

# GULF NEWS



## **Gulf states need to aim higher on freedom parameter**

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September 4, 2015

The six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council member-states are — unfortunately — not among the best in the world in the recently-released Human Freedom Index, brought out by the Cato Institute of the US, Frazer Institute of Canada and Germany's Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.

Much to its credit, the index attempts to measure values of great significance, namely personal, civil and economic freedom. Some 76 variables are used for calculating personal and economic freedom including rule of law, security and safety, association, assembly and civil society, size of government, legal system and property rights, access to sound money, freedom to trade internationally, regulation of credit, labour and business.

### **Tough index**

It is not unfair to claim that the index is exceptionally tough on GCC countries.

Of the 152 nations ranked in the report, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia are assigned rankings of 89, 97, 112, 114, 117 and 146, respectively.

Several African and Asian countries without a stellar track record on this count are placed ahead of the GCC states.

It seems the prime culprit for the GCC is that of personal freedom like access to a free press. Still, some member states have more to do more in the area of economic freedom. But GCC nations have the means to improve on these vital areas.

Bahrain stands out for being relatively strong on variables relating to both personal and economic freedom, earning 6.71 points on a maximum 10-point scale. This is the highest collected by any GCC state.

Boosted by the presence of a lively press, Kuwait stands out in the personal freedom index. Debates about challenges facing the country are discussed in the local press as well as by members of parliament. If any, Kuwait has established a tradition of having a powerful elected assembly with a record of challenging the appointed government on sociopolitical and socioeconomic matters.

Not surprisingly, the UAE leads in economic freedom. The regulations in place are known to encourage rather than hinder business activities.

Notwithstanding the generally questionable rankings, GCC states cannot afford to overlook such a vital index. This is the age of globalisation where countries are ranked against each other. This index will leave an impressions with potential investors and visitors.

Certainly, GCC economies have no problem enticing foreign workers, but what matters is attracting and retaining the talented.

These people have the option of comparing places of work. Keep in mind some 200 countries compete for businesses or investments on the one hand and skilled individuals on the other.

In fact, foreign workers make up the majority of the workforce in all GCC countries. Also, foreign nationals form the majority of the population in all of them except for Saudi Arabia and Oman. By one account, some 23 million expatriates reside in the GCC, of which about 17 million people are employed.

At least, half of the total population in the GCC is foreign, something extraordinary by any means. No restrictions are put in place with regards to remitting funds. In 2014, some \$80 billion were remitted from GCC countries, and primarily to Asian economies.

Needless to say, enhancing personal freedom is one area requiring special attention from GCC authorities. Certainly, media freedom can expose wrong practices in society at large, and offer recommendations to improve things.

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