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# The United Arab Emirates: Statehood and Nation-Building in a Traditional Society

Frauke Heard-Bey

*Nationals represent barely 20% of the population in the United Arab Emirates, but form the economically and socially privileged group of UAE citizens. The Rulers of the seven emirates were able to retain the historical loyalty of the "Emiratis" by advancing the economic development of the individual states, while Abu Dhabi-financed federal development helped to create a viable national state. Democratization is not of the same urgency as in some neighboring Gulf countries.*

Following the death on November 2, 2004 of Shaykh Zayid bin Sultan Al Nahayyan, who had been the UAE's only President in 33 years of the country's existence as a modern state, it is an apt moment to take stock of the stage of this young nation's development. At the time of the imminent withdrawal of the British military and diplomatic protection between 1968 and 1971, when his emirate and a group of other small shaykhdoms had to decide on their political structure and future statehood, Shaykh Zayid had been an ardent advocate of political cooperation between the Gulf states, which were affected by this decision. Initially Bahrain and Qatar were expected to form part of a federal solution. When these two decided in July of 1971 to "go it alone" the seven Trucial States formed a federation, called the United Arab Emirates.<sup>1</sup> The seven Rulers voted for Shaykh Zayid to be the UAE's first President. He was re-elected by them every five years. By the end of his life, Shaykh Zayid left behind a remarkably prosperous and stable country. Testimony to this was the spontaneous outpouring of sympathy from leaders all over the world, who came in person to Abu Dhabi to express their condolences. Many individuals and organizations who had benefited from his generosity joined the people of the UAE and the Gulf region in mourning the passing of their benefactor.



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1. The member emirates in order of size are: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras Al Khaimah, Fujairah, Ajman and Umm al Qaywayn.

## ASPECTS DISTINGUISHING THE UAE FROM NEIGHBORING GULF COUNTRIES

The United Arab Emirates does not fit ordinary norms — be they the ones of political and social structures or of economic assets. Just over a generation ago the population of the Trucial States was illiterate and after the decline of the pearling industry they became so poor that during the 1950s entire families emigrated to neighboring Qatar.<sup>2</sup> Now, the UAE faces its biggest challenges because of its extreme and sudden wealth — not poverty. In many ways the UAE is still a developing country. Another surprising aspect of this extraordinary country is that Arabic is the declared official language of this Arab state, but Arabic is not the language used by the majority of the UAE's current inhabitants. Above all, it is the combination of the adopted federal form of government with the inherited role of the tribal rulers, which makes the UAE unique in terms of political structure and reality of governmental administration.

When this federation was proclaimed in 1971, the majority of the distant observers had their doubts about the viability of this precarious structure.<sup>3</sup> More than 30 years later it may be argued that the unorthodox nature of the UAE's political make-up may have proven to be its strength and is likely to serve the country well enough for the foreseeable future.

The expectation now is that the foundations, which have been laid down in over three decades, will sustain lasting stability and prosperity into the future — even without the charismatic leader. Because the UAE has such an unusual political make-up, much depends on the function of its federal structure — more precisely on the relationship between the central administration of the Federal Government and the powers vested in the individual emirates' authorities.

Regular observers of the Gulf are struck by the way in which Dubai has launched into a multifaceted development drive. Oil production is irreversibly in decline in Dubai. Now the desert, which in the past was common tribal grazing land, but for which the current generation has no use any more, is being turned into a source of instant wealth in the form of marketable real estate.<sup>4</sup> If the space, which is already

2. A lively description of the deprivations, which people endured as a matter of course is given by Mohammed Al Fahim in his autobiographical book *From Rags to Riches: A Story of Abu Dhabi* (London: The London Centre for Arab Studies, 1995).

3. See as an example an article by the *Financial Times*' Middle East correspondent, Richard Johns on December 21, 1972 writing: "...Last year the UAE's creation was in doubt until the eleventh hour ...For most well-wishers the fact that the UAE has held together so well as it has amounts to an achievement in itself. Not only was the birth difficult, but the early days were fraught with the pan-Arab furore over the British-sponsored deal ..." (meaning the dispute with Iran over three islands). He added: "...the egotism which in some way characterises all the Rulers...in fairness should be taken into account in any assessment of the UAE's progress over the past year."

4. Although title to the land cannot be obtained except as a gift from the Ruler, many thousands of items of real estate have come onto the Dubai market in the last three years in the form of offices and apartments in numerous clusters of high rise buildings, in very extensive residential "free zones" for villa developments as well as in the spectacular offshore developments of artificial islands and three

under construction now, is fully occupied, the population of Dubai would rise exponentially from the currently estimated 1.2 million. The other emirates also market their particular assets or interests. Sharjah is becoming the center for learning; Fujairah makes good use of its geographical situation astride the shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean. None of these developments can be sustained with the indigenous manpower — nor even the current, locally available expatriate manpower. While it is certainly seen as a very good thing for every individual emirate to develop a flourishing economy of its own, estimating the price in terms of social cost proves an enduring source of much debate among national politicians.

### *EARLY TENDENCIES TOWARDS CENTRALIZATION*

The UAE was founded as a federation in 1971. During the early years, however, the political thinking of most of the decision-makers tended to see this small country as one big field, which was in need of ‘blanket’ treatment for speedy material and social development. The educated elite of Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, and Ras al Khaimah were particularly keen that the entire country should benefit from the modernization, which had become possible thanks to the God-given oil resources. In their view, the tribal basis of the individual emirate’s political existence was an anachronism, which would fade in time.

Yet, over the years political reality has brought about the reverse. The integrity of every local emirate’s autonomy remains an all-important principle in the UAE’s political landscape. Throughout the more than three decades of its existence, the political life of the UAE was beholden to a “push-me-pull-you” relationship of the local versus the central powers.<sup>5</sup> Every time one of the emirates gave up its authority, for instance, over its police force or law courts or opened its power station to the federal ministry, such acts were hailed as progress by some, but regretted by others.

Why did, and still do, the particularistic ambitions of all the emirates continue to shape the political landscape of the UAE? Why are all seven ruling families still a power even beyond their own land such a long time after the country embarked on its drive to modernity?

### *THE MEMBER STATES OF THE FEDERATION HAVE ALWAYS BEEN UNEQUAL BROTHERS*

From the outset the member states of this federation were very unequal in size, population, and wealth. The emirate of Abu Dhabi covers approximately 87% of the 30,000 square miles of territory of the UAE. Some of the world’s most prolific oil

*continued from the previous page.*

reclaimed land areas in the shape of palm trees.

5. See also Frauke Heard-Bey, *The United Arab Emirates: Transition in a Federal State*, Occasional Paper 20 (London: Centre for Near and Middle Eastern Studies, School for Oriental and African Studies, 2001).

fields happen to be situated within Abu Dhabi's boundaries. At the time when the UAE was created in 1971, Abu Dhabi's revenues from oil that year were some \$450 million, while Dubai's were about \$40 million — and the other emirates had none. Out of the 180,000 inhabitants which were counted in the first population census conducted in 1968 in the seven Trucial States, nearly 59,000 lived in Dubai, over 46,000 in Abu Dhabi, but only 3,744 souls were counted in Umm al Qaywayn.

These emirates ended up being so different in size and economic fortune because their natural environment limited the choice of traditional economic activities, which a particular community could pursue. The people in the mountainous regions enjoyed more rainfall and were able to raise crops other than dates and herd sheep and goats as well as camels, while the tribes in the vast open desert of Abu Dhabi had to lead a life geared to the needs of the camel and the date palm.<sup>6</sup> This tribal society looked to its leaders for jurisdiction, economic support, or moral guidance in times of peace and expected military bravado and inspired negotiating skills in times of strife. Certain families have filled this leadership role for generations. Over time, some attracted an ever larger number of tribes to pay them allegiance and they became the paramount shaykhs of large tribal confederations. Thus, even in the past, inequality in size of population reflected differences in the political weight of these entities. All of them were only elevated to the status of "states" because their shaykhs — or "Rulers" — had since 1820 each entered into a series of treaty relationships with the British Government of India.

### *THE POPULATION IMBALANCE WELDS THE LOCAL POPULATION TOGETHER*

When the land was still known as the Trucial States, the society was homogeneous because the economic conditions were such that there was very little room for any section of the population to live very much better than any one else. The moral codes by which everyone lived were derived from a common understanding of Islam — free of sophisticated differences of interpretation.<sup>7</sup> Today in the 21st century the totality of the UAE's population represents one of the most racially, ethnically, religiously, and socially mixed to be found anywhere. The national society's characteristics can also no longer be defined as easily as in the past. Therefore, statements about the nationals' reaction to certain developments are bound to be only partially correct and cases may be found which confirm the opposite. Thus, while the national population is proud of the UAE's achievements and grateful for the transformation, which they have witnessed in their own lifetime, some aspects of the rapid developments are

6. The traditional economies are discussed in chapters five and six of Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates. A Society in Transition* (London: Longman, 1982; 3rd edn. Dubai: Motivate 2004). See also Frauke Heard-Bey, "The Tribal Society of the UAE and its Traditional Economy," in Ghareeb, Edmund and Ibrahim Al Abed (eds.) *Perspectives on the United Arab Emirates*, (London: Trident Press, 1997): pp. 254-272.

7. The homogeneous traditional society is discussed in Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States*, on pp. 132 ff and 189 ff and Frauke Heard-Bey, *Perspectives on the UAE*.

criticized. As is to be expected, demands are constantly being made for improvements in education, health service, judicial services, or in the provision of employment, to name just some of the most prominent topics. It is not surprising that the local population of the five poorer northern and eastern emirates should feel particularly underprivileged compared to people in Abu Dhabi and Dubai.<sup>8</sup>

Over the last three decades these inequalities have grown rather than diminished. Currently the UAE's population is estimated to be well over 4 million, with some 1.3 million living in the emirate of Abu Dhabi and well over one million in the city-state of Dubai.<sup>9</sup> But still only 2% of the total population of the UAE live in Umm al Qaywayn. In this estimate, the national population only accounts for about 670,000 people.<sup>10</sup>

Depending on the criteria which are applied to define a "national" — by passport or by genealogy — between 80% and 85% of the inhabitants of the UAE are foreigners, hailing from almost every country in the world but overwhelmingly from the Indian subcontinent and south-east Asia. This extraordinary population structure harbors a number of possible future problems for the UAE's national inhabitants.

The fact that nationals are constantly made aware of their being a minority in their own country has had the effect of bringing the national population of all the seven emirates together to form a completely undisputed class of the privileged few. In the face of the overwhelming presence of expatriates, all the genuine "locals" perceive themselves now first and foremost as UAE citizens — even though old tribal rivalries and new hierarchical discrimination continue to structure the local population internally. Despite various social strata, the local population all feel strong national solidarity, and accordingly have their very own set of behavior towards each other.<sup>11</sup> Since few of the "Emiratis" nowadays need to take up employment as an unskilled worker or a manual laborer, almost the entire local population could be considered in traditional social ranking as being "middle class" or above.

The UAE's unparalleled population imbalance is thus a considerable force, which has helped to build a nation state out of the individual tribally-based emirates. Older people compare the past with their present comforts and call themselves lucky to live in a country where the hardships of the past are over and considerable material comfort is guaranteed for every national family. A large number of individuals are even

8. For two weeks in December 2004 and January 2005 the Arabic daily *Al Khaleej* dedicated a two-page spread every day to interviews with people in remote villages and small towns, who complained about bad roads, electricity cuts, dilapidated schools, accumulation of rubbish, and the distances to the next hospital. In countries less accustomed to governmental care from the cradle to the grave, several of these highlighted shortcomings, like leaking roofs and broken pipes, would clearly not be the responsibility of the state.

9. This figure may not include the thousands of manual workers and specialists required for the completion of the numerous building projects in a frantic race for expansion in all fields — industrial, touristic, residential, financial, educational, or as a regional center for medical treatment.

10. Reliable population figures are notoriously difficult to come by, therefore estimates may vary a great deal.

11. This is noticeable e.g., when a national is involved in a traffic accident with another local — as opposed to an expatriate.

immeasurably rich. Younger people recognize the enormous privileges of being members of this wealthy nation. It offers them opportunities to lead a life, which is usually vastly better than that of the expatriate non-nationals in their midst.

However, in parallel to the steady development of the notion among most nationals in all corners of the federation, that they are proud to be citizens of the UAE, the individual emirates have lost nothing of their identity. On the contrary, over the decades each of the ruling families has been able to consolidate greatly their leadership, while their respective emirate has developed its distinctive economic and social role.

*CONSTITUTIONAL DIVISION BETWEEN  
“FEDERAL = CENTRALIZED” AND “LOCAL = EMIRATE”*

As can be expected, the theoretical framework delimiting the balance between centralizing elements and the role of the individual emirates was addressed before founding the new state, when the so called “Provisional Constitution” was agreed in July 1971. Indeed, 70 articles (out of a total of 152) elaborate on defining the powers of the central government — while the local or emirates’ role is dealt with in only four articles. This suggests that the authority of the individual Rulers was meant to shrink to make room for the well-defined central authorities. The seven Rulers had agreed to accord the lion-share of power to the centralized authority, because they themselves, jointly and together represented this authority. In the Constitution, which they all signed in 1971,<sup>12</sup> the “Supreme Council of Rulers” was named to be in overall command of the destiny of the new state. Did they make good use of this, their joint supreme power?

In order to deliver their obligation to a society, which was anxiously waiting for speedy development, the seven members of the Supreme Council would have had to operate like the board of directors or the management of a corporation. Effective guidance by the Supreme Council would have required that the seven Rulers meet as frequently as any cabinet to chart new developments and monitor progress of the projects in hand.

As it was, the Supreme Council met in formal session only a few times in the first five years after 1971 and not at all between November 1976 and March 1979. In these few formal sessions some of the burning issues of the time were addressed, but not necessarily resolved. The Rulers did, however, get together more frequently in informal gatherings such as shaykhly weddings, camel races, or condolences. But changes in the political direction usually came out of private meetings between only two or three Rulers at a time. During such rounds of consultation the sometimes delicate bilateral relationships were improved, cemented, put on hold, or put to good use — depending on the chemistry between the Rulers. The threads of this informal political network usually came together in the hands of Shaykh Zayid. This was so,

12. Shaykh Saqr bin Muhammad Al Qasimi signed reluctantly in February 1972, after his hopes for Ras Al Khaimah to become an oil producer had been dashed.

not primarily because of his constitutional position as President, but because he was “one of them” as the “*primus inter pares*” — quite apart from being the wealthy facilitator for whichever problem needed solving.

### GETTING STARTED – THE EARLY YEARS

The provisions of the Constitution, which delegated almost all the power to the President while the Supreme Council was not in session, became progressively less meaningful. In the crucial years between 1968 and 1971, the Rulers of the weaker states had agreed to the federation because they could not see an alternative to this arrangement, which the British were advocating, and which Abu Dhabi and Dubai favored. Also, in 1971 they all felt that there was a very good chance that every one of the emirates would become an oil producer and soon be equal to Abu Dhabi and Dubai in wealth and standing. When this did not materialize and the individual emirates could not finance their own ambitious dreams, the UAE started to head towards centralization of its administration. The federal or “Union” ministries attempted as far as possible to deliver improvements to the lives of an expectant population up-country on distant coasts and in inaccessible *wadis*.

During the first years of the federation, the federal ministries were themselves still in the process of being formed and getting organized. All institutions were short of suitable manpower. The absence of proper roads, harbors, and other means of communication also hindered attempts by the Abu Dhabi-financed central authorities to spread development and benefits evenly. From the beginning, the federal budget of the UAE was entirely funded by allocations from Abu Dhabi.

As the first President of the UAE, Shaykh Zayid wanted to forge ahead with building a strong state. Therefore, his generosity and largess in committing Abu Dhabi’s fast increasing wealth knew no bounds. He traveled all over the UAE as he pleased, to take charge of projects in distant parts of the country, to witness the progress, and to get feed-back from the population. In consequence, the population — in particular in the five poorer and more remote northern and eastern emirates — was beginning to see Abu Dhabi and the “Union” as their best hope for a better life. The local ruling families of these emirates had reason to worry, lest their tribal population eventually transfer their allegiance to a more distant benefactor with much more power to satisfy their expectations.

Recognizing that this would have led to great resentment on the part of fellow tribal leaders, Shaykh Zayid made certain that the Rulers of the five poorer emirates were able to continue to play an adequate part as benefactors for their local people. He bankrolled every one of the ruling families — incumbent in their old fortresses or modest new palaces — in order for them to maintain their status and respond to the ever-increasing demands made on their largesse. Thus, the local Rulers became ever more established in their role of administrators of developing communities. In consequence, they became increasingly reluctant to cede any more power in favor of the central federal government.



*THE CONSTITUTION AND INSTITUTIONALIZED  
PRESIDENTIAL AUTHORITY*

As has been stated before, the Provisional Constitution of the federation provided for strong legislative and executive power at the center, vested in the “Supreme Council of Rulers.” In the absence of an operational authority, the President was to assume the Council’s power to run the federal affairs on its behalf. An increasing number of educated nationals wanted to see this “devolved” power consolidated in the “Permanent Constitution” in order to make it possible to administer the UAE centrally for the benefit of all parts of the small but unequally developed society. They intended to use the impending need to draft a Permanent Constitution after five years as the vehicle to create a much more unified state.<sup>13</sup> In particular, they wanted to abolish article 23 of the Provisional Constitution, which gave each individual emirate exclusive control over its natural resources. A committee consisting of most of the federal ministers and members of the Federal National Council (FNC) worked for months, trying to agree on the structure of a modern Arab state to be built on the foundations of the fledgling federation. But when the text was put to vote, the Supreme Council of Rulers rejected it in July 1976 and decided to prolong the life of the unchanged Provisional Constitution for another five years.

Shaykh Zayid was ready to commit Abu Dhabi’s funds to develop the entire UAE as evenly and fairly as possible in the expectation that the particularistic policies of the individual emirates would be scaled down for the benefit of a simplified and unified administration. However, the Maktums in Dubai, in particular, were not prepared to condone the interference of federal administrators, or even worse, expatriate Arabs, as Dubai already had well-organized departments and functioning routines for the development of this commercial hub in place. Opposition to the impending development of ever more federal centralization was also awakening among the Rulers of the five northern and eastern emirates.

The question of centralized and “presidential” authority versus continued and increasing political power being vested in the individual emirates and their ruling families persisted. It culminated in the constitutional crisis of 1979, which had the same result as the one of 1976, namely that the Rulers of some emirates, led by Dubai, refused to endorse a popular memorandum presented to the Supreme Council by most of the educated national politicians. This memorandum called for a fairer deal over the country’s oil wealth by abolishing internal borders, for the revenues to be handled by the federal authorities, for unification of the armed forces, and an end to wasteful arms purchases by the individual emirates. While focusing on building a more centralized and more evenly distributed administration for the entire union, the authors of the memorandum also made demands for a more democratic system of decision making by giving full legislative powers to the Federal National Council (FNC), the appointed 40-member parliament.

13. According to article 144, the Provisional Constitution was to be replaced by a Permanent Constitution within five years.

The staunch “unifiers” of Abu Dhabi finally compromised with the “diversifiers” headed by Dubai, who would not cede their governmental and administrative authority to a central power. By then the principle had been established, that the ruling families were not going to be “retired.” However, the key issue of the 1979 crisis was not the abolition of the ruling families — it was about making the federation more governable and its institutions more professional.

### *EXTERNAL PRESSURES REQUIRED A UNIFIED FRONT*

The events in spring 1979 can now be seen as a turning point for the course, which the UAE’s constitutional make-up was to follow during the next growth period. The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran followed by the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s concentrated the minds of the UAE’s decision-makers and the young intellectuals alike on the dangers threatening the country from outside. Internally, it was considered bad form to continue to rock the boat during the prolonged illness of Shaykh Rashid bin Sa‘id, Ruler of Dubai, whose appointment as Prime Minister in 1979 had raised hopes that he would apply his administrative verve to the development of the entire UAE.

Constitutionally, the *status quo* was by now universally accepted. Every five years the Provisional Constitution was re-confirmed and Shaykh Zayid was re-elected by his fellow Rulers as President. More than ever the UAE benefited from the impressive leadership, which the President demonstrated in his foreign policy during the turbulent years of the first Gulf War raging just off the UAE’s shores. There were casualties from floating mines in UAE waters and a rocket attack was sustained by one of its oil production platforms. A constant worry was the threat of the Gulf becoming the theater for a showdown between the super powers. The re-flagging of Kuwaiti tankers appeared as a risky undertaking to observers further down the Gulf. Events in Afghanistan were watched closely, not least because it seemed likely that after Kabul, the tribes in Baluchistan could fall into Soviet hands and provide the long-sought Russian access to the warm waters of the Gulf<sup>14</sup> — a development, which would not be watched idly by Washington. In 1990/91 the UAE strongly and actively supported the war to liberate Kuwait.

### *INCREASED “EMIRATE-POWER” AND PROSPERITY*

Largely because domestic policy continued to be overshadowed by outside developments, the individual emirates experienced a previously unexpected consolidation of their importance in the 1980s and the 1990s. Thus, at the beginning of the new century the UAE turns out to be a country, which differs greatly from what could have been expected after its foundation in the early 1970s.

*Then*, the expectation was that prosperity would be spread most efficiently by

14. In the first decade of the 20th century rumors about Russian negotiations with Persian authorities to build a railway to Bandar ‘Abbas caused a stir in the administration of the British Indian Empire.

using Abu Dhabi's money with the help of an ever-expanding federal administration. Now, it is obvious that the vigorous development of each emirate's own economy contributes hugely to the overall prosperity of the entire country. Dubai is leading in creating wealth with real estate, tourism, trade, banking, and as a strategic location for foreign companies' regional activities. The scope and speed of new projects and initiatives announced in the media in Dubai leave many observers baffled. But the obvious aim of diversifying as much as possible and of creating a critical mass large enough to sustain many of the newly initiated economies is being acclaimed by other observers. Dubai's approach has already attracted the interest of neighboring emirates, and the countries of the region lose no time in trying to do likewise. Sharjah, which has over the years benefited from modest income from selling gas and a little oil, is home to a large number of small-scale industries, which serve Dubai and the entire region. Sharjah builds further on its claim as the "cultural capital" of the UAE. Many new tertiary educational institutions established in Sharjah attract fee-paying students from the Gulf, the Indian subcontinent, and the Arab world. As for Ras Al Khaimah, the newly-appointed Crown Prince of that emirate lost no time in setting very large real estate developments in motion in 2004. Fujairah continues to expand its leadership in all kinds of maritime services, helped by its international airport and ever-expanding port and bunkering facilities. Ajman benefits from proximity to Sharjah and Dubai but has also developed a fair amount of industry. Abu Dhabi is also likely to diversify much more actively than before away from dependence on its large oil revenues. Since the beginning of 2005, the announcements of one large construction or industrial project after another has transformed the economic scene in the capital – in particular for the private sector.<sup>15</sup>

It is obvious that in every emirate the nationals are eager to give credit to their ruling family for leading or facilitating their respective economic diversification. Thus, the erstwhile Trucial Rulers whom the British Raj conveniently used for effectively influencing the local Arab population, and who were still indispensable as counterparts to sign the new state of the UAE into existence, but whose days were considered to be numbered from then on, have proven to be very effective facilitators for economic development in each and every one of the different emirates.

This outcome is not at all in conformity with the text of the original Constitution, which had become the permanent one in December 1996. But the political reality, which was created over the last three and a half decades has helped to provide prosperity to all, and huge wealth to some, of the nationals. In their distinctive national dress, the nationals stand out from among even others in similar flowing robes. In particular, the women take care to retain a distinctly local way of using their *abayah*, the black outer garment. In many instances the use of very darkened car windows, which is allowed only for the conveyance of the local female family members, who shun the public gaze, re-enforces the image of a separate identity. The

15. "Abu Dhabi has been punching below its weight in the region and on the international stage..." is the comment in the Online Economic and Political Briefing of the *Oxford Business Group* on March 28, 2005.

nationals display pride in their young state and the UAE's achievements in the short time of its existence.

Their identity as citizens of the UAE and their newly created nation does not detract from their sense of belonging to their particular tribe, which has traditionally been loyal to one or another of the emirates' Rulers. Through this chain of mutual loyalties and belonging, every national is a member of and forms part of the society of his or her emirate and is inevitably identified by others in these terms. But towards the rest of the expatriate inhabitants of the UAE and to the outside world, they are nationals of the UAE or simply "Emiratis."

The recent loss of their "national" hero, Shaykh Zayid, has visibly underscored the UAE's advancement from tribal affiliation to statehood. This event has also touched the overwhelming majority of inhabitants of the UAE, who are not nationals. Having shared this loss on such a very public and unifying occasion, this majority has demonstrated its ever-increasing stake in the economy of the UAE. Will it always remain a silent — somewhat disenfranchised — majority? This question is not unrelated to the general issue of the way in which a more participatory form of government could be introduced in response to the world-wide interest in the state of democracy in Arab countries.

### *THE ISSUE OF DEMOCRACY*

It did not need the announcement of President Bush's "Forward Strategy of Freedom" initiative<sup>16</sup> to trigger the awareness of intellectuals in the Gulf region of the deficit of formal democratic procedures and political transparency in their countries' governments. Public discussion of this deficit has always been on the agenda of many an Arab writer, publicist, and public figure. After 9/11 the Arab World had to consider tackling this deficit with much more urgency. This intensified media debate about democratization was not lost on the society of the Gulf region. Shaykh Muhammad bin Rashid, the Crown Prince and principal architect of Dubai of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, used the Arab Strategic Forum 2004 to send the message to Western leaders that at least in the Gulf, leaders have understood that changes will have to be made.<sup>17</sup>

Compared to the almost total negation of the need for change in the Gulf countries during the first three decades since the British tutelage ended, the last three years have witnessed some bold steps taken in some countries towards more participatory

16. This initiative was first announced by the White House in November of 2003. In early February of 2004, the President followed it up by asking Congress to double the budget for the National Endowment for Democracy to a total of \$80 million. He said: "We will focus its new work on bringing free elections and free markets and free press and free speech and free labor unions to the Middle East."

17. This event took place in Dubai from December 13 to 15, 2004 with the participation of Bill Clinton, Madeleine Albright, Hanan Ashrawi, and many other Western and some Arab politicians. Shaykh Muhammad said: "I tell my fellow Arab leaders 'if you do not change, you will be changed'." He also told them that if they could not initiate radical reforms...and uphold the principles of transparency, justice and accountability, their people would resent them. See the Dubai daily English paper *Khaleej Times* of December 14, 2004. p. 8.

government. Since 1962, Kuwait has had a fraught history of establishing and then twice abolishing an elected parliament; so has Bahrain since 1971. When Shaykh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani took over as Ruler of Qatar in 1995, he initiated a drive to open up and democratize government in his country — encouraged and assisted by the American military presence and economic interest in its vast gas reserves. Bahrain is now a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament and witnessed the appointment of a second woman in the most recent reshuffle of the 21-member cabinet. The Omani experiment with elections for its parliament, in which women are included as voters as well as candidates, sought to extend gradually and deepen the democratization of the indigenous population.

No such tangible developments have taken place in the UAE in recent years. Yet, the general trend to discuss the issue of democratization has certainly reached the media and the *majalis*<sup>18</sup> of the seven emirates. The newspapers discuss every twist and turn of the often stormy relationship between the Kuwaiti or the Bahraini parliaments and government ministers. The haphazard Saudi approach to municipal elections is being scrutinized, and when dissidents are tried or jailed in any of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries the international agency reports are being reproduced in the UAE's local newspapers — now often under glaring headlines on the first page. In light of these developments, where does the matter of democratization and popular participation in the UAE stand?

The Federal National Council's (FNC) 40 members are at present all appointed by the governments of the individual emirates, which were allotted between eight and four members each, depending on their population numbers in 1971. According to the Constitution, each emirate can decide how to find its delegates to the FNC, and it is quite possible that elections will soon be held in one or another of the emirates to choose these representatives. The Ruler of Sharjah, Shaykh Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, declared in February 2005 that an elected Consultative Council would soon support the role of Sharjah's Executive Council. This initiative was taken up in some of the other emirates, and declarations to plan for such local elected bodies were greeted with enthusiasm in the press. However, concrete developments can only be expected at the earliest during the next governmental "season" of winter 2005/2006. Elections have taken place for some other assemblies, such as the chambers of commerce, which now exist in most of the emirates. But such elections only involve a limited number of the nationals, because by definition this process is restricted to the Emirati owners of companies with a minimum of 51% local ownership.

Even before the establishment of the UAE, a National Consultative Council was instituted for the state of Abu Dhabi. Its 50 members were nominated by the Ruler from among the traditional leaders of this tightly-knit society — the shaykhs and heads of the main tribes, and family clans, and the leading business men of the emirate. Recently, Dubai, Sharjah, and most of the other emirates established their own

18. Plural of *majlis*, a word used for the room in which men gather informally to discuss anything and everything; it is also the word for parliament and other formal gatherings, where decisions are taken on behalf of the society.

consultative or municipal councils of members appointed by the Rulers. There, too, the mix of personalities would still today not be very different if the members were chosen by the ballot box, because tribal leaders are trusted representatives of their communities, and a local businessman, who has made good, may be entrusted with public affairs. However, one could well imagine that in the not too distant future at the level of the individual emirates the selection process for public offices will become more formalized and conform with democratic principles. The generation of Western-educated technocrats, some of whom are themselves no longer so closely in touch with the traditional social system, will push vigorously for this.

But it would not help the cause of increasing political participation if the introduction of formal elections were pursued without building on the existing system of mutual responsibility between a shaykh and his people. The essence of “grass-roots democracy” in an Arab tribal environment is that from time to time a consensus has to be reached within the community as to which member in his generation is deemed to be the best leader to choose — almost invariably from the particular family, which has provided the community’s leaders for generations. The authority, which is thus conferred to the tribal ruler can be withdrawn, if this leader’s performance is not up to expectation and he gradually or suddenly loses majority support. Because the nationals of the seven emirates are very conscious of being a privileged minority, tribal affiliation means more than providing a person with an important sounding name. The local knows that he is important because he can still benefit from traditional mutual unwritten loyalty agreements, which he and the members of his family or clan have with their leaders, who in turn will have to speak up for him, when he needs it. The immediacy and informality of such representational networking would have to be built into a ballot-based system of democracy — as has been tried in Oman.

There could be a conflict of priorities, when it comes to introducing democratization into the political life of the federation. As mentioned above, the balance of power between the central political leadership on the one side and the Rulers and governments of the individual emirates on the other side rests on respect for traditional structures — even for the idiosyncrasies displayed by some of the member states. Therefore, it would be more difficult to impose a nation-wide and centrally decreed democratic system of political participation in the UAE, than for instance in Bahrain or even in Saudi Arabia. Such moves would pre-suppose the weakening if not marginalization of the role of the seven emirates’ governments. It could only be implemented if both Abu Dhabi and Dubai believe very strongly in the desirability and value of the resulting increase in popular political representation and participation in the decision-making process.

### *THE ISSUE OF PARTICIPATION*

Yet, if the level of participation is not *only* measured by the number of people who make the trip to the ballot box, the UAE has a credible record considering the other valuable ways in which nationals can and do participate in shaping their society and the economy of their country. At the outset of the development drive in the 1960s

and early 1970s, the national decision makers in the different fields — political, administrative, economic, educational, or other — had many Arab and some western foreigners by their side. These specialists were supposed to provide the know-how needed to formulate a decision and prepare a draft for signature. Today throughout many areas of public administration and private economic activity, these functions are performed by nationals, some of whom more than adequately fill these important positions.

The oil industry is one of the best examples where nationals, who entered as trainees in the 1960s, have come up through the ranks and are now the decision-makers in most departments of this vital sector of the economy. Similar developments took place across the board in the emirates. At all levels, mostly young nationals are now developing the new approaches, which are being implemented by governmental decision-makers. This applies particularly to public sectors, which are in the process of being privatized, as well as to the public and private financial sectors.

Also, the exciting initiatives tabled at a breath-taking rate by the authorities in Dubai and followed, accompanied, or copied in some or all of the other emirates, provide plenty of access for national men and women to have their say and their input in such developments. These national technocrats are all the more needed because many departments and institutions have to have an important national as the head. Yet not all who ultimately authorize decisions are of the generation, which could be expected to be familiar with the technical details and the procedures for implementing these increasingly complex projects. The nationals, who attained the more junior positions, where the decisions were being prepared, also tend to be the ones who value transparency and accountability as part of their work ethic and will themselves increasingly build this into the system of public and private administration. Thus, while there is as yet little formal political participation possible for the national population of the UAE, the level of participation of Emiratis in the public administration on the federal or emirate level, as well as in the private economy, helps to some extent to alleviate this deficit of democratic political life.

If one regards the established Western-style democracies as role models, one may even doubt whether the UAE's society would adapt easily to the essential mechanisms of canvassing voters and garnering support for a particular idea. Electioneering is essentially confrontational.<sup>19</sup> It is probably correct to say that the national intellectuals of the UAE have so far not come to view their relationship with the authorities in the same *we* versus *them* terms as is increasingly the case in some of the neighboring Gulf states.

The political climate of the UAE is generally one of seeking compromises. Although some individuals may at times act out their irritation, if they feel wronged,

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19. The example of Kuwait shows that arguably, political liberation without prior exercise of civic responsibility by the society can quickly lead to confrontation. A number of parliamentarians in both Kuwait and Bahrain now see the primary function of their institution as attacking the government and criticizing cabinet ministers. In both countries the assembly is not a legislative body and does not share the ultimate responsibility for national politics with government.

the qualities which are very much honored in this society are patience, forgiveness, charity, and above all the readiness to negotiate a compromise in all situations. In the outpouring of grief and praise after the death of their first President, local people did not limit themselves to thanking him for the good life, which he made possible for the nation. They particularly praised him for his ability to reach out to individuals and societies across the borders of material and educational differences, ideology, or religion. The UAE national was and is proud to have leaders who are father figures for their own people, and who want to be seen in the outside world as brothers who assist brothers — not only materially but also through their Beduin methods of mediation and advice. The community spirit, which moves people to establish institutions now termed as “civil society” is the essence of what creates and holds a tribe together.

### *CIVIL SOCIETY AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH*

As for the currently fashionable question about the state of “civil society,” there is precious little to report from anywhere in the UAE.<sup>20</sup> The reason seems to be two-fold. The law<sup>21</sup> is extremely restrictive with regard to the establishment of associations of any kind. Considering that the vast majority of inhabitants are foreigners and come from countries where political and social strife is not uncommon, the authorities wanted to avoid if possible the importation of such festering problems.<sup>22</sup> In consequence, even foreign charitable groups — such as environmental initiatives, art societies, and trade-based groupings, such as national business associations — are currently still rare and have to observe circuitous measures to function legally. The other reason for the meager role of civil society in this country is that there is much less of a need for formal social support groups while the extended families and the tribal society are intact.

But families no longer live in close proximity or even within shouting distance of their relatives as in the past. Many now need to travel by car to visit each other. A growing number of younger Emiratis work away from home in another emirate during the week. So the time will come, when more local individuals feel the need to join formal organizations to share common interests and, maybe, to discuss how to reform their society and to influence the way the country is governed. In recent years the establishment of some national profession-based associations such as the National Lawyers Association, the Writers Union, the Heritage Club, or students’ unions at the various institutions of higher education for nationals has been encouraged. But such

20. Christian Koch has provided a very useful example for the Gulf region, combining theoretical aspects with the historical perspective of the development of civil society in Kuwait: *Politische Entwicklung in einem arabischen Golfstaat: Die Rolle von Interessengruppen im Emirat Kuwait* [Political Development in an Arab Gulf State: the Role of Interest Groups in the Emirate of Kuwait] (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2000).

21. The “Federal Social Welfare Societies Law” dated from 1974.

22. As an example of a notable exemption, the large community of Christian and Muslim Eritreans who had all fled their country while it was under Soviet-backed Ethiopian occupation, were given a house in Abu Dhabi and encouraged to educate the members of their society to enable them to back the resistance.



associations are either essentially creations of the authorities or depend, at least for most of their support, on governmental funding.

The authorities in the UAE have always been very sensitive to the views of the outside world. In order to face off criticism from abroad, the federal governmental agencies and in particular the leadership in Dubai now seem very keen, indeed, to satisfy world opinion on a number of issues. This led to steps such as the establishment of a human rights unit at the Dubai Police, to numerous spontaneous environmental initiatives, to publicity about the ethics of child labor, clamping down on trade in endangered animals, and on infringement of copyright laws.<sup>23</sup> As mentioned above, there are almost no nationals who are manual laborers in the UAE, however, a well publicized initial draft for legislation to allow trade unions and labor associations is currently being discussed because the establishment of such organizations is mandated by the International Labor Organizations for countries that want to join the World Trade Organization (WTO).<sup>24</sup>

Since the inception of the local media in the late 1960s, there has been an almost universal abstinence from criticizing officialdom and their governance or administration. News about the region, in particular the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council was treated equally reverentially. Local news consisted very largely of reproducing texts handed out by the local news agency WAM, while at the same time a great deal of controversial, stimulating, and critical material is presented, thanks to generous arrangements with foreign agencies and media syndicates. The best locally produced journalism usually addresses the burning issues concerning the Arab World and is at its best in the Arabic language media.

In recent months and particularly since January of 2005 a growing number of domestic issues have come under the local media spotlight. In particular, the grievances, which foreign labor took to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the mismanagement and the hint of corrupt administration at this and other ministries, the problems with the educational system, shortcomings in the public health provision, or stories about abused housemaids, are reported almost daily. But even earlier the caution, with which critical news about neighboring countries was treated, had already given way. Security problems in Saudi Arabia were reported as the news came off the agency wires; embarrassing wrangling in the Kuwaiti parliament, strikes and dissent over the constitution in Bahrain, the details about the conviction of 31 dissidents in Oman — all were prominently reported.

23. In 2004, a foreign documentary film drew attention to the use of under-aged foreign children as camel jockeys; the UAE leadership was quick to clamp down on this practice and punish local and foreign agents involved in the exploitation of the children from poor communities in Pakistan or Somalia and elsewhere. This legislation was followed up: In order to curb illegal immigration, children from such countries can no longer travel on the passports of the — often bogus — parents.

24. Christopher Davidson states that one of the reasons for the weakness of civil society in the UAE is the “severe lack of ‘civic space’.” His prediction for the future is that the “increasing number of international organizations...could provide indigenous associations with a “democratic effect” ...and successful example of civil society elsewhere.” See Christopher M. Davidson, *The United Arab Emirates: A Study in Survival* (Boulder Colorado & London: Lynne Rienner Press, 2005), p. 16 and p. 33.

The authorities have repeatedly called for more locally generated investigative journalism and encouraged the media to be on a par with standards outside the Arab World. In response to this, *Gulf News*, the Dubai-based English language newspaper, which is not alone in portraying the best possible image of Dubai on most of its pages, dedicated four entire pages to Press Freedom Day on May 3, 2005. Almost all the articles and interviews emphasized the growing commitment by the media to support more transparency, accountability, and involvement of the public in running the affairs of the state. The Editor-in-Chief's contribution came under the banner headline: "Self-censorship virus plagues media." He asserted that "this malady ... has taken root in an environment that lacks legislation..." to protect the journalists from parties, which "...because of our social and religious values...file complaints against newspapers." Since only a marginal number of the media in English is produced by nationals and not many local writers are involved full time in writing for the Arabic newspapers, the phenomenon of "self-censorship" can be very largely explained with the fact that expatriate journalists have to err on the side of caution. If they lose their job they cannot stay in the country.

This constant threat, which in one way or another affects all expatriates — more than 80% of the population — is itself becoming the object of criticism and calls for reform. However, it seems not unreasonable to predict that further calls for the many issues, which are ripe for reform, will not need to be followed up by popular action because the authorities will be eager to pre-empt such situations by coming up with timely solutions.

### *THE NEW LEADERSHIP*

For the past several decades Shaykh Khalifa bin Zayid had been entrusted with the affairs of the emirate of Abu Dhabi, while the Ruler, Shaykh Zayid dedicated his time to the federation's role on regional and international platforms. Now that Khalifa has succeeded his father as the new President of the UAE, his administrative experience has become of interest to observers of the Gulf region.

The new Ruler of Abu Dhabi was born in 1948 as the eldest son of Zayid bin Sultan, who was at that time entrusted with the governorship of the important inland oasis of Al Ain on behalf of his brother Shakhbut, Ruler of Abu Dhabi since 1928. Khalifa's mother is the only one of Zayid's wives who is from the ruling family, the Al Nahayyan. When his father became the Ruler of Abu Dhabi in August of 1966, Khalifa's brothers were too young to be called to any public office. Therefore, the different departments of the rapidly developing government machine of the oil producing emirate of Abu Dhabi were entrusted to the many sons of an erstwhile "king maker" and trusted advisor, Shaykh Muhammad bin Khalifa, a cousin of the Ruler. In September 1966, the young Khalifa succeeded his father as the governor of the Al Ain region. He was proclaimed Crown Prince in February 1969, which was then still an unusual dynastic act in a tribal society — even though for generations successive rulers were always scions of the emirate's one accepted ruling family, the Al Nahayyan. At the same time Zayid also appointed his eldest son as the head of Abu Dhabi's

Defense Department and entrusted him with the development of the partly British-officered Abu Dhabi Defence Force, which later became the nucleus of the UAE Armed Forces. While the emirate of Abu Dhabi had its own government between July 1971 and December 1973, Khalifa had a leading role as Prime Minister and Minister of Defense and Finance.

Ever since this cabinet of the state of Abu Dhabi was replaced by the Abu Dhabi Executive Council in 1973, Shaykh Khalifa has been its chairman and effectively came to assume responsibility for the development of that emirate. The people of the emirate associate his tenure particularly with successive schemes, enabling all citizens to live in their own modern family homes and to acquire a commercial property — even if their educational background did not predestine them to be business men. The so-called “Khalifa Committee” has since 1981 financed and facilitated over 6,000 residential and commercial properties in Abu Dhabi town and elsewhere in the emirate at a cost of about \$10 billion. The expatriate diplomatic and business community — having to use an interpreter — report that the lines of communication with Shaykh Khalifa were not always as easy as with some other members of the ruling family. Yet, he has always been very popular with the local people, and in the context of the administration of the emirate of Abu Dhabi, his role has been much appreciated by the tribal families, who have all benefited from the various schemes, which he administered.

A federal role was first entrusted to him in 1976, when he was nominated as Deputy Supreme Commander of the newly unified federal forces. Since then the UAE Armed Forces have undergone substantial expansion and have received some of the latest and best equipment available. Through the more than two decades of involvement with that aspect of the federal development, Shaykh Khalifa became a familiar figure for young Emiratis, whose graduations and various military events he always attends.

Although Shaykh Khalifa has so far contributed most prominently to the running of the emirate of Abu Dhabi, his election as the new President, by the conclave of the seven Rulers only hours after the funeral of his father, confirms the view that this was a forgone conclusion. There is every reason to believe that the role, which the previous President had marked out for Abu Dhabi within the federation as well as in the region will be followed by his sons and the heirs to the system of government, which has served them well. The federal ministries’ performance depends vitally on Abu Dhabi financing the federal budget. As the President of the UAE, the Ruler of Abu Dhabi, Shaykh Khalifa, is therefore bound to ensure that the funds continue to be made available. While another one of the Rulers might have also been a suitable candidate for the Presidency, it is likely that the nature of this position would have been altered even more than is the case after the loss of the charismatic and internationally known previous incumbent. The majority of the local population has expected nothing less than the assurance of the continued commitment of wealthy Abu Dhabi to their causes through the presidency of the great benefactor’s son.<sup>25</sup>

25. In response to the expectations of nationals living in the less privileged emirates, the President allocated \$430 million “...in a first phase of a scheme to meet the health, education, residence and

*CONCLUSION*

Throughout the last few decades the population of the UAE has become accustomed to changes, both in their every day lives as also in the way their society developed. But radical changes in the political arena, as for instance the abolition of the role of the ruling families or the tribal basis for the federal system, are no longer being advocated by many local people. Most intellectuals would like to see more transparency within the existing systems of government and many have recently called for a more accountable administration. But in spite of what Shaykh Muhammad bin Rashid has prescribed for other Arab countries, most UAE nationals would want such changes to come about through consultation rather than confrontation. Many would initially even be most comfortable to have gradual changes decreed by the Rulers as in some neighboring Gulf countries, rather than to have to vote, shout, or fight for them.

The national identity of the citizens of the UAE faces two potential challenges. In a federation, in which the basis for the individual member states was the historical allegiance of the tribal people to the leader of their society, the challenge to the coherence as a national entity is rooted in the strong attachment, which each national retains to his or her “home” emirate. This attachment is bound up with the traditional role of the individual in his tribal society as well as with diverse new economic opportunities, which the Rulers of the individual emirates have sought to encourage over recent years. Yet this strong regional identity is being amalgamated into an equally strong national Emirati identity.

The most potent factor, which has helped all along to create the nation of the UAE, is the outcome of the other potential challenge to the national identity. The estimated six to eight hundred thousand nationals among well over four million inhabitants could become culturally, socially, and politically marginalized, as tends to happen to minorities elsewhere. But in the UAE, their small number is the very reason why the holders of a UAE passport are the only group of the country’s inhabitants, who can claim ownership of the UAE’s national identity. With all the social and economic inequalities, which are caused in any community by differences of geography, birth, education, and ability, the coherence among the privileged minority of national citizens is enhanced, not diminished by the daily confrontation with the many grades and shades of culture imported by the expatriate majority.

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infrastructure requirements in the remote areas of the northern emirates.” *Gulf News*, January 18, 2005.