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The UAE's Silenced Spring

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Numerous death threats, his employer's demand to transfer out of the country and a middle-of-the-night visit from state security forces were not enough to intimidate the prominent Emirati rights activist Ahmed Mansoor, who recently called for political reforms. Security forces managed to silence him only by whisking him away from his family during a raid on his house on April 8. "I know the risks but I need to keep doing everything that I can to improve the human rights situation in my country," Mansoor told me in one of our last conversations before his arrest.

Six weeks later, leading international institutions with major stakes in the United Arab Emirates, like New York University, University of Paris-Sorbonne, and the Louvre and Guggenheim museums, remain silent over the detention of Mansoor, a member of Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa advisory committee. They have looked the other way as the government widened its crackdown on civil society by arresting four other activists and purging the elected boards of two prominent civil society organizations. By refusing to condemn this repression despite their prominent presence in the UAE, these public institutions are complicit in the abuses of their partner -- the UAE government -- and do a disservice to their mission of serving the enlightenment of humanity.

The arrests of Mansoor and the others followed a campaign of harassment after dozens of Emiratis signed a petition published on March 9 that demanded constitutional and parliamentary changes, and free elections for all citizens. Following Mansoor's detention, UAE security forces arrested Nasser bin Ghaith, an economics lecturer at the Abu Dhabi branch of Paris' Sorbonne University, and online activists Fahad Salim Dalk, Hassan Ali al-Khamis, and Ahmed Abdul Khaleq. The authorities now admit that the detainees are facing charges that involve speaking out against the government.

The arrests were preceded by a vicious online smear campaign and death threats against Mansoor and others through blogs, Facebook and Twitter. The local press in the UAE, long engaged in self-censorship, hit new lows with mainly superficial and one-sided pro-government coverage of the crackdown. State-run newspapers devoted much ink to articles about UAE tribes and lawyers swearing allegiance to the government and denouncing Mansoor and his "followers."

The UAE government has not limited its repressive actions to individual activists or even to its borders. The government dissolved the elected boards of two of the country's oldest and most prominent non-governmental organizations -- the Teachers' Association and the Jurist Association -- after they signed an April 6 public appeal calling for greater democracy. Away from home, the UAE government sent troops to bolster the Bahraini monarchy as it cracked down on its restive population, and it supported Egypt's Hosni Mubarak until the bitter end, when he was forced from office.

Despite this affront to freedom and basic human rights, the educational and cultural institutions that have partnered with the UAE government to open up branches in the country in return for tremendous profits have uttered nary a word of protest. After Human Rights Watch sent letters to the institutions last month urging them to condemn the UAE's crackdown, the Sorbonne alone responded, but only, shamefully, to minimize the university's connection to bin Ghaith, claiming he is merely a "lecturer" there, rather than promising to work for his freedom.

In statements to the media, NYU made it clear that it would stay silent and indirectly criticized Human Rights Watch for asking the university to speak out. "We're not sure what to make of it when an outside group tries to insist on setting a particular political agenda for an independent institution of higher learning," it said to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

As partners of the UAE government, these non-profit institutions are not only well-placed to condemn these outrageous attacks but have a responsibility to do so. These public institutions claim to be doing more than turning a pretty profit with their glamorous, starchitect-designed outposts in Abu Dhabi. They promised the world that they will serve the public good by creating a powerful UAE center of "ideas, discourse, and critical thinking" and that their branches will serve as a "bridge between civilizations," as the Sorbonne Abu Dhabi motto says.

Yet how can they serve as a bridge with a government that has shown little respect for the rights, freedom and dignity for its own citizens or the hundreds of thousands of migrant workers who work in slave-like conditions in the country? How much abuse and repression will these organizations tolerate before determining that their mission in the country is unsupportable? The Guggenheim hasn't shied away from condemning other abusive governments, where they had less at stake -- initiating a petition demanding that Chinese release the detained artist Ai Weiwei. Surely it is time to do the same here.

If these institutions truly have a vision to lead the region's development as a society that celebrates artists and academics, they need to speak out forcefully now against the government's silencing of the leading voices for freedom in the United Arab Emirates. Ahmed Mansoor and the others sitting in jail spoke out for freedom. The least these institutions can do is to speak out on their behalf.

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