

Why the thumbs-up, the cactus and the conch shell couldn't survive

"The removal of Mohamed Nasheed is not the first time President Gayyoom has acted against popular Malé Majlis members. In the 1990s, Dr. Mohamed Waheed who now works in the US for UNICEF, and Ahmed Mujuthaba, a prominent Maldivian businessman in the tourist sector, found themselves in orchestrated difficulties when they began to rival Gayyoom in popularity." Maldivesculture.com

In 1989 Dr Mohamed Waheed Hassan Maniku, a PhD holder, ran for a seat of Male', the capital of the Maldives, in the parliamentary election. After completing his education in Majeediyya School of Male', Dr Waheed went to the American University of Beirut and then to University of Stanford in USA where he completed an International Development Education Programme and obtained an MA. He served the education sector before going abroad again to obtain his PhD in the field of education. Upon returning home Dr Waheed was not awarded a minister's position as many people expected. Public expectations were high because he was the first PhD from Maldives to return home but it also meant he could be a political challenge to the regime; President Gayyoom had gained popularity as a scholar with renowned qualifications from Al Azhar University of Cairo. When Dr Waheed contested as a parliamentary candidate, it proved the regime's fears were well-founded.

Campaign logos were introduced in elections in the Maldives for the first time and Dr Waheed adopted the logo of a fist with the thumbs-up. The logo was painted on walls of Male', t-shirts bearing the logo were distributed, and letters signed by Dr Waheed were sent to every household. Leading the campaign of Dr Waheed was a group of young people who advocated democracy and reform. Soon it became clear that the people of Male' supported Dr Waheed.

Dr Waheed's main contender in the election, Ilyas Ibrahim, then Trade Minister and Deputy Minister of Defense, is a brother of the First Lady Nasreena Ibrahim. Ilyas was the second-most-powerful-man in the country at the time. Using his powers he tried to undermine the campaign of Dr Waheed, mobilizing even the police to paint over Dr Waheed's campaign logos on walls and confiscating campaign materials. Ilyas and his brother Abbas Ibrahim mobilized a group of middle-aged thugs called 'Binbi Force' and gave them police protection while they harassed the supporters of Dr Waheed.

Despite all this effort, Dr Waheed won a seat in the election. Along with him were a number

of young MPs who advocated reform. They debated in the parliament and questioned government's policies.

Following the wind of change that was sweeping across the Eastern Europe, President Gayyoom gave a speech in which he encouraged the Maldivian people 'to come out of the shell'. However, freedom of speech could not thrive; the government could not tolerate the criticism it faced from two magazines Sangu and Hukuru in 1990, and subsequently shut down the magazines. A number of writers and journalists were arrested. By August 1990 the experiment with democracy had been abandoned.

The MPs who were campaigning for reform were harassed, some of them were charged with various offences, and some of them resigned from their posts. Binbi Force was active in harassing the liberal MPs. Dr Waheed also resigned, left the country and got a UN post.

Some of Dr Waheed's supporters paid a heavy price for their alliance with him.

"Eight of his campaign organizers were arrested on charges of distributing Anti-Government leaflets, and sentenced by the Police Court from 4 to 7 years," Libertarian Party of the Maldives' 2001 publication Gayyoom's Democracy said.

"It is now clear exactly how they were framed, from the person who was used as a tool. Of the people who were initially arrested, one person, Mr. Hamid Fahmy was released without a sentence. On release he was presented with the construction of a room and toilet for him by Mr. Ilyas Ibrahim. Mr. Hamid Fahmy said that he was taken to the State Trading Organisation office (Another office of Ilyas Ibrahim) and requested by Mr. Ilyas to contact Mr. Majeed and dump some leaflets on the road.

Hence he had met Mr. Majeed and discussed this, wrote the leaflets in his own writing and dumped on the streets. He had been wired when he had talked to Majeed. The tape was given to the person who arranged to drama. This proves that the eight people were framed by Mr. Ilyas. This is how Mr. Hamid Fahmy narrated the incident to a friend when Mr. Ilyas Ibrahim went on his first "exile" to United Kingdom supposed to be without the knowledge of the President," LPMV's article explained.

The 'exile' that LPMV is referring to is the time Ilyas Ibrahim left the country when he was associated with a major case of corruption in

the Fisheries Projects Implementation Department (FPID) of the State Trading Organization. FPID was in charge of exporting canned tuna from the Maldives and it was found out that some of the managers there were embezzling money from the operation.

Millions of dollars were embezzled in this corruption case, and when it became apparent that Ilyas was part of it, he was quietly sent abroad till the crisis was over. Ilyas left Maldives on 9 May 1990 and returned on 6 August 1990. Charges were pressed against Abdul Sathar Ali of Kudaveyomatheege house in Maafannu ward of Male', who was a Deputy Director of FPID, and Ahmed Ameen Jaleel of Fahivaage house in Galolhu ward of Male', who was a Manager of the FPID. Ahmed Ameen Jaleel was a nephew of President Gayyoom. The case was investigated by a parliamentary committee while the free press of 1990 highlighted it. However, the case was delayed and later the charges against the implicated two men were not proved and Court Number 7 ruled in September 1992 that they were not guilty.

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Even though LPMV reported that eight supporters of Dr Waheed were convicted by the Police Court for putting leaflets on streets of Male', according to the information we have so far received, only seven people (not eight) out of the arrested people had 'admitted' to the offence. Their trial began at the Police Court on 21 April 1990. The seven people are Abdul Majeed Shameem of Alimaswadhee house in Machangolhi ward of Male', Adam Ali (Adam Fulhu) of Lilac house in Maafannu ward of Male', Ali Mohamed Fulhu (Velanbuli Ali Fulhu) of Velanbulige house in Machangolhi ward of Male', Ibrahim Waheed of Silver Scene house in Machangolhi ward of Male', Zakariyya Jameel of Naares house in Machangolhi ward of Male', Ibrahim Rasheed of Thalvaaruge house in Galolhu ward of Male' and Ahmed Khaleel of Keemiyaage house in Machangolhi ward of Male'.

LPMV said that not long after the sentencing of

the men the government was forced to abolish the notorious Police Court due to pressure from the new parliament.

The police also wanted to question Mohamed Zaki of Ahmadhee Abad house in Maafannu ward of Male' concerning dumping of the leaflets. However, by then he had left the country and he did not heed to the notice to return to the Maldives. The government cancelled Zaki's passport while he was abroad. Zaki remained in Malaysia for years doing business till his relations with the regime improved. Even though he visited Maldives a couple of times later, Malaysia remained his base of business. Zaki was arrested in January 2002, during a visit to Maldives, for his involvement in the underground email newsletter Sandhaanu. He received a life imprisonment sentence along with two other men, Ahmed Ibrahim Didi and Ibrahim Lutfy. A young woman named Fathimath Nisreen was also sentenced to ten years of imprisonment for her involvement in Sandhaanu, which was very critical of the regime. Lutfy escaped from Maldives police custody in 2003 while he was in Sri Lanka for a medical treatment. He has been granted asylum and currently lives in Europe and publishes Sandhaanu.

Dr Waheed remains a 'taboo' figure in the Maldivian politics. In 2001 an interview he gave to a local magazine Adduvas could not be published because the magazine's backer, Minister of Information Ibrahim Maniku (Samarey) blocked the effort. A subsequent attempt to publish it in Monday Times, an English-language weekly, proved futile when Zahir Hussein, the father of the magazine's founder Leena Zahir Hussein, did not give his blessing. Zahir Hussein was Minister of Youth and Sports till September 2004 and he is a close friend of President Gayyoom. They were buddies and roommates while studying in Al Azhar University of Cairo. Monday Times was being printed at Loama-faanu Print, a press owned by Zahir Hussein. When Monday Times became too critical of the regime, Gayoom told Zahir Hussein not to print the newspaper anymore. There was no other printing house willing to print it and Monday Times could not be published. After a few months it was closed down by the Ministry of Information.

Following their disappointment regarding how the regime had treated Dr Waheed, the people of Male' tried to elect a petty door-to-door salesman by the nickname of Ugulhey to the seat vacated by Dr Waheed. However, another drama unfolded in the by-election of July 1992 when Ugulhey was arrested for allegedly bribing a judge and was banished for six months. Sandhaanu claims the charges were false. Sandhaanu says there was no judge to whom Ugulhey gave a bribe.

In 1994 elections two candidates that the people of Male' favored and supported won the two seats. Even though Minister of Information Ibrahim Maniku (Samarey) contested, he was defeated and came fourth with 1,594 votes. Male' is the centre of power and the success of candidates who were backed by popular support was very significant. People began believing the notion that as Male's population was more politically conscious it was not possible for the regime to manipulate election in Male' as

it does extensively in the atolls.

Abdullah Kamaludheen, who came first in the election with 4,845 votes, was first elected to the parliament in the by-election held after Dr Waheed's resignation. He was a minister then, but by the time of 1994 election he had been sacked from cabinet for his alliance with Ilyas Ibrahim's unsuccessful attempt to come to power in 1993. Kamaludheen promised many reforms during his campaign. None of the promises were kept and later Kamaludheen would betray the people and accept a post in Cabinet, in strict contrast to the ideal of separation of powers he advocated in his campaign.

Ahmed Mujuthaba came second in the election with 4,666 votes. A former minister who had held numerous senior posts in the government, Mujuthaba had resigned after he received pension. Mujuthaba began his career in the government as an English Secretary in Telecommunications Department on 12 March 1970. He received the position of Minister of Transport and Shipping on 11 November 1982. Mujuthaba was in three government posts - Minister of Trade and Industries, Director of Maldives National Ship Management Ltd, and in-charge of State Trading Organization - when he handed over his resignation for personal reasons. President Gayoom accepted his resignation on 14 March 1991.

Mujuthaba also promised many reforms during his campaign. One of his slogans was 'Mujuthaba ah Ithubaaru, Thiyabeyfulhunnah Ithuru Baaru' which roughly translates as Trust Mujuthaba and you (people) will receive more powers. As a campaign symbol Mujuthaba used a cactus.

However, even the cactus could not survive in the harsh political climate of the Maldives. Sandhaanu says Mujuthaba was also harassed by the regime as it had intimidated Dr Waheed. Only one year into his parliamentary career, he resigned from the seat he had won after contesting with twenty-two candidates.

In an interview to Monday Times (15th issue - 12 March 2001) Mujuthaba gave some explanation.

"At that time the rules of the parliament required one to give a reason for resigning. So the reason I gave was: "my conscience did not permit me to be in the parliament at that time, because I was not effective." I sent several bills but not one got passed".

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"So I was either not effective, or I was out of tune with the rest of the elected members," he told Monday Times. "If I try to achieve something and if I do not achieve a headway then my position is that I should not waste time on that. When I was there I worked very hard, but when I could not produce results."

"As I told you, I'm really not a politician. I'm

a technocrat. Technocrats don't mind quitting when they can't make headway; but the politicians somehow cling on in the hope that someday something is going to happen", Mujuthaba explained.

After Mujuthaba resigned, a by-election was held. The people of Male' showed little enthusiasm in this by-election. Few people turned out for voting. Minister of Construction and Public Works Umar Zahir was elected. Mohamed Haleem, who was seen as the people's candidate, did not put up a strong campaign. The people were too fed up to participate in the process. Nevertheless, Haleem also got votes almost equal to Umar Zahir.

In 1999 the people of Male' witnessed an exciting election again. Mohamed Nasheed (Anni), a journalist who had been imprisoned on several occasions for criticizing the regime, was running for a seat. Nasheed's election symbol was a conch shell named Sangu in Maldivian language. Having a Sangu as the campaign logo was significant and nostalgic. Nasheed was one of the young journalists whose outspoken criticism in a magazine called Sangu led to immense popularity of the magazine in 1990. People queued at bookstores to get a copy. Finally the government shut down the magazine.

A number of people, mostly young people, joined Nasheed's campaign. The campaign logo was painted on walls while banners bearing the logo were hung from public buildings. The regime tried to undermine the campaign but soon it realized that Nasheed had gained too much popularity. On the election day a large number of people went to vote as if motivated by a slogan Nasheed's supporters were using, 'Get up, Stand up, Stand up for your rights'. Even though not everybody could identify with the message relayed by Bob Marley in his famous song, the slogan itself was self-explanatory. After a long time of disillusion with politics people had come out of their isolation and there was a sense of participation.

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When there was a delay in announcing the results for Male', hundreds of people gathered near Dharubaaruge where the counting was going on. When the results were announced the campaign centre of Nasheed was flooded with supporters who cheered. Nasheed came second while Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation Ilyas Ibrahim came first. Although there were reasons to suspect that a fraud had occurred to reduce the number of votes Nasheed had actually received, the fact that he won one of the two seats led to celebrations. Even Ilyas Ibrahim came to congratulate Nasheed.

People who sold their souls

In this section we are going to write about the people who were formerly seen as champions of the people but who later became active proponents of the current system. We will also present the people who had studied about the democratic values but whose education have not helped them in becoming upholders of those values. They are the people who sold their souls. In *Bedazzled*, Elizabeth Hurley plays Satan who makes a contract to buy the soul of Brendan Frazer. We are presenting the people who sold their souls to the regime in the Maldives.

Abdullah Kamaludheen

In the parliamentary election of November 1989 Dr Mohamed Waheed Hassan Maniku won a seat of Male'. His win, in an election in which 7131 people voted in Male', reflected the increasing popularity of Dr Waheed, a PhD holder. However, the regime in the Maldives put so much pressure on Dr Waheed, who was by then seen as a potential competitor for the post of President, he was forced to resign from his parliament seat. Subsequently he left the country for an overseas job.

Abdullah Kamaludheen first became an MP in the by-election held on 10 July 1992 to elect an MP for the position vacated by Dr Waheed. Only 3,967 people, 26.73% of the eligible voters in Male', voted in the election and with 2,204 votes Kamaludheen won the seat.

Thus Kamaludheen had been an MP for Malé for two years by the time the 1994 elections came.

In 1994 parliamentary elections he contested with many formidable candidates. By that time he was stripped of his position as Minister of Construction and Public Works. Kamaludheen is said to have had links with Ilyas Ibrahim, President Gayyom's brother-in-law and then Minister of Atolls Administration, who made an unsuccessful attempt to come to power in 1993. Ilyas was sent diplomatically to Singapore and then he was tried in court in absentia on various charges including the use of black magic to come to power. Several people who had close links with Ilyas, even some NSS officers, were stripped of their positions.

Having lost his cabinet post, Kamaludheen cultured the image of him as a man of the people. He promised reforms if he became an MP. To win a seat of Male' you have to be either backed by the government or be entirely supported by the people. Kamaludheen was sidelined and humiliated by the regime; he had no other choice but be a champion of the people.

Kamaludheen's election campaign was organized by a group of educated Maldivian youth who believed in the principles of democracy. Their beliefs were incorporated in the agenda and slogans of Kamaludheen. A series of advertisements were run on local papers. He promised the campaign organizers that he will keep those promises.

"In a democracy, three powers exist to manage the affairs of the people fairly and justly.

Legislature (People's Majlis or parliament)
Executive (government)
Judiciary (the power that settles disputes among individuals and between individuals and the government)

I believe that any one of the said powers should not be able to exert influence on any other power."

This is a translation of the advertisement placed in Aafathis on 18 November 1994 by Kamaludheen.

In another ad, he said that in a democracy the people should have the guarantee that their rights will be protected by the government.

In the election held on 2 December 1994 Kamaludheen came first with 4,845 votes. A former minister Ahmed Mujuthaba won the second seat of Male' with 4,666 votes. Even the Minister of Information and Arts Ibrahim Maniku, who is also the brother-in-law of First Lady, came fourth with 1,594 votes. This was a clear victory for the promoters of democracy; even Mujuthaba had promised numerous reforms. Now it was time for the people of Male' to see if their MPs could deliver.

"I will stand by the beliefs and values that I had outlined. I did not talk about those values just to win the election. What I was talking about were values that even I believe. The people have given me five years. So I want to tell that I want to render a considerable service within that five years." This is a translation of what Kamaludheen told the Meehun (People) column of Haveeru daily edition of 4 December 1994.

Kamaludheen's election as an MP changed the way the regime treated him. The President is nominated first in an election within the parliament and then sent to a public referendum. This means the vote of each MP in the parliament is important in the process of electing a President. Most of the MPs are senior officials of the government and the few remaining ones are also puppets of the government. Only very few people are independent.

Kamaludheen had to be brought back into the regime. The regime did not want an MP

of Male' to be seen as an opposition figure. Thus Kamaludheen was offered the post of a cabinet minister. For some time he declined this offer, having had bitter resentment about the way he was stripped of his position back in 1993. However, he later he accepted the offer, becoming the Minister of Human Resources, Employment and Labor.

For the people who backed Kamaludheen in the election of 1994 this was a bitter betrayal. Not only did Kamaludheen join the rank of ministers but he also did not do anything significant in the parliament to deliver his promised reforms. Kamaludheen tried to justify his actions by saying that he accepted the post of a minister to serve the people even more efficiently. He said in his former status he was just nobody and by becoming a cabinet member he could do more things. This was in striking contrast to what he said during the election campaign; his duties as a minister would come into conflict with his responsibilities as an MP. This was the man who promised to rally for the separation of powers.

For the people who backed Kamaludheen in the election of 1994 this was a bitter betrayal. Not only did Kamaludheen join the rank of ministers but he also did not do anything significant in the parliament to deliver his promised reforms.

So by the time of the election of 1999 Kamaludheen had lost the popular support of the people. In this particular election the inner circle of the regime were also weary of Kamaludheen. The inner circle did not trust him entirely because of his former connections with Ilyas. Ilyas was by then back in Maldives and given a cabinet post. It is said that President Gayyoom was forced to bring Ilyas back into the cabinet because of pressure from the First Lady who is the sister of Ilyas. Ilyas was also a candidate in the election and it complicated things.

So Gayyoom's brothers Abdullah Hameed

Dissident Watch

Mohamed Zaki, Ibrahim Lutfy, Ahmed Ibrahim Didi were sentenced to life in prison two years ago in July. It was on 7 July 2002 that the three men were given the sentence, and Fathimath Nisreen was sentenced to ten years in jail, for conspiring in an act against the state through their alleged involvement in Sandhaanu, an underground newsletter. The three men were also sentenced to one year banishment for defamation while Nisreen received a sentence of one year house arrest for defamation.

On 19 May 2003, Ibrahim Lutfy escaped from a hotel in Sri Lanka, while he was detained by Maldivian police. He was taken to Sri Lanka for a medical treatment. He sought protection of the UNHCR and later received political asylum from a European country.

In December 2003, the government of the Maldives reduced the life sentence of Ahmed Didi and Mohamed Zaki to 15 years and reduced the sentence of Nisreen to five years. Nisreen was released from prison but banished to Feeali island in Faafu Atoll. The reduction in sentence was made after mounting pressure from international human rights organisations and journalist protection groups in the wake of the September 2003 riots in prison.

When Black Friday (13 August 2004) arrived Mohamed Zaki, Ahmed Didi and Fathimath Nisreen were under house arrest in Male' because they had been brought to Male' due to illness. Ahmed Didi and Nisreen spoke in the gathering of Black Friday. After that they were arrested and were detained in Dhoonidhoo island. Mohamed Zaki was transferred to Maafushi jail again after Black Friday. Fathimath Nisreen was put under house arrest and then banished to Feeali island again after a long ordeal in the Dhoonidhoo detention island.

Both Didi and Nisreen were later put under house arrest, probably to put them on trial for Black Friday gathering. Even though it is believed that cases regarding Black Friday will be dropped, as indicated by the government after the tsunami, there is no indication at all concerning any amnesty for Sandhaanu prisoners regarding their ongoing sentences.

Both Zaki and Didi are very ill and Ahmed Didi is a registered heart patient. Doctors have recommended providing him with adequate medical care from abroad, which the regime in the Maldives continues to deny him.

We call upon the government of the Maldives for the unconditional and immediate release of Zaki, Didi and Nisreen. The constitution of the Maldives grants the freedom of expression and all the Sandhaanu creators did was to express their opinions about government policies. The right to legal representation is granted by the constitution of the Maldives but in Sandhaanu trial the defendants were denied legal representation. Hence the trial was unconstitutional.

Please write to international human rights organizations and organizations working for the protection of journalists, asking them to press for the release of those prisoners of conscience.

Ibrahim Fareed Ahmed was arrested on 8 June 2002 for delivering a religious lecture that criticized government policies. He was kept under solitary confinement at the Police Headquarters in Male' for 29 days. He was then transferred to Dhoonidhoo island where he was kept under solitary confinement for 5 months and 25 days. Fareed was then brought back to Male' and kept under house arrest for 2 months and 12 days. He was then transferred to Dhoonidhoo again and was kept under solitary confinement for 7 months. In October 2003 he was brought back to Male' and kept under house arrest. On 1 April 2004 he was released from house arrest but was not permitted to travel outside the capital city.

On 28 May 2004 Ministry of Information, Arts and Culture published on its website a reply made by the government of Maldives to Amnesty International about Fareed's case. It said "Ibrahim Fareed was arrested and charged over plots to carry out numerous terrorist activities including blowing up places of entertainment, kidnapping senior Government officials, sabotaging the tourism industry and instigating calls for a violent jihad."

After receiving this information Fareed sent a letter to Attorney General's Office inquiring about the charges against him. The Attorney General's Office replied that "The case brought against Ibrahim Fareed by this Office, the case which is now being conducted at the Criminal Court are, attempting to carry out an act against the state and speaking to people in a way that could create religious thoughts and making religious speeches in a way that could have undermined the rights of some people in the Maldivian society. No other case is recorded in this Office except those mentioned here."

On 29 July 2002 Ministry of Defence and National Security replied to a letter submitted by Abdullah Saeed, Sweet Meat house, Dhaalu Atoll Kudahuvadhoo asking to clarify the reason for Fareed's arrest. The reply said: "Ibrahim Fareed is detained due to allegedly speaking in a way that could divide them under the Religious Unity Protection Law."

When the free debates started in Male' in mid-2004 Fareed also started speaking in the debates. Fareed was perceived as a political threat again and the government started his trial. On 11 August 2004 a judge tried to hand over a long sentence to Fareed and a large crowd gathered near the Justice Building. Later that day Fareed and some supporters held a march on streets of Male'.

Fareed also addressed the gathering on Black Friday. After that his photo was shown on national television as a wanted person. Later Fareed was arrested and several charges were pressed including planning terrorist activities. NSS tortured Fareed after his arrest. Fareed was later sentenced to two years in prison in September 2004. There are reports that he is tortured even now. We are particularly concerned with reports that Fareed is unable to walk after injuries he sustained from torture.

What we can see as reasons for his arrest are expressing his views and also being a threat to the regime. Please write to international human rights organizations asking them to work to free this prisoner of conscience.

Naushad Waheed, the double agent and government informer, was put under house arrest after serving part of his 15-year jail sentence. Naushad, a famous artist, was arrested on 9 December 2001 and kept in prison before he was transferred to house arrest prior to the trial. He was sentenced on 14 October 2002. It is believed that he was sentenced because of writing to Amnesty International. The media in Maldives did not mention Naushad's jail sentence. Naushad had often informed the police about dissidents while at times he was at the other end of political spectrum, being arrested for his involvement in activities against the regime. We reported in Maverick 3.35 that Naushad was sentenced to 18 years in jail, and it was erroneous and based on wrong information. Regardless of Naushad's character, we do not see writing to Amnesty International as a crime or offence. So we believe Naushad's arrest, sentencing and detention are unfair. Naushad has launched his website in which he has published some paintings illustrating the torture and inhuman cruelty prisoners go through in jails of Maldives. We applaud Naushad for this brave act especially as he was under detention. We urge all prisoners who have been detained unfairly to stand up for their rights and publicize their condition. On 13 August 2004 Naushad also addressed the gathering at Republican Square and detailed the torture he went through in jail. He has the rights to express his opinions like that. After the Black Friday Naushad was arrested and was detained. Even though it is believed that cases regarding Black Friday will be dropped, as indicated by the government after the tsunami, there is no indication at all concerning any amnesty for Naushad regarding his ongoing jail sentence. We call upon the government of the Maldives for the unconditional and immediate release of Naushad Waheed. Please write to international human rights organizations asking them to press for the release of this prisoner of conscience.

From Maldives constitution

25. Every citizen shall have the freedom to express his conscience and thoughts orally or in writing or by other means, unless prohibited by law in the interest of protecting the sovereignty of the Maldives, of maintaining public order and of protecting the basic tenets of Islam.

26. Persons shall be free to assemble peaceably and in a manner that does not contravene the law.

16.—(1) Every person shall be presumed innocent until proven guilty.

(2) Every person who is charged with an offence shall have the right to defend himself in accordance with Shari'ah. To this effect, such a person shall be allowed to obtain the assistance of a lawyer whenever such assistance is required.

Unfairness of January 2005 parliamentary election, a forgone conclusion

The parliamentary election of 2004 has been postponed to January 2005 after the unexpected tsunami of December 2004.

This election is remarkable in many aspects. It is the first election that is observed by international election observers. We are happy to note that the Commonwealth has sent a Commonwealth Expert Team to observe the elections.

The international media's attention is focused on the election. It is partly because of the attention the country received after the August 2004 demonstration. In 2004 the political climate of the Maldives had changed a lot. The opposition grew stronger and its voice was heard both in the international community and in the Maldives. The Maldivian Democratic Party has gained credibility as a body representing the needs and aspirations of the reformists in the Maldives.

The increasing pressure from the European Union on the government of Maldives to bring genuine reforms is also an unprecedented change.

The tsunami has only increased the dependence of the Maldives on foreign aid and assistance. The government is in no position to merely reject the requests of the international community. Faced with this changing equation, the government has shown some tolerance to dissent and criticism.

However, any hopes that the January 2005 election will be free and fair is already gone. Since late 2004 the government-backed candidates have been continuously violating the election laws and regulations. Government officials in various levels of power have intimidated opposition candidates and denied them a free and fair campaign.

Till late December, several reformist candidates were either in prison, under house arrest or restricted from campaigning in their constituencies. Officials in islands have been openly campaigning for government-sponsored candidates including cabinet ministers. These government candidates have used government facilities at their disposal, such as speedboats, in their campaign.

Recent developments include the discovery of a campaign speech current MP for Noonu Atoll Yameen Abdul Gayoom gave in Miladhoo island in Noonu Atoll. In his speech, the President's brother and Minister of Trade, clearly violated the rights of other candidates. The Maldives election regulation forbids making public speeches as part of election campaigns. Liberal candidates are not allowed public speeches under the regulation, while government candidates such as Yameen could blatantly violate the regulation.

Two government candidates have been running a joint campaign in Lhaviyani Atoll. This is also something that the election regulation forbids.

The Office of the Commissioner of Elections is turning a blind eye to the complaints made about such cases.

The current Commissioner of Elections Ibrahim Rashad was assigned with the post in July 1999. During the five and half years he has been in the post, his incompetence and inefficiency have been proved in the past elections.

The government is deliberately trying to decrease the water turnout. It had first scheduled the election for 31 December. It would have been very inconvenient for several workers, especially those in tourist

resorts, to vote on that day as they would be occupied with New Year preparations. A low water turnout will be beneficial to the government. Most of the workers in tourism industry are young people and they favour reform.

The election is now being held at a time when the tsunami has battered several islands of the country. Thousands of people are not mentally and psychologically prepared to vote in this election. Given the inefficiency in handling the relief operations, and the mismanagement of the Office of the Commissioner of Elections, it is questionable whether the people affected by the tsunami will be provided with a convenient voting mechanism.

This election should have been postponed even if it meant the constitution had to be amended. Gayoom could have used the powers granted to the president in the constitution, declared a State of Emergency, and suspended the clauses of the constitution that calls for election within a certain period before the life of the prevailing parliament ends. Gayoom rushed to use the powers vested in the constitution and declared a State of Emergency, and suspended several constitutional rights in August 2004 when there was a peaceful demonstration. Yet when the whole country is in chaos after the tsunami, he is opting to have an election.

When the election takes place on January 22, several people have gone to different islands to spend their Eid holidays. Those people would not be able to vote either.

Even before the actual rigging of the vote results begins, the intimidation and violation of election law and regulation has made the unfairness of this election a forgone conclusion.

Be vigilant on aid distribution!

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Maldives needs foreign assistance as the country heals from the scars of the tsunami. We appreciate the kindness of the international community in providing help. At the same time we are concerned that the government of the Maldives might abuse the aid as it had done to foreign aid in the past. The aid must reach the affected people and not the pockets of corrupt government officials. All Maldivians and the donors must be vigilant about how the aid is distributed.

Maldives is very much a part of the international community and as our country is dependent on tourist dollars our government cannot continue to act as a barbaric uncivilized beast.

Friends of Maldives is one organization that is contributing much to the aid effort. We also note the role Friends of Maldives play in trying to bring democratic reforms in the Maldives. Their website is www.friendsofmaldives.org

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އިދުރީ ޖުމްހޫރިއްޔާ ގުޅިގެން ހިތް ދަތި ސަލާމް ދެއްވަމެވެ!