

Joint NGO Letter to Formula 1 on the Saudi Arabia and UAE Grand Prix

Dear Mr Stefano Domenicali,

We, the undersigned human rights organisations, are writing to express our concern regarding the Formula One (F1) Grand Prix that will take place in Saudi Arabia on December 5, 2021 and in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on December 12, 2021.

Despite some limited reforms, the human rights situation in both countries has significantly deteriorated, and continues to do so. With the organisation of the F1 Grand Prix, both Emirati and Saudi officials are seeking to improve their respective image and reputation, while deflecting attention from their countries' deplorable human rights records, a practice commonly known as sportswashing. Human Rights Watch characterised the F1 events as "a blatant attempt at sportswashing to legitimise the country's repressive regime". Hosting these races in countries that do not respect human rights and instead stigmatize and persecute peaceful dissenting voices, sends the wrong message to the international community.

As the CEO of Formula One Group and organiser of the F1 race, we respectfully submit it is your responsibility to remind both the Saudi and the Emirati governments of their international human rights commitments and obligations to respect and protect human rights. They should not be allowed to resort to sportswashing through F1 to cover or distract from gross human rights violations, including violations of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

United Arab Emirates

The UAE is a dictatorship with one of the poorest human rights records in the world. The UAE authorities have imprisoned hundreds of peaceful human rights activists for exercising their fundamental right to freedom of expression, with no guarantee of a fair trial. There are no active human rights defenders in the UAE since the arrest of the country's most prominent human rights defender, Ahmed Mansoor, in March 2017. In many cases, torture is used to extract confessions, and those torture-tainted confessions are relied upon to convict individuals. The UAE have ratified the UN Convention Against Torture which clearly stipulates that torture is prohibited absolutely and that confessions resulting from torture should be deemed inadmissible in all proceedings. However, despite the international law obligations, the reality is starkly different—detainees in the UAE are at constant risk of torture, including being held incommunicado, without legal counsel, and suffering from all sorts of ill treatment; such as being imprisoned in solitary confinement, in unhygienic conditions and without adequate medical treatment.

The UAE is also part of the Saudi-led coalition in **Yemen**, and an actor in one of the worst humanitarian crises of the century. In its latest report, the UN Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen indicated that all parties to the conflict had committed human rights violations, with some amounting to **international crimes**. The Group also reiterated its call for Third Parties to stop selling arms to the belligerents and to hold all parties accountable for their crimes. Several organisations have denounced the creation by the UAE of **secret prisons**, outside of any legal framework or judicial

oversight. These prisons have been the scene of numerous human rights [violations](#), including enforced disappearances, torture, beatings, and sexual assaults.

At a time where countries are fighting to improve **women's rights**, the UAE has one of the poorest records of any country in the world on the rights of women and gender minorities. Laws still protect male guardianship over women, putting them in a permanent position of inferiority, while giving men the ability to discipline their female family members, as well as perpetrate marital rape. Consensual extramarital sex is also forbidden, and a woman can lose her right to financial support from her husband if she refuses to have sex with him. The notion of "honor killings" still exists, and men can be granted lower sentences because of it. Many domestic workers, most of whom are women, are still being trafficked in the UAE, and do not benefit from decent working conditions.

Even though migrants account for 80% of the total population of the UAE, there is significant systemic discrimination against them. Among the major issues **migrant workers** are facing in the UAE are wage-withholding, passport confiscation, a restrictive kafala system, and dishonest recruitment practices. Unsanitary living conditions in overcrowded accommodations, scarce legal protection, and limited access to preventive health care and treatment put these workers in a more vulnerable situation, which is even more problematic and dangerous amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is currently [abusing its antiterrorism laws and measures](#) to arbitrarily arrest, on security-related grounds, dissidents or critics of governmental policies even if they have not committed violence. Arbitrary arrests and imprisonment of human rights defenders and peaceful political opponents are common. In July, a Saudi prison [guard](#) provided evidence on the extent of the torture inflicted on political prisoners, citing the case of prominent women's rights defender Loujain al-Hathloul and stating that she was subjected to unprecedented levels of sexual abuse after being arrested for demanding women's right to drive. The systematic repression of human rights defenders and activists is part of the authorities' larger campaign to silence all forms of criticism that reveal, either directly or indirectly, human rights violations committed by the authorities. Today, most of the country's prominent and independent human rights defenders have been imprisoned, scared into silence, or forced to flee the country.

Additionally, women's rights in Saudi Arabia are strictly limited by the male guardianship system: women must rely on men to approve many basic aspects of daily life. Whilst some measures have been taken to soften the guardianship system, it remains the norm. Women still cannot freely decide about their own education, employment, health or whom they want to marry. This system was established in violation of Article 5 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), ratified by Saudi Arabia in 2001. It was only recently that women gained the right to drive in Saudi Arabia. Dozens of supporters of women's right to drive are either in prison or have been released from prison but remain under travel ban and are silenced, unable to get jobs.

In Saudi Arabia, the death penalty, remains legal and widely used by the authorities. The Kingdom performed at least 159 executions in 2015, at least 154 in 2016, at least 148 in 2017, 148 in 2018, 186 in

2019 - a record peak [according](#) to monitoring conducted by the European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (ESOHR), and 27 executions in 2020. Despite a reported decrease of executions in 2020, in 2021 Saudi Arabia has carried out at least 62 [executions](#) so far, which is nearly double the number of executions that took place last year.

As of November 2021, [43 individuals](#) are at risk of execution or death penalty sentences in the country. Eighteen of these individuals have already been sentenced to death and four individuals have finalised death sentences - meaning they are at risk of imminent execution. Amongst the 43, five allegedly committed crimes as minors.

In addition to child defendants, the threat of the death penalty is also used in Saudi Arabia to curb freedom of expression. Esteemed scholar Hassan al-Maliki faces a potential [death sentence](#) for peacefully expressing his thoughts on Islamic history. The authorities are seeking the death penalty for what amount to thought crimes, essentially threatening to kill him for the contents of his library.

The use of the death penalty is further exacerbated by the lack of fair trial: numerous people convicted allege that they have been [subjected to torture](#) and beatings to force them to confess. Despite its ratification of the Convention Against Torture, Saudi Arabia has been violating fair trial rights, and resorting to torture to extract self-incriminating confessions.

Formula 1 Responsibility:

F1 companies have publicly [committed](#) to respect human rights in conducting operations, and to the identification and assessment of potential adverse human rights impacts resulting from their activities and relations with suppliers and promoters.

Additionally, promoting [campaigns](#) such as #WeRaceAsOne Initiative, F1 has committed to stand united against racism and inequality. You once [said](#): *“Our WeRaceAsOne platform was very effective at raising the awareness of socially important issues and our steadfast commitment to make a positive change. [...] While our commitment through words to tackling issues like sustainability and diversity in our sport are important, it is our actions that we will be judged on”*.

Therefore, human rights should be the main focus this December in Jeddah and Abu Dhabi. With this in mind, we urge you and chiefs of F1 teams to:

- **Use** the Grand Prix as a platform to highlight human rights violations in Saudi Arabia and the UAE and the cases of all human rights defenders who are languishing behind bars for their peaceful activism;
- **Call on** the Saudi and Emirati governments to immediately and unconditionally release all political prisoners and human rights defenders imprisoned for exercising their fundamental rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association;
- **Call on** the Saudi and Emirati governments to repeal and end all laws, policies and practices which discriminate against women and implement obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women;
- **Call on** the Saudi and Emirati governments to allow the operation of civil society organizations and end the criminalisation of political association and dissent; and

- **Call on** the Saudi and Emirati governments to abolish the death penalty for all childhood crimes and for all non-violent offences, with no exceptions.

By putting an end to the sportswashing practice, a clear message would be sent to these countries: that the gross human rights abuses they commit cannot be washed away.

We hope you will consider this letter with the gravity it merits, and we look forward to your response.

Cordially submitted,

Signatories:

European Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (ECDHR)
Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB)
Human Rights Sentinel
International Service for Human Rights
Yemen Relief and Reconstruction Foundation
Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR)
CIVICUS
European Saudi Organization for Human Rights (ESOHR)
WRHD MENA Coalition
MENA Rights Group
Alliance for Global Justice
CODEPINK
Reprive
ALQST for Human Rights
Freedom Forward
Innovation for Change Middle East and North Africa