

The Maldives: Stop the harassment and intimidation of civil society and media

(Bangkok/Kathmandu, 16 September 2016) - The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is deeply concerned by the recent police raid of the office of the Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN), a leading human rights organisation and member of FORUM-ASIA, as well as of the *Maldives Independent*, an English language media outlet in the country. FORUM-ASIA strongly condemns the Maldives Government's systemic harassment, intimidation and abuse of power to silence civil society organisations, human rights defenders, journalists and media professionals.

On 7 September, the Maldives police raided a building in Malé that houses MDN and the *Maldives Independent*, with a search warrant that alleged an attempt 'to overthrow the elected Government, getting external help to overthrow the elected Government, trying to create hatred between the public and the state institutions, and planning to create discord and unrest in Malé.'¹

The raid came immediately after the online release of 'Stealing Paradise', an *Al Jazeera* documentary exposing grand corruption and abuse of power in the Maldives. The documentary alleged the involvement of the President, his former Vice President and officials at the highest levels of the Government, including the Governor of the Central Bank, security forces and the judiciary in misappropriation of state funds, bribery and money laundering.

The *Al Jazeera* exposé revealed that the former Vice President of the Maldives colluded with officials of security forces in several criminal activities, including the arson attack on *Raaje TV*, a private television station, in October 2013. The documentary also alleged the President's direct involvement in suppressing the investigation into the enforced disappearance of journalist Ahmed Rilwan.

The documentary featured interviews with Zaheena Rasheed, editor of the *Maldives Independent*, who had to leave the country before its broadcast for fear of persecution. The former Auditor General, Niyaz Ibrahim has had to leave the country following a series of threats to himself and his family.

'The raid on the entire building is clearly an attempt by a repressive Government to intimidate, harass and threaten those who cooperated in the production of this scathing exposé', says Mukunda Kattel, Director of FORUM-ASIA.

Prior to the release of the documentary, senior Government officials and members of the ruling party threatened to bring criminal charges against anyone who was suspected of having provided information to *Al Jazeera* using the recently adopted Freedom of Expression and Anti-Defamation Act.

'Instead of harassing civil society and journalists with spurious accusations for exercising their legitimate right to freedom of expression, the Government and police should conduct a credible and transparent investigations of the damning allegations of serious crimes levelled against the highest officials of the State,' Kattel continues.

¹ <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/police-raid-maldives-independent-office-over-coup-plot-126418>

These raids on a prominent non-governmental organisation (NGO) and a media outlet have added a chilling effect to an already repressive and restrictive environment for civil society, independent media and dissidents. The recently enacted Freedom of Expression and Anti-Defamation Act essentially bans dissent and prescribes exorbitant fines and imprisonment for offences listed under this law. Similarly, the recent amendment to the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly Act (2013) further limits the right to peaceful protest with an effective prohibition of street protests. Offices of both MDN and *Maldives Independent* were previously vandalised and staff members were threatened with dire consequences, none of which has been investigated to date.

FORUM-ASIA calls on the Maldives Government to respect and uphold its own Constitution and the democratic values enshrined in it, as well as its obligations under international human rights treaties. The Maldives Government should create an enabling environment for civil society and media for them to be able to work freely. This requires the repeal of all legislations that hinder the work of civil society and media in addition to criminalising dissent.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 58 member organisations in 19 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratization.

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