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# The UAE has a Data Regulator, at last

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On 14 June 2026, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum announced the establishment of the Federal Authority for Artificial Intelligence and Data.[1] For the first time since the Personal Data Protection Law came into force, the country has an institution capable of enforcing it.

## What was missing

The UAE has had a personal data protection law since the start of 2022. Federal Decree-Law No. 45 of 2021[2] entered into force on 2 January 2022.[3] What it has lacked is the machinery to operate. However, the two pieces were absent to bring PDPL to life.

The first is the Executive Regulations. Article 28 required the Cabinet to issue them within six months of promulgation,[4] which placed the deadline in or around March 2022. They have never appeared. The PDPL repeatedly defers its operational detail to them: the technical and organisational standards, the procedures for several of the controller's obligations, the conditions for exemptions, and the schedule of administrative penalties. Without them, the law states the duties but withholds much of the apparatus for enforcing them.

The second is the regulator itself. Federal Decree-Law No. 44 of 2021 created the UAE Data Office as the supervisory authority — the body the PDPL refers to throughout as '*the Office*', which receives breach reports, handles complaints, proposes the penalty schedule and issues guidance. The Office was established on paper and given administrative support from the TDRA for its first two years.[5] It never became operational.

The result was a law in force but without enforcement. Controllers were bound by its terms, yet no authority was issuing regulations, receiving reports, taking complaints or imposing penalties. Compliance became, for most, an internal risk exercise rather than a response to a supervisor. For some, that was a comfortable arrangement. Many businesses concluded the PDPL would not be enforced and acted accordingly.

## What the Authority is

The Authority consolidates three bodies: the Office of Artificial Intelligence, Digital Economy and Remote Work Applications; the Digital Government Sector of the TDRA; and the UAE Data Office, the dormant regulator just described. It reports to the Cabinet and is chaired by Omar Sultan Al Olama. For data

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[1] The establishment was announced by HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum on 14 June 2026 and reported by the Dubai Media Office (@DXBMediaOffice) and the UAE Government Media Office.
[2] Federal Decree-Law No. 45 of 2021 issuing the Personal Data Protection Law (the '**PDPL**'), in force 2 January 2022.
[3] PDPL, Article 31.
[4] PDPL, Article 28. The PDPL was promulgated on 20 September 2021; the six-month period for issuing the Executive Regulations accordingly expired in or about March 2022.
[5] Federal Decree-Law No. 44 of 2021 on the establishment of the UAE Data Office; Article 9 provides for TDRA administrative and logistical support during the Office's first two years.

**SOVA FZ LLC**
Twin Tower – M1 Floor
Hamad Bin Abdulla Road – Fujairah – UAE
P.O. Box 4422
https://sova.ae
T+971 58 515 2919
hello@sova.ae

protection, the third component is the most important. By absorbing the Data Office, the Authority becomes the '*Office*' that the PDPL has been referring to for the last four and a half years.

## What to expect

We believe three moves would follow. Firstly, the Executive Regulations, finally issued. Secondly, a working complaints and breach-reporting channel, giving the Office's statutory functions a counterparty. And thirdly, the Cabinet decision under Article 26 specifying the violations and administrative penalties.[6]

Data protection is one line in a broad mandate dominated by AI policy and digital-government transformation, and it is entirely possible that the Regulations and PDPL enforcement do not lead the Authority's first year. The structural conditions for enforcement now exist for the first time, and the timetable is yet to be set. The sensible planning assumption is now whether the Regulations will come, but when. Given how active the UAE Government has been over the past five years,[7] it is reasonable to assume that the PDPL Executive Regulations, as well as other Personal Data-related regulations, will follow shortly.

## What the law already requires of you

The substantive obligations of the PDPL bind now and have bound since January 2022. The Executive Regulations supply operational detail and, in practice, the enforcement trigger; they do not create the duties. An in-house team that has been waiting for the Regulations before acting has misread what it was waiting for. The obligations already on the face of the law include the following.

- **Scope.** The PDPL applies to controllers and processors in the UAE, and to those outside it processing the data of subjects inside it. It does not apply to government data, to health or banking and credit data governed by sectoral legislation, or to companies in free zones[8] with their own data protection legislation (Article 2).
- **Lawful basis.** Consent is the default basis for processing; the law then sets out the cases in which processing may proceed without it (Article 4). Where consent is relied on, the controller must be able to prove it, and it must be clear, specific and capable of withdrawal (Article 6).
- **Processing principles.** Fairness, transparency and lawfulness; purpose limitation; data minimisation; accuracy; storage limitation; and security (Article 5).
- **Records of processing.** Controllers and processors must maintain a record of processing activities (Articles 7(4) and 8(7)).
- **Data protection officer.** A DPO must be appointed where processing would cause a high risk to the confidentiality and privacy of personal data, would involve a systematic and comprehensive assessment of sensitive personal data (including profiling and automated processing), or would be carried out on a large volume of sensitive personal data (Articles 10 and 11).
- **Data subject rights.** Access, correction, erasure, restriction, objection and the related rights (Articles 13 to 18).

[6] PDPL, Article 26. The penalty schedule is to be issued by Cabinet decision on the proposal of the Office's General Manager; the PDPL itself specifies no penalty amounts.
[7] The personal status law, the new commercial companies and civil transactions law (the 'Civil Code'), the amendments to the Employment law, etc.
[8] Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC) and Abu Dhabi Global Market.

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- **Breach reporting.** The controller must report personal data breaches to the Office; the processor must report to the controller (Article 9). The operational detail, including timing, is among the matters left to the Regulations, but the duty itself is in the statute.
- **Impact assessments.** A data protection impact assessment is required before high-risk processing (Article 21).
- **Cross-border transfers.** Transfers are permitted to jurisdictions providing an adequate level of protection, and otherwise only on one of the statutory bases (Articles 22 and 23).

None of this is contingent on the Regulations. What the Regulations will change is the precision of some requirements and, above all, the existence of a regulator able to ask whether they have been met.

## What to do if little or nothing has been done

Many onshore businesses have done little, precisely because nothing compelled them to. If that describes your organisation, the work is manageable provided it is sequenced correctly. Done in the wrong order, it wastes effort.

**Starting from zero.**

- **Confirm the scope first.** Establish, entity by entity and activity by activity, whether you fall within the onshore PDPL at all, or whether a free-zone or sectoral carve-out applies (Article 2). Everything that follows depends on the answer, and it is common for a group to sit partly inside and partly outside the regime.
- **Then map the data and build the record.** You cannot fix lawful bases, honour data-subject rights, or assess transfers until you know what you process, why, on what basis and where it goes. The record of processing is the foundation, not the paperwork (Articles 7(4) and 8(7)).
- **Then fix the lawful bases.** For each activity, identify and document the basis relied on; if consent, ensure the mechanics meet Article 6.
- **Then the rest.** The DPO assessment, data-subject rights handling, a tested breach response procedure, impact assessments when triggered, and transfer mechanisms.

If some of it has been done, the recurring gaps are predictable: no documented assessment against the Article 10 DPO triggers; no impact-assessment discipline for high-risk processing (Article 21); cross-border transfers running on neither an adequacy basis nor a statutory mechanism (Articles 22 and 23); and a breach plan that exists on paper but has never been tested against the reporting obligation in Article 9.

For the time ahead, the aim is a defensible baseline before the Regulations issue: a current record of processing, documented lawful bases, a DPO position resolved one way or the other, and a breach procedure someone has actually rehearsed. Article 29 allows only six months to regularise once the Regulations are issued (extendable, at the Cabinet's discretion, by a further period of up to six months[9]), and a team that begins on the day the Regulations land is well behind one that has the baseline ready.

[9] PDPL, Article 29.

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## A note on cross-border transfers

For groups moving personal data between the UAE and other jurisdictions, the transfer rules deserve specific attention. The PDPL permits transfers to jurisdictions that provide an adequate level of protection (Article 22). In practice, no adequacy determinations have been published. That leaves the route for transfers absent adequacy: the statutory bases, which include a contract or undertaking binding the recipient to the PDPL's protections, the data subject's explicit consent, and the various necessity grounds (Article 23). Intra-group flows running on the assumption that '*the Regulations aren't out, so nothing applies*' are running on a misreading. The transfer provisions are in force.

Entities in the DIFC and ADGM fall outside the onshore PDPL and under their own regimes (the DIFC Data Protection Law No. 5 of 2020[10] and the ADGM Data Protection Regulations 2021[11]), each with its own operational commissioner. A group holding both onshore and free-zone entities is managing more than one framework at once, and movements between them are transfers, not internal housekeeping.

## In short

The Authority does not change what the PDPL requires. It changes the likelihood that someone will ask. The organisations that comfortably come through the next phase will be the ones that treat the coming months as the time to build the baseline the law has required since 2022, calmly, before the regulatory clock starts to run.

Alexey Myagchenkov,
Managing Partner at SOVA

*SOVA advises on PDPL readiness, data mapping and record design, lawful basis and consent review, DPO assessments, breach procedures, and cross-border transfer structuring. To scope where your organisation stands and what the sensible next steps are, write to us at hello@sova.icu.*

[10]Data Protection Law, DIFC Law No. 5 of 2020.
[11]ADGM Data Protection Regulations 2021.