



[Human Rights Watch Raises Alarms About Wide-Ranging Legal Changes Introduced by the United Arab Emirates Which Deepen Restrictions on Human and Civil Rights](#)

Human Rights Watch recently released a report outlining how the United Arab Emirates has instituted a string of new legal changes that enhance severe restrictions over internationally-recognized human and civil rights. The measures, which include amendments to over 40 laws, continue to heavily restrict freedoms of speech, assembly, and association in the Gulf country. The laws impose severe penalties, but yet are extremely vague in stating what constitutes a crime. They also entrench the outlawing of criticism of those in power that is deemed to encourage social unrest. New provisions of the law criminalize “false” and “misleading” information, or more appropriately and accurately, whatever the government arbitrarily views as falling under either of these two classifications. Using vague laws with severe penalties is common practice in repressive regimes. This is done to open the door for broad interpretations of the laws and creates a chilling effect, spreading fear and causing people to be extremely careful with what they say. It also allows the government to imprison dissidents with so-called justifications, and can result in media entities often self-censoring themselves.

The trend of restricting these rights began back in 2011, when scores of independent lawyers, judges, teachers, students, and activists were arrested and prosecuted. Many civil society organizations were also shut down, effectively muting all dissent in the country. This was in response to the Arab Spring pro-democracy movements, a string of popular uprisings across the Arab world. Though most of the countries failed to overthrow their repressive regimes, one of the lasting effects it had was to scare the ruling elites in these nations. This fear has led to a harsh crackdown on liberties such as freedom of speech and the freedom to assemble in these places.

The United Arab Emirates uses sophisticated Israeli and EU-produced spyware as one way of enforcing these repressive laws. This constant and intense surveillance has led to the arrests of many media members and activists. Prominent Emirati human rights activist Ahmed Mansoor was arrested and abused in detention, before being sentenced to 10 years in prison back in 2018. Email correspondence and WhatsApp conversations were used during the grossly unfair trial.

Some of these new laws have also added and strengthened discriminatory provisions against women. One such law criminalizes extramarital sex and disproportionately affects women, as it only allows men to submit a complaint which can be prosecuted. The laws also continue to criminalize vague acts, such as anything that can be considered “scandalous” and that “offend modesty and public morals and incite to a life of sin or tempt another openly to sinfulness by any means.” These provisions allow for the arrest of LGBT people while not specifically stating it in law. Another new troublesome penal code, Article 155, makes anyone who “intentionally commits an act that compromises the sovereignty of the state or its independence, its unity, or its territorial integrity” subject to life in prison or even the death penalty. Article 174 has similar punishments for anyone who commits an act against a foreign country that “could harm political relations.”

Ultimately, these vague laws give rulers in the United Arab Emirates wide-reaching power to stop and punish any dissent that takes place in the country. Along with violating international human rights laws, this is also done in an attempt to cement their power and make it harder for any social change to come about from the people.