

Political Naturalisation: Conscripting Transit Citizens in the United Arab Emirates

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Since its formation, the United Arab Emirates has sought to construct a cohesive sense of national identity among its citizens, centred on a system of material and legal privileges granted exclusively to Emirati nationals. A pillar of its nation-building project was the strict exclusion of foreigners from citizenship and the upholding of a patrilineal citizenship regime. Thus, Emirati nationals are part of a social hierarchy that reproduced colonial inequalities, which have become increasingly difficult to overcome in the post-nation-state era. For long, these inequalities were appeased by a social contract that dispensed material benefits in exchange for political quiescence. The Arab uprisings of 2011, however, were a turning point for this arrangement. In response to regional demands for reform and increased political participation, governments in the Gulf region, including the UAE, implemented measures to strengthen regime stability and reduce the possibility of civil mobilisation. As a result, the UAE began granting citizenship to select expatriates, turning naturalisation into a strategic tool for economic and political gain. Unlike the well-known 'golden visas' and long-term residency schemes, the naturalisation process is ambiguous. The government does not disclose the names or numbers of individuals who have been naturalised, nor does it clearly define the eligibility criteria for such naturalisation. This paper examines the evolution of the UAE's social contract and how naturalisation came to function as a tool for recruiting loyal and productive citizens and as an instrument of statecraft and influence projection. By analysing the state's strategic use of political naturalisation, this study highlights how citizenship is utilised to reconfigure traditional hierarchies and notions of belonging within the UAE, thereby extending the state's influence and reinforcing its power inside and beyond its borders through naturalised 'transit citizens'.

More Information

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