

The hunt for creators of Dhivehi Forum

They are watching you, Neo.

The hunt for Kalhusoru, the then most wanted person by NSS, continued beyond the islands, territorial waters and the Exclusive Economic Zone of the Maldives. It basically zeroed in on the apartments and streets of Malaysia. The informal gatherings, the outings and the dinners and lunches of the Maldivian students in Malaysia.

The usual gang of undercover cops visited Malaysia, and no doubt enjoyed their visits which the government willingly financed. They were not receiving any tips or clues, everyone knew who they were and why they were there. The investigation was getting almost futile.

Even Dr Latheef, the education minister, the man who is said to have continued work on his thesis even after the government announced his receipt of doctorate, paid an unofficial (nurasme) visit to Malaysia, where he met with the students.

"Who is Kalhusoru? We know he must be one of you!" he said. A rather blunt way of investigation, even for a minister. Reminds us of the primary school days when you were lined up in front of the principal, and asked to tell who broke the windowpane or else skip the lunch for that day.

It all started around mid 2000 when an online forum named Dhivehi, which was hosted at Delphi.com, started getting popular among Maldivians. The forum, which became known as the dhivehiforum, was moderated and sensitive content was removed. However, later the extent of control was reduced and it started to become a forum for voicing dissent and anti-government feelings. It also became very popular and well-known, a forum in which you can express yourself freely. Naturally the government of the Maldives was annoyed, disturbed and then alarmed. The forum was banned by the single ISP in the Maldives, effectively blocking the access of people in Maldives to the forum.

Of course, there were ways of getting around this ban, but that's another story. Whenever the government discovered such a hole they patched it. But for crackers and hackers there is no absolute control...

Nevertheless the forum continued to be a popular tool for Maldivians, residing or studying abroad, to voice their sentiments. The criticism of the government was so intense that an action had to be taken, first and foremost finding the creator or creators of the forum, who were hidden behind the complex nature of Internet.

Kalhusoru was the chief moderator or the creator. He had special privileges such as deleting messages, adding members, etc. It was like his forum. Of course we do not know whether it was a he or a she but kalhusoru, meaning dark boy in Dhivehi, led to many people to assume that it was a he...

MORPHEUS

I've been looking for you, Neo. I don't know if you're ready to see what I want to show you, but unfortunately, we have run out of time. They're coming for you, Neo. And I'm not sure what they're going to do.

NEO

Who's coming for me?

Coolness came to Male' in late 2001. He had spent a few years in Malaysia studying. It was December and a Ramazan and

Coolness spent much of his time in the mosque. Apart from prayers, he also had time for his girlfriend. The two of them had developed an e-commerce website while in Malaysia, a site through which people in Maldives could also order products available in Malaysia. Coolness is a good programmer.

Coolness was also the prime suspect for being Kalhusoru. His main crime was entering IRC chat rooms, especially the Maldivians' most popular Kotari, and using the nick Kalhusoru. The undercover cops, during their visits to Malaysia, tried in vain to find any connection but were so far not getting any real evidence.

It was a surprise for Coolness when a group of cops, mainly officers, entered the house he resided in Male' during Ramazan and took him away. The computer that he used was also taken..

Surfer was a frequent visitor of IRC channels including Kotari. Apart from chatting with his then girlfriend, he also had many friends. Like Coolness, he was also well-known, at least their nicks were well-known, in the cyber world of chat rooms.

Surfer also had spent some time in Malaysia and then went to Australia to complete his degree in Business Studies. He returned from Melbourne for a short holiday, but this holiday turned out to be a big surprise as he too was dragged away in December for questioning, first to NSS Headquarters and then Dhoonidhoo, an island near Male' where some prisoners are detained for investigation. Coolness and Surfer were friends.

At the same moment, the door opens and the agents enter. Agent Smith sits down across from Neo. A thick manila envelope slaps down on the table between them.

Neo glances at the name on the file: "Anderson, Thomas A."

AGENT SMITH

As you can see, we've had our eye on you for some time now, Mr. Anderson.

He opens the file. Paper rattle marks the silence as he flips several pages. Neo cannot tell if he is looking at the file or at him.

AGENT SMITH

It seems that you have been living two lives. In one life, you are Thomas A. Anderson, program writer for a respectable software company. You have a social security number, you pay your taxes and you help your landlady carry out her garbage.

The pages continue to turn.

AGENT SMITH

The other life is lived in computers where you go by the hacker alias Neo, and are guilty of virtually every computer crime we have a law for.

Neo feels himself sinking into a pit of shit.

AGENT SMITH

One of these lives has a future. One of them does not.

Your real name is Mushthaq, you are also known as Mutho, your nick in chat rooms is Coolness. But you are also Kalhusoru, the guy who started dhivehiforum. And you Mustho, Musthafa, who goes in the chat rooms with the nick Surfer. You two are guilty of plotting against the government, trying to ruin the unity and

Big Brother Flexes Muscle in the Maldives

It may seem an Orwellian scenario straight out of 1984. The difference is that it is not fiction but reality. The presence of Big Brother is being felt ever more. Day-to-day life has become mingled with nervousness and fear.

It is the Maldives, a small island nation in Indian Ocean. It is most famous as an exotic tourist destination but beneath the surface of the paradise on earth lies the fear of the people in facing an autocratic regime and the government's absolute control of the lives of the people.

In 2000 a forum in Internet hosted by Delphi.com, started very open discussions concerning various issues facing the Maldives. It started criticizing the government, which like many totalitarian regimes, control the print and electronic media in the country. The Dhivehi forum could not be controlled by the government as it was Internet-based and also because its creators, believed to be Maldivian students studying overseas, were not identified.

However, like so many dictatorial regimes, the government of the Maldives also used its control over the single ISP in the country and its proxy server, to deny access to the Dhivehi forum. It was still accessible from other countries but in the Maldives, for most of the Internet users, it was not accessible.

This was not the first time the government had used its 'proxy powers' to control critical online content. In 1998 some web pages named Sangu98 was hosted at Geocities. It consisted of critical content, including those published in Sangu and Hukuru, two newspapers that started in 1990 and was subsequently stopped by the government the very same year. Sangu98 also had a message board. The website was blocked by the ISP and for sometime there was a cat and mouse game between the creators and the government as the pages were moved to different locations in Geocities with the aim of evading the government.

It is worth mentioning here that Dhivehiraaajeyge Gulhun Pvt. Ltd (shortly known as DHIRAAGU), the single ISP in the country, licensed in 1996, is also partially owned by the government. It is a joint-venture between the government and Cable and Wireless PLC of the UK.

Between 1998 and 2000 there were a few web pages that criticized the government and were effectively blocked by the government. It was the Dhivehi forum which started making a big wave. The fact that it provided a means for different people to express their opinion and in return react to other people's opinion, made it very popular. Maldivians, always a suppressed people yearning for freedom, were quite attracted to this online discussion forum.

After the government blocked access to Dhivehi forum from Maldives, it was still accessed through some other proxy servers based in other countries. After the government realized this, the ISP started blocking some of the ports used to get data through these proxy servers. Exactly how the government was preventing the people from accessing banned sites through alternate proxy servers is not clear but apart from blocking certain ports it could have also requested certain proxies not to let requests from Maldives pass through the servers.

By 2001, another website was making waves. Maldivesculture.com, a website by a Maldivian woman residing in Australia and her Australian husband, had been around for sometime. It contained content on Maldivian culture, the spiritual and supernatural aspects of life in Maldives, the dependence on black magic, and folk tales from Maldives among other things.

However, by 2001 it also started publishing materials that were critical of the government and was later blocked.

To evade the government, Maldivesculture.com was also hosted at free sites and dissidents in Maldives continued to get material from the site through those pages. Whenever the government came to know of such a URL it was blocked.

Salvation for dissidents came in the form of SafeWeb, which allows users to circumvent the blocking by the government and request URLs through the SafeWeb. However, when the government became aware of this they blocked the SafeWeb too. (SafeWeb also no longer provides the free service it previously offered)

The government was always slow in reacting to the dissident activities that were going on Internet. It had a shortage of trained people and were quite ignorant of Information Technology compared to some of the dissidents who saw the potential of Internet. However, by mid-2001 it seemed that the government had an edge over the dissidents. Dhivehi forum still existed and Maldivians overseas still contributed to it. But Maldivians in Maldives had limited access to the materials published online in Dhivehi forum and MaldivesCulture.com. A few other anti-government pages mushroomed but it was lacking enough content and were blocked.

By September 2001 a group of dissidents started using a new method: the old concept of e-mail. Sandhaanu, a political newsletter, was e-mailed to a number of Maldivians. The content of Sandhaanu was so critical of the regime that it started the operation to stop the delivery and find out its creators. Moreover, the content was in Dhivehi, the local language, and it had the potential of reaching the masses who could not understand English.

Since an incoming e-mail could not be blocked by the ISP through URL filtering alone, the government had to resort to other methods. Freedom of speech on Internet, including personal e-mails, suffered a heavy blow as the government started building its counter offensive.

The government started intercepting people's e-mail, chats on IRC and Instant messaging applications. Rumors spread that the regime had hired hackers from a foreign country. Some people said there were two hackers were from Philippines, one of them was said to have had worked with the group that made the notorious Love bug. Others said the hackers were from USA. The exact origin of the hackers cannot be determined but it is known that the government paid a large amount to keep them.

The first arrests occurred in November 2001 when a Maldivian student in Australia and another guy who completed studies in Malaysia were arrested. They were alleged to be involved in the creation of the Dhivehi forum. They were released later. Apparently no connection was established between them and Sandhaanu. It is said that the government now controls the Dhivehi forum after getting the passwords from the young people. Some dissidents feel that the regime might use Dhivehi forum to trap unsuspecting dissidents, luring them to the forum and letting them express their feelings and tricking them to reveal their identities.

Naushad Waheed, a Maldivian cartoonist and artist, was arrested shortly thereafter. He was held in detention for more than 3 months before he was transferred to house arrest in April 2002.

Dissent on the web

Maldives has always been a very closed society despite its interactions with foreigners throughout history. Even after tourism came to the islands in 1970s the certain aspects of the way of life remained unchanged. It was relatively easy for the government to control the people, using the media that the government dominated.

In 1996 the government introduced Internet to the Maldives. Tariffs remained high and for the ordinary Maldivian it was like a luxury to use Internet. Little did the government realize the Internet will later become their Achilles heels.

Internet draws people from different countries closer, it lifts cultural and ethnic boundaries, and it gives the power to communicate easily. Repressive regimes find it hard to censor thought when ideas and thoughts flow across Internet.

"The government can no longer control the free flow of information. It cannot control the Internet. The society will find a means of expressing their thoughts," a political analyst of the Maldives said around 1999.

His prophecy was to come true. However, even when he said this Maldivian dissidents had already realized the potential of Internet.

The first material to come online criticizing the government of the Maldives was perhaps some pages hosted at geocities. Named Sangu98 the pages appeared as a surprise in 1998. Since the ban of popular magazines Sangu and Hukuru in 1990 freedom of expression had been tightly controlled in the Maldives. People could not even imagine that the free media that the Maldives witnessed in 1990 will ever return. Since 1990 dissent was suppressed and virtually non-existent.

The Sangu98 brought many promises and hope to the people. The hope that dissidents would become active again one day and that a revival of the pro-democracy movement will begin. It also brought the promise of Internet; a medium that could be used to bypass most censorship and reach the people.

The power of Internet in reaching the masses in the Maldives was of course debatable. Internet was still used by only a fraction of the population and high rates discouraged people from using it. This could be exactly what the government wanted. They could enjoy Internet with the public money while the people were unable to reach the vast flow of information.

Sangu98 consisted of a message board in which people could express their opinion. This was also a fairly new concept for Maldivians. The pages also contained many new material that the public had not read before, including details of how the government covered up a case of child abuse involving primary school teachers in 1980s. Sangu98, which had the email address of sangu98@hotmail.com, started the project of bringing online the materials that were published in Sangu and Hukuru, two magazines shutdown in 1990, and Manthiri, a magazine which was confiscated by the Customs when it was brought to the country after printing overseas.

Before Sangu98 made real headway, the government blocked its URL so that people in the Maldives could not access it. The pages were then moved to different locations in Internet, especially geocities. The government continued blocking whenever it came across a URL that pointed to Sangu98. Over time, however, the site got lost in the vast web of information called the World Wide Web.

In fact, we have a feeling that it was lost very much. A search in geocities or in popular search engines such as Google has not led us to the Sangu98 pages. However, such a search would lead to another website that was hosted roughly around the

same time: Human Rights Maldives.

A message board in the Human Rights Maldives website has a reference to Sangu98, indicating that this website was also created roughly the same time. This site has some information about the human rights situation in Maldives and has links to human rights resources on the web. It also has a contact email hrmaldives@hotmail.com. This site was not as famous as Sangu98.

By mid 2000 a forum hosted with Delphi.com became quite famous. It was called the Dhivehi forum and soon it turned out to be the forum where the government was criticized at one's own will. The government tolerated this forum to some extent before blocking it. Not only was the URL www.delphi.com/dhivehi blocked but the whole Delphi.com site was blocked. The creators of the Dhivehi forum also made a small website with the URL www.dhivehiforum.com. This URL pointed to a page hosted in a free server and within that page the user was directed to the forum in Delphi. The URL redirection service was from Namezero.com and when that site ceased to provide the free service, dhivehiforum.com did not point to any page. However, before this had happened the government did block the dhivehiforum.com too.

Kalhusoru the main moderator of Dhivehi forum became a cult figure. He was the most wanted person in the Maldives. However, he evaded the regime's attempts to hunt him as did many others who contributed to the forum. This was the beauty of Internet at work, you can write anything you want and be anonymous as long as you are careful. Dhivehi forum was a watershed in the history of dissent in the Maldives. It showed the capabilities of the Internet to the dissidents. Unfortunately it showed this to the regime as well. The regime started its own steps to deal with this new monster.

One weakness of the Dhivehi forum was its democratic nature; anyone can post anything and somebody else can respond to it. Of course the moderators deleted foul language and such stuff, but usually it was quite free. The regime used this to their full advantage. They started posting pro-government material and even garbage. Their aim was to flood the forum with rubbish so that good content will not stand out. They did succeed in their attempts partly because there were not enough people to post material criticizing the government. People from Maldives could not access it except the people who were engaged in this scheme of flooding the forum. It is obvious that the regime deployed the resources at hand and kept certain people busy just to monitor the Dhivehi forum and post rubbish.

Thus Dhivehi forum was quite inactive and its scope as a tool for dissidents was almost gone by the end of 2001 when two young men were arrested, apparently for their links with the forum. It could be concluded that the Dhivehi forum was not a good propaganda tool for dissidents as its creators did not ban pro-regime material. It was an unbiased forum. However, it played a major role in providing information about government's corruption and bad practices. It woke many people from the inertia they were going through and set the stage for more things to come.

By the end of 2000 another website was also becoming quite well-known for content that criticized the government. maldivesculture.com, a website by a Maldivian woman residing in Australia and her Australian husband, had been around for sometime. It contained content on Maldivian culture, the spiritual and supernatural aspects of life in Maldives, the dependence on black magic, and folk tales from Maldives among other things. However, later it also started publishing materials that were critical of the government and was blocked.

To evade the government, maldivesculture.com was also hosted

at free sites and dissidents in the Maldives continued to get material from the site through those pages. Whenever the government came to know of such a URL it was blocked.

Maldivesculture.com provided analytical articles on the political situation in the Maldives. The quality of the content was very good and it was accompanied by links to relevant material online. At the beginning the most famous section was The Family, pro-regime and anti-regime content that appeared in other sources such as Dhivehi forum about various members of President Gayoom's family, relatives and close friends.

Today maldivesculture.com is the best source of information on the political situation of the Maldives. It is fairly up-to-date, considering that it is based in Australia and the information flow from Maldives to overseas is quite restricted. However, since the majority of the population is denied access to Internet, it does not reach the common people, and as it is in English, is not a perfect tool against the government. It may be read by intellectuals and political analysts but, besides being blocked in the Maldives, it does not reach the common people.

The first anti-regime underground publication that reached the masses and appealed them came in late 2001. It came in the form of an e-mail newsletter. It was in Dhivehi, the local language which most people can read. It was in PDF format which most people could read from their computers and print.

Sandhaanu was the first publication in the Maldives to effectively use e-mail as a tool. The first issue, in PDF format was attached to an e-mail and in the body of the email there was a message to the Maldivians.

"To all our utmost beloved countrymen and women of all ages! Oh, the children of this beloved nation of ours. Please lend us an attentive mind for a few minutes for the sake of our own nation and finally for our own sons and daughters.

Do you foresee a stormy dark cloud is hovering over the nation's future? Yes it is. Therefore, let us renew our sense of dedication to our beloved nation. Let us understand that we were in a same boat and if this boat is in danger we all are in danger.

Please, please let us not be cowards who are 'Boduvarihama' and who says as far as we get our livelihood we don't care. Alas, they are miserable creatures who don't have common sense.

It is the duty of every member of our community to strive diligently to free the nation from the bondage of the present tyrant regime.

To understand better, the danger hovering above us, please read attached "Maldives Political News Bulletin 1" (PDF format file) and also pass it to your trustworthy friends and relatives (specially to your loved ones who don't have access to the Net). Beware of the risk, but do your duty towards yourself and towards your own folk. Please let us act quickly, boldly and decisively.

May Allah (S.W) be with us and give us strength to fulfill the noble task ahead of us.

To retrieve the attached document you need Adobe Acrobat Reader, which is widely available as a freeware. If you are unable to locate then follow the steps to download."

The message then instructs how to download Adobe Acrobat Reader and read PDF files. "Maldives Political news Bulletin" was the filename usually given but the newsletter was named Sandhaanu and this was the name that soon became a household name.

An email newsletter in PDF format was an idea that was expressed even before Sandhaanu started, by a group known as Libertarian Party of the Maldives (LPMV). LPMV's ideology

was based on the Libertarian movement of USA. Libertarians are more liberal than the liberals in the context that they believe that the government should have minimum interference in a society and that individuals should be free to do whatever they want as long as they do not harm other individuals.

By mid 2001 LPMV had already promoted its cause in chat rooms such as Kotari and it had e-mailed its manifesto to a number of Maldivians.

"We as members of the Libertarian Party believe in the rights of free speech, free press, right to assemble, right to live without fear and the right to work, play and dream in our own unique ways without government intervention. We want a system which encourages people to choose what they want from life and not be dictated by big brother," the Manifesto said.

"In order to create awareness we will be publishing a magazine quarterly. The name of this magazine would be "Thakurufaan", in honor of the great lord who saved Maldivians from the vile terror of the Portuguese 430 years ago. Our magazine would be published in PDF and distributed electronically. You are encouraged to print/translate and share our magazine and this manifesto in any way you can. At the same time we would like to warn you about the risks that might be involved in distributing this magazine in Maldives," the Manifesto said about the magazine.

Before Thakurufaan, the idea was implemented by Sandhaanu. In fact the cops, for sometime, thought that Sandhaanu was being published by LPMV.

Sandhaanu was a turning point in the history of dissent against the current regime. Sandhaanu was full of rage. It was radiating the heat and fury caused by years of frustration. It used simple down-to-earth language, it was written in Dhivehi, the local language, and hence it was more appealing to the general public.

While Sandhaanu was very popular among most people, there were critics too. Their concern was that the tone of the language was too harsh and it was too personal. The leading figures of the regime were criticized using very sarcastic tones. Foul language was not used but it was almost on the verge of using such language and attacks against personality of the ruling people were common.

Maldivians are still mild by nature and many are conservative. Hence a publication that was using very rough language against some individuals was not acceptable to some people, even though those individuals were too corrupted to deserve anything but personality attacks.

But to say Sandhaanu consisted of only personality attacks is not a true portrayal. It exposed the corruption of various government officials, detailed the scandals and schemes, and it described how the government was crushing dissent with an iron fist. No wonder the government was concerned.

The government's hunt for the creators of Sandhaanu went in vain for months. The last issue of Sandhaanu was published on 15 January 2002. Beginning from late January a number of people were arrested because they were suspected of been involved in Sandhaanu. Only four people remain in detention.

When Sandhaanu first came, it was printed and circulated even to the fishing boats in Male' harbor. It went to islands and was read by the island folk while they spent their free time in benches on the beaches. It is being read by people in islands even now. It will slowly go to islands it had not reached in the past. It will continue to make impact even though it is no longer being published.

Furthermore, dissidents will continue to use the Internet to voice their criticism. They will find a way of bypassing the controls. There is no end to this. This movement will continue.

Wave of arrests related to Sandhaanu

It was said that in November 2001 President Gayoom summoned his senior officers of the National Security Service - the government body under which the armed forces, police and coast guard comes - and gave them a warning.

They were warned to find out the creators of the underground publication Sandhaanu. They were cautioned that if they did not find the people responsible, some of the high-ranking officers of the NSS will lose their jobs.

The officers of NSS lives a life of luxury and they will resort to any method to preserve this life. Dissidents were worried that NSS will arrest innocent people on charges related to Sandhaanu as a means of buying time till the actual creators were found. For more than three months Sandhaanu was bringing headaches to the leaders of the regime. As Americans were hunting Osama bin Laden in the rough terrain of Afghanistan, all the resources of the government of Maldives were deployed to find an enemy that was as versatile: the creators of Sandhaanu.

Two youngsters, Mushthaq and Musthafa, were arrested first in December 2001. Mushthaq had completed his education in Malaysia and returned in late 2001. Musthafa, after completing part of his education in Malaysia, was finishing his studies in Australia. He came on holiday. They were detained for about two weeks before they were released. They were also said to have been questioned about Dhivehi forum, an online discussion forum which was used by dissidents to post material. Apparently the cops did not find any connection between them and Sandhaanu. However, it was said that the cops made a deal with them, got the passwords of the forum, and now control the forum. It was also said that the arrest of Naushad Waheed, a Maldivian artist, was based on information given by the two youngsters or one of them.

Now we know that not all those rumors were true. It is quite possible that the cops got the password of the Dhivehi forum from the youngsters and now control the forum. However, it was a rumor spread by the regime that Naushad was arrested based on information provided by the young people. In fact Naushad's arrest involved more shadowy details that the government wanted to conceal.

MaldivesCulture.com, a website that is been criticizing the regime, also says that the two youngsters were questioned about the website.

"No official media has confirmed or denied Naushad's arrest, detainment, continuing interrogation or his condition after his arrest, or his whereabouts for that matter. True to form, spin-doctors in the President's Office and the Ministry of Defense and National Security spread rumors and disinformation, alleging that Naushad is a suspect in an ongoing criminal investigation. This refers to the hunt to nail the architects of the underground paper Sandhaanu. Other rumors originating from the establishment claim to connect some unnamed Maldivian students studying abroad in Malaysia and Australia, apparently involved in publishing subversive material online.

A source disclosed that two students, one arriving from Australia and the other from Malaysia were arrested and detained. This source also revealed that two groups of undercover police had been working in both countries lately, gathering evidence by cultivating student bodies.

Apparently, the student from Australia had been interrogated regarding the maldivesculture.com activities. And, he had mentioned Naushad Waheed in a confession. Contrary to earlier

reports, the Maldivian government is highly engaged in trapping and arresting all those they think are passing information to this site," the website based in Australia said in January 2002.

"On the 9th December 2001, 9.30 p.m local time, Naushad Waheed, a prominent artist was arrested and taken away to the NSS along with his PC. Soon after, a change of clothes, etc. were taken in as well, reflecting to the public yet another violent reaction by the authorities to the Sandhaanu affair," MaldivesCulture.com said while reporting the arrest of Naushad.

Growing evidence indicates that Naushad was a double agent who passed information both to the regime and the opposition. It was his connections with the opposition, and according to some people, his passing of information to Amnesty International, which landed him in trouble. He was sent to house arrest in April 2002 and awaits trial. It is clear that he was not involved in Sandhaanu.

In the afternoon of 30 January 2002 NSS Officers conducted a stealth operation in which the offices on Nazaki, a leading business in Maldives, was raided. Mohamed Zaki, one of the shareholders and the leading man in the business, was arrested allegedly while he was at his home in Male' at the same time.

The raid was very discreet and only NSS officers were involved. There were no low-ranking staff for the fear of a leak. Zaki had already escaped the cops once before; this time they were taking no chances.

The police searched the computers and files and other stuff in Nazaki. They also arrested Ismail Zaki, a brother of Mohamed Zaki. Both brothers were involved in the business. Only recently had Ismail arrived from Malaysia after spending years there with his brother. They had businesses and property in Malaysia.

In a raid that was very coordinated, the Malaysian police raided the house of Zaki in Malaysia simultaneously. A group of Maldivian policemen, led by the Deputy Commissioner of Police Captain Latheef, were already in Malaysia in advance, plotting the raid.

The Malaysian cops searched Zaki's residence and arrested his 16-year-old son, who is said to have been surfing when the raid took place. The boy was released on bail and later released. In both Male' and in Malaysia, the police is said to have taken hard disks of computers for examination.

Zaki was a prominent businessman of the Maldives and his arrest was much talked about in town. Nazaki was situated in an area bustling with traders and buyers during daytime and the cops' raid was much noticed by the people. All sorts of rumors started, some linking Zaki to the then recent leakages of GCE O level papers. Some people suspected that Zaki's arrest had something to do with his past in which he fled the country and stayed in Malaysia for years after the cops started hunting him in relation to a political case, of which the details are not very clear even now. But for people who were analyzing the recent happenings in the Maldives, the nature of the arrest seemed to be related to the hunt for the publishers of Sandhaanu, the underground publication.

On the morning of 31 January 2002 the office of Viuga, an IT company located in Alilikagefaanu Magu of Male', was raided. Its shareholder and Managing Director Ibrahim Luthufy was arrested along with Sofwath, a young programmer working for the company, and Nisrin, a young girl working for the company. Nisrin was released later but was arrested again.

Muaz, another young man who was employed in Viuga, was arrested at his home later. In each case either computers or hard disks were taken to Police Headquarters for investigation.

Ibrahim Luthufy was a creative businessman who in early 1990s organized a computer training centre named Computerland. His business career was interrupted by a long spell of custody, during which time he was either in prison or under house arrest for crimes he did not commit. After he was released in 1999 he formed the IT company with Qasim Ibrahim, one of the leading businessmen of the Maldives.

Sofwath is a famous programmer in the Maldives. He worked for sometime in the telephone company Dhiraagu before going to Malaysia for studies. After he returned, apart from various computer projects, he was teaching computing to students. Sofwath is a leading guy in the Maldives Linux Group.

Muaz had worked in Focus Computers, a leading computer reseller in the Maldives, before joining Viuga.

With the resources of talented IT people at hand, backed by the finance of Qasim Ibrahim, Viuga was venturing into many big projects in the Maldives. Their top priority at the time was the ISP project, in which they aimed to bid for the second ISP that the government had announced that it will license.

To become the second ISP Viuga was about to form a partnership with many powerful companies in the Maldives, which coincidentally included Nazaki. Hence, there were rumors that the arrest of the Viuga group and Zaki was related to this business deal. Either the government did not want them to become the second ISP or an envious competitor was collaborating with powerful figures in the government to prevent the coalition of Viuga and Nazaki from bidding. Indeed, in the end the partnership were not able to bid for the project.

About two weeks later Amjad, another shareholder of Viuga, was also arrested. Amjad was no longer involved in the business of Viuga and he had just started his own business. But the fact that he was a shareholder made him a prime target and it was now clear that Viuga, a Dhivehi name which meant Network, was now in deep water.

Shafy, nicknamed DOS, was also a staff of Viuga and was working in an assignment in a resort when the police called him and told him to report to the police station in Male'. Shafy came in his own will and joined his arrested colleagues. There was not much choice.

Shafy developed an interest in computers at a very early age. Hence, while in Majeediyya School in Male', he was recognized as a bright student who was very good in computers, thus earning him the nickname of DOS, after the operating system that was used before the Microsoft Windows.

Like Sofwath, Shafy was also educated in Malaysia and he even worked there for sometime. He is considered to be one of the most skilled computer professionals in the country. He had joined the start-up company Viuga with high hopes that ultimately will not be realized.

The plot thickens as Ahmed Didi, a former parliamentary candidate for Addu Atoll, was arrested. It was reported that he was in Sri Lanka for a medical treatment when he was brought back home. Apparently, the government was forming alliances with neighboring countries in their search for the culprits.

For Ahmed Didi, nicknamed Mandela, jail was not a new environment. A dissident and critic, he was imprisoned during a parliamentary election so that he could not conduct his campaign. Like Zimbabwe the regime in Maldives intimidate and bully candidates and even imprison them to ensure that they do not win. Ahmed Didi, who comes from Hulhudhoo in Addu Atoll, had a high chance of winning a seat in parliament before he was imprisoned during the election.

After conducting the investigation to some extent Ismail Zaki, Amjad, Muaz, Sofwath and Shafy were released. Mohamed Zaki, Ibrahim Luthufy, Ahmed Didi and Nisrin remain detained even till this day.

Four more people were taken to the police station in late March and early April but were later released. Some of them were detained for a few days and others for about a week. They are Abdul Hannan, shareholder of sign making company Harins, Ahmed Nashid, a shareholder of ADK Hospital in Male', Hassan Zahir, shareholder of Reefside company, and Qasim Ibrahim, majority shareholder of Villa group of companies and one of the richest men in the country. All of them come from the same circle of businessmen who are seen as leading an opposition movement.

Their connection with Sandhaanu is not clear. Nashid, Qasim and Hannan were close to Naushad Waheed who was arrested earlier. Even before Qasim was summoned to the Police Station rumors had spread in Male' that he had financed Sandhaanu. As he had invested in Viuga and was a shareholder it was natural for this rumor to spread but it is not necessarily true. Qasim was also a leading figure in the movement which tried to form a political party in the Maldives.

Qasim was about to go to Sri Lanka with a delegation of Maldives National Chamber of Commerce and Industry when he was arrested. The local media, controlled directly or indirectly by the government, circulated the news that Qasim, the President of the chamber of commerce, had visited Sri Lanka, while he actually was in the National Security Service building in Male' where he was kept for about four days. For a businessman like Qasim this was enough humiliation and punishment as opportunity cost of even a day in detention was very high.

Analysts believe that Qasim and Zahir were detained as a measure of intimidation. Either the government had evidence linking them to Sandhaanu and did not want to arrest them fearing a public outcry and instead went for a face to face talk in which they were warned, or there was no such evidence but still they were detained to warn them not to engage in anti-regime activities. As those businessmen were potential financiers for the parliamentary by-election that was later to be held in May, their arrest may have been done to warn them not to spend for the campaign of any opposition candidate. Their arrest may also have been intended as a warning for the public to shatter any illusions it may have that some people were 'above the law' because of their place in the society.

Ahmed Didi (Mandela), Nisrin, Ibrahim Luthufy and Mohamed Zaki are still detained. Mohamed Zaki fled the country in about 1989 or 1990 after the cops began hunting him. It is said that he was involved in distributing underground materials criticizing the then Minister of Trade Ilyas Ibrahim. Ilyas was then filling a number of powerful posts in the country; besides being the brother-in-law of President Gayoom he was also one of the most corrupt individuals. Apart from Zaki, the others who distributed the materials were arrested, and later sentenced. Later it emerged that they were framed; it was a plot of Ilyas and his followers to cause havoc in the town and put the blame on dissidents.

Some people also say that Zaki was involved in the mysterious White Shark affair. The government never acknowledged this had happened but based on available information it could be said that this was a formidable challenge to the government. It was 1988 or 1989 and phone calls were made to parents asking them not to send their kids to the drills of July 26th (Independence Day) because something was bound to happen. Written material were distributed in Male' warning the government. Even now some people may have copies of them but they are well-hidden. White Shark never materialized as a threat but it was one of the occasions when the regime was in danger, one of the few cases that are kept in unmarked files.

