

The Maldives: Stop crackdown on dissent and create a conducive environment for free and fair election

(Bangkok/ Kathmandu, 19 September 2018) - The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is gravely concerned about the ongoing crackdown on dissent and political opponents in the Maldives, ahead of the presidential election on 23 September 2018. FORUM-ASIA calls on the Maldivian authorities to enable a conducive environment for the free and fair election.

The civic space in the Maldives is continuously deteriorating following the crackdown on media and the lack of independent institutions. Earlier this year, three Supreme Court judges were arrested after ordering the release of political opponents of President Yameen. Media such as Raajje TV that is supportive of the opposition has been intimidated for its “defamatory comments” towards President Yameen and national security. In addition, the Maldivian authorities have been increasingly placing unjustifiable restrictions on the right to peaceful assembly and association by using the controversial counter-terrorism law to restrict protests and arrest opposition leaders. FORUM-ASIA believes that such attacks against the civil society and the judiciary has been a deliberate strategy by the ruling party to suppress dissent and political opposition.

The current oppressive state of the Maldives raises questions on the credibility of election being conducted in a free and fair manner across the country.

The Maldives Police Service has been allegedly involved in unlawful and politically targeted activities like arresting cadres who put up opposition banners and flags, shutting down meeting halls of opposition parties, obstructing their political campaigns and deterring people from taking part in opposition rallies in the name of preventing unrest. Since this August, the Maldives Police has arrested 19 supporters of the joint opposition coalition, despite mounting pressure from both local civil society and international communities to free political prisoners. Abuse of authority and power has also reportedly been committed by President Yameen. The Maldives Independent reported that the President inaugurated at least 133 projects in the last three months since the poll date was announced and campaigned in 68 islands on public money. It is prohibited for candidates to use public fund as per the Maldives' General Act on Elections.

The silence of the Election Commission over such malpractice of the Government increases the suspicion of the Commission being highly politicized. It has been criticized for a fraudulent voter's registration process that selectively disenfranchised a large number of voters and cancelled the re-registration of more than 5600 people. It also allegedly recruited cadres from the ruling party for the polling activities and has refused the representation of civil society organization.

The imposed restrictions on both local and foreign media have made it extremely difficult to monitor the election. While local media is penalised for giving space to opposition views, foreign journalists are asked to apply for business visas which asks for complex details such as a Maldivian sponsor, bank account and travel history, which was not needed before. Such conditions show deliberate attempts to restrict journalists from covering election and will limit independent scrutiny.

FORUM-ASIA unequivocally condemns any attempt, overt or covert, to threaten, humiliate or curtail freedom of speech and expression, and believes that dissent is a powerful means, especially in the context of election, to give resonance to plurality and make visible of people's will.

Elections should never be seen as a pretext for States to unduly restrict free speech, freedom of peaceful assembly and association. In the wake of the election procedure coming under high scrutiny, FORUM-ASIA calls on the Maldivian authorities, including the Election Commission, to create an enabling environment for a free and fair election by stopping intimidation of dissidents and guaranteeing the fundamental human rights of its people.

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 democratisation.

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