

# UNITED ARAB EMIRATES 2015 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven semiautonomous emirates with a resident population of approximately 9.2 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. In 2009 the council selected Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, ruler of Abu Dhabi emirate, to a second five-year term as president. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan 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 (FNC), a consultative body that examines, reviews, and recommends changes to legislation, consisting of 40 representatives allocated proportionally to each emirate based on population. There are no political parties. In October the appointed electorate of approximately 224,000 citizens, making up one-fifth of the total citizen population, elected 20 FNC members. The rulers of the individual emirates appointed the other 20. Citizens may express their concerns directly to their leaders through traditional consultative mechanisms such as the open majlis (forum). Topics of legislation also emerge through discussions and debates in the FNC. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over the security forces.

The three most significant human rights problems were the inability to change government; limitations on civil liberties (including the freedoms of speech, press, assembly, association, and internet use); and arrests without charge, incommunicado detentions, and lengthy pretrial detentions.

Other reported human rights problems included a lack of government transparency; police and prison guard brutality; governmental interference with privacy rights, including arrests and detentions following individuals' internet postings or commentary; and a lack of judicial independence. Domestic abuse and violence against women remained problems. Noncitizens faced legal and societal discrimination. Legal and societal discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS and based on sexual orientation and gender identity remained problems. Trafficking in persons, mistreatment and sexual abuse of foreign domestic servants and other migrant workers, and discrimination against persons with disabilities

remained problems, although the government took steps to prevent them. The government restricted worker rights. Lack of governmental transparency and access made it difficult to assess the extent of many reported human rights problems, such as conditions surrounding detentions in state security cases, and discrimination and societal abuses of women and children.

The government took steps to investigate allegations of official corruption and officials who reportedly committed other violations.

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

### **a. Arbitrary or Unlawful Deprivation of Life**

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

### **b. Disappearance**

There were reports of disappearances of individuals allegedly involved in state security cases. For example, human rights organizations claimed Muawiya al-Ruwahi, an Omani writer and blogger, disappeared on February 24 while attempting to enter the country from Oman. Allegedly his last telephone call prior to his disappearance was to another Omani activist, Mohammad al-Fazari, stating border security officials had taken his travel documents and not allowed him to enter the country. Muawiya's whereabouts were unknown for several months before reports surfaced that authorities transferred him to a prison in Abu Dhabi for trial before the State Security Court. On November 9, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported al-Ruwahi appeared before the Federal Supreme Court and was transferred to Sheikh Khalifa Medical City hospital to address health concerns.

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

The constitution prohibits such practices; however, there were reports of police and prison guard brutality in state security cases. Amnesty International (AI) claimed the government tortured and otherwise ill-treated certain prisoners, such as 69 individuals who remain in prison since their conviction in 2013 for belonging to a banned group with alleged links to the Muslim Brotherhood.

There were allegations of detainees held in state security cases being tortured. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported techniques used by authorities to include beatings, forced standing, and threats to rape or kill, including by electrocution. Detainees reported to HRW state security officers blindfolded, handcuffed, and shackled them to the floor of a vehicle. In May the special rapporteur for the Human Rights Council issued a report citing credible information regarding beatings, assaults, threats, exposure to bright light or extreme temperatures, and other mistreatment carried out in unofficial places of detention. Detainees at state security facilities reported the use of mock executions, in which prison guards blindfolded a detainee and dangled a noose in front of him, joked he would be executed, and then had him sign a confession. Detainees also reported being whipped, sleep deprived, electroshocked by taser gun, drugged, given laxatives then deprived of the use of a bathroom, and forced to stand under an air conditioner after having water poured on them.

Sharia (Islamic law) courts, which adjudicate criminal and family law, have the option of imposing flogging as punishment for adultery, prostitution, consensual premarital sex, pregnancy outside marriage, defamation of character, and drug or alcohol abuse. The penal code also requires all individuals to pay diya (blood money) to victims' families in cases where accidents or crimes caused the death of another person. There were reports courts imposed these punishments. In some cases sharia courts imposed more severe penalties during the month of Ramadan. There were also reports courts applied these punishments more strictly to Muslims. Multiple Western consulates reported courts imposed flogging as a punishment in some of the northern emirates.

### **Prison and Detention Center Conditions**

Prison conditions varied widely among the individual emirates and between regular prisons and state security detention facilities. There were reports individuals within state security detention facilities were mistreated.

Physical Conditions: The government did not release statistics on prison demographics and capacity. Some prisoners reported poor sanitary conditions, poor temperature control and overcrowding.

There was no information available on whether prisoners with HIV/AIDS received appropriate health care. Medical care was generally adequate in regular prisons, although some prisoners reported that insufficient overnight supervision meant authorities did not treat medical problems promptly. In addition media reports

stated some detainees in State Security Department custody do not receive adequate access to medical care.

Prisons attempt to accommodate persons with disabilities based on their specific needs, such as by placing a wheelchair user on a lower floor. Reportedly it is common for authorities to grant a humanitarian pardon in cases where a person with a disability has been convicted of a minor offense.

Administration: Authorities did not make records public. Judicial authorities did not use alternatives to sentencing for nonviolent offenders. Some state security detainees did not have access to visitors. Although prisoners had a right to submit complaints to judicial authorities, details about investigations into complaints were not publicly available and there were no other independent authorities to investigate credible allegations of inhuman conditions. There was no publicly available information on whether or not authorities investigated credible allegations of inhumane conditions.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted charitable NGOs to visit prisons and provide material support. 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 (MOI) 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; however, the government reportedly often held persons in custody without charge or a preliminary judicial hearing. The law permits indefinite detention, including incommunicado detention, without appeal. Authorities withheld detainee contact with attorneys, family members, or others for indefinite or unspecified periods.

In cases of detained foreign nationals, which in view of the country's demographic breakdown were the vast majority of cases, the government often did not notify the appropriate diplomatic missions, as required under the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, to which the country is a signatory. In state security cases, this practice meant available information about the status of an individual was very limited.

At times authorities treated prisoners arrested for political or security reasons differently from other prisoners. A separate government entity, the State Security Department, often handled these cases, and held prisoners and detainees in separate undisclosed locations.

In February human rights organizations alleged authorities arrested Asma, Mariam and Alyaziah al-Suwaidi, sisters of imprisoned Emirati dissident Issa al-Suwaidi, and held them in secret detention for three months. AI reported authorities did not allow the sisters outside contact and did not inform them or their families of the charges against them. Advocacy groups speculated the sisters' social media campaigning on behalf of their brother led to their arrests.

Human rights organizations reported two Libyan-Americans were arrested on security-related grounds in August 2014. Authorities did not inform their families or relevant consular missions. They were denied access to legal counsel and they claimed to have been tortured while in detention (see section 1.c. for additional information on the use of torture in state security detention facilities). They remained in detention without charge, access to legal counsel, or adequate medical treatment as of November.

### **Role of the Police and Security Apparatus**

Each of the seven emirates maintains a local police force called a general directorate, which is officially a branch of the federal Ministry of Interior. All emirate-level general directorates of police enforce their respective emirate's laws autonomously. They also enforce the country's federal laws within their emirate in coordination with each other under the federal ministry, but the manner in which they did so varied. The federal government maintains federal armed forces for external security.

The MOI emirate-level police and federal security forces, and the government had effective mechanisms to investigate and punish abuse and corruption. There were no reports of impunity involving security forces during the year.

### **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; however, incidents occurred. There were reports security forces failed to obtain

warrants in some cases. Police must report an arrest within 48 hours to the public prosecutor, and police usually adhered to the deadline. The law requires prosecutors to submit charges to a court within 14 days of the police report and to inform detainees of the charges against them; however, authorities did not always meet to this requirement.

Public prosecutors may order detainees held as long as 21 days without charge or longer with a court order. Judges may not grant an extension of more than 30 days of detention without charge; however, they may renew 30-day extensions indefinitely. 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.

There is no formal system of bail; however, authorities may temporarily release detainees who deposit money, a passport, or an unsecured personal promissory statement signed by a third party. In accordance with the law, authorities may deny 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.

A defendant is entitled to an attorney after police complete their investigation. Police sometimes questioned the accused for weeks without permitting access to an attorney. The government may provide counsel at its discretion to indigent defendants charged with felonies punishable by imprisonment of three to 15 years. 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.

Arbitrary Arrest: There were reports the government committed arrests without informing the individual of the charge, notably in cases that allegedly violated 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. Authorities did not permit the individual access to attorneys, give prompt court appearances, or afford consular notification.

Authorities held citizens and noncitizens incommunicado and at undisclosed locations. According to AI, in February authorities in Dubai arrested Egyptian national Sameh Bassiouni for allegedly falsely reporting a crime. Convicted and sentenced to one month in jail, AI reported authorities held him in an unknown

location for a period considerably longer than his sentence. AI further stated Bassiouni did not receive necessary medication and that he lost significant weight.

Pretrial Detention: Lengthy pretrial detention occurred, especially in cases involving state security. There was no estimate available on the percentage of the prison population in pretrial status.

Amnesty: On religious and national holidays rulers of each emirate pardoned and paid the debts of many prisoners.

### **e. Denial of Fair Public Trial**

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary; however, court decisions remained subject to review by the political leadership and were influenced by nepotism; authorities often treated noncitizens differently from citizens. There were reports the State Security Department interfered in judicial affairs. The judiciary consisted largely of contracted foreign nationals subject to potential deportation, further compromising its independence from the government. There is no functional separation between the executive and judicial branches.

By tradition the local rulers' offices, or diwans, maintained the practice of reviewing criminal and civil offenses before referring cases to prosecutors. The offices also reviewed sentences judges passed, approved the release of every prisoner who completed a sentence, and returned cases to appeals courts if they did not agree with verdicts.

### **Trial Procedures**

The constitution provides for the right to a fair trial, and the judiciary generally enforced this right.

The law presumes 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 poor.

The constitution provides the right to a public trial, except in national security cases or cases the judge deems harmful to public morality. Consistent with the civil law system, there are no jury trials. Defendants have the right to be present at

their trials and have a limited right to legal counsel in court. While awaiting a decision on official charges at the police station or the prosecutor's office, a defendant is not entitled to legal counsel. In all cases involving a capital crime or possible life imprisonment, the defendant has a right to government-provided counsel. The government may also provide counsel, at its discretion, to indigent defendants charged with felonies punishable by imprisonment of three to 15 years. The law provides prosecutors discretion to bar defense counsel from any investigation. Defendants and their attorneys may present witnesses and question witnesses against them, and defense counsel has the right to access relevant government-held evidence, but this did not always occur, especially in state security cases. Defendants have the right not to be compelled to testify or confess.

Each court system has an appeals process. Convicted defendants may 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 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.

When authorities suspected a foreigner of crimes of moral turpitude, authorities sometimes deported the individual without recourse to the criminal justice system. In some cases foreigners charged with crimes are permitted to defend their cases while in bail status at the judge's discretion.

In June authorities pardoned Mahmoud al-Jaidah and deported him to his home country of Qatar. Al-Jaidah was sentenced to seven years in prison in March 2014 for aiding and abetting Dawat al-Islah (an organization linked to the Muslim Brotherhood), as well as illegally collecting funds.

### **Political Prisoners and Detainees**

During the year there were persons reportedly held incommunicado and without charge for reasons related to their political views or affiliations.

The number of political prisoners, and particularly detainees held in prolonged detention without charge, could not be reliably ascertained. In many cases it was difficult to determine the legal basis for incarceration until the individual was charged. Those who remained imprisoned after trial typically were convicted of

terrorism-related crimes, and there often was not sufficient public information about the alleged crimes to judge whether these individuals had a credible claim to being political prisoners. International NGOs criticized the government for using overly broad anti-terrorism laws to arrest and detain those with suspected ties to political Islamist movements.

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the government restricted the activities of organizations and individuals allegedly associated with Dawat Al Islah and individuals critical of the government. As part of its security and counterterrorism efforts, the government issued or updated restrictive laws--such as the 2014 antiterrorism law--governing activities, including the use of the internet and social media. Numerous observers criticized these laws as overly broad and extending beyond security concerns by also outlawing activities and speech of a political nature.

For example, according to human rights organizations, in August authorities arrested Nassir bin Ghaith, an Emirati activist convicted previously in 2011 of insulting the leadership, incitement, and endangering national security. The government did not comment on the case, and authorities did not levy charges. HRW speculated his social media postings criticizing the Egyptian government precipitated his arrest.

### **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 independence. In some cases courts delayed proceedings. Administrative remedies are available for labor complaints, and authorities commonly applied them in cases regarding physical abuse of domestic workers.

#### **f. Arbitrary 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, but there were credible reports security forces occasionally failed to obtain warrants. Officers' actions in searching premises were subject to review by the Ministry of Interior, and officers were liable to disciplinary action if authorities judged their actions irresponsible.

The constitution provides for freedom and confidentiality of correspondence by mail, telegram, and all other means of communication. There were reports,

however, the government censored some incoming international mail, wiretapped telephones, and monitored outgoing mail and electronic forms of communication illegally.

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 law provides for corporal punishment for sexual relations and pregnancy outside of marriage.

The country employs judicial supervision for individuals considered at risk from relatives committing honor crimes against or otherwise harming them. Judicial supervision typically included housing individuals to provide for their well-being and for family mediation and reconciliation.

## **Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:**

### **a. Freedom of Speech and Press**

The constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press; however, the law prohibits criticism of national rulers and speech that may create or encourage social unrest; the government restricted the freedoms of speech and press.

Freedom of Speech and Expression: After the onset of the Arab Spring in 2011, authorities severely restricted public criticism of the government and ministers. The government continued to make arrests or impose other restrictions reportedly related to Islamist political activities and calls for democratic reforms.

On May 18, the Federal Supreme Court convicted five individuals, reportedly members of the Qatari intelligence service, of organizing an online campaign to damage the reputation of the country’s leaders and state symbols by disseminating false information on websites and social media. Authorities convicted and sentenced four of the defendants in absentia to life in prison and fined them. The court convicted and sentenced the fifth, who stood trial, to 10 years in prison and a fine. On May 22, the president pardoned all five individuals.

Press and Media Freedoms: International NGOs categorized the press as not free. Except for media outlets located in Dubai and Abu Dhabi’s free trade zones (and media targeted at foreign residents), the government owned most newspapers, television stations, and radio stations. All conformed to unpublished government

reporting guidelines. The government also influenced the privately owned media, particularly through the National Media Council (NMC), which directly oversaw all media content. Satellite-receiving dishes were widespread and provided access to uncensored international broadcasts.

International media and human rights organizations, including Freedom House, stated the government banned certain journalists and researchers from entering the country.

In March the government prevented a professor from a Western university from boarding a flight to Abu Dhabi to continue his research on labor rights problems in the country. He had previously criticized labor conditions.

Censorship or Content Restrictions: By law the NMC, whose members the president appoints, licenses and censors all publications, including private association publications. The law authorizes censorship of domestic and foreign publications to remove criticism of the government, ruling families, or friendly governments; statements that “threaten social stability;” and materials considered pornographic, excessively violent, derogatory to Islam, or supportive of certain Israeli government positions. According to the NMC and Dubai police officials, authorities did not give journalists specific instructions; however, government officials reportedly warned journalists when they published or broadcast material deemed politically or culturally sensitive. Journalists commonly practiced self-censorship due to fear of government retribution, particularly since most journalists were foreign nationals and could be deported. Authorities banned some books perceived as critical of the government, Islam, and Emirati and tribal culture, as well as books that supported the Muslim Brotherhood or its ideology and books containing anti-Semitic content.

In July authorities detained and deported an Australian woman for a Facebook posting that included a photo and comments about a car without a handicap sticker taking two reserved parking spaces. Authorities alleged she violated the cybercrimes law pertaining to the privacy of the owner of the parked car.

In May authorities denied entry to the country for an AI representative scheduled to speak on migrant worker’s rights at the Middle East Economic Digest Construction Leadership Summit.

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 through online or information technology means. Those who commit libel may face up to two years in prison; the maximum penalty for those convicted of libel against the family of a public official is three years in prison.

On July 20, the president signed the Anti-Discrimination Law that criminalizes acts that provoke religious hatred or insult religious convictions through any form of expression. It also criminalizes the broadcasting, publication, or transmission of provocative material by any means, including audiovisual film, printed media, or the internet.

In May the Federal Supreme Court sentenced Ahmad al-Wahdi to 10 years in prison and confiscated his electronic devices for creating a social media account that insulted the country's institutions and leadership. It was not clear under which law he was charged.

National Security: Authorities often cited the need to protect national security as the basis for laws that curb criticism of government or expression of dissenting political views. For example, the country's cybercrimes 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 government restricted access to some websites and monitored chat rooms, instant messaging services, and blogs. Authorities stated they could imprison individuals for misusing the internet. Self-censorship was apparent in many chat rooms and blogs, and there were reports the Ministry of Interior monitored internet use in cyber cafes. The International Telecommunication Union estimated more than 90 percent of the population had access to the internet.

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. Blocked material included pornographic websites and a wide variety of other sites deemed indecent, including those that dealt with dating and matrimony; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) issues; Judaism and atheism; negative critiques of Islam; testimonies of former Muslims who converted to Christianity; those postings that explained how to circumvent the proxy servers; and some transmissions that originated in Israel. The proxy servers occasionally blocked broad categories of websites. The service

providers populated their list of blocked sites primarily from lists purchased from private companies, although individuals could also report allegedly offensive sites to be blocked. Social and politically oriented sites remained either blocked or modified. International media sites accessed using the country's internet providers contained filtered content. The government also blocked some sites that contained content critical of ruling families. The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority was responsible for creating lists of blocked sites. Service providers did not have the authority to remove sites from blocked lists without government approval. The government also at least partially blocked voice-over-internet-protocol websites.

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; to proselytize Muslims to join other religions; to abuse a holy shrine or ritual of any religion; to insult any religion, belief, sect, race, color, or ethnic group; to incite someone to commit sin; or to contravene family values by publishing news or photographs pertaining to a person's private life or family.

A cybercrime decree and the Anti-Discrimination Law provide for more severe penalties for violations and 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 March authorities arrested a Western citizen upon his return to Abu Dhabi, accusing him of having violated the country's cybercrime law by posting derogatory comments about his employer while on leave outside the country. He was later deported.

### **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 that discussed political issues. 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 ruling regime 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 to promote blasphemy or addressing controversial political issues.

In May the government denied entry into the country of two artists who were members of the Gulf Labor Artists Coalition, reportedly on security grounds. The Sharjah Art Foundation had invited the artists to participate in a meeting. Gulf Labor has organized protests against the Guggenheim, which plans to build a museum in Abu Dhabi, alleging it has not done enough to provide protection for workers at the future Abu Dhabi worksite against labor abuses.

### **b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association**

The constitution provides for the freedoms of assembly and association; however, the government did not respect these rights.

#### **Freedom of Assembly**

The law provides limited freedom of assembly. The government imposed some restrictions.

The law requires a government-issued permit for organized public gatherings. Authorities dispersed impromptu gatherings or protests and at times arrested participants. While there was no uniform standard for the number of persons who could gather, civil society representatives 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.

In April police in Ras al Khaimah dispersed a spontaneous protest by a group of foreign-born laborers angered at poor working conditions, which they said resulted in the April 11 death of one of their colleagues. Authorities reportedly deported the leaders of the protest.

#### **Freedom of Association**

The law provides limited freedom of association. The government imposed some restrictions.

Political organizations, political parties, and trade unions are illegal. All associations and NGOs are required to register with the Ministry of Social Affairs, and many received government subsidies. Domestic NGOs registered with the ministry were mostly citizens' associations for economic, religious, social, cultural, athletic, and other purposes. Registration rules require that all voting organizational members, as well as boards of directors, must be Emirati; this excluded almost 90 percent of the population from fully participating in such organizations.

Associations must follow the government's censorship guidelines and receive prior government approval before publishing any material. The Dubai government's Community Development Authority denied licenses to existing social groups.

In Abu Dhabi 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 and the government denied permits if it did not approve of the topic or speaker.

### **c. Freedom of Religion**

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at [www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/](http://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/).

### **d. Freedom of Movement, Internally Displaced Persons, Protection of Refugees, and Stateless Persons**

The law generally provided for freedom of internal movement, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights; however, the government imposed certain legal restrictions on foreign travel. The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other persons of concern. The lack of passports or other identity documents restricted the movement of stateless persons, both within the country and internationally.

At the sole discretion of emirate-level prosecutors, foreign nationals had their passports taken or travel restricted during criminal and civil investigations. There were reported cases of foreign nationals who faced significant difficulties because of the seizure of their passports. Some also had travel bans, which prohibited noncitizens from departing the country, placed on their names in immigration

systems. Travel bans were also placed on citizens; citizens of interest for reasons relating to state security, including former political prisoners, also encountered difficulties renewing official documents, resulting in de-facto travel bans. Authorities did not lift travel bans until the completion of a case through the judicial system. In cases of technical and complex violations of the law, particularly in the investigation of financial crimes, travel bans remained in place for three years or more.

Foreign Travel: Authorities generally did not permit male citizens involved in legal disputes under adjudication and noncitizens under investigation to travel abroad. 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. Without passports persons without citizenship or proof of citizenship (known as bidoon) could not travel internationally.

Citizenship: The government may revoke naturalized citizens' passports and citizenship status for criminal or politically provocative actions. In contrast to previous years, there were no reported cases of authorities revoking citizenship.

### **Protection of Refugees**

UNHCR lacked formal legal status in the country separate from the UN Development Program; however, the government worked with UNHCR on a case-by-case basis to address refugee issues. While the government did not formally grant refugee status or asylum to aliens seeking protection, the government allowed refugees to remain in the country temporarily on an individual basis--often for considerable periods--until UNHCR was able to find a solution, generally foreign-country resettlement.

In September the government stated it had granted residency permits to more than 100,000 Syrian nationals since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, bringing the total Syrian population in the country to approximately 240,000. The government also sponsored programs outside of the country to help refugees, including funding a Syrian refugee camp in Jordan.

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. The government, however, generally did not send individuals who expressed a fear of return back to their country of origin against their will.

The government continued to detain selected persons seeking refugee status while they awaited resettlement to other countries. While the government extended informal protection from return to refugees in some cases, any such 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.

Access to Basic Services: As access to employment, education, and other public services is based on an individual's status as a legal resident, persons with a claim to refugee status were generally not eligible for such benefits. The government provided or allowed access to some services on a case-by-case basis, often upon the intervention of UNHCR representatives.

### **Stateless Persons**

Estimates suggested 20,000 to 100,000 bidoon, or persons without citizenship, resided in the country. 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. The government has a naturalization process, and individuals may apply for citizenship. For example, 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 the government generally accepts. A foreign woman may receive citizenship through marriage to a citizen after 10 years of marriage. Anyone may receive a passport by presidential fiat.

Children of citizen mothers married to foreigners have the right to apply for citizenship, and the government has a committee to review such applications. In 2012 the government expanded the committee's mandate to review the applications of those 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 of stateless persons receiving citizenship. Stateless persons were known to have taken another country's citizenship, namely that of the Republic of Comoros, to gain a passport and legal identification. Nevertheless, if authorities deported them, the Republic of Comoros would not accept these persons, and they had to find refuge elsewhere.

Bidoon reportedly faced harassment by governing officials and were vulnerable because of their lack of legal status. They faced discrimination in employment and restricted access to medical care and education. Without passports or other forms of identification, their movement was restricted, both within the country and internationally.

### **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. Women attended some majlises, but male proxies reportedly voiced concerns of women in majlises closed to them. There were reports authorities occasionally held women-only majlises.

#### **Elections and Political Participation**

Recent Elections: While there were no democratic general elections during the year, in October an appointed electorate of more than 224,000 members, representing approximately one-fifth of the total citizen population, elected 20 FNC members of the FNC, a 40-member consultative body with some legislative authority. Each emirate receives seats in the FNC based on population. Each emirate's ruler appoints that emirate's portion of the other 20 FNC members. The electorate appointment process lacked transparency. Approximately 35 percent of eligible voters participated, electing one woman among the 20 FNC members, with another eight appointed by their respective rulers.

Political Parties and Political Participation: Citizens did not have the right to form political parties. There were no reports of citizens attempting to form political parties during the year.

Participation of Women and Minorities: Although some traditional practices discouraged women from engaging in political participation, the government prioritized women's participation and running for office in the October FNC elections. Women constituted 40 percent of the electoral pool appointed by the emirates' rulers and 22 percent of FNC candidates. There were five women in the 24-member cabinet, two of whom held ministerial portfolios, and nine women, one elected, who served in the FNC. In November a woman was elected speaker of the FNC.

Except in the judiciary and military, religious and racial minorities (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 in government appointments and contract allocations existed. The Ministries of the Interior and Justice and the state audit institutions are responsible for combating government corruption.

Corruption: The government took steps to punish government corruption. For example, in April authorities in Dubai sentenced two police officers to three years in jail for forging police reports.

Financial Disclosure: There are no financial disclosure laws, regulations, or codes of conduct requiring officials to disclose their income and assets, although the operating instructions for the Federal National Council elections required all candidates to disclose sources of funding for their campaigns.

Public Access to Information: The law provides for public access to government information, but the government followed this provision selectively. Requests for access usually went unanswered. There were no reports of public outreach activities or training for public officials to encourage the effective use of the law to access public information.

#### **Section 5. Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights**

The government generally did not permit organizations to focus on political issues. Two recognized local human rights organizations existed: the government-supported EHRA, which focused on human rights problems and complaints such as those concerning labor conditions, stateless persons' rights, and prisoners' well-being and treatment; and the government-subsidized Emirates Association for Lawyers and Legal Council (formerly the Jurists' Association Human Rights Administration), which focused on human rights education and conducted seminars and symposia subject to government approval. Several EHRA members worked in the government and the organization received government funding. Nevertheless, the EHRA viewed itself as operating independently and with neutrality without government interference, apart from the requirements that apply to all associations in the country.

The government directed, regulated, and subsidized participation by NGO members in events outside the country. All participants must obtain government permission before attending such events. The government also restricted entry to the country by members of international NGOs. The Anti-Discrimination Law provides the legal basis for further restricting events such as conferences and seminars.

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: The government did not allow international human rights NGOs to be based in the country but, on a limited basis, allowed representatives to visit. In May, however, authorities prevented an AI representative from entering the country. There were no transparent standards governing visits from international NGO representatives.

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

The constitution provides for equality of citizens without regard to race or social status. Additionally, the law (including the Anti-Discrimination Law) prohibits discrimination based on disability, religion, belief, sect, faith, creed, race, and ethnicity. Legal and cultural discrimination, however, existed and went unpunished. The law does not prohibit discrimination based on sex, political opinion, national origin, citizenship, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, language, or communicable diseases; however, the constitution states all persons are equal before the law. The government took some steps to advance the rights of women and promote their role in all sectors of society such as encouraging their participation as candidates in the October FNC election.

## Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalizes rape, which is punishable by death under the penal code. The penal code does not address spousal rape. The penal code allows men to use physical means, including violence, at their discretion against female and minor family members. Punishments issued by courts in domestic abuse cases were often minimal. According to local media, the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children dealt with 453 cases of domestic abuse at a shelter in Dubai during the first half of the year, an increase above 2014 attributed to increased awareness of domestic violence problems and avenues available for victims to seek help.

In general the government did not enforce domestic abuse laws effectively, and domestic abuse against women, including spousal abuse, remained a problem. There were reports employers raped or sexually assaulted foreign domestic workers. These cases rarely went to court, and those that did had few convictions. 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. Additionally, female victims of rape or other sexual crimes faced the possibility of prosecution for consensual sex 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. Women, however, often were reluctant to file formal charges of abuse for social, cultural, and economic reasons. There were domestic abuse centers in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Ras al Khaimah, and Sharjah.

The government, in coordination with social organizations, undertook efforts to increase awareness about domestic violence, conducting seminars, educational programs, symposiums, and conferences. The Dubai Foundation for Women and Children increased awareness about domestic violence by hosting workshops in schools and universities and by sponsoring radio advertisements about the services the organization offers to all those residing in or transiting the country.

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. The practice was rare and largely confined to foreign residents.

Sexual Harassment: The government prosecutes harassment via the penal code. 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 under age 14. Conviction of “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.

Reproductive Rights: Married couples have the right to decide freely the number, spacing, and timing of their children; have the information and means to do so; and have the right to attain the highest standard of reproductive health free from discrimination, coercion, and violence. Authorities typically deported unmarried noncitizen workers who become pregnant. Abortion is illegal; however, authorities may make exceptions if the pregnancy endangers the life of the mother. The government only provides access to contraception, obstetric and gynecologic services, prenatal care, and delivery care to married female citizens. The government did not provide antenatal care for noncitizen pregnant women.

Discrimination: The treatment of citizen and noncitizen women differed. The treatment of Emirati women showed some signs of improvement, while noncitizen women continued to face women’s rights abuses.

Women faced legal and economic discrimination. The government’s interpretation of sharia applies in personal status cases and family law. The law forbids Muslim women to marry non-Muslims. Unlike men, female citizens married to noncitizens do not automatically pass citizenship to their children. A 2011 presidential decree gives children with Emirati mothers and non-Emirati fathers the right to apply for citizenship at age 18. The government granted citizenship to the children of Emirati mothers during the year. In August the government announced that children with citizen mothers and foreign fathers may enlist for national military service, which is required of citizens.

The law permits a man to have as many as four wives. Women normally inherit less than men under the government’s interpretation of sharia. A son may inherit double what a daughter inherits when their parent dies.

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 maintained her upkeep or that of their children. Alternatively, women may divorce by paying compensation or surrendering their dowry to their

husbands. Strict interpretation of sharia does not apply to child custody cases, as courts have applied the “the best interests of the child” standard since 2010.

Sex outside of marriage is a crime, and the government may imprison and deport noncitizen women if they bear children out of wedlock. Authorities arrested some individuals who were victims of sexual assault for engaging in sexual relations outside of marriage; authorities usually commuted prison sentences or fined the victims for other less serious offenses.

Women who worked in the private sector regularly did not receive equal benefits and reportedly faced discrimination in promotions and equality of wages (see section 7.d for additional information).

While foreign men working in the country could obtain residency permits for their families for three years, a foreign woman could obtain permits for her family only if she was working in a job deemed rare or with a specialty such as health care, engineering, or teaching. Such a permit was renewable for one-year.

The government reported that 95 percent of citizen women pursued higher education after high school, and women constituted more than 70 percent of government university students. Federal law prohibits coeducation in public schools and 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.

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

In February the government formed a Gender Balance Council to promote a greater role for female citizens who were working outside the home. To date the council has primarily engaged in speaking and awareness raising activities. The GWU also supported the rights of women, children, and families by introducing seminars, workshops, and conferences aimed at educating and empowering women. The government requires female participation on the boards of government agencies and companies.

## **Children**

Birth Registration: Children derive citizenship generally from their parents. The children of Emirati mothers married to foreigners, however, did not receive citizenship automatically. The government registered births of bidoon, but it did not automatically grant them citizenship.

Education: Education is compulsory through the ninth grade; however, compulsory education was not enforced, and some children did not attend school, especially children of noncitizens. Noncitizen children could enroll in public schools only if they scored more than 90 percent on entrance examinations, which authorities administered only in Arabic. The government provided free primary education only to citizens. Public schools are not coeducational after kindergarten. Islamic studies are mandatory in all public schools and in private schools serving Muslim students.

Child Abuse: The law prohibits child abuse and the government has taken steps to increase awareness of the issue. The government provided shelter and help for child victims of abuse or sexual exploitation. Newspapers frequently advertised the Ministry of Interior's child abuse reporting hotline and carried stories of prosecutions of child abuse cases. According to authorities, Dubai police recorded 26 cases of child abuse during the first nine months of 2015. In October the Human Rights Department of the Ministry of Interior hosted a conference on combating child abuse.

Early and Forced Marriage: The legal age of marriage for both men and women is 18.

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 under age 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. For further information, see the Department of State's report on compliance at [travel.state.gov/content/childabduction/en/legal/compliance.html](http://travel.state.gov/content/childabduction/en/legal/compliance.html) and country-specific information at [travel.state.gov/content/childabduction/english/country/ united-arab-emirates.html](http://travel.state.gov/content/childabduction/english/country/ united-arab-emirates.html).

## **Anti-Semitism**

There were no synagogues for the very small foreign Jewish population (which likely constituted less than 1 percent of the population); it could, however, conduct regular prayer services in private homes. Some media contained anti-Semitic remarks.

There were reports of anti-Semitic materials available at some book fairs.

## **Trafficking in Persons**

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at [www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/](http://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/).

## **Persons with Disabilities**

The law prohibits discrimination against persons who have physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities in employment, education, air travel and other transportation, access to health care, or the provision of other state services; however, some discrimination occurred.

Public and private facilities provided education, health services, sports, and vocational rehabilitation for persons with disabilities; however, capacity was insufficient. Many of the facilities were reserved for citizens, thereby excluding noncitizen persons with disabilities. The Ministry of Social Affairs is the central body dealing with 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 entry access for persons with disabilities.

Government entities, including the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Services for Educational Development Foundation for Inclusion, and the UAE Sports Organizations for Persons with Disabilities, sponsored conferences and workshops emphasizing the inclusion and integration of persons with disabilities into schools and workplaces. The Ministry of Social Affairs, which ran a number of rehabilitation centers, stated that the increased emphasis on integrating children with disabilities into regular schools opened up space in their rehabilitation centers to better accommodate persons with more significant disabilities.

Various departments within the Ministries of Labor, Education, and Social Affairs are responsible for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, and the government enforced these rights in areas related to employment, housing, and other entitlement programs. While enforcement was effective for jobs in the public sector, the government did not sufficiently encourage hiring in the private sector. The emirate of Abu Dhabi reserved 2 percent of government jobs for citizens with disabilities, and other emirates and the federal government included statements in their human resources regulations emphasizing priority for hiring citizens with disabilities in the public sector. 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 societal discrimination.

The government sponsored several initiatives to host international conferences for persons with disabilities emphasizing rights, opportunities, and the importance of inclusion into society. The government also worked to improve the accessibility of parks, swimming pools, and other public areas.

The General Authority of Sports and Youth Welfare provided programs to promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities in sporting activities. The Disabled Sports Federation was established to support these initiatives.

Officials overseeing the FNC election assisted voters with disabilities, and polling stations had wheelchair ramps at both the men's and women's entrances, as well as specific voting machines dedicated to persons with disabilities.

### **National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities**

Approximately 89 percent of the country's residents were noncitizens, more than half of whom originated from the Indian subcontinent. 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. Under the penal code, those who issue checks with an insufficient account balance are punishable by detention or fine. By presidential decree citizens have immunity from prosecution for bounced checks.

## **Acts of Violence, Discrimination, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity**

Both civil law and sharia criminalize consensual same-sex sexual activity. Under sharia individuals who engage in consensual same-sex sexual conduct are subject to the death penalty. Dubai's penal code allows for up to a 10-year prison sentence for conviction of such activity. There were reports of arrests for consensual same-sex activity.

Due to social conventions and potential repression, LGBTI organizations did not operate openly, nor were gay pride marches or gay rights advocacy events held. Information was not available on official or private discrimination in employment, occupation, housing, statelessness, or access to education or health care based on sexual orientation and gender identity. 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 deported foreign residents and referred the cases of individuals who wore clothing deemed inappropriate to the public prosecutor. For example, in August authorities arrested and deported two men for being drunk and wearing women's clothing in public.

## **HIV and AIDS Social Stigma**

Noncitizens and, to a lesser extent, citizens, with HIV/AIDS and other diseases faced discrimination. Legal protections regarding employment and education discrimination against 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 HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, or leprosy. Noncitizens that 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.

In June the Health Ministry, in conjunction with UNICEF, sponsored an awareness campaign aimed at educating youth between ages 16 and 24 about the risks of HIV/AIDS.

## **Section 7. Worker Rights**

### **a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining**

The law does not protect the right to organize, strike, or bargain collectively. The law does not permit 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 Labor must approve and register individual employment contracts. The labor law does not apply to domestic and agricultural workers or to most workers in export processing zones.

Private sector employees may file collective employment dispute complaints with the Ministry of Labor, which by labor 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.

All foreign workers have the right to file labor-related grievances with the Ministry of Labor. The ministry sometimes intervened in foreign workers' disputes with employers and helped negotiate private settlements. The law provides for employers to request the government to cancel the work permit of, and deport for up to one year, any foreign worker for unexcused absences of more than seven days or for participating in a strike.

The government generally enforced labor law. 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. Professional associations were not independent, and the Ministry of Labor had broad powers to interfere in their activities. For example, the Ministry of Labor had to license and approve professional associations, which were required to receive government approval for international affiliations and travel by members.

Foreign workers may belong to 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 conditions of work.

The threat of deportation discouraged noncitizens from voicing work-related grievances. Nonetheless, occasional protests and strikes took place, such as a strike by hundreds of workers in Dubai in March and a protest in Ras al Khaimah in April over pay. The government did not always punish workers for nonviolent protests or strikes, but it dispersed such protests during the year, and sometimes deported noncitizen participants.

In April an independent investigator released results of an inquiry into allegations that authorities mistreated, imprisoned, and subsequently deported workers who participated in a 2013 strike at a construction site of the New York University (NYU) in Abu Dhabi. The investigation concluded the contractor in question dismissed some strikers in compliance with labor law.

One of the activities of the government-supported NGO, EHRA, was to promote the rights of workers. It conducted unannounced visits to labor camps and work sites to monitor conditions and reported violations to the Ministry of Labor.

#### **b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor**

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor; however, the government did not effectively enforce the law, particularly in the domestic labor sector.

The government took steps to prevent forced labor through continued implementation of the Wages Protection System (WPS) (see section 7.e.). The government continued to enforce fines for employers who entered incorrect information into the WPS, did not pay workers for more than 60 days, made workers sign documents falsely attesting to receipt of benefits, and made workers pay recruitment fees.

In September the government issued three decrees that aim to ensure that work is performed on a voluntary basis throughout the employment relation. The first decree addresses contract substitution by requiring a migrant worker to sign an offer letter in his home country, which is turned into a contract when he arrives in the United Arab Emirates. The second decree addresses ending the employment relationship, allowing either party to do so subject to certain requirements of notice and/or indemnification. The third decree addresses an employee's ability to switch employers without the consent of his current employer.

It was relatively common for employers to subject migrant workers, predominantly from South and East Asia and employed mainly in domestic work, but to some degree in construction work, to conditions indicative of forced labor. Such treatment typically included nonpayment of wages, withholding passports, threats and in some cases physical or sexual abuse.

The April independent investigative report on labor conditions at the NYU campus worksite (see section 7.a.) reported cases of involuntary passport retention, delays in wage payments, and some cases of involuntary overtime, particularly among subcontractors who employed approximately 30 to 35 percent of the workforce. Contrary to previous international media reports, the investigation did not find evidence to support allegations of substandard housing or of widespread labor mistreatment among the majority of workers directly contracted.

Some employers subjected domestic workers to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; in a few cases, such abuse led to death. Local newspapers reported on court cases involving violence committed against maids and other domestic workers. For example, in July the Abu Dhabi criminal court convicted a husband and wife of enslaving and killing their maid.

In violation of the law, employers routinely held employees' passports, thus restricting their freedom of movement. Some employers reportedly prevented domestic workers from leaving the country by withholding their passports. Upon arrival in the country, employers required some foreign workers to sign contracts that had lower salaries or involved a different type of work than was stated in the original contracts signed in their country of origin, a practice known as "contract substitution."

Some employers required some foreign workers in the domestic and agricultural sectors to compensate them for hiring expenses by providing unpaid labor. In some cases employers illegally withheld wages as repayment for visa and other expenses that were their legal responsibility. Some employers did not pay their employees even after they satisfied these debts. Workers who had borrowed money to pay recruiting fees in their home countries spent most of their salaries trying to repay either the labor recruiters or lenders. These debts often trapped workers in exploitive work conditions.

Also see the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at [www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/](http://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/).

**c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment**

The law prohibits employment of persons under age 15 and includes special provisions regarding children ages 15 to 18. The law, however, excludes domestic and agricultural work, leaving underage workers in these sectors unprotected. There are separate provisions regarding foreign resident children age 16 or older. The Ministry of Labor is responsible for enforcing the regulations and generally did so effectively; violations were uncommon.

**d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment or Occupation**

The Anti-Discrimination Law prohibits all forms of discrimination based on religion, ethnicity, or race, although without specific reference to employment. No specific law prohibits or regulates discrimination regarding sex, political opinion, national origin or citizenship, social origin, disability sexual orientation or gender identity, age, language, or communicable diseases with respect to employment or occupation. Women who worked in the private sector, however, regularly did not receive equal benefits and reportedly faced discrimination in promotions and equality of wages. 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. Nevertheless, job advertisements requesting applications only from certain nationalities were common and not regulated.

**e. Acceptable Conditions of Work**

There is no minimum wage. There was little information on domestic, agricultural, or construction worker salaries or on public sector salaries.

The law prescribes a 48-hour workweek and paid annual holidays. The law states daily working hours must not exceed eight hours in the day or night shifts and provides for overtime pay to employees working more than eight hours in a 24-hour period.

There are government occupational health and safety standards. The law requires 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, from 12:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m., between June 15 and September 15, for laborers who work in open areas such as construction sites.

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.

Wage, overtime, and other working condition protections do not apply to workers in domestic services, agriculture, and other categories administered by the Ministry of Interior. These workers were vulnerable to unacceptable work conditions.

The Ministry of Labor was responsible for enforcing laws governing acceptable conditions of work for workers in semiskilled and professional job categories but did not do so in all sectors, including the informal sector and the domestic labor sector. To monitor the private sector, the ministry had active departments for inspection, occupational safety, combating human trafficking, and wage protection. The ministry periodically published statistics on its inspection and enforcement activities.

The Ministry of Interior was responsible for regulating domestic labor, and the enforcement of protections against workers was weaker in this segment. There was no information available on the informal economy or an estimate of its size; however, anecdotal reports indicate it was common for individuals to enter the country on a short-term visa and join the informal job sector.

The Ministry of Labor conducted inspections of workplaces--primarily construction sites and labor camps. The government also routinely fined employers for violating the midday break rule and published compliance statistics.

The government took action to address wage payment issues. Its vigorous implementation of the WPS and fines for noncompliance discouraged employers from withholding salaries to foreign workers under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Labor. The WPS, an electronic salary-transfer system, allowed institutions to pay workers via approved banks, exchange bureaus, and other financial institutions, to assure timely and full payment of agreed wages. The WPS, however, did not apply to foreign workers under the authority of the Ministry of Interior, including domestic and agricultural workers. The Ministry of Labor dismissed approximately half of the complaints made to the "My Salary" hotline as not meeting the required criteria for salary complaints.

The Ministry of Labor continued its efforts to provide adequate health standards and facilities in labor camps, including food safety. It conducted regular

inspections of health and living conditions at labor camps and stated that it issued written documentation on problems to be corrected and reviewed them in subsequent inspections. 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 Arabic, English, Hindi, Urdu, Filipino, and other languages spoken by foreign residents through which workers were able to report delayed wage payments or other violations. Ministry of Labor mobile van units also visited some labor camps through which ministry officials informed workers of their rights.

In June 2014 the government instituted a revised standard contract for domestic workers. According to the government, the contract protects domestic workers under a binding agreement between employers and domestic workers. The contract provides for transparency and legal protections. Officials from some labor-sending countries criticized the process, saying it prevented foreign embassies from reviewing and approving the labor contracts of their citizens. As a result some countries halted their citizens' travel to the country to assume domestic labor positions.

The government allows 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 in certain cases. The government designed this regulation to improve job mobility and reduce the vulnerability of foreign workers to abuse. The regulation, however, did not apply to day laborers, construction workers, or domestic servants.

Violations of wage, overtime, and other labor regulations were common in sectors employing migrant workers, such as construction. Foreign workers frequently did not receive their wages from employers on time, and sometimes for extended periods. The weakness in protections for domestic and agricultural workers left them vulnerable to excessive work hours, nonpayment or underpayment of wages, and otherwise abusive or exploitative work conditions.

Each emirate enforced its own standards for housing accommodations. Dubai emirate required construction companies and industrial firms to appoint safety officers accredited by authorized entities to promote greater site safety. Some low-wage and foreign workers faced substandard living conditions including overcrowded apartments or unsafe and unhygienic lodging in labor camps.

A report released in April by Nardello and Company regarding working conditions during 2013 and 2014 at the NYU Abu Dhabi construction project stated workers often had to pay recruitment fees that employers did not reimburse and employers did not allow them to retain their passports.

There were cases in which workers were injured or killed on job sites; however, authorities typically did not disclose details of the deaths, including the adequacy of safety measures.

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