

## A Gift with Lots of Baggage (About the realities of the UAE)

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Earlier this month Mayor Rahm Emanuel celebrated the opening of the United Arab Emirates-Manchester City Field at Haas Park, praising the facilities paid for and named after the UAE and Manchester City FC, the English soccer club owned by its ruling family. Chicagoans should not let the UAE's very public association with a child and family-friendly project blind them to the realities of the UAE.

**This a country where people who attempt to exercise their right to free speech and peaceful dissent are likely to find themselves in [arbitrary detention](#), where [lawyers are harassed](#) and even deported for their efforts to defend peaceful dissidents, and where migrant workers, who make up about 95 percent of the work force, face extraordinary exploitation. In the last year the situation has deteriorated so significantly that on October 26 the European Parliament issued an urgent [resolution](#) calling on its strategic partner to call a halt to an ongoing campaign of repression and intimidation against its citizenry.**

On October 13, two days after Mayor Emanuel praised the UAE's contribution to Chicago, UAE State Security forces arrested Mansoor al-Ahmadi, vice-president of the UAE Student Union, bringing to 64 the total of peaceful activists locked up so far this year in this country with a population a lot smaller than metropolitan Chicago. Worse, the whereabouts of 62 of them is unknown, an invitation to further abuse of their rights.

The government detained Ahmed Mansoor, an Emirati member of Human Rights Watch's advisory committee and a leading human rights activist in the country, for seven months last year. He is still not allowed to travel and has been subject to a public smear campaign and [threats](#) against his life. On July 18, the UAE authorities [deported](#) a man who was born and raised in the UAE, but who under its rules did not possess Emirati citizenship, to Thailand, where he had no ties at all, as punishment for his entirely peaceful political activities.

The UAE has claimed, without a shred of evidence, that foreign plots to overthrow its rulers justify its harsh crackdown, but the only thing that these human rights defenders, lawyers, educators, bloggers, charity workers, students, and religious figures have in common is a belief in their right to free speech and a desire for reform.

And then there's the issue of the UAE's migrant workers. In 1906, Upton Sinclair famously described the appalling wage-slavery conditions in Chicago's meat industry: "Here is a population, low-class and mostly foreign, hanging always on the verge of starvation and

dependent for its opportunities of life upon the whim of men every bit as brutal and unscrupulous as the old-time slave drivers; under such circumstances, immorality is exactly as inevitable, and as prevalent, as it is under the system of chattel slavery."

Despite the UAE's phenomenal wealth (it sits upon vast reserves of oil and natural gas), living and working conditions for many migrant workers there are also an affront to basic standards of decency and recall abuses that are generally thought to belong to a bygone and shameful era. The UAE is home to over 5 million migrant workers from South Asia. They have no right to organize or bargain collectively and face arrest and deportation for going on strike.

The legal system keeps them tethered to their employers, who sponsor their visas and control whether they can switch jobs. The recruiting system leaves workers owing recruiters thousands of dollars, which they often must use at least two years of wages to repay even though employers are supposed to pay these fees. Abuses include unsafe work environments, nonpayment of wages, no rest periods or days off, and the routine confiscation of passports by employers.

The current economic climate makes it easier for political leaders to turn a blind eye to human rights concerns as they look for creative ways to take care of their constituents.

Chicago shouldn't stop looking for creative ways to bring investment into the city, but it should have clear-eyed awareness of who its partners are and look for ways to engage them about human rights and the rule of law. Unfortunately, the UAE-Manchester City Field at Haas Park is the site of the latest PR victory for a government that has contempt for free speech and shows no regard for the hard-working men and women on whose labor it depends.

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