



Emirati Officials Elicit Criticism for Media Repression After Dozens of Newspaper Journalists in the Country are Fired for Covering a Story on Increased Fuel Prices

Last week, Lebanese news outlet Raseef22 published a story detailing the firing of as many as 90 employees from Emirati subsidiary Al-Roeya, which is part of the larger media group International Media Investments (IMI). In June, Al-Roeya released an article about the difficulties many low-income Emiratis were facing in response to high gas prices. Although editors were very aware of oppressive media laws, they had thought the story to be safe to release. Instead, the government required that the publication be removed before it even made it to the website, but not before it was widely circulated on social media. As of the end of June, much of Al-Roeya no longer exists. It appears that the reason for which the article spread so quickly is more or less the same reason that the Emirati government mandated its removal – the story centered on anonymous interviewees who described what they were being forced to do to save money amidst high gas prices caused by the war in Ukraine. This included taking trips to neighboring Oman, where gas is subsidized and half the price. Emirati officials' actions are problematic for the UAE on multiple fronts. For one, it obviously does no favors for the Emirati economy. Secondly, it hurts the image that the UAE likes to project as an attractive, economically-advanced destination for international business and offers a clear example of the level of media repression used by authorities in the country.

Reportedly, eight top editors were first called in merely days after the publication was released, or only hours later according to some sources. After being thoroughly interrogated, the journalists were given the choice of voluntarily resigning or attempting to stay and facing charges. Those who voluntarily resigned had to sign an agreement declaring that they would not speak about why they left Al-Roeya. Within two weeks, the rest of the employees and the whole of the company were essentially wiped from existence, seemingly due to retaliation by the UAE government. However, IMI and the Emirati journalist union (not independent) have given a different reason for the mass firing and elimination of Al-Roeya. Both have stated that the massive cuts and release of the story have nothing to do with one another, despite the timeline of events pointing to the contrary. Rather, IMI and the union are taking the line that the cuts were made in preparation for Al-Roeya's conversion into new CNN Business Arabic, which has been set to take place later this year. What is left of Al-Roeya are a number of business-only publications, as their culture and politics sections were taken down following the release of the story.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the removal of this story and the subsequent firing of so many employees was an act intended to repress the free speech of the media. The UAE has a concerning record when it comes to press freedom, ranking 138th in the world on the annual press freedom index released by Reporters Without Borders. A ranking of 138th puts the UAE in the "difficult situation" zone. Only the "very serious situation" demarcation is worse, which only consists of the 28 most silenced presses in the world. Moreover, the UAE has fallen from 119th in 2016 to the 138th they now sit at in 2022. Reports about tourism and the economy especially must be approved before they can be published, although all publications are subject to removal and censorship. Journalists can also lose their residency if the government disapproves of what they write.

There are countless historical examples of limits on freedom of speech in the UAE. In 2017, Arabian Business magazine was banned for a time for publishing a story revealing that the government was liquidating housing developments that failed to launch due to the 2009 recession. In 2016, Amina Al Abdouli was given a prison sentence of five years for tweets that "spoke ill of the government." In that same year, two others were sentenced to prison terms for website and WhatsApp posts and another for what authorities deemed to be "controversial tweets."