

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES 2020 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United Arab Emirates is a federation of seven semiautonomous emirates with a resident population of approximately 9.7 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 October 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).

Each emirate maintained a local police force called a general directorate, which was officially a branch of the federal Ministry of Interior. All emirate-level general directorates of police enforced their respective emirate's laws autonomously. They also enforced federal laws within their emirate in coordination with each other under the federal ministry. The federal government maintained federal armed forces under the Ministry of Defense for external security. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces. There were reports that security forces committed some abuses.

Significant human rights issues included: torture in detention; arbitrary arrest and detention, including incommunicado detention, by government agents; political prisoners; government interference with privacy rights; undue restrictions on free expression and the press, including criminalization of libel, censorship, and Internet site blocking; substantial interference with the rights of peaceful assembly and freedoms of expression and association; the inability of citizens to choose their government in free and fair elections; and criminalization of same-sex sexual activity, although no cases were publicly reported during the year. The government did not permit workers to freely associate, bargain collectively, or join

independent unions and did not effectively prevent physical and sexual abuse of foreign domestic servants and other migrant workers.

The government investigated, prosecuted, and punished officials who committed abuses. There were no public reports of impunity involving officials, but there was also no publicly available information on whether authorities investigated complaints of police abuses, including prison conditions and mistreatment.

The United Nations, human rights groups, and others reported that operations conducted by the country's military forces as part of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen killed civilians and damaged civilian infrastructure. Human rights groups alleged UAE-backed security forces in Yemen committed torture, sexual assault, and mistreatment against detainees. The government rejected allegations that members of its security forces serving in Yemen had committed human rights abuses. (See the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Yemen).

Human rights organizations and international media outlets alleged the country's military conducted drone and air strikes in support of Libyan National Army commander Khalifa Haftar's forces, resulting in more than 130 civilian casualties. The United Nations investigated the country's suspected involvement in operating a covert air bridge to supply weapons to General Haftar in contravention of the arms embargo established under UN Security Council Resolution 1970. There was no publicly available information on whether the government carried out any investigations into these reported incidents.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

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.

All emirate-level general directorates of police enforced their respective emirate's laws autonomously. They also enforced federal laws within their emirate in coordination with each other under the federal ministry.

The United Nations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and some Yemeni observers expressed concerns regarding Saudi-led coalition activities in Yemen, alleging some coalition air strikes were disproportionate or indiscriminate and

appeared not to sufficiently minimize impact on civilians. (See the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Yemen.)

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

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 of released prisoners and their family members, diplomatic observers, and human rights organizations, UN human rights experts believed that some individuals imprisoned for suspected state security and nonstate security violations were subjected to torture or mistreatment. Human rights groups alleged these abuses took place during interrogations and as inducement for signed confessions. UN human rights experts and those released from detention in recent years alleged that authorities used techniques including beatings, forced standing, and threats to rape or kill.

Sharia (Islamic) courts, which adjudicate criminal and family law cases, may impose flogging as punishment for adultery, prostitution, consensual premarital sex, pregnancy outside marriage, defamation of character, and drug or alcohol charges. In October the Federal Supreme Court upheld a sentence of 100 lashes in an adultery case involving an unmarried Muslim man and woman who confessed to having illicit sex before the prosecution in one of the northern emirates. The court stated, “Article 1 of the Penal Code under the provisions of Islamic Sharia law stipulates giving 100 lashes and expatriation or distancing for a period of one year to an unmarried person.” Although the pair challenged the ruling, both the appellate court and the Federal Supreme Court based in Abu Dhabi upheld the flogging sentence. The government announced a series of legal reforms in November modifying the penalties for some of these crimes but had not published text of the reforms by year’s end.

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 were instances 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 complained of 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 Western embassy representatives that they witnessed routine abuse of fellow prisoners, stating that prison guards claimed they were able to erase footage from security cameras.

In March human rights organizations reported on the attempted suicide of prisoner Amina al-Abdouli after she was reportedly subjected to mistreatment, denied adequate medical care, and placed in solitary confinement for approximately three weeks. Al-Abdouli said that new charges of spreading false information and harming the country's reputation were introduced after she shared information of her detention conditions with the United Nations.

According to Western embassy officials, overcrowding was at times a problem in prisons in Dubai and the northern emirates. In particular, prisoners awaiting transfer to Abu Dhabi for federal prosecution experienced longer stays in police holding cells equipped only for short-term incarceration. In May, to reduce population density in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Dubai Central Prison released inmates being held for minor offenses, reducing the prison population by approximately 35 percent. Prisons also implemented stringent COVID-19 prevention measures throughout the country. Dubai and other emirates implemented virtual court systems more widely, which allowed detainees and prisoners to participate in hearings and trials remotely and afforded continued access to the justice system through pandemic-related government office closures. In December 2019 the Ministry of Interior announced its system to allow electronic tagging devices as an alternative to imprisonment for convicts of minor crimes would be introduced in Sharjah, following successful implementation of the program in Abu Dhabi and Ras al-Khaimah. In February the Abu Dhabi Judicial Department announced that 302 convicts in Abu Dhabi had been fitted with electronic tagging devices since 2018.

Some prisoners were not permitted exercise or reading materials. There were reports some prisoners did not have access to outside areas and exposure to sunlight. According to human rights organizations, imprisoned activist Mohammed al-Mansoori was held in solitary confinement at al-Razeen prison in Abu Dhabi and denied visiting and contact rights for more than a year. In Abu Dhabi there were also 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 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. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), at least four HIV-positive prisoners in Dubai's al-Awir Central Jail were allegedly denied medication for periods as long as five months. There were reports of poor food handling and inadequate general hygiene in special detention facilities for drug offenders. Media reports and NGOs stated some detainees in State Security Department custody did not receive adequate access to medical care.

In April human rights organizations expressed their concern regarding the safety of prisoners after rumors emerged of an inmate at al-Wathba Prison testing positive for COVID-19. According to HRW, family members of inmates said prisoners had exhibited COVID-19 symptoms and that some inmates with chronic health conditions were being denied sufficient medical attention. Human rights organizations called on authorities to provide adequate medical care, health supplies, and sterilization to protect prisoners, prison staff, and visitors from COVID-19.

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 capabilities to accommodate prisoners with mental health disabilities were allegedly less well developed in the other emirates. It was reportedly 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 did not have access to visitors or

had more limited access than other prisoners. Although prisoners had a right to submit complaints to judicial authorities, details about investigations into complaints 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. According to UN experts, several prisoners, including Maryam al-Balooshi and Amina al-Abdouli, faced reprisals, including months in solitary confinement, and intimidation after testimonies of their detention and health situation were shared with the Special Procedures of the UN's Human Rights Council--independent human rights experts tasked with reporting and advising on human rights issues.

Dubai maintained a website where individuals could obtain basic information about pending legal cases, including formal charges and upcoming court dates. Western embassies reported a similar website in Abu Dhabi but said, in many instances, cases could not be located in the system or the site would not function. 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. In April the Dubai Police launched a remote visual communication service between inmates at the General Department of Punitive and Correctional Institutions in Dubai and their families inside and outside the country.

Within prisons the authorities required Muslims to attend weekly Islamic services, and non-Muslims reported some pressure to attend ostensibly nonmandatory lectures and classes about Islam. In some of the emirates, Christian clergy were not able to visit Christian prisoners.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted charitable NGOs to visit prisons and provide material support on a limited basis. In the past members of the government-sanctioned Emirates Human Rights Association (EHRA) met with prisoners during regular visits to detention facilities and reported their findings to federal Ministry of Interior officials. Their reports were not publicly available. Authorities did not grant 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 permits indefinite detention, including incommunicado detention, without appeal. 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.

In cases of foreign nationals detained by police, which in view of the country's demographic breakdown were the vast majority of cases, the government often did not notify the appropriate diplomatic officials. For state security detainees, notification was exceptionally rare, and information about the status of these detainees was very limited.

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.

According to HRW, during the year authorities continued to hold two activists who completed their sentences in 2017. Khalifa al-Rabea and Ahmad al-Mulla were charged with joining a secret organization. Both activists were allegedly affiliated with al-Islah, a Muslim Brotherhood affiliated organization, which is designated by the government as a terrorist organization. According to the Emirates Center for Human Rights, authorities continued to hold activist Mansoor al-Ahmadi past the completion of his seven-year prison sentence in October 2019. Al-Ahmadi, one of the signatories of a petition demanding political reforms, was arrested as part of the UAE 94, a mass trial of 94 political activists accused in 2012 of sedition and membership in a secret organization.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

Police stations received complaints from the public, made arrests, and forwarded cases to the public prosecutor. The public prosecutor then transferred cases to the courts. The law prohibits arrest or search of citizens without probable cause. Within 48 hours police must report an arrest to the public prosecutor, and police usually adhered to the deadline. The public prosecutor must then question the

accused within 24 hours of notification of arrest. Authorities did not consistently provide consular notification for arrests.

Police investigations can regularly take up to three months, during which time detainees are often publicly unaccounted. The law requires prosecutors to submit charges to a court within 14 days of police report and to inform detainees of the charges against them. Judges may grant extensions to prosecutors, sometimes resulting in extended periods of detention without formal charges. Multiple detainees complained that authorities did not inform them of the charges or other details of their case for months at a time. Noncitizen detainees reported that when the prosecutor presented the charges, they were written in Arabic with no translation, and no translator was provided. There were also reports of authorities pressuring or forcing detainees to sign documents before they were allowed to see attorneys.

Public prosecutors may order detainees held as long as 30 days without charge and this can be extended by court order. Judges may not grant an extension of more than 30 days of detention without charge; however, with charge, they may renew 30-day extensions indefinitely. As a result, pretrial detention sometimes exceeded the maximum sentence for the crime charged. 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 the legal framework for establishing rehabilitation centers called the *Munassaha* program, which aims to reform persons deemed to pose a terrorist threat or those convicted of terrorist offenses by using psychosocial attitude adjustment. The counterterrorism law stipulates that program administrators provide reports on the convicts' status every three months and that the public prosecution submit a final opinion on the outcome of rehabilitation to inform the court's decision on whether to release the individual. Diplomatic sources reported detentions of more than two years without charges for crimes not related to state security.

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, law enforcement 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 guilty of causing a death under criminal procedure, 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 September a Sharjah court awarded 200,000 dirhams (AED) (\$54,400) to the family of an Indian citizen who died after an adverse drug reaction while seeking care at a Sharjah medical clinic.

A defendant is entitled to an attorney after authorities complete their investigation. 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 provisional 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. The speed with which these cases were brought to trial increased, as it did in the previous year, with a higher 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 conferencing measures for litigation procedures. In December 2019 the Ministry of Interior announced the nationwide implementation of an electronic police surveillance system to track low-risk offenders as an alternative to pretrial detention and imprisonment, following earlier pilot programs in Abu Dhabi, Ras al-Khaimah, and Sharjah. There was no estimate available of the percentage of the prison population in pretrial status. In December 2018 the State Security Court at the Federal Supreme Court upheld a 10-year prison sentence and significant fine issued in May 2018 against citizen and human rights activist Ahmed Mansoor. Mansoor spent more than one year in pretrial detention leading to the initial verdict. Mansoor was convicted under the cybercrime law of insulting the "status and prestige of the UAE 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.

According to human rights organizations, Mansoor was held in solitary confinement without access to a mattress or other basic necessities or to lawyers and granted only a limited number of family visits. In December the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation refuted allegations of Mansoor's ill health and physical abuse. The ministry asserted the government had afforded Mansoor all legal and constitutional rights, as well as access to necessary medical care and regular visits from family members. Mansoor remained in prison at year's end.

Detainee's Ability to Challenge Lawfulness of Detention before a Court: There were reports authorities sometimes delayed or limited an individual's access to an attorney and did not give prompt court appearances or afford consular notification, both for the average prisoner and in state security cases. There were no reports of courts finding individuals to have been unlawfully detained and eligible for compensation. 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.

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.

The law presumes all defendants innocent until proven guilty. By law a defendant enjoys the right to be informed promptly and in detail of the charges. The law requires all court proceedings be conducted in Arabic. Despite the defendant's procedural right to an interpreter, there were reports authorities did not always provide an interpreter or that quality was sometimes poor. In October the Abu Dhabi Judicial Department announced that Russian would be an official language used in the Abu Dhabi court system, alongside Arabic, English, and Hindi.

Defendants' rights were circumscribed in national security cases or cases the judge deemed harmful to public morality. Defendants have the right to be present at their trials and have a right to legal counsel in court for cases that carry punishment other than a fine. While awaiting a decision on official charges at a police station or the prosecutor's office, a defendant is not entitled to legal counsel. In cases involving a capital crime or possible life imprisonment, the defendant has a right to government-provided counsel after charges have been filed. 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, and requested additional time. Diplomatic observers noted cases where the time defendants spent waiting for a court date surpassed the maximum sentence for the crime. 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. The appeals process consists of up to two stages: 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 murder 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, compensation 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 state security cases, the Federal Court of Appeals serves as a court of first instance. State security cases may be appealed to the higher 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 crimes may be granted bail and

allowed to remain in the country to defend themselves. In January an amendment to the penal code stated that immediate relatives of Emirati citizens may not be sentenced to deportation. Previously, a deportation order was mandatory in cases where an expatriate was convicted of a crime and sentenced by a court. The amendment does not apply to expatriates charged with a crime that endangers national security.

The penal code also requires all individuals to pay diya to victims' families in cases where accidents or crimes caused the death of another person, and media reported multiple cases of courts imposing this punishment. Diya was granted by the judge in criminal cases at the time of sentencing. In October the president issued a directive instructing that standard diya payments be set at 200,000 AED (\$54,400), regardless of gender, in criminal courts across the country. Previously, it was common practice for the families of female victims to receive only half of the 200,000 AED (\$54,400) given to families of deceased males. In some cases, sharia courts imposed more severe penalties during the month of Ramadan.

In May the Abu Dhabi Federal Court of Appeals sentenced 21-year-old Omani citizen Abdullah al-Shamsi to life in prison for conspiring against the UAE after he was detained for allegedly establishing a Qatari spy cell. Human rights organizations and Omani media outlets reported that al-Shamsi was allegedly subjected to incommunicado detention, prolonged solitary confinement, and torture. According to HRW, al-Shamsi's family said the trial was marred by lack of due process. Al-Shamsi was allegedly denied access to a lawyer during the investigation and was not informed of the charges or evidence against him until one month before his trial.

Women faced legal discrimination because of the government's interpretation of sharia (see section 6).

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 2019 the president issued a pardon for the former leader of al-Islah, Abdulrahman bin Subaih, accused of plotting to overthrow the government in 2013. Prior to his release, bin Subaih appeared on local television condemning al-Islah and Qatari attempts at utilizing the group to destabilize domestic politics. According to a May article from the Gulf Center for Human Rights, bin Subaih and three other activists pardoned at the same time, Osama al-Najjar, Osman al-Shehi, and Bader al-Bahri, remained under house arrest wearing an electronic monitoring bracelet and were not allowed to leave the country.

As part of its security and counterterrorism efforts, the government applied restrictive laws--such as the 2014 antiterrorism law and the 2012 cybercrime law--and monitored and blocked activities, including the use of the internet and social media. Numerous observers criticized these laws as extending beyond security concerns by also outlawing activities and speech of a political nature. According to HRW, government authorities targeted dozens of relatives of political prisoners detained in the country and dissidents living abroad, allegedly subjecting them to arbitrary punishment and harassment in reprisal for their relatives' activism.

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. Bin Ghaith was an economist, professor, and activist who was allegedly held incommunicado for one year and a half after being arrested for harming the reputation of the country in tweets that criticized UAE officials and the Egyptian government. Al-Roken and bin Ghaith were sentenced to 10 years in prison in 2013 and 2017, respectively.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Citizens and noncitizens had access to the courts to seek damages for, or cessation of, human rights violations. The civil courts, like all courts, lacked full independence. In some cases, courts delayed proceedings. In October 2019 the government issued an order identifying 28 minor crimes to be punished with fines instead of a court trial, a decision intended to speed up procedures and alleviate pressure on the legal system.

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, in some cases, 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. Some of those whom the government reportedly targeted in online surveillance campaigns, such as the human rights activist Ahmed Mansoor, were subsequently arrested and allegedly abused in detention (see also section 2.a., Internet Freedom).

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.

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.

g. Abuses in Internal Conflict

For information on the United Arab Emirate's involvement in the conflicts in Libya and Yemen previously found in this section, please see the executive summary and section 1.a. of this report and the Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for Libya and Yemen.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for the Press

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press. Nonetheless, the law prohibits criticism of national rulers and speech that may create or encourage social unrest. The government restricted freedom of speech and the press. The media 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 issues, they commonly practiced self-censorship.

Freedom of Speech: After the onset of widespread regional popular uprisings in 2011, authorities severely restricted 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. The material was considered a violation of privacy or personally insulting to acquaintances, colleagues, employers, or religions. In March, Dubai police arrested a man for allegedly publishing a video on social media that mocked the traditional dress of Emiratis. In April police arrested and detained a British woman in the Dubai airport under the cybercrime law for insulting Facebook comments she posted about her former husband’s new wife; she was given a small fine. In May, Dubai authorities arrested a TikTok social media app user for “insulting the national currency” and charged him under the cybercrime law after he shared a video of himself blowing his nose into a 500 AED (\$136) banknote. In the same month, authorities arrested a man for filming and posting a viral video of a dispute between a hotel worker and a woman after she refused to pay for valet parking service; the poster faced a possible six months in prison and a 500,000 dirham (\$136,000) fine for “violating the privacy of others” under the cybercrime law. Under the cybercrime law, individuals using any information technology for the invasion of privacy, including the act of capturing someone’s photograph without their consent, can be punished by imprisonment for a period of at least six months and a fine between 150,000 AED (\$40,800) and 500,000 AED (\$136,000).

Throughout the year authorities reminded residents that spreading rumors that affect security and incite public panic is an offense punishable by up to one year in prison. In April the cabinet announced that anyone found sharing or circulating false guidelines, fake news, or any misleading information on COVID-19 could be fined up to 20,000 AED (\$5,440).

After the government severed diplomatic ties with Qatar in 2017, the general prosecutor declared that showing any sympathy with Qatar or objecting to the government’s position against Qatar in written, visual, or verbal form would be

punishable by three to 15 years in prison or a minimum fine of 500,000 AED (\$136,000). These restrictions continued to apply to social media users in the country. The government continued to block Qatari-funded al-Jazeera's website and most Qatari broadcasting channels. During the year there were no confirmed arrests under the declaration.

Freedom of 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 most newspapers, television stations, and radio stations. Journalists reported the government maintained unpublished guidelines for acceptable media content. The government also influenced privately owned media through the National Media Council (NMC), which directly oversaw all media content. In July a government restructuring brought the NMC under the Ministry of Culture and Youth, and the state-run Emirates News Agency under the Ministry of Presidential Affairs. Satellite-receiving dishes were widespread and provided access to uncensored international broadcasts. NMC 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 NMC.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: By law the NMC, whose chair the president appoints, licenses and censors all publications, including private association publications. In practice, domestic and foreign publications were censored to remove 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, excessively violent, or derogatory to Islam. In January, Dubai's Criminal Court sentenced an Arab man to three months' imprisonment, a significant fine, and deportation for insulting God in messages sent to his wife. The law also criminalizes as blasphemy acts that provoke religious hatred or insult religious convictions through any form of expression, including broadcasting, printed media, or the internet. Government and private institutions must obtain a license before publishing or broadcasting media or advertising content, or face penalties. This 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 reportedly warned journalists when they 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 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.

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. In December the Abu Dhabi Court of Cassation levied a moderate fine against a man on defamation charges for insulting his former wife 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.

National Security: Authorities often cited the need to protect national security as the basis for laws that curb 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 speech.

Internet Freedom

The Ministry of Interior lists 10 types of social media activities considered illegal under the cybercrime law: defaming or disrespecting others; violating privacy; filming persons or places and posting these videos without permission; spreading fake 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.

Based on the cybercrime law, 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. Authorities stated they could imprison individuals for misusing the internet. Self-censorship was apparent on

social media, and there were reports the Ministry of Interior monitored internet use. 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 and employed foreign hackers in systematic campaigns to target activists and journalists.

The country's two internet service providers, both linked to the government, 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 pornographic websites and a wide variety of other sites deemed indecent, such as those dealing with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) issues; atheism; negative critiques of Islam; testimonies of former Muslims who converted to Christianity; gambling; promotion of illegal drug use; 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 country and other states in the region. The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority was responsible for creating lists of blocked sites with no oversight or transparency. Service providers did not have the authority to remove sites from blocked lists without government approval. The government also blocked most voice-over-internet-protocol (VoIP) applications and the use of VoIPs through virtual private networks. In 2017 the government blocked Skype and in 2018 reportedly blocked an online petition protesting that move. Voice and video functions on WhatsApp and VoIPs were also blocked from use in country or with telephone numbers registered in the country. Convictions for violations of using VoIPs under cybercrime laws can lead to significant fines, imprisonment, or both. In March the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority approved a set of VoIP applications in an effort to support teleworking and distance learning measures implemented as a result of COVID-19. The authority's statement noted that the applications were only temporarily available given the exceptional circumstances.

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, insults to Islam and God, illegal collections of donations, trafficking in persons, calling for or abetting the breach of laws, and the organization of demonstrations.

The law explicitly criminalizes use of the internet to commit a wide variety of offenses and provides fines and prison terms for internet users who violate

political, social, and religious norms. The law provides penalties for using the internet to oppose Islam; proselytize Muslims; abuse a holy shrine or ritual of any religion; insult any religion, belief, sect, race, color, or ethnic group; incite someone to commit sin; or contravene family values by publishing news or photographs pertaining to a person's private life or family.

The 2012 cybercrime decree and the 2015 antidiscrimination law provide for more severe penalties for violations, including sentences up to life imprisonment and fines depending on severity and seriousness of the crime. The penalties for violating the cybercrime law include a significant fine, while acts of discrimination carry a large fine or a minimum of five years' imprisonment. These laws add to existing online communication limitations on freedom of speech to include prohibitions on criticism or defamation of the government or its officials; insults based on religion, belief, sect, race, color, or ethnic origin; insults directed at neighboring countries; and calls for protests and demonstrations. In April the Federal Judiciary ordered the arrest and provisional detention of well known TV personality Tariq al-Mehyas for racist comments implying that Asian laborers were inferior to Arabs. In February, Dubai police reported it received 600 criminal tips through its social media accounts and took action in cases where social media users posted content showing them engaging in illegal activity, such as a case involving three men who shared a video on Snapchat in which they appeared to be smoking marijuana.

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. This was also required at private schools for events on campus. Some organizations found it difficult to secure meeting space for public events that dealt with contentious issues.

Cultural institutions avoided displaying artwork or programming that criticized the government or religion. Self-censorship among cultural and other institutions, especially for content presented to the public, was pervasive and generally directed at preventing the appearance of illegal works, including those deemed as promoting blasphemy or addressing controversial political issues.

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. The government imposed significant restrictions in practice.

The law requires a government-issued permit for organized public gatherings. Authorities dispersed impromptu protests such as labor strikes and at times arrested participants. While there was no uniform standard for the number of persons who could gather without a permit, some residents reported authorities could 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 its 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 (formerly Social Affairs), and many that did so receive government subsidies. Domestic NGOs registered with the ministry were mostly citizens' associations for economic, religious, social, cultural, athletic, and other purposes. In August the Ministry of Community Development announced it had registered 249 nonprofit associations. Of the total, 204 were nonbenefit public associations,

18 were solidarity funds, and 27 were NGOs. The nonbenefit public associations were categorized as: 75 public and cultural service associations; 35 professional associations; 30 popular arts associations; 28 humanitarian associations; 15 community associations; 13 theater associations; and eight women's associations.

Registration rules require that all voting organizational members, as well as boards of directors, must be local 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 approval from the CDA before conducting fundraising activities.

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. The government denied permits if it did not approve of the topic or speaker. If the event or speaker continued without an approved permit, the government imposed fines.

c. Freedom of Religion

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

d. Freedom of Movement

The law generally provided for freedom of internal movement, emigration, and repatriation. In June the Abu Dhabi Emergency, Crisis, and Disaster Committee for the COVID-19 pandemic banned movement between cities within the emirate and to and from other emirates, justifying the restrictions as necessary to ensure the success of Abu Dhabi's mass COVID-19 testing campaign.

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 airport.

At the sole discretion of emirate-level prosecutors, foreign citizens had their passports taken or travel restricted during criminal and civil investigations. Some individuals were also banned from foreign travel. 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. According to media reports, the president pardoned 662 prisoners ahead of UAE National Day and pledged to settle financial obligations of the released prisoners. Authorities across the emirates pardoned more than 3,500 prisoners during the holy month of Ramadan. In February, Dubai authorities released approximately 11,000 prisoners after a group of charities and individual donors contributed nearly seven million AED (\$1,900,000) to pay the prisoners' debts.

Travel bans were placed on citizens and noncitizens. For example, citizens of interest for reasons of state security, including former political prisoners, encountered difficulties renewing official documents, resulting in implicit travel bans.

In December 2019 HRW reported on the government's alleged targeting of relatives of political prisoners and dissidents living abroad. According to HRW, the government revoked the citizenship of 19 relatives of two dissidents, banned 30 relatives of six dissidents from traveling, and barred 22 relatives of three dissidents from renewing their identity documents. In all cases, authorities allegedly cited state security reasons.

Authorities did not lift travel bans until the completion of a case in the judicial system. In complex cases, particularly in the investigation of financial crimes, travel bans remained in place for three years or more. Dubai maintains 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 via a smart system implemented in 2019.

Custom dictates that a husband may prevent his wife, minor children, and 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 did not formally grant refugee status or asylum to aliens seeking protection, but it 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. In 2018 the government announced that citizens of war-torn countries who were living in the UAE and had overstayed their visas would be permitted to apply for a permit to remain legally for one additional year. These applicants were also exempted from immigration fines. According to foreign observers, the government had not issued instructions on how to extend the permits issued in August 2018, which expired in August 2019, or whether this would be allowed.

Refoulement: In contrast with 2019, there were no public reports of refoulement during the year.

Access to Asylum: The law does not provide for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government had 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.

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. In December the Abu Dhabi Department of Health reminded health-care facilities that they are prohibited from denying emergency care based on lack of insurance, thereby allowing refugees access to emergency medical services.

g. Stateless Persons

Informal estimates suggested 20,000 to 100,000 *Bidoon*, or persons without citizenship, resided in the country. Government statistics estimated the population at 10,000. Most *Bidoon* lacked citizenship because they did not have the preferred tribal affiliation used to determine 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, the movement of *Bidoon* was 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 UAE. The passports however did not extend citizenship or the right to residency in Comoros. In 2018 the Comoros Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that the Comoros government would stop the issuance of new passports under its economic citizenship program.

The government has a naturalization process, and individuals may apply for citizenship. Children of female citizens married to noncitizens do not acquire

citizenship automatically at birth, but their mothers may obtain citizenship for the children after submitting an application, which a government committee reviews and generally accepts, once the child is 18 years old. A foreign woman is eligible for naturalization after seven years of marriage if the couple has a child, or 10 years of marriage if the couple has no children. Anyone may receive a passport by presidential fiat. In October 2019 the Arab League launched the Arab Charter of Women's Rights in Abu Dhabi. One of the items of the nonbinding charter stipulates that an Arab woman should be able to pass her nationality to her children and retain and restore her nationality in case of marriage or dissolution of marriage to a man of a different nationality.

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 no reports, however, 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 could express their concerns directly to their leaders through an open *majlis*, a traditional consultative mechanism. On occasion women attended 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 October 2019 an appointed electorate of more than 330,000, representing just under a 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, the FNC achieved raising women's representation in the FNC to 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.

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: Although some traditional practices discouraged women from engaging in political life, no laws limit participation of women or members of minority groups in the political process. The government prioritized women's participation in government. There were nine female ministers in the 31-member cabinet, an increase of two women from the previous cabinet, and 20 women in the FNC (seven elected).

Except in the judiciary and military, members of religious and racial minority groups (including Shia) 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 July, four Ministry of Interior employees (three Emiratis and one Indian) were arrested on corruption charges for using confidential information to blackmail persons, threatening to add their victims' names to the police wanted list if they did not pay. In the past, authorities also prosecuted cases of police corruption.

Financial Disclosure: There are no financial disclosure laws, regulations, or codes of conduct requiring officials to disclose their income and assets. The operating

instructions for the FNC elections require all candidates to disclose sources of funding for their campaigns.

Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding 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 had to obtain government permission before attending such events. The government also restricted entry to the country by members of international NGOs. The antidiscrimination law, which prohibits multiple forms of discrimination and criminalizes acts or expression the government interprets as provoking religious hatred or insulting religion, provides 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.

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: The government did not allow international human rights NGOs to maintain offices in the country but did allow their representatives to visit on a limited basis. There were no transparent standards governing visits from international NGO representatives.

Government Human Rights Bodies: In October 2019 the government created the National Human Rights Committee (NHRC), which met for the first time in July. The NHRC aims to liaise between human rights bodies in the UAE, supervise the implementation of a comprehensive national human rights plan, and develop policies to raise awareness about human rights. In July the NHRC discussed preparations for the country's national human rights plan and the implementation of the Universal Periodic Review's 2018 recommendations for human rights. The national human rights plan was to be crafted in cooperation with a national human rights institute, scheduled to be established in 2021.

Two recognized local human rights organizations existed: The government-supported the 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. Several EHRA members worked in the government, and the organization received government funding. The EHRA claimed it operated independently without government interference, apart from requirements that apply to all associations in the country. In the past, the EHRA accused HRW and Amnesty International of disseminating incorrect and misleading information regarding the human rights situation in the country.

Section 6. Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes rape, which is punishable by death under the penal code. In March a Ras al-Khaimah court sentenced an Asian man to death after convicting him of raping his 14-year-old daughter. The penal code does not address spousal rape.

Punishments issued by courts in domestic abuse cases were often minimal. In some cases, police shared a victim's contact information with her or his family, which sometimes reached the assailant.

In general the government did not enforce domestic abuse laws effectively, and domestic abuse against women, including spousal abuse, remained a problem. 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. In addition, female victims of rape or other sexual crimes faced the possibility of prosecution for consensual sex outside marriage instead of receiving assistance from authorities.

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 were domestic abuse centers in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Ras Al-Khaimah, and Sharjah.

The government, in coordination with social organizations, sought to increase awareness of domestic violence, conducting seminars, educational programs, symposiums, and conferences. The Dubai Foundation for Women and Children increased awareness of domestic violence through social media, television, radio programming, and advertising; by hosting workshops; and sponsoring a hotline.

The Aman Shelter for Women and Children in Ras al-Khaimah also maintains a hotline for domestic abuse victims.

In November 2019 the cabinet passed the Family Protection Policy to address domestic violence concerns. The directive aims to raise awareness of domestic abuse, train staff in detection and intervention, strengthen information sharing across institutions working to combat domestic violence, and establish a standardized system to report incidents of domestic violence. As part of the policy, authorities introduced restraining orders and new prison terms for domestic violence, including maximum six-month sentences. According to the Ministry of Community Development, the policy was to be implemented over the next three years.

Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C): The law does not address FGM/C, although the Ministry of Health prohibits hospitals and clinics from performing the procedure. FGM/C is practiced by some tribal groups and was reportedly declining as a traditional custom, yet little information was available. Foreign residents from countries where FGM/C is prevalent undertook the practice.

Sexual Harassment: The government prosecutes harassment via the penal code. In November the president amended the code to expand the legal definition of sexual harassment to include repetitive harassment through action, words, or signs. The amendment also acknowledges that men could be victims of sexual harassment. Article 359 stipulates that acts of sexual harassment shall be punished by a prison term of at least one year, a minimum fine of at least 10,000 AED (2,720), 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.

Coercion in Population Control: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Discrimination: Women in general faced legal and economic discrimination, with noncitizen women at a particular disadvantage.

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 forbids Muslim women to marry non-Muslims. In addition, the law permits a man to have as many as four wives, women normally inherit less than men, and a son's inheritance may be double that of a daughter. 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.

For a woman to obtain a divorce with a financial settlement, she must prove her husband inflicted physical or moral harm upon her, abandoned her for at least three months, or had not provided 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 September the Federal Supreme Court refused to grant a woman a divorce, stating it was not permissible for a woman to ask for a divorce without reason or evidence of the husband's maltreatment.

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 13 years of age and sons 11 years of age. 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 feel the child has become "too soft."

The law provides for corporal punishment for sexual relations and pregnancy outside of marriage. The government may imprison and deport noncitizen women who bear children out of wedlock. In November 2019 Dubai authorities charged a Filipina woman with having sex out of wedlock after she was caught disposing of the body of a stillborn infant.

In July 2019 the Federal Authority for Identity and Citizenship announced a change to the main condition for acquiring residency, replacing the previous employment requirement with a minimum income requirement. While foreign men working in the country and earning a salary between 3,000 AED (\$816) and 4,000 AED (\$1,090) could obtain residency permits for their families for three years, a foreign woman would need to earn 10,000 AED (\$2,720) a month to

sponsor her husband or 4,000 AED (\$1,090) to sponsor her children. The previous requirements allowed foreign women to obtain a one-year, renewable permit for her family only if she was working in a job deemed rare or with a specialty such as health care, engineering, or teaching.

While education is equally accessible, 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. A large number of 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 2019 the local Arabic-language newspaper *al-Bayan* reported that Emirati women occupied 66 percent of public-sector jobs, of which 30 percent held leadership and decision-making positions. The article also reported that 21,000 Emirati women were business owners and that Emirati women represented 72 percent of the total citizens working in the banking sector, although only 12 percent held leadership positions.

Children

Birth Registration: Children generally derive citizenship from their parents. The children of UAE citizen mothers married to foreigners do not receive citizenship automatically. The government registered noncitizen births, including of Bidoon. The criminalization of sexual relations outside of marriage prevented the registration of children born out of wedlock and, as a result, access to travel documents.

Education: Education is compulsory through the ninth grade; 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 April, Dubai's Community Development Authority implemented a 24-hour child abuse hotline. Sharjah authorities reported in April they had received 401 reports of child abuse in the past three months through a child abuse hotline maintained by the Sharjah Social Services Department. In June the government established the Federal Family and Child Prosecution Division to provide better child protection and expedite the legal process. The dedicated division is responsible for handling juvenile offenses and cases involving families and children. Several emirates, including Dubai, had child prosecution offices in their individual judicial systems. The government provided shelter and help for child victims of abuse or sexual exploitation.

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. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women previously reported on the persistence of unregistered child marriages.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The law criminalizes the sexual exploitation of children, with a minimum penalty for conviction of 10 years in prison. Consensual sex is illegal outside of marriage, carrying a minimum penalty of one year 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 and no formal recognition of the very small foreign Jewish population (which constituted less than 1 percent of the population). The foreign Jewish community could conduct regular prayer services in rented space. The Jewish community requested

a formal license during the year from the Dubai Community Development Authority. Following the Abraham Accords normalizing relations between the UAE and Israel, the government unblocked some websites containing Israeli- or Judaism-related content, as well as numerous online Israeli media outlets, including *The Jerusalem Post*, *The Times of Israel*, and *Haaretz*. Occasionally social media contained anti-Semitic remarks. There was anti-Semitic material available at some book fairs, including a few that operated with government oversight. In February the Ministry of Foreign Affairs affirmed the importance of keeping anti-Semitic literature out of book fairs.

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.

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 (formerly Social Affairs) is the central body responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities and raising awareness at the federal and local level. In accordance with the law, most public buildings provided some form of access for persons with disabilities.

Government entities sponsored conferences and workshops emphasizing the inclusion and integration of persons with disabilities into schools and workplaces. The government continued to raise public awareness of societal inclusivity through its National Strategy for Empowering People with Special Needs. The policy includes investment in research and development for health and rehabilitation, an integrative education system, vocational rehabilitation and employment, creation of unified criteria for building requirements, social protection, and societal integration through cultural, sports, and social activities.

In December the cabinet approved the People of Determination Protection from Abuse Policy, which aims to protect persons with disabilities. The policy, which establishes mechanisms to identify instances of potential maltreatment, also seeks to raise the proficiency of response specialists and offer restorative programs to persons with disabilities who suffered abuse. In July the Community Development Authority in Dubai announced the launch of a 24/7 hotline to report violations of the rights of persons with disabilities.

The government sponsored several initiatives to host international conferences for persons with disabilities emphasizing rights, opportunities, and the importance of social inclusion. The government also improved accessibility of public facilities. In August, Dubai Municipality announced it completed building or upgrading 70 parks and playgrounds, which included improving accessibility for disabled persons.

Members of National/Racial/Ethnic Minority Groups

Approximately 90 percent of the country's residents were noncitizens, more than half of whom originated from South Asia. Societal discrimination against noncitizens was prevalent and occurred in most areas of daily life, including employment, education, housing, social interaction, and health care.

The law allows for criminalizing commercial disputes and bankruptcy, which led to discrimination against foreigners. Authorities enforced these laws selectively and allowed citizens to threaten noncitizen businesspersons and foreign workers with harsh prison sentences to assure a favorable outcome in commercial disputes.

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. 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 reports of arrests or prosecutions for consensual same-sex conduct.

The law does not extend antidiscrimination protections to LGBTI individuals on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex

characteristics. There were no government efforts to address potential discrimination.

By law, wearing clothing deemed inappropriate for one's sex is a punishable offense. The government previously deported foreign residents and referred the cases of individuals who wore clothing deemed inappropriate to the public prosecutor.

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, LGBTI organizations did not operate openly, nor were gay pride marches or gay rights advocacy events held.

HIV and AIDS Social Stigma

Noncitizens and, to a lesser extent, citizens with HIV/AIDS and other diseases 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.

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. In the private sector, the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization, formerly the Labor Ministry, 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 some 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. While the law does not explicitly delineate labor strikes as grounds for deportation, the law prohibits unauthorized demonstrations or the expression of opinions deemed false, incitant, or hurtful to the country's public image.

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 issues.

The government generally enforced labor laws. 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 issues, petition the government for redress, and file grievances with the government.

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. In Dubai 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.

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. In response to the government-mandated closing of many businesses as part of its COVID-19 pandemic response, the government changed employment contract regulations to give 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.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor, but the government did not effectively enforce the law or impose penalties that were commensurate, particularly in the domestic-worker sector.

The government took steps to prevent forced labor through continued implementation of the Wages Protection System (WPS) (see section 7.e.). The government enforced fines for employers who entered incorrect information into the WPS, did not pay workers for more than 60 days, or made workers sign documents falsely attesting to receipt of benefits. According to local media reporting, some firms withheld ATM cards from employees, withdrawing the money and paying the employee 35 to 40 percent less than the mandated salary. As a result of COVID-19-related restrictions and cost-saving measures, workers reported forced leave without pay or nonpayment of wages.

According to a December 2019 statement issued by the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization, one million low-skilled laborers benefited from instruction on labor laws and regulations offered by its 34 Tawjeeh centers specializing in providing governmental services and orientation on labor laws. In April authorities stated that in 2019 the Abu Dhabi Judicial Department carried out awareness campaigns in labor camps targeting 266,000 workers.

The domestic worker law that regulates domestic workers' contracts, rights and privileges, prohibitions, and recruitment agencies was implemented throughout the year. In January the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization announced that to enable employers to pay domestic workers a living wage, residents sponsoring a domestic worker must earn at least 25,000 AED (\$6,810) per month, a change from the previous salary minimum of 6,000 AED (\$1,630).

It was relatively common for employers to subject migrant domestic workers, and to a lesser degree, construction and other manual labor workers, to conditions equivalent to 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. There were reports employers raped or sexually assaulted foreign domestic workers. These cases rarely went to court, and those that did led to few convictions. In a few cases physical abuses led to death. Local newspapers reported on court cases involving violence committed against maids and other domestic workers.

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

Some employers forced foreign 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 other reports from community leaders that employers would refuse to apply for a residency visa for their domestic workers, rendering them undocumented and thus vulnerable to exploitation.

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 and sometimes trapped them in exploitive work conditions. The Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization oversees recruitment of domestic workers. In 2018 the ministry established Tadbeer recruitment centers, one-stop shops for recruitment agencies to register their services, workers to undergo interviews and receive training, and visas and identification documents to be distributed. Persons reported problems obtaining proper documentation and processing for domestic workers through Tadbeer Centers, including difficulties with processing basic services, salary payment, and passport retention.

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 the worst forms of child labor, including child trafficking, forced labor, and sexual exploitation. The law also prohibits employment of persons younger than 15 and includes special provisions regarding children ages 15 to 18. The law, however, 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 law allows issuance of work permits for 12- to 18-year-old persons, specifically for gaining work experience and under specific rules. The Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization is responsible for enforcing the regulations and generally did so effectively.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The antidiscrimination law prohibits all forms of discrimination based on religion, ethnicity, or race, although without specific reference to employment. Penalties include fines and prison terms of six months to 10 years. The law had been applied only in cases of religious discrimination, including one incident that occurred in a work environment.

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. In September 2019 the Dubai government released an eight-page pamphlet explaining the government's equal opportunity policy and encouraging employers to hire persons with disabilities. Public-sector employers provided reasonable accommodations, defined broadly, for employees with disabilities. The employment of persons with disabilities in the private sector remained a challenge due to a lack of training and opportunities and also societal discrimination.

In September 2019 the government amended the labor law to prohibit discrimination, which prejudices equal opportunity employment, equal access to jobs, and continuity of employment. The law does not specify what types of discrimination are prohibited. The government also reformed laws that prohibited women from working during certain hours, or in certain occupations, eliminating legal restrictions. In September 2019 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 an employee based on pregnancy. Termination of service is considered arbitrary under the labor law. In August the UAE became the first country in the region to offer paid parental leave after it amended the country's federal labor law to grant private-sector employees five days of paid paternal leave. Public-sector employees receive three days of paternal leave. In August the president also issued a decree granting women equal pay for "work of equal value." Work of "equal value" is to be determined by rules and regulations approved by the cabinet based on recommendations from Ministries 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 on the basis of 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 zones individualized laws govern employment requirements. For example, in the Dubai International Financial Center, employers may not discriminate against any person based on sex, marital status, race, national identity, religion, or disability.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

There is no national minimum wage. 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. According to TAMM, an online government services platform, Tadbeer Centers charged higher recruitment and sponsorship transfer fees for domestic workers of certain nationalities, including Indonesia and the Philippines.

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 it provides for overtime pay to employees working more than eight hours in a 24-hour period, with the exception of those employed in trade, hotels, cafeterias, security, domestic work, and other jobs as decided by the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization.

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 include laying asphalt or concrete and repairing damaged water pipes, gas lines, or electrical lines.

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, combating human trafficking, and wage protection.

Although workplace inspection is permissible but not required under the law, oversight of the large domestic worker population, often the most vulnerable to abuse, remained a challenge, due to significant cultural barriers to entering and inspecting private households.

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 they have some legal protections regarding working hours, overtime, timeliness of wage payments, paid leave, health care, and the provision of adequate housing; however, enforcement of these rules was often weak. As a result, these workers were more vulnerable to unacceptable work conditions.

There was no 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.

Sailors faced particular difficulty remedying grievances against employers. In 2018 the Federal Authority for Land and Maritime Transport announced that ship owners operating in the country's ports were required to carry insurance contracts for all sailors on board and mandated that sailors must be deported to their home countries in case of abandonment by the ship owner. Ship owners often declare bankruptcy but refuse to sell their ships, leaving their crews cut off from both pay and regular resupply. As a result, crew members often remain on board their ships even under substandard conditions. In June 2019 the Coast Guard seized the ship *MV Hoot* off the coast of Khor Fakkan after it refueled in midsea, a crime under UAE law, allegedly at the instruction of the ship's owner. In March media reports called attention to the sailors' complaints, including unpaid salaries, harsh living conditions, lack of fresh water, and no access to medical treatment. According to local media, the ship's owner asked the sailors to accept half of what they were owed in unpaid wages, with some sailors making as little as 6,000 AED (\$1,630) a month. The crew continues to remain on board the vessel pending the issuance of a verdict in Fujairah Court.

To provide for the continuity of ship crew changes complicated by COVID-19, in August the Federal Transport Authority issued a circular opening crew changes to all ports across the country. Previously, crew changes were possible only in Dubai. The decision sought to relieve crew whose time onboard extended past the limits delineated under maritime conventions.

The Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization conducted inspections of labor camps and workplaces such as construction sites. The government also routinely fined employers for violating the midday break rule and published compliance statistics. The penalties were not commensurate with those of fraud crimes, which carried larger fines and imprisonment. The Abu Dhabi Judicial Department and Dubai Courts 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. In September 2019 the mobile courtroom settled a labor dispute, presented to the Abu Dhabi Labor Court, allowing more than 1,000 workers to recover 10 million dirhams in unpaid wages from their employer. In April the Executive Committee of the Abu Dhabi Executive Council announced the formation of the Abu Dhabi Workers Committee mandated with assessing compliance with legal statutes governing contracts, workers' rights, salary payments and protections, and the provision of suitable living arrangements.

The government took action 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, an electronic salary transfer system, requires private institutions employing more than 100 employees to pay workers via approved banks, exchange bureaus, and other financial institutions, to assure timely and full payment of agreed wages, within 10 days of payment due date. Under the law, after 16 days of nonpayment, the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization freezes issuance of new work permits to the employer. If the nonpayment persists past 29 days, the ministry refers the case to the labor courts; after 60 days, a fine of 5,000 AED (\$1,360) per unpaid worker is imposed, up to a maximum of 50,000 AED (\$13,600). For companies employing fewer than 100 employees, the freezes, fines, and court referrals apply only after 60 days of nonpayment. The ministry monitored these payments electronically. The WPS, however, did not apply to foreign workers under the authority of the Ministry of Interior, such agricultural workers, or to domestic laborers.

The Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization conducted site visits to monitor the payment of overtime. Violations resulted in fines and in many cases a suspension of permits to hire new workers.

The Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization continued efforts to provide for adequate health standards and safe food and facilities in labor camps. A

ministerial decree requires that employers with 50 or more employees must provide low-salaried workers (those earning less than 2,000 AED (\$544) per month) with accommodations. It conducted regular inspections of health and living conditions at labor camps, stated that it issued written documentation on 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 violations. The ministry's mobile van units also visited some labor camps to inform workers of their rights.

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 blue-collar 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 Abu Dhabi government mandated employers to continue paying rent and food costs for all workers through August, although the government allowed drastic salary cuts. 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 instituted a standard contract for domestic workers aimed to protect domestic workers through a binding agreement between employers and domestic workers. The contract provides for transparency and legal protections concerning issues such as working hours, time off, overtime, health care, and housing. Officials from some originating countries criticized the process, saying it prevented foreign embassies from reviewing and approving the labor contracts of their citizens. As a result, some countries attempted to halt their citizens' travel to the UAE to assume domestic labor positions. Many entered on visit visas, however, and then adjusted status, making them vulnerable to exploitation by illegal recruiters.

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 *kafala* (or sponsorship) system, a 2019 cabinet resolution granted domestic workers 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.

The government-supported NGO EHRA promoted worker rights. It conducted unannounced visits to labor camps and work sites to monitor conditions and reported violations 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, including the adequacy of safety measures. The Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization routinely conducted health and safety site visits. The ministry mandated that companies with more than 15 employees submit labor injuries reports. A ministerial resolution requires private companies that employ more than 500 workers to hire at least one local as an occupational health and safety officer; companies with more than 1,000 employees must hire two health and safety officers. In addition, Dubai required construction companies and industrial firms to appoint safety officers accredited by authorized entities to promote greater site safety.

Reports of migrant worker suicides or attempted suicides continued. In some cases, observers linked the suicides to poor working and living conditions, low wages, and financial strain caused by heavy debts owed to originating-country labor recruitment agencies. Dubai police and the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children, a quasi-governmental organization, conducted vocational training programs with some elements aimed at decreasing suicidal behavior.