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The Politics of the United Arab Emirates

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Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) stands as a remarkable experiment in political and social organization in the modern Middle East. Established in 1971 as a federation of seven emirates, its emergence as a unified state brought together a tapestry of tribal monarchies under a singular constitutional framework. This dynamic synthesis of tradition and modernity is central to understanding the UAE's distinctive political system, which has produced a society marked by both rapid economic development and carefully curated political evolution.

This book seeks to serve as a comprehensive guide to the politics and political system of the United Arab Emirates, offering analysis of its constitutional foundations, governmental institutions, and the unique interplay between the federal and emirate levels. The UAE's political architecture—rooted in its constitution of 1971, made permanent in 1996—reflects enduring influences of tribal customs, the vital role of hereditary leadership, and strategic efforts to adapt to new economic and geopolitical realities. At the heart of the system lies a blend of absolute authority in the hands of the seven ruling families and the development of federal institutions designed to unify and coordinate diverse regional interests.

Over the decades, the UAE has drawn international attention not only for its dramatic transformation into a global economic and cultural hub, but also for the distinctive character of its political life. The political system deliberately restricts the formation of political parties and places sharp limits on civic and political expression in the name of stability and unity. Yet, at the same time, the country has experimented with elections to its consultative Federal National Council, as well as incremental reforms aimed at expanding women's participation and enhancing the visibility of local governance institutions such as the majlis.

These features give rise to recurring debates about the prospects for democratization, transparency, and inclusivity in the Emirates. The absence of broad-based, electorally accountable institutions and the prevailing ban on organized opposition frequently attract criticism from international human rights organizations. The space for independent civil society remains tightly circumscribed, and the state's intolerance for dissenting voices reflects the leadership's deep-seated concerns over regional upheaval and domestic consolidation. However, government narratives highlight a gradual, carefully calibrated approach to political reform, commensurate with Emirati traditions and realities.

In examining the UAE's political system, this book also explores the interplay between internal governance and the country's ambitious and increasingly assertive foreign

policy. Over the last two decades, the UAE has projected influence far beyond its borders, shaping regional politics, mediating in conflicts, forging new alliances—including the groundbreaking normalization with Israel—and responding to shifting global power dynamics. Domestically, debates over national identity, the status of women, and the rights of millions of migrant workers add further complexity to the broader political picture.

By tracing the evolution of the state's political institutions, customs, and strategies, readers will gain a nuanced understanding of how the United Arab Emirates navigates the tensions between continuity and change. Whether considering the prospects for future reform or interrogating the basis of its enduring stability, this book aims to provide a thorough, balanced, and accessible introduction to one of the Middle East's most enigmatic and influential states.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Formation of the United Arab Emirates

The story of the United Arab Emirates is a fascinating journey from a collection of historically autonomous sheikhdoms to a unified, modern federal state. For centuries, the region that now constitutes the UAE was known as the Trucial Coast, a name bestowed by the British due to a series of treaties, or truces, signed with the local rulers beginning in the early 19th century. These agreements, initially focused on suppressing maritime piracy in the Gulf, gradually evolved into a more formal protectorate relationship, with Britain handling foreign policy and defense in exchange for the rulers maintaining peace at sea.

This arrangement, while providing a degree of stability, also meant that the individual emirates operated with a significant degree of internal independence, their political structures deeply rooted in tribal traditions and the authority of ruling families. The pearl trade was the economic lifeblood of the coastal communities for generations, shaping societies and fostering connections across the Gulf. Life was often challenging, marked by the harsh desert environment and the vagaries of the pearl markets.

However, the discovery of oil, particularly in Abu Dhabi in the late 1950s and early 1960s, began to dramatically alter the economic landscape. This newfound wealth provided the resources necessary for significant development and modernization, paving the way for a future far removed from the traditional pearling economy. It also introduced new dynamics and considerations into the political sphere.

The pivotal moment that set the stage for unification came in 1968, when the British government announced its intention to withdraw its military forces from "east of Suez," including the Gulf, by the end of 1971. This decision, driven by economic pressures in Britain, created a political vacuum and the urgent need for the Trucial States to determine their future.

Initially, there was a proposal to form a federation that would include not only the seven Trucial States but also Qatar and Bahrain. This idea was explored in a constitutional conference held in Dubai in February 1968, involving the rulers of all nine states. They agreed on an 11-point plan as a basis for this larger union.

However, forging a union among nine distinct entities with their own histories, interests, and ruling families proved complex. Disagreements arose over various issues, including the structure of the proposed federation and representation within it.

Ultimately, Qatar and Bahrain decided to pursue independent statehood in August and September of 1971, respectively.

This left the seven Trucial States to navigate their path forward. The rulers of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan and Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum, played crucial roles in spearheading the drive for unity. Sheikh Zayed, who had become Ruler of Abu Dhabi in 1966, was a strong advocate for federation, recognizing the potential for collective strength and prosperity. Sheikh Rashid of Dubai, a visionary leader in his own right, shared this vision.

Their meeting on February 18, 1968, at Al Sameeh is considered a historic turning point. They agreed in principle to form a union between their two emirates and invited the other Trucial States to join them. This agreement, known as the Union Accord, laid the groundwork for the future federation.

Over the next few years, intense negotiations and discussions took place among the rulers of the Trucial States. Despite challenges and differing perspectives, the shared goal of forming a viable state after the British withdrawal provided a powerful impetus for unity. The rulers recognized that a unified entity would be better positioned to protect its interests and ensure stability in a changing regional landscape.

On July 18, 1971, the rulers of six of the seven Trucial States – Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, and Fujairah – agreed to form the United Arab Emirates. A provisional constitution was drafted, and on December 2, 1971, the UAE was formally established as an independent, sovereign state. Sheikh Zayed was unanimously elected as the first President, a testament to his leadership and vision in bringing the union to fruition. Sheikh Rashid was elected as the first Vice-President.

The seventh emirate, Ras Al Khaimah, initially hesitated to join the federation. However, following the Iranian seizure of the islands of Greater and Lesser Tunbs, which were claimed by Ras Al Khaimah, the emirate decided to accede to the UAE on February 10, 1972. This completed the formation of the seven-emirate federation that exists today.

The formation of the UAE was a remarkable achievement, bringing together disparate historical entities with distinct identities and interests into a single political framework. It required skillful diplomacy, a shared recognition of the challenges and opportunities ahead, and the strong leadership of figures like Sheikh Zayed and Sheikh Rashid. The new nation embarked on its journey with a blend of traditional ruling structures and the foundations of a modern federal system, setting the stage for the rapid transformation that was to come.

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