

ETHNICITY AND DEMOGRAPHICS IN UNITED ARAB EMIRATES. THE CURIOUS CASE OF A COUNTRY WITH MORE FOREIGNERS THAN NATIONAL POPULATION

*Tudor-Octav DAN**

Abstract. *The purpose of this research is to demonstrate how a state can shape its policies in order to successfully meet the social challenges caused by the large number of foreign nationals who settle in that state for a better living. The political, social and economic aspects will be analysed in order to find an answer to the research question, namely: (how) has the UAE managed to find the right solution to manage an atypical social context, in parallel with meeting the continuing need for economic development?*

Keywords: *Labour politics, Migration, Society, Human rights, discrimination.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to demonstrate how a state can shape its policies in order to successfully meet the social challenges caused by the large number of foreign nationals who settle in that state for a better living. The reason why I chose to study the subject that I would personally classify as a phenomenon of the modern world, is to better understand the ingredients necessary to achieve a solid social structure, even at the cost of changing the status of the indigenous population, from the majority population, to the minority population. The way in which the United Arab Emirates has managed this situation with a view to visible economic progress is the main landmark of the research. The political, social and economic aspects will be analysed in order to find an answer to the research question, namely: how has the UAE managed to find the right solution to manage an atypical social context, in parallel with meeting the continuing need for economic development?

In the following rows I will present the political and social context of the United Arab Emirates, the political, economic and social aspects that can be interpreted in response to this research question. Then, in the first part of this paper I will analyze the main political measures that have favored the development of this phenomenon and the attraction of the high number of immigrant workers in the United Arab Emirates. After the analysis of the political and legal aspects, I will present and research the way in which the United Arab Emirates focuses its attention on education, both as a tool for integration and as an easy way of economic development of the country. In the second part of the paper I will present the main barriers of the United Arab Emirates in trying to achieve a successful process of integrating immigrants into society. At the same time, I will focus on the problems caused by the negative perception of female immigrant workers in this Muslim state. In the last part of this research, I will present the main conclusions of the paper. I will use as research tools, the analysis of the specialized literature, the

* PhD Candidate, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, tudordan29@gmail.com

interpretation of some statistical data, the approach of some articles from the press or of some official statements of some profile institutions.

As a result of decolonization process of former British Overseas Territories in Middle East, one of the new established countries is the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a country made up as a federal state of seven small emirates united as a single state on 2nd December 1971. The original identity of the people from this new country were a traditional one with two main orientations: one orientated to the nomadic, desert life, of the legendary Bedouin people that organized through history different cultural entities around the small desert oasis, and a sea-orientated cultured, of those who decided to live their lives at seaside in order to develop an economy based on sea trade and fishing. Those two original cultures had a lot of similarities between them because they were used to trade between them, had a same religion, language, and even a similar identity (Melvin, Ember, 2001: 2325).

The economical development of UAE in the last two decades, due in particular to rich oil resources has facilitated the spectacular evolution of demographic characteristics in this country. Since 1968, till 2018, the population of UAE grown from less than 200.000 inhabitants to more than 9.5 milion, A far more important characteristic of this evolution is the immigration process of foreign workers in this country. More than 85% of the population is made up by foreign residence workers, most of them from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Philippines. This aspect is almost unique in the world, but quite similar for Gulf States. Once more we can see the how the globalism and economical development can change the way of how a modern state can look in terms of population (Snoj, 2015).

The United Arab Emirates has Sunni Islam as its official religion, an issue to remember in this analysis, as most emigrants from this state share this belief. Politically, the United Arab Emirates is a constitutional monarchy with an elective federal system, led by a president of the federation (Stewart, 2013: 155). The economy of this Persian Gulf state is based on oil and gas-rich resources, the exploitation of these resources being the main reason why there was a need for external labour.

2. UNITED ARAB EMIRATES – ETHNICITY, DEMOGRAPHICS AND NATIONAL POLITICS

2.1. Labour politics and main agreements

In the following lines I propose a research of the political characteristics of the United Arab Emirates by which this state succeeds in maintaining the proper development of social life for citizens, but also supporting continuous economic development. In this respect, I will carry out a descriptive research of the legislative framework in the Arab state.

An interesting aspect of the labor market in the United Arab Emirates is provided by the symbolic process of *emiratization*, marked by the "theory of labor market segmentation" through which one can observe a phenomenon of economic marginalization of ethnic minorities, lower social classes and women. This segmentation can be interpreted as a failure of the labor market and those who manage this issue, to find a balance between all those involved in the labor market. Labor market segmentation is also an increase in racial capitalism through which Western nationalities are subjugated (Reich, Gordon & Edwards, 1973: 359-365).

From the point of view of the labor market in the United Arab Emirates, we can see two different structures that are interdependent. A level of workers who come from the ranks of the citizens of this state and a level of those who belong to imported ethnic groups. The two structures are "de facto" obliged to work with each other, but are subject

to a system of laws that proposes different rights and obligations for the two categories of workers. In this sense, according to the Labor Law of 1980, stateless workers are subject to a kafala type system (sponsorship), through which employers have increased power over foreign employees. Also, the mobility of workers in the labor market in this state is restricted by a policy adopted by employers which seeks to provide opportunities for all national workers (Girgis, 2002: 38).

The diversity of the labor market in the rich Arab state, caused by the multitude of nationalities sharing different economic and cultural characteristics, was also supported by the Dubai 2020 and 2015 strategic plans or the vision of the United Arab Emirates 2021, which proposed a development agenda in line with with the economic principles of the free market in this state. Policies in this state will continue to support demographic branching to facilitate diversity in the labor market. Consult these strategies, we can understand that it is not aimed at homogenization, but the continuation of a habit already well assumed. The segmentation of the labor market in the United Arab Emirates is based on a socio-economic system that embodies a "core-periphery" relationship. These issues are caused by the fact that the United Arab Emirates is developing its human capital capabilities through modern instruments of globalization. Thus, according to the context, the theory of segmentation of work pieces is correct, and the duality and hierarchical configuration of the specific ethnic groups of the labor force in this state can be analyzed from the perspective of other theories. One is the theory of human capital proposed by Ehrenberg and Smith, who describe workers in the United Arab Emirates as the embodiment of a set of skills that can be closed to employers. These skills are represented by the knowledge and skills they generate, a worker can create a certain stock of capital (Ehrenberg, Smith, 1997: 278-279).

From a political point of view, the "emigration" of foreign nationals is considered a capacity of the state to legitimately use its power to stabilize economic relations between all residents of the United Arab Emirates. This practice is often used by Arab states. However, in this case, the government of the United Arab Emirates demonstrated subjectivity by acting in relation to individuals from abroad, because for them, the economic purpose violated some of the social principles that it should have respected (MacQueen, 2013).

The United Arab Emirates is one of the states that has signed the United Nations Convention on the Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. The United Arab Emirates has also signed the World Trade Organization's general agreement on trade services. Even though the Middle East state has signed these two agreements, the Abu Dhabi government sees these agreements as two tools that facilitate the "emigration" of migrants. However, if this process were to take place on an industrial scale, the newly acquired identity would soon be dissolved, and this branch of society in the United Arab Emirates would again become subordinate to the native population, especially since the patronage in this country is differ from the ranks of this category of population (Alzaabi, 2012: 4-5).

Given the autocratic nature of the Abu Dhabi leaders, the two international agreements and the large number of emigrants from the United Arab Emirates are unsafe for the national government. In order to reduce the effects of the danger found by the government of this state, ministerial decrees, laws and resolutions were initiated to regulate the whole situation. At the same time, the new Emiratisation policy of the United Arab Emirates seeks to constrain and prevent the indigenous population from taking

advantage of the opportunities offered by the acceleration of economic development in the Emirates, to the detriment of the population from other countries (Gamburd, 2010).

2.2. Education for emigrants

The United Arab Emirates is a young state with an equally new education system, deeply influenced by the political, social and economic changes of the last half-century in this state. The educational process carried out in this territory, historically integrated into the structure of several foreign imperial rulers, was one specific to the Islamic world, led by Imani and classrooms in mosques. The main object of study at that time was the Quran, the educational system being a deeply religious one. Moreover, specific to Islamic culture, only men from wealthy families had access to education. Relatively modern forms of education would be implemented in the late 19th and early 20th centuries due to the British administration, which would also be involved in this field.

The large-scale, mass education system was only implemented after gaining independence from the British in 1971, a time confused with the founding of the modern Emirian state. The spectacular economic development facilitated by the trade in rich oil resources, have created the ideal framework for continuous investment in the public education system. The administration from Abu Dhabi understood the necessity for an education system based on the Western model and were able to implement such a project in a relatively short time. Currently, the United Arab Emirates benefits from a similar system to the American one, with a pre-university education of 12 classes (K-12), four years of college (bachelor's degree) and two years of master's degree followed by doctoral studies.

The progress of the education level of the population of the United Arab Emirates has been extraordinary, both in terms of time and results achieved. The main indicator confirming this is the increase in literacy rates. According to UNESCO data, literacy in 40 years (1975-2005) increased from 32 percent among women and 57 percent among men, to over 90 percent for both categories. Moreover, in 2005, 97 percent of young women in the United Arab Emirates could read and write. This percentage is truly an educational miracle, especially since the overall average among young women is 86 percent (Sergon, 2021).

The United Arab Emirates understood the role of prioritizing education, and in this regard devised a national education strategy for the period 2017-2021, proposing to increase the percentage of high school graduation (upper-secondary) from 96.7 percent in 2016 to 98 percent. Although the 2016 percentage is high enough, the Emirian state is constantly proposing to raise education standards in order to benefit from a well-prepared population that can cover the need for ever-growing labour, especially in the field of services, where at least high school education is needed. Moreover, the ambitions of the Abu Dhabi government also take on a symbolic character, in search for international prestige. The government proposes to improve the score of the United Arab Emirates in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study to reach the top 20 countries globally. The National Higher Education Strategy 2030 also aims to improve accreditation standards, increase research capabilities and apply a curriculum in synchronise with labour market requirements through broad partnerships with the private sector and major employers (*National Agenda 2021 website*, 2021).

Another important aspect to mention, which also characterizes the entire Emirian society, is that of the integration of residents of other nationalities. The entire education system in the United Arab Emirates does not differentiate between the indigenous population, immigrants or foreign students who are engaged in a study program in that

state. Moreover, given the minority specificity of the native population, with Arab roots, it would have been a huge blunder for the United Arab Emirates to carry out two educational systems simultaneously, one elitist for the indigenous population and one discriminatory for immigrants. Thanks to these logical and correct approaches, the United Arab Emirates enjoys international prestige thanks to effective internationalization and recognition of educational and scientific merits. A study by the British Council included the United Arab Emirates among the world's best performing countries in terms of educational legal framework, internationalization and outbound and inbound student mobility over the past decade. Moreover, the United Arab Emirates benefits from a higher inbound mobility rate than that of outbound mobility, so more foreign students come to the Emirates than students who opt to study outside the borders of the Arab state (Ilieva, 2017: 14).

Although the United Arab Emirates, as a relatively small state, does not have a numerical total of international students such as the United States, the United Kingdom or the main European states, the Abu Dhabi government's education system benefits from extraordinary results, with inbound mobility growing exponentially. The inbound mobility rate is 48.6 percent, which places the United Arab Emirates among the most attractive study destinations in the world. Moreover, 84 percent of American University of Sharjah students, one of the leading universities in the Arab state, are international students, which places this university first in the world in terms of the ratio between international and indigenous students.

From the point of view of the origin states of these students, we can see a direct relationship with the whole phenomenon of labour migration. Most international students come from India (about 17 percent), followed by students from Middle Eastern countries, North African countries or Pakistan. The same trends can be observed, with small differences, throughout the immigration process of foreign workers to the United Arab Emirates (*American University of Sharjah website*, 2018).

Due to the high demand for skilled workers in different fields, the United Arab Emirates has become an attractive destination not only for already qualified people, but also for students who have as their prospect their establishment in this country at the end of their studies. This is also facilitated by the increasing quality of university studies, institutions such as United Arab Emirates University or the University of Sharjah enjoy modern facilities, educational capacities to the highest standards and partnerships with the highly profitable private environment. We can say that universities in this state can compete with prestigious universities in North America or Europe.

Moreover, in the United Arab Emirates, the need for qualified staff exceeds the number of resident students of that state, which gives this state the opportunity to attract foreign students. This is also benefiting from the condition of neighbouring states, which do not benefit of the same educational conditions or of the same opportunities in the labour market as the United Arab Emirates. Both features place the United Arab Emirates in a position of regional leadership, both in terms of education and work opportunities for highly qualified staff (Malit, 2017).

To further exploit this advantage, the United Arab Emirates does not charge high tuition costs and have devised various "loyalty" policies for foreign students to further attract them to settle in Abu Dhabi or Dubai in the future. The residence and visa policies have been considerably relaxed for students, the state offering visas valid for up to 10 years after graduation for students with very good results. Moreover, since 2016, the United Arab Emirates allows foreign students to obtain part-time contracts with various business partners of the universities where they study. Since 2018, the government has

extended visas for graduates of universities in the United Arab Emirates (Reynolds, Webster, Rizvi, 2020).

The United Arab Emirates has observed trends in the countries of origin of these students, most of whom are from India or different states in the Arab world (about 66 percent in 2016). In this regard, the government has established a strategic partnership with the People's Republic of China, the world's largest student exporter, to attract even more Chinese students to universities in the United Arab Emirates, with the aim of increasing diversity and creating a multicultural environment. Future partnerships with European countries are part of United Arab Emirates educational agenda (Zacharias, 2019).

2.3 Integration process

The United Arab Emirates has offered a number of advantages and benefits to immigrants, especially from an educational point of view. However, due to the Kafala sponsorship system, the integration of immigrants has been conditioned by the availability of employers, especially those in the private sector, who have broad control over foreign employees. Low-skilled workers from Asia have been the main subjects of economic, social and even political abuses in this context, of the application of these policies of cooperation between the public system (Emirate state) and the private system (large companies).

The United Arab Emirates has been influenced by two aspects in managing the integration of immigrants. First, during the fast and abrupt development of the young Arab state, the United Arab Emirates did not consider it necessary to integrate foreign workers, as they were considered only a temporary part of a larger process. In addition to the temporal aspect, the workers were quite often replaced by each other and did not have the necessary time to be able to "acommodate". Thus, the United Arab Emirates, in the rush for development, has omitted the application of "comfortable" policies for immigrants. This omission, intentional or not, allowed employers to have the ideal corridor to exploit the despair of people who wanted a better life for themselves and their families.

The second reason why the United Arab Emirates, as well as other Gulf states, failed to pay attention to the integration of immigrants, was the economic condition of these states. The United Arab Emirates' economy has been based in recent years on exports of oil and petroleum products. This market is a dynamic one, because it is deeply influenced by the fluctuation of the oil price. Thus, the entire economy of the United Arab Emirates functioned in line with the evolution of the price of oil, and the fate of foreign workers depended exclusively on this economic detail. If the price increased, the economic development was stronger, the job opportunities multiplied, if the price decreased, the need to have foreign workers also decreased. Therefore, this economic feature highlighted even more strongly the temporary feature of foreign workers in the United Arab Emirates. However, the United Arab Emirates has understood that it needs to detach itself from the fate of oil and as their economic development has opened up new opportunities, distinct from those in the oil field, the continuing need to have foreign workers at its disposal has forced the Abu Dhabi to take measures to integrate these immigrants. One such example is the granting of citizenship to children from mixed families, consisting of a foreign husband and a mother who is a citizen of the United Arab Emirates (Martin, Malit, 2016).

The United Arab Emirates and its Gulf neighbors are relatively young, growing and assertive states. It is quite clear that in the near future, these states will not directly abandon the conditional approach to immigrant integration. For the Abu Dhabi government, granting citizenship and more benefits to immigrants would cost more than the potential benefits.

Therefore, the United Arab Emirates will not implement a sudden change in these policies, although the current approach has discriminatory effects on immigrants, especially low-skilled workers in Asia, who serve an important category in the national economy. In the United Arab Emirates there is a clear difference in the integration of immigrants according to their level of education. Skilled workers with higher education, high-skilled, are considerably advantaged unlike low-skilled workers who are not discriminated and do not have the same social, economic and politic advantages.

2.4. Foreign female workers perception

Although a modern state, the United Arab Emirates does not give up the traditionalism specific to the Islamic world, and the principle of gender equality is still far from being properly implemented in this state. Therefore, over time, especially in the early years of independence, female immigrants were considered a problem. Both the state and the citizens of the United Arab Emirates did not consider this category of people as an integral part of national development or only as a simple component necessary for economic development. Unfortunately, this attitude has also affected the education of young people in the United Arab Emirates, who have borrowed the discriminatory habits of their parents, thus making it difficult to change their mentality (Ibrahim, 1986).

Discrimination against immigrant women has become even more pronounced in the last decade of the last century, when various foreign housekeepers or nannies have been convicted of various crimes, such as adultery, theft or non-compliance with migration laws. Curiously, it was considered that the women of the United Arab Emirates were responsible for these mistakes, who according to public opinion, by seeking emancipation and professional development, they neglected their duties as spouses. Therefore, discrimination against women took place in three directions. Men accused their wives of neglecting their domestic responsibilities and hiring housewives or nannies, and the immigrant women were accused by both men and women in the United Arab Emirates of their mistakes.

However, there are people in the public space in the United Arab Emirates who criticize the discriminatory treatment of women in the Arab world, especially against immigrant women. Said Bin Bellelah, General Director of the Dubai Migration Service Office, strongly condemns the negative perception of these women, whom he considers that those perception to be developing major problems in the relationship between these women and employers. Moreover, the same official from the United Arab Emirates also condemns this attitude due to the fact that it is also borrowed by the young generation. Other voices in the public sphere consider that such attitudes are not productive at all and create serious discrepancies in society (Afkar, 2019).

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that the United Arab Emirates, although a modern state, is far from understanding the need for effective policies to integrate the population of foreign origin into the local social structure. The government from the capital city of Abu Dhabi is far too preoccupied with finalizing its economic progress and regional power status as an important global financial center to neglect these goals in favor of implementing social measures.

The main mistake the United Arab Emirates is making is to grant far too much and uncontrolled freedom to private companies. Thus, employers have full control over the immigrant workforce and the state provide to those companies a free way to abuse

foreign workers and restrict their political, social or economic rights. Although in recent years, even under pressure from international forums, the United Arab Emirates has relaxed restrictive measures and offered more freedoms and rights to immigrants, the general situation is far from aligning with social norms similar to those in the West. It is likely that the United Arab Emirates will implement a strategy to integrate the foreign population only when it considers that the need to exploit this category of people will no longer be necessary or at least not at the same levels as at present.

In addition to the rapid economic development, which has made it the ideal frame to neglect social issues, the United Arab Emirates, in order to implement measures conducive to the integration of immigrants, must completely detach itself from dependence on oil resources. The evolution of the oil price directly influences the development capacity of the state, and the fear of a sharp decrease in the price of oil, which would destabilize the national economy, do not allow the creation of a secure framework for the application of such social measures.

As a compensation for these shortcomings, the United Arab Emirates does not make a difference between the domestic and foreign population in terms of education. Also for economic reasons, the government considers it necessary to implement measures to promote the internationalization of education in the United Arab Emirates. These policies have proved useful so far, and the education system enjoys very good results, placing the entire educational system in the top of the best education systems in the world, especially due to high level internationalization rate.

Unfortunately, despite a successful education system, traditional mentalities, specific to Islamic culture, do not allow the elimination of social barriers to the perception of the role of women in society, especially foreign women.

The last conclusion of this research is that the United Arab Emirates has begun to understand the need to implement social policies for better integration of the foreign population, but the whole process is only at the beginning and it will pass more years till the United Arab Emirates society will enjoy equality of opportunity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Afkar Abdullah (2019), "Gangs incite housemaids to run away from sponsors in UAE", *Khaleej Times*, 6 December [online]. Available at: <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/uae/sharjah/gangs-incite-housemaids-to-run-away-from-sponsors-in-uae> (Accessed: 15 January 2021).
- Alzaabi Ahmed (2012), "The risks that foreign labour poses to UAE national security", Unpublished BA thesis, Zayed Military College, Abu Dhabi.
- American University of Sharjah (2018), "Times Higher Education International Student List names American University of Sharjah number one in the world". Available at: <https://www.aus.edu/media/news/times-higher-education-international-student-list-names-american-university-of-sharjah> (Accessed: 13 January 2021).
- Brie, Mircea; Florentina Chirodea, Constantin Vasile Țoca (coord.) (2013), *European Public Policies. Instruments, Models and Behaviour in the Public Space*, supliment *Analele Universității din Oradea, Seria Relații Internaționale și Studii Europene*, Oradea.

- Brie, Mircea; Ioan Horga, Sorin Şipoş (coord.) (2011), *Ethnicity, Confession and Intercultural Dialogue at the European Union's East Border*, Editura Universităţii din Debrecen/Editura Universităţii din Oradea, Debrecen/Oradea, 2011, 502 p.
- Ehrenberg G. Ronald. & Smith S.Robert (1997), "Modern labour economics: Theory and public policy", 6th edn., Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA.
- Ember Melvin and Carol (2001), "Countries and their Cultures", vol. 4, Macmillan Reference, New York, USA.
- Gamburd R. Michele (2010), "Sri Lankan migration to the Gulf: Female breadwinners – Domestic workers in migration and the Gulf", *Middle East Institute*, 2 February 2010 [online]. Available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/sri-lankan-migration-gulf-female-breadwinners-domestic-workers> (Accessed: 14 January 2021).
- Girgis Maurice (2002), "The GCC factor in the future Arab migration" Submitted to *Fourth Mediterranean Development Forum* Amman, Jordan.
- Ibrahim Khalifa (1986), "Foreign nannies in the Arab Gulf household", *Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States*, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
- Ilieva Janet (2017), "The shape of global higher education: international mobility of students, research and education provision", vol.2 *British Council*.
- MacQueen Benjamin (2013), "An introduction to Middle East politics", SAGE Publications, London.
- Malit Froilan (2017), "The future of work: Skills and migration in the Middle East" presentation at *Inter-Regional Experts Forum on Skills and Migration in the South Asia – Middle East Corridor*, New Delhi, India.
- Martin Philip and Malit Froilan (2016) "A New Era for Labor Migration in the Gulf Countries?" Forthcoming in *Migration Letters*.
- National Agenda 2021 (2019), "Upper Secondary Graduation Rate". Available at: <https://www.vision2021.ae/en/national-agenda-2021/list/card/upper-secondary-graduation-rate> (Accessed: 13 January 2021).
- Reich Michael, Gordon David & Edwards Richard (1973), "Dual Labor Markets: A Theory of Labor Market Segmentation" *American Economic Review*, no. 63.
- Reynolds Rory, Webster Nick and Rizvi Anam (2020), "UAE to expand 10-year golden visa system to all doctors, PhD holders and highly skilled workers", *The National News*, 15 November [online]. Available at: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/government/uae-to-expand-10-year-golden-visa-system-to-all-doctors-phd-holders-and-highly-skilled-workers-1.1111663> (Accessed: 14 January 2021).
- Sergon Valentine (2021), "Guide to the education system in the United Arab Emirates", *Expatica*, 11 March [online]. Available at: <https://www.expatica.com/ae/education/children-education/education-system-in-the-united-arab-emirates-71237/> (Accessed at: 14 January 2021).
- Snoj Jure (2015), "UAE's population – by nationality" *BQ Magazine*, 12 April [online], Available at: <http://www.bq-magazine.com/economy/socioeconomics/2015/04/uae-population-by-nationality> (Accessed at: 13 January 2021).
- Stewart J. Dona (2013), "The Middle East Today: Political, Geographical and Cultural Perspectives" Routledge, London and New York.
- Zacharias Anna (2019), "How a growing Chinese community found a home away from home in the UAE", *The National News*, 23 July [online]. Available at: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/how-a-growing-chinese-community-found-a-home-away-from-home-in-the-uae-1.889406> (Accessed at: 15 January 2021).

