

# Harmonizing Globalization and Traditionalism in the Rentier State: Exploring the Modernization of the United Arab Emirates

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*This study is conducted with a grant from St Clements University Somalia*

## Abstract

Scholars of oil-based rentierism otherwise dubbed as ‘the oil curse’, claim that the political systems of such countries and their leaderships cannot be taken as serious development focused agents. In a similar contention, proponents of western-style democracy support the idea that ‘sheikhdom’ leadership based on patriarchic inheritance is destructive to development, while yet another section of scholars claims that Islam, as a faith, is in general anti-development. In order to broaden the debate on this subject, this study uses the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as a case of a country that has achieved a tremendous success in various development areas and contrary to the old view of the three types of critics mentioned here.

**Keywords:** Arabian Gulf, economic diversification, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), leadership, Middle East

## Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) became the youngest state in the Middle East after gaining independence from the UK in 1971 and creating in 1972 a federation of seven small emirates. It has an average population of about 5 million, including a large number of expatriates who also constitute the majority of the workforce in the country. However, the International Monetary Fund had projected the population of the UAE to reach up to six million by 2015, increasing from 5.4 million in 2010, and that an increase in the number of expatriate population, considered over 80 per cent of the country’s workforce, comprises the main growth drivers within the various areas of the country’s economic development (IMF, 2011).

The island city of Abu Dhabi is the capital of the UAE. Although it is the seat of the federal government, Abu Dhabi, as an emirate, is also composed of several regions which make it the largest among its federated sister emirates. With most of the oil and gas produced in the country extracted within the geographical boundary of the island, Abu Dhabi is indeed the richest individual emirate, making the UAE the second largest oil exporting country in the Middle East with a high concentration in the petrochemical industry.

Despite Abu Dhabi’s natural wealth, many people around the world think of Dubai as the capital of the country. This perception reigns due to Dubai’s drastic measures in commercializing its potential in the areas of tourism, real estate, and the maritime business, particularly offering free port facilities for goods destined to other countries in the region and far beyond the Gulf region. As such, Dubai enjoys being the commercial hub of the country and possibly of the entire Gulf region. An attractive policy of short-stay tourist visa system has contributed massively towards Dubai’s popularity at the global scene with numerous academic, industrial, commercial as well as professional seminars, workshops, conferences and other high profile celebrity events held in the emirate.

The UAE is sometimes lumped together with its Gulf neighbors when the discussion is about political environment and structure of the states in the region. For instance, it is common to hear terms like Gulf Arab States or Arab Gulf States or the Persian Gulf Arab States, referring to the six Arab nations that formed in 1981 the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) consisting of Bahrain, Kuwait, The Sultanate of Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. The grouping up, though providing descriptive similarities, seems to undermine the internal differences the countries have in their social and political structures, leadership selection and even compositions and constitutions of the states (Aartun, 2001).

The similarity may be drawn from the patrimonial inheritance of the rulership and other traditional hierarchical factors relating to the patrilineal ascension to the crown. But the distinctness of the UAE from its sister neighbours becomes clear when some consideration is given to the function of the first adjective in the country’s name ‘United’, which symbolizes the federal type of government which the UAE embraces, unlike the other Gulf states. Secondly, the UAE, though a Muslim state, does not have tendencies of adherence to Islamic conservatism as a national political guideline or constitution (Bill & Springborg, 2000). It practices a modest quality of Islam which complies with the principles of the *sharia* while at the same time harmonizing it with the modern doctrines of contemporary socio-economic systems. This is to argue that it has opted to adhere to both the principles of the Federation and of the Islamic doctrine, fulfilling simultaneously the requirements of a

modern state within the framework of a robust political economy as driven by the modern teachings of international trade policy. On the social landscape, the UAE government has succeeded to maintain a remarkable relationship of trust and integrity between the masses and the leadership, by allowing the individual emirates to function as independent governments under the broader umbrella of the federal state – with each body bearing distinct responsibilities. The individual governing system is underpinned to the aim of maintaining a close relation and communication between the leaders and the citizens.

### Method

The study uses qualitative approach and tools such as interview and observation of relevant secondary material. This included data we accessed from various academic sources, newspapers, public and private websites. To make our presentation, we arranged the paper in several sections. In the next parts we intend to discuss about the political economy of the UAE, structure of the UAE leadership and the legal system the country practices, respectively in that manner. We then present issues focusing on the economic development and diversification the UAE has embarked on in recent years, followed by issues on education and the citizens' participation in this sector before we move on to the final segment to present the conclusion.

### A political economy perspective

Proponents of the oil curse theory claim that the Gulf Arab countries' economic dependency on oil will cause future backlashes to both the political equilibrium and economic stability (Karl, 1997:17). Their argument is based on the understanding that the oil and gas producing Gulf Arab nations practice an oil-dependent rentier system, otherwise termed as the disparity between the actual "market price of a good or factor of production and its opportunity cost" (Richards & Waterbury, 1996:16-17). Rent is explained by Beblawi (1990:85) as "the income derived from the gift of nature," which has or can have an external impact on other states in terms of remittances and bilateral/multilateral aid distributions to poorer or non-oil countries.

Although in their 1996 edition the authors wrote about the potential of rentierism to boomerang with tremendous repercussions in the wake of revenue decline or disappearance of oil rent, about a decade later Richards and Waterbury (2008:430) acknowledge:

What is astonishing is that despite the investment of colossal resources and energies in the destruction of enemies, the region is more prosperous, its citizens better educated, and its nations more firmly rooted than forty years ago.

In his discussion on the implications of oil revenue towards the development of Arab countries, Galal Amin (1974:49-50) argues that a government which is collecting colossal quantities of "...oil revenue is not likely to feel the urgent need for raising productivity, for increasing or diversifying exports or for tapping other sources of savings." In the introduction of their edited volume *The Rentier State*, Beblawi and Luciani (1987) attempt to provide what they call "a structured debate" regarding the problems of the rentier system and develop the intricacy between the state, the economy, and the rentier system. Their introduction precedes a mélange of criticisms and analyses of the interplay between the functions of the rentier system, quality of leadership and distribution of rent to the society.

Karl (1997) contends that problems are likely to occur in the rise of a situation where the revenue earning commodity diminishes and the rentier state naturally embarks on introducing or raising taxes against the citizens to cover state expenditure. In the opinion of Michael Ross (2001), since the rentier state equips its military strength during the boom years of its oil revenue; there is likelihood it will utilize the army for coercion of the citizens. Apart from the generalizations characterizing the Gulf Arab states, Davidson (2008:151; 2005) emphasized the United Arab Emirates as representing "the purest examples of rentier states."

There is another section of scholars such as Luigi Guiso, Paola Sapienza, and Luigi Zingales (2002:12) who claim to have produced a study cemented "more credibly to religion," with findings that Islam, as a faith and tradition, is not conducive to economic growth and development. In their investigation of the correlation of religions to growth factors, they conclude in what sounds like an apodictic tone that: "On average, Christian religions are more positively associated with attitudes that are conducive to economic growth, while Islam is negatively associated," hence a theologically defined backwardness (p. 35). Rather than observe the various factors that can potentially hinder human development, scholars in the theoretical camp of Perkins (2004) also tend to accuse Islamic culture and Arab tradition for resulting the economic backwardness of these countries. On the other hand, like Ioan Lewis (1961) misreading and mispresenting the entire Somali people as a society so bellicose, Huntington (1996) associates Muslim society with bellicosity, suggesting a predilection for Muslim militarism as a factor responsible for their underdevelopment.

Another section of scholars emerged recently with a new perspective of analyzing the Arab rentier state. Conducting an analysis of the quality of leaders-citizens ties in rent-oriented Iran and Iraq, Mehran Kamrava elaborates, "[t]he rentier arrangements that took hold in Iran and Iraq became more indirect, more fragile, and less solid." In a contrastive analysis he writes, "Across the Arabian Peninsula, however, overlaid on historical

patterns of 'sheikhly rule', rentier arrangements took far more direct forms by strengthening the pre-existing bonds of patronage and clientelism between rulers and the ruled and creating new linkages between them" (2011:5). Kamrava further suggests that despite the huge resources in the state's possession, rentierism exists as a form of "mutual dependence" between the state and the people.

A keen observation of Kamrava's point elucidates pitfalls of conventional theorists of rentierism who neglected to analyze the various aspects of the system from; a) the strengthened pre-existing bonds (read as 'mutual trust'), and b) the creation of new linkages. These two factors, among others, shape the Emirates philosophy of leadership which benchmarks on the modern approach of bottom-up and top-down communication avenue between the leaders and the citizens as structured on an Arabian grassroots format not yet studied to detail. Although Katzman (2011:4) believes "The UAE is far from a democracy," he underlines the fact that "its openness and tolerance, coupled with ample wealth, have enable (sic) the government to keep the population largely satisfied and unwilling to jeopardize their economic benefits by challenging the system intently."

### **Structure of the UAE leadership**

In the political structure, the highest constitutional authority is the Federal Supreme Council (FSC) which consists of the seven rulers of the distinct emirates. Appointment to these executive posts is not through political parties but by the cherishment of traditionally accepted communal system of governance (Herb, 1999) which existed for a long time and is attained through patrilineal inheritance. As the ruling institution, the UAE federal government is bestowed with specific powers to execute policies and make decisions at the federal level while the member emirates also have certain powers reserved to exercise within the premise of their individual emirate governments. This traditional approach to leadership, as an Emirati undergraduate student expresses, "is built on communal acceptance of the leadership on the basis of their provenance and charisma, and the community's trust and loyalty to them rather than distribution of wealth." According to graduate student, "The structure of sheikhdom leadership existed well before the discovery of oil; and the leaders ruled the country at a time when we were a poor country with little or no economic significance to the world."

The understanding of the unique nature of this 'communal acceptance' is what western educated scholars, particularly proponents of the controversially defined 'western democracy' type of thought, are grappling with and at times finding rather cumbersome to locate not only its origins but rather the substance of its ingredients such as trust, loyalty, culture, tradition, and values, just to highlight a few. The conundrum is further precipitated by the failure to appreciate and accommodate in the analysis the good of that which is Arabian and traditional rather than a system that is western and recent. Thus, it is a concentration on the latter that somehow contributed to the stifling of the observation of the phenomenon from the significance of its traditional characteristics and in its own context without necessarily seeking its alignment to what many purport as the 'ideals' of western political culture or democracy.

Rather than the hasty conclusion that there is no democracy in the UAE, scholars need to provide an elaboration of the 'democracy gap' they see but with an analytical view of the cultural functions laden to the leadership structure; and not necessarily through the vintage point of Western democracy. Here, we invoke Blume's (1974:215) illustration "that [even] a measure of consensus over ends does not [necessarily] extend to means" particularly when such a conceptualization is mirrored from the fact that no just a few but "many prescriptions are offered for attaining the democratic society" and many definitions provided to democracy. A study of this nature would constructively detail areas of similarities and differences with existing systems, and explore the vital pros and cons. The lens of observation, or rather the measurement tool, must be borrowed not solely the mode by which the leaders are hoisted to power but broadly on whether the leadership system functions according to the citizens' desired satisfaction. This assumption provides another element of a bottom-up democratic category built on the consent of tribal institutions; one which is comparable to Western democracy of affiliation to certain scholars would classify a modern "political party" (Orum, 2001; LaPalombara & Weiner, 1966; Chambers, 1963). One such perspective would put the UAE system akin to what Arend Lijphart (1968; 1977) termed earlier as "the consociational model," considering the people's consent of the leadership through their tribal sheikhs or chiefs.

It is probably in view of some of the symmetries between the Netherlands and the UAE systems that one might juxtapose the two, specifically from Lijphart's (1979:515) observation that "federalism is a particularly promising method" in the implementation of the principles of consociation. That notion might be true when the objective of federalism is, according to Schendelen (1989:147), to harmonize "the spirit of accommodation" among the various social cleavages federated in the same political system. We do not intend to deny that the consociation theory itself became at the center of discussions and criticism (Steiner, 1981) but that it also became a topic that extended the margins of political study, more specifically that of comparative politics (Powell, Jr. 1982).

From a definitional approach, this tradition is contextualized by Rolf Schwarz (2004:16) who calls it a system of primordialism hinged to "the existence of strong tribal, clan, and sectarian loyalties." The tribal and

societal cohesion is not to be treated here as an outward segmentation of cleavages but a phenomenon which is at the same etched firmly in an inward cohesion of lineages descended from the same pedigree and emerged from a homogeneous Arabian Desert culture. An emphasis on the functions of this particular perspective is what needs further interrogation as to understand the nature of the bond as the root of the cohesion that currently prevails in the country; in other words, the communal or tribal system of leadership structure which underpins a bottom-up approach. Given that a cultural/traditional perspective of the UAE leadership system is an inadequately studied area, it is worthwhile noting that, from the viewpoint of someone accustomed to Western-style democracy (though the definition of the term democracy itself is contested), the argument would surface on the absence of party politics and popular voting in the formation of the ruling institution. On the other hand, a proponent of the socialism or communism dogma would easily discover the absence of resource control mainly concentrated in the central authority where the national resource mechanism is controlled and expected to be distributed from as in the Marxian approach.

Nonetheless, by the observation of the Islamist or scholar of Islamic studies, a more specific remark would be the sprinkles here and there of *sharia*-compliant (Lippman, 1995; El Qorchi, 2005) aspects of the system while at the same time noting a fair appreciation and accommodation of a contemporary mode of business structures and transactions as seen and practiced pervasively in the West. More importantly, a keen student of international business/trade, who is familiar with Hirschman's (1944) thesis concerning the possible intermarriage between the systems of governance, and in general the debate over the best system, would be very much at ease with the UAE's unique approach of crafting an interconnectivity of selected relevant bits and portions from the diverse systems to function as one body; thus enabling it to achieve the goals and aspirations of national development.

In any case, a majority of the critics look at democracy in the UAE from the viewpoint of what is dominant in the West. They criticize the rentier country for the patriarchy-based monarchical (sheikhdom) system of leadership, without considering the value base of the traditional system and values the adherents attach to it. Notwithstanding the criticism, the UAE has maintained a remarkable political stability and economic reliability considering the two tough situations recently experienced: a) The so-called Arab Spring that shook the base of the political leadership and therefore stability of several Middle Eastern and North African nations, and b) The economic downturn that hit several of the world markets, the UAE not being an exception. The stability of the UAE, as we argue, was neither forged out of deliberate rent distribution nor appeasements for clientelism. It is constructed on the pillars of traditional communal coherence, loyalty, and trust between the leaders and the citizens. One also needs to note at this point that after several years of hardship, the participating countries of the Spring are still staggering to stand on stable feet politically, socially and economically; despite the persistent reminiscences and in many cases prolongation of the devastation that has now become part of the experiences they undergo in their everyday social life.

However, in a bid to accommodate change and introduce political participation, despite that being an imported ideology, the country has as recently as October 2015 held its 3<sup>rd</sup> elections to the national assembly known as the Federal National Council (FNC). The exercise saw the appointment of a female speaker to head the FNC, the first to lead a national assembly in the region (Al Khoori & Dajani, 2015). After conducting the first ever FNC elections in 2006, the UAE held its second election to the national assembly in September 2011. Even after that, the critics did not view the shift as an initial step in the right direction. For instance, Prof. Toby Jones raises criticism that, despite the elections, the citizens would nevertheless "...admit there's no political empowerment that comes from these elections," as reported by the Voice of America (VOA, 2011). In contrast, some of the citizens believe otherwise. A post graduate Emirati student expresses his view about the elections to one of the authors (Mohamed):

Democracy, as we see it in the Western world and in some of the developing economies, has led to setbacks causing death of the citizens and destruction of national wealth. Therefore, it makes better sense when people do not take all of what constitutes Western way of democracy. They need to practice according to what belongs to them as their culture and traditions; the systems of governance and communal democracy of what they know; what they have been working for them effectively for generations, as long as it works for them now. Imitation and acceptance of what culturally does not belong to you may in the long run result in unnecessary destruction of human life and property. Therefore, we need to be cautious about adopting Western political systems we are not familiar with.

Another Emirati presents his perspective as follows:

We are happy about our traditional system same as the Westerners are pleased with their cultures and traditions. May be we are better, so we don't need to follow anyone's way but our way. We have been using our system of leadership for centuries and we have had no problems with it, so we need to follow that; not foreign democracies which have failed to cater for the social welfare and well-being of their citizens.

In the same line of discussion, the VOA (2011) quotes another Emirati citizen optimistic about the outcome of

the 2015 elections and its impact in the future: “We cannot say it will change 100 percent, but for the future, it’s a nice step...I think it will help the people here to change a lot of things.” The optimistic views expressed here by the citizens, though genuine, do not seem to be given merit by scholars critical of the traditional system of leadership and the achievements of the rentier state. Nevertheless, they represent a rich perspective that begs for further academic interrogation.

### **The legal system of the UAE**

The UAE practices a dual legal system, firmly based on the *Sharia* as well as civil courts with judges appointed by the head of state. The dual legal system is aimed at: a) responding mainly to the cultural purpose of Islam and, b) serving commercially the economic prospects of the global business market with a shift towards the ideals of a free market economy. An explanation is offered by Khedr and Al Nuaimi ([www.nyulawglobal.org](http://www.nyulawglobal.org)), who state:

although the principles of *Sharia* influence criminal and civil laws, the direct influence of *Sharia* in the UAE is primarily confined to social laws, such as family law, divorce or succession. Most commercial matters are now dealt with by either civil courts or permanently established arbitration tribunals.

Opinions vary but seem to lead to the same course of observation. An expatriate of Indian origin expressed, “As long as both systems are working hand in hand to serve the multi-cultural communities in the country, Muslims and non-Muslims, there is no harm at all in the dual legal structure.” His compatriot supports that “Choices of this kind make the UAE as one of the most attractive expatriate destinations all over the world.” Due to these ideals, the young but vibrantly developing UAE embraces a policy of free competition, enticing it to embark on very enormous and challenging national development projects and plans whose core strategies are informed by the shift in recent years of the country’s economic diversification approach. Accordingly, the UAE is implementing very desirable programs in privatization and massive improvement of infrastructure, with the adoption of investor-friendly policies that attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) across the globe, particularly from the technologically advanced as well as developing economies. These federated emirates provide favorable Free Trade Zones that in certain respects offer 100% foreign ownership of enterprises and industries, with zero taxes on products.

The provision of free-port facilities, very competitive low tax rates on imports, generous revenues from oil and gas exports, as well as an enviable stability in the political environment, among other factors, made the UAE an attractive spot with enormous business potential and prospects. These phenomenal essentials of political economy generally make the UAE a unique example because:

- a. It succeeded to augur well with the simultaneous practice of Islamic *Sharia* and civil courts; thus maintaining a harmonious balance between the upholding of its cultural values and the legal requirements necessary for the conduct of international business to attract foreign investors;
- b. It maintains a very stable political system without adhering to any of the main political ideologies of capitalism/democracy and party politics or socialism and communism as interpreted in the Western socio-political paradigm; or without adhering to the qualities of extreme Islamic conservatism as the sole political dominance; and
- c. Despite the cultural and religious practice of the Islamic doctrine, the UAE’s economy is guided according to the tenets of free market approach while at the same time Islamic banking and *sharia*-compliant investments vividly play prominent roles in the financial sub-regime of the broader economic regime,<sup>1</sup> thereby providing options to the migrant and indigenous population representing the distinct cultures the country is holding together.

Therefore, contrary to the interpretations of political systems as known in the Western world, we witness how an amalgamation of factors including a non-Western and party-less governing system of communal self-rule, success in the maintenance of a stable political environment, good leadership and lucrative economy from oil and gas exports have responded to a positive UAE per capita GDP equal to that of the developed western economies. This is to argue that the nature of the UAE’s development approach clearly envisages the fact that the ingredients of political economy the country has intermarried have worked tremendously to satisfy the tenets of social cohesion and the principles of globalization and international free market. Based on these facts, we can repudiate the theory brought forward by Luigi Guiso and colleagues as mentioned above, that Islam as a religion is against national development. Needless to say, many rich but non-Muslim countries in parts of the world do not address the basic social welfare of their society anywhere close to the UAE and other countries in the region; despite giving some space to the criticism often unleashed to the rentier system.

### **From oil dependency to economic diversification: A shift in perspective**

The economy of the UAE is based on oil and gas and related hydrocarbon industry but mostly the exportation of oil and gas which are mainly produced within the geographical area of the emirate of Abu Dhabi. The oil production of Dubai is not very substantial though higher than the amounts produced in the emirates of Sharjah

and Ras al Khaima which have lesser production output not capable of sustaining considerable commercial volume. Therefore, Abu Dhabi, as the wealthiest emirate, remains to be the primary contributor to the main economic and fiscal contributions to the federal government budget while at the same time catering for its own individual domestic needs and development projects as an entity (O'Sullivan, 2009).

The pursuance of economic diversification and commitment to innovation has shaped the UAE policy towards the fulfilment of the core values of domestic and international trade. Understandably because, despite the wealth from oil and gas, the country has a small population of citizens and a large size of expatriates who constitute the dominant labor force in almost all sectors of the economy, the private sector in particular. This approach situates the country in a unique position whereby it stipulates a global trade policy framework which advances the application of the Islamic *Sharia* as well as non-*Sharia*-compliant courts that enforce national and international commercial laws to cater for the multicultural expatriate community. Considerations of these realities have led to overwhelm the job market, seen by some observers as alienating the indigenous expertise and potential.

As a matter of its long strategic plan and economic sustainability, the UAE has begun to shift focus away from its dependency on oil to a policy of diversified economy. The various Emirates as well as the federal governments set goals that are finely tuned to the realization of the goals of economic diversification. Jean-François Seznec (2011:7) writes, "The Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA) is often described as the largest [Sovereign Wealth Fund] SWF in the world and reputed to have constantly stellar performances." Quoting a top Emirati official, Fareed Rahman (2015) writes:

The country attracted foreign direct investment to the tune of \$100 billion in the last ten years. We have become a favored destination and ranked number one in the Middle East and Arab region in attracting FDI by World Economic Forum...[while] the growth rate recorded by the UAE economy last year was 4.6 per cent and the total GDP was \$1.47 trillion.

The Federal Customs Authority (2016a) of the UAE reports that in 2015 the country recorded a non-oil total trade volume of AED 1.56 trillion. In a more recent report highlighting the performance of non-oil trade in the first quarter of 2016, the FCS (2016b) reveals a foreign trade amounting to AED 269.5 billion. A subdivision of the categories further demonstrates an imports trade of Dhs 166.1 billion (over 50%) against exports and re-exports of AED 269.5. The new development raised the UAE's 2016 Logistics Performance Index to the 13<sup>th</sup> position all over the world and the first in the Middle East region, as mentioned in a World Bank report (FCA 2016a). It also helped the UAE secure a remarkable place ahead of a number of western and Asian countries such as Australia, France, China, Canada, Finland, South Korea, Denmark as well as countries in Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

According to its diversification strategy, the UAE is targeting to raise the non-oil GDP to about 80%, despite the huge slump in the hydrocarbon industry, particularly oil. Among the UAE's ambitious development and diversification agenda include a space program under the UAE Space Agency. In its strategic plan for 2015-2016, the agency "announced its strategic framework to achieve its three mandates: [a] The development of the space sector [b] The formulation of policies and the organization of space [c] Guiding national space programs that will benefit the economy of the United Arab Emirates. The active players of the UAE space industry are Thuraya, Al Yah Sat and Mohamed Bin Rashid Space Center (MBRSC) which are all operationally active. Established in April 1997, Thuraya is an international "mobile satellite service provider...to two-thirds of the world's geographical area, across more than 160 countries..., the only mobile satellite operator that offers GSM roaming services over mobile networks" ([www.space.gov.ae/](http://www.space.gov.ae/)).

Owned by the giant Mubadala, the investment organ of the government of Abu Dhabi, Al Yah Satellite Communication Company was created in 2007 and since carried out vital research programs relevant to its objective and operational activities before designing "the region's first multipurpose satellite system consisting of two satellites and related ground infrastructure" ([www.yahsat.com](http://www.yahsat.com)). MBRSC was established in 2006 under the ownership of the Dubai government. It is a pioneer of the UAE's space development and "part of a strategic initiative to inspire scientific innovation, technological advancement and to advance sustainable development in Dubai and the UAE" ([www.dubai.ae](http://www.dubai.ae)).

The realization and application of appropriate components of the political economy has caused the expansion of the country's market economy in which a majority of the various large scale industries in the country are owned by joint ventures with foreign-owned multinationals, some of which have benefited from first mover advantages by extending their production lines into the UAE market early enough. Likewise, and apart from oil and gas, several locally initiated and indigenously owned enterprises have reciprocally expanded their activities in markets outside their UAE local domain, selling their products to market destinations as far as Europe, Asia and Africa, while various export processing zones are benefiting from the removal of trade and investment barriers which the diverse individual emirates have effected for the purpose of attracting expertise and foreign investment (Kawach, 2010).

According to the current national development philosophy, vast diversification projects are underway in

which both the federal government and the governments of the individual emirates are encouraging privatization, aiming at shifting the economic strategy to the in-flow and out-flow of FDI as well as multi-dimensional joint ventures with multinationals. As a result, drastic changes have been made in the national trade policies in a measure to realize more global representation, thereby raising the curtain for competition in the UAE marketplace. The new policy directed at the diversification of the business strategy has enabled the UAE to benefit from the “opportunities to invest in Asia and the Americas,” as stated by Peter Barker-Homek (quoted in [www.uaeinteract.com](http://www.uaeinteract.com) 2009).

The UAE’s FDI reflects the growth of business and profits in the country after it has removed several crucial barriers by the issuance of industrial licenses, customs exemptions on importation of raw materials, industrial equipment, accessories, semi-processed or intermediate goods and packing and wrapping materials. The strategy of the UAE’s economic diversification program is yielding significant results as the country is showcased as a promising destination “for investments in hi-tech and heavy industries for global investors” ([www.gulfnews.com](http://www.gulfnews.com) 2009). In order to actively participate in the multiple aspects of the international business competition, several UAE enterprises have seen the importance of investing overseas where prospects for gain exist. For instance, Aabar succeeded in the acquisition of about 40% shares in Tesla Motors Inc. from Daimler, a deal that provides the UAE investor with an almost “10% stake of San Carlos, Calif.-based electric car start-up.” Aabar chief Executive, Mohamed Al-Husseiny hints at first-mover advantage when he says, “We think this is the future, at some point, of cars, and we’d like to position ourselves -- when the technology grows and more people would like to move on to electric cars – to take advantage of that area ([zawya.com](http://zawya.com)). An auto news source reveals, “Aabar said it was setting up vehicle and engine manufacturing plants in Algeria with five German firms, including Daimler” ([www.autonews.com](http://www.autonews.com)).

Apart from FDI outflow, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) as well as sophisticated manufacturing companies have developed access into foreign markets as a symbol of the UAE’s intervention in the global trade industry. In this endeavor, a variety of domestically manufactured commercial products find their way into the export markets worldwide. As some business analysts say, the UAE has attracted the international business and FDI circles, particularly in 2007, by Abu Dhabi’s signing of a memorandum of understanding between government-owned Mubadala Development Company (MDC) and one of the world’s leading military aircraft designers and manufacturers, Lockheed Martin ([www.prnewswire.com](http://www.prnewswire.com)), among other participations in hi-tech investments and joint ventures with leading international entities. To achieve the various investment goals, several sovereign wealth funds (SWFs) were created such the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA) which has about eighty percent of its investment funds under the management of “outside fund managers and 60% are used to replicate indexes worldwide” (Seznec, 2011:8). Analyzing the performance of ADIA’s operations, Seznec (*ibid.*) suggests “an estimate of funds at ADIA of between \$310 and \$390 billion” a figure measured to be “much less than often estimated, but is still quite staggering.”

Another SWF investment oriented company is the giant Mubadala which operates as per international standards including the disclosure of “its assets and liabilities as well as some detail on its portfolio mix and philosophy.” This is an institution that sets high standards in its performance not only in real estate, oil and gas, and other industrial investments but also in aerospace; while it is audited by KMPG. Seznec (*ibid.*) further highlights the activities of the International Petroleum Investment Company (IPIC) and describes it as follows:

The International Petroleum Investment Company (IPIC) appears to be a strategic investor, taking participations in companies that have substantial involvement in the economy of the UAE such as OMV of Austria, or Borealis of Norway. It also owns NOVA, a chemical manufacturer in Canada and is building a 1.5 million b/d oil pipeline between Abu Dhabi and Fujairah to bypass the Strait of Hormuz (*ibid.*).

At the regional level, the UAE is a member of several regional organizations like the GCC. Joint ventures of this nature with globally outstanding corporations like Lockheed Martin add a lot of flavor to the importance of not only the UAE as a potential business partner, but showcases the entire region as a promising destination for potentially lucrative and high level regional investments. In order to accentuate the exposition of the Gulf region as an appropriate market and strengthen its financial wealth, the regional leaders have embarked on a regional integration policy as the way forward for the Gulf States. A regional cooperation is necessary, particularly in the current situation of security in the region and considering the lifting of sanctions against Iran and its involvement in the internal affairs of several Arab countries, more specifically in recruiting opposition as well as sectarian groups with arms against sitting regimes.

However, and notwithstanding the implementation of certain sub-regimes of the economy and the security from Iran and other destructive groups, the states of the GCC region have not succeeded to integrate their entire economies and policies towards strategic areas such as defence. Unlike the Euro zone, the countries recently disagreed on the initial proposals of a GCC common currency system ([www.ecommercejournal.com](http://www.ecommercejournal.com)). This also reminds us of a 2005 incident in which the UAE took a reservation from signing a Gulf Arab Customs Union pact ([www.bilaterals.org](http://www.bilaterals.org)). However, considering the UAE’s political and economic stability, compared to

some of its other Arab and GCC counterparts where political instability and poor practice of human rights have become a concern in the region and the world, there is likelihood for more attraction in FDI in-flow and out-flow and a good prospect for economic growth, given that the multi-sphere diversification projects and other development ambitions are implemented. The attainment of these ambitious goals may in the long run prove unsustainable if the local human capital is not adequately educated to keep abreast with the fast moving trends in global technology, information and communication as well as business culture.

### **Education and the need for home-grown human capital**

In her essay titled “Knowledge Economies in the GCC States” Kristian Ulrichsen (2011:9) reveals the efforts the Gulf States undertook to improve the quality of their citizens’ education:

Policy-makers in the Gulf states utilized a large share of their capital accumulation during the 2002-2008 oil price boom to invest in high-profile and frequently headline-making initiatives in higher education and scientific research.

From the perception of the domestic socio-political and socio-economic realities, the UAE has seen it necessary to encourage and/or preserve certain categories of jobs for its citizens, particularly in the public sector. Relevantly, some of these types of jobs may be classified for citizens only, due to cultural and national security requirements. With regard to these requirements, the Emiratisation policy has been particularly designed to empower and encourage the citizens to participate in the process of nation building. In the economy sector, and considering the encouragement of the participation of the private sector in the manufacturing and service industries, in order to avert them from being overwhelmed by multinationals. One may argue therefore, that this particular approach by the UAE might augur well with first US treasury secretary Alexander Hamilton’s 1792 proposal for protecting the infant industry (cited in Hill, 2009) so that what is owned domestically in resources is exploited and not disenfranchised.

For the Emiratisation policy to succeed, the course of the national education system had to be recalibrated to produce local manpower educated and trained to the competency level of the expatriates. In the UAE federal budget for the year 2016, a source reports, “The Cabinet has approved the project of the UAE Federal Government Budget project estimated at AED 48,557,000,000 with zero deficit” (WAM 2015). Out of the total budget, priority was given to social services which benefits from “more than 50% of the budget” including “education (21.2%), social development (15.5%), public services (11.1%) and health (7.9%)” (ibid.). According to a report by the Center for Higher Education Data and Statistics (CHEDS, 2013:10):

The UAE has 102 higher education institutions, 9 public institutions (three federal and others with major government support) and 93 private institutions (including those in the free zones), across the seven Emirates, with more than 50% located in the Emirate of Dubai.

Despite the laudable government funding and the high per capita income of about US\$40,000 (IMF, 2009 cited in Ridge, 2010), “the UAE also has a public education system that is increasingly seen as failing to meet the most basic needs of its students (Ridge, 2010:9). In a 2007 report by the UAE Ministry of Education, a high concern was raised over the vulnerability of Emirati boys who drop out of school at Grade 10 and by about 11% on yearly basis in certain emirates, and at around 30% as a group, while achieving less in academics when compared to their female counterparts (MOE, 2007; Ridge, 2010). Unlike many developing countries where girl-child drop-out is considered as a persistent pandemic in academics, in the UAE a girl has a better chance of not just accomplishing high school with good grades, but enrolling into higher education and graduating with success. As Ridge analyzes in her well documented study, about 70% of Emirati students in the universities were female, raising the bar to 100% when counting those attending the Bachelor program in education at the United Arab Emirates University (Ridge, 2010:9).

Rania Moussly’s (2009) statement adds more to the anxiety in the education sector: “The Emirates College for Advanced Education (ECAE) in Abu Dhabi has a student population of 220. Of this number 95 per cent is female.” It is even more disquieting that out of 140,000 students in the private schools in the United Arab Emirates, only 20% are Emiratis, notwithstanding the large size of expatriate population (Ian Haslam quoted in Moussly, 2009). While admitting the UAE authorities’ endeavor to ameliorate and invest massively in the education sector, Sue Cooke (cited in Moussly, 2009) notes the importance of building a strong academic foundation at the elementary school level with suggestion that “[t]he bones of the system need to be set in place at the beginning.” The indicators to the education gap are reflected in the job market and the employability of the Emirati workforce in the private sector, particularly in the multinational institutions. Citing the Monster Employment Index Middle East, Cleofe Maceda (2016) reports a 9% annual growth in recruitment in the UAE with a main demand from the private sector particularly for professionals in arts, IT, marketing and communication, and the creative industries; while in contrast the public sector is geared to recruit a bigger percentage of its employees from the citizens.

Apart from the problems mentioned, the UAE Ministry of Education and the various educational bodies in the seven federated emirates recently embarked on a policy of strengthening the education sector. More focus



has been geared to quality enhancement in the instruction and more importantly on learner performance in tertiary and lower learning institutions in the mainstream schools as well as in technical colleges. A growing number of students are returning to schools to take advantage of available employment opportunities as they arise in both the public and private sectors, considering the effectiveness so far achieved in the implementation of the Emiratization policy. There is evidence that youth are even taking advantage of skills training programs offered in well equipped technical/vocational institutions such as ADNOC Technical Institute (ATI), where they improve their English language competency before qualifying to join the technical section for specialization in one of four technical areas that gives them an edge in the oil and gas industry or in any other industry relevant to their specialization.

The new trend in the appreciation of the value of education in this tiny but wealthy country is reflected, among others, in the recent appointments of Emirati PhD holders to the top leadership of both ADNOC Technical Institute (ATI) and its parent company Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC). It is a move expected to contribute not only to the profitability and enhancement of the quality of performance of these institutions but one which will create motivation among the Emirates, particularly the young generation, to tolerate the hardships associated with higher learning at Masters and PhD levels. Indications of the new changes and appointments taking place in the various organs and institutions at both the federal government and at the governments of the individual emirates suggest a major shift in state policy, particularly the priority tightly knotted to the value of the education sector.

However, the various observations demonstrated here provide sufficient reflection of the gravity of the education problem in the UAE. An appropriate solution needs to be put in place to encourage the citizens to actively participate and be at the forefront of national education. The government, both at emirate and federal levels, should develop pragmatically attractive incentives that are not just commensurate with what is offered in other sectors but indeed better incentives and rewards conducive to the hardship and stress related to the conundrums faced in the teaching profession, regardless of the variant levels of the academic institutions. This rationale draws from the reality that a nation cannot develop without the sacrifice and massive participation of its citizens in the education sector. Therefore, the UAE authorities need to launch a massive campaign that attracts the citizens into the classroom and not necessarily in the management and leadership positions in education.

We need to emphasize that the absence of Emirati teachers in the classroom can incur a serious impact on generations of Emirati learners who are not in contact with local role models engaged in the academic profession seriously but also enthusiastically. Additionally, and particularly at the lower stages of learning, studies related to society, culture and history etc. are better taught by people who more extensively knowledgeable to the culture and traditions of the concerned society, hence the necessity for the presence of local teachers in the classrooms. By this note, we do not intend to disregard or depreciate the well learned and highly motivated expatriate professionals performing excellently in the execution of their duties, but actually to highlight the importance of the local teaching manpower when it comes to the implementation of the hidden curriculum and the citizens' knowledge and expertise in their culture.

## **Conclusion**

This essay discussed about the political economy of the UAE and views of certain observers regarding the political system of the country. It also touched upon the role of the UAE in globalization, the shift for diversification and the Emiratization process whose objective is the integration of the citizens into the process of nation building. It also highlighted the critics' main focus on the absence of "democracy" as per western tutelage, and in accordance with their interpretation; which falls short of consideration to the importance of the culture and tradition of the people concerned, their familiarity with the system of "democracy" popularized from western perspective, and mainly the overlapping variables of trust and loyalty that benchmark the harmony of the relationship between the leadership and the citizens. That insufficient view of scholars is what ushers in the need to study further the relationship of the rentier state beyond the visible, measureable contexts of wealth distribution which scholars of the rentier and oil curse theory have made their primary yardstick. That said, and despite the stability, industrialization, technological advancement as well as hefty allocations of budgetary funds witnessed across the close to half century of the UAE's existence since independence, a lot needs to be implemented in the education sector if the country aspires to meet its future projections. Economic diversification alone and accumulation of fiscal profits may not respond to the sustainability of the national social culture and history if the crucial development of the education sector, especially classroom teaching, is shunned by the citizens who were supposed to be primarily the agents at the core of national development. It is, at this juncture, imperative that drastic changes are carried out at all levels of the education sector in order to foster a knowledge-driven society capable of facing the hard task of national development.

## **Notes**

1. For more about the principles of Islam regarding business and economics and about Islamic Banking, read the

works of T.W. Lippman (1995) *Understanding Islam*, New York: Meridian Books; S.M. Abbasi et al (1990) "Islamic Economics: Foundations and Practices" *International Journal of Social Economics*, 16, no. 5, pp. 5 – 17.

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