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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain Inc, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[19 August 2022]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Ongoing Detention of Human Rights Defenders in the United Arab Emirates

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) welcomes this opportunity at the 51st session of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council (HRC) to draw attention to the ongoing imprisonment of human rights defenders and pro-democracy activists in the United Arab Emirates. Since the 2011 Arab Spring, Emirati authorities have severely restricted expression and suppressed dissenting voices critical of the government. Human rights activists continue to be arbitrarily detained, harassed, and subjected to trials marred by due process violations. Individuals are routinely arrested for questioning the authorities, calling for freedom of expression, or criticizing the United Arab Emirates' role in the war in Yemen.

The Situation of Human Rights Defenders in the United Arab Emirates and the Silencing of Dissent

From 2013 onward, the government has expanded its legal ability to stifle dissent by promulgating and updating restrictive laws. The government has taken further action to limit fundamental freedoms by building on an already expansive legal framework designed to criminalize many forms of activism, peaceful criticism, and dissent. The comments of the UN's Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders in February 2021 indicate that persecution of human rights defenders in the United Arab Emirates remains systematic. The Emirate's vague national security legislation empowers authorities to deem a wide range of behaviors to be threats to national security, thereby empowering the State Security Department to target human rights defenders and other peaceful activists. The individuals detained and held under these auspices are often held in separate sections of prisons or in undisclosed locations for extended periods and away from impartial judicial supervision and their families. During this period, detainees are at the most risk of torture and abuse. Among the methods used by officials are sleep deprivation, denial of medical treatment, verbal threats, beatings, and sexual assault.

The new Cybercrime Law, adopted by Federal Decree Law No. 34 of 2021, went into effect on January 2, 2022, replacing the Emirates' former Federal Law No. 5 of 2012 on Combatting Cybercrime. However, the new text does not address the problematic provisions of its predecessor and, on the contrary, further restricts civic space and free speech within the United Arab Emirates and maintains the criminalization of acts that are protected under international law.

The Targeting of Ahmed Mansoor and Dr. Mohammed al-Roken

On 20 March 2017, human rights defender Ahmed Mansoor was arrested from his home in a pre-dawn raid. He was held for over a year in pre-trial detention until the State Security Chamber of the Federal Appeals Court sentenced him on 29 May 2018 to ten years in prison and fined him more than 1 million dirhams on charges of "insulting the 'status and prestige of the United Arab Emirates' and its rulers" and publishing false reports on social media aiming to harm the country's relations with neighboring countries. These charges stem from his human rights work and public criticism of the United Arab Emirates. His sentence was upheld on 31 December 2018, and since then he reportedly has been held in solitary confinement in a small cell with no bed or water. In March 2019, Mansoor began a hunger strike to protest those conditions. On 16 July 2021, a letter authored by Mansoor was published which detailed the mistreatment he suffered during his imprisonment and referenced a series of abuses perpetrated by officials within the United Arab Emirates's state security agency. The letter cites a wide range of violations of international human rights standards, including deprivation of basic necessities, indefinite solitary confinement, and the prolonged denial of meaningful contact with other individuals. Mansoor continues to be detained to date.

Dr. Mohammed al-Roken, a prominent activist within the United Arab Emirates, was arrested by Emirati authorities twice in 2006 after he helped found the al-Islah Association, an Emirati based group focused on human rights. On both occasions he was arrested without warrant, detained for days, and questioned about the al-Islah Association. During one of these unlawful detainments, his passport was confiscated to prevent him from leaving the country, he was forced to “sign a pledge agreeing to stop writing for newspapers and giving interviews,” and was subjected to surveillance without any legal proceeding or warrant.” Dr. al-Roken was arrested again by Emirati authorities on 17 July 2012 when he was inquiring after the arrests of his son and his son-in-law who had been taken hours earlier by UAE security forces. While he was awaiting trial, Dr. al-Roken was detained in an undisclosed location for nearly one year, tortured, and denied access to a lawyer until a few weeks before his trial began. In July 2013, Mr. al-Roken was convicted by the Federal Supreme Court of Abu Dhabi, along with 68 other people, and received a 10-year prison sentence and three years of probation. In 2021 the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders publicly condemned the United Arab Emirates’ imprisonment and treatment of Dr. al-Roken and called on them to release him.

Prolonged Detention

In addition to being subjected to illegal practices such as a lack of independent investigations; the use of coerced confessions as evidence in trial proceedings; the denial of access to a lawyer; incommunicado detention; prolonged solitary confinement; overcrowded and unhygienic detention centers; the denial of adequate medical care; and torture and ill-treatment, human rights defenders are commonly detained in prison after the completion of their prison sentence without any legal justification. Similar to the country’s cybercrime law, the United Arab Emirates’ anti-terror law is exceedingly broad and allows Emirati authorities to prosecute acts of free expression, association, and assembly as terror crimes. Exceptionally concerning is the inclusion of language within the promulgated law that states that those “adopting extremist or terrorist thought” may be indefinitely detained for “counselling”. These so-called “rehabilitation” programs are not only inconsistent with international human rights law, but also contradict the United Arab Emirates Penal Code itself, which requires the authorities to release convicts upon the expiration of their sentences.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As a member of the UN HRC, it is imperative that the United Arab Emirates be held to high standards as it relates to its commitments to human rights. The incarceration of activists, particularly those advocating for human rights, is deeply concerning. Although four prisoners of conscience were released on 12 April 2021, this belies the Emirati government’s escalation of its crackdown on human rights defenders and activists.

Due to this ongoing persecution, ADHRB urges the government of the United Arab Emirates to:

- Release all imprisoned human rights defenders and activists, detained in violation of their right to freedom of expression.
- Comply with international standards for prisoners, including by allowing regular family visits, access to healthcare and regular consultations with their lawyers.
- End the practice of solitary confinement for detained individuals.
- Free all prisoners who have been denied release after the completion of their sentence.

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