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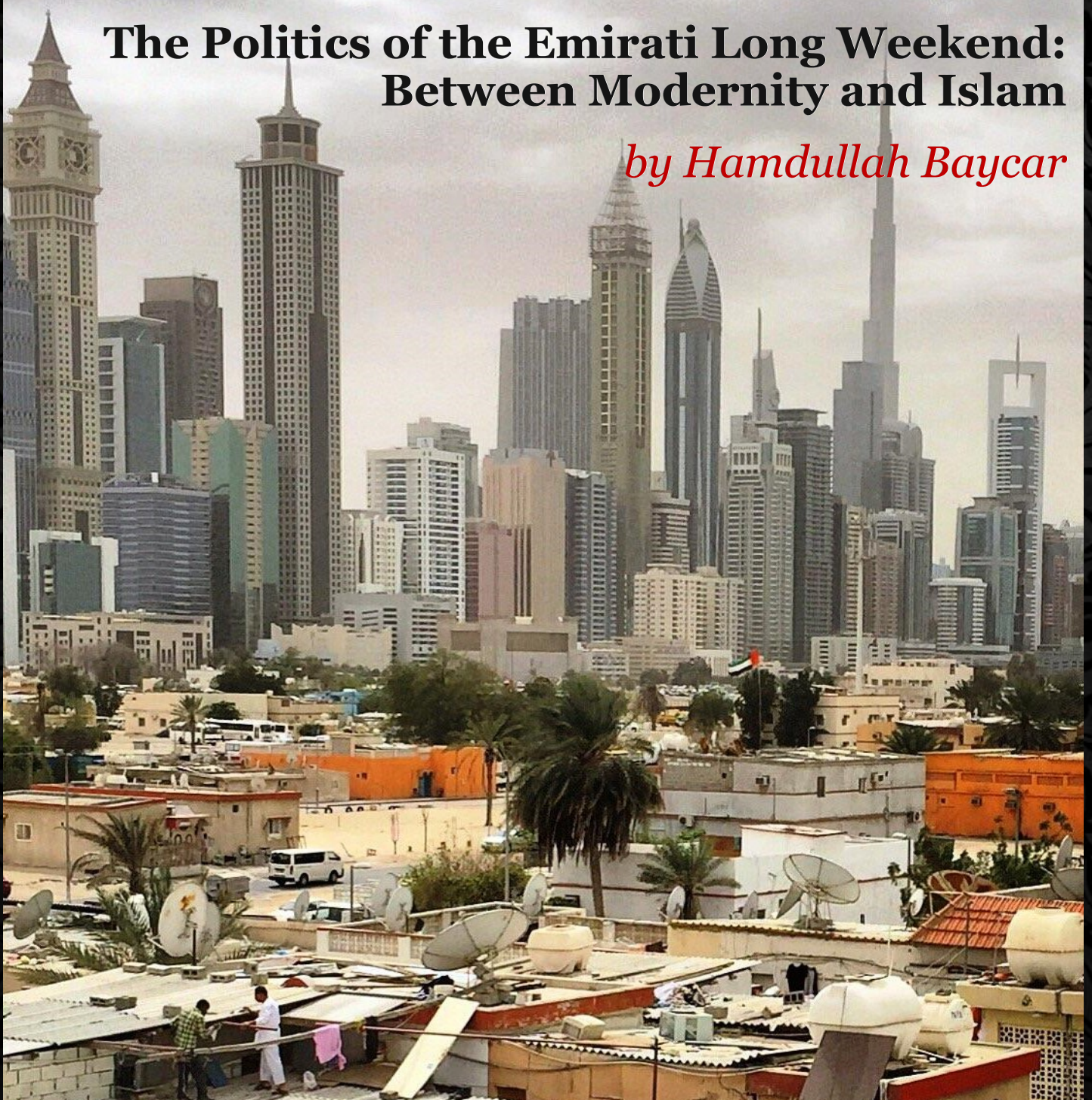
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The Politics of the Emirati Long Weekend: Between Modernity and Islam

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THE Federal Government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has announced a change in weekend days. From January 2022, the Sunday-Thursday weekdays applied in most Arab countries changed to Monday-Friday in the UAE, though Friday remained a half-day holiday. The increase in the holiday period by extending it to two-and-a-half days instead of the previous two days was presented as a step to increase global integration and boost productivity (Bostock, 2021; El-Naggar, 2021). Even though the media focuses more on the international financial integration of the system and the PR campaign than what this shift may mean for future anti-modernization movements (*Financial Sector to Benefit Most from UAE Weekend Shift*, 2021; *UAE Becomes First Country to Transition to 4-and-Half Day Work Week*, 2021), this shift may be used as a powerful instrument against the state in its provocative modernization.

The weekend shift is not the first of its kind, which was washed out by the PR campaign despite its unpopular stance. The recent UAE-Israel normalization, for example, was called the Abraham Accords, referring to the common prophet of the three religions. The action was hailed as a step toward tolerance, which is presented as a value at the core of the UAE. Regardless of the catchphrases such as tolerance, multiculturalism, and interfaith dialogues, the agreement was considered by many as the abandonment of the Palestinian cause, which has been considered one of the common themes uniting Arabs and Muslims. The domestic hesitancy to react to this particular incident and other controversial issues, such as the Abraham Accord, is underestimated as the state is powerful and the opposition is weak (Batrawy, 2021). However, the current silence over both the Abraham Accords and Friday as a working day may be ideological symbols for future movements.

A Religious Symbol

The UAE's government seems aware of the symbolic meaning of the day, as it did not abolish the Friday holiday as a whole but adopted a more cautious stand by making the morning of Friday a working day and extending the weekend to two-and-a-half days. The UAE is not the first Muslim country to adopt the Saturday-Sunday holiday. Turkey, for example, shifted the Friday

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and Saturday (half-day) holidays in 1935 until it made it Saturday-Sunday in 1974. The change, however, has always been considered a symbol of Westernization and a barrier between Turkish people and their Islamic history by the Turkish public. Even though 80 years have passed since Turkey's weekend change law was introduced, the topic is still heated and creates a debate about the loss of Islamic identity and unnecessary Westernization. If Turkey can serve as an example, this particular issue may be one of the symbols against modernization policies in the future, if not now, in the UAE.

A prominent Turkish poet, Arif Nihat Asya, criticized the shift from Friday to Sunday and believed Westernization policies were equal to Christianity. His poem is circulated online in Turkey from time to time as a reaction to Turkey's one-party modernization. Despite the fact that a century has passed since the Republican Party's founding and intense modernization efforts, several policies have always been blamed on the Republican era because modernization has been equated with Westernization and un-Islamization. Among many others, the Saturday-Sunday holiday, the Latin alphabet, the adoption of the Gregorian calendar, and maybe more provocatively, abolishing the Caliphate are the best-known examples for the Turkish public.

Because Saturday and Sunday are not value-free and are highly affiliated with religious days (in Christianity and Judaism), a shift to these days might be considered an abandonment of Islamic values in the UAE, like what happened in Turkey. Even though the current political and societal status of the UAE does not allow for active opposition, the change is not immune to criticism both in the UAE and in the region. The Saudi religious figure Saleh Al-Luhadian addressed the action as inciting infidels (الخيرالله, 2021).

The Conservatives and Sharjah

Many went on Twitter to comment on the issue, supporting or denouncing the decision. One of the nationalist Twitter users who approached the issue from an Islamic perspective denounced the critiques by saying that it is totally legitimate to work on Friday, except for prayer times (إماراتي تويت, 2021). Moreover, he argues that abandoning work on Friday has not been promoted by classical Islamic scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah and Imam Malik, who are well-regarded in the Gulf.

The reaction of Sharjah, one of the emirates of the UAE, is further evidence of domestic dissatisfaction with the policy (Mason, 2021). After the federal government's shift proclamation, the two biggest emirates, Abu Dhabi and Dubai, also followed suit. However, the third most important emirate, Sharjah, did not follow the path. Instead of a two-and-a-half-day holiday, Sharjah announced a three-day holiday, with Friday announced as a holiday in addition to Sunday, to avoid criticism of not following the Islamic holiday and any public conflict with the federal state and Abu Dhabi, the dominant emirate in federal affairs. Sharjah sought to avoid any contradiction with its

image as the cultural capital of the UAE, in which Islamic and Arab identities are promoted.

Even though the Saturday-Sunday weekend has just been announced in the UAE, the country's weekend holiday has been evolving since its foundation (Rory & Al Nowais, 2021). From the country's foundation in 1971 until 1999, the UAE's weekend was one day: Friday. It was in 1999 that Thursday was added to the weekend, making the working week five days. In 2006, the Thursday-Friday weekend shifted to Friday-Saturday in response to global economic integration in both the public and private sectors.

Even though the UAE proudly presents itself as a progressive land of harmony, tolerance, and multiculturalism, the domestic reaction to this kind of policy is not unexciting. Some Emiratis' dissatisfaction over the dress code's neglect became a matter of several complaints, prompting the states and state-sponsored media to take action (Wateen Media, 2014). The recent laws decriminalizing alcohol sales and allowing unmarried couples to live together may also serve as other symbols for the people who oppose provocative modernization (Graham-Harrison, 2020).

Given the UAE's leadership's ideological opposition to political Islam, this policy may foster greater solidarity with Islamist groups, as these symbols can be used to mobilize people. Currently, the UAE's opposition has no capacity to challenge the issue, but it may serve as a symbolic force in the future in the case of its emergence.

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