

Driverless in Dubai: Autonomous Vehicle Regulation Advances in the United Arab Emirates

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In line with Dubai's Autonomous Transportation Strategy (the Strategy), on 14 April, 2023, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates (the UAE) and Ruler of Dubai, introduced legislation to provide a legal basis for the Strategy being adopted as Law No. (9) of 2023 On regulating the operation of autonomous vehicles in Emirate of Dubai (the Law).

The UAE is resolutely positioning itself as a leader in innovation and technology, aspiring for Dubai to be the model city of the future and the introduction of the Law demonstrates the country's commitment to the same.

The Law aims to regulate the operation of autonomous vehicles in accordance with international best standards and attract investment into Dubai in respect of related activities. Amongst others, a key aim of the Strategy is to transform 25 percent of transportation in Dubai to autonomous mode by 2030, with an estimated resulting saving of AED 22 billion in annual economic costs.

The Law grants the Dubai's Road Transport Authority (the RTA) wide discretionary powers in respect of the governance of autonomous vehicles, including: (i) determining the types of vehicles to be made autonomous; (ii) selecting locations in Dubai where autonomous vehicles will be permitted; (iii) licensing autonomous vehicles; (iv) planning to facilitate investment; and (v) creating the infrastructure required to operate autonomous vehicles in Dubai.

In order to operate an autonomous vehicle in Dubai, the following must be granted: (i) an autonomous vehicle license; and (ii) permission from the Director General of the RTA for the proposed operator to partake in activities related to autonomous vehicles. Furthermore, the following criteria must be met for a vehicle to be licensed as an autonomous vehicle by the RTA:

1. the initial registrant of the vehicle must have prior approval for the particular type of vehicle in Dubai;
2. the vehicle should be registered in the country of origin or exporting country and proven that it has been used on public roads allocated for the category and type of autonomous vehicle in such country;

3. the vehicle must pass all RTA technical examinations;
4. the vehicle must appropriately read traffic signs and handle road priorities;
5. the vehicle should meet the criteria of standards of safety and security as set out in the RTA's approved guide;
6. the vehicle must conform with the specification approved in the UAE;
7. an insurance company licensed in the UAE as determined by the RTA's Director General should insure the vehicle; and
8. any other conditions that may be determined by the RTA's Director General from time to time should be met.

The procedures for licensing an autonomous vehicle that meet the above conditions are still to be decided by the RTA's Director General.

The Law also sets out responsibilities relating to not only the operator of an autonomous vehicle, but also passengers of such vehicles, who must also comply with certain rules when being driven by an autonomous vehicle. The Law also sets out certain responsibilities placed upon the owner / operator of such vehicles and those parties who are responsible for the sale and distribution of the same in Dubai. Consequently, owners, operators, passengers and distributors are all subject to certain obligations pursuant to the Law. In addition, the Law also restricts the way in which autonomous vehicles are sold insofar as sales to a licensed operator are only permitted through the relevant agent and the transfer of ownership from one operator to another may only occur following prior approval of the RTA.

Anyone that violates the Law shall be subject to a fine of no less than AED 500 and no more than AED 20,000 which may be doubled in the event of repeat violations within the same year with a maximum fine set at AED 50,000.

By the end of 2023, Dubai is planning to launch autonomous taxi services which are due to be delivered by Cruise, in exclusive partnership with RTA with the first set of self-driving taxis being custom built on the foundation of the Chevrolet Bolt.

Dubai aims to deploy 4,000 self-driving taxis by 2030, and Cruise has been designated as the exclusive robotaxi service provider in the city until 2029. This project will make Dubai the first non-US city to commercialise Cruise's self-driving cars.

The introduction of autonomous vehicles will not only alleviate traffic congestion but also reduce the number of road traffic accidents and harmful emissions, making Dubai an even more attractive destination for tourism and business.

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