

Trial of political activists underway in United Arab Emirates

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A trial began in March in the Federal Supreme Court in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the oil-rich Gulf state of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), of 94 activists charged with plotting to overthrow the country's despotic regime.

The unnamed defendants are said to be members of the banned al-Islah movement (The Reform), linked to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, and include human rights lawyers, judges, teachers, student leaders and 13 women.

According to reports, after several months in detention the defendants had pleaded guilty to setting up a secret organisation with an armed wing to establish an Islamic state. If convicted, they could serve up to 15 years in prison. As they are being tried under state security procedures, they have no right of appeal.

While the UAE has long struggled to stifle dissent, particularly from Islamist groups, this latest case is striking in terms of the unprecedented number of defendants. All the indications are that the venal ruling elite are seeking to make an example of them to others who want political reform.

Amidst allegations of torture, international journalists and observers, including Amnesty International, have been denied access to the trial. Abdullah al-Hadidi, the son of one of the defendants, has been arrested for allegedly publishing information about the proceedings on Twitter, regional human rights groups report.

According to relatives, the accused had been held at undisclosed locations, in solitary confinement and in tiny rooms with nothing more than mattresses on the floor. They said the charges were without foundation: their family members had no links to the Brotherhood, met in each other's houses, and only sought greater democracy in the form of more powers for the Federal National Council, which "advises" the rulers.

The UAE is made up of seven small city states—Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Ajman, Fujairan, Ras al Khaimah, Sharjah and Umm al-Qaiqain—and run by the seven sheikh families, the heirs of the UAE's founder, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, who died in 2004.

Dominated by two of Zayed's sons in Abu Dhabi, they run a police state—appointing the prime minister and the cabinet, and banning all political parties and demonstrations.

While the per capita income is one of the highest in the world, this benefits just a tiny minority. More than 80 percent of the country's 7.9 million people are migrant workers from South and South East Asia with no rights. More than a few are stateless, known as the *bidoon* (without papers), despite generations of residence.

Emiratis constitute just 2 percent of the workforce. Even so, unemployment among Emirati nationals was estimated at 20.8 percent in December.

As a result, discontent is rising along with demands for political reform.

Following the mass revolutionary movements in 2011 that toppled Egypt's dictator Hosni Mubarak, a close ally, and Tunisia's Ben Ali, the UAE dispatched troops to crush all opposition in neighbouring Bahrain.

At home, minor concessions were made, including further elections in which only a limited number of people would be allowed to vote. This was followed, in November, by the introduction of legislation curtailing political activism on the Internet. This empowered the authorities to crack down on web activists for offences such as mocking the country's rulers, publishing information, news, caricatures or any other kinds of pictures that could threaten security or public order, and calling for demonstrations, stipulating "penalties of imprisonment".

To distance itself from this draconian crackdown by one of its allies who had played a leading role in the NATO-led coalition against Libya and against Syria, the European Union passed a resolution condemning “restrictions on freedom of expression” and “illegal imprisonment”, and demanded the “unconditional release of prisoners of conscience,” which it said numbered 64.

With its vast oil wealth, the UAE does not feel beholden to the European powers or bound by international public opinion. Last August, the UAE left oil giant BP off the shortlist to renew the lucrative onshore oilfield concession. This was apparently in retaliation for Britain’s legislators and the BBC Arabic service’s criticism of the UAE’s arrest of activists.

The trial of the 94 also reveals the ever growing tensions and fissures within the Washington-backed Sunni coalition to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria and isolate Iran using Islamist mercenaries.

The UAE had repeatedly claimed that the defendants had been financed by individuals in other Gulf states, without naming them. In January, two Kuwaiti legislators said that Sheikh Jaber al-Mubarak al-Sabah, the Kuwaiti prime minister, had admitted to them that Kuwaiti nationals had been providing financial support to Muslim Brotherhood members in the UAE. The Brotherhood is not banned in Kuwait. Two Kuwaiti nationals are among the 94 accused.

Following their expulsion from Egypt in the 1960s, the Brotherhood was initially welcomed in the Gulf state where they were allowed to set up a branch known as al-Islah. But they encountered hostility in the 1990s when they were found to be running the education and justice sectors, and became subject to restrictions.

The emergence of an Islamist government in Turkey provided al-Islah with new opportunities to link up with the Brotherhood across the region. When some of these meetings were sponsored by Western governments and associations, the UAE moved to shut down a number of NGO’s and think tanks.

The UAE launched a national crackdown on al-Islah that has included arbitrary detention and torture. This was tightened following the Brotherhood’s rise to power in Egypt and Tunisia, when scores were arrested. The Dubai police chief Dhahi Khalfan has made it clear that the Brotherhood are not welcome.

The Emirates has become, along with Riyadh, the

chief antagonist of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose political arms rule in Egypt and Tunisia. This has strained relations with Qatar and Egypt, where a senior Brotherhood figure recently accused the UAE, which is home to more than 300,000 Egyptians, of financing the opposition in Egypt. The UAE in turn claimed that the Egyptian Brotherhood was building underground cells in the UAE. In December, 11 Egyptian citizens living in UAE were arrested for plotting to destabilise the country.

The conflict was apparently fuelled by the flight to the Emirates of Mubarak’s former political and business associates, and the fact that successive Egyptian governments “refused an offer by the Emirates to pay a large sum of money—possibly amounting to billions of dollars—to keep Mubarak out of jail.” Since the revolution, Egypt has strengthened its relations with Qatar and Kuwait at the expense of its former close friends, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain.

Opposition to the Brotherhood has also brought conflict with its neighbour, Qatar, which finances the Brothers and whose satellite channel Al Jazeera has been an ardent Brotherhood supporter. The UAE is to launch its own rival Arabic language channel, al-Ghad (Tomorrow), based in London to prosecute its war against the Brotherhood.

In short, the Gulf states, which are playing a key role in Washington’s proxy war against Syria, are riven with dissent and are backing different Islamist groups in their attempts to unseat Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad, while suppressing their own Islamist opponents at home.



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