

Interpreting Muslim Brotherhood Verdicts in the UAE

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Brief Analysis

Convincing public evidence of criminal activity by defendants in the Brotherhood case would increase foreign and domestic support for future UAE security actions against the group.

On July 2, a United Arab Emirates court is expected to announce verdicts in the trial of ninety-four citizens linked to local Muslim Brotherhood group al-Islah and charged with sedition. If stiff sentences are issued, they should be read not only as an effort to punish and deter political and alleged criminal activity, but also as a reflection of the UAE's genuine anxiety about the Brotherhood as a serious threat, particularly amid ongoing regional uprisings and the Egyptian Brotherhood's perceived drive for total power in Cairo. If Abu Dhabi hopes to secure stronger foreign and domestic support for future action against the group, however, it will need to publicly present solid evidence of the crimes committed by any convicted defendants.

UAE DIGGING IN ITS HEELS

Even apart from the trial, the Emirati government has been digging in its heels against the Brotherhood recently. On June 19, authorities referred another thirty people (some Emirati, some Egyptian) to the same state security court that has been trying the ninety-four defendants. The new defendants were detained months ago and are charged with having organizational and financial ties to the Egyptian Brotherhood; authorities have also linked them to the individuals currently awaiting judgments.

On June 25, outspoken Dubai police chief Lt. Gen. Dahi Khalfan reiterated dire warnings about Brotherhood efforts to topple Persian Gulf regimes. Although the UAE released a member of the Bahraini Brotherhood in early June after secretly detaining him for nearly two months (apparently in connection with tweets of support for the ninety-four defendants), a Qatari citizen detained in February on suspicion of backing the Brotherhood remains in UAE custody. Emirati authorities have made clear that they plan to continue their aggressive approach to Brotherhood supporters beyond the current cases.

REACTION ON THE GROUND

Within the UAE, public reaction to the verdicts will likely be limited even if the sentences are stiff. Emiratis do not have a tradition of mass demonstrations. Unlike in Bahrain and Kuwait -- where large numbers have taken to the streets to champion various detainees and activists linked to recent unrest -- the UAE has seen few public displays of support for the ninety-four defendants. Many of those who did express such support early on (including defendants' family members) were themselves arrested and are now among those being tried.

Besides detentions and trials that have seemingly flouted international standards for due process, other recent government moves have further discouraged political expression in the UAE. For example, the November 2012 crackdown on internet use has affected how Emiratis use social media for political commentary. As a result, online reaction to the verdicts will likely be limited, as well as lopsided in favor of al-Islah critics.

Yet this muted reaction should not obscure what may be significant public support for al-Islah, particularly in the poorer, more socially conservative and religious northern emirates. Many citizens seem to sympathize with the group's social agenda, if not with the use of seditious activity to achieve a Brotherhood political agenda. The group's relatively long history, pervasive influence, and organizational strength in the country should not be underestimated.

Public displays aside, the verdicts may have a divisive effect on UAE society. Harsh sentences could strengthen support for al-Islah among some Emiratis while further vilifying the group among others, including those who want to avoid upsetting the country's current political system. An unexpectedly gentle verdict, such as conviction on lesser offenses, would give al-Islah an opening to claim victory. In short, whatever the court's decision, the conclusion of the case will galvanize further Brotherhood political activity.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Since the trial began, the UAE government has been inundated with accusations of using the case to suppress peaceful calls for reform, since some of the ninety-four defendants had signed an unprecedented March 2011 petition asking authorities to schedule comprehensive parliamentary elections and grant full legislative authority to the Federal National Council. Washington should encourage Abu Dhabi to definitively demonstrate that this interpretation is wrong.

For example, publicly displaying convincing criminal evidence for any guilty verdicts issued tomorrow could contribute to stigmatizing al-Islah locally and internationally, giving the UAE greater backing for future action against the group if warranted. Proper security actions coupled with political reform -- such as broadening the very restricted voter rolls and strengthening the limited powers of elected officials -- could fortify Abu Dhabi against Brotherhood political objectives.

Lori Plotkin Boghardt is a fellow in Gulf politics at The Washington Institute. ❖

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