
THE BANKING REGULATION REVIEW

EDITOR
JAN PUTNIS

LAW BUSINESS RESEARCH

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

Legal and regulatory areas of concern come and go in their perceived importance. It is, however, very difficult to recall any other occasion when a subject regarded by many lawyers as so obscure and arcane as international banking regulation has come to such prominence in such a short period of time.

Before the onset of the financial crisis in western economies in 2007, banking regulation was regarded by many as a discipline practised by technocrats who were, to put it politely, best left to themselves. The subject has risen up the agenda so quickly since then that few lawyers who advise financial institutions have had time to draw breath and assess the position now reached. The reality, of course, is that no final position has been reached and none is ever likely to be reached: banking regulation will continue to evolve, punctuated by bursts of activity every time there is a serious crisis to manage. What has happened is that the importance of this subject, and its rightful place amongst legal disciplines, has finally been recognised. This means that there is now great demand, from the banks themselves, but also from governments and regulators, for accessible and user-friendly explanations of the applicable rules.

The continual evolution of the rules makes any survey of banking regulation very difficult to write without risking almost immediate obsolescence. This book is an attempt to rise to that challenge and it is hoped that future editions will address the many further developments in this area that are expected to take place in the coming months and years. The book is aimed principally at lawyers and others who need access to an overview of the applicable rules in the important areas that the book covers and a commentary on recent developments. It also includes commentary on many of the areas of banking regulation that are of critical importance to the major cross-border transactions in which banks become involved.

The book illustrates the many and differing approaches that governments and banking regulators have taken to addressing what they perceive to be the problems affecting the banks that they regulate. To that extent, the lack of international coordination is a potential source of dismay amongst politicians and others who have spent so much time over the past three years trying to develop common approaches to the international challenges highlighted by the financial crisis.

It is, however, to be hoped that surveys of the kind in this book also inform the continuing debate about how to minimise the risk of a further crisis on anything like the scale that we have just seen. It will, quite literally, pay for governments to appreciate that further significant financial crises are inevitable in the future, and that the principal aim of reform should, therefore, be to minimise their likely impact, both on the lives of the millions of people who rely on banks and on local and regional economies.

It is a tribute both to the contributors and the publishers that so many leading banking and regulatory lawyers have made themselves available to write chapters for this book. I would like to thank them all for the support and encouragement that they have provided at a time when many of them have been almost overwhelmed with work on other projects emerging from the financial crisis. Many of the contributors have also been involved in initiatives designed to stabilise and reform the banking sectors in their countries. I would also like to thank Gideon Robertson and his colleagues at the publishers for their efforts in coordinating the project that this book has become, and in bringing it to fruition.

Jan Putnis
Slaughter and May
London
June 2010

Chapter 33

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

*Amjad Ali Khan and Stuart Walker**

I INTRODUCTION

The UAE is a federation of seven emirates, all of which (with the exception of Dubai and Ras Al Khaimah) are part of the federal judicial system; the emirates of Dubai and Ras Al Khaimah have separate judicial systems.

The Dubai International Financial Centre ('DIFC') is a financial free zone located within the Emirate of Dubai. The DIFC has been in existence for approximately six years, and it has its own body of laws (completely separate from the laws applicable within the UAE), its own court system and its own regulator, the Dubai Financial Services Authority ('DFSA'). There are approximately 500 entities either incorporated within or registered within the DIFC. Of these, approximately half are regulated as financial service providers by the DFSA.

The past 18 months have been most challenging for banks and banking regulators in the UAE. Although banks had similar challenges in the late 1970s and in the mid-1980s, when the economies of the region suffered negative growth, few bankers currently in the UAE have memory of those downturns. On a more positive note, the size and complexity of the current challenges in the UAE banking sector reflect its entry into the mainstream of international banking and commerce.

2008 saw a great number of banking and financial transactions in the UAE including jumbo-syndications, bond and *sukuk* issues and IPOs. Earlier in 2006 and 2007, speculation relating to the possible appreciation of the dirham and its delinking from the US dollar resulted in a steady inflow of billions of US dollars into the UAE banking sector. As a result dirham deposits with banks grew to record amounts and banks reacted with generous credit lines to corporates while consumer assets grew at annual rates in excess of 25 per cent for several years. Non-resident banks also substantially increased their exposure to the UAE private and public sector. However, the UAE government's

* Amjad Ali Khan is managing partner and Stuart Walker is a partner at Afridi & Angell.

decision in 2008 not to depeg the dirham from the US dollar resulted in the speculative deposits to withdraw from the UAE. Simultaneously, the international financial crisis began to impair the portfolios of several large UAE banks and locally it became apparent that the massive investment in real estate would result in an equally massive oversupply. The UAE construction and real estate sector fared well till late 2008 when real estate prices crumbled, liquidity dried up, the economy shrank, there were substantial lay-offs, and there was a noticeable reduction in the population on account of the departure of large numbers of expatriates.

The sectors in the UAE worst hit by the crisis are real estate, construction and banking. Real estate activity has fallen to a fraction of previous levels. Construction of a number of potential projects has been cancelled, while construction of several existing projects has been suspended or abandoned. Banks have had to take substantial write-offs in their real estate, construction and consumer loan portfolios and have greatly restricted fresh loans.

In response to the crisis the Central Bank of the UAE ('Central Bank'), the federal UAE government and the emirate governments have responded with a variety of measures.

II THE REGULATORY REGIME APPLICABLE TO BANKS

UAE

The regulatory framework for banking in the UAE is based on Federal Law No. 10 of 1980 concerning the Central Bank, the monetary system and the organisation of banking ('the Banking Law'). Under the Banking Law, the Central Bank was created and entrusted with the issuance and management of the country's currency and the regulation of the banking and financial sectors

The Banking Law provides for the licensing and regulation by the Central Bank of the following financial institutions

Commercial banks are defined to include institutions that customarily receive funds from the public, for granting loans, and which issue and collect cheques, place bonds, trade in foreign exchange and precious metals, or carry on other operations allowed by law or by customary banking practice. Investment banks are distinguished from commercial banks principally in that they do not accept deposits for less than two years.

Investment companies manage portfolios on behalf of individuals or companies, subscribe to equity and debt instruments, prepare feasibility studies for projects, market shares and debt instruments and establish and manage funds.

Finance companies provide corporate and consumer credit facilities but may not accept deposits from individuals. Financial intermediaries broker the purchase or sale of domestic or foreign shares or instruments. Monetary intermediaries are foreign exchange dealers who purchase and sell currency. Representative offices are regional or liaison offices of foreign banks and financial institutions

Islamic Banks, finance companies and investment companies are regulated by the Central Bank under Federal Law No. 6 of 1985 regarding Islamic Banks, Financial Institutions and Investment Companies. Islamic banks undertake all the activities of

a commercial bank and additionally can own assets financed by them. Islamic finance companies may provide personal and consumer, property, vehicle and trade financing, issue guarantees and enter into foreign exchange contracts with corporate entities, subscribe to shares, bonds and certificates of deposits, accept deposits from corporate entities and manage investment vehicles. All Islamic institutions must operate in accordance with the principles of Islamic shariah and are also subject to regulation by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs.

Real estate finance companies are finance companies that specialise in funding real estate projects on a conventional or shariah-compliant basis.

The Banking Law does not apply to statutory public credit institutions, governmental investment institutions and development funds, private savings and pension funds and the insurance sector.

While the Central Bank is the principal regulatory authority of banks and financial institutions in the UAE, such entities are also subject to additional registration and licensing requirements at the federal and emirate levels. Also the Federal Companies Law governs all commercial companies incorporated in the UAE and all foreign companies with branch offices in the UAE.

All commercial banks incorporated in the UAE must be established as public shareholding corporations under the UAE Companies Law and must be majority-owned by UAE nationals. A majority of directors of such companies must be UAE nationals. While for monetary intermediaries and investment companies the minimum UAE national shareholding requirement is 51 per cent, for finance companies, commercial banks and investment banks the minimum UAE national shareholding requirement is 60 per cent. Although branches of foreign companies established in the UAE are required to appoint a UAE national as a national agent, foreign banks can establish branches without appointing an agent.

The principal difference in the treatment of local and foreign commercial banks is that local banks are not subject to any taxation on their income, whereas foreign banks are subject to taxation at the emirate level. Normally this tax is 20 per cent of net income.

Non-resident banks grant bilateral credit facilities and also participate in syndications in the UAE. They are not deemed to be resident, domiciled or carrying on business in the UAE and not liable to tax in the UAE merely on account of such participation. However, sale of foreign securities in the UAE by non-resident entities requires consent of the Central Bank or appointment of a locally licensed financial entity.

The confidentiality of customer information by banks is not specifically provided for under the Banking Law, but the principle is recognised as a customary banking practice, and, implicitly, under certain regulations issued by the Central Bank. However, the Central Bank has wide powers to obtain information.

DIFC

The DFSA has adopted a regulatory approach modelled, at least in part, on the FSA in the United Kingdom. The DFSA does not grant banking licences *per se*; it authorises financial service providers to undertake specific financial services. The relevant financial

services in respect of banks would include providing credit and accepting deposits. There are approximately 30 international banking institutions with a registered presence in the DIFC. Of these, only a very small number have actually applied for the authorisation to accept deposits. This reluctance to be a 'true' bank can be traced to two reasons. One, historically, DIFC entities were not able to deal with retail customers. This restriction was lifted recently but the business models of the vast majority of institutions within the DIFC has been to focus on corporate clients or high net worth individuals. The other reason that banks have been reluctant to apply for the 'accepting deposits' authorisation is that they remain unable to deal in dirhams or accept deposits from the UAE markets. Most of the banks that have set up in the DIFC have done so as branches of overseas companies; this has been done for capital adequacy reasons. Recently, however, it has been the policy of the DFSA to encourage banks to incorporate new subsidiaries within the DIFC and capitalise those subsidiaries to an acceptable level.

III PRUDENTIAL REGULATION

UAE

The Central Bank has a bank examiner-type approach to the regulation of the banking and finance sector. The Central Bank has issued regulations on a whole range of issues affecting the conduct of banking.

Banks are required to publish quarterly audited accounts and have their annual audited accounts approved by the Central Bank before they are published. Banks are required to obtain prior approval of the Central Bank to changes in directors, senior management, shareholders (holding over 5 per cent equity), constitutional documents and capital.

The Central Bank is responsible for the anti-money-laundering regime in the UAE and has a special department that implements Central Bank anti-money-laundering regulations.

The approval of the Central Bank is required for all branches, ATMs/CDMs, electronic business units and other physical premises required by banks. The Central Bank also regulates outsourcing of back-office and marketing functions.

For a number of matters, Central Bank approval is clearly required. However, for a substantial number of other issues, various banks are subject to different policies regarding Central Bank approval. Local banks generally tend not to seek Central Bank approval while foreign banks generally are more inclined to seek Central Bank approval or, at a minimum, notify the Central Bank. There is currently little or no regulation of bank holding companies or subsidiaries.

UAE banks are all publicly listed companies and must comply with the Central Bank law, UAE Companies law and Emirates Securities and Commodities Authority laws, all of which, *inter alia*, regulate management.

In summary, local banks have a board of directors, chief executive, a number of board committees and senior executives. There is currently no regulation of bonus payments to management; bonus payments have, however, not been of a magnitude that requires regulation.

The Central Bank has adopted Basel II recommendations regarding regulatory capital. In 2009, the Central Bank issued regulations to commercial banks in the UAE to increase their minimum capital requirement by 30 June 2010 from 11 to 12 per cent.

DIFC

i Relationship with the prudential regulator

Firms authorised by the DFSA are required to notify the DFSA of all matters of which it could reasonably expect to be notified of. There are quarterly reporting requirements in respect of capital adequacy. The DFSA conducts themed reviews on a regular basis; recent reviews have focused heavily on prevention of money laundering and terrorism financing. The DFSA has also focused on authorised firms' compliance with restrictions imposed on dealing with Iranian counterparties arising from the UN sanctions relating to non-nuclear proliferation.

ii Management of banks

The DFSA requires all financial institutions active in the DIFC to have adequate systems and controls in place to ensure that they are properly managed. There are a number of mandatory appointments (senior executive officer, chief financial officer, etc.). The individuals holding the mandatory appointment positions are subject to prior clearance by the DFSA. The DFSA does not impose any requirements or make any restrictions in respect of bonus payments to management and employees of banking groups.

iii Regulatory capital

Those firms holding authorisations to accept deposits and provide credit fall into prudential category 1 (being the highest of categories 1 to 5). Category 1 firms have a base capital requirement of \$10 million. The actual capital requirement may be significantly higher depending upon the volume of business being conducted and other factors set out in the DFSA Rulebook. As previously mentioned, historically, most banking groups established branches in the DIFC and were able to obtain waivers of the capital adequacy requirements on that basis. In short, they looked to their head office balance sheet as support for their DIFC functions. This approach is becoming less and less acceptable to the DFSA, particularly for smaller financial institutions coming from jurisdictions other than tier 1 jurisdictions.

IV CONDUCT OF BUSINESS

UAE

The Banking Law, along with the various circulars and notices issued from time to time by the Central Bank, govern the conduct of business by banks in the UAE. Any violations of the Banking Law and/or any of the circulars or notices issued by the Central Bank would attract fines and additionally could attract other penalties such as warnings, reduction or suspension of credit facilities granted to it, prohibition or restriction on carrying on certain activities or revocation of its licence to conduct banking business, depending upon the gravity of the offence. Accordingly, a bank may be subject to civil

or regulatory liability under the Banking Law. There may also be occasions where a bank may be exposed to criminal liability under the UAE Federal Penal Code.

DIFC

The DFSA Rulebook contains a detailed conduct of business module. The Rulebook is essentially a principle-based system. For example, principle 1 (integrity) states that an authorised firm must observe high standards of integrity and fair dealing. Principle 5 (marketing conduct) states that an authorised firm must observe proper standards of conduct in financial markets. There are 11 principles, the final being principle 11 (compliance with high standards of corporate governance), which states that an authorised firm must meet the applicable standards of corporate governance as appropriate considering the nature, size and complexity of the authorised firm's activities. A bank operating in the DIFC will be subject to civil liability under the various DIFC laws, regulatory liability in respect of the applicable DIFC laws such as the Market Law and the Regulatory Law, plus the provisions of the DFSA Rulebook. Depending on the relevant customer documentation, a bank in the DIFC may also be exposed to civil liability under the laws of the UAE outside the DIFC. Finally, there may be occasions where a bank in the DIFC would be exposed to criminal liability (i.e., under the UAE Federal Penal Code).

V FUNDING

UAE

Under the Banking Law, commercial banks including investment banks must have a minimum paid-up capital. A foreign bank is required to allocate capital for its UAE operations. At least 10 per cent of the annual net profits of banks is required to be allocated to a special reserve, until such reserve equals 50 per cent of the bank's paid up capital or, in the case of a foreign bank, the amount allocated as capital for its UAE operations.

Additionally, the Central Bank has issued specific circulars on capital adequacy requirements for banks in the UAE. Until 1993, all commercial banks were required to maintain a capital-to-assets ratio of 1:15. This was widely regarded as being inadequate. In 1993, the Central Bank issued new risk-based capital adequacy rules based on the 1988 recommendations of the Basel Committee on Banking Regulations and Supervisory Practices. These rules require all commercial banks to maintain a risk-to-assets ratio of 10 per cent. The rules also prescribe the manner in which different categories of assets are to be risk-weighted.

The Central Bank has stated that the risk-to-assets ratio is only one of the factors it will consider when assessing the capital adequacy of each bank. It will also take into consideration such factors as the geographical or business sector credit concentration, policies, procedures and internal control systems of the lending bank.

DIFC

There is no Central Bank or equivalent within the DIFC and therefore banks registered within the DIFC must fund their activities through support from other branches of their

international operations and/or debt issuance programmes of their own. As previously mentioned, deposit taking is not a significant source of funding for any institution in the DIFC.

VI CONTROL OF BANKS AND TRANSFERS OF BANKING BUSINESS

UAE

There is no specific definition of control (except in relation to determination of large exposures). 'Control' is generally viewed as a majority shareholding interest, a right to appoint the majority of the board of directors of a bank, or both. Any change in such control requires the prior approval of the Central Bank.

Transfer of customer relationships (e.g., deposits, loans, credit cards, accounts, investment products) generally requires customer consent. There is no statutory mechanism for transfer of such relationships.

DIFC

Any material change of control in a DFSA-authorized firm requires prior approval from the DFSA.

The DFSA Rulebook does not include detailed provisions regarding the methods by which banks may transfer all or part of their business (comprising deposits and possibly loan agreements and other assets) to another entity without the consent of the customers concerned. The ability of an institution to do this would be governed by the assignment clauses in their contractual documentation as interpreted in accordance with the DIFC Contract Law.

VII THE YEAR IN REVIEW

UAE

i Central Bank action

The Central Bank has taken the following principal measures to address the current issues in the UAE banking sector:

- a* launched a 50 billion dirham repo facility for banks;
- b* offered deposits of a total of 70 billion dirham to UAE banks;
- c* guaranteed deposits with UAE banks and UAE branches of foreign banks; and
- d* subscribed \$10 billion in a government of Dubai bond issue.

There is currently a debate on whether the Central Bank should further ease liquidity in the interbank market where rates continue to be high.

ii Emirate-level action

The government of Dubai, following the announcement by Dubai World that it is seeking to restructure its debt, has established a tribunal in the DIFC to hear all claims against Dubai World and its subsidiaries. The decree setting up the tribunal also amends

the DIFC Insolvency Law and makes such amended Insolvency Law applicable to any insolvency proceedings relating to Dubai World and its subsidiaries.

The government of Dubai has also set up an economic council to address issues arising from the economic crisis.

DIFC

The most significant regulatory action undertaken by the DFSA in the past year has been the steps taken in respect of Damas, a local jewellery manufacturer and retailer, whose shares were listed on Nasdaq Dubai. Damas was not a financial services provider but was a reporting entity by virtue of its listing on Nasdaq Dubai (an exchange regulated by the DFSA). There were a series of corporate governance failures within Damas that led to the DFSA imposing record fines on various directors and the company itself. The entire board was required to step down and a new board has been appointed. The Damas matter has highlighted the gap between local standards of corporate governance and standards expected at an international level and imposed by the DFSA.

VIII OUTLOOK AND CONCLUSIONS

Banks in the UAE reported 2009 results and more recently first-quarter results for 2010 generally with substantial reserves for non-performing loans. However, the deficit of deposits to loans has been nearly made up and the deposit rates offered by banks have fallen substantially. Nonetheless, 2010 continues to provide challenges.

The DFSA is currently undergoing a substantial overhaul of its collective investment funds regime. The intention of the overhaul is to attract additional asset managers and fund managers to the DIFC. Presently, only a small number of funds are actually domiciled in the DIFC but it is hoped that this will change. If there is a growth in funds domiciled in the DIFC and asset managers present in the DIFC, then there may be further moves by international banks to establish a presence in the DIFC. One of the things that has been slowing the number of applicants to the DIFC is the relatively high rent charged within the Centre. Again, it is hoped that steps will be taken to reduce the rents within the financial free zone to a more reasonable level.

AMJAD ALI KHAN

Afridi & Angell

Amjad Ali Khan is currently the managing partner of Afridi & Angell. He represents foreign and local clients including private equity firms, banks and leading multinationals in banking, financial and corporate transactions in Dubai and abroad. His clients have invested in projects in the US, UK, India, Thailand and GCC states. He specialises in banking and financial services including project finance, syndicated loans, treasury products and Islamic banking matters.

Mr Khan has considerable experience in undertaking conventional, Islamic and private banking transactions and in advising private equity firms in relation to cross-border acquisitions. He has advised clients on private placements of minority interests, management buy-outs and sale of businesses spread across the Middle East. He has been involved in several project finance transactions in the UAE. He is also a regular speaker at banking seminars.

STUART WALKER

Afridi & Angell

Stuart Walker became a partner of Afridi & Angell in November 2008. Prior to joining the firm in 2003, Mr Walker was a solicitor in the banking department of Lovells in London.

Mr Walker regularly advises on financial services regulation, asset management and custody, corporate finance and advisory business and the establishment of and operation of collective investment funds. His particular area of specialisation relates to the regulation of financial services in the DIFC. He has advised in connection with a significant number of the enforcement actions undertaken by the DFSA.

Mr Walker is the co-author of the UAE chapter of *Financial Services Regulation in the Middle East*, Oxford University Press (2008), and has contributed articles to various publications including *International Financial Law Review*. He is a regular contributor to Euromoney's *Global Banking & Financial Policy Review*.

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