



23 October 2019

Maldives: Civil society groups call for better respect for civic freedoms in report to the UN

Civil society groups CIVICUS and FORUM-ASIA have submitted information to the UN Human Rights Council on civic freedoms in the country ahead of its review in 2020. While welcoming the human rights improvements undertaken by the new government since it came to power, the [submission](#) highlights ongoing restrictions to freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression, and unwarranted restrictions on human rights defenders since its previous examination in 2015.

The UN Human Rights Council will review the Maldives' human rights record at its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in May 2020. This marks five years since its last review, when UN member states made 258 recommendations to the Maldivian government including 16 recommendations that directly relate to barriers to open civic space. They included protecting journalists, human rights defenders and other civil society actors and creating an enabling environment for them. Other recommendations include guaranteeing freedom of expression and the media and upholding freedom of assembly. As of today, the government has only partially implemented these recommendations.

The report welcomes the significant strides by the government in opening up the space for the exercise of fundamental freedoms, establishing a commission to probe unresolved disappearances and reviewing legislation restricting civic space since its last UPR examination. We also welcome the proposed bill to protect whistleblowers. However, there are still implementation gaps with regard to the protection of human rights defenders and the freedom of expression.

Our organisations are alarmed by ongoing reports of harassment of and threats against human rights defenders and journalists, particularly by extremist groups, and the lack of effective action by law enforcement authorities. We are also concerned by efforts to silence civil society groups as illustrated most recently by the decision to "temporarily suspend" the Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN), a leading human rights organization following accusations of blasphemy. This is a regressive move that sets a dangerous precedent for freedom of expression and association, and threatens the positive steps towards restoration of fundamental freedoms and human rights. The government must reverse its decision to suspend MDN, and create a safe and enabling environment for human rights defenders and organisations to carry out their legitimate work without fear of reprisals and harassment.

On freedom of expression, we welcome the repeal of the Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act, enacted in 2016, which was systematically used against the media, opposition

activists and dissidents. However, we remain concerned about threats and attacks on government critics. In January 2019, Ibrahim Ismail, the chairman of Mandhu College and a former lawmaker, came under attack for criticising the sentencing of a woman to death by stoning for adultery.

The report also highlights the slow progress in undertaking comprehensive reforms of the laws related to the freedoms of association and peaceful assembly. The Freedom of Peaceful Assembly Act 2013 imposes undue limitations on assemblies and gives the police wide discretion in granting permission and must be reviewed. We also urge any revisions to the Associations Act – which was often used by the previous government to stifle critical civil society groups – to be consistent with international human rights law and standards.

The Universal Periodic Review of the Maldives is an important opportunity for the Maldives to display its commitments toward human rights reforms. We have seen encouraging developments but much more needs to be done. In the lead up to the UPR review we call on the Maldives government to increase its efforts to fulfil the commitments made in the 2015 review and systematically consult with civil society on the implementation of UPR recommendations, including by holding periodical comprehensive consultations with a diverse range of civil society.

We also urge the international community to support both the people and the government of the Maldives in addressing the shortcomings in the protection of civic freedoms as well as work of human rights defenders in the Maldives. International scrutiny is necessary to sustain the improvement we have seen in the Maldives over the past year, and ensure any positive reforms made are not reversed.

The [CIVICUS Monitor](#), an online platform that tracks threats to civil society in countries across the globe, rates the space for civil society in the Maldives as [obstructed](#).

For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact: Josef Benedict, CIVICUS Civic Space Researcher, josef.benedict@civicus.org