

IFLA Succumbs to Dubai's Soft Power Strategy

Frank Houghton

Technological University of Shannon

Daisy Houghton

University of Galway

ABSTRACT: The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) have announced that the 2024 World Library and Information Congress (WLIC) will be held in Dubai. It is clear that the IFLA has fallen prey to Dubai's soft power strategy. Dubai routinely denies basic human rights, with particular restrictions evident in relation to women's rights, the LGBTQ+ community, and those of migrant workers. The ruling regime in Dubai represents so much of what the IFLA and the American Library Association (ALA) stand against. This decision runs contrary to the wishes of a recent vote of the IFLA membership. This decision will significantly weaken the credibility of the IFLA. To attend the WLIC in Dubai confers tacit support, as well prestige and legitimacy on a regime that denies basic freedoms.

Keywords: IFLA, Dubai, Ethics, Values



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Journal of Radical Librarianship, Vol. 9 (2023) pp.155-158. Published 13 September 2023.

It has recently been announced that the 2024 World Library and Information Congress (WLIC) of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) will be held in Dubai, one of seven states in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (IFLA, 2023a). This shocking and patently unwise decision clearly demonstrates that the IFLA has fallen prey to Dubai's "soft power strategy" (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The international non-governmental organization (NGO) Human Rights Watch (2022) describes this strategy as "aimed at painting the country as a progressive, tolerant, and rights-respecting nation" despite its manifold breaches of basic human rights.

The IFLA (2023b) describes itself as the "global voice of libraries" and, as can be seen from Figure 1, lists its core values as including both freedom of access to information and freedom of expression (IFLA 2023c). Figure 1 also details its core values of equitable access to information and the promotion of diversity and inclusion including on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation.

Figure 1: IFLA Core Values

Core Values

In pursuing our Vision and Mission, IFLA seeks to demonstrate the following core values:

- the endorsement of the principles of freedom of access to information, ideas and works of imagination and freedom of expression embodied in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- the belief that people, communities and organizations need universal and equitable access to information, ideas and works of imagination for their social, educational, cultural, democratic and economic well-being;
- the conviction that delivery of high quality library and information services help guarantee that access;
- the commitment to promote and value diversity and inclusion, notably as regards age, citizenship, disability, ethnicity, gender-identity, geographical location, language, political philosophy, race, religious beliefs, sex, sexual orientation or socioeconomic status, and actively pursue relevant policies and practices.

(IFLA, 2023c)

However basic human rights are denied on a daily basis in Dubai, particularly to certain groups including critics of the regime and migrant workers. Women experience widespread discrimination in law and in practice and the denial of basic rights. LGBTQ+ populations are also subject to prosecution and detention.

The US Department of State (2022) report for the UAE states that:

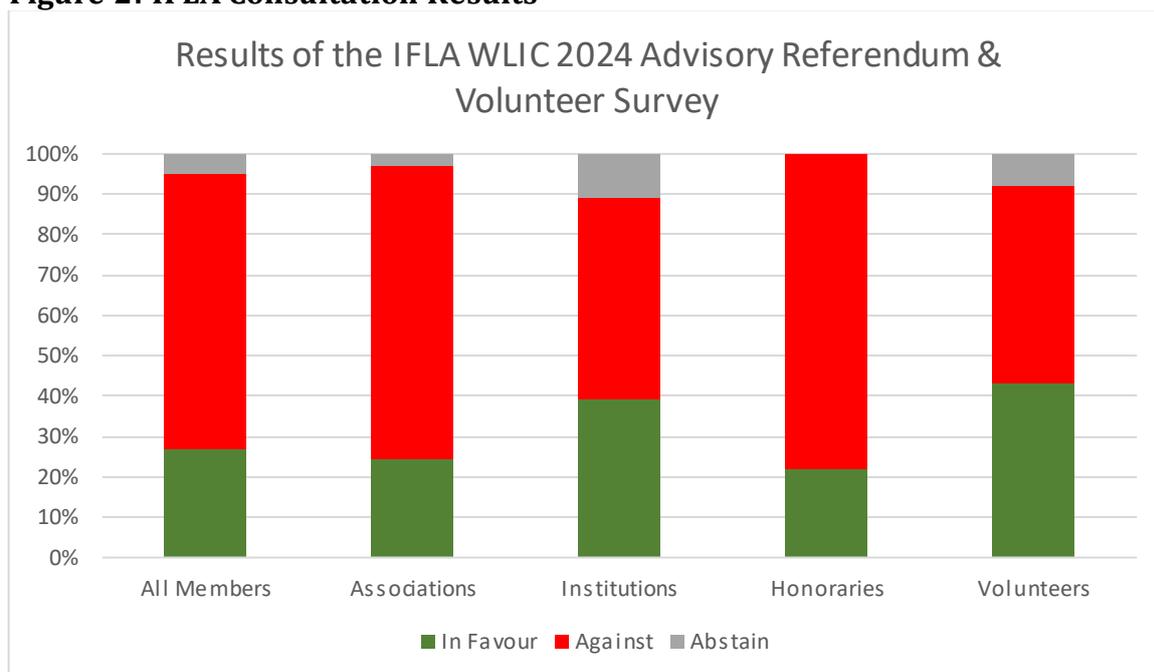
Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary arrest and detention, including those involving hostile prison conditions such as incommunicado detention, by government officials; political prisoners; transnational repression against individuals in another country; unlawful government interference with privacy; serious restrictions on free expression

Journal of Radical Librarianship, Vol. 9 (2023) pp.155-158. Published 13 September 2023.

and media, including censorship and enforcement of or threat to enforce criminal libel laws; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental organizations and civil society organizations; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; serious and unreasonable restrictions on political participation; serious government restrictions or harassment of domestic and international human rights organizations; laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults; and outlawing of independent trade unions and significant restrictions on workers' freedom of association.

Core values of the American Library Association (ALA,) include diversity, intellectual freedom, democracy, and social responsibility. The choice to hold the WLIC in Dubai is blatantly incompatible with these values. Crucially, the decision to hold this flagship annual event in Dubai has been taken by the IFLA in clear contradiction of the democratic wishes of its membership. Figure 2 details the results of the IFLA's (2023d) advisory referendum on holding the WLIC in Dubai. The results are starkly clear across all membership categories, indicating a rejection of the proposal.

Figure 2: IFLA Consultation Results



Despite this overwhelming result, the IFLA has announced the next WLIC will take place in Dubai. This decision will quite rightly be poorly received and will undoubtedly raise cynical questions about motives and influence. The IFLA has already suffered as a result of controversy over a lack of transparency (Biblioteks Bladet, 2022). Locating the WLIC in Dubai further undermines the credibility of the IFLA and threatens its legitimacy. Will the IFLA survive this decision? The answer is probably. Will it be weakened as a result? Definitely. Given its location, many potential participants will opt not to attend the WLIC and a potential boycott is possible. Any suggestions that holding the WLIC in Dubai will help to build bridges

and help spread democratic values and human rights are as empty as the similar claims which were voiced in support of tours by sports teams to apartheid South Africa which knowingly broke international boycotts and accomplished nothing in the way of softening South Africa's stark apartheid (Hain, 2014; McDougall, 2018; Sikes et al, 2020; 2022a; 2022b; Bolsmann, 2021).

The IFLA appear to have forgotten that holding the WLIC in Dubai means succumbing to a charm offensive that confers respectability, legitimacy, credibility and prestige on the Dubai monarchic dictatorship. This dictatorship routinely breaches a host of professional and personal ethical tenets held by many librarians. Librarians, like all others, are independent moral agents and their actions have real world consequences (Diamini, 2021). To attend this conference will be to turn a blind eye to widespread human rights breaches, and undoubtedly offer tacit support to the regime.

References

- American Library Association. (2019). Core Values of Librarianship. <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues>
- Biblioteks Bladet. (2022). Closed Doors Damage Trust. <https://www.biblioteksbladet.se/nyheter/english/closed-doors-damage-trust/>
- Bolsmann, C. (2021). "Playing With Apartheid": Irish and South African Rugby, 1964–1989. *Sport History Review*. 52(2), 262-278. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1123/shr.2020-0027>
- Dlamini, J. (2014). *Askari: A Story of Collaboration and Betrayal in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hain, P. (2014). *The politics of sport and apartheid. Sport, Culture and Ideology*. London: Routledge.
- Human Rights Watch. (2022). United Arab Emirates. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/united-arab-emirates#e81181>
- IFLA. (2023a). IFLA Governing Board decides on WLIC 2024. <https://www.ifla.org/news/gb-decides-on-wlic-2024/>
- IFLA. (2023b). About IFLA. <https://www.ifla.org/about/#:~:text=IFLA%20is%20the%20global%20voice,and%20close%20collaboration%20with%20partners.>
- IFLA. (2023c). Our Vision and Mission. <https://www.ifla.org/vision-mission/>
- IFLA. (2023d). Results of the WLIC 2024 Advisory Referendum and Volunteer Survey. <https://cdn.ifla.org/wp-content/uploads/advisory-referendum-dubai-results-1.pdf>
- Journal of Radical Librarianship*, Vol. 9 (2023) pp.155-158

- IFLA. (2023e). IFLA Governing Board decides on WLIC 2024. <https://www.ifla.org/news/gb-decides-on-wlic-2024/>
- McDougall, H. (2018). "The whole world's watching": New Zealand, international opinion, and the 1981 Springbok Rugby Tour. *Journal of Sport History*, 45(2), 202-223. ISSN 0094-1700 <https://doi.org/10.5406/jsporthistory.45.2.0202>
- Sikes, M. M., Fredericks, J. J., Rodriguez, P. A., Macedo, E., Poorman, M., Lyons, M., Pandit, R., & Dyreson, M. (2022a). 'Athletes for Peace'? From the Quest to Hold the Mavericks Accountable to a Second American Rebel Tour of South Africa. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 39(8-9), 1027-58.
- Sikes, M., Rider, T., & Llewellyn, M. (2020). Sport in Isolation? New Perspectives on Race, Sport, and Politics in Apartheid South Africa. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 37(7), 515-519.
- Sikes, M. M., Rider, T. C., & Llewellyn, M. P. (2022b). *Sport and Apartheid South Africa: Histories of Politics, Power, and Protest*. London: Routledge.
- U.S. Department of State. (2023). <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/united-arab-emirates/>