

A Comprehensive Overview of the Judicial System of the United Arab Emirates

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A COMPREHENSIVE OVERVIEW of the Judicial System of the United Arab Emirates

The judicial system of the United Arab Emirates is characterized by its multi-layered structure and diverse jurisdictions. It combines a federal judicial system covering several emirates, independent local judicial systems in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, and Ras Al Khaimah, as well as specialized judicial systems in financial free zones. Abu Dhabi has a dual judicial structure: local courts operate under the Abu Dhabi Judicial Department, while federal courts also operate in the emirate for disputes involving ministries or other federal entities. This sophisticated framework aims to provide comprehensive justice covering all types of disputes, from pre-litigation stages through to compulsory enforcement.

PART ONE:

Pre-Litigation Settlements and Alternative Dispute Resolution

This stage aims to reduce the burden on courts and resolve disputes amicably before resorting to litigation.

1.1 Civil and Commercial Dispute Settlement

Amicable settlement of civil and commercial disputes is conducted through specialized centers such as the Centre for Amicable Settlement of Disputes. certain disputes (including claims under AED 500,000) must be referred to Centre for Amicable Settlement of Disputes before litigation can commence.

Additionally, under the Civil Procedure Law (Federal Decree-Law No. 42 of 2022), the Case Management Office or the supervising judge may refer parties to mediation or conciliation at any stage of the case before the closure of pleadings. If a settlement is reached, the supervising judge issues a decision recording the settlement and the content of the parties' agreement, which shall have the power of a writ of execution. **Federal Decree-Law No. 40 of 2023 on Mediation and Conciliation in Civil and Commercial Disputes** establishes the Mediation and Conciliation Centre (MACC).

1.2 Family Reconciliation and Personal Status Settlements

Family reconciliation is handled by specialized court departments or family reconciliation centers, aiming to preserve family cohesion and resolve family disputes amicably before resorting to litigation.

Under Federal Decree-Law No. 41 of 2022 on Civil Personal Status Law, referral procedures to Family Guidance Committees do not apply to divorce cases filed by non-Muslims. Such cases are filed directly with the court for adjudication in the first hearing, applying the principle of equality between men and women in rights and duties, including equal inheritance, the right to request divorce, and joint custody of children.

1.3 Settlement of Labor Disputes

Pursuant to Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021 Regulating Employment Relationships, as amended, an individual labour dispute must generally be submitted first to the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization ("MOHRE") for an attempt at amicable settlement before proceedings may be commenced before the competent court. Different procedures may apply to employees working within certain free zones, particularly financial free zones that have their own employment laws and judicial systems.

Notably:

- MOHRE may issue a final and enforceable decision where the value of the claim does not exceed AED 50,000. (please refer to article 54 of the law)
- Either party may challenge MOHRE's decision before the competent Court of Appeal within 15 working days from the date of notification. The judgment issued by the Court of first instance is final (The court of first instance handles the appeals of the MOHRE decision).
- Labour claims filed by workers or their heirs, where the value of the claim does not exceed 100,000 AED, are exempt from judicial fees at all stages of litigation and execution. (please refer to article 55 of the law)

1.4 Mediation and Conciliation

The Civil Procedure Law (Article 45) permits the referral of parties to mediation or conciliation. The supervising judge may hold sessions with the parties, propose conciliation, and attempt to reconcile them. The judge may order the parties to appear in person for this purpose. If conciliation is reached, the judge issues a decision recording the conciliation and the content of the parties' agreement, which shall have the power of a writ of execution. The mediator or conciliator may, under Law No. 40 of 2023, seek the assistance of persons of expertise and specialization to assist in performing his tasks.

PART TWO:

Courts and Lawsuits (Litigation Stage)

The litigation structure consists of three main levels within each judicial system.

2.1 Courts of First Instance

Courts of First Instance branch into specialized circuits that hear the following types of cases:

2.1.1 Civil Cases

Include contractual disputes, tort claims for compensation, and all other disputes of a civil nature that are not commercial. Article 25 of the Civil Procedure Law provides that each Emirate may form committees that have sole competence to hear lawsuits relating to leases between lessor and lessee.

2.1.2 Commercial Cases

Hear disputes between merchants, disputes relating to commercial papers (cheques, bills of exchange), bankruptcy proceedings (pursuant to Federal Decree-Law No. 51 of 2023 on Bankruptcy), and all other commercial matters.

2.1.3 Real Estate Cases

Specialize in property ownership disputes, real estate registration disputes, and compensation claims arising from expropriation for public benefit. Each emirate has its own local jurisdiction regarding real estate cases, following its own rules and procedures for case registration and adjudication in accordance with its applicable local or federal laws.

2.1.4 Personal Status Cases

For Muslims:

Heard by **Sharia Courts** (in the Federal/Federal system) or Personal Status Circuits (in Dubai, Sharjah, and Ras Al Khaimah). These courts adjudicate matters of marriage, divorce, maintenance, custody, inheritance, wills, and other family matters in accordance with the provisions of Islamic Sharia.

For Non-Muslims:

Heard by independent civil courts that adjudicate matters of civil marriage, civil divorce, inheritance, wills, and proof of parentage in accordance with the provisions of Federal Decree-Law No. 41 of 2022 on Civil Personal Status Law.

2.1.5 Labor Cases

Labor cases are filed before the Court of First Instance after the failure of an amicable settlement attempt before the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation. The court hears all rights and obligations of the parties to an employment relationship regulated by Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021. By decision of the Chairman of the Federal Judicial Council or the president of the local judicial authority, one or more circuits may be allocated to adjudicate cases in a single session.

2.1.6 Inheritance Cases

Include inheritance claims of Muslims (within the jurisdiction of Sharia Courts or Personal Status Circuits) and inheritance claims of non-Muslims (within the jurisdiction of civil courts), including estates of minors, absent persons, and missing persons.

Article 32 of the Civil Procedure Law does not automatically establish inheritance circuits by operation of law. Rather, specialized inheritance circuits may be established by decision of the Chairman of the Federal Judicial Council or the president of the relevant local judicial authority, as applicable. These circuits have exclusive jurisdiction over:

- All disputes relating to the inventory list, liquidation of the estate, division of its assets, and distribution among heirs.
- Any civil, real estate, or commercial claim arising from or connected with the estate between heirs and third parties.
- Disputes arising between heirs and guardians or persons in a similar capacity.
- Incidental applications relating to inclusion or exclusion of an heir, wills, endowments (Awqaf), or settlement among heirs.

Judgments issued by this circuit are not subject to appeal except by way of a petition for reconsideration.

2.1.7 Criminal Cases

Criminal cases are filed based on a complaint submitted by the victim or upon the Public Prosecution's own motion. They are heard by specialized criminal circuits. Pursuant to the Criminal Procedure Law (Federal Decree-Law No. 38 of 2022), criminal courts are structured as follows:

- **High Felony Court (Major Felonies):** Composed of three judges, with jurisdiction over felonies punishable by qisas (retribution), death, or life imprisonment.
- **Minor Felony Court (Minor Felonies):** Composed of a single judge, with jurisdiction over other felonies punishable by temporary imprisonment.
- **Misdemeanour Court:** Composed of a single judge, with jurisdiction over all misdemeanours and violations.

- **One-Day Court:** The Chairman of the Federal Judicial Council or the heads of local judicial authorities may establish rules regulating the work of the one-day court in the Misdemeanour Court.

2.1.8 Rental Cases

Rental cases include disputes arising from landlord-tenant relationships, including eviction, rent increase claims, compensation for damage relating to leased property, jointly owned property disputes, and heirs' disputes connected with leased properties. In Dubai, the landlord-tenant relationship is regulated by Law No. (26) of 2007 Regulating the Relationship between Landlords and Tenants in the Emirate of Dubai, as amended. Rental disputes are heard by the Rent Disputes Settlement Centre in the Emirate of Dubai, established by Decree No. (26) of 2013, which has exclusive jurisdiction over rental disputes and related provisional and summary applications, unless a special provision provides otherwise.

2.2 Courts of Appeal

The Court of Appeal hears appeals against judgments issued by the Courts of First Instance, whether on matters of fact or law. The Court of Appeal hears the dispute afresh, and parties may file further submissions and evidence. The appeal restores the case to its state prior to the issuance of the appealed judgment only with respect to the part of the judgment appealed against (Article 167 of the Civil Procedure Law).

Appeal Deadlines (Civil and Commercial):

30 days from the date the Court of First Instance delivers its judgment (presence), or 30 days from the date the judgment was served on the defendant if issued in default (Article 161 of the Civil Procedure Law).

Appeal Deadlines (Urgent Matters):

10 days (Article 161).

Appeal Deadlines (Criminal - Presence):

15 days (Article 230 of the Criminal Procedure Law).

Appeal Deadlines (Criminal - Default):

7 days from notification (Article 229 of the Criminal Procedure Law).

Appeal Threshold (Article 159 of the Civil Procedure Law):

Judgments issued by the Courts of Appeal are final and not subject to cassation appeal if the value of the case does not exceed **AED 500,000 (five hundred thousand dirhams)**.

2.3 Courts of Cassation

The Court of Cassation is the highest judicial level within each emirate that has an independent local judicial system. It only hears appeals on points of law, procedural impropriety, or nullity, and does not re-examine factual findings.

NAMES OF CASSATION COURTS BY EMIRATE

Emirates with Independent Local Judiciary:

Emirate	Cassation Court Name	Judicial Authority
Abu Dhabi	Court of Cassation in Abu Dhabi	Abu Dhabi Judicial Department
Dubai	Court of Cassation in Dubai	Dubai Courts
Sharjah	Court of Cassation in Sharjah	Sharjah Local Judicial Authority
Ras Al Khaimah	Court of Cassation in Ras Al Khaimah	Ras Al Khaimah Courts Department

Emirates under Federal Judiciary:

Emirate	Cassation Equivalent
Ajman	Federal Supreme Court
Umm Al Quwain	Federal Supreme Court
Fujairah	Federal Supreme Court

Cassation Appeal Thresholds and Grounds (Civil)

Pursuant to **Article 175** of the Civil Procedure Law (as amended by Federal Decree-Law No. 22 of 2025), an appeal in cassation may be filed against judgments of the Court of Appeal if:

- The value of the claim exceeds AED 500,000 (five hundred thousand dirhams) OR the claim is of indeterminate value.
- The judgment is based on a violation of the law, or an error in its application or interpretation.
- Nullity has occurred in the judgment or in the procedures affecting the judgment.
- The judgment was issued in contravention of the rules of jurisdiction.
- The dispute was adjudicated contrary to another judgment previously issued on the same subject matter between the same litigants which has acquired the force of res judicata.
- The judgment is devoid of reasons, or such reasons are insufficient or ambiguous.
- The judgment awarded relief not sought by the disputing parties, or in excess of what was sought.

Time Limit for Cassation Appeal (Civil):

30 days (Article 178 of the Civil Procedure Law).

Cassation in Criminal Matters

Pursuant to **Article 244** of the Criminal Procedure Law, the Public Prosecution, the convicted person, the person responsible for civil rights, the civil claimant, and the insured may appeal by way of cassation against final judgments of the Court of Appeal in a felony or misdemeanour on the following grounds:

- Violation of the law or error in its application or interpretation.
- Nullity in the judgment or in the procedures affecting the judgment.
- The court ruled in the civil claim in excess of the litigant's request.
- The contested judgment is devoid of reasons, or such reasons are insufficient or ambiguous.
- Two irreconcilable judgments are issued in one incident.

Time Limit for Criminal Cassation:

30 days from the date of issuance of the judgment (Article 245 of the Criminal Procedure Law).

Death Sentence:

The death penalty sentence is considered challenged by way of cassation automatically, and its execution is stayed until the cassation appeal is decided upon (Article 253 of the Criminal Procedure Law).

PART THREE:

Interim and Urgent Judicial Orders

These are fast-track preservative measures requested by a party to safeguard their rights pending a final judgment on the merits.

3.1 Order on Petition

A fast-track ex parte order issued upon a petition submitted by a party without notifying the opposing party, in urgent matters where delay is harmful. The judge issues the order within one day following submission at the most (Article 140 of the Civil Procedure Law). The order is subject to grievance before the competent court (Article 141).

3.2 Urgent Lawsuits

Lawsuits filed for swift adjudication of matters that cannot be delayed. The Court of Urgent Matters (Magistrate of Summary Justice) has jurisdiction as provided in Article 26 of the Civil Procedure Law. The attendance period is 24 hours, which may be reduced to one hour in cases of extreme necessity, provided that the notice is served on the litigant himself (Article 46).

3.3 Precautionary Attachment

A measure aimed at attaching a debtor's assets (movables, immovables, or funds in the hands of third parties) in anticipation of enforcing a future judgment. Available in the cases specified in Article 247 of the Civil Procedure Law (fear of losing the guarantee of the right, the debtor having no stable residence in the State, or there being serious evidence that the debtor may flee or smuggle his assets). The attaching creditor must file a substantive action to establish the right within 8 days from the date of the attachment order; otherwise, the attachment is deemed void ab initio (Article 250).

3.4 Travel Ban

A precautionary measure preventing the debtor from leaving the State, pursuant to Article 324 of the Civil Procedure Law. Requirements include:

- The debt is known, payable, and not subject to a condition, or the judge temporarily estimates the debt.
- The debt is not less than AED 10,000 (unless it is established alimony or a work obligation).
- The claim is based on written evidence.
- The creditor submits a guarantee accepted by the court.

The order is issued by the Execution Judge or the Magistrate of Summary Justice.

3.5 Payment Order

A fast-track order for a debt confirmed electronically or in writing, provided the debt is urgent and for a specified amount or a movable of a specified type and amount (Article 143). The order is issued within 3 working days from submission of the petition (Article 144). It is subject to grievance within 15 days if the value is within the jurisdictional amount of the Court of First Instance, or to appeal if the value exceeds that amount (Article 147).

Note: A cheque is considered a writ of execution under the law, and the provisions relating to payment orders do not apply to cheques (Article 143(2)).

3.6 Offer and Deposit

A procedure by which a debtor offers payment of the due amount when the creditor refuses to accept without justification (Article 192). The debtor may deposit the amount with the court treasury (Article 195). If the court validates the offer, the debtor is discharged from the debt from the day of the offer (Article 196). The debtor may retract his offer and recover what he deposited within 10 working days from the date of notifying his creditor of the offer and deposit (Article 197).

3.7 Grievance Against Interim Orders

Any interested party may file a grievance against orders on petitions (Article 141) or decisions of the Execution Judge (Article 209) within 7 working days from the date of issuance (if issued in presence) or from the date of notification (if issued in absence).

PART FOUR: Appeals and Judgments

4.1 Appeal

An ordinary appeal before a higher court (the Court of Appeal) against a judgment issued by a Court of First Instance. The appeal may relate to both facts and law. The appeal restores the case to its state prior to the issuance of the appealed judgment with respect to the appealed part only (Article 167 of the Civil Procedure Law). The Court of Appeal hears the dispute afresh and may accept new evidence.

Appeal Deadlines (Civil and Commercial):

30 days (Article 161).

Appeal Deadlines (Urgent Matters):

10 days (Article 161).

Appeal Deadlines (Criminal - Presence):

15 days (Article 230 of the Criminal Procedure Law).

Appeal Deadlines (Criminal - Default):

7 days from notification (Article 229 of the Criminal Procedure Law).

Appeal Threshold (Article 159 of the Civil Procedure Law):

Judgments issued by the Courts of Appeal are final and not subject to cassation appeal if the value of the case does not exceed **AED 500,000 (five hundred thousand dirhams)**.

4.2 Cassation Appeal

An extraordinary appeal before the Court of Cassation. It is only available on limited grounds prescribed by law and does not involve re-examination of the facts.

Grounds for Cassation (Civil - Article 175 of the Civil Procedure Law):

- Violation of the law or error in its application or interpretation.
- Nullity in the judgment or in the procedures affecting the judgment.
- Contravention of jurisdiction rules.
- Contradiction with a previous final judgment on the same subject matter between the same parties.
- Judgment devoid of reasons, insufficient, or ambiguous reasons.
- Judgment awarding relief not sought or exceeding the request.

Grounds for Cassation (Criminal - Article 244 of the Criminal Procedure Law):

- Violation of the law or error in its application or interpretation.
- Nullity in the judgment or in the procedures affecting the judgment.
- Court ruling in the civil claim in excess of the litigant's request.
- Judgment devoid of reasons, insufficient, or ambiguous reasons.
- Two irreconcilable judgments issued in one incident.

Time Limit for Cassation:

30 days in both civil and criminal matters (Article 178 of the Civil Procedure Law; Article 245 of the Criminal Procedure Law).

Cassation Threshold (Civil):

Value of the claim must exceed AED 500,000 OR the claim is of indeterminate value.

4.3 Petition for Reconsideration

An extraordinary appeal seeking reconsideration of a final, binding judgment, available only on limited grounds enumerated by law (Article 171 of the Civil Procedure Law; Article 257 of the Criminal Procedure Law), including:

- Fraud is affecting the judgment or decision.

- Judgment based on forged documents (where forgery is subsequently established or acknowledged).
- Judgment based on false testimony (where the witness is subsequently convicted of perjury).
- Discovery of decisive documents withheld by the opposing party.
- Judgment awarding relief not sought or exceeding the request.
- Judgment rendered against a natural or legal person who was not properly represented in the case.
- The judgment or decision is based on a repealed law, and applying the correct law would have changed the outcome (Article 190 of the Civil Procedure Law).

Time Limit for Petition for Reconsideration:

30 days from the date the ground for reconsideration is discovered (Article 172 of the Civil Procedure Law; Article 258 of the Criminal Procedure Law).

PART FIVE:

Judicial Enforcement

This is the stage following the issuance of a final judgment or executory instrument, aiming to compel the judgment debtor to comply, either voluntarily or compulsory.

5.1 Writs of Execution

Pursuant to **Article 212** of the Civil Procedure Law, writs of execution are:

- Judgments and orders (including penal judgments with civil rights such as refunds, compensation, and fines).
- Documents are authenticated in accordance with the law governing authentication and documentation.
- Minutes of conciliation ratified by the courts.
- Other documents granted such capacity by law (e.g., a cheque is considered a writ of execution).

The executory formula stamped on the writ reads: *"The competent authorities and entities shall proceed with the execution of this writ and assist in its execution even coercively whenever requested to do so."*

5.2 Execution Judge

Pursuant to Article 206 of the Civil Procedure Law, execution is carried out under the supervision of the Execution Judge assigned at the seat of each Court of First Instance, circuit, or execution court. The Execution Judge has exclusive competence to enforce writs of execution and to summarily adjudicate all execution disputes, whether substantive or procedural, and to issue judgments, decisions, and orders related thereto (Article 207). The procedures prescribed for the Court of First Instance shall be observed before the Execution Judge unless the law provides otherwise.

5.3 Enforcement Procedures

Enforcement of Movables (Seizure and Sale):

- The enforcement officer seizes the debtor's movables (Articles 264-282).
- A judicial receiver is appointed for the seized items (Article 266).
- The seized items are sold by public auction after at least 3 days from completion of listing on the court's website or posting or publication (Article 273).

Enforcement of Immovables (Real Estate):

- The Execution Judge issues a seizure decision, which is registered with the competent real estate registration department (Article 286).
- An expert is appointed to estimate the real estate's value within 15 days (Article 288).
- The sale is announced at least 30 days in advance through listing on the court's website or publication in two daily newspapers (Article 288).
- A judgment of auction knock-down is issued. Registration of this judgment results in clearing the sold real estate from preferential rights, mortgages, and possessory liens (Article 301).

Enforcement of Debts in the Hands of Third Parties (Garnishment):

- The creditor requests an attachment order from the judge (Article 252).
- The order is notified to the garnishee (the third party holding the debtor's assets).
- The garnishee must file a statement of what they hold within 7 days of notification (Article 256).

5.4 Enforcement of Foreign Judgments

Pursuant to Article 222 of the Civil Procedure Law, judgments and orders delivered by a foreign country may be ordered to be executed in the UAE under the same conditions as prescribed in the law of that country for the execution of UAE judgments.

Requirements for Enforcement:

- The UAE courts are not exclusively competent in the dispute.
- The foreign courts are competent under their international jurisdiction rules.
- The judgment was delivered by a competent court and duly ratified.
- The litigants were summoned and duly represented.
- The judgment has the force of res judicata in the country of origin.
- The judgment does not conflict with a UAE judgment or contain anything contrary to UAE public order or morals.

Judicial Cooperation Agreements:

The UAE is a signatory to the Riyadh Arab Agreement for Judicial Co-operation (1983), the GCC Convention for the Execution of Judgments, Delegations and Judicial Notifications (1996), and has bilateral treaties with various countries (including France, China, and India).

5.5 Detention of the Debtor

Pursuant to Articles 319-323 of the Civil Procedure Law, the Execution Judge may issue an order to imprison the debtor if the debtor has abstained from enforcing any writ of execution, unless he proves his insolvency.

Detention Limits:

- Initial period: up to 1 month (renewable).
- Total for non-fraudulent debts: 36 months.
- Total for deliberate financial crimes: 60 months.

Exceptions (no detention order) (Article 321):

- Debtor under 18 or over 70 years of age.
- Debtor with a child under 15 whose spouse is deceased or imprisoned for any reason.
- Debtor provides a bank guarantee or a solvent surety accepted by the Execution Judge.
- Debt subject to execution is less than AED 10,000 (unless it is a fine, established alimony, or work remuneration).

5.6 Enforcement of Criminal Judgments

Pursuant to the Criminal Procedure Law (Federal Decree-Law No. 38 of 2022), the Public Prosecution undertakes the enforcement of judgments issued in all criminal lawsuits (Article 272).

Death Sentence:

- If issued by a Federal court, the lawsuit papers must be submitted to the President of the State for ratification (Article 285).
- Executed inside a penal institution in the presence of a Public Prosecution member, a delegate from the Ministry of Interior, the penal institution manager and its physician (Article 288).
- Blood relatives in qisas (retribution) murder cases have the right to attend the execution procedures (Article 288).
- Not executed on official holidays or holidays of the convicted person's religion (Article 290).
- Postponed for pregnant women until she gives birth and breastfeeds within two years (Article 291).

Freedom-Restricting Penalties:

- Executed in penal institutions prepared for that purpose (Article 292).
- The period starts from the day of arrest based on the sentence (Article 294).
- Pre-trial detention is deducted from the sentence (Article 295).

Physical Coercion for Fines (Articles 314-319):

- Physical coercion (imprisonment) is permitted to collect fines and other financial penalties.
- Calculated at 1 day per AED 100 (or less).
- Maximum coercion period: 6 months.
- Different maximum periods apply depending on the amount of the fine (Article 314).

PART SIX:

Judicial Committees and Special Systems

6.1 Jurisdictional Conflict Committees (لجان تنازع الاختصاص)

Specialize in resolving conflicts between different judicial authorities (Article 154 of the Civil Procedure Law), whether between Federal and local courts or between courts belonging to different local systems. A request to appoint the competent court is submitted to the Federal Supreme Court for adjudication (Articles 155-156).

6.2 Committees for Enforcing Foreign and Arab Court Judgments

Specialize in considering applications for enforcement of judgments issued by courts of countries with which the UAE has judicial cooperation agreements (Riyadh Convention, GCC Convention, bilateral treaties). They issue decisions either enforcing the judgment or rejecting enforcement, in accordance with the prescribed conditions in those agreements and in the Civil Procedure Law.

6.3 Special Committees

These are committees established by law to adjudicate specific categories of disputes, including:

- Collective Labor Disputes Committees: Formed by the Cabinet upon the Minister's proposal to consider collective labor disputes that the Ministry has been unable to settle amicably, pursuant to Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021.
- Rent Disputes Settlement Centre in the Emirate of Dubai: Established under Dubai Decree No. (26) of 2013 as a specialized judicial body for rental disputes and related provisional and summary applications.
- Arbitration and Bankruptcy Committees provided for under Federal Bankruptcy Law No. 51 of 2023.

6.4 Public Prosecution (النيابة العامة)

The Public Prosecution is part of the judicial authority (Article 5 of the Criminal Procedure Law). Its functions include:

- Investigating crimes and filing and initiating criminal lawsuits.
- Supervising penal institutions and places of detention under remand (Article 6).
- Enforcing criminal judgments (Article 272).
- Appointing a representative for a victim lacking legal capacity to claim civil rights (Article 24).
- Filing cassation appeals in the interest of the law (Article 256 of the Criminal Procedure Law).

PART SEVEN:

Special Judicial Systems and Free Zones

Alongside the Federal system (applied in Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Fujairah, and certain federal circuits in Abu Dhabi) and the independent local systems (in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, and Ras Al Khaimah), there are separate judicial systems in financial free zones.

7.1 Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC) Courts

- An independent judicial system based on **English Common Law**.
- The DIFC was established pursuant to Federal Law No. 8 of 2004 Regarding Financial Free Zones, and the current judicial framework of the DIFC Courts is governed by Dubai Law No. 2 of 2025 Concerning Dubai International Financial Centre Courts.
- The language of proceedings is English (with Arabic permitted by court permission).
- Under Article 16 of Dubai Law No. 2 of 2025, the DIFC Courts comprise the Court of Appeal, the Courts of First Instance including any specialized courts established within them, and the Small Claims Tribunal.
- Jurisdiction covers civil and commercial disputes arising within the DIFC, or disputes falling within the jurisdiction of the DIFC Courts by party agreement or other applicable jurisdictional basis under the DIFC Courts law.
- Dubai Decree No. 29 of 2024 established the Judicial Authority for Resolving Conflicts of Jurisdiction between DIFC courts and judicial bodies in the Emirate of Dubai.
- Can be used as a "conduit" jurisdiction for recognizing and enforcing foreign court judgments and arbitral awards within the Emirate of Dubai.

7.2 Abu Dhabi Global Market (ADGM) Courts

- An independent judicial system applying English Common Law and rules of equity directly.
- Established pursuant to ADGM Founding Law (2013) and ADGM Board of Directors Resolution No. 4 of 2015 applying the laws of England and Wales.
- The language of proceedings is English.
- The ADGM Courts comprise the Court of First Instance and the Court of Appeal. The Court of First Instance includes specialized divisions, including the Small Claims Division, the Commercial and Civil Division, the Real Property Division, and the Employment Division.
- Jurisdiction covers civil and commercial disputes arising within the ADGM, or by consent of the parties.

- Hosts the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) Court case management office.
- The Abu Dhabi Court of Cassation (in Case No. 1045 of 2022) affirmed ADGM courts' jurisdiction over arbitrations administered by the ICC branch office located within the ADGM.

7.3 Federal Courts' Exclusive Jurisdiction Over Cases Against Federal Ministries and Administrative Entities

Important Note: Pursuant to Article 24(2) of the Civil Procedure Law, the Abu Dhabi Federal Court of First Instance has exclusive jurisdiction over all disputes to which ministries and Federal entities are parties. This means that the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, despite having its own independent local judicial system (Abu Dhabi Judicial Department), also has Federal courts under the Ministry of Justice that have jurisdiction over cases involving Federal ministries and administrative entities. The cassation court for such cases is the Federal Supreme Court, not the Abu Dhabi Court of Cassation.

7.4 E-Court Systems

The UAE has significantly advanced e-court systems. Sharjah, Ras Al Khaimah, and Dubai have independent local online systems for case management and judicial services. Meanwhile, courts in the other emirates under the Federal system (Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Fujairah) operate on the Federal electronic platform. Notably, Abu Dhabi, despite belonging to the Federal system for cases involving Federal entities, also possesses an independent local electronic system operating through the Abu Dhabi Judicial Department (ADJD) website for case management and judicial services.

PART EIGHT:
Key Procedural Rules

8.1 Limitation Periods

Pursuant to the Civil Transactions Law (Federal Decree-Law No. 25 of 2025) and the Civil Procedure Law:

Type of Claim	Limitation Period
General contract disputes	15 years
Commercial contracts (subject to Commercial Transactions Law)	5 years
Rights of physicians, pharmacists, lawyers, engineers, experts, professors, teachers, brokers	3 years
Rights of merchants and manufacturers (for goods supplied to non-traders)	2 years
Rights of workers, servants, and laborers (wages)	2 years
Tort (causing harm)	3 years
Building defects (engineer and contractor warranty)	10 years
Criminal lawsuit (felonies other than qisas, diya, death, life imprisonment)	20 years
Criminal lawsuit (misdemeanours)	5 years
Criminal lawsuit (violations)	1 year

8.2 Language of Proceedings

General Rule (Article 5 of the Civil Procedure Law; Article 8 of the Criminal Procedure Law):
Arabic is the language used in courts.

Exception:
The Chairman of the Federal Judicial Council or the president of the local judiciary may decide that the language of trial, procedures, judgments, and decisions in certain specialized circuits or specific lawsuits shall be English (Article 5 of the Civil Procedure Law).

Translation Requirement (Article 9 of the Civil Procedure Law):

If the official language of the defendant is not Arabic, the plaintiff must attach to the notice a certified translation in English (unless otherwise agreed by the parties). This requirement does not apply to labor claims filed by workers or personal status claims.

8.3 Service of Process

Pursuant to Articles 9-11 of the Civil Procedure Law and Article 160 of the Criminal Procedure Law, notice may be served by:

- Audio or video recorded calls, SMS, email, fax, or any means of modern technology agreed upon by the parties.
- In person at the defendant's domicile, residence, workplace, or to their agent.
- If not possible, to any of the persons living with the defendant (spouses, relatives, in-laws, or servants).
- At the defendant's elected domicile.
- At the defendant's workplace.
- If all the above fail, by listing on the court's website or publication in a daily newspaper.

Effect of Service Dates (Article 11 of the Civil Procedure Law):

- Technology means: Date of fax arrival, email sending, SMS, or audio/video call.
- Court website listing: After 15 days of continuous listing.
- Diplomatic channels: After 21 working days from serving the diplomatic mission.

8.4 Electronic Procedures and Remote Communication

Pursuant to Articles 328-338 of the Civil Procedure Law and Articles 414-427 of the Criminal Procedure Law, remote communication technology may be used in all civil and criminal procedures, including:

- Case registration, service of process, and submission of documents.
- Remote appearance, witness examination, and interrogation.
- Deliberation, issuance of judgments, and filing of appeals.
- Execution procedures.

Remote procedures shall have the same legal authority as procedures conducted in person.

8.5 Case Management Office

Pursuant to Article 45 of the Civil Procedure Law, a Case Management Office is established at the seat of each competent court. The Case Management Office is responsible for:

- Preparation and management of the case before trial.
- Registration, announcement, exchange of memoranda, documents, and expert reports between parties.
- Proposing conciliation to parties and attempting to reconcile them.
- Issuing a decision not to accept the case for failure to pay fees (the supervising judge has the power to impose procedural sanctions, including fines ranging from AED 1,000 to AED 10,000).

PART NINE:
Small Claims Procedure in Dubai Courts

Pursuant to Resolution No. 1 of 2026 regarding the establishment of specialized circuits for small claims in the Courts of First Instance and the Court of Appeal in the Emirate of Dubai, effective as of 16 March 2026, the following classification applies:

Claim Value	Classification
Less than AED 500,000	Automatically classified as a small dispute
AED 500,000 to AED 1,000,000	Classified as a small dispute if the defendant is over 60 years old

Small Dispute Types:

- Small Civil Dispute
- Small Commercial Dispute
- Small Real Estate Dispute

Procedure:

- Disputes must first be referred to the Centre for Amicable Settlement of Disputes (CASD) before filing with the court.
- The case management office verifies the correct dispute type during registration.
- Files are distributed to specialized conciliators according to the nature of the dispute (civil, commercial, or real estate).

PART TEN:

Federal Supreme Court

The Federal Supreme Court is the highest judicial authority in the Federal judicial system. Its competences include:

- Final appellate jurisdiction (Court of Cassation) over judgments issued by Federal Courts of Appeal in the emirates of Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, and Fujairah.
- Adjudicating requests to appoint the competent court in cases of jurisdictional conflict between Federal and local courts.
- Adjudicating the constitutionality of laws and regulations.

Conclusion

The judicial system of the United Arab Emirates represents a complex and sophisticated tapestry that blends authenticity (through Sharia courts, amicable settlement principles derived from Islamic law and customs, and adherence to traditions) with modernity (through independent judicial systems in financial free zones inspired by global best practices, and through advanced e-court systems).

This multi-faceted system, which is distributed across Federal courts, independent local courts (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras Al Khaimah), and specialized free zone courts (DIFC and ADGM), provides diverse judicial pathways aimed at achieving justice and efficiency in resolving all types of disputes—civil, commercial, real estate, family, labor, criminal, administrative, and inheritance.

The ongoing development of the judicial and legislative framework, reflected in the issuance of comprehensive new laws such as the Civil Procedure Law (2022, as amended), the Civil Transactions Law (2025), and the Criminal Procedure Law (2022, as amended), along with the establishment of specialized circuits for inheritance matters and small claims, and the establishment of the High Judicial Commission for unifying judicial principles between Federal and local judicial authorities (2019), demonstrates the State's commitment to providing a fair, stable, and progressive legal environment that supports business and investment and contributes to social stability.

For further information or legal assistance concerning the UAE judicial system and court procedures, please contact us at info@alsuwaidi.ae.

Sources and Legal References:

- Constitution of the United Arab Emirates.
- Federal Decree-Law No. 42 of 2022 Promulgating the Civil Procedure Law (as amended by Federal Decree-Law No. 22 of 2025).
- Federal Decree-Law No. 25 of 2025 Issuing the Civil Transactions Law.
- Federal Decree-Law No. 38 of 2022 On the Issuance of the Criminal Procedure Law (as amended by Federal Decree-Law No. 45 of 2023).
- Federal Decree-Law No. 31 of 2021 Promulgating the Crimes and Penalties Law.
- Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021 on Regulation of Employment Relationships.
- Federal Decree-Law No. 41 of 2022 on Civil Personal Status Law.
- Federal Decree-Law No. 51 of 2023 on Bankruptcy.
- Federal Law No. 8 of 2004 Regarding Financial Free Zones.
- Federal Decree-Law No. 32 of 2022 Concerning the Federal Judicial Authority.
- Federal Decree-Law No. 34 of 2022 on the Regulation of Advocacy and Legal Consultancy Professions.
- Federal Decree-Law No. 35 of 2022 Promulgating the Law of Evidence in Civil and Commercial Transactions.
- Federal Decree-Law No. 40 of 2023 on Mediation and Conciliation in Civil and Commercial Disputes.
- Dubai Law No. 18 of 2021 Regarding the Amicable Settlement of Disputes Centre.
- Dubai Law No. 2 of 2025 Concerning Dubai International Financial Centre Courts.
- Dubai Decree No. 29 of 2024 Establishing the Judicial Authority for Resolving Conflicts of Jurisdiction.
- Dubai Law No. 26 of 2007 Regulating the Relationship between Landlords and Tenants in the Emirate of Dubai, as amended.
- Dubai Decree No. 26 of 2013 Concerning the Rent Disputes Settlement Centre in the Emirate of Dubai.
- Dubai Courts Resolution No. 1 of 2026 Regarding the Establishment of Specialized Circuits for Small Claims.
- ADGM Courts Regulations and ADGM Board of Directors Resolution No. 4 of 2015 on the Application of English Law.