

UAE's ban on book about Dubai reveals gulf in values

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By [John Gill](#)

British author says 'kneejerk' censorship could put off overseas researchers. John Gill reports

A UK academic's analysis of Dubai's rise to prominence in the Gulf has been banned from being sold in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Christopher Davidson, author of *Dubai: The Vulnerability of Success*, said the ban was an own goal by a country that is at pains to present itself as an open society with aspirations for its higher education sector.

Dr Davidson, a lecturer at Durham University's School of Government and International Affairs, has previously worked in the UAE at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi. He has also acted as a consultant to the Dubai Government.

His book details the emirate's economic success and the problems it faces as oil reserves dwindle and its need for foreign investment pushes it towards socioeconomic reforms that could clash with the ideological, religious and cultural legitimacy of its monarchy.

It also analyses Dubai's awkward relationship with its federal partners in the UAE and its attractiveness as a free port to international criminal gangs and terrorists.

Dr Davidson said: "This is an academic book published by Columbia University Press, so it went through a rigorous peer-review process.

"Crucially, it is independent research, written by someone whose salary is not paid in the UAE, so there's none of the self-censorship that often prevents people who live there discussing anything beyond the bland and banal about the ruling families."

The result, he said, is that the National Media Council - which rules on censorship - had no leverage over the book's content and had made a "kneejerk" reaction.

"It's rare that a peer-reviewed academic book from an esteemed press is banned - it just makes them look as though they've got something to hide, and of course in the internet age with online booksellers it is also rather pointless."

The book is also available elsewhere in the Gulf, including neighbouring Bahrain.

Dr Davidson said: "It makes it difficult for foreign academics to come to a country and try to do research when there is freedom on anything except the domestic matters of the country and the government. It's a mentality that is self-defeating for these countries, which are trying to become knowledge economies."

Among those to have read the book before publication is Faisal Devji, professor of history at New School University in New York, who said that he, too, was surprised by the ban.

He suggested, however, that it was indicative of a bureaucratic attempt to stifle bad publicity rather than a threat to academic freedom.

"This management (of information) is not political so much as corporate, resembling regulations common in workplaces around the world, since the UAE is as much a corporation as a country. In this respect it represents the global future of politics and capitalism," he said.

Dr Davidson added: "Ironically, the book is neither a neoconservative essay on the need for Western democratic implants, nor is it particularly supportive of the current format of domestic opposition - although it does highlight their existence, which is something of a first. If anything, the overall flavour of the study is one of appreciation for an alternative political model rooted in history, culture and the principles of consultation."

john.gill@tsleducation.com.