money payment and insisted on the death penalty.

In state security cases, the Federal Court of Appeals serves as a court of first instance. State security cases may be appealed to the Federal Supreme Court.

When authorities suspected a foreigner of crimes of "moral turpitude," authorities sometimes deported the individual without recourse to the criminal justice system. At the judge's discretion, foreigners charged with such crimes may be granted bail and allowed to remain in the country to defend themselves if they so request. This provision does not apply to foreign residents charged with a national security-related crime. Changes to the penal code announced in November mandated deportation for noncitizens accused of crimes, with limited exceptions.

Women continued to face legal discrimination because of the government's interpretation of sharia (see section 6, Women).

Political Prisoners and Detainees

During the year there were reports of persons held incommunicado and without charge because of their political views or affiliations, which often involved alleged links to Islamist organizations. Since 2011 the government has restricted the activities of organizations and individuals allegedly associated with al-Islah, a Muslim Brotherhood affiliate and government-designated terrorist organization,

and others critical of the government.

In a July report, Human Rights Watch (HRW) stated that Ahmed Mansoor, a human rights activist convicted in 2018 under the cybercrime law of insulting the “status and prestige of the United Arab Emirates and its symbols” and of seeking to damage the country’s relationship with its neighbors by publishing information critical of those governments on social media, was held in solitary confinement for nearly four years without access to a mattress or other necessities. He also was reportedly denied access to lawyers, granted only a limited number of family visits, and subjected to death threats, physical assault, government surveillance, and inhuman treatment while in custody. Mansoor remained in prison at year’s end.

During the year human rights organizations continued to call for the government to release Mohammed al-Roken and Nasser bin Ghaith. Al-Roken is a lawyer, academic, and human rights defender whom authorities allegedly arbitrarily detained in 2012 for “plotting against the government.” Bin Ghaith is an economist, professor, and activist who was allegedly held incommunicado for 18 months after being arrested in 2015 for harming the reputation of the country in tweets that criticized local officials and the Egyptian government. Al-Roken and bin Ghaith were sentenced to 10 years in prison in 2013 and 2017, respectively.

In April human rights organizations confirmed the release of four Emirati political activists under the president’s annual Ramadan pardon. The four were convicted in 2011 of belonging to the banned Islah group and seeking to overthrow the government. They had been held beyond their jail terms in state security-run counseling centers for individuals deemed to be terrorist threats.

Politically Motivated Reprisal against Individuals Located Outside the Country

Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, and Coercion: According to human rights groups, government authorities continued to target relatives of political prisoners detained in the country and dissidents living abroad, allegedly subjecting them to harassment in reprisal for their relatives’ activism.

International media reporting in August alleged that the government used surveillance software to spy on Emirati human rights figures located outside the

country such as Alaa al-Siddiq, executive director of the London-based Emirati human rights organization ALQST, until her death in June.

In September the government designated as terrorists Hamad al-Shamsi, Ahmed al-Nuaimi, Mohammed al-Zaabi, and Saeed al-Tenaiji. These individuals resided outside the country and belonged to the UAE 94. They also were alleged to be members of al-Islah.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Citizens and noncitizens had access to the courts to seek damages for, or cessation of, human rights abuses. Courts lacked full independence, often delaying proceedings.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution prohibits entry into a home without the owner's permission, except when police present a lawful warrant. Officers' actions in searching premises were subject to review by the Ministry of Interior, and officers were subject to disciplinary action if authorities judged their actions irresponsible.

The constitution provides for free and confidential correspondence by mail, telegram, and all other means of communication. There were reports, however, that the government monitored and occasionally censored incoming international mail, wiretapped telephones, and monitored outgoing mail and electronic forms of communication without following appropriate legal procedures. According to media reports, the government engaged in systematic campaigns to target journalists and activists using spyware and hackers. In July a series of investigations by 17 global media organizations, known as the *Pegasus Project*, accused the government of using NSO Group-developed spyware to target journalists and activists in the country and abroad, including *Financial Times* editor Roula Khalaf and human rights defender Alaa al-Siddiq.

g. Conflict-related Abuses

The government continued to support partner forces in Yemen that NGOs have

previously alleged committed human rights abuses including arbitrary detention and torture. For further information see the Department's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for Yemen*, section 2, Respect for Civil Liberties.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media

The constitution provides for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, but the law prohibits criticism of national rulers and speech that may create or encourage social unrest. The government regularly restricted freedom of speech and the press, and human rights organizations reported that the government continues to detain political activists and human rights defenders. Media outlets conformed to unpublished government guidelines. Editors and journalists were aware of government “red lines” for acceptable media content, stipulated in federal libel and slander laws. On other socially sensitive topics, they commonly practiced self-censorship. In January the government introduced the *National Policy for the Quality of Digital Life* aimed at encouraging positive digital citizenship by promoting “tolerance, coexistence, and pluralism” in the curriculum of government schools.

Freedom of Expression: After the onset of widespread regional popular uprisings in 2011, authorities severely restricted freedom of expression by prohibiting any public criticism of the government and individual ministers. The government continued to make arrests or impose other restrictions for speech related to and in support of Islamist political activities, calls for democratic reforms, criticism of or perceived insults against the government and government institutions, and, in rarer cases, criticism of individuals. Both verbal and written insults online are a prosecutable offense.

In other cases authorities brought individuals to trial for posting material on social media platforms that was considered a violation of privacy or personally insulting to acquaintances, colleagues, employers, or religions.

Freedom of Expression for Members of the Press and Media, Including

Online Media: International NGOs categorized the press, both in print and online, as not free. Except for regional media outlets located in Dubai and Abu Dhabi's free-trade zones, the government owned and controlled most newspapers, television stations, and radio stations. Journalists reported the government maintained unpublished guidelines for acceptable media content. Regulations for electronic media, including rules for publishing and selling advertising, print, video, and audio material, require those benefitting monetarily from social media advertising to purchase a license from the National Media Council (NMC).

Censorship or Content Restrictions: By law the NMC, whose chair the president appoints, licenses, and censors all publications, including private association publications. Domestic and foreign publications were censored to remove any criticism of the government, ruling families, or friendly governments. Online content was often removed without transparency or judicial oversight. Domain hosts or administrators are liable if their websites are used to "prompt riot, hatred, racism, sectarianism, or damage the national unity or social peace or prejudice the public order and public morals." Censorship also extends to statements that "threaten social stability" and materials considered pornographic or excessively violent. The government in December introduced a new "21+" rating for films with mature content, allowing "international versions" of films to be screened in the country. Prior to the announcement of the new rating system, authorities reportedly banned or edited films for "mature" content, which it considered to include representations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) individuals.

Government and private institutions must obtain a license before publishing or broadcasting media or advertising content, or face penalties. This requirement applies to any media or advertising activity and to any person or entity that issues any type of publication, including clubs, associations, diplomatic missions, foreign centers, and movie theaters.

Government officials allegedly warned journalists who published or broadcast material deemed politically or culturally sensitive. Editors and journalists commonly practiced self-censorship due to fear of government retribution, particularly since most journalists were foreign nationals and could be deported. Authorities did not allow importation or publication of some books they viewed as

critical of the government, Islam, and local culture, as well as books that supported the Muslim Brotherhood or its ideology.

Internet and television providers continued to block Qatari-funded al-Jazeera's website and most Qatari broadcasting channels at the direction of government authorities.

Libel/Slander Laws: The government used libel and slander laws to suppress criticism of its leaders and institutions. The law criminalizes acts that defame others online or through information technology, including communication applications such as WhatsApp; punishment is either imprisonment or a fine. In July a Ras al-Khaimah court ordered a woman to pay a former Federal National Council member AED 20,000 (\$5,450) as compensation after she allegedly insulted him and damaged his reputation on social media.

Those convicted of libel face up to two years in prison. The maximum penalty for libel against the family of a public official is three years in prison.

The law also criminalizes any form of expression the government interprets as blasphemous or offensive toward "divine recognized religions," inciting religious hatred or insulting religious convictions.

National Security: Authorities often cited the need to protect national security as the basis for laws that prohibit and punish criticism of the government or expression of dissenting political views. For example, the country's cybercrime laws include broad limitations on using electronic means to promote disorder or "damage national unity." Human rights groups criticized these laws for excessively restricting freedom of expression.

Internet Freedom

The Ministry of Interior lists 10 broad categories of online activities it considers illegal under the cybercrime law: defaming or disrespecting others, violating privacy, filming persons or places and posting these videos without permission, spreading false news and rumors, manipulating personal information, engaging in blackmail and threats, establishing websites or accounts that violate local regulations, inciting immoral acts, posting work-related confidential information,

and establishing or managing websites or accounts to coordinate with terrorist groups. The law imposes fines and sentences up to life imprisonment depending on the nature of the alleged offense. In February HRW contended that the Abu Dhabi Court of Appeals' October 2020 sentencing of a Jordanian national to 10 years' imprisonment was based solely on "peaceful" Facebook posts critical of the Jordanian government. Prosecutors had asserted that the posts could endanger national security, harm the social order, and damage relations with Jordan.

The government restricted access to some websites and conducted widespread surveillance of social media, instant messaging services, and blogs with little to no judicial oversight. Virtual private networks (VPNs) are permitted for use by companies, institutions, and banks for internal purposes only; use by private individuals is forbidden. The usage of VPN technology for illegal means is considered a serious offense under the law. Authorities threatened to imprison individuals for misusing the internet. Self-censorship was apparent on social media. There were reports the Ministry of Interior monitored internet use, and access to the Clubhouse social media application was allegedly deliberately interrupted by telecom operators, although the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority denied these claims to an international media outlet. There were numerous documented instances of online surveillance used to track dissidents in the country and abroad. This included reports the government had purchased spyware, including NSO Group's Pegasus spyware, and employed foreign cyber-experts to bolster its own hacking capabilities. NGOs and media outlets reported that activists, journalists, politicians, and dissidents were targeted in systematic hacking campaigns.

The country's two internet service providers, both majority owned by the government's sovereign wealth fund, used a proxy server to block materials deemed inconsistent with the country's values, as defined by the Ministry of Interior and overseen by the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority. Blocked material included sites with LGBTQI+ content; atheism; negative critiques of Islam; testimonies of former Muslims who converted to Christianity; gambling; promotion of illegal drug use; pornography; and postings that explained how to circumvent the proxy servers. International media sites, accessed using the country's internet providers, contained filtered content. The government also

blocked some sites containing content critical of the government or laws of the country, and other states in the region.

The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority operated with no oversight or transparency in identifying which sites it blocked. Service providers did not have the authority to unblock sites without government approval. The government also blocked most voice-over-internet-protocol (VoIP) applications and the use of VoIPs through VPNs. Convictions for unauthorized use of VoIPs can lead to significant fines, imprisonment, or both. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority temporarily approved a set of VoIP applications to support teleworking and distance learning.

The Federal Public Prosecution for Information Technology Crimes investigated criminal cases involving use of information technology, including the use of the internet with the intent to “damage public morals,” the promotion of “sinful behavior,” illegal collections of donations, trafficking in persons, calling for or abetting the breach of laws, and the organization of demonstrations.

The NMC requires social media influencers who accept payment in money or high-value goods and services in return for endorsing products to join a social media management agency or obtain an e-commerce license for a small fee and a trade license, for which the price varies by emirate. Unlicensed paid social media influencers face a moderate fine.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

The government restricted academic freedom, including speech both inside and outside the classroom by educators, and censored academic materials for schools. The government required official permission for conferences and submission of detailed information on proposed speakers and topics of discussion. The same procedure applied to on-campus events at private schools. Some organizations found it difficult to secure meeting space for public events that dealt with contentious topics.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution provides for the freedoms of assembly and association, but the

government did not always respect these rights.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The law provides limited freedom of assembly, although the government imposed significant restrictions on freedom of assembly in practice.

The law requires a government-issued permit for organized public gatherings. While there was no uniform standard for the number of persons who could gather without a permit, some residents reported authorities ask groups of four or more to disperse if they did not have a permit. The government did not interfere routinely with informal, nonpolitical gatherings held without a government permit in public places unless there were complaints. The government generally permitted political gatherings that supported government policies. Hotels, citing government regulations, sometimes denied permission for groups such as unregistered religious organizations to rent space for meetings or religious services.

Freedom of Association

The law provides limited freedom of association. The government imposed significant restrictions on freedom of association in practice.

Political organizations, political parties, and trade unions are illegal. All associations and NGOs are required to register with the Ministry of Community Development, and many that did so received government subsidies. Domestic NGOs registered with the ministry were mostly citizens' associations for economic, religious, social, cultural, athletic, and other purposes.

Registration rules require that all voting organizational members, as well as boards of directors, must be citizens. This requirement excluded almost 90 percent of the population from fully participating in such organizations. In Dubai volunteer organizations were required to register with the Community Development Authority (CDA) and obtain its approval before conducting fundraising activities. In April the president issued a federal law requiring a license from the CDA for individuals and entities to engage in fundraising activities or collecting donations, which they may do no more than four times a year. Penalties under the law may include substantial fines and deportation of noncitizens.

Associations must follow the government's censorship guidelines and receive prior government approval before publishing any material. In Abu Dhabi all exhibitions, conferences, and meetings require a permit from the Tourism and Culture Authority. To obtain a permit, the event organizer must submit identification documents for speakers along with speaker topics.

LGBTQI+ individuals could not openly engage in advocacy for LGBTQI+ rights due to social norms and possible prosecution or reprisal (see section 6).

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

The law generally provided for freedom of internal movement, emigration, and repatriation. In September the Abu Dhabi Emergency, Crisis, and Disaster Committee for the COVID-19 pandemic ended internal movement restrictions following a sharp drop in COVID-19 cases.

While the government generally respected the right to freedom of internal movement, emigration, and repatriation, it imposed certain legal restrictions on foreign travel. The lack of passports or other identity documents restricted the movement of stateless persons, both within the country and internationally.

Foreign Travel: Authorities generally did not permit citizens and residents involved in legal disputes under adjudication and noncitizens under investigation to travel abroad. In addition, authorities sometimes arrested individuals with outstanding debts or legal cases while in transit through an international airport. Abu Dhabi and Dubai maintain a system that allows individuals to verify if they are subject to a travel ban related to unsettled debts or pending legal action. In some cases travelers can settle debts directly at the airport and have their travel ban lifted. Debtors also may challenge travel bans in court.

Emirate-level prosecutors have the discretion to seize the passports of foreign citizens and restrict foreign travel during criminal or civil investigations. These

measures posed particular problems for noncitizen debtors who, in addition to being unable to leave the country, were usually unable to find work without a passport and valid residence permit, making it impossible to repay their debts or maintain legal residency. In some cases family, friends, local religious organizations, or other concerned individuals helped pay the debt and enabled the indebted foreign national to depart the country. In February Dubai authorities released a number of prisoners after a group of charities and individual donors paid their debts. In September a charity in Sharjah paid the debts of 805 persons including an unspecified number of inmates.

Citizens targeted for reasons of state security, including former political prisoners, encountered difficulties renewing official documents, resulting in implicit travel bans.

Custom dictates that a husband may prevent his wife, minor children, or adult unmarried daughters from leaving the country by taking custody of their passports.

Citizenship: The government may revoke naturalized citizens' passports and citizenship status for criminal or "politically provocative" actions.

e. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons

Not applicable.

f. Protection of Refugees

The government allowed the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations to provide protection and assistance to refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern.

UNHCR lacked formal legal status in the country separate from the UN Development Program. The government nevertheless worked with UNHCR on a case-by-case basis to address refugee issues. The government informally granted refugee status or asylum to aliens seeking protection and allowed some asylum seekers to remain in the country temporarily on an individual basis. This nonpermanent status often presented administrative, financial, and social

hardships, including the need frequently to renew visas and the inability to access basic services such as health care and education.

Access to Asylum: The law does not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has not established a transparent, codified system for providing protection to refugees. While the government extended informal protection from return to refugees in some cases, any persons lacking legal residency status were technically subject to local laws on illegal immigrants, and authorities could detain them. In some cases authorities confined individuals seeking protection at an airport to a specific section of the airport while they awaited resettlement in another country. Since August the government has supported the evacuation from Afghanistan of more than 10,000 individuals, including American citizens, third-country nationals, and at-risk Afghans. As of December the non-U.S. citizen individuals were being evaluated for resettlement or relocation to other countries.

Employment: Access to employment was based on an individual's status as a legal resident, and persons with a claim to refugee status but who lacked legal residency status, including those with either short-term visitor visas or expired visas, were generally not eligible for employment.

Access to Basic Services: Access to education and other public services, including health care, is based on an individual's status as a legal resident. As a result, some families, particularly from Iraq and Syria, reportedly did not have access to health care or schools. The government provided or allowed access to some services on a case-by-case basis, often after the intervention of UNHCR representatives. Some hospitals were willing to see patients without the mandatory insurance but required full payment up front.

g. Stateless Persons

Informal estimates suggested 20,000 to 100,000 *Bidoon*, or persons without citizenship, resided in the country. The government estimated the population at 10,000. Most Bidoon lacked citizenship because they did not belong to one of the tribes granted citizenship when the country was established. Others entered the country legally or illegally in search of employment. Because children derive

citizenship generally from the father, Bidoon children born within the country's territory remained stateless. Without passports or other forms of identification, Bidoon find their movement restricted, both within the country and internationally. In previous years the government purchased a number of passports from Comoros and issued them to Bidoon. The documents conferred economic Comorian citizenship on the recipients and legalized their status in the country but did not extend citizenship or the right to residency in Comoros. In 2018 the Comoros government reportedly halted issuance of new passports under its economic citizenship program, but there were reports of Bidoon individuals receiving Comoros passports issued after 2018.

The committee that reviews mothers' citizenship applications for their children also reviews citizenship applications from Bidoon who could satisfy certain legal conditions to be eligible for naturalization and subsequently could gain access to education, health care, and other public services. There were few reports of stateless persons receiving Emirati citizenship.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The law does not provide citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections based on universal and equal suffrage. Federal executive and legislative power is in the hands of the Federal Supreme Council, a body composed of the hereditary rulers of the seven emirates. It selects from its members the country's president and vice president. Decisions at the federal level generally are by consensus among the rulers, their families, and other leading families. The ruling families, in consultation with other prominent tribal figures, also choose rulers of the emirates.

Citizens may express their concerns directly to their leaders through an open majlis, a traditional consultative mechanism. On occasion, women were permitted to attend a majlis. If a majlis was closed to women, men sometimes expressed concerns as proxies on behalf of women. In addition, authorities sometimes held a women-only majlis or a majlis focused specifically on women's issues.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: In 2019 an appointed electorate of more than 330,000, representing just under one-quarter of the total citizen population, elected 20 members of the Federal National Council (FNC), a 40-member consultative body with some legislative authority. Approximately 35 percent of eligible voters participated. The size of the appointed electorate increased by approximately 50 percent from the 2015 election. Each emirate receives seats in the FNC based on population. In a nontransparent process, each emirate ruler appoints that emirate's portion of the other 20 FNC members. As mandated by a 2018 decree, female representation in the FNC stands at 50 percent, to include both directly elected and appointed members.

Political Parties and Political Participation: Citizens did not have the right to form political parties, which are prohibited by law.

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: No laws limit participation of women or members of minority groups in the political process, although cultural practices and norms discouraged women from engaging in political life. The government prioritized women's participation in government. There were nine female ministers in the 31-member cabinet and 20 women in the FNC (seven elected).

Except in the judiciary and military, members of non-Muslim and racial minority groups did not serve in senior federal positions. Many judges were contracted foreign nationals.

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for official corruption, and the government generally implemented the law effectively. There were isolated reports of government corruption.

Nepotism and conflict of interest in government appointments and contract allocations existed. The Ministries of Interior and Justice and the state audit

institutions are responsible for combating government corruption.

Corruption: In February the Abu Dhabi Criminal Court sentenced two former senior executives of a government-owned company to 15 years in prison for money laundering. According to the report, the unnamed CEO and former chairman of the board of the unnamed Abu Dhabi company were also ordered to return AED eight billion (\$2.2 billion) in misappropriated funds.

In May the president of the Supreme Audit Institution and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime signed an agreement to implement a three-year program to strengthen the anticorruption role of supreme audit institutions and enhance cooperation between them and anticorruption bodies.

In August the president issued an accountability and transparency law on questioning ministers and senior officials. The law gives the attorney general the power to investigate officials, issue travel bans, and freeze officials' assets. Officials can be removed from their job for administrative or financial misdeeds. The law also includes provisions to hold officials accountable after resignation or removal from their position. The public prosecutor's office is the designated body to receive complaints against senior officials and has the power to refer them for investigation in coordination with the cabinet.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

The government generally did not permit domestic or international organizations to focus on domestic political or human rights issues.

The government directed, regulated, and subsidized participation by all NGO members in events outside the country. All participants were required to obtain government permission before attending such events. The government also restricted entry to the country by members of international NGOs. There were no transparent standards governing visits from international NGO representatives. The antidiscrimination law, which prohibits multiple forms of discrimination and criminalizes acts or expression the government interprets as provoking religious

hatred or insulting religion, was used as a legal basis for restricting events such as conferences and seminars. The law also criminalizes the broadcasting, publication, and transmission of such material by any means, including audiovisual or print media, or via the internet, and prohibits conferences or meetings the government deems promote discrimination, discord, or hatred.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The National Human Rights Committee acts as the main liaison between human rights bodies in the country and supervises the implementation of a comprehensive national human rights plan. In December 2020 the committee launched the first stage of the consultative process for developing the *National Human Rights Action Plan*, covering matters such as women's empowerment, humanitarian aid, interfaith acceptance and tolerance, labor rights, and workers' welfare. That same month the government approved the formation of the National Human Rights Authority to advance the country's efforts to protect human rights and safeguard the rights of women, children, workers, older persons, persons with disabilities, and the vulnerable, on the regional and international level. In August the country established the National Human Rights Institution, which aims to "promote and protect" human rights and "fundamental freedoms" in accordance with the constitution, federal laws and legislation, and relevant international conventions; in December the government announced the appointment of its secretary general and 12-member board of trustees.

Two recognized local human rights organizations existed: the quasi-governmental Emirates Human Rights Association (EHRA), which focused on human rights problems and complaints on matters such as labor conditions, stateless persons' rights, and prisoners' well-being and treatment; and the Emirates Center for Human Rights Studies, which focused on human rights education for lawyers and legal consultants. The EHRA claimed it operated independently without government interference, apart from requirements that apply to all associations in the country, although several EHRA members worked in the government, and the organization received government funding.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes rape, which is defined as coerced sexual intercourse with a woman or sodomy with a man. Rape is punishable by death under the penal code. Changes to the penal code announced in November made rape of women generally punishable by life imprisonment but still punishable by death in certain cases. The penal code does not prohibit spousal rape. In sharia courts, which are primarily responsible for civil matters between Muslims, the extremely high burden of proof for a rape case contributed to a low conviction rate. There were reports employers raped or sexually assaulted foreign domestic workers. The government rarely prosecuted these cases, and those that did led to few convictions.

In November 2020 the government decriminalized consensual extramarital sex. Changes to the penal code announced in November, however, stipulated that consensual extramarital sex is punishable by six months' imprisonment if a complaint is filed by a husband or guardian of either of the parties. Updates to the penal code also criminalized indecent assault by coercion, threat, or deceit, and cover instances where the victim is incapable of providing consent due to mental incapacity. Sexual relations with a person younger than the age of consent, 14 years old, is punishable as indecent assault. Changes to the penal code announced in November raised the age of consent to 18. If the perpetrator is related to the victim, responsible for their upbringing or care, or has authority over them, the punishment may be up to life imprisonment.

In February the Ras al-Khaimah Criminal Court of Appeal upheld the life sentence of two Gulf nationals convicted of kidnapping and raping an unidentified person described only as "a youth." Also in February the Abu Dhabi Criminal Court sentenced three male nationals of a Gulf country to life imprisonment on charges including attempted rape. In April the Dubai Court of Appeals upheld a life sentence against an Indian salesman for raping a housewife inside her home and threatening her with a knife.

The penal code outlaws multiple forms of domestic abuse, including mental,

sexual, and financial abuse. Public prosecutors may issue protective orders for victims, and abusers may be subject to prison or monetary fines. In June a criminal court in Dubai sentenced a man to life in prison for killing his wife.

Victims of domestic abuse may file complaints with police units stationed in major public hospitals. Social workers and counselors, usually female, also maintained offices in public hospitals and police stations. There are domestic abuse centers in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Ras al-Khaimah, and Sharjah.

While the government has not yet fully implemented the Family Protection Policy, adopted in 2019, it did coordinate with social organizations to increase awareness of domestic violence, conduct seminars, educational programs, symposiums, and conferences. The Dubai Foundation for Women and Children sought to increase awareness of domestic violence through social media, television, radio programming, and advertising; by hosting workshops; and by sponsoring a hotline. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Foundation, which operated a shelter, also launched a project with the L'Oreal Fund for Women to construct a medical screening and quarantine facility for domestic abuse survivors. The Aman Shelter for Women and Children in Ras al-Khaimah also maintains a hotline for domestic abuse survivors.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): The law does not prohibit FGM/C, and although the Ministry of Health prohibits hospitals and clinics from performing the procedure, private clinics and ritual/traditional circumcisers continued to carry it out. The type of FGM/C most prevalent in the country was performed during infancy and childhood. FGM/C was practiced by some tribal groups and was reportedly declining as a traditional custom, although little information was available. Foreign residents from countries where FGM/C is prevalent undertook the practice.

Other Harmful Traditional Practices: In November 2020 the government repealed an article in the penal code allowing men to receive lighter sentences for killing a female relative found in the act of extramarital sex. The country employs judicial supervision for individuals considered at risk from relatives threatening to commit honor crimes against or otherwise harming them. Judicial supervision typically included providing housing to individuals for their safety and well-being

and family mediation and reconciliation.

Sexual Harassment: The government has prosecuted sexual harassment. The legal definition of sexual harassment includes repetitive harassment through action, words, or signs, and acknowledges that men can be victims of sexual harassment. The penal code stipulates punishment by a prison term of at least one year, a fine of 100,000 AED (\$27,250), or both. If a criminal judgement is rendered against a foreigner, it is to include a prison term followed by deportation.

Conviction of “disgracing or dishonoring” a person in public is punishable by a minimum of one year and up to 15 years in prison if the victim is younger than age 14. Conviction for “infamous” acts against the rules of decency is punishable by a penalty of six months in prison, and “dishonoring a woman by word or deed on a public roadway” is also a punishable offense. The government generally enforced this law.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

According to changes to the penal code announced in November, pregnancy outside marriage is punishable by two years’ imprisonment unless the parents marry or one or both acknowledge the child and obtain identification papers and travel documents in accordance with the laws of the country of which either parent is a national. Unmarried noncitizen women who become pregnant have faced difficulties registering births and obtaining identity documents for children, complicating the ability for such children to remain in the country.

While reproductive health care is available, it was more challenging to access for unmarried and noncitizen women, who represented a significant majority of the female population. Additionally, there were restrictions to health-care access based on health insurance. Although the government provides free health care to citizens, including access to contraception, obstetric and gynecologic services, prenatal care, and delivery care to married female citizens, insurance plans for unskilled laborers often did not offer prenatal or postnatal care, and the government did not provide free postnatal care for noncitizen pregnant women. Foreign residents with no health insurance benefits may use public hospitals for a

fee and sometimes relied on charity to cover these costs. Access to limited pharmacological contraception options was available only through medical prescription. Oral contraceptive prescriptions are legal for single women as treatment for menstrual issues. Most health insurance plans did not cover insertion and removal of intrauterine devices and contraceptive implants.

Abortion is generally illegal. It is permitted only when the pregnancy endangers the woman's life, or when there is evidence that the baby will be born with deformities and will not survive.

There were no reports that virginity tests were practiced in the country. Hospitals must report rape cases to police, and rape victims were usually provided with medical care. Emergency contraception was reportedly available with a doctor's prescription and in some cases required spousal consent.

Discrimination: Women in general faced legal and economic discrimination, with noncitizen women at a particular disadvantage. In November Abu Dhabi passed a new personal status law for non-Muslims related to marriage, divorce, custody of children, and inheritance that would limit discrimination against non-Muslim women.

The government's interpretation of sharia applies in personal status cases and family law. Muslim women must have the consent of their guardians to marry. Local interpretation of sharia prohibits Muslim women from marrying non-Muslims and Muslim men from marrying women "not of the book," generally meaning adherents of religions other than Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. In addition, the law permits a man to have as many as four wives. Non-Muslim women normally inherit less than men, and a son's inheritance may be double that of a daughter under sharia law. The reforms announced in November in Abu Dhabi would entitle non-Muslim women to larger inheritances than previously. Legal reforms in 2019 allow women to apply for a passport without the written consent of her husband. In 2019 the government began allowing women to be head of household.

To obtain a divorce with a financial settlement, a woman must prove her husband inflicted physical or moral harm upon her, abandoned her for at least three months,

or did not provide for her or their children's upkeep. Physical abuse claims require medical reports and two male witnesses. It is up to the judge's discretion to consider women as full witnesses or half witnesses. Alternatively, women may divorce by paying compensation or surrendering their dowry to their husbands. In April, Sharjah passed a decree providing female citizens additional protections against eviction from their marital home in cases of divorce. According to the decree, a divorced citizen woman cannot be evicted if the home was given as government aid or if she has children.

The strict interpretation of sharia does not apply to child custody cases, and courts applied the "the best interests of the child" standard. According to federal law, a divorced woman may lose custody of her children to their father once daughters reach age 13 and sons age 11. Women are permitted to file for continued custody until a daughter is married or a son finishes his education. Under federal law, fathers are permitted to seek custody of a son younger than age 11 if they believe the child has become "too soft." The new family law for non-Muslims in Abu Dhabi, issued in November, grants parents joint custody, unless a parent waives their right or submits a request to deny the other parent custody on grounds of "ineligibility," potential danger to the child, or failure to perform parental duties.

In March a criminal case against a resident who gave birth out of wedlock in 2020 was dismissed on the grounds that the decriminalization of consensual premarital sex rendered the act "unpunishable." The legal reforms did not address the civil status of births out of wedlock, however, and many residents were not able to register their children without a marriage certificate.

Despite these changes to federal laws, local laws may still penalize adultery or consensual premarital sex. In August the Supreme Federal Court rejected the appeal of a woman from Sharjah accused of consensual premarital sex, finding that local laws remained applicable despite the absence of a federal penalty.

While the law mandates equal access to education for all, federal law prohibits coeducation in public universities, except in the United Arab Emirates University's executive MBA program and in certain graduate programs at Zayed University. Many private schools, private universities, and institutions, however, were coeducational. According to officials, local women represented more than 70

percent of national higher education students.

The government excluded women from certain social and economic benefits, including land grants for building houses, because tribal family law often designates men as the heads of families.

The government has a Gender Balance Council to promote a greater role for female citizens, but not noncitizens, working outside the home. In 2020 the president issued a law stipulating equal wages for women and men in the private sector.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

Racial discrimination is illegal, but the government did not effectively enforce these protections and discrimination remains common in areas such as employment. In September the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor and ImpACT International for Human Rights Policies accused the government of arresting individuals based on their race and national origin and deporting them without charge. Job postings may list ethnic preferences, and the government has taken no action to mitigate such discrimination in the workplace.

Children

Birth Registration: Children generally derive citizenship from their parents. The children of citizen mothers married to foreigners do not receive citizenship automatically. The government registered noncitizen births, including of Bidoon. Despite recent legal reforms, women reportedly faced difficulty registering births, and thus obtaining residency and travel documents for their children, without a marriage certificate, or if they were unable to pay hospital debts.

Education: Education is compulsory through the 12th grade or until the age of 18, whichever occurs first; however, the law was not enforced, and some children did not attend school, especially children of noncitizens. The government provided free primary education only to citizens. Noncitizen children could enroll in public schools only if they scored more than 90 percent on entrance examinations, which authorities administered in Arabic, and if one of the parents worked in a government entity, among other criteria. In 2018 the Ministry of Education made

all public schools coeducational from the first to fifth grades, starting with that year's first-grade class.

Child Abuse: The law prohibits child abuse, and the government took steps to increase awareness of the issue, including the Child Safety Campaign, which reinforced the role of media in protecting the rights of children. In March the Fujairah Appeals Court fined an Emirati man AED 1,100 (\$300) for assaulting and injuring his 11-year-old son, as confirmed in two videos by the victim's mother. In August the Dubai police announced they had handled 103 child abuse cases, including 17 instances of children deprived of identity documents and 14 of their education rights, thus far in the year.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The legal age of marriage for both men and women is 18, unless a judge gives approval for an earlier marriage.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law criminalizes the sexual exploitation of children, with a minimum penalty for conviction of 10 years in prison. The penalty for conviction of sex with children younger than 14 is life imprisonment. Distribution and consumption of child pornography is illegal.

International Child Abductions: The country is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State's *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

Anti-Semitism

There is no indigenous Jewish community. There were no synagogues, but Abu Dhabi was constructing the country's first purpose-built synagogue as part of the larger government-sponsored Abrahamic Family House, scheduled to open in 2022. The small foreign Jewish population conducted regular and holiday prayer services in rented space. In February the Jewish community living in the country formally incorporated the Association of Gulf Jewish Communities, the country's first Jewish court of law, to adjudicate personal disputes. Dubai's Jewish community was able to obtain its first official license from the CDA under the name "Gates of the East," conferring among other privileges the ability to seek

religious worker visas. Anti-Semitic remarks decreased on social media, and government officials demonstrated inclusivity by broadcasting greetings on Jewish holidays through social media and highlighting the normalization of UAE-Israel relations under the Abraham Accords to promote interfaith understanding and combat anti-Semitism.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities in employment, education, air travel and other transportation, access to health care, or the provision of other state services. The government enforces the law, and children with disabilities are integrated into the school system. Most public buildings provided some form of access for persons with disabilities.

Public and private facilities provided education, health services, sports, and vocational rehabilitation for persons with disabilities. Many of the facilities were reserved for citizens.

The Ministry of Community Development is the central body responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities and raising awareness at the federal and local level. In September 2020 the ministry launched the first guide for the employment of persons with disabilities. The guide incorporated sign language interpretation technology through a virtual 3D cartoon character. The government continued to raise public awareness of societal inclusivity through its National Strategy for Empowering People with Special Needs.

In September 2020 Abu Dhabi launched a five-year strategy, involving six government organizations and 30 initiatives, to increase integration, empowerment, access, and opportunities for persons with disabilities in the emirate.

In April the cabinet adopted the *National Autism Policy* to improve the health and well-being of persons with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and to support

caregivers. The policy focuses on improving service delivery and upgrading the skills of personnel working in ASD centers operated by the Ministry of Community Development.

On October 1, the government opened the six-month Expo 2020 Dubai with the stated aim for it “to be one of the most accessible Expos in history.” Organizers implemented various measures to meet this goal, including hearing induction loops, service-dog relief areas, and the creation of specifically designed applications to assist persons with disabilities in navigating the event. The site is wheelchair accessible, and organizers worked with international consultants to incorporate accessibility into building designs. Expo 2020 Dubai received international accreditation as a “Sensory Accessible Event” from the International Board of Sensory Accessibility due to its incorporation of quiet rooms, tactile maps, audio output, and braille. On December 3, organizers celebrated the International Day of Persons with Disabilities with programming by international participants across the site, including an event hosted by the Ministry of Community Development in partnership with the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs addressing such topics as inclusive accessibility and education

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

Noncitizens and, to a lesser extent, citizens with HIV/AIDS faced discrimination. Legal protections against employment and education discrimination for individuals with HIV/AIDS, as well as free access to HIV treatment and care programs, existed for citizens; however, noncitizens did not have these rights. The government does not grant residency or work visas to persons with certain communicable diseases including HIV/AIDS. Noncitizens who test positive for these diseases may be detained and deported. Doctors are required to inform authorities of HIV/AIDS cases, reportedly discouraging individuals from seeking testing or treatment.

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Both civil law and sharia criminalize consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults. Under sharia individuals who engage in consensual same-sex sexual

conduct could be subject to the death penalty. Dubai's penal code allows for up to a 10-year prison sentence for conviction of such activity, while Abu Dhabi's penal code allows for up to a 14-year prison sentence. There were no known reports of arrests or prosecutions for consensual same-sex conduct.

The law does not extend antidiscrimination protections to LGBTQI+ individuals on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics. There were no government efforts to address potential discrimination.

In November 2020 the penal code dropped a clause criminalizing wearing clothing deemed inappropriate for one's sex. The law now criminalizes only men who enter a place designated for women while disguised as a woman. The punishment for this infraction is up to one year in jail and a fine of up to AED 100,000 (\$27,250).

The law permits doctors to conduct sex reassignment surgery when there are "psychological" and "physiological" signs of gender and sex disparity. The penalty for performing an unwarranted "sex correction" surgery is three to 10 years in prison.

Due to social conventions and potential repression, LGBTQI+ organizations did not operate openly, nor were gay pride marches or gay rights advocacy events held.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law neither provides for the right to organize, strike, or bargain collectively nor permits workers to form or join unions. The labor law forbids strikes by public-sector employees, security guards, and migrant workers. The law does not entirely prohibit strikes in the private sector but allows an employer to suspend an employee for striking. The government generally enforced labor laws, but penalties were not commensurate with those for other laws involving denials of civil rights, such as discrimination.

In the private sector, the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization must

approve and register individual employment contracts. The labor law does not apply to public-sector employees, agricultural workers, or most workers in export-processing zones. Domestic workers fall under a separate labor law but are regulated by the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization. Persons with a claim to refugee status but who lacked legal residency status, including those with either short-term visitor visas or expired visas, were generally not eligible for employment.

Private-sector employees may file collective employment dispute complaints with the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization, which by law acts as mediator between the parties. Employees may then file unresolved disputes within the labor court system, which forwards disputes to a conciliation council. Public-sector employees may file an administrative grievance or a case in a civil court to address a labor-related dispute or complaint. Administrative remedies are available for labor complaints, and authorities commonly applied them to resolve issues such as delayed wage payments, unpaid overtime, or substandard housing.

All foreign workers have the right to file labor-related grievances with the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization. Reports on the length of administrative procedures varied, with workers citing both speedy and delayed processes. The ministry sometimes intervened in foreign workers' disputes with employers and helped negotiate private settlements. The law allows employers to request the government to cancel the work permit of, and deport for up to one year, any foreign worker on a work-sponsored residency visa for unexcused absences of more than seven consecutive days or for participating in a strike. The law prohibits unauthorized demonstrations or the expression of opinions deemed "false, or hurtful to the country's public image." Changes to the penal code announced in November mandated deportation of noncitizen workers inciting or participating in a strike. In June Abu Dhabi set up a fast-track court to handle labor disputes and cases concerning unpaid wages for claims of less than AED 500,000 (\$136,000). Plaintiffs must register their cases with the Abu Dhabi Judicial Department, and the courts are obligated to hear cases and issue rulings within 15 days. Rulings on claims less than AED 50,000 (\$13,600) may not be appealed.

Abu Dhabi police directed private security personnel at several camps for laborers to surveil gatherings of laborers and report if they discussed security, social, and

religious-related concerns.

Professional associations were not independent, and authorities had broad powers to interfere in their activities. For example, the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization had to license and approve professional associations, which were required to receive government approval for international affiliations and travel by members. The government granted some professional associations with majority citizen membership a limited ability to raise work-related matters, petition the government for redress, and file grievances with the government.

Foreign workers may belong to local professional associations; however, they do not have voting rights and may not serve on association boards. Apart from these professional associations, in a few instances some foreign workers came together to negotiate with their employers on issues such as housing conditions, nonpayment of wages, and working conditions.

The threat of deportation discouraged noncitizens from expressing work-related grievances. Nonetheless, occasional protests and strikes took place. The government did not always punish workers for nonviolent protests or strikes, but it dispersed such protests and sometimes deported noncitizen participants. Following the mandatory closure of many businesses in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government gave employers the ability to reduce wages or place workers on unpaid leave with the workers' consent. There were instances of employers exploiting these changes illegally to reduce salaries or furlough workers without their consent.

In Dubai the CDA regulates and provides licensing services to nonprofit civil society organizations and associations that organize ongoing social, cultural, artistic, or entertainment activities. All voluntary organizations and individual volunteers are required to register with the CDA within six months. In addition, all voluntary activities require a CDA permit, but there are no prescribed penalties for noncompliance.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits and criminalizes all forms of forced or compulsory labor, but the government did not effectively enforce the law, particularly in the domestic-worker

sector. Penalties were not commensurate with those for analogous serious crimes, such as kidnapping.

The government took steps to prevent forced labor through continued implementation of the Wages Protection System (WPS) (see section 7.e.). In April the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization increased the penalty for private-sector companies that do not pay salaries on time. Upon recruiting a new employee, the employer has the option either to submit a bank guarantee on behalf of the employee or to insure them for two years. In case of a company's bankruptcy or failure to pay benefits, employees receive insurance coverage of end-of-service benefits, vacation allowance, overtime allowance, unpaid wages, return air tickets, and compensation for any work injuries certified by a court ruling. Some employers subjected migrant domestic workers, and to a lesser degree construction and other manual labor workers, to conditions indicative of forced labor. Contract substitution remained a problem. Workers experienced nonpayment of wages, unpaid overtime, failure to grant legally required time off, withholding of passports, threats, and in some cases psychological, physical, or sexual abuse.

Contrary to the law, employers routinely withheld employees' passports, thus restricting their freedom of movement and ability to leave the country or change jobs. There were media reports that employees were coerced to surrender their passports for "safekeeping" and sign documentation that the surrender was voluntary. In most cases individuals reported they were able to obtain their travel documents without difficulty when needed, but this was not always the case. With domestic workers, passport withholding frequently occurred, and enforcement against this practice was weak. In labor camps it was common practice for passports to be kept in a central secure location, accessible with 24 to 48 hours' notice. In June a group of Indian migrant workers became stranded without jobs after they were reportedly duped by an agent who confiscated their passports.

Some employers forced migrant workers in the domestic and agricultural sectors to compensate them for hiring expenses such as visa fees, health exams, and insurance, which the law requires employers to pay, by withholding wages or having these costs deducted from their contracted salary. Some employers did not pay their employees contracted wages even after they satisfied these "debts."

There were reports from community leaders that employers refused to apply for a residency visa for their domestic workers, rendering them undocumented and thus more vulnerable to exploitative labor practices.

Although charging workers recruitment fees was illegal, workers in both the corporate and domestic sectors often borrowed money to pay recruiting fees in their home countries, and as a result they spent most of their salaries trying to repay home-country labor recruiters or lenders. These debts limited workers' options to leave a job, sometimes trapped them in exploitive work conditions, and increased their vulnerability to labor trafficking through debt-based coercion. The Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization oversees recruitment of domestic workers through one-stop Tadbeer Centers at which recruitment agencies register their services, workers undergo interviews and receive training, and visas and identification documents are distributed.

Also see the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits and criminalizes all the worst forms of child labor, but penalties were not commensurate with those for analogous serious crimes, such as kidnapping. The law prohibits employment of persons younger than 15 and includes special provisions regarding children ages 15 to 18. Under the labor law, teenagers are not allowed to work at night in industrial enterprises, be hired to do hazardous or strenuous jobs, or work overtime or on holidays. The law excludes agricultural work, leaving underage workers in these sectors unprotected. Under the law governing domestic workers, 18 is the minimum age for legal work. The Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization is responsible for enforcing the regulations and generally did so effectively.

In September the government announced a juvenile work permit, issued by the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization, allowing individuals aged 15 to 18 to apply for a part-time permit provided they receive approval from their parents, hold valid residency, and continue their education. The permit allows youth to work six hours a day, with a one-hour break, for up to six months, or for a

few hours during a year. A training permit allows those older than 12 to work in the private sector as summer hires.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

In November the government announced a new labor law that specifically prohibits discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion, nationality, ethnicity, or disability. The government also reformed laws that prohibited women from working during certain hours, or in certain occupations, eliminating legal restrictions. A national decree introduced new rules to the labor laws to promote equal opportunities and access to the labor market, prohibit discrimination based on gender in the workplace, and repeal articles prohibiting women from working during the hours of 10 p.m. to 7 a.m. and in hazardous, strenuous, or physically harmful jobs. The decree prohibits discrimination in jobs with the same functions and prohibits an employer from discriminating against or terminating an employee based on pregnancy. In 2020 the UAE offered paid parental leave, granting private-sector employees five days and public-sector employees three days of parental leave.

Various departments within the Ministries of Human Resources and Emiratization, Education, and Community Development are responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, and the government enforced these rights in employment, housing, and entitlement programs. Enforcement was effective for jobs in the public sector, and the government made efforts to encourage private-sector hiring of persons with disabilities. Some emirates and the federal government included statements in their human resources regulations emphasizing priority for hiring citizens with disabilities in the public sector and actively encouraged the hiring of all persons with disabilities.

A presidential decree grants women equal pay for “work of equal value” in the private sector. Work of “equal value” is to be determined by rules and regulations approved by the cabinet based on recommendations from the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization. Women who worked in the private sector, and especially nonnationals, however, regularly did not receive equal benefits and reportedly faced discrimination in promotions and equality of wages. The domestic worker law also prohibits discrimination based on race, color, gender,

religion, political opinion, national, or social origin. Nevertheless, job advertisements requesting applications only from certain nationalities were common and not regulated. In free-trade zones individualized laws govern employment requirements.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wage and Hour Laws: There is no national minimum wage. The government announced in November, however, that a new labor law would set a minimum wage for employees in the private sector to be determined by the cabinet. There was very limited information on average domestic, agricultural, or construction worker salaries or on public-sector salaries. In some sectors minimum wages were determined by workers' nationality and years of experience. The law prescribes a 48-hour workweek and paid annual holidays. The law states daily working hours must not exceed eight hours in day or night shifts and provides for overtime pay to employees working more than eight hours in a 24-hour period, apart from those employed in trade, hotels, cafeterias, security, domestic work, and other jobs as decided by the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization.

The government took action, including site visits, to address wage payment issues. Its implementation of the WPS and fines for noncompliance discouraged employers from withholding salaries to foreign workers under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization. The WPS requires private institutions employing more than 100 employees to pay workers electronically via approved banks, exchange bureaus, and other financial institutions, to assure timely and full payment of agreed wages and overtime within 10 days of payment due date. After 16 days of nonpayment, an employer becomes ineligible for new work permits from the ministry. If the nonpayment persists past 29 days, the ministry refers the case to the labor courts; after 60 days, the employer faces a fine for each unpaid worker. For companies employing fewer than 100 employees, the freezes, fines, and court referrals apply only after 60 days of nonpayment. The government enforced fines for employers who entered incorrect information into the WPS or made workers sign documents falsely attesting to receipt of benefits. Media and diplomatic sources continued to report that some companies retained foreign workers' bank cards or accompanied them to withdraw cash, coercively shortchanging the employees even though the WPS showed the proper amount

paid. Such cases were difficult to prove in labor courts. The WPS payment requirement did not apply to foreign workers under the authority of the Ministry of Interior, such as agricultural workers, or to domestic laborers.

In July a judge from a Dubai labor court affirmed that under the federal labor law there is no minimum wage, noting that the law stipulates that “both parties who sign a work contract can agree to include a specified salary to the contract.” He added that certain jobs related to private security under the supervision of the Dubai police do have a monthly minimum wage. According to TAMM, an online government services platform, Tadbeer Centers charged higher recruitment and sponsorship transfer fees for domestic workers of certain nationalities, including those from Indonesia and the Philippines.

Occupational Safety and Health: Occupational safety and health standards were appropriate for the main industries in the country, such as construction. Penalties for violations of occupational safety and health laws were commensurate with those for crimes like negligence. Responsibility for identifying unsafe situations remains with occupational safety and health experts and not the worker. The Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization was responsible for enforcing laws governing acceptable conditions of work for workers in professional and semiskilled job categories but did not do so in all sectors, including the informal sector. To monitor the private sector, the ministry had active departments for inspection, occupational safety, and wage protection. Workplace inspection is permissible but not required under the law.

Government occupational health and safety standards require that employers provide employees with a safe work and living environment, including minimum rest periods and limits on the number of hours worked, depending on the nature of the work. For example, the law mandates a two-and-one-half-hour midday work break between June 15 and September 15 for laborers who work in exposed open areas, such as construction sites. Companies are required to make water, vitamins, supplements, and shelter available to all outdoor workers during the summer months to meet health and safety requirements. Employers who do not comply are subject to fines and suspension of operations. The government may exempt companies from the midday work break if the company cannot postpone the project for emergency or technical reasons. Such projects included laying asphalt

or concrete and repairing damaged water pipes, gas lines, or electrical lines. Employers with 50 or more employees must provide low-salaried workers with accommodations.

The Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization conducted inspections of labor camps and workplaces such as construction sites, routinely fined employers for violating the midday break rule, and published compliance statistics. The penalties were not commensurate with those for crimes like fraud, which carried larger fines and imprisonment. The ministry stated that it issued written documentation on health and safety problems needing correction and reviewed them in subsequent inspections. Nevertheless, some low-wage foreign workers faced substandard living conditions, including overcrowded apartments or unsafe and unhygienic lodging in labor camps. In some cases the ministry cancelled hiring permits for companies that failed to provide adequate housing.

During some inspections of labor camps, the ministry employed interpreters to assist foreign workers in understanding employment guidelines. The ministry operated a toll-free hotline in several languages spoken by foreign residents through which workers were able to report delayed wage payments or other abuses. The ministry's mobile van units visited some labor camps to inform workers of their rights. The Abu Dhabi Judicial Department and Dubai courts also employed buses as mobile courts, which traveled to labor camps to allow workers to register legal complaints. Abu Dhabi's mobile courtroom was used for cases involving large groups or those who encountered difficulties attending court.

Emirate-level officials across the country developed programs aimed at verifying the protection of workers' rights, security, and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Abu Dhabi workers residing in labor camps and industrial cities received free COVID-19 testing. Quarantine facilities and free health care were provided to those who tested positive. The Dubai Municipality and the Dubai Health Authority instituted regulations, including thermal screening and capacity limitations on shared transportation to and from work sites, to limit the spread of COVID-19 within labor camps, and engaged in a systematic inspection campaign to verify compliance.

The government-supported NGO EHRA promoted worker rights. It conducted

unannounced visits to labor camps and work sites to monitor conditions and reported problems to the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization.

There were cases in which workers were injured or killed on job sites; however, authorities typically did not disclose details of workplace injuries and deaths or discuss the adequacy of safety measures despite a Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization requirement that companies with more than 15 employees submit labor injuries reports. A government resolution requires private companies that employ more than 500 workers to hire at least one citizen as an occupational health and safety officer; companies with more than 1,000 employees must hire two such officers. In addition, Dubai required construction companies and industrial firms to appoint safety officers accredited by authorized entities to promote greater site safety. In August the Abu Dhabi Court of Appeal ordered a company to compensate a worker after he fell into a ditch during work, sustaining multiple injuries. Reports of vehicle-accident deaths of delivery workers in Dubai highlighted the lack of protections for migrant laborers, who have been in particular demand due to the pandemic.

There were no reports of migrant worker suicides and limited stories of attempted suicides, which observers linked attributed to personal problems possibly linked to problems in the workplace. Dubai police and the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children, a quasi-governmental organization, conducted training programs aimed at decreasing suicidal behavior.

Sailors faced particular difficulty remedying grievances against employers. Although ship owners operating in the country's ports must carry insurance contracts covering repatriation of noncitizen employees, owners often declared bankruptcy but refused to sell their ships, leaving their crews aboard under substandard conditions without pay or regular resupply. In January media reports called attention to the five-man crew of the MT Iba, a merchant tanker that ran aground after anchoring offshore for several years due to its owner's financial problems. The crew survived on limited food rations until the ship was sold in March, whereupon they received 80 percent of the salaries they had been owed for more than two years.

To provide for the continuity of ship crews complicated by COVID-19, in August

the Federal Transport Authority permitted crew changes in all ports across the country. Previously, crew changes were possible only in Dubai. The decision sought to relieve crews whose time aboard exceeded the limits delineated under maritime conventions.

Informal Sector: There was no official information available on the informal economy, legal enforcement within this sector, or an estimate of its size; however, anecdotal reports indicated it was common for individuals to enter the country on a nonwork visa and join the informal job sector, subjecting them to exploitative conditions. The Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization requires that residents sponsoring a domestic worker meet an income standard sufficient to pay the employee a living wage. Workers in agriculture and other categories overseen by the Ministry of Interior come under a different regulatory regime. These workers are not covered by private- and public-sector labor law, but have some legal protections regarding working hours, overtime, timeliness of wage payments, paid leave, health care, and the provision of adequate housing. Enforcement of these rules was often weak, however. As a result, these workers were more vulnerable to substandard work conditions.

Domestic workers often faced unacceptable working conditions. Many such workers frequently worked seven days a week and more than 12 hours a day with few or no holidays, no overtime pay, and limited means to redress grievances. The law prohibits employers from withholding foreign workers' passports and penalizes employers who do so, but noncitizen community leaders and officials from labor-exporting countries stated that passport confiscation remained a widespread problem with insufficient enforcement of penalties. Despite partial exit-permit reform, domestic workers were required to obtain permission from employers to leave the country. Some employers denied domestic workers food or access to a telephone although such actions were illegal.

Despite a government-mandated contract for domestic workers spelling out requirements for working hours, time off, overtime, health care, and housing, some originating countries contended that they were unable to review and approve their citizens' labor contracts. As a result, some countries attempted to halt their citizens' travel to the UAE to assume domestic labor positions. In April the Philippines lifted its 2014 ban on domestic worker recruitment to the UAE after

agreeing with the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization on additional contract protections to provide domestic workers access to a personal mobile phone, private sleeping quarters, and a bank account in the worker's name for salary deposits. Liability for exploitation was extended to cover recruiters, and any contract extensions or transfers to other employers would need to be approved by the Philippine Embassy.

Although domestic worker salaries were not required to be paid via the WPS, the government continued a 2020 pilot program to incorporate domestic workers into the WPS through an agreement between the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization and First Abu Dhabi Bank. The National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking reported that the pilot program integrated 423 individuals during the year, a figure representing less than 1 percent of the estimated number of domestic workers nationally.

The government allowed foreign workers to switch jobs without a letter of permission from their employer. Labor regulations provide foreign employees the option to work without an employment contract or, in cases in which a contract was in force, to change employer sponsors after two years, as well as within the first two years within the terms of the contract. The government designed this regulation to improve job mobility and reduce the vulnerability of foreign workers to abuse. To mitigate against potential labor abuse under the employer-based sponsorship system known as *kafala*, domestic workers have the right to terminate their employment if an employer fails to meet contractual obligations or if the employee is subject to sexual harassment or physical or verbal abuse by the employer. Despite legal measures allowing workers to change sponsors or terminate their employment, regulatory enforcement remained a problem.