

UAE imposes life sentences on 43 defendants in second-largest trial in its history

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On Wednesday, a court in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), following a mass trial of 84 defendants, sentenced 43 dissidents to life in prison for operating what it said was a Muslim Brotherhood group that aimed to commit attacks in the country.

The Abu Dhabi Federal Court of Appeal handed down lesser sentences of 10 to 15 years to 10 others, dismissed the cases against 24 and acquitted just one person. The fate of the remaining defendants remains unclear. It convicted six companies of money laundering to support a terrorist organisation.

Many of the 84 defendants, now in their 50s, 60s and older, include a senior member of the ruling family in the northern emirate of Ras Al-Khaimah, lawyers, academics, writers, former government employees, a television presenter and activists known as the “UAE84”. They were convicted a decade ago in the UAE’s largest-ever mass trial held in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring.

The court, in that earlier trial in 2013 of 94 people who had called in an open letter for democratic reforms, including an elected Parliament with legislative powers, had sentenced them to 10 years imprisonment. In 2014, a United Nations working group found that their convictions had been “based on charges of acts that would fall under the rights to freedom of expression and of assembly,” and that their detention had been “arbitrary.”

Due for release last year, the defendants were charged with new offences relating to the same events under legislation passed in 2014, using new legislation retrogressively based on double jeopardy—trying people for the same offence twice. Confident that it had the support of the US and other major powers, the UAE announced the new charges during COP28, the UN climate talks held in Dubai last November-December.

The trial was a travesty of justice. The defendants had restricted access to case material and information and limited legal assistance, with the defence lawyers banned from sharing the details of the indictment even with their own clients. The trial judges directed witness testimony and

held the hearings in secrecy. There were credible allegations of serious abuse and ill-treatment. Some of the defendants had protested prolonged solitary confinement and other abusive detention conditions, including assaults and the failure to provide them with prescribed medications.

Family members told Amnesty International, “Nobody has read the court files. Nobody has seen them. We’re forbidden from attending. And the attorneys are under strict order not to cooperate with the prisoners or their families, and not to give them full, transparent information.”

Joey Shea, UAE researcher at Human Rights Watch (HRW), said, “This unfair mass trial is a farce, and the allegations of torture and gross fair trial violations lay bare the UAE’s hollow rule of law and utter lack of access to justice.” She made a forlorn appeal for the UAE’s imperialist allies, the US, UK and the European Union, to “urgently call for an end to these abuses and for the release of human rights activists.”

This sham trial has attracted little publicity in the international media. One can only imagine the furore that would have erupted if this had happened in Iran, with the Biden administration and its allies spreading the news far and wide. But the UAE has close political and economic relations with Washington, which rarely criticises its atrocious human rights record.

Abu Dhabi has installed a vast surveillance system across the city purchased from an Israeli-owned security company. Its Falcon Eye surveillance system “links thousands of cameras spread across the city, as well as thousands of other cameras installed at facilities and buildings in the emirate.”

UAE citizens, less than 15 percent of the 9.7 million population, have no political rights. The government clamps down on freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Local media are censored to prevent criticism of the government, government officials or royal families governing the seven states that constitute the UAE. Anyone who dares criticise the unelected government is detained and imprisoned, and their families subject to harassment by the state security apparatus. The Emirati authorities hold at least 26 prisoners

of conscience.

The state maintains capital punishment and discriminates against women, migrants and LGBT individuals. Earlier this week, Tori Towey, a 28-year-old Irish woman from Ireland who works in the UAE as an airline cabin crew member, was charged with “attempting suicide” and abusing alcohol after she was attacked and left with severe bruising and other injuries in a violent incident. She was only released and allowed to leave the country after the Irish government intervened on her behalf.

The 8.2 million non-nationals have even fewer rights. Most are labourers working without the protection of a minimum wage and under the laxest safety standards for outdoor work in the Gulf region. In the peak summer months, the Emirati government limits its protection measures to a ban on outdoor physical labour during just 2.5 hours in mid-afternoon, even though evidence shows that outdoor workers face significant health dangers from the heat for at least half the year.

The UAE plays a crucial role in American imperialism’s plans to undermine Iran and dominate the resource-rich region as “a long-established partner in security and intelligence matters,” while helping the US stave off Chinese dominance in Africa by outspending Beijing in return for diplomatic protection at the United Nations. Abu Dhabi joined the NATO-led intervention to topple Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, where it continues to support the forces of General Khalifa Hiftar in the Benghazi region in opposition to the UN-recognized government in Tripoli. It financed, sponsored and trained proxy forces to overthrow the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

But the UAE is increasingly, along with Saudi Arabia, pursuing its own interests that on occasion conflict with those of the imperialist and regional powers. Their joint opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, shared by Egypt’s brutal dictator, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, set them against Qatar—showing sympathy with Qatar became punishable by up to 15 years in jail—and Turkey, which hosts Egyptian members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist exiles, although relations have improved since 2021. The UAE provided the ground forces for the Saudi-sponsored war against the Houthi rebels in Yemen in 2015 before pulling out of the coalition in 2020 to support the Southern Transitional Council, a secessionist organization in Southern Yemen.

In June last year, the UAE president welcomed Iran’s visiting foreign minister to Abu Dhabi in an indication of the warming relations between the Gulf states and Iran, despite having signed up to Washington’s Abraham Accords with Israel in an anti-Iran alliance. It followed the announcement the previous month that the UAE would no longer take part

in a US-led task force protecting Gulf shipping. The UAE, along with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, has also refused to join the multinational naval alliance in the Red Sea led by the US against Yemen’s Houthi rebels who have pledged to disrupt shipping to Israel during its war on Gaza.

Sudan, which has witnessed a horrific, 15-month long civil war by rival army factions that has displaced 10 million people and brought the country to the brink of famine, has become the most recent focus for Gulf rivalries. The UAE is backing the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) of the former Sudanese deputy army chief Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, which is accused of carrying out war crimes in Darfur. Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran are backing the Sudanese army led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, while Russia has switched sides to support Burhan in a bid to secure a Red Sea naval base. The war threatens to spill over and destabilise Libya, Chad and other parts of the Sahel.

This week, the UAE is holding joint military training exercises—dubbed Falcon Shield—with China in the mainly Muslim province of Xinjiang. The exercise, which follows one last year, indicates deepening defence ties between the two countries, giving rise to growing US concerns. China was the UAE’s largest trading partner in 2022, while the UAE was China’s biggest partner in the Arab world, exporting \$17.4 billion in crude petroleum and \$4.12 billion in petroleum gas to China in 2022. Last year, China paid for its purchase of liquefied natural gas from the UAE in yuan instead of dollars for the first time. In 2022, the UAE’s Defence Ministry announced it was buying 12 L-15 light attack planes from the China National Aero-Technology Import & Export Corporation.

The support of Washington and its European allies for the UAE’s police-state methods is the clearest expression of its role in the Middle East. As with all US state and media propaganda about “democracy,” “human rights” and a “war on terrorism,” it is founded upon mass murder, naked state terrorism, the suppression of all dissent, and slave labour. All these crimes are committed to further the predatory interests of US imperialism in its efforts to assert hegemony over the energy-rich and strategically critical region, and to push back the influence of Iran, Russia and China.



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