

# Migrant workers in dubai's development



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## **Migrant Workers and the Development of Dubai.**

### **Introduction**

Dubai is part of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), one of the seven emirates that make up the UAE. Dubai attracts millions of visitors for both business and pleasure each year. Dubai is a relatively new city. The last 30 years have seen mass construction as can clearly be seen from the pictures of Sheikh Zayed Road at Annex 1 and from the NASA pictures at Annex 2. As in any developing city numerous construction cranes dot the horizon. Dubai is very much a tale of two cities... the stunning modern city and the workers subject to labour conditions of those in the dark ages. Dubai has achieved economic success due to both its abundance of natural resource and because of its tax free shopping but at whose expense and with what future potential problems has this stunning modern city emerged? While Dubai has emerged as a global city, hosting sporting events and conferences and attracting both media attention and the attention of the rich and famous for its beautiful buildings, villas and apartment, criticism of their treatment of immigrant workers and of human rights violations have also emerged.

This essay looks at who is operating those cranes, the people who are building this new, ultra modern city and examines the Government's policy towards them. The first section provides a demographic profile of the population of Dubai. The second section looks at the socio-economic stratifications that exist in Dubai and the potential here for conflict, particularly in relation to the migrant workers. The third section looks at some of the UAE Government policy towards migrants, in particular it looks at the issue of human rights examines the criticisms of human rights

violations. In conclusion it is argued that if the Government of the United Arab Emirates does not act to support and protect and integrate the people that are building their leading city then there is potential for great repercussions.

The fast urban development that followed the 1971 federation completely changed the character of Dubai. The local citizens now represent only a minority of the population of which the great majority consists of immigrants from different societies with different planning ideologies (Haggag, 2003). The Table below clearly details this with 83.02% of the total population of Dubai being foreign born. The cultural and economic implications of this are discussed in the following section.

**Dubai – Metropolitan Statistical Area – Foreign Born – 2005**

(<http://www.gstudynet.org/gum/UAE/Dubai2005.htm>, 31/03/07)

Country of Birth	Population	% of Foreign Born	% of Total Population
India	538,560	51%	42.34%
Pakistan	168,960	16%	13.28%
Arab (from SW Asia and North Africa)	116,160	11%	9.13%
Bangladesh	95,040	9%	7.47%
Philippines	31,680	3%	2.49%

Sri Lanka	19, 008	1. 8%	1. 49%
Europe	11, 616	1. 1%	0. 91%
USA	3, 168	0. 3%	0. 25%
Other Countries	71, 808	6. 8%	5. 65%
Total Foreign Born	1, 056, 000	100%	83. 02%
Total Population*	1, 272, 000		

Source: Ministry of Labor (2005 Statistics)

\* 2004 Estimate, UAE in Figures

([www.uae.gov.ae/mop?UAE\\_figure/UAE\\_%2004\\_files/sheet001.htm](http://www.uae.gov.ae/mop?UAE_figure/UAE_%2004_files/sheet001.htm))

There are very distinct cultural (social) and economic stratifications in Dubai. Nicholson describes this as the 'Dubai sandwich: at the bottom, cheap and exploited Asian labour; in the middle, white northern professional services, plus tourist hunger for glamour in the sun and... at the top, enormous quantities of invested oil money, combined with fearsome social and political control' (Nicholson, 2006)

Although a Muslim emirate, Dubai has largely developed upon Western lines. large-scale projects have been imported and implemented by western  
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professionals, using their own modern building technologies. Many practical decisions, which ultimately affect the structure of society, education and administration systems, and the shaping of the physical environment, are taken largely according to western ideologies. In many cases, major planning policies, development strategies, and even legal codes follow western models (Haggag, 2003). Arab cities are fundamentally laid out differently to western ones and the impact of western planning ideologies on the traditional pattern of Arab cities has been significant. There is a cultural dichotomy between western and Arabic. The complex pattern of architectural concept and style, the development of building processes, are all impacted by changes in socio-economic, political and cultural development (Haggag, 2003). As a result Dubai is a Westernised city in an Arabic state. This is true culturally as well as bars and restaurants serve alcohol, women are free to go out alone (not usual in most Arabic countries). There is concern over this but herein lies the crux of the issue for Dubai how can a minority ideology rule? Dubai has strict policy on public behaviour, it is an arrest able offence for a man and woman to kiss in public and it's an offence to dress inappropriately during Ramadan. Recently there has been debate in Dubai about the problems associated with multiculturalism in Dubai. (Fattah 19/10/06) Western liberalism in terms of dress combined with the traditional Muslim beliefs in the Arab country does not sit well together. Indeed Dubai can be seen as the place where Huntington's Clash of Civilisations is actually in one country (Huntingdon, 1993). How can Dubai balance the Arabic beliefs with what would become a cultural melting pot based on the multi-ethnic composition of it's populace. Haggag gives an excellent account of this dichotomy explaining that the adoption of Western

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concepts and ideologies in the cultural domain contradict the traditional way of life and yet although a driving a concern in most modern Arabic societies, there has been little debate about the potential conflicts arising from this situation. Dubai is catering to the needs of the rich Western investor and needs to find a balance with the more traditional Arab way of life in order to prevent any future conflict.

There is a clear economic stratification in the ethnic groups in Dubai also. ' Locals are typically owners, Westerners earn the top salaries and South Asians do the menial labor'. (Fattah, 19/10/06) Locals will remain owners, as non-locals cannot buy land in Dubai. The inequality in pay in itself has potential for conflict as the workers cannot be part of the city that they themselves are helping to create. ' An army of some 250, 000 men, largely from India and Pakistan, are labouring to create the new glimmer fantasy, earning on average £150 a month, and living in camps, four to a room, 12ft by 12ft, hidden away in the industrial quarters of al Quoz. One night in one of the luxury hotels would cost six months' wages of one of the men who built it.'(Nicolson, 2006)

### **Government Policy towards Migrant Workers**

With regards to citizenship there are strict regulations, foreigners are ineligible for citizenship therefore preventing Dubai from becoming a cultural melting pot even though it has been built by non-residents. Given that there are no means of gaining permanent residency in Dubai (or any of the other Emirates) the UAE Government has ruled that anyone born in the UAE takes on the nationality as their father and not that of the UAE. So should all those

currently in Dubai remain there the ethnic make up will not change and the Arabs will remain a minority group in their own country.

In the period since 1971, public policy in Dubai has been characterised by a rush to construct. In order to do so it needed people to do the construction and so to sustain and enable the growth desired by the Government in Dubai thousands of migrant workers have come to the emirate. While the influx of people into Dubai and the construction has happened rapidly, there has been concern over the implementation of thought out and effective urban policy, or in other words policy development has not been in line with the development of the skyline of Dubai.

There have been some reforms introduced but they have been met with opposition from the construction and business communities. In 2005 the Government put limits on when workers could work during the hottest months of July and August after an increase in heat related injuries and fined companies who did not allow for an afternoon break between 12. 30pm and 4. 30pm. This resulted in a lot of companies just paying the fines. (Human Rights Watch Report, 2007 p. 45) A new draft labour law from the UAE has been criticised for failing to meet international standards, for example it does not protect the workers right to strike in fact it punishes those workers who do strike. If Dubai and the rest of the UAE do not act to improve the treatment and rights of migrant workers they face potential for conflict not only from workers revolting but also increased international pressure, for a developing first class world city they need to balance the needs of the development with the needs of the people who are helping to make the development dreams real.

Dubai is quite unique in that its indigenous population are a minority ethnic group. The Government's policy and desire of rapid urbanisation and a first class world city brought with it an influx of cheap migrant labour, thus changing the ethnic demographic of the emirate. As this essay has shown this has not come without problems and unless effective policies are put in place there is great potential for further clashes along the different, interlinked stratifications that exist in society in Dubai. One of the most pressing issues facing the Government and of course those affected is that of human rights violations. Although this essay has shown that the Government has taken some steps towards addressing human rights abuses, those steps have not been big enough nor have they covered enough ground. The Government needs to find a balance between their needs and those of the people who are building their vision.

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