

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

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Life in the UAE: ‘We expect anything from the authorities - we are afraid of everything’

The two men are so scared they don't want to be named.

They know that if the authorities in their home country, the United Arab Emirates, hear them criticize the human rights situation in the country, their families will pay a high price.

Both activists are part of a group of 94 currently on trial for their alleged link with an organization which threatened national security.

Many are members of the Reform and Social Guidance Association (*al-Islah*), an organization that has for years peacefully advocated greater adherence to Islamic precepts and freedom in the country.

They face charges including violating article 180 of the Penal Code, which prohibits founding, organizing, or operating a group that aims to ‘overthrow’ the country’s political system. If convicted, they could face up to 15 years in prison.

People linked with *al-Islah* started facing pressure from the authorities in March 2011 when over a hundred activists, academics, lawyers and student leaders sent a petition to the country’s authorities, calling for parliamentary elections and freedom.

What unfolded since then has been unprecedented for the UAE.

After the petition was sent, the UAE’s intelligence services started harassing human rights and political activists across the country.

In April 2011, four NGOs including the Jurists’ and Teachers’ Associations were ordered closed.

Two months later, five men were put on trial on defamation-related charges in connection with articles posted on the *UAE Hewan* online discussion forum. The five were sentenced to prison terms and released the following day under a presidential pardon, though their criminal records still stand.

Stepping up the pressure

By March 2012, pressure against activists began to increase.

One by one, the 94 now on trial, including a handful of women, were arrested. Some lost their jobs; others were vilified in the media.

The wives of many of them were also fired from their jobs, and some of their children were forced out of schools.

Relatives of many of them are now banned from travelling out of the country.

Those arrested were taken to unknown locations; some have said in court that they were tortured. They were detained for a month before being allowed to make a call home to inform their loved ones they were alive.

Up to a year passed before those detained had a chance to face a judge for the first time in March 2013.

“[The 2011 petition] wasn’t the first petition. In 2008 we had done one regarding a new media law. With that one, they didn’t say anything, they just accepted it, but maybe now because our petition came after the “Arab Spring”, they went crazy. They became like someone had slapped them on the face and they wanted revenge,” said one of the men to Amnesty International.

“They want to control everything and now they show in the media that we are against them, the country and the people.”

Unfair trial

Human rights organizations including Amnesty International have said the mass trial of the 94 is flawed. Due process has not been followed while independent observers and the international media have not been allowed in the court.

Family members were banned from the court after the arrest of Abdulla al-Hadidi, the son of one of the defendants on 21 March. He was charged with publishing, ‘without probity and in bad faith’, details of a public trial session via the internet.

In March 2013, Ahmed Nashmi al-Dhafeeri, the international trial observer for Amnesty International, and Noemie Crottaz, a representative of the Geneva-based human rights organization Alkarama who had planned to attend the first session of the trial were denied entry to the country.

At least 64 of the detainees were held in undisclosed locations for up to a year before the trial. Many of them did not see a lawyer until late February and when they did, meetings were held in the presence of a representative of the state security prosecutor.

From bad to worse

The activists who spoke to Amnesty International said the human rights situation in the United Arab Emirates was getting “worse and worse”.

“In the UAE, if you talk about anything blaming the authorities they attack you in the media and suddenly you find yourself arrested. You cannot talk about politics, democracy, [or] the ruler’s family. When you talk about elections, you are considered a criminal. They want us to think the way they want.”

The two men understand more than anyone the price their relatives pay for their human rights work.

“One of the people arrested is my brother [...]They went to his home in July 2012 with 20 people and five cars. They didn’t have an arrest warrant. They took everything, computers, phones and they took him. We didn’t know where they were until March 2013 when he was brought to the court,” one of the man explained.

“My nephew was arrested in December. He is 19 years [old] and they took him because he wrote on Twitter. We don’t know where he is. He called us once and said: ‘I’m fine, just pray for me’.”

Since the first charges were brought against the defendants, some of their relatives have been

prevented from leaving the country.

As one of the man explained: "My wife went to renew her and my son's passport and they were not allowed. When my wife asked what the problem was, they said: 'Ask your husband'".

The verdict in the trial of the 94 is expected on 2 July.

"We expect anything from the authorities. We are afraid of everything. They don't have a limit in doing anything with people. We are only fighting for people's rights," they said.

As it published its Annual Report 2013, Amnesty International said the case is illustrative of the wider human rights situation in the Middle Eastern country, where during 2012 authorities intensified the crackdown on peaceful dissent which began in 2011 and has particularly targeted online and social media.

"There's a great gap between the international image the UAE promotes of itself as a prosperous tourist destination and the many abuses that take place behind closed doors," said Ann Harrison, Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International.

"In order to live up to its public image, the authorities in the UAE must bring their policies and practices in line with international human rights standards.

"We have been calling for many months for the release all prisoners of conscience - such as prominent human rights lawyers Mohamed al-Roken and Mohamed al-Mansoori; and for the UAE authorities to ensure that due process guarantees are upheld in all trials and to end all unlawful restrictions on the peaceful exercise of the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.