The Last Human Rights Defender in the United Arab Emirates

An Interview with Ahmed Mansoor by Manu Luksch, May 2016

Manu Luksch: Would you tell us a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up?

Ahmed Mansoor: I was born in a small village in a northern Emirate called Ras al-Khaimah, before the foundation of the UAE. I grew up in that village, between the sea and the mountain, and finished primary school and high school there. At that time, going to a city like Dubai was a mission in itself. There was no easy transportation, or even electricity. The first time I went to a demonstration I was in primary school – we were demanding electricity to be brought to our village. Later, I moved to a different city for college and after that I went to the United States, for my Electrical Engineering degree and Master's degree in Telecommunications. I came back to the UAE in the year 2000; since then I've lived in Dubai, and in 2008 became a citizen of Dubai. (The UAE has different passports for different Emirates; I had to change my passport from Ras al-Khaimah because I'd been living in Dubai for a long time.)Throughout this history I was involved in so many different things. The first was literature – I'd been writing in almost all the newspapers in the UAE about literature and specifically poetry, and later I published a book on poetry. That's when the value of freedom of expression became of great importance for me, and I started my involvement in human rights, driven by the great respect that I have for freedom of expression.

Let's move forward to the time around 2011. Could you describe the atmosphere?

2011 was a turning point in the history of the UAE. What happened after 2011 is different to anything that happened before. It's a remarkable history. Of course, the reason is the Arab Spring that started toward the end of 2010. We'd seen some of its initial results during early 2011, for we shortlined tried to create an atmosphere that would allow people to express themselves. We were really doing this as a group of citizens, not as a cosmopolitan city. [...] Emiratis make up 10% of the total population of the UAE. [There was no hope that] foreigners in the country would promote our freedom, because their interests are different We had to do that ourselves, and things were moving toward a narrowing of freedom of expression, and more restrictions. So we thought of something that would at least shock the society and take things to a different level – and I, along with a few individuals, established an online discussion forum.

At that time, the forums were flourishing, but the discussion was poor, and not promoting human rights and tolerance. We established this online discussion forum called UAE dialogue (UAEHewar.net). I thought that we could do something really different and promote freedom of expression to an extent that [others could] not, because of their own internal censorship, because of the restrictive environment that they worked in, because of their orientation, because of many other reasons. We opened the site for all types of discussions – political, religious, cultural, social... We had some parts that talked about music, and even the ruling system in UAE and adjacent countries. We even translated some of the articles that had been written about the UAE in the foreign media that would not be published here because [they contained] negative things [...] about the country. We allowed people from different backgrounds to give their views and write their thoughts – we had some liberal people who were writing, we had some atheists, we had some religious people, and they were all interacting and creating a dialogue that we'd never seen, and were craving, in the country. Shortly after that the site became the focus of a lot of people.

What was discussed on the UAEHewar forum?

One of the major subjects was the ruling system in the UAE – who really has the upper hand at the moment, who is controlling the country, [by] what mechanism [...] and what are the major contributing factors in shaping policy. Also we talked about the economic crisis that hit the UAE and the world; we talked about human rights, [...] religion was discussed. In fact the first thread on the site [was] written by an atheist who was challenging some of the Islamists. This thread was blocked by the authorities, three months after we launched the site.

Of course after that the site became really a trendsetter, you could say, in discussions. And people were spreading discussions through emails, through Blackberry Messenger, and were talking about it in society. That attracted security worries and close monitoring of the site and resulted in blocking of the site six months after that. First of all they did some sort of technical blocking, so that when you opened the site it would tell you, there's a system issue, the site is not loading. I have an engineering background, I could understand that they'd blocked the site at the DNS level [... so] the site name wouldn't translate to the IP address that pulls the site. I asked people to write the IP address directly and they were able to reach the site. But then a few months after that, they blocked the whole site [again] – formally blocked – and we tried to challenge that through the courts, but then we reach 2011 and I was arrested.

But before the arrest we were very active, lots of intellectual people [were] thinking a lot about what was happening around us. Since the foundation of this country people [have been] asking for real political representation through the parliament – the Federal National Council (FNC) – which is supposed to represent the people. Unfortunately that body is a purely consultative body and does not have any legislative or regulatory authority. In 2006, the president of UAE thought of improving that situation by [...] electing some of its members. Hand-picked people would elect half the members without really adding any authority to the parliament. We gave it the benefit of the doubt. I was also one of those candidates, who wanted to show [...] willingness to accept gradual improvement. In 2011 there was supposed to be another election, also by some hand-picked people, to elect some members of the FNC without adding any authority to the work they could do. [That's when] myself and other intellectuals in the UAE came up with the '3rd of March Petition', directed to the president and the other six rulers of the UAE, urging them to make constitutional change to allow the members of the FNC to be elected by means of universal suffrage, like everywhere else in the world, and to give this parliament full legislative and regulatory power.

That petition was well received in the beginning by the authorities, but when we started to defend and promote it in TV interviews and with international news agencies, we saw a strange change that happened suddenly, during the [peak of the] Arab Spring. Two presidents, in Tunisia and Egypt, [had been] thrown out basically, so that brought everybody here to extreme alert. We weren't driven initially by what was happening in the Arab Spring as much as [by the] decree issued February 2011 that governed new elections and the number of people who were going to be hand-picked again to elect members of the FNC. We were surprised to see no improvement in parliament. Basically there was no new power, and we were expecting that, during the Arab Spring, they would at least try to absorb anger that was growing in the whole Arab world for more freedom and more accountability. We were shocked to see no improvement. That's why we wrote this petition, and we wrote it in a very polite manner. But the reaction from the authorities was extreme, and they started focusing on me because I was really one of the initiators.

There were other reasons as well – I was involved for many years in defending human rights [and] had some very good links with international human rights organisations, the international media and also the UN. I could see that [the authorities] were trying to prepare the nation for my arrest. It would be noticed by the international community, so they spared absolutely no effort really to smear me; they started to fabricate videos; they created a dedicated internet site [about me]; they made up stories every day and started to spread information by Blackberry Messenger, by Facebook, by Twitter at a later stage – and then radio, TV, newspaper writers started getting involved. I received several death threats by individuals who even indicated their actual names and phone numbers; in some cases they put their photos on their Facebook profiles. I knew that something was going to happen so I took copies of these threats to my lawyer in the hope that we would take legal action. Unfortunately [the threats] were orchestrated by the body that was supposed to be protecting us, and none of these cases were accepted by the authorities.

Were you arrested because you initiated the 3rd of March Petition?

When I was arrested on April 8th 2011, they did not attribute my arrest to the petition, but to my humiliating the president, Crown Prince and prime minister of the UAE as owner of the online discussion forum. Though we didn't declare our names, by monitoring (UAEHewar.net), the authorities managed to know who was running the site and they pinpointed certain people concerned about freedom of expression and human rights. [Also] I had asked people to boycott the 2011 election for parliament because I seriously believed it was only executing it. And this is not real participation to me. But to give credit to the ruler of Dubai, he is a great visionary guy who has lots of good ideas that would benefit the region and the people. However, on the other side, the economic/business model that has been put onto Dubai has been based on real estate, which is why in 2008, 2009, during the financial crisis it was greatly affected.

On the one hand, e-services and 'smart city initiatives' (which encompass a range of services that are not really well defined) promise efficiency; on the other, it's not really clear how everything from your health indices, to where you go, or with whom you communicate, is protected. And of course in some fields more transparency is to be welcomed, but it also means that the individual becomes transparent, because every step you take with the smartphone in your pocket is fully documented, as GPS traces, or as communications, or transactions.

I think this 'Smart City' concept and the consequences that go with the move toward well connected and smart cities is universal, and they usually do not pertain to any specific geographical location or city. In countries where the justice system is strong and is independent, you will be able to claim your rights, they will be preserved through the judiciary system as well as the laws that give you protection. However, when you come to third world countries where the judicial system is not independent and is totally under the control of the executive authorities, the laws do not even provide you with protection as an individual. You wouldn't be able, for example, to get the information about yourself held by any of the authorities. There is no Information Act; we don't even have a right to information about any government spending. So the impact of a 'Smart City' kind of arrangement in a democratic country is different than its impact in a non-democratic country. Like anywhere else in the world, an individual in the UAE cares about privacy, but, especially if you are involved in political activities or human rights activities, you will have to be extremely cautious about what you carry with you.

Your smartphone is [...] a tracking device, basically. Even regular telephones are tracking devices by nature because they communicate with the towers, and the authorities know to great proximity where you are by using the technology itself. They basically measure the signal-to-noise ratio from the tower and they can tell your location within meters. This is even before smartphones. With smartphones, there are several hundred applications that can track you. [...] In 2009, the telecom operator pushed spyware over the air to all Blackberry devices. And it was a real big scandal, because it was discovered immediately by software experts as well as acknowledged by the Blackberry company. The UAE authorities wanted to have full control, to have everything under their view. At that time the encryption algorithm of Blackberry Messenger hadn't been given to the authorities, so Blackberry was the most secure communications tool back then. But people didn't 'run [the spyware], so the authorities decided to stop Blackberry services [...] Then, apparently, Blackberry gave [the UAE authorities] the encryption keys so that they could decode some of the activities, and we have evidence that that did happen actually in the UAE.

In the region here we have to be extremely cautious. The technology developed in the West that is supposed to be adding extra protection to individuals sometimes becomes a risk factor here. For example, in emails they have technology called two-step verification, where they send you, for example, a code on your phone you have to use to enter your email. In our country this is a risk factor because as an activist your phones are monitored, and if the government intercepts [the code] they could use it to log into your emails. There is no respect really for the laws and regulations, and the ethics also that technology brings in. You are monitored 24/7, basically – even when you sleep at home and you put the phone somewhere beside you, they know you're at home, you're not active on Twitter, you're not active on Facebook, you're not communicating with anybody else, so probably you're sleeping. So this is part of what technology brings to us as well.

Returning to your personal story, what happened after UAEHewar was taken down and you were arrested?

After we signed the [the 3rd March] petition, and after the smear campaign against myself and other individuals that participated in the petition, I was arrested on the 8th of April, 2011. In general, here, when you are taken [into jail], you are exposed to a very humiliating body search, where you have to get rid of all of your clothes and make some movements, up and down on both the front and the back sides of your body while you are naked. I [was made to do] this in Dubai and unfortunately also for the second time in Abu Dhabi. I spent overall 11 days in solitary confinement, two days here and nine days in Abu Dhabi, in the public jail.

During that time, the smear campaign was [still] going on against us, and we were mistreated in the jail as a group. We were isolated in many aspects from the rest of the inmates, initially during the solitary confinement, and then afterward as well. We weren't given the same rights as everybody else in the jail. [When] I was admitted in, one of the careless police officers did not give me clean clothes; he saw a wheelchair [with] some clothes on it and told me, 'you can wear these things'. I was really shocked – at least he should have given me some clean clothes—but because I did not have any experience, I did not know how things happen in jail. A few days after that, I felt my waist itching, and I started to get spots on the waist and lower part of my body. The spots became larger and black, so I started to complain. And then the cell that I was in was very, very dirty and it wasn't air conditioned. During April it was 50C, but afterward in the summertime – imagine how bad a cell that is not air-conditioned in the middle of the desert could be. During my stay there, one guy passed away inside one of those cells, probably because of the heat, mainly.

[Later] we were taken to the general blocks while [we] were prepared for trial. The hearings did not start at once. We were taken back and forth for interrogation about the online discussion forum [and] what had been written there, and political views. During that time they told people not to talk to us about our case. There was a huge campaign running against us throughout the period that we were in jail – almost 8 months – in all the government media. Not only that, but they also invoked the tribes and different Emirates to sign a petition against us, and to take me to court because I 'hurt their feelings' by criticising the government and the president and so on... well, I didn't do anything of that. I can criticise anybody politically, I have the right to do so, and I still do that, but I do not make derogatory comments, and we didn't even allow libellous comments or defamation of people – we need people to focus on ideas as opposed to individuals and personal things. But anyhow, during our time in jail we were not allowed to go to the library, to the recreation centre, we weren't given the same level of communication capabilities with the outside world like everybody else, and we were

Your citizenship could be revoked – and that is a real death, equivalent to the death penalty

empowered by actions there, and decided to really crack down on them. They are totally different to those guys in Egypt, although they have similar intellectual beliefs. [...] But they were really working within the system and even considered to be the cream of society – they were role models a few days before their arrest in 2012. And then suddenly the authorities wanted us to believe that this group wanted to overthrow the government and take over. The smear campaign that was practiced against me in 2011 was a rehearsal; the authorities implemented the same thing against al-Islah, but they were taken to secret detention. Many of them came in front of the court and claimed torctured. A lot of them are [sentenced to] 10 years imprisonment in the UAE right now.

2011 was when we started to see a real deviation from the core values of the UAE. The founders of the UAE stated in the preface of the constitution that they would lead the country to full parliamentary representation. What we asked for was really to implement that statement in the constitution, and yet that was dealt with harshly, because the total orientation of the country is now towards security, and the internal and external policy of the UAE is really centred around an obsession with the Muslim Brotherhood (which was) never a threat to the UAE. Yes, we are in a very turbulent region that has lots of problems, but I don't think by resorting to this security mechanism you will able to defeat problems, [because] you are creating reasons for internal differences instead of stronger unity.

UAE is now seen in the region to be the country that is leading the anti-democracy movement like that, Saudi Arabia is now seen like that.... All the Arab Spring countries that were hoping for a better future were dealt with by Saudi Arabia and UAE and the dictatorships were brought back and supported – Egypt is the biggest example of this. Egypt's biggest supporter is UAE, and Saudi Arabia second. So the UAE is seen right now as a force that is going against the hope of the people in the region – despite the fact that it is creating big cities and great images for the young Arab people, and an environment that they would love to live in. There is a deep contradiction here – the UAE government needs people to live by its rules, it doesn't want to give them freedom. But freedom is the core value of existence. If you do not have freedom you don't have anything else. You could lose everything else – there is no [...] sustainable development without human rights, and this is what we lack in the region and, of course, in the UAE.

There's a paradox, because from the outside we also see that the UAE has exceptional material wealth which it shares out, invests in the people, higher education, healthcare – unlike other countries with weak or no democratic representation...

You know we live in this real paradox [...]. Yes, UAE offers free schools for its citizens, sends lots of people aboard for higher degrees and so on. In every speech [the authorities] emphasise the fact that the youth and the citizens are the building blocks of this country, and they are proud of them, and they believe that [...] the country is going to thrive and develop further. They are putting all kinds of flattering statements in the speeches of the political figures of the country. [But] when you say that, if we are that good and well educated and if we are going to be a major bloc for future development, why don't you involve us in the political decision making process, [...] in making the decisions that really matter to us, to future generations? Why don't you get us involved in knowing how the wealth of this country is distributed, why don't we [have] a monitoring tool for that? Basically what we ask for is really what everybody was asking for, to have representation that really holds the government accountable for whatever they do. Yet you will hear a response saying that we are not ready for that. So how come we are ready to lead the world, [but not to] choose representatives in the government?

[The authorities] make excuses like, we've seen some other countries in this region that allowed this kind of representation with the result that development was regressing. And they are referring to Kuwait of course, which has a parliament that is elected by the people and has regulatory and legislative authority, but the country is not doing well compared to our country. So you suddenly become, from a marvellous citizen, an incapable citizen, unable to select the people that would represent you correctly, and hindering development. We live that kind of contradiction. From the outside you see beautiful buildings, great shopping malls, beautiful beaches, glittering windows on the highest skyscraper on Earth, but when it comes to values [without which] no nation can sustain its development, [...] they are considered to be a threat to the security of the country. How would a critical view on the political system be a threat to the existence of this country, or to its economy or foreign interests? How would people associating with themselves and asking for a change in society endanger the political system and collapse the whole country?

So from one side you see something beautiful, materialistic – basically, freedom as you expressed, but actual freedom is not there. Now they've put an arsenal of laws and regulations [...] to reduce the space available for people speak up. There's a long list of punishments that would deter anybody... You could lose your job, [get] a travel ban, not get scholarships – even your kids would not get scholarships. Your citizenship could be revoked – and that is a real death, that's equivalent to a death penalty. Physically you exist within the space that you occupy, but you have no other means to even identify yourself, because you don't have any documents that prove that you are there – and they are doing this even to children, some not even in primary school yet – their citizenship was revoked because their fathers were considered to be political prisoners. So it [becomes] a punishment as well, besides the fact that many are spending the best of their lives behind bars, for no good reason really, and [going] through serious ill treatment, torture, psychologically and physically. It is the basic unit of the society that you are destroying – lots of people [who have been targeted] have families. Who will pay for their living expenses? Where could that kind of [father-child] passion take place if the kids are unable even to touch their father because there are barriers when you go see them in jail?

I believe that if you want to measure how humanistic any situation is, you need to start from the jail, because that is where you see how much any government really cares about human rights. And I've been there... Others are in an even worse situation than mine, and went through worse jails than the one I've been to, and I can tell you how awful those jails are. Even your rights that they put in their regulations are not implemented. It's just on a document and it's show, so that they can use it in the propaganda. But there's no actual respect for even the regulations that they put in. So that kind of contradiction really exists massively, massively in this country.

And it's not only that... I'll throw a new dimension to this discussion. We're trying to import the latest technology into the region, and now we're talking about cars without even a driver, and we're talking about space authorities to explore outer space and so on. At the same time, we cannot use some VoIP services like WhatsApp voice. We cannot use FaceTime, we cannot use Snapchat Voice and video services, or Facebook voice services simply because the authorities here are very obsessed about security. If they cannot monitor any tool, they will not allow it. And this is going really to go with us all the way until a good balance is struck between what is absolutely necessary for the security of people and what is really necessary for the people to do the things that they have to do and to enjoy their lives as well. At the moment that balance is not there at all. The only thing that you can enjoy is the area around you, the physical entities of this country. But the incorporeal values, the freedoms, human rights, political participation, justice—are the values that we are missing. And these are the values that we are trying our best, as human rights defenders, to promote and educate people about, and raise awareness about.

I follow a bitt bik at the Smart Dubai initiative publishes and announces, and it is the aim of the government that the whole range of citizen services will be delivered to your smartphone, from navigating the streets in driverless cars to e-elections or cashless payment. It's called m-governance (governance through mobile phone). Through going smart, Dubai wants to make sure it's the 'happiest city' by 2020, and this is really being promoted and invested in abroad at Smart City expos...

Actually I think Dubai as a city by itself has great potential, and the ruler of Dubai has a vision – that is something that I have to say, the guy started e-government in the very early stages of the Internet. He has this view and he implemented it, and other cities and countries started to copy Dubai's experience. So they are really ahead of everybody else in the region when it comes to implementing new technologies, bringing in new ideas and new concepts. The issue here probably is that this whole process is centralised, and the level of contribution by individuals is really only at the level of execution, as opposed to building the whole, or setting out a future path. So somebody else is going to do the thinking for you and you'll be nobody was allowed to enter the hearing, and they changed the judge three times during this whole trial! We weren't really comfortable and could see things were not right, our lawyers weren't given the right time to talk, we weren't given the right time to talk, the hearings were closed for I don't know what reasons... At that time we were still receiving death threats from outside and people were making [up] stories about us every day inside the jail. So we told the judge, 'either you open the door and let the hearing be public, or we're going to leave, we'll boycott the hearings'. He totally ignored what we told him and our request, so we decided to open the door and move away from the courtroom, but not the court – there is another block outside. So we left, we just opened the door and walked out there, and then we boycotted all the subsequent hearings until the end. So over the course of maybe three months, we wouldn't go to court. Every time they came to us to take us to the court, we refused, and then in the last 16 days we went on hunger strike, all five of us.

The hearings after the one that we walked out from were opened to the public, and many human rights organisations were able to come into the country and attend. They saw something that usually doesn't happen in courts – basically, some lawyers who were appointed by citizens who wanted to sue us conducted an economic presentation inside the court, and showed how prosperous the people were and what good things the government did for them. The human rights organisations were amazed to see this kind of thing happening inside the court, and understood the reasons that we boycotted the hearings. Anyhow, that continued until the very last date. On the verdict date, the phones were switched off deliberately so that we could not call our families and understand what was happening. But we had some radios there, and came to know from the BBC that I was sentenced to three years, and that everybody else was sentenced to two years. However, the next day the sentences were commuted and we were released on presidential pardon.

Now things did not stop there for me. When I was walking out of the jail, a journalist waiting outside asked if we were going to stop doing what we'd been doing, now that we'd received a pardon. I told her, 'To the contrary, I really do not have the courage to back off. I have more reasons, now that I went myself through this experience, to continue my work in human rights. Not only have I been listening to others' stories, now I have my own story as well.' So I continued my activities. I was immediately fired from my job. The authorities did not return my passport (till this day, by the way). They denied me a Certificate of Good Conduct which means that I cannot even work, because it's a prerequisite for applying for any job in the UAE.

Then, the authorities started arresting the Islamist al-Islah group. As a human rights defender, I do not look at the intellectual background of people, I consider them as abstract human beings. I abstract them from everything else. To me they are human beings, whether they are criminals, whether they are Islamists, whether they are intellectuals... I do not really care about their intellectual beliefs as much as I care about their rights as human beings, and whether these were violated according to the international definition. So I started defending these individuals, just as I'd been defending everybody else as a human rights defender.

I was still under the same [smear] campaign month after month until in Sept 2012, I was assaulted physically at the University. I'd started a law degree in the evenings. I wanted to foster my human rights interest academically. I had to stop when they put me in jail, and then after I was released I went back to the University. I'd done a semester over the summer and was going into the spring semester; the campaign was still running against me, inflating people's emotions against me. The authorities were really doing a great job—it was a clear case of McCarthyism, they were defaming us so that people would think that we were enemies of the country. They spared absolutely no effort – there were TV shows, newspaper, radio... they were working relentlessly to smear us. One day, during the 'add and drop' weeks [when] not all the people were at the University, a person approached me behind my car and asked if I was Ahmed Mansoor. I said yes and extended my hand to shake; he spat in my face and pushed me [to the ground]. I was carrying my bag and so got scratched on my arm and leg. When I gained my balance and tried to run after him he ran away. Somebody was waiting for him inside a car that was parked with easy access to the external gate and he jumped inside without saying anything else.

A week later, I was attacked again at the University, this time by a huge guy [...] He grabbed me from the back of my neck and started giving me a series of strong punches to the head, without saying anything. I started to scream and people started gathering. This was in the parking lot inside the University. And when people gathered, he ran away. It was quick, but they were severe punches to the head. When I was able to again stand and see [where he was heading], another short, muscly guy jumped in front of me from behind the trees to obstruct me. Then he also ran to the same car that was parked with somebody inside it, and they got away. In both cases I had to go and get medical reports and open cases with the police, but of course nothing happened.

Campaigns continued against me, and my activities continued. Now the major incident... In January 2013, money suddenly disappeared from my bank account. I'd been working for 12 years in a company, and when they fired me [after I was released from jail] they gave me my end of service benefit. That was the only money that I had to live for a few years, and it disappeared from my bank account. I was really shocked, to tell you the truth – I'm talking about almost USD 140,000. I called the bank and they said that a cheque had been withdrawn from my account. I told them that I did not write a cheque to anybody, and that this was fraud. My bank is in Abu Dhabi; the transaction took place in Abu Dhabi and I was living in Dubai at that time. The next day I went to the bank – they were shocked themselves, and brought my [cheque]. I told them that the [stab] was not in my chequebook – it was not there at all and it had not been there, it seemed to me... there were 13 pages before it and four pages after that were not used, and that page had not existed at all. I told them that maybe somebody took it during the printing of the chequebook. I went to the police and filed a case, and to the Prosecution [Public Prosecution Office in Abu Dhabi]. When I was going there, a taxi driver honked at me telling me there was a problem with my tyres, so I pulled over and saw that the valves had been loosened deliberately on both tyres on the passenger side. I knew that I was being watched. So I fixed them and had my brother-in-law, who was with me, wait inside the car while I went to the Prosecution. Then I went to the police, and drove back to Dubai.

Afterwards, I was called twice by the criminal lab in Abu Dhabi to give samples of my handwriting and bring them documents that had my signature. They also brought my files from the bank to see if the signature was mine or not. They came to the conclusion that the signature on the cheque had

isolated in the visiting area.

The worst thing that happened to me was that I couldn't get medical treatment. After that skin disease I also got scabies, where my whole body became very, very, very,