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By Sonali Kolhatkar  
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## ***Dubai Is a Fitting Host for the Climate Circus***

**Teaser:** A host nation that promises progress but relies on regressive policies is revealing just how seriously fossil fuel interests have coopted UN climate talks.

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### **[Article Body:]**

In January 2023, nearly a year before the latest United Nations climate conference began, there was [deep concern and alarm](#) over the head of one of the world’s largest oil companies being appointed president of the [COP28 summit](#). The climate talks taking place

in December 2023 were hosted by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and overseen by Sultan Al Jaber, a man who happens to be in charge of the UAE's national oil company Abu Dhabi National Oil Company. It's a fitting illustration of an old idiom that the fox is in charge of the hen house.

Al Jaber's appointment was such a clear conflict of interest that a group of United States lawmakers, including House Representatives Barbara Lee, Rashida Tlaib, and Jamaal Bowman, and Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, sent a scathing [letter](#) on January 26th denouncing it. "Having a fossil fuel champion in charge of the world's most important climate negotiations would be like having the CEO of a cigarette conglomerate in charge of global tobacco policy," wrote the lawmakers.

Their warning fell on deaf ears and yet their fears proved to be correct months later when [The Guardian newspaper](#) published Al Jaber's revealing remarks made at a November 2023 online climate meeting. Climate justice leader and former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, rightly pointed out that the climate crisis was hurting women and children, and that Al Jaber had the power to do something about it. The oil company head angrily retorted that her comments were "alarmist," and asserted that, "There is no science out there, or no scenario out there, that says that the phase-out of fossil fuel is what's going to achieve 1.5C."

He went on to [say](#), "Show me the roadmap for a phase-out of fossil fuel that will allow for sustainable socioeconomic development, unless you want to take the world back into caves." Sounding defensive and cornered, Al Jaber added, "Show me the solutions. Stop the pointing of fingers. Stop it."

Adding (fossil) fuel to the fire, the [BBC published an exposé](#) days before COP28 began revealing that "The United Arab Emirates planned to use its role as the host of UN climate talks as an opportunity to strike oil and gas deals." UAE authorities did not deny the reports and instead responded with shocking hubris that "private meetings are private."

Such shenanigans reveal the futility of relying on the UN's annual COP meetings to phase out fossil fuels in order to stave off catastrophic climate change. Whereas earlier COP meetings fixated on the goal of "net zero emissions"—a phrase that climate activists rightly denounced as [greenwashing and propaganda](#)—the favorite phrase at this year's COP28 appeared to be a "[phase down](#)" of fossil fuels.

The idea is that oil and gas producers may consider, someday in the far future, to start producing fewer fossil fuels than they do now. "Phase down" is a clever dilution of "phase

out.” It is a sleight of hand intended to assuage concern over the warming climate all while remaining on a path to climate destruction.

The first draft of the COP28 agreement spelled out the two terms as interchangeable, referring to a “[phasedown/out](#).” Al Jaber reflected this equation of two different words even as he sought to maintain his credentials as head of COP28, saying that he has maintained “over and over that the phase-down and the phase-out of fossil fuel is inevitable.”

That Al Jaber would engage in trickery to protect fossil fuels is hardly surprising given his role as head of the Abu-Dhabi-based oil firm. In his [leaked remarks to Robinson](#), he proclaimed that phasing out oil and gas was not feasible, “unless you want to take the world back into caves.”

But it is precisely the continued use of fossil fuels that may take us back to the stone age. We may all be living in caves someday, seeking high ground from the rising waters of the warming oceans, all while Al Jaber and his ilk are ensconced in the [luxury bunkers of the wealthy](#).

It is an image that reflects the reality of Dubai, a [gleaming, futuristic city](#) where the Emirates pays lip service to climate progress as host of COP28, while simultaneously conspiring to secure oil and gas deals on the side. It’s a city that is defined by yet another idiom: trying to have your cake and eat it too.

I know, because I was born and raised in Dubai, a child of Indians who emigrated in 1970 to a land known as the [Trucial Sheikhdoms](#)—one year before they formally emerged as a single sovereign nation called the United Arab Emirates. My parents’ tenure in the UAE was older than the nation itself and while they toiled for more than 50 years as part of an immigrant workforce that outnumbers [Emiratis 9 to 1](#), they were never afforded citizenship, as were none of their three children born there.

The Emirates, with the blessing of its former colonial master [Britain](#), and its newer imperial partners, the [U.S.](#) and [Israel](#), has presided over an [oil-funded project](#) fueled by [exploited immigrant labor](#) to emerge as one of the most [important trading hubs](#) in the world: a [seductive tourist trap](#) dotted by [massive shopping malls](#) and [billboards](#) beneath which teeming [labor camps](#) invisibly keep the wheels of capitalism turning. It touts a liberalism that allows [women](#) to work, drive, and even hold limited leadership, all while suppressing the rights of low-wage [female domestic workers](#). It [pledges](#) sustainability while marketing itself to global investors.

It is hypocrisy manifested; a pretty façade of a promising future built on an age-old model of serfdom, a nation that celebrates the freedom to consume, but clamps down on the freedom to speak. In other words, it is a capitalist's wet dream. What better place for fossil fuel promoters to pretend they care about the future of the planet?

The COP meetings have been a [disastrous distraction](#) from the urgent need to end fossil fuel production and consumption. Even [Christiana Figueres](#), former executive secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, who is considered the architect of the 2015 Paris climate accord, is so disgusted by the state of proceedings that she called the COP "[a circus.](#)"

Having Dubai host the largest annual international climate gathering is a desperate bid by a dying industry to maintain relevance. [Energy forecasting predictions](#) point to a grim future for petrostates like the UAE. It's no wonder Al Jaber has publicly tied himself into knots of contradictions. His nation's future depends on the continued flow of oil and gas, while our world's future depends on an immediate termination of the poisonous fuels.